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Bottom-up regionality and the Sustainable Development Goals: civil society organizations shaping 2030 Agenda implementation in Latin America

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Abstract

Civil society organizations (CSOs) are shaping the formation of a bottom-up regionality in the context of the 2030 Agenda implementation. Using the Latin America and Caribbean (LAC) region as a case, this article unravels the pivotal role they play in the diffusion and incorporation of the Sustainable Development Goals. Drawing from qualitative content analysis of official documents, critical discourse analysis of primary and secondary sources, and semi-structured interviews, we understand CSOs as institutional entrepreneurs with specific motivations to engage and influence the regional governance process. While many challenges persist, civil society organizations are shaping 2030 Agenda implementation in LAC.

Keywords: Regionality; 2030 Agenda; Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs); Latin America and Caribbean; Brazil; Civil Society Organizations.

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Introduction

All regions are off track to achieve the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030. Based on current trends, projections for Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) are that the region will only achieve 25% of SDG targets by 2030, while 48% of the targets are progressing but are unlikely to be fully attained, and the remaining 27% are regressing (Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean 2023). This situation requires in-depth reflection of SDG governance and their political impacts in different regions (Biermann et al. 2022).

As Gresse (2023, 9) points out, "the lack of political momentum and societal support for sustainability transformations" has been one of the main factors hindering implementation progress

on the 2030 Agenda. In a context of dwindling cooperation, growing skepticism of multilateralism, and erosion of public trust in governments and institutions, civil society organizations (CSOs) become pivotal for the transformation toward a more sustainable future. In the words of Alicia Barcena, CSOs can act like "visionaries who are looking ahead and who can lead the process."[1]

Indeed, non-state actors have been key players in the 2030 Agenda since its inception. Civil society representatives were instrumental in influencing the content of the SDGs (Fox and Stoett 2016; Sénit and Biermann 2021). They have helped "localize" goals and targets in different domestic contexts (Llanos et al. 2022; Ningrum et al. 2023), and they have held governments accountable for their commitments (Siegel and Bastos Lima 2020; Galvão and Ramiro 2023a). Nevertheless, these actors play more than just an auxiliary role. They may also be initiative takers and either pursue new ideas as norm or policy entrepreneurs domestically, or engage in transnational cooperative efforts (see Flohr et al. 2010; Huitema and Meijerink 2010). With the 2030 Agenda, SDGs have become a key space for CSOs to play a creative role in regional integration. CSOs not only react or respond to state (in)action on their commitments, but may also materialize SDG-related achievements and go beyond policy advocacy.

This article addresses civil society's understudied roles in the SDGs framework, focusing on discursive and practical dynamics in the Forum of the Countries of Latin America and the Caribbean on Sustainable Development (henceforth Forum LAC). It, therefore, takes a Global South perspective on regionalism regarding the 2030 Agenda implementation. More specifically, we focus on how CSOs – acting as norm entrepreneurs – have promoted the dissemination and incorporation of SDGs in formal spaces in the Latin America and Caribbean region. Such engagement presumably advances a specific regionality, based on their historical struggles, specific demands, and particular embeddedness of these social actors in their territories.

This assessment draws on a qualitative content analysis of an array of official documents and a critical discourse analysis of primary and secondary sources, including reports from the Economic Commission on Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) on regional progress and challenges regarding the 2030 Agenda, as well as countries' Voluntary National Reviews on SDG implementation. In addition, we have examined civil society reports on the 2030 Agenda and conducted 12 semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders from governments, international organizations, and CSOs.

The article is structured as follows. First, we detail the SDGs' framework regarding "governance through global goals" and the role of LAC CSOs therein. Second, we present our qualitative-interpretive research approach and data-collection methods. Third, we provide our results on CSO motivations and forms of engagement with the 2030 Agenda in the LAC region. Finally, we assess challenges and opportunities, as well as future perspectives related to the SDGs in the region.

[1] United Nations – UN. Alicia Bárcena Biography. http://foroalc2030.cepal.org/2019/en/node/53.

CSOs under governance through goals: A theoretical framework

The main theoretical reference for discussing the implementation of the 2030 Agenda is governance by goal-setting and through global goals. It relies on non-legally binding objectives and discretion in domestic implementation, aiming for inclusive participation and steering effects with orchestration and norm diffusion, as in the case of SDGs (Biermann et al. 2017; Vijge et al. 2020). That governance approach leaves broad room for what has been termed SDG politics – processes of contestation over how the goals and targets are interpreted, institutionalized, and implemented (or not) in different country contexts (Siegel and Bastos Lima 2020). We can also speak of an SDG culture, which draws a roadmap generating political guidance and modulating expectations that induce commonalities across the board. That involves a logic of inclusion and care, the resilience of people and institutions in the face of human challenges, social equity, and the incorporation of ideas that connect global scientific beliefs (mirrored in the 2030 Agenda and its Goals) with local demands and interests (Cabral and Galvão 2022). Politics and culture, thus, define the background against which this governance creates a sort of 2030 international order on sustainable development (Galvão 2020).

Those dynamics intersect with processes of regionalization and regionalism as part of the asymmetrical globalization of the world (Santos 2008). Notably, when Andrew Hurrell explains the resurgence of regionalism in world politics, he addresses among many features that "regionalization can also involve (...) the creation of a transnational regional civil society" (Hurrel 1995, 334). As Fawcett and Serrano (2005, 43) point out, "Latin America is perhaps unique in terms of the size and number of such groups, but also of their relative power." As such, the LAC region's recent integration process has been marked by "activists beyond borders" in Keck and Sikkink's (1998, 11) terminology.

In that sense, transnational advocacy networks may have already been influencing a bottom-up regionality around the 2030 Agenda and SDG implementation. This idea of "bottom-up regionalism" was originally conceived to describe the concerted efforts of local players to integrate regions within countries (Bollens and Caves 1994; Willett and Giovannini 2013). However, the term has also received growing attention in the international sphere. In an increasingly interconnected globe, transnational networks and cross-border civil society engagement have gained salience as conduits for regional integration and become particularly critical for instances when politics or ideological orientation make governments refrain from playing that role (Igarashi 2018; Titifanue et al. 2020). We thus have the emergence of "regionalism from below" (Rosset et al. 2021) related to such a bottom-up process of building regionalisms based on social movements acting and thinking locally. These movements weave connections to grassroots experiences and bring local knowledge elements. They become part of a broader struggle to turn local troubles into a form of transnational activism network (Stewart 2006), with a very clear political dimension that transcends technical aspects and serves marginalized and vulnerable populations.

This new conceptualization of regionalism detaches the concept of "region" from a state-driven perspective. Instead, it sees regions as social constructs shaped by people and their interconnected histories of struggles and conviviality. Regionalism thereby comprises a process of identity formation – or regionality – that builds mosaics of political interactions among non-state actors, established by the cultural connections of local subjects as well as communities of interests and emotions (Barbieri 2019; Goodwin et al. 2001). Regions of the world therefore function as geographic *forces profondes* (Renouvin and Duroselle 2010) that motivate people to form regionalities. Regionality, in turn, becomes a cognitive tool to apprehend reality through a territorial lens that sheds light on processes of alignment, convergence, translation, and the antagonization between local singularities and global designs (Kernalegenn 2021). Finally, a regional habitus (Bourdieu 1992) constitutes regionality by weaving social relations and tying inclinations and abilities that result from learning and incorporating ideas and values. This regional habitus tends to guide movements of collectives and groups of people – motivated by ideational aspects – to mobilize, select, and present in a certain way ideas and meanings to form a shared understanding of the world and of themselves that legitimizes and motivates collective action.

Recently, the diffusion and incorporation of the 2030 Agenda in LAC international relations have been influencing their regionality formation. Diffusion refers to how social actors make sense, engage with, and translate norms or practices established in different institutional settings elsewhere (Gresse 2023). Incorporation refers to the local redefinition of specific social roles stemming from the rhetorical and practical elements of localizing – or territorializing – global norms (Galvão and Ramiro 2023b). Incorporation and diffusion are, thus, the main elements used by social movements and CSOs on regionality formation.

The LAC's SDG arena encapsulates a mix of old and new organizations. On the one hand, some movements and CSOs were already part of this specific international ecosystem of participation, advocating from different backgrounds such as the environment, human rights, or specifically the fight for gender equality – particularly feminist movements. On the other hand, new and less traditional movements that include collectives fighting, for instance, for the rights of LGBTQIA+ populations and others, have gained momentum with the rise of the SDG order (see Almeida and Ulate 2015).

CSO agency is therefore key to understanding how the SDGs are reshaping a specific LAC regionality. The focus on activist agency (Stewart 2006, 200) allows one to understand how micro processes triggered within society by its participants affect macro processes such as regional integration. Civil society agency therefore refers to the capacity to access political spaces and pursue changes in the intertwined space of local-global politics and culture. The empowerment of different sectors of society characterizes the LAC region in terms of the constitution of a specific cultural framework, which encourages social inclusion and social policies such as those of decentralization, gender equality, and multiculturalism (Escobar 2010). Hence, one foundational observation in our research is the recognition of the relative power of non-governmental and civil society movements, whether labor, indigenous, or environmental groups in LAC.

Such civil society agency flourishes from participation, engagement, and mobilization efforts, qualifying CSOs as institutional or policy entrepreneurs. Institutional entrepreneurship refers to the concerted efforts of certain societal actors to create, modify, or destroy institutions – broadly understood as principles, norms, rules, or decision-making mechanisms (Battilana 2006; Weik 2011). That involves agency to frame problems and purported solutions in a certain way, including those pertaining to sustainability and regionality (Bastos Lima 2021). However, how exactly they have done that in SDG governance remains to be addressed.

Research approach and methods

This research adopts a qualitative-interpretative approach to build an overview of SDG incorporation and diffusion in the LAC region from a CSO perspective. It can be understood as "(...) a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns" (Hsieh and Shannon 2005, 1278). Our approach focuses on people, movements, and networks acting in the transnational public space of participation (Stewart 2006). A practical perspective in IR theories, meaning "practices that enact and give meaning to the world" (Cornut 2017, 1), would support the analysis of CSOs engagement in SDGs politics and culture. The researchers' living experiences with the subject motivated them to adopt a practical IR perspective (Wille 2018) and a participant observation approach (Johnston 2014). From this point, it was possible to capture useful insights about the way CSOs and their representatives engage in the Forum LAC to shed light on the reasons for their participation, the decisions they make, how they see their actions, and the impacts their actions would have.

Our data collection relies on a combination of two main methods. First, we have examined ECLAC's annual reports on regional progress and challenges concerning the 2030 Agenda, countries' Voluntary National Reviews, and civil society reports. Second, we have triangulated these policy and document analyses with semi-structured online or in-person interviews with relevant stakeholders (Annex 1; see Johnston 2014). Between May and July 2023, we conducted 12 interviews, in Portuguese or Spanish, with stakeholders including representatives of civil society, international organizations, and government bureaucracies. We selected individuals based on their involvement with SDG implementation, mainly their role in the Forum LAC and its Mechanism for Civil Society Participation in the Sustainable Development Agenda. Using a snowball sampling technique, we then added stakeholders to our interview list.

We asked interviewees to comment on how they understood the governance and implementation of the 2030 Agenda in the region and in their own countries, whether and for which purposes they use the SDGs in their work, and to what extent they have participated in regional initiatives on the SDGs. Finally, we asked them to provide their perspectives on what a post-2030 Agenda should look like (See interview guide in Annex 2).

This approach allows for (i) the identification of underlying beliefs, values, and expectations held by CSOs and individuals regarding the implementation of the 2030 Agenda in the LAC region and (ii) the evaluation of the ambivalent steering effects that emerge from the relationship between CSO and SDGs. In addition, it highlights a (iii) contextualized approach to understand opportunities and challenges in implementing and monitoring SDGs in LAC; and (iv) unravels a CSO perspective in addressing the governance of the 2030 Agenda in the region.

Results: CSOs and the SDGs' diffusion and incorporation in LAC

Social Participation through global and regional governance

One of the main landmarks of the social participation process within the United Nations was establishing the "Major Groups" in the early 1990s, later renamed "Major Groups and Other Stakeholders" (Bäckstrand 2006). They are institutionalized tools for representation in UN settings, constituting independent spaces that cover nine themes ranging from "women" and "indigenous peoples" to "business" and "local authorities" (Sénit and Biermann 2021). Several Latin American CSOs currently involved with the SDGs have a participation *habitus* or the tendency to engage in the Major Groups debates, considered an important gateway for discussions in the UN system.

Another perspective on that historical involvement concerns the paradigmatic change from the MDGs to the SDGs. The MDGs were conceived top-down, in the offices of UN agencies and international organizations such as the OECD, based on the notion of development as overcoming basic needs, through market solutions and international cooperation (Jong and Vijge 2021). Nevertheless, their implementation involved the engagement of various state and non-state actors. By participating and understanding the limitations and possibilities of the MDGs, organized civil society was able to propose changes in the course of building the post-2015 agenda. As highlighted by one of the civil society representatives:

> The MDGs were geared to the needs of the countries and were not linked to the realities of the most vulnerable communities. Due to this more direct relationship with the national and not the local level, civil society had little participation. But it was important to get to know them because of their focus on combating poverty in all its dimensions, hunger, and diseases. It was the origin of our work on the SDGs (interview 08).

In turn, the SDG negotiation process initiated in 2012 is considered "the largest public and multistakeholder consultation in UN history" (Kanie et al. 2017). The Open Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals led it with the participation of around 70 representatives from

countries and space for action by organized civil society (UNGA 2013). The working group decision-making process was exclusive to country representatives, but civil society participated in defining the agendas of the meetings, as well as reviewing the documents produced and doing its independent reporting – generally critical of the outcomes – which was also made public along with the formal result (interview 08). This process served to include issues dear to civil society and as a way of holding governments accountable (interview 06; interview 07; interview 08).

Despite the perception of inclusiveness from CSOs' representatives, at the regional level, once the negotiation process takes over, the sense of participation gradually fades away, emulating a similar pattern at the High-Level Political Forum. There, the responsibility of overseeing and keeping track of SDG implementation moves away from society and becomes centralized in the states. According to one of the interviewees:

> Civil society has been left on the sidelines (...) We are increasingly being deprived of our voice or the ability to speak. Basically, civil society does not have open spaces in New York meetings. The only spaces are when countries present their reports, the VNR, and sometimes --- sometimes --- we are given two minutes to question the countries. Which is absurd, [as] in a couple of minutes it is very difficult to contest them when countries present real government programs (interview 08).

The perception of Latin American CSOs is that there has been a substantial decrease in participation compared to the negotiation process. In addition to the restricted spaces, funding has decreased, which makes the participation of smaller organizations even more challenging. Many therefore end up depending on volunteer work, besides language barriers and difficulties in accessing the internet in some parts of the world.

At the regional level, ECLAC as well as the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific were highlighted for their social participation initiatives (interview 08). These organizations' preparatory meetings for the High-Level Political Forum involve both an official statement from the positions agreed by government representatives and independent reports from civil society. ECLAC in particular has become a hub of communication and interface between governments and civil society regarding regional agendas (interview 07; interview 05; interview 01). It has historically shed skins and constantly tried to adapt and reinvent its mandate to mobilize regional integration depending on the development fashion of the time.

Under the 2030 Agenda, ECLAC created the Forum LAC as the institution responsible for following up and reviewing the SDG's implementation in the region. Between 2017 and 2023, the Forum launched six annual reports on regional progress and challenges regarding the SDGs, as a way to guide LAC governments and support their commitments before the global High-Level Political Forum. In 2017, Forum LAC also created the Mechanism for Civil Society Participation in the Sustainable Development Agenda, a space dedicated to CSOs, allowing them to present a

political declaration before the Forum plenary. These presentations of civil society declarations have both symbolic value and practical consequences, as they shed light on gaps left by the official reports negotiated by LAC governments.

CSO motivations to engage with the 2030 Agenda

Why do non-state actors invest their resources to engage in an agenda whose main responsibility for implementation and follow-up is attributed to states (Gresse 2023)? In general, the perception of CSO representatives is that such engagement is necessary to contest the official narratives about sustainable development in international forums. In addition, there is a perceived alignment between SDG politics and LAC countries' historical challenges on development. Therefore, CSOs participate in the Forum LAC because they understand the possibilities coming from that locus in terms of reinterpreting global norms as well as territorializing the SDG in a more progressive way (interview 06).

Moreover, we identify pragmatism as a cultural belief guiding CSOs on SDG implementation in the LAC region. They have recognized the SDGs' transformative potential as a tool to connect different interests and worldviews in a single coherent framework and action agenda (Siegel and Bastos Lima 2020). Therefore, the pragmatic identification with the 2030 Agenda has a steering effect in aligning multiple distinct CSOs working on subjects as varied as transgender rights and environmental sustainability. Furthermore, such pragmatism seems motivated by an interest in learning from the experiences of other countries as well as in networking to create additional institutional entrepreneurship opportunities. Networks and alliances of CSOs that used to have certain difficulties trying to articulate a common voice and position in regional fora began to do so by visually and vocally referencing themselves as part of the same club of SDG culture promoters (Galvão and Ceccato 2021). Indeed, the SDGs have created a new space for experience and dialogue, as well as confrontation and resistance between governments and non-governmental actors.

Nonetheless, there is an essential tension between the 2030 Agenda's aspirational character and CSOs' pragmatism. Despite the Agenda's general appeal to "transform the world," CSOs depend on financial support, political influence, and social visibility. Therefore, the use of the 2030 Agenda is discursive (interview 06), enhancing the possibilities of holding governments accountable, as well as in opening pathways for learning about experiences in other countries and promoting networking, but usually towards previously defined advocacy agendas that CSOs already had.

ECLAC's Mechanism for Civil Society Participation in the Sustainable Development Agenda

Despite recognizing progress in terms of places for social participation in the SDG debates and particularly within the Forum LAC, CSOs initially expressed dissatisfaction with the process of

preparing ECLAC's official declarations. They complained that only governments agreed upon the final documents of the first summits, without genuine opportunities for other actor's participation. That situation then led to the creation of the Mechanism for Civil Society Participation in the Sustainable Development Agenda as a permanent locus for civil society participation in the region, adjacent to – but independent from – the Forum LAC.

Despite the resistance of some government representatives, the Mechanism is considered a more effective space for civil society participation than the global High-Level Political Forum, for example. LAC CSOs report widely using it to uphold some of their long-standing banners and hold governments accountable (interview 05; interview 06; interview 07; and interview 08). CSOs participating in the Mechanism are clustered into 20 working groups, which fall under three main categories: (i) subregional groups, (ii) stakeholder groups, and (iii) thematic groups. Every two years, each working group elects a focal point and a deputy to form a coordination and management body called the Liaison Committee.

Typically, the CSOs currently following the regional process of monitoring and evaluating progress on the 2030 Agenda tend to have previous experiences with international development and the environment. For instance, the stakeholders who participate in the Mechanism have generally engaged previously in forums, conferences, or projects in the UN system or other international organizations, as well as transnational networks. That is, they are organizations and actors that have the knowledge, training, and resources to participate in international discussions (interview 05; interview 06; interview 07; interview 08). They can be referred to as "a transnational civil society" who know the rules and codes that allow them to access international spaces.

The Forum's statements usually highlight the primordial role of organized civil society in achieving the SDGs and recognize the importance of the Mechanism, yet CSO positions vis-à-vis that of country representatives normally stress their tensions and contradictions. Since its inception, the Mechanism has been very critical of the dynamics in the 2030 Agenda's official fora, as demonstrated by the following statements, "They want to leave us behind. And we will not allow it." (2017) and "Two monologues do not make a dialogue" (2019)[2].

With increased freedom to advocate their positions, Latin American CSOs have thus become ever more assertive. This involves topics that have historically been central to LAC social movements but that were never addressed or explicitly stated in the UN Resolution launching the 2030 Agenda or High-Level Political Forum declarations. For instance, human rights-based approach, fighting any form of discrimination, LGBTQIA+ and anti-racist banners, intercultural approaches, or the incorporation of regional agendas such as the Montevideo Consensus on Population and Development.

[2] https://agenda2030lac.org/en/civil-society

Discussion: Persistent challenges and new opportunities

While ECLAC's openness through the Mechanism for Civil Society Participation has helped strengthen sustainable development advocacy in LAC, many challenges remain. The fact that the SDGs' framework has led to open spaces for voicing problems does not mean they are necessarily addressed (see Bastos Lima and Da Costa 2022). Instead, there is a tendency for governments and international organizations responsible for SDG implementation to conceal their mistakes and blame events such as the COVID-19 pandemic as well as economic crises and wars for their shortcomings.

Moreover, there remains a gap between the lip service paid to civil society participation and the mechanisms for its effective involvement in decision-making. Various constraints remain, such as logistical, financial, or administrative, notably for smaller CSOs and weaker stakeholders. That remains a key issue within a context of competition between more and less prepared and engaged organizations in international political processes. Furthermore, there remains an intentional reaction within government bureaucracies to stop the most combative organizations and "neutralize or co-opt social potentially anti-systemic movements" (Korzeniewicz and Smith 2005, 142). The monitoring of decisions and agreements reached by countries remains challenging, and the continuity of such CSO efforts are inevitably conditioned upon the availability of resources. Finally, some CSO representatives report a sentiment of fatigue due to the lack of progress on major global commitments and the rise of far-right populism as a counterforce in politics (interview 07).

It is possible to infer that mere participation in dedicated fora is not enough to promote deep transformations in regional integration processes. Promoting the participation of civil society is, therefore, necessary but not sufficient to construct a new bottom-up regionalism and transnationality. LAC's case shows that the level of permeability of government policy to civil society ideas is not secure and ends up depending on the political mood of the moment. In regional negotiations, it may swing from high to moderate or low acceptance of the social issues CSOs espouse (Chadid and Cavalcante 2020). In some cases, such as Brazil's, there is also a permanent bureaucratic filter that curbs civil society participation in terms of ideas or demands and decants these into a more state-centric framing in the final documents. As seen, the positions expressed in civil society declarations within the Mechanism for Civil Society Participation continue to exhibit predominantly resistance and confrontation vis-à-vis the official positions of the Forum LAC.

That said, the 2030 Agenda paradigm has also created opportunities for CSOs. One clear opportunity already in motion is introducing a non-state-centric approach and a more flexible context of action. An SDG culture and politics based on regionality has already generated a steering effect to induce CSO alignment across borders in terms of language, procedures, and discursive strategies. Like-minded organizations using the SDGs as a frame already organize themselves across national boundaries in spaces such as the Forum LAC's Mechanism and beyond, thus creating a transnational civil society movement of regionality inside the traditional borders of formal state-oriented regionalism.

The creation of a regional space for bringing together experiences on the 2030 Agenda has been critical in this regard. ECLAC therefore stands out by providing an independent venue for social participation within the Forum since 2017. Despite facing resistance from some government representatives, the Mechanism for Civil Society Participation in the SDGs is considered a step forward in enhancing civil society engagement, particularly when compared to the MDGs. That builds on previously existing subsidiary institutions such as the Regional Commission on Population and Development, which defined the Montevideo Consensus (2013), and the Escazú Agreement (2018) that opened space for civil society to defend the rights of environmental activists.

Future perspectives

The idea of a better future for LAC on sustainable development is a mobilizing political force. Thinking about the future is a way to reorganize the political efforts of multiple actors to transform cultural references in global politics from national governments to local communities' leaderships. The 2030 Agenda has established a horizon of expectations (Koselleck 2006) that defines aspirations and goals with a clear purpose and temporality. The SDGs, therefore, become key to dealing with real preoccupations of the present while foreseeing a different future.

One current preoccupation concerns the future of democracy in the LAC region. SDGs have close ties with democracy, and the exercise of participative democracy is central to building bottom-up regionality. Therefore, one major interest of CSOs dealing with development has been to foster transparency in governmental actions and to fully enforce the rule of law (Serbin 2012). As governance by goal-setting demands a high level of orchestration, the strengthening of democracy is paramount for dealing with the complexities of the 2030 Agenda in terms of territorialization, financing, and synergies (Galvão 2020).

For instance, the strengthening of Brazilian democracy through participatory institutions such as councils, commissions, and national conferences enhanced CSO's influence on the formation and implementation of its foreign policy vis-à-vis the LAC region. In that respect, center-left governments tended to include CSO representatives in their delegations at Forum LAC and incorporate their demands in the country's official positions. Conversely, when the far-right Bolsonaro administration (2019-2022) downplayed regional integration in South America, CSOs continued to play a strategic role – albeit facing operational difficulties – participating in regionality-building efforts (Siegel and Bastos Lima 2020; Casarões and Farias 2022).

Another key question relates to the urgent call to strengthen long-term sustainability in a systematic way. LAC CSOs have emphasized there needs to be a greater focus on youth and their ability to change the course of SDG policies and culture as part of paving the way for a post-2030 agenda (interview 03). ECLAC's annual reports generally have a prospective section, with scenarios for the region until 2030. Yet a post-2030 perspective on a sustainable development agenda may be needed in order to outline some real possibilities of change made through SDG incorporation and diffusion. In this regard, some ideas voiced by LAC CSO representatives

include the need to redesign the SDGs, focusing on priority objectives and reducing their scope (interview 02; interview 07), and the possibility of making them – at least in part – legally binding (interview 01; interview 03).

That said, there are concerns about how the prioritization of environmental SDGs and the global debate on climate change could affect *Our Common Agenda*, considered the UN Secretary-General's vision for the future of global cooperation. A future common agenda or a post-2030 Agenda would, however, need to promote a more synergistic approach to the reduction of inequalities (SDG 10), gender equality (SDG 5), and racial equality (SDG 18, in the words of President Lula da Silva).[3] In addition, it would be necessary to explicitly consider data disaggregation that goes beyond the division by sex and age in order to design indicators based on race, territoriality, or gender to allow for an intersectional view of global challenges (interview 08). That would, in turn, help improve analyses on the links between objectives, enhance synergies, and more clearly understand trade-offs (interview 09). Finally, social participation remains key to the future of bottom-up regionality. In the words of one of the most important leaders of civil society movements in the Forum LAC, "we need to be united; separated [they] will kill [us] again" (interview 12).

Conclusion

SDG diffusion has significantly influenced Latin American regionality, with CSOs acting as critical institutional entrepreneurs. Yet, without strengthening democracy, the 2030 Agenda's enormous undertaking will remain contested. We show herein that the conceptual differentiation between participation, engagement, and mobilization matters to understand how the SDGs are slowly moving the political and cultural tectonic plates of LAC regional and broader international relations.

Our evaluation shows that some CSOs already act transnationally in Latin America, using the Forum LAC both to engage at the SDG debate and as a springboard to advance their particular agendas. On the one hand, CSOs instrumentalize the SDG debate to question democratic mechanisms of social participation and political representation, notably challenging the state-centric bias of the 2030 Agenda in LAC politics. On the other hand, there are different levels of foreign policy's permeability to civil society influence on the 2030 Agenda in the region. Sometimes, a permanent bureaucratic filter within chancelleries may absorb CSOs' ideas and demands, but then turn them into a more mainstream, state-centric agenda reflected in the documents of Forum LAC. Still, compared to the MDGs, the 2030 Agenda has allowed for far more social participation,

[3] Speech by President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva at the opening of the 78th UN General Assembly. According to Lula da Silva: "In Brazil, we are committed to implementing all 17 SDGs in an integrated and indivisible manner. We want to achieve racial equality in Brazilian society through an eighteenth goal, which we will voluntarily adopt. See: https://www.gov.br/planalto/en/follow-the-government/speeches/speech-by-president-luiz-inacio-lula-da-silva-at-the-opening-of-the-78th-un-general-assembly

from the negotiation process to implementation, follow-up, and review. One of the main findings of this research is that CSOs' adoption of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs does impact regionalism in a particular way, not necessarily at the state level, but in how organizations and their leaders navigate the existing institutional spaces.

The double category "2030 Agenda" and "SDGs" provide a certain level of identity stability to a set of organizations. A club of select CSOs and their representatives use the SDGs as a common language inserted into LAC's regionality. Indeed, the SDGs have become a shared framework to connect people and institutions across borders, facilitating their interactions and conformations. Furthermore, the 2030 Agenda has worked as a lightning rod capable of bonding organizations that did not necessarily have links with sustainable development in their history of activism. For example, those who advocate for populations with HIV/AIDS, or those who fight against racism or hunger, suddenly find themselves together at the same space of experience, struggling collectively for the 2030 Agenda and using the SDGs as a compass to vocalize, make visible, and disseminate their historical demands.

That said, CSOs' participation in the Forum LAC unveils practical difficulties that remain in accessing participation mechanisms due to financial requirements, travel time availability, human resources, and language barriers (e.g., English- or French-speaking Caribbean islanders complain about the dominance of Spanish countries in Forum LAC negotiation dynamics, while Latin American organizations feel excluded at the global level by the dominance of English). Moreover, a remarkable difference persists between CSOs that have more experience and resources available and others that have lesser engagement capabilities and tend to demobilize more easily. Furthermore, there is a sentiment of participatory fatigue due to the lack of concrete advances in development agendas. The move from the MDGs to the present context has brought us this far, with significant but still insufficient achievements. How culture, politics and institutions will evolve from here to address persistent needs in a post-2030 framework remains to be seen.

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