

**GLOBAL GOALS AS GLOBAL NORMS:  
WHAT GOAL-BASED GOVERNANCE CAN LEARN FROM POLITICAL THEORY**

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***Abstract:** Many of the SDGs and associated targets can fruitfully be understood as nascent global moral norms. Global moral norms are standards of appropriate behaviour expected of states and globally significant non-state actors that came about through concerted efforts inspired by normative ideals (like justice or human rights). Because of their location at the intersection of normative ideals and real-world attempts by political actors to alter their normative environment, global moral norms invite attention from both the normative and empirical branches of political science. In this paper, I argue that goals-as-norms can usefully be evaluated from two distinct perspectives. First, they can be evaluated in the light of social scientific research on how moral and social norms emerge, spread and effect change. Second, they can be evaluated in the light of normative political theory by asking whether and to what extent their instantiation would contribute to ideals such as basic rights. Combining these two sets of considerations may reveal hidden complementarities and trade-offs within individual SDGs as between their ideal-desirability and their potential to contribute to real-world change. These insights, in turn, can help practitioners to identify and prioritise the most promising goals and targets. For researchers, these insights offer numerous potential payoffs. They can be deployed to evaluate SDGs and targets, both *ex ante* and *ex post*, and to develop theoretical explanations for the (in)effectiveness of the goals and targets, informing both qualitative and quantitative empirical research.*

## **I Introduction**

The United Nations General Assembly in 2015 adopted 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as the core of its 2030 *Agenda for Sustainable Development*. The adoption of the SDGs also marked “the most ambitious effort yet to place goal-setting at the centre of global policy and governance” (Biermann, Kanie, and Kim 2017, 26). Global governance by goal-setting is distinguishable from hierarchical and market-based modes of global governance, since goal-setting does not rely for its normative authority on internationally legally binding instruments, such as international treaties, and does not rely for its implementation on substantial institutional arrangements at the intergovernmental level (ibid 26–27). This raises two immediate questions: on what normative authority do the SDGs rest? And on what social mechanisms for their implementation do they rest?

In this paper, I suggest that these two questions can be answered, at least in significant part, by analysing the SDGs and associated targets as putative *global moral norms*. A norm is a standard of appropriate behaviour that is expected of an agent with a particular identity (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998, 891). A global moral norm is a norm that (i) pertains to states and globally significant non-state actors (such as international organizations and multinational corporations) and (ii) originates from concerted attempts to change what counts as appropriate behaviour for those agents in line with a conception of justice or

ethics. Because global moral norms reflect attempts by political actors to alter the global normative environment, they invite attention from both the empirical/positive and critical/normative branches of political science. Accordingly, I will consider what positive and normative political theory might usefully contribute, respectively, to the evaluation of the SDGs' normative authority and their effective implementation.

The paper is structured as follows. In Part II, I outline some of the resources that positive political theory brings to the task of evaluating the likely adoption of the SDGs ("adoption" of a specific SDG being a precursor to implementation, as I shall discuss). Specifically, I draw on theory that has been developed through social scientific research into how moral and social norms spread and effect change, especially through processes of civil society-led *mobilisation* (primarily *within* countries) and government-led *socialisation* (primarily *between* countries). In Part III, I outline the resources that critical and normative political theory bring to the task of evaluating the SDGs, considered as global moral norms. In Part IV, I conclude with some suggestions as to how the positive and normative analysis of the SDGs can fruitfully be combined in the holistic evaluation of SDGs, and as to how these perspectives could be integrated more broadly into research and practice concerning the SDGs.

## II Positive political theory and the SDGs' implementation

In this section, I set out a positive political theory as to how goals, *qua* norms, can spread widely throughout the international system and have a significant causal effect on the identity-related considerations or rational calculations of states.<sup>1</sup> In so doing, this section elaborates on the mechanisms by which "mere" goals—which are not legally binding and do not have a significant multilateral body to implement them—could have any effect in the world. Biermann, Kanie, and Kim argue that "governance through goals works through the inclusiveness and comprehensiveness of the goal-setting process" (2017, 27, emphasis added). But while inclusiveness and comprehensiveness in the process of goal-setting no doubt increases the legitimacy of the goals and socialises them to a degree among the state and non-state actors involved (Chasek et al. 2016; Chasek and Wagner 2016; Gellers 2016), it is difficult to see how this alone could prompt effective *implementation* of the goals. At the very least, the potential causal pathways involved in the implementation phase of this type of governance seem underspecified. Drawing from a variety of social science literatures, especially social movement theory and international relations theory on state socialisation, I posit two such mechanisms: domestic social-political *mobilisation* by NGOs and social movements; and international *socialisation* by "champion" states. To clarify, I do not suggest that the SDGs *will* become effective through these mechanisms. Rather, I make the more modest claim that, *if* global goals such as the SDGs are to be effectively implemented, these two sets of processes are likely to be the operative ones. By reference to theoretical insights about the operation of these mechanisms, the SDGs can be evaluated as to their *likelihood* of effective implementation.

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<sup>1</sup> This part of the paper draws on Green (2018).

With respect to both mechanisms, the key theoretical concept I will use is the *feedback effect*, which can be defined, for present purposes, simply as an effect that a given political intervention has on a political variable which, in turn, is a cause of a relevant future effect. The political variables could be structural phenomena like institutions, resource distributions and available technology, or agential phenomena like the identities, values, and preferences of agents. The “policy feedback effect” is a theoretical construct widely employed by political scientists to explain how policy interventions are not only the effects of (past) politics, but also the causes of (future) politics and hence (future) policy outcomes (see, e.g., Pierson 1993). A policy intervention can have “positive” feedback effects, reinforcing the direction of the original change over time and/or “negative” feedback effects, causing political counter-reactions that work against the original change (ibid). Policy feedback effects are beginning to be employed insightfully by political scientists working on the politics of environmental and climate policy (e.g. Lockwood 2013; Urpelainen 2013). But it is not only *policy* interventions that have feedback effects: norms also exhibit complex dynamics that can appropriately be analysed in terms of feedback effects (Green 2018). The below discussion explicates the generic processes by which the SDGs are likely to have positive feedback effects.

#### **A**     *Political mobilisation within countries*

First, I posit that one mechanism of governance through goals involves civil society actors such as NGOs putting pressure on governments ‘from below’ through political mobilisation, i.e. “facilitating, motivating and galvanising individuals to actively participate” in politics (Klandermans 1997). Mobilising people around new norms and ideas requires effectively *framing* the norm in order to raise awareness and attract support among the wider public, building *alliances* among distinct groups with similar objectives, and forging *networks* across multiple levels and scales of operation (Bomberg 2012).

With regard to framing, three findings about the links between framing and political mobilization are pertinent across relevant literatures (Benford and Snow 2000; Finnemore and Sikkink 1998; Gauri 2012). Synthesising from this literature, I have noted that frames are likely to be more resonant where they are (Green 2018, 107):

- (i) Intuitively plausible to lay audiences, in that they appeal to common sense understandings of (a) facts/reality (e.g. personal experience and simple facts, rather than requiring complex cognitive tasks or technical expertise) and (b) values/morality (e.g. values that are widely-shared and intuitive, rather than narrowly-shared and requiring complex utilitarian calculations);
- (ii) Relevant to the audience’s everyday concerns and priorities; and
- (iii) Delivered by messengers perceived by the target audience to be credible and in an authoritative forum or context relevant to that audience.

Motivating more engaged forms of participation in collective action (such as participation in protests and other social movement activities) is likely to additionally require frames that trigger intense emotions such as moral indignation or pride (Jasper 2011).

In light of these insights, we can evaluate the potential for the SDGs and associated targets to resonate with potential supporters. A key asset, from the perspective of framing, is that 11 of the 17 headline goals appeal to intuitively plausible objects (poverty, hunger, clean water, etc.). Moreover, where the goals refer to numbers, these are simple to understand (e.g. “zero poverty”, “no hunger”). (I note that six of the goals are not in fact goals at all, but simply thematic labels under which the associated clusters of targets effectively become the relevant goals; hereafter references to “goals” should thus be read as references to “goals/targets” unless the context suggests otherwise).

Having said that, the goals have a number of liabilities from a framing perspective. Many of the goals involve ambiguous or imprecise terms that effectively mean that much will depend on how these terms are defined, or which targets within those goals become salient (examples include: “good health and well-being”, “decent work and economic growth”, “reduced inequalities”, “sustainable cities and communities”, “responsible production and consumption”, and “climate action”). Furthermore, many of the targets underneath the goals invoke technical concepts, numbers and measures. Consider, for example, target 3.1 under the health and wellbeing goal: “reduce the global maternal mortality ratio to less than 70 per 100,000 live births”. Though undoubtedly useful for technocrats seeking to implement the goals, this language undermines the potential resonance of the targets/goals with lay audiences, and does not augur well for their successful implementation *via a social-political mobilisation process* (see also Vauri 2012 regarding the MDGs).

Target 3.1, just mentioned, illustrates a further problem with respect to framing: many of the targets are specified at the aggregate, global level. This is doubly unfortunate from the perspective of mobilising social movements. First, an aggregate global goal is almost by definition not relevant to the everyday concerns and priorities of most ordinary people. Of course, maternal mortality (for example) *itself* is a highly salient issue in many communities around the world, but we didn’t need to put it in an SDG target to know that; the point is to see whether *the SDG (and associated targets)* has potential to resonate among a wider population, and so attract additional political support relative to a counterfactual baseline scenario without the SDG. Second, since most movements primarily seek directly or indirectly to influence the policies of national and subnational governments, it is difficult to see how globally-framed goals could serve as useful focal points for their activism. That said, a number of the goals, such as “zero poverty”, “no hunger”, and “affordable and clean energy”, have potential to resonate with a wide range of domestic audiences *and* can relevantly be applied at the national and subnational level.

The second key aspect of political mobilisation is alliance-building. Goals and targets are more likely to be focal points around which diverse groups can build politically-significant alliances when they simultaneously address the distinct but overlapping concerns of multiple groups (Baumgartner and Jones 2009; Bomberg 2012; Klandermans 1997). Goals and targets likely to perform better on this score are either (i) those that are framed more broadly, so as to effectively encompass multiple issues that (but for the SDG/target) might not otherwise have been lumped together (e.g. “reduced inequalities”; “sustainable cities and communities”, “sustainable production and consumption”), or (ii) those that govern a

specific object that is of concern to multiple communities for different reasons (for example, under the “life under water” goal, multiple groups might be concerned about marine pollution for different reasons). By contrast, those goals and targets that govern a specific object that is of interest to only one or a few distinct groups may present limited options for alliance building.

With regard to the third key aspect of mobilisation, network-formation, the potential for networks to form across scales will largely depend on the nature of the object being governed by the goal (Bomberg 2012, 417–18). If it is an issue that tends to be governed at multiple levels and in multiple parts of the world, and organisations committed to the issue exist to service these different levels of governance and across these different places, then the issue will be ripe for network-formation. Otherwise, it will not be.

## **B      *Socialization among countries***

The second set of processes by which the SDGs, *qua* norms, may spread and affect state behaviour occurs at the international level and involves attempts by proponents of a given goal, which I will call “champion states”,<sup>2</sup> to socialize other states (“target states”) to adopt it as a domestic policy. By “adopting” an SDG, I mean a clear indication in state rhetoric and/or practice (beyond their voting for the SDGs *as a whole package* in the UN General Assembly) that the state has chosen to incorporate the specific SDG in question into its national policy/planning agenda, and intends to meet it. Adoption can be seen as a significant, necessary step towards full implementation or achievement of the goal (though clearly not a sufficient step). Because adoption (as opposed to implementation) can in principle occur relatively quickly, the possibility arises for prominent adoptions to trigger other adoptions in quick succession, just as norms can follow a cycle of rapid adoption, once tipping points have been crossed, as I shall elaborate below (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998).

The analysis below makes the following assumptions, drawing on the literature on state socialization. First, it is assumed that the state is a corporate agent and that it is thus meaningful to conceptualise it as a distinct agent, while recognising that its behaviour is a function of many individual persons’ behaviour and interactions (Flockhart 2006). Second, following Flockhart (2006), a distinction is drawn between a state’s political elite (here defined as government officials) and the wider public. Third, it is assumed that the tactics by which champion states (via government officials) may seek to socialize target states include *modelling* appropriate behaviour (i.e. leading by example) (Thies 2003, 548–49), *persuasion* (attempting to change another’s mind using argument, without overt coercion) and *social influence* (eliciting pro-norm behavior through the distribution of social rewards and punishments such as praise/blame, esteem/disesteem, back-patting/opprobrium, inclusion/exclusion) (Johnston 2001, 496–506).<sup>3</sup> Together, these assumptions allow a more

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<sup>2</sup> A “norm champion” is an advocate of the norm. This may be (but need not be) the same as the “norm entrepreneur” who developed the norm (see Green 2018, 105, and references there cited for further discussion for the distinction).

<sup>3</sup> This formulation excludes *coercion* and the provision of *material incentives* (e.g. side-payments or sanctions). Scholars differ as to whether they include one or both of these within their respective definitions of socialization (compare, e.g., Flockhart 2006; Johnston 2001; Thies 2003, 548).

detailed specification of hypotheses about the micro-processes by which champions states' socialization tactics induce target states to adopt a given SDG.

Fourth, it is assumed that the motivations of states to adopt an SDG in light of socialization tactics may range from, at one extreme, a dominant "logic of appropriateness", whereby the target state accepts that adopting the SDG constitutes appropriate behaviour for it, in light of its perceived international identity or role conception (e.g. "developed state", "liberal state") to, at the other extreme, a dominant "logic of consequences", whereby the target state adopts the SDG because it rationally calculates that the benefits of doing so outweigh the costs (Choi 2015; March and Olsen 1996). In practice, a mixture of these "ideal-type" motivations is typical, and states'/officials' particular mix of motivations will differ from context to context (Choi 2015). This assumption facilitates flexibility in the analysis of state motivations for adopting an SDG, recognising that appropriateness and consequence logics may be convergent in some cases, divergent in others (Choi 2015, 120–22). It also facilitates rational choice analysis that aggregates *social* benefits (and costs) to states/officials, such as enhanced international reputation or status from adopting an SDG/target, with *material* costs (and benefits), such as the domestic net economic costs of adopting it (Johnston 2001, 502–6).

It is hypothesised that, in the early stages of the SDGs' international diffusion, rational champion states will use a combination of persuasion and modelling to try to socialize early adopters, and will focus on target states that meet the following two criteria: (i) the target state has an international *identity* or role conception linked to strong action on the issue governed by the SDG, such that non-adoption of the SDG would be strongly dissonant (e.g. for the "climate action" goal, if the state identifies as a "climate leader" or, more generally, a "progressive" state); and (ii) the perceived *material costs* to the target state from adopting the SDG are low (e.g., again for the climate action goal, the state is not a major producer and/or consumer of fossil fuels).

This hypothesis reflects the greater effectiveness of persuasion among like-minded peers relative to social influence tactics when a norm is not yet widely adopted among states (Johnston 2001, 509–10). Social influence tactics are likely to be relatively ineffective in the early stage of a norm's diffusion because the (international) social benefits accruing to early norm adopters are likely to be relatively low (Johnston 2001, 503–6). Accordingly, rational state champions of SDGs will seek to persuade state peers who share a common identity and face low material costs of adopting the SDG. Modelling appropriate behaviour also seems likely to be prevalent as an early stage tactic, as this allows for evidence of causal effectiveness to be accumulated as a norm begins to be implemented by an adopting state, enhancing the champion state's legitimacy and complementing persuasion tactics.

The diffusion of norms is not, however, simply a matter of persuading states, one-by-one; cases of successful international norm diffusion are characterized by positive feedback mechanisms. Specifically, we can expect the use of social influence tactics, and hence the identity dissonance and/or social costs (e.g. international opprobrium, reputational damage) to a non-adopting state, to grow as a function of the number of other states that have adopted the norm (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998, 902–4; Johnston 2001, 503–10). This feature

of norm diffusion gives rise to “tipping” dynamics: once a “critical mass” of states adopts a norm a “cascade” will be triggered, whereby many other states adopt it in rapid succession (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998). It is hypothesised that SDGs would follow this norm diffusion pattern (albeit with variation and uncertainty as to the “critical mass” from goal to goal) among states for whom motivations to adopt it are mixed and divergent (Choi 2015, 120–22)—i.e. they have either a strong identity attached to the issue governed by the goal but high perceived material costs of adoption or a weak identity concerning the issue in question but low perceived material costs of adoption. For such states, the rising social costs to non-adoption (social benefits to adoption) as the norm spreads would push them toward adoption.

Of course, there are likely to be holdout states that resist the diffusion of specific SDGs (if they get to that stage). For example, we can hypothetically expect states with powerful and/or growing fossil fuel industries, and which do not identify as progressive climate leaders, to resist the “climate action” goal, as countries in the OPEC group have done for decades. For such states, rational calculation is likely to be their dominant motivation and the perceived material benefits of non-adoption are likely to exceed the associated social costs.

Of course, the SDGs will not magically dissolve the material incentives for certain countries to continue unsustainable development practices, such as fossil energy-dependent modes of consumption, production and economic growth. The crucial point is, rather, that the feedback mechanisms associated with the spread of norms nonetheless have the potential to *affect* these states. Theory on norm diffusion predicts that the *social* costs—to reputation, status etc.—on holdouts to adopt a norm will become highly intense when only a few of them remain (Jacquet 2015, 71–74). Consequently, holdout states must spend considerable political/diplomatic capital to mitigate international opprobrium (see, e.g., Klotz 2002 on apartheid South Africa and pre-abolition US). Over time, these costs can become unsustainable, leading to a change of position. In this way, “naming and shaming” can indeed act as an enforcement strategy for the SDGs, pressuring recalcitrant countries to “nudge their programmes forward” (Biermann, Kanie and Kim 2017, 28).

Additionally, these international pressures can have positive feedback effects within the wider polity of holdout states that can also lead to a shift in position over time. These can be theorized as interactions between international socialization processes and domestic political mobilization processes. First, widely adopted global norms can provide a focal point around which civil society actors in holdout states can mobilize and which legitimizes their claims (Dai 2010). Second, widely adopted norms provide a benchmark against which a holdout state can be held accountable by third parties, including domestic civil society actors, even though that state has not adopted the norm. This further increases the moral and political pressure on states to adopt the norm (Dai 2010; Keck and Sikkink 1996, 24).

As adoption and implementation of the SDGs progresses become more widespread, opportunities will arise to test these hypotheses.

### III Normative political theory and the SDGs' normative authority

In this section I will discuss what critical and normative political theory can contribute to the task of evaluating the SDGs. I should note that I will not cover the contribution of normative theory to the analysis of the *process* by which the SDGs were created — what political theorists refer to as “procedural justice” or what governance scholars sometimes refer to as “input legitimacy”. Though this itself raises interesting and important normative questions, it is beyond the scope of the present analysis.

Normative analytic political theory aims to construct the most justifiable concepts, principles and theories, concerning ideals such as justice, rights, duties, wellbeing, liberty and equality. One way of dividing up contemporary discussions in this sub-field is to distinguish between liberal-egalitarianism and utilitarianism.

Liberal egalitarianism is the dominant paradigm of contemporary western political philosophy. It is concerned with the social, economic and political relations that ought, as a matter of justice, to apply among persons considered as ‘free and equal’. Theories of justice within this tradition typically specify principles concerning the allocation of (moral) *rights* and corresponding *duties* within a political community. Such rights are commonly theorized as intermediate concepts that protect the most weighty interests that all persons have as human beings – many of which (health, shelter, free expression and so on) pertain to *well-being* (cf. Raz 1988, 181).<sup>4</sup> Liberal egalitarian theories of justice thus seek to “identify ‘moral thresholds’ below which people should not fall” in the interests of ensuring that all enjoy a minimum standard of well-being (Caney 2010, 72). To be entitlements of justice, though, such rights need to be owed to a person by some other agent (be it other individual persons, the state, or other corporate agents).

Cosmopolitan theorists of justice argue that individuals are the relevant units of justice and that the scope of justice is global, meaning rights and enjoyed and duties are owed across borders, to all persons (Caney 2016, 239). In this respect, normative theorising about justice has much in common with the idea of “human rights”, though the latter is often understood in terms of international law, rather than the more abstract theories of justice developed in political theory. Over the last two to three decades, much cosmopolitan scholarship has sought to incorporate environmental impacts — at least insofar as they affect others — into its theorising about justice (ibid). Recognising that the fulfilment of rights has both environmental preconditions and environmental impacts, cosmopolitans such as Simon Caney argue that theories of justice must place limits on the consumption of natural resources so that efforts to fulfil the rights of some do not undermine the preconditions for the fulfilment of others’ rights (ibid 249). While cosmopolitan theories of justice are contested, they offer a plausible lens through which to evaluate global goals, such as the SDGs, as I shall illustrate shortly.

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<sup>4</sup> Alternatively, rights can be justified intrinsically, either as “natural rights”, or by reference to the status of persons as autonomous agents worthy of respect, as with scholars in the Kantian tradition.

Whereas liberal-egalitarians seek to ensure a minimum threshold of well-being for each individual person, utilitarians seek to maximize the aggregate sum of expected well-being (also known as “utility”) across all persons globally, or at least all members of a polity.<sup>5</sup> Figuring out what would maximize utility is an informationally demanding task, which requires many empirical assumptions about the likely impacts of our actions. A less informationally demanding form of utilitarianism that is also more in keeping with the rule-based nature of rule-of-law societies is “rule utilitarianism”. Rule utilitarians seek to specify *rules* that would *tend* to maximize aggregate well-being, at least within a given polity.

The SDGs and the specific targets accompanying them can be evaluated in the light of various principles and theories of distributive justice and against utilitarian ideals. In particular, if we think of global goals as norms that the international community is seeking to instantiate at national and subnational level, then both justice-based and rule-utilitarian standards can be applied to evaluate such norms. We can ask: are these norms that, if instantiated, would advance the cause of justice or utility maximisation?

From a justice-based perspective, the SDGs generally can be evaluated as deficient insofar as they do not anchor the goals in (justice-based or human rights-based) rights language, implying that the goods to be provided under the goals—such as access to water, sanitation and food—are not basic entitlements, but mere aspirations (Pogge and Sengupta 2015, 576–77). This linguistic choice significantly mitigates the goals’ normative potential, since the idea of rights has significant social power, particularly in rights-based socio-legal cultures. Additionally, concerns may be raised about the extent to which the goals would secure what liberal egalitarian theorists would consider to be basic minimum thresholds of wellbeing. For example, the poverty reduction goal includes the target to “eradicate extreme poverty for all people everywhere, currently measured as people living on less than \$1.25 a day”. However, this income-based measure is likely to be insufficient from the perspective of the income needed to meet basic needs protected by rights, while also failing to capture the diverse factors that cause poverty (ibid 579–80). Likewise, liberal egalitarians would likely condemn the weakness of the inequality goal, targets and metrics in the SDGs for focusing excessively on the growth in income of the bottom 40% while insufficiently addressing the top-end of the income and wealth distribution, and the relationships between the top and the bottom (ibid 580–84). These are but a few illustrations of the kinds of criticisms that normative political theorists have offered or could offer to the evaluation of the SDGs.

Whereas the normative analytical political theory considered so far “is free-standing and its consideration of politico-moral issues is guided by ideas of analytical clarity and argumentative rigour”, critical social/political theorists regard normative reflection as intrinsically connected to the *critical assessment of existing social and political arrangements* (McNay 2008, 85). One particular area of concern for many critical theorists in recent decades has been the notion of *recognition* (see ibid). Scholars of recognition “proceed from the insight that it is only possible to think meaningfully about desirable political

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<sup>5</sup> Some utilitarians argue for a wider scope, applying utilitarianism to, for example, all sentient beings (i.e., roughly, all beings that can experience pleasure and pain).

arrangements if individuals are conceived not as abstract ends in themselves but as constitutively situated with a specific social context" (ibid 85). In this way, "the idea of recognition has become a dominant way of representing the increasingly central role played by identity claims in social and political conflict" (ibid 87).

Critical theories, including those concerned with questions of recognition, also offers useful resources for the evaluation of the SDGs. In particular, the various goals and targets can be scrutinised to expose the assumptions that are made about the subjects they are intended to govern; and in turn to consider how differently constituted subjects—those with currently marginal identities, or members of historically oppressed groups, for example—might perceive the goals' aspirations. Of particular relevance here are the social or status inequalities—of class, sexual orientation, (dis)ability, indigeneity, and many others—that pervade contemporary societies, and that are not, or not adequately, recognised in the SDGs. Given the importance of social standing to sustainable development (Nussbaum 2000, 2011; Sen 1999), ideals of recognition provide a basis for both normatively critiquing the assumptions and contents of the SDGs and questioning their likely effectiveness. An additional role for critical theories concerns the evaluation of metrics associated with SDG targets, which may privilege western knowledge systems over, for example, indigenous and other non-western knowledge systems that also make legitimate claims to relevance in achieving the SDGs.

In sum, normative analytic political theory presupposes that there is an objective, universal, correct normative position (about which theorists debate) concerning the basic entitlements/rights (and duties) of individuals, or about (the rules according to which) to maximise aggregate net benefits to society. *Insofar as a proposed theory/principle/rule is accepted*, then, it can provide normative resources for evaluating the SDGs in light of purportedly objective and universal standards. Critical theorists and theorists of recognition, on the other hand, reject the notion that such standards exist, and seek to anchor their normative visions in a critique of existing social institutions made from the perspectives of the thick social identities of socially-constituted subjects. This provides a different set of resources for evaluating the SDGs: in the light of the groups whose social identities or knowledge systems are marginalised in the assumptions, goals, targets and metrics of the SDGs.

#### **IV Conclusion**

In this paper I have outlined some key resources that positive/empirical and critical/normative work in political science can bring to bear in the analysis and evaluation of global goals (specifically the SDGs) as governance tools, insofar as they can be considered as global moral norms.

Combining these two sets of considerations may reveal hidden complementarities and trade-offs *within* individual SDGs as between their ideal-desirability and their potential to contribute to real-world change. The most promising goals and targets are those that are both highly normatively desirable and that have features that render them apt to be promoted through both domestic mobilisation and international socialisation. In any event, analysing the attributes of a given goal or target in light of these considerations can help

practitioners and proponents of the SDGs to prioritise goals and targets to focus on, depending on their strategic and tactical strengths.

For researchers, these insights offer at least two potential payoffs. First, they can be deployed to evaluate the SDGs and targets, both *ex ante* and *ex post*, in terms of their normative desirability and likely effectiveness as normative influences on state behaviour. Second, they can (especially those developed in Part II) be used to develop theoretical explanations for the (in)effectiveness of the goals and targets, informing both qualitative and quantitative empirical research.

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