

A polycentric perspective on the United Nations

In 2020, the United Nations (UN) commemorates 75 years since the ratification of its founding Charter. Over recent years, the public has increasingly challenged the prospect of multilateralism and the effectiveness of global bureaucracy. At the same time, academics and practitioners recognise that present-day challenges require collective solutions. The UN has acknowledged the public mistrust and engages eagerly on reviving its merit, displayed not least through the innovative formulation of 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs). Elaborated as part of the 2030 Agenda, these ambitious goals range from eradicating poverty, to fighting climate change, promoting gender equality, and creating an enabling, safe and sustainable environment for all communities.

The paper is based on the premise that governance is a critical enabler of the 2030 Agenda. Most research equals this view to the functioning of national government institutions. Only few recognize the inherent potential of the 2030 Agenda to reform the governance and to reinvigorate the positioning of the UN itself, away from current critic and back towards its founding principles. The paper draws on Vincent and Elinor Ostrom's studies on polycentric governance. It projects the original application of polycentricity in local administration to the current affairs of global bureaucracy. The paper analyses the inclusiveness of governance arrangements and examines the extent of polycentricity in the UN development system. The study asserts that a polycentric approach to the UN's rules, procedures and institutions offers a provoking perspective to adversaries of global governance. The paper concludes that an increased level of polycentricity in the UN development system gives local communities the global voice promised in the organisation's founding Charter. More so, it repositions the UN as a transformational change agent critical to innovate and accelerate the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

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A polycentric perspective on the United Nations

As the United Nations (UN) approaches 75 years since the signing of its Charter in 1945, the public increasingly challenges the prospect of multilateralism and the effectiveness of international organisations in settling “wicked problems”.¹ (Rittel and Webber, 1973) The UN has acknowledged the public mistrust in its institutions and eagerly engaged in reviving its merit, displayed not least through the innovative formulation of 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs). Elaborated as part of the 2030 Agenda, these ambitious goals aim at enthusing a proliferation of development stakeholders to create an enabling, safe and sustainable environment for all people. (UNGA, 2015)

The 2030 Agenda founds on multi-lateral commitment to advance sustainable development² – including matters of climate change, forced migration and displacement, gender equality, pandemics, new technologies and data privacy, population growth and urbanisation – to mention but a few global challenges. Stimulated by global goal-setting, the UN faces the ultimate challenge of proving its relevance by translating the SDGs into action. (Biermann et al., 2017; Rachman, 2019; UNGA, 2015; UNGA and ECOSOC, 2017a, p. 5, 2017b)

The paper is based on the premise that governance is a critical enabler of the 2030 Agenda and thus a decisive component of reinvigorating the UN as a custodian of global goal-setting and its implementation. Most research on public governance equals this view to the functioning of national government institutions. (OECD, 2019) Only few recognize the inherent potential of the 2030 Agenda to influence the governance and the positioning of the UN itself, perhaps away from current critic and back towards its founding principle of placing people at the centre of its operations. (Biermann et al., 2017; Niestroy, 2014; Rachman, 2019; Weiss and Carayannis, 2017)

Building on this academic void, the paper provides a distinct governance perspective on the UN by drawing on Vincent and Elinor Ostrom’s studies on polycentricity. It projects the original application of polycentric governance in local administration to the current affairs of global bureaucracy, reflecting on recent efforts to understand the relevance of polycentricity in implementing international agreements (Cole, 2015; Dorsch and Flachslan, 2017; Jordan and Huitema, 2018; Ostrom, 2014; van Asselt and Zelli, 2018), as well as on its applicability beyond states (Aligica and Tarko, 2012; Ostrom, 2010a; Zeben and Bobić, 2019).

¹ In the 1973 paper “Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning”, Horst Rittel and Melvin Webber coined “wicked problems” to describe the challenge of overcoming and governing inter-connected public policy issues, as opposed to problems in natural sciences which offer logical solutions. (Rittel and Webber, 1973) Over 40 years later, the 2030 Agenda (UNGA, 2015) aims at coping with the entirety of “wicked problems” of sustainable development.

² The Bruntland Commission Report (1987) introduced sustainable development as a concept which “implies meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”. The Report asserted the sustainable development concept as the key principle guiding the work of all development stakeholders. (UNGA, 1987)

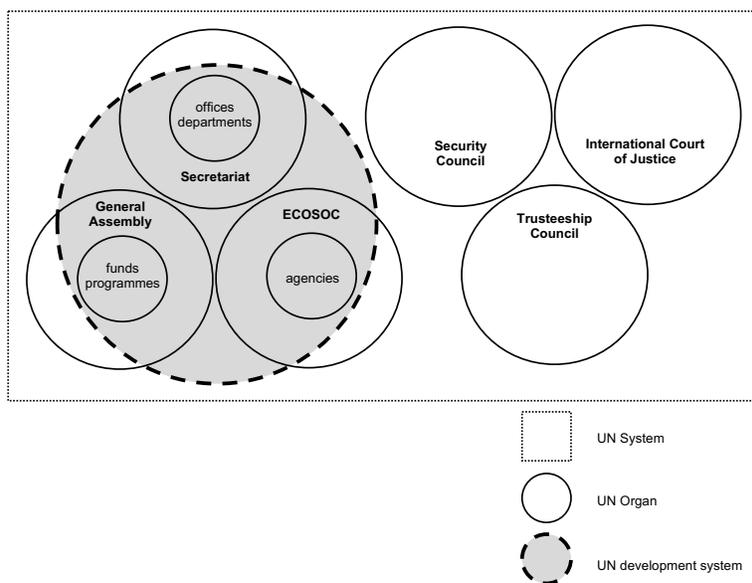
The paper is arranged into four components: first, it provides a brief overview of the UN development system nested in the broader governance of the UN System. Then, the paper considers different governance approaches defining polycentricity and its features as the founding framework for further analysis. Next, the paper discusses the polycentric features in the context of the UN development system and its appeal to solve the collective action problems of the 2030 Agenda. Finally, the paper considers advantages and disadvantages of polycentricity in the UN.

The paper concludes that a polycentric approach to the UN's rules, procedures and institutions offers a provoking perspective to adversaries of multilateralism and global governance. Augmented polycentricity in the UN carries the potential to move away from state-centric thinking and give local communities the global voice promised in the organisation's founding Charter. More so, it repositions the UN as a transformational pivot critical to innovate and accelerate the SDGs' implementation.

System matters

Any governance discussion hinges on the definition of the system in question. For the analysis to succeed, it is essential to articulate tangible system boundaries and to distinguish between the *UN System* and its intrinsic *UN development system*, both shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: The UN System and its intrinsic UN development system



In the UN context, the lavish use of institutional terminology easily leads to confusion and wrong assumptions about the system. Frequently equated to the UN General Assembly or the UN Security Council, the UN System reaches far beyond this simplification. The UN embraces an extensive web of inter-dependent bodies with diverse mandates and governance arrangements expressed through a complex structure of horizontal and vertical relationships. (Weiss and Daws, 2018)

Heads of states established the UN in 1945 as an inter-governmental organisation with the intention to bring long-lasting peace. (Plesch and Weiss, 2015; UNICEF, 2015, p. 4; United Nations, 1945; Weiss, 2015, p. 1224; Weiss and Daws, 2018). Its founding Preamble remains unchanged and stands firm as the binding thread across the system. (United Nations, 1945)

“We the Peoples of the United Nations...” (United Nations, 1945) begins the Preamble of the UN Charter, consciously placing people and communities at the centre of early multilateral thinking and the organisation’s mandate. It commits people, and their representatives in national governments and at the UN, to collaboratively work towards peace and security; human rights; rule of law; and economic and social development. (United Nations, 1945; Weiss and Daws, 2018)

Responding to this ambition, the UN Charter established six Principal Organs, each with distinct responsibilities and extensive institutional backbone: the UN General Assembly, the UN Security Council, the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), the UN Secretariat, the UN International Court of Justice and the UN Trusteeship Council³. Together, these Organs form the entirety of the UN System, including its numerous subsidiary organs, functional commissions, regional commissions, specialised agencies, funds and programmes, departments and offices, related organisations, research and training entities and other institutional arrangements. (United Nations, 2019, 1945; Weiss and Daws, 2018)

In 2017, the UN System received a total revenue of US\$53.2 billion, a US\$3.9 billion increase compared to 2016. The UN Department for Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO, US\$8.2 billion), the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF, US\$6.5 billion), and the World Food Programme (WFP, US\$6.4 billion), registered the largest revenues. Contributing 74% of all UN operational activities, national governments are the UN’s largest donors. Together, ten governments – including the US (US\$10.4 billion), Germany (US\$4 billion), the UK (US\$3.3 billion), Japan (US\$2.4 billion), China (US\$1.4 billion), Sweden (US\$1.3 billion), Norway (US\$1.1 billion), Canada (US\$1.1 billion), Italy (US\$1 billion) and France (US\$969 million) – provided for over half of all contributions. NGOs and private firms, in contrast, contributed 13% of all UN operational activities. Most contributions benefit the UN’s development (39%) and humanitarian (32%) activities. (UN MPTF, 2019)

The UN development system, in turn, is a distinctive, yet intrinsic part of the UN System. Figure 1 shows its extent across three Principal Organs – the UN General Assembly, UN ECOSOC and the UN Secretariat – combining activities across all UN entities which receive “contributions for operational activities for development” (UNDG, 2015, p. 1). It comprises over 40 UN agencies, funds and programmes, offices and departments, all with distinguished mandates and varying degrees of operational independence, working in 162 countries and territories. Members include e.g. the UN Development Programme (UNDP); UN Environment (UNEP); the UN Population Fund (UNFPA); UNICEF; WFP; the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the International Labour Organization

³ The UN Trusteeship Council was discontinued as of 1 November 1994 following the independence of Palau, the last UN Trust Territory.

(ILO) and many others. (United Nations, 2020)⁴ With US\$20.9 billion in contributions in 2017, the UN development system is the world's largest institutional arrangement to receive multilateral assistance from countries belonging to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) Development Assistance Committee (DAC).⁵

Considering these system boundaries, the paper moves on to consider what governance approaches are most apt for the UN to integrate people into the design and implementation of development solutions, as well as to extend its partnership to embrace the proliferation of non-governmental entities from across the private and third sectors.⁶

Governance matters

The importance of governance in advancing the SDGs sparked a debate on what approaches are most suited to recalibrate the UN's influence to the ambition of the 2030 Agenda. While national governments have the prime responsibility to implement the 2030 Agenda, they rely greatly on the UN's ability to augment the national SDG prioritization and implementation with financial support and technical expertise.⁷ By 2017, 120 governments had requested the UN's assistance in their quest to translate the 2030 Agenda into national action. (UNGA, 2018, 2016, 2015, 2012a; UNGA and ECOSOC, 2017a, 2017b)

The debate set off a comprehensive change process to innovate the UN business model and to reinvigorate its governance structure in pursuance of facing global collective action problems. (UNGA and ECOSOC, 2017a).⁸ The literature offers a limited number of studies on UN governance and management practices, with few reflecting on the endeavours to advance the quest of sustainable development. (Burall et al., 2006; Caballero, 2019; Campbell and Hushagen, 2002; Fues et al., 2007; Gore, 2013; Hochschild, 2010; Johnson, 2014; United Nations, 2014a; Uzunidis and Yacoub, 2009; Weiss, 2015, 2009; Weiss and Daws, 2018)

⁴ The paper refers to the UN development system as "the organisation" in singular, noting that some scholars discuss the UN in plural as a "system of interrelated international organizations" (Archer, 2015, p. 41).

⁵ With a share of 33%, the UN leads the way ahead of other multilateral actors such as the European Union (EU) institutions (23%), the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF, 19%) or regional development banks (9%). (UN MPTF, 2019)

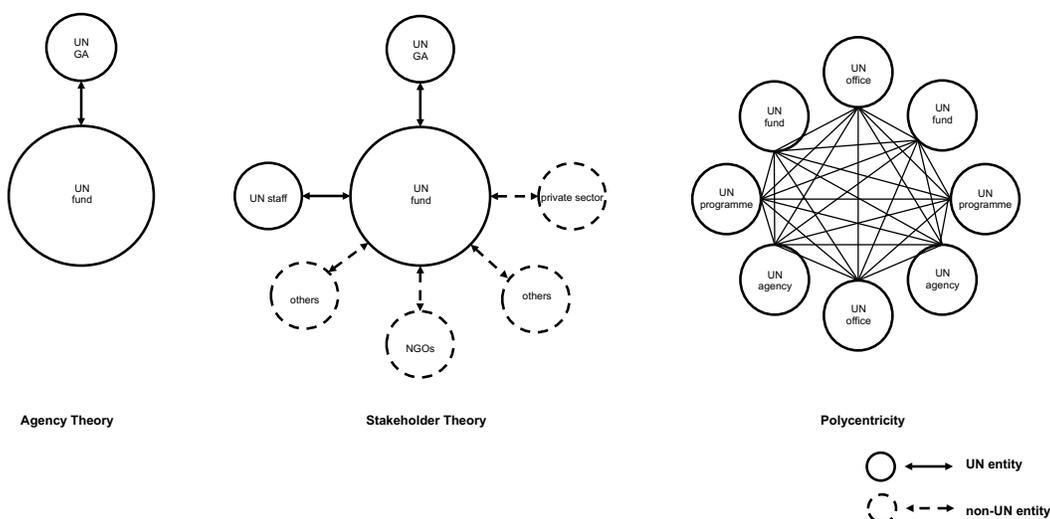
⁶ The paper applies Etzioni's definitions and distinguishes between the public sector – government led offices and organisations, the private sector – profit maximising businesses and firms, and the third sector – non-profit and non-state organisations. (Etzioni, 1973)

⁷ The 2019 GlobeScan-SustainAbility Leaders Survey engaged over 800 respondents from across the private, public and third sectors in 78 countries in measuring the progress of various institutions on advancing matters of sustainable development. The Survey concluded that NGOs (56%), the UN (47%) and academia (45%) are best regarded for contributing to sustainable development. National governments (6%), institutional investors (11%) and the private sector (20%) make up the bottom of the leadership ranking. (GlobeScan, 2019)

⁸ Proposed changes are part of the ongoing UN System reform evolving along three interlinked tracks: the UN development system reform focuses on strengthening the role of UN resident coordinators and on increasing coherence among UN country teams to accelerate the SDGs' implementation at local level; the management reform aims at making the UN Secretariat fit-for-purpose to support the implementation of the 2030 Agenda at global level; the peace and security reform aims at improving the structures and operations of UN peace and security engagements. (UNGA, 2018)

Focusing on the governance of the UN development system, conventional principal-agent theory (Smith, 1976) and stakeholder theory (Freeman, 2010), both shown in Figure 2, quickly encounter their limits in describing a complex system which aims at integrating the voice of people into the design and implementation of development solutions and which works with multiple non-UN entities. While one could argue a collective or multiple principal-agent relationship between the UN member states – in the UN General Assembly – and a particular UN entity (Hanrieder, 2014; Nielson and Tierney, 2003), the basic assumption that each agent reveals an egoistic, profit-seeking behaviour and acts from a position of power limits the theory’s ability to integrate each fund or programme’s independent governing board and compound relationship with multiple other UN entities.

Figure 2: Agency, stakeholder and polycentric governance theories in the UN context



Stakeholder theory, in comparison, reflects on the agency’s relationship with a diverse range of stakeholders, including principals or shareholders, donors, employees, host governments, communities, customers and others. (Freeman, 2010) Again, one could argue such a relationship exists between a particular UN fund or programme and the UN General Assembly, various agencies’ governing boards, UN staff, non-governmental agencies, collaborating firms, beneficiaries and others. One could also argue that the corporate assumption for agencies to maximise profit could be replaced by the assumption to maximise value to better reflect on the public administration purpose. However, the assumption that relationships create dependence between the stakeholders, and that the agency retains a position of power over other stakeholders, results in questions as to how the theory would accommodate the diversity of multiple independent UN entities.

Both theories depart their explanations from a central unit of analysis, whether a corporate or public agency, and fail to deviate from a hierarchical structure. In doing so, both theories fall short of accounting for a context of multiple agency relationships in a horizontal system.

As an alternative governance solution, this paper considers a polycentric approach, shown alongside agency and stakeholder theories in Figure 2. This approach moves away from a hierarchical

structure towards a dynamic system in which the decision-making ability is shared among multiple units of analysis acting independently or inter-dependently from each other for the provision of public goods within an overarching set of rules. (Ostrom, 1972, 2008; Ostrom et al., 1961).

On first accounts, the scope to describe the UN governance through a polycentric lens may seem limited. Vincent Ostrom's original polycentric studies in the 60es and 70es focused on municipal units, exclusively in the United States. (Ostrom, 2008; Ostrom et al., 1961) However, polycentric studies have recently enjoyed a renewed impetus as scholars are keen to uncover its application to the governance of global public goods, including climate change and environmental protection. While many of these studies refer to the UN as the holder of international agreements, such as the UNFCCC and its consecutive Kyoto Protocol and Paris Agreement (Dorsch and Flachsland, 2017; Jordan and Huitema, 2018; Ostrom, 2014), they do not reflect on polycentricity in the UN itself.

Driven by the public reproach of "too much government and not enough governance", Ostrom et al. originally studied both efficiencies and deficiencies of metropolitan government units in providing public goods, with particular attention to their "duplication of functions" and their "overlapping jurisdictions". (Ostrom et al., 1961, p. 831) Similar criticism, yet at global scale, appears in the context of this paper, as many member states perceive "too much talk and not enough action" in the UN bureaucracy. (UNGA, 2006)

Departing from the premise that individual self-governance increases the provision and use of public goods, Ostrom et al. moved away from the importance of the "central state to rule or government to govern". Their understanding of a polycentric system centred around the ability of self-governance by diffusing authority across multiple institutions at different scales. (Ostrom et al., 1961; Zeben and Bobić, 2019, pp. 16, 31) Similar thinking is at the core of the development paradigm expressed in the 2030 Agenda. Global goals recognise the need for local – bottom-up – solutions and reflect on the proliferation of development stakeholders across multiple jurisdictions. (Biermann et al., 2017)

Beyond its diagnostic application, empirical explorations into polycentric – as opposed to monocentric – governance structures have been instrumental in articulating their common denominators and capturing their normative complexity. (Aligica and Tarko, 2012, p. 240; Andersson and Ostrom, 2008) Among those attempting to shape both theory and practice, Aligica and Tarko took the discussion a significant step forward. The authors' logical structure of polycentricity linked the concept of polycentricity to attributes and indicators commonly found across complex systems. The structure demonstrated the possibility of generalising polycentric governance systems and allowed to draw systematic analogies between different polycentric systems, including the ability to isolate well-functioning from defective features of complex institutional arrangements. (Aligica and Tarko, 2012)

More recently, Van Zeben and Bobić retraced the logical structure of polycentricity and expanded the scope of polycentric theory from municipal to regional administration. In the context of the EU, they studied how individuals build agency relationships with other individuals to represent interest groups and communities. They acknowledged that individuals interact with many others – both simultaneously and

sequentially – building a web of horizontal and vertical relationships. While horizontal relationships were fostered between individuals, vertical relationships took into account the role of the state and the EU, both critical to the establishment and enforcement of the overarching system of rules. (Zeben and Bobić, 2019)

Van Zeben and Bobić articulated an analytical framework with nine interrelated and non-exclusive features of polycentric governance, which all ensure that a polycentric system persists over time. Table 1 summarises the three attributes, including multiple independent centres of decision making; continuous competition, cooperation and conflict resolution; and the overarching shared system of rules. The attributes are supported by three institutional essentials – freedom to enter and exit the system; rule enforcement; and peaceful contestation – which in turn are facilitated by three prerequisites – access to information; capacity to learn; and access to justice.

Table 1: Attributes, Institutional Essentials and Prerequisites of polycentric governance systems

Attributes	Institutional Essentials	Prerequisites
Multiple independent centres of decision making	Freedom and ability to enter and exit	Access to information
Continuous competition, cooperation and conflict resolution	Enforcement of shared system of rules	Capacity to learn
Overarching shared system of rules	Peaceful contestation among different (interest) groups	Access to justice

adapted from Van Zeben and Bobić, 2019

The paper builds on this recent articulation and rescales polycentric thinking to the global level. It moves past local and national governments as the unit of analysis (Ostrom, 2010a) and studies the extent to which the UN development system expresses the features of a polycentric arrangement in its rules, procedures and institutions. More so, it examines the approach's ability to accommodate self-governance in a complex institutional setting and its impact on solving the collective action problems of the 2030 Agenda.

Polycentric features of the UN development system

Among the proliferation of actors engaged in accelerating the 2030 Agenda, the UN retains some inherent vantages. Inter-governmental by nature, it represents the interests of 193 member states, and by extension, of the public overall. It is the largest international organisation able to convene world leaders to shape global policies on i.a. economic and social development. With 162 country operations, it's local reach and ability to create conducive conditions to implement the SDGs remains unparalleled. It upholds international principles and values, warrants accountability in the provision of global public goods and engages to evade market failure. (Weiss and Carayannis, 2017; Weiss and Daws, 2018)

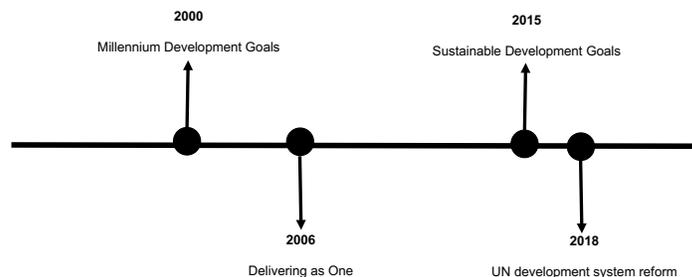
Over the past two decades, the public has increasingly challenged these vantages and questioned the legitimacy and effectiveness of global bureaucracy. At the UN General Assembly in 2019, member states offered two divergent prognoses: some appealed for the return to sovereignty, others called for increased authority in UN institutions to shape global public policy and solve collective action problems. (UNGA, 2019a) Those supporting a strong inter-governmental organisation perceive reform as

an opportunity to steer the UN agencies, funds and programmes towards more centralised governance and coordination structures. They argue that hierarchical structures would increase oversight and accountability, maximise cost-efficiency, and reduce redundant overlap.

Against this conventional top-down approach, the SDGs reflect on the recent success of bottom-up consultation and policy agreement, involving citizens, community leaders, representatives from developing countries, local governors, civil society actors and private sector executives. (Biermann et al., 2017; Griggs et al., 2013) Consultations at multiple scales found that development was no longer the sole responsibility of governments and inter-governmental organisations; it was no longer the sole problem of developing countries. Rather, settling the “wicked problems” (Rittel and Webber, 1973) of sustainable development required collective action of multiple stakeholders across the public, private and third sectors at multiple scales in both developed and developing countries. (Caballero, 2019; Moore, 2015; UNGA, 2015)

Development indicators conveyed the “paradigm shift for people and planet” (United Nations, 2014b) and prompted the UN to progressively adjust its business model to the ambition of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the SDGs through two comprehensive and integrated change processes: first, the “Delivering as One” reform initiated in 2006 (UNGA, 2006, 2005; United Nations, 2012; Weiss, 2009), and consequently the UN development system reform in 2018 (UNGA, 2020, 2018, 2016). (Figure 6)

Figure 3: Evolution of development indicators and UN reforms



Reform efforts, however, failed to fully articulate the development paradigm. The efforts’ conventional approach to public administration sought to increase coherence and create a collective identity by strengthening coordination and streamlining operating practices across the UN development system. (UNGA, 2018) Five years into the 2030 Agenda, implementation challenges evidence that a UN-centric approach is insufficient to embrace the proliferation of development stakeholders and to solving the growing complexity of global collective action problems.

Mutually non-exclusive, polycentricity may bridge the discrepancy between conventional public administration and the multi-dimensional ambition of the SDGs. The polycentric perspective facilitates to glance beyond the dichotomy of member states and UN agencies, funds and programmes to engage individuals or non-governmental interest groups at multiple scales. It embraces the dynamic environment of the 2030 Agenda and nurtures the collective action required to achieve the SDGs.

System attributes

To achieve optimal results and to persist over time, a polycentric system is expected to stipulate common ground rules allowing multiple decision centres to create mutual trust, joint implementation strategies, as well as sanctions. (Ostrom, 1994, pp. 192–193, 197, 221; Ostrom et al., 1961) Since 2015, the 2030 Agenda is the blueprint of global development integrating the economic, social and environmental dimensions of development. (UNGA, 2015) Opposed to conventional international regulations with strong institutional mandates, the collective goal-setting process of the 2030 Agenda set in place an innovative rule system, which encourages local adaptation and application by embedding goals into national development plans and related legislation. (Biermann et al., 2017; Deacon, 2016)

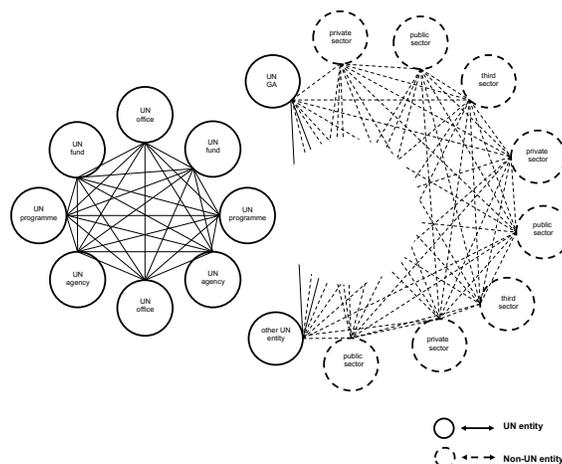
The heart of the 2030 Agenda consists of the articulation of 17 SDGs, broad strategic commitments ranging from the rights and well-being of individuals and communities to creating an enabling, safe and sustainable environment in which they can thrive. SDG1, for example, asks development partners to work towards the eradication of extreme poverty by 2030, measured as people living on less than \$1.25 a day. SDG2 aims i.a. at tackling hunger and malnutrition by ensuring access to safe and sufficient food. Goal4 looks i.a. at children completing free primary and secondary education and Goal 5 i.a. at ending all forms of discrimination on the basis of gender. Goal11 aims i.a. at enhancing inclusive and sustainable urbanization and Goal13 summarises the global community's strive for climate action. (UNGA, 2015)

The definition of SDGs allows to assert a “strong relationship” between public goods and the development agenda. (Kaul, 2013; Paulo, 2014; United Nations, 2014a, p. 4) This affinity is important as studies highlight that a polycentric approach increases access by individuals to public goods, improves individual choice, and ultimately allows a more efficient provision of public goods at multiple scales. (Ostrom, 2010a) The association of SDGs with public goods therefore suggests that a polycentric approach to sustainable development would reveal similar benefits.

To picture the complexity of development operations, Figure 4 recalls the institutional imagination of the UN development system (Figure 2) insinuating its nested collaboration with a range of stakeholders from across the public, private and third sectors. Together, they entertain relationships at local, national, regional and global levels to implement their mandate and support the collective SDG implementation.

Polycentric conceptualisation grows exponentially complex, as the number of development partners proliferates. In an effort to simplify the choreography of UN governance and management practices, Figure 4 attempts to visually isolate the UN entities from their nested relationships with other development stakeholders.

Figure 4: Polycentricity in the SDG context



Multiple independent centres of decision making build the foundation of polycentric systems. (Aligica and Tarko, 2012).⁹ In the UN development system, over 40 UN agencies, funds and programmes, offices and departments co-exist, including UNDP, UNICEF, WFP, the World Health Organisation (WHO), UNFPA, UN Women and many others. They collaborate with numerous non-UN stakeholders to accelerate the SDG implementation.

Inter-dependence and different degrees of authority in the UN development system uncontestedly exist. Overlapping mandates are extensive, such as between UNICEF and WHO around new-born health and immunization, between UNICEF and UNFPA around reproductive health and adolescence, between UNICEF and UNESCO around education, between UNICEF and UNHCR around refugee children. Entities come in diverse shapes, with different public reputations and with their own human and financial resources. In 2017, UNDP, for example, received revenues over US\$5.2 billion and employed 7,177 staff, including 3,529 male and 3,648 female staff. UN Women, as another example, received revenues of US\$379 million and employed 825 staff, including 209 male and 616 female staff.¹⁰ (UN CEB, 2018; UN MPTF, 2019)

Individual UN entities have their own membership and governance structures in form of executive boards, such as UNDP, UNICEF and WHO; governing councils, such as the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO); or governing bodies, such as the ILO. Governance structures are typically responsible to review, approve, control and evaluate programmatic and financial activities, as well as to contribute to formulating global strategies and policies. (ECOSOC, 2016, p. 38) Joint annual meetings between e.g. the executive boards of UNDP, UNFPA and

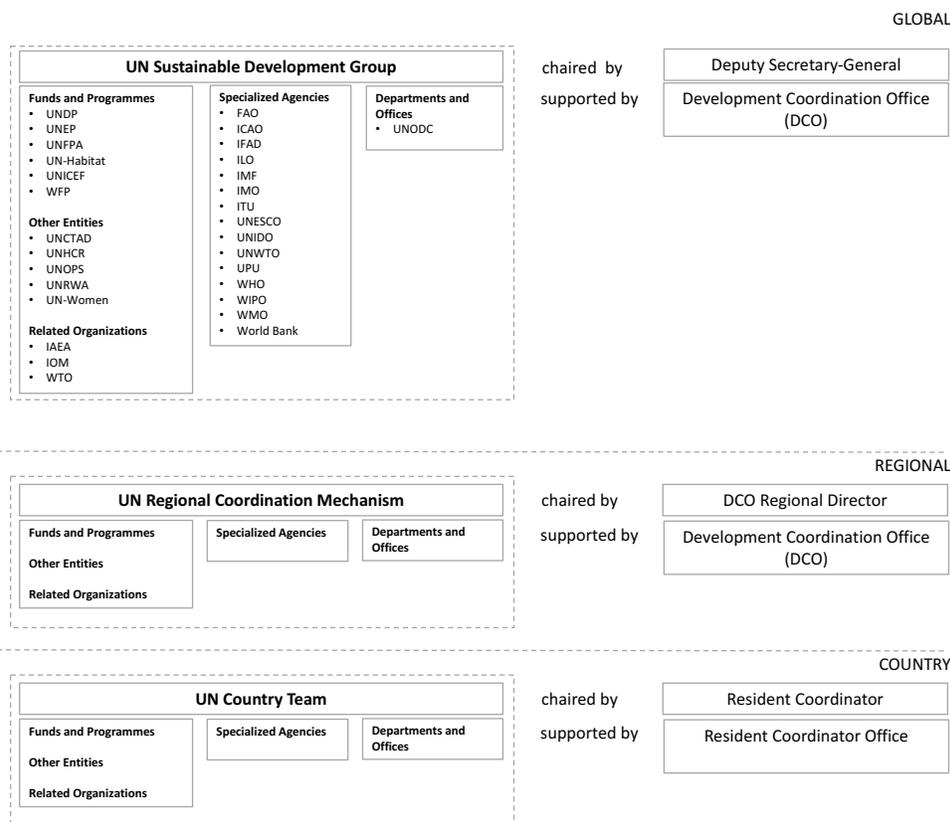
⁹ Reflecting on polycentric self-governance, these centers of decision-making – Ostrom’s basic unit of analysis – refer to individuals entering agency relationships with other individuals to represent interest groups and communities. (Zeben and Bobić, 2019, pp. 18–19)

¹⁰ Statistics only include UN staff with appointments for a period of one year or more.

the UN Office for Project Services (UNOPS), as well as UNICEF, UN Women and WFP intend to increase accountability and achieve greater centralisation in decision-making and oversight across UN entities.

Among all entities, it is useful to single out the UN Development Coordination Office (DCO). Founded in 2018 in response to the member states' request to "improve [the UN's internal] governance to become more coherent, transparent, responsive and effective" (UNGA, 2016, p. 12), DCO serves as the secretariat to the UN development system and is mandated to coordinate all development actors within the UN development system at country, regional and global levels.¹¹

Figure 5: The UN development system at global, regional and country levels



UNDP = UN Development Programme; UNEP = UN Environment; UNFPA = UN Population Fund; UNICEF = UN Children's Fund; WFP = World Food Programme; UNCTAD = UN Conference on Trade and Development; UNHCR = UN High Commissioner for Refugees; UNOPS = UN Office for Project Services; UNRWA = UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine; IAEA = International Atomic Energy Agency; IOM = International Organization for Migration; WTO = World Trade Organization; FAO = Food and Agriculture Organization; ICAO = International Civil Aviation Organization; IFAD = International Fund for Agricultural Development; ILO = International Labour Organisation; IMF = International Monetary Fund; IMO = International Maritime Organization; ITU = International Telecommunication Union; UNESCO = UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization; UNIDO = UN Industrial Development Organization; UNWTO = UN World Tourism Organization; UPU = Universal Postal Union, WHO = World Health Organization; WIPO = World Intellectual Property Organization; WMO = World Meteorological Organization; UNODC = UN Office on Drugs and Crime; DCO = Development Operations Coordination Office

¹¹ The office evolved out of the previous UN Development Operations Coordination Office (DOCO). Having had its home in UNDP, DOCO was often criticised for not having the operational and financial independence to service the UN development system appropriately and equally across all members.

Figure 5 shows the global, regional and country level structure of the UN development system and demonstrates the instrumental role of the DCO in holding the system together. Global operational consultation and coordination takes place among the representatives of UN development system entities in the UN Sustainable Development Group (UNSDG).¹² Delegated by the UN Secretary-General, the UN Deputy Secretary-General leads the UNSDG “to enhance strategic direction, impartial oversight and accountability regarding the system’s in-country contributions to the implementation of the [2030] agenda” (UNGA and ECOSOC, 2017a, p. 11).¹³

At regional level, UN regional directors in Addis Ababa, Amman, Bangkok, Istanbul and Panama, convene UN agencies, funds and programmes in the UN Regional Coordination Mechanism (RCM). Its focus lies on developing agreement on a regional response to global priorities, encouraging cross-country learning and policy coherence at regional level. At country level, 129 resident coordinators lead 131 UN country teams, including several multi-country teams covering 162 countries and territories. (UNGA, 2018; United Nations, 2020).

To sustain polycentricity in the UN development system, it is important to closely observe the impact of creating system-wide governance and coordination architectures (ECOSOC, 2016). Both affect the ability of UN entities to retain their independence from each other, autonomously take decisions and collaborate with a range of non-public actors. A result of system-wide governance efforts is the positioning of the UN High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development as the system’s main platform on sustainable development. (UNGA, 2013, 2012b) Meeting on an annual basis under ECOSOC auspices, and every four years as part of the UN General Assembly, the Forum i.a. adopts inter-governmental declarations on sustainable development and conducts reviews of countries’ progress towards achieving the 2030 Agenda.

A result of system-wide coordination, in turn, is the creation of DCO and the reinvigoration of resident coordinators. De-linking resident coordinators from their former home in UNDP, the UN development system reform placed them within the UN Secretariat to emphasise their delegated authority as the representatives of the UN Secretary-General at country level. The reform also introduced accountability lines between agency representatives and resident coordinators on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. In the absence of consensus, resident coordinators were given the authority to take a final decision on strategic objectives in the United Nations Strategic Development Coordination Framework (UNSDCF), as well as to inform the country presence and leadership profiles of UN entities. (Baumann, 2018; UN DOCO, 2018; UNGA, 2018)

¹² The UNSDG one of three pillars of the UN Chief Executive Board (CEB). Other pillars include the High-Level Committee on Programmes, which elaborates on global policy issues; and the High-Level Committee on Management, which focuses on system-wide administrative and management priorities.

¹³ In an effort to harmonise development programmes, the UN General Assembly created the UN Development Group in 1997 and renamed it as the UN Sustainable Development Group (UNSDG) in 2018. (Stokke, 2009, pp. 401–406; UNDG, 2015; UNGA, 2018, 1997)

Polycentric systems persistently tolerate inter-dependence and vertical relationships for as long as no one entity monopolises authority. (Aligica and Tarko, 2012, p. 245; Zeven and Bobić, 2019, p. 21) Provided that governance boards and entity representatives, as well as DCO and resident coordinators act as *primus inter pares*, the equality and independence among all units in the system is retained. Once, however, one of them exposes a central authority over other UN entities, the polycentric potential of the UN development system quickly dissolves.¹⁴

A look at the attributes has shown the existence of UN entities working within the rule framework of the 2030 Agenda for the provision of SDGs at local, regional and global levels. Informal and formal coordination regulate their competition and cooperation, guaranteeing the collaboration as a system. A closer look at institutional essentials, however, is necessary to analyse the extent to which the UN development system is polycentric.

Institutional Essentials

The freedom to enter and exit a system, the enforcement of rules and the ability to peacefully contest decisions are all critical to distinguish polycentric systems from other pluricentric systems. (Aligica and Tarko, 2012; Zeven and Bobić, 2019) To appreciate the extent of freedom involved in entering and exiting the UN development system, it is necessary to differentiate between formal membership of UN entities and informal participation of non-UN entities, including community representatives, NGOs and private companies.

Formal membership is limited to UN entities and hinges on two main criteria: first, the UN General Assembly's creation of a new entity in response to a particular UN General Assembly resolution, as was the recent case for UN Women in 2011 (UNGA, 2010, par.49-90); and second, the UN General Assembly's willingness to open the system to an existing entity, which is prepared to uphold UN principles and to play by its rules and regulations.

One recent example of a new entry is IOM, which joined the UN System in 2016 after decades of mutual consultations and procedural adjustments.¹⁵ IOM's entry was accompanied by decades of industriousness to re-profile the organisation from its logistical character of facilitating the movement of people to its ability to influence a broad range of policies concerning migration, ranging from human trafficking to climate induced migration. At the same time, IOM's seat in the UNSDG and the UN Chief Executive Board at headquarters, the RCM at regional level, and the UN country team at national level,

¹⁴ In such case, the UN development system would display features of other pluricentric governance approaches, whether federal or multilevel governance, exposing the DCO as the central agency.

¹⁵ IOM was founded in 1951 as an intergovernmental organization with the mandate to promote humane and orderly migration. In 1992, IOM was given Permanent Observer status to the UN General Assembly. Four years later, IOM and the UN signed a cooperation agreement. In 2016, IOM finally joined the UN system during the UN General Assembly high-level summit to address large movements of refugees and migrants. (IOM, 2016; Siegfried, 2016)

filled the UN's void of a dedicated UN entity focusing on migration. (Siegfried, 2016) Since 2019, IOM acts as the Coordinator and Secretariat for the UN Migration Network. (IOM, 2016)

Informal membership embraces non-UN entities from across the public, private and third sectors. Their ability to participate is a significant aspect of the UN's ability to reflect polycentricity in its rules, procedures and institutions. The seat at the table hinges both on the UN's invitation as well as on the non-UN entities' interest and its human and financial capacity to join conversations, programmes and projects. Where others are offered a seat, UN agencies retain exclusive authority to take decisions and sign documents. Rather than the freedom to enter and exit the system, non-UN entities have the freedom to shape the level of cooperation and influence policy making at multiple scales.

At global level, ECOSOC is the most diverse convening ground as it aims at facilitating dialogue between member states, other international organisations, civil society organizations and the private sector. On a three-year rotation, 54 member states, including 14 from Africa, 11 from Asia and the Pacific, six from Eastern Europe, ten from Latin America and the Caribbean and 13 from Western Europe and other states, make up the council. In addition, over 4,000 NGOs enjoy consultative status with access to ECOSOC and its subsidiary bodies. (Weiss and Daws, 2018)

While the UNSDG and the RCM fall short on including any non-UN stakeholders, UN country teams occasionally offer private and third sector stakeholders an informal seat at the table. Their entry and exit relies on the readiness of the resident coordinator to systematically involve non-UN stakeholders beyond the bilateral consultation in designing and implementing development policies and programmes.

UN country teams do not directly engage community representatives or public officials. Their concern is typically voiced in bilateral consultations or through community engagement projects, which aim at increasing civic participation in the design and implementation of development projects. (Mansuri and Rao, 2012)

UN agencies, funds and programmes are subject to the same rule enforcement and have access to peaceful contestation. At global and regional levels, disputes between UN entities are discussed in the UNSDG and the RCM respectively. At country level, similar disputes are discussed in the UN country team. The UN Secretary-General and the resident coordinator – by delegated authority – are responsible for mediating between conflicting agencies. Non-UN entities are not exposed to the enforcement of UN rules and procedures. (UNGA, 2018)

The rules set forth in the 2030 Agenda, underpinned by global norms and principles, including the UN Charter, human rights and international humanitarian law, however, break the exclusivity of rule enforcement and contestation. They equally apply to the proliferation of stakeholders and account for numerous opportunities to engage in a polycentric approach to sustainable development.

System prerequisites

For a polycentric system to persist over time, the ability of stakeholders to access information, their capacity to learn and their access to justice are all critical. SDG16 speaks to these polycentric

system prerequisites asking stakeholders to “[...] provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels”. UN agencies, funds and programmes have increasingly seen the advantages of sharing information for the sake of improving joint programming and “responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels”. (UNGA, 2015, SDG16 and SDG16.7)

In more detail, target 16.10 commits stakeholders to “ensure public access to information and protect fundamental freedoms, in accordance with national legislation and international agreements.” (UNGA, 2015, SDG16.10) The SDG’s understanding of “public access to information” goes well beyond the conventional definition of public information, including i.a. legal and financial records, demographic and economic data. Information and data gathered no longer belongs to the perimeters of the collecting entity, but to the public at large. (UNGA, 2019b)

Individual UN entities have made significant progress in increasing internal information management and transparency. UNDP, UNEP and UNESCO’s access to information policies e.g. all outline their commitment to making information about policies, programmes and operations accessible to the public. (UNDP, 2020; UNEP, 2016; UNESCO, 2017)

In the UN development system, DCO plays a critical information and knowledge management role. It increasingly takes on the responsibility for the collection and analysis of data, as well as the sharing of information beyond the UN development system to governmental and non-governmental agencies. DCO’s information management capacity, however, remains limited and frequently requires the delegation of this task to other UN entities. (UN DSG, 2020)

Reports debating politically sensitive contexts are kept under a “classified” seal. Access to such documents is restricted to UN staff directly involved in the matter, often linked to staff seniority and allegiance to specific UN entities. (United Nations, 2007) The risk of over-using the seal is intrinsic to trying to delay or even avoid the publication of certain documents, retaining the access to information to an internal circle of privileged staff.

Modern technology and website access make it possible for staff, donors and people to access UN documents online. In the absence of a central repository of UN documents, it requires the patience to navigate user-unfriendly systems and a thorough search through country websites, agency websites and thematic websites. Once found, any meaningful engagement with UN documents requires the ability to speak and read one of the six official UN languages, with English, French and Spanish being the most common languages to access programmatic country documents. Beyond language skills, access to documents requires the reader to understand UN jargon, including a long list of specific expressions and acronyms.

Increased access to information is reciprocal to the ability of learning. Over the past years, the UN development system has placed more value on reviewing and evaluating its own country programmes. The most recent guidance on joint strategic planning requires the annual joint review of progress and failures of the UN development system towards implementing the 2030 Agenda. The

findings of such annual reviews lead to adjustments and changes of ongoing UN programmes, as well as to influence over global policy and guidance on future programming. Passing on operational lessons allows stakeholders beyond the UN, including individuals and grass-root organisations, to learn and improve their services to the public. (UN DOCO, 2019)

Access to justice aims at solving disagreements and disputes among UN entities, as well as between staff and UN entities. While the Secretary-General and resident coordinators handle inter-agency disputes at global and local level respectively, UN staff have access to agency specific administration and the UN Ombudsperson, typically co-located with UN regional commissions.

Given the non-binding nature of the 2030 Agenda, individuals, civil society organisations and private firms involved in the SDG implementation, do not have access to UN justice mechanisms. They merely have the prospect of addressing formal complaints on development issues, directly or through their community leaders and government representatives, to agencies at local, regional and global levels. While there is no formal response process in place, UN representatives are encouraged to consider individual complaints or refer them to appropriate authorities. UN workshops, consultations and community engagement projects often serve as the platform for individuals to express their dissatisfaction with the UN system, at the same time proposing solutions to increase accountability and adjust the system. Individuals may further influence their government representatives or permanent representatives to the UN in New York, as well as permanent NGO members in ECOSOC, to speak up in Principal Organs, such as the UN General Assembly or ECOSOC.

Attributes, essentials and prerequisites in mind, a simple governance solution is no longer a viable option to solving the complexity of global problems. They require the collective action of individuals, as much as of the public, private and third sectors at large. Ostrom considered polycentric systems to be the fundamental instrument for people to achieve sustainable self-governance and representation across multiple scales of jurisdiction. An increased level of polycentricity in the UN development system carries the Ostromian potential. It moves away from the state-centric thinking, increases the engagement of people – and their representatives across different sectors – in the design of UN rules and activities, and improves their ability to benefit from the SDG implementation.

Advantages and disadvantages of a polycentric UN development system

Opposed to the mainstream belief that centrality and monocentricity are the only means to efficient performance, studies have introduced a multitude of governance options, possibly overlapping and occurring at the same time at the same scale, on the spectrum between one extreme and the other. (Biermann et al., 2017; Klijn and Koppenjan, 2015) In the context of the UN development system, polycentricity is no panacea¹⁶. The extent of polycentricity varies on a case by case basis and co-exists

¹⁶ Ostrom used to highlight that “self-organized, polycentric systems are not a panacea!” (Ostrom, 2010b, p. 555)

with other forms of governance. Considering a polycentric perspective, it is important to highlight both the advantages and disadvantages revealed by decades of polycentric studies and inherent to polycentric systems. (Aligica and Tarko, 2012, p. 241; Carlisle and Gruby, 2017; Fotos, 2015, p. 68; Morrison et al., 2019, pp. 56–57; Ostrom, 2010a)

The application of polycentric governance is no longer exclusive to local administrations. Studies have shown its potential as the approach is increasingly applied to the commons and global public goods. (Cole, 2015; Dorsch and Flachslund, 2017; Jordan and Huitema, 2018; Ostrom, 2014; van Asselt and Zelli, 2018) It's recent application to the EU (Aligica, 2020; Vogler, 2020; Zeben and Bobić, 2019) and now to the UN development system show the potential to apply polycentricity at scale and to stimulate further studies on polycentricity in other parts of the UN System, such as the UN General Assembly or the Security Council.

Polycentric governance recognizes that different public services and goods require different scales of provision or production and see the polycentric approach as an alternative driver to increase efficiency. (Carlisle and Gruby, 2017; Ostrom, 1999; Ostrom et al., 1961) The affinity of the 17 SDGs articulated as part of the 2030 Agenda with global public goods (Kaul, 2013; Paulo, 2014) suggests that a polycentric UN enables collective action and accelerates their implementation at scale.

Studies found empirical evidence that polycentric governance increases the accountability to people as it increases the engagement of the public in shaping and implementing sustainable solutions to public concerns. In fact, polycentric systems encourage many different actors, at different scales, to take responsibility for their own and the public welfare. This includes an increased opportunity for self-governance as polycentric governance creates abundant means for local participation. Individuals are encouraged to create alliances and interest groups, as well as influence or even represent public offices themselves. (Aligica and Tarko, 2012; Ostrom, 1991; Zeben and Bobić, 2019)

The consultation process which led to the formulation of the SDGs and the unanimous agreement by the UN General Assembly to sign off on the 2030 Agenda has shown the polycentric potential of integrating people in local and global UN processes. An increasingly polycentric UN could unleash the potential to further engage individuals and communities in the design and implementation of development policy and action at local, regional and global levels.

From a normative perspective, the potential of the UN to act as a fertilizer of self-governance at multiple levels is an alternative endeavour to current institutional design thinking and the public reproach of disconnected multilateralism. More of a commitment to integrate polycentricity into UN rules and procedures than a question of polycentric representation and institutional membership, polycentric governance would bolster the UN as a platform for dialogue and sustainable solutions by accommodating a multiplicity of differing views.

Unlike other governance theories (Hanrieder, 2014; Nielson and Tierney, 2003), polycentric governance has the ability to capture lasting relationships between multiple entities at multiple scales. The diversity of UN agencies, funds and programmes working together within the UN development

system at local, national, regional and global level, and partnering with numerous external partners, captures the imagination of a growing polycentric development platform, resulting in the ability to solve global action problems beyond the parameters of their institutions, sectors and borders. However, as the development system grows beyond its current boundaries, greater polycentricity adds further complexity to an already complex UN system.

Within the overarching system of rules, polycentric governance creates opportunities for cooperation, experimentation and innovation. It allows different actors to concurrently evolve and implement distinguished small-scale and large-scale solutions to the same problem. (Aligica and Tarko, 2012; Carlisle and Gruby, 2017; Herzberg, 2015; Ostrom, 1994) Against the conventional perception that the overlap of entities' mandates leads to duplication of efforts and inefficient bureaucracy, a polycentric perspective suggests that overlap and competition among UN entities foster innovation and create a more robust system, able to better operate at multiple scales. If one entity fails to deliver, several others could step in to cooperate and to sustain the system.

Inability to sufficiently reflect on the role of the government and of power relationships between different actors, overburdening of pro-active individuals, unpredictable behaviour by the many different actors such as free-riding, free-following and cherry-picking, could all lead to gridlock and ultimate system failure. (Carlisle and Gruby, 2017; Morrison et al., 2019, p. 57) To anticipate the derailing of the UN development system, any analysis has to consider the diversity of the UN entities, and their power to influence each other as well as non-UN partners. In the UN development system, entities come in specific mandates, and distinct human and financial capacity. Different levels of authority create vertical relationships and influence system-wide rules and policy-making. The recently established DCO, responsible for coordinating the UN development system, plays an important role in taming these relationships. For as long as neither DCO nor any one entity centralises authority over others, the UN development system functions as a polycentric arrangement of inter-dependent entities.

Critics argue that polycentric systems display exceedingly high transaction costs evidenced by compounded consultation and coordination requirements. (Carlisle and Gruby, 2017; Morrison et al., 2019) To a large extent, the success of the UN development system in supporting governments in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, however, relies precisely on DCO's coordination capacity. While coordination, including information management and communication, is not immediately visible as a development goal, it is essential to collective action at multiple scales.

After all, there is no one governance solution that fits all context, and there is no exclusivity to polycentric governance. Rather, the advantages and disadvantages determine the degree to which a system benefits from polycentricity on a case by case basis. (Zeben and Bobić, 2019, p. 36)

Conclusions

The purpose of this paper was to explore the features of polycentric governance in the UN development system. Polycentricity in the UN has no polar application on offer. Rather, the analysis of

attributes, institutional essentials and prerequisites in the UN development system shows that it is a matter of the extent to which the UN is polycentric. The extent, in turn, is driven by two convergent dynamics: As part of reform efforts, member states asked that the UN development system, including its 40 independent agencies, funds and programmes, recalibrate its leverage to the ambition of the 2030 Agenda. To comply with this aspiration, the UN set in motion a comprehensive reform process aimed at increasing coherence and creating a collective UN identity. (UNGA, 2018)

This conventional UN-centric outlook, however, failed to fully articulate the development paradigm that underpins the SDGs. Five years into the 2030 Agenda, implementation challenges evidence that a UN-centric approach is insufficient to solve global collective action problems. More so, it risks the ambition of repositioning the UN, away from current critic on its legitimacy and efficiency. Mutually non-exclusive, polycentricity implies the ability to avert this risk by bridging the discrepancy between the UN-centric reform vision of member states and the multi-dimensional mission of the SDGs.

More of a commitment to integrate polycentricity into UN rules and procedures than to change institutional structures, an increased extent of polycentric governance emphasises the potential of the UN as a pivot of sustainable development by accommodating a multiplicity of differing views. The integration of individual voices and decentralisation of development programmes and projects revert to the ambition of the UN Charter and “put people first: their needs, their aspirations, their rights” (Guterres, 2019).

Acting as a fertiliser of self-governance at multiple levels is an alternative endeavour to conventional UN-centric thinking and offers a provoking perspective to future multilateralism. Increasing the extent of polycentricity might be the most promising, but also the most challenging element of addressing the debate about the usefulness of the UN, and international organisations more generally.

Polycentric governance is not a panacea to all UN problems. However, appropriately contextualised, a polycentric UN is bound to reposition the system as a transformational change agent able to influence stakeholder behaviour towards collective action and consequently accelerate the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

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