Responsibility and the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals

Magdalena Bexell & Kristina Jönsson

To cite this article: Magdalena Bexell & Kristina Jönsson (2017) Responsibility and the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals, Forum for Development Studies, 44:1, 13-29, DOI: 10.1080/08039410.2016.1252424

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/08039410.2016.1252424

© 2016 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

Published online: 21 Nov 2016.

Article views: 5274

Citing articles: 8

Full Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at http://www.tandfonline.com/action/journalInformation?journalCode=sfds20
Responsibility and the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals
Magdalena Bexell and Kristina Jönsson

Department of Political Science, Lund University, Lund, Sweden

This article asks what key concerns emerge from the way responsibility is framed in United Nations summit documents on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted in 2015. Our conceptual framework serves to make the study of SDG responsibility more systematic by distinguishing three main senses of responsibility: cause, obligation, and accountability. The framework structures our analysis of two SDG summit documents, Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Addis Ababa Action Agenda. The article shows, first, that the causal sense of responsibility is hidden between the lines in paragraphs on poverty, debt and environmental issues. As a consequence, root causes of problems might not be appropriately addressed. Second, SDG summit documents deal predominantly with responsibility in the sense of obligation. We raise concerns with repeated consideration for national circumstances and with vague obligations for non-governmental actors. Third, with regard to accountability, we stress that quantitative indicators have unintended steering effects both before and beyond the review phase. The focus on indicators risks shadowing broader obligations, such as international human rights. In all its three senses, responsibility in key SDG documents remains state-centric with great room for state sovereignty, self-regulation and respect for national circumstances. Our framework is useful also in showing that the three senses of responsibility build on each other and that engagement with responsibility provides fruitful ground for further research.

Keywords: responsibility; accountability; sustainable development goals; United Nations

Introduction
In September 2015, the United Nations (UN) General Assembly adopted 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) after three years of multi-stakeholder consultations and intergovernmental negotiations. The SDGs replaced the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) by merging the agendas of development and environment. The formal adoption of the new goals triggered a phase where the allocation of responsibility at different levels takes centre stage. The realm of sustainable development is replete

© 2016 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.
with issues related to responsibility. Persistent poverty, epidemics and global warming, to name a few, raise a multitude of questions on the character of responsibility. Who is responsible to take action in response to these problems? What possible limits exist for the scope of responsibility? Responsibility has become a key organising term in policy circles in global governance settings, alluding to moral, legal and political understandings of the term. It also increasingly appears in academic debates, for example, on a ‘Responsibility to Protect’ (e.g. Bellamy, 2015), on corporate social responsibility (e.g. Kolks, 2016) and on the need to address climate change (e.g. Frumhoff et al., 2015). Yet, such debates would benefit from more conceptual engagement with responsibility in political–theoretical terms.

This article explores how responsibility is framed in two key UN summit outcome documents of the new global development agenda where the SDGs provide a cornerstone until 2030. The outcome documents are not legally binding treaties; their realisation has to rely on moral commitments and political resolve in combination with financial and institutional capacities. Questions on who is responsible for what goals and on which grounds will become increasingly important and politically controversial in sustainability debates within and between countries. The article aims to provide a systematic and conceptually based exploration of responsibility. Drawing on political–theoretical works on responsibility (see below), we distinguish among three main senses of the concept: responsibility as cause, responsibility as obligation and responsibility as accountability. The article contributes to an emerging field of research centred on the SDGs and the broader 2030 Agenda. Thus far, publications in this field have focused on the post-2015 consultations, intergovernmental negotiations and the substantive increase in scope from the MDGs to the SDGs (e.g. Chasek et al., 2016; Fejerskov, 2016; Fukuda-Parr, 2016; Vandemoortele, 2014). A nascent literature usefully identifies challenges involved in realising the new goals and future accountability matters (Berensmann et al., 2015; Donald and Way, 2016; Fukuda-Parr and McNeill, 2015; Ocampo and Gómez-Arteaga, 2016; Pogge and Sengupta, 2015). Yet, less attention is paid to what we regard as a necessary prior step in the analysis, namely identifying the principles and obligations that accountability is supposed to be based on. We distinguish the concept’s three main connotations and let those guide a brief exploration of two key SDG documents. Our empirical ambition is limited to identifying concerns emerging from the way responsibility, in all three conceptual senses, is framed in UN summit documents on the SDGs.

The two UN policy documents selected for our explorative study are the SDG summit outcome document *Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (2015) and the *Addis Ababa Action Agenda* (AAAA, 2015) on financing for development. Even if the trajectory of the documents differs, they are intimately linked as the AAAA provides means of implementation of the SDGs. There are several cross-references between the two and leaving the AAAA out would not do justice to SDG policy-making. That being said, *Transforming Our World* is likely to be the most important document for the coming 15-year period. It contains the broader political vision for post-2015 sustainable development as well as the range of specific SDGs that will influence national-level
priorities and review exercises at national and UN levels. The SDGs also lend themselves better to broader public communication than the more detailed means of implementation of the AAAA.

*Transforming Our World* was formally adopted at the heads-of-state summit in the UN General Assembly in September 2015. The document is based on unprecedentedly broad global stakeholder consultations, recommendations from the UN Intergovernmental Open Working Group on the SDGs, and negotiations by governments in the UN General Assembly during 2014–2015 (see Chasek et al., 2016). *Transforming Our World* comprises a preamble and a political declaration, 17 SDGs with 169 targets, and sections on implementation, follow-up and review. The AAAA (2015) is the outcome document of the Third International Conference on Financing for Development held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, in July 2015. This summit gathered heads of state and government, ministers of finance and development, UN system representatives and non-state development stakeholders. Its purpose was to evaluate agreements made at earlier development financing conferences in Monterrey (2002) and Doha (2008) and to plan the financing of the post-2015 agenda. Consultations with civil society, the business sector, local authorities and research institutions were conducted, albeit not as extensive as in the case of the SDGs. The UN General Assembly endorsed the AAAA in July 2015.

Our objective is not to suggest how responsibility ought to be distributed. Rather, we study in what ways responsibility is articulated in SDG summit documents. Such texts shape and construct worldviews and perceptions of problems and solutions. They are the product of international political negotiations and power relations. Policy texts express the interests and ambitions of their authors, and perform actions through making demands and proposing solutions. Yet, they are often vague and open for multiple interpretations. Hence, many of the concerns we highlight in our text-based analysis are not surprising. However, the article does not aim to look into governments’ ‘real motives’ during SDG negotiations or to unravel the politics of those negotiations. Rather, our present purpose is to study the main ideas on responsibility transpiring from the policy documents as such. The framework has guided our reading and interpretation of the two SDG documents in focus and enabled us to identify concerns for the future.

The continuation of the article is structured as follows. We first outline a conceptual framework pinpointing three senses of responsibility that will serve as a heuristic instrument to bring greater clarity to empirical inquiries on responsibility. Next, we examine the two SDG documents in light of our three-fold framework. The conclusion summarises key issues and concerns identified in our analysis. It also discusses the merits of our framework and suggests further research.

**Responsibility: a conceptual framework**

This section outlines key distinctions that inform our understanding of the concept of responsibility. Based on political–theoretical works that do not employ a strict legal
understanding of responsibility, we distinguish among three main senses of the concept: responsibility as cause, responsibility as obligation and responsibility as accountability. We draw particularly on authors identifying challenges raised by these senses of responsibility when applied in political–institutional realms (Cane, 2002; Lucas, 1993; Miller, 2001; Young, 2004; 2006). Our three-fold conceptual framework clarifies the temporal elements of responsibility, where prospective obligations form the basis of retrospective accountability. The framework shows that obligations can be broader than what is actually mirrored by concrete accountability mechanisms. This is particularly true in the case of non-binding voluntary-based political agreements, exemplified by the SDGs, where legal accountability is lacking.

**Responsibility as cause**

In the first sense, responsibility means a claim that someone or something caused an outcome without necessarily implying that the individual, thing or organisation causing it will have to answer in any way for the outcome. Thus, in a strict sense of the term, it is possible to substitute ‘responsible’ with ‘caused’ in the past tense. In international political arenas, the question of to what extent past activities causing a particular problem lead to greater present responsibilities is a recurrent theme. This is in political theoretical terms labelled the *contribution principle*. According to the closely related *beneficiary principle*, one has duties to the extent that one has historically benefited from an unjust state of affairs (Barry, 2003). Hence, causal claims have far-reaching political implications when current responsibility spheres are debated. In this sense of the concept, those who contribute to structural processes producing injustice share responsibility for such injustice, which creates obligations to address it. The power to influence processes that produce unjust outcomes is an important factor that distinguishes the degrees of responsibility of different agents (Young, 2006). One illustration of this is climate change negotiations where the principle of ‘common but differentiated responsibilities’ has been a controversial issue. The principle places more responsibility to respond to climate change on those historically having caused it than on those who have not (Chasek et al., 2016). Another illustration is relationships between former colonial and colonised states, which raise political and moral questions on how contemporary institutions should respond to past colonial injustices.

**Responsibility as obligation**

To say that someone is responsible in the sense of obligation means that someone is required to undertake specific tasks in a forward-looking meaning. To bear such prospective responsibility is to have a duty or obligation in virtue of some role that one fills, to ensure that something occurs (Cane, 2002, p.31; Zimmerman, 1992, p.1089). We call this role-responsibility. Individuals exercise responsibility and are held
responsible in society by carrying out the obligations of many more or less well-defined roles, such as employee, parent and citizen. The content of obligation can be defined according to different principles and limits. Key among those are political, legal, moral and social custom principles (Lucas, 1993, pp.54–55; Miller, 2001). Responsibility thinking in political theory is intricate because it often mixes political, legal and/or moral considerations into different substantive principles. The connectedness principle asserts that responsibilities should be allocated on the basis of closeness, so that people with special ties of different kinds have more obligations towards each other. According to the capacity principle, the ability to bring remedy to deprivations entails the obligation to do so (Barry, 2003). In other words, ‘response-ability’ is necessary for those who are assigned obligations (Fukuda-Parr and McNeill, 2015). The concept of a goal requires that there is an agent whose goal it is, who holds obligations to fulfil it (Pogge and Sengupta, 2015). In the political–institutional setting of sustainable development governance, obligations are primarily realised through the collective action of institutions. Institutions have greater capacities for addressing structural conditions than do individuals, and political responsibility is a form of institutional responsibility (Erskine, 2003, p.26; Young, 2004). Limits of responsibility arise from both ideational and material realms. Political ideologies hold different views on public and private responsibility, mirroring deeper conflicts on the role of states and market in, for example, sustainability affairs. Material limits arise from resource scarcity, insufficient know-how and weak institutions, to name a few.

Responsibility as accountability

Accountability refers to someone having to answer for the way in which that person or organisation carries out its obligations. Such retrospective judgement implies bearing responsibility for something in the past, whether this involves having failed to fulfil a duty or being praiseworthy. Concepts such as accountability, answerability and liability deal with the backwards-looking sense of responsibility. Accountability is a retrospective mechanism that involves a presumption of monitoring and sanctioning instruments (Fearon, 1999; Lucas, 1993, p.184). For example, elected politicians are supposed to be accountable to their electorates, employees to their employers, chief executive officers to their boards and boards to shareholders (Fearon, 1999, p.55). In a democratic setting, the exercise of authority requires the expressed consent of the governed and mechanisms through which to hold policy-makers accountable. Global policy-making raises challenges for accountability, as those who are affected often have at best indirect means of holding decision-makers from government, business or civil society spheres accountable. In the international setting of sustainable development governance, effective enforcement and vertical accountability are absent and most commitments made by governments are non-binding (Ocampo and Gómez-Arteaga, 2016). Effective accountability requires both mechanisms for reliable information between decision-makers and citizens and mechanisms for imposing sanctions, such
as elections, legal redress, and ‘naming and shaming’ practices. In the case of quanti-
tative global goal setting, accountability is steered in the direction of what can be
measured, which can distort original broader policy intentions (Hickel, 2016; Unterhal-
ter, 2014). Even so, ‘count-ability’ often shapes forms of accountability in sustainable
development governance (Fukuda-Parr and McNeill, 2015; Hansen and Muhlen-
Schulte, 2012). We will now turn to our analysis of the two SDG summit documents.

**The contentious role of causal responsibility**

In the first sense of responsibility, past activities causing a particular problem lead to
greater present responsibilities. Accordingly, causal claims may in this understanding
have far-reaching political implications for the allocation of obligations. In the global
setting, it means that those who contribute to structural processes producing injustice
share responsibility for such injustice, therefore resulting in present obligations
(Young, 2006). This is expressed in the contribution principle (see above). In the
case of the two SDG documents in focus of this article, this is the least explicit
sense of responsibility. Still, causal issues hide between the lines in the two summit
documents when dealing with structural problems and various inequalities. This is par-
ticularly the case for problems shaped through longer historical processes. Both docu-
ments raise global structural inequalities that cause contemporary problems without
 going into their origins or ascribing culpability to particular agents. Such structures
relate primarily to global economic issues of debt, trade, and monetary and financial
systems (e.g. AAAA§8,9; Transforming Our World §30,68) and to unsustainable con-
sumption and production patterns (Transforming Our World §28). Yet, as shown in the
article’s next section, a recognition of causal responsibility and historical culprits are
not among the sources of obligations featuring in the two documents. This is not sur-
prising in the context of a global intergovernmental political agreement where we
would not expect explicit acknowledgement of the beneficiary principle, according
to which one has duties to the extent that one has earlier benefited from an unjust
state of affairs.

The documents make a key distinction between developed and developing countries
but do not go into causes of different levels of development. The latter category is
explained to include African countries, least developed countries, land-locked develop-
ing countries, small-island developing states and middle-income countries (e.g. Trans-
forming Our World §44). The documents point to a need for sound regulation of
financial markets and a more inclusive and representative international architecture
for sustainable development, and strengthening the participation of developing
countries in international economic decision-making (AAAA§103–7; Transforming
Our World, Goal 16, 17). For example, the AAAA (§73) states that the IMF should
‘fulfil its systemic responsibilities’ through capacity-building and work against tax
evasion and that WTO should implement the principle of special and differentiated
treatment for developing countries, in particular least developed countries. Rich
countries assume a responsibility for macro-economic issues in relation to heavily indebted poor countries (AAAA §94).

Maintaining sustainable debt levels is the responsibility of the borrowing countries; however we acknowledge that lenders also have a responsibility to lend in a way that does not undermine a country’s debt sustainability. (AAAA §97, Transforming Our World §69)

The two documents’ balancing acts regarding global economic structures and institutions are a manifestation of continued contentious north–south divisions on these issues. The area of sovereign debt is one where inter-state consent is difficult to obtain and where powerful non-state actors are involved (Sudreau and Bohoslavsky, 2015).

A direct reference to causal responsibility as expressed in the contribution principle was made through the ‘the polluter pays principle’ in an earlier draft of the AAAA (§36 in draft of 6 May 2015). Tellingly, this was removed in the final outcome version of that agenda, indicating that ascribing causal responsibility is politically contentious due to its implications for current obligations. The contribution principle is now implicit through the inclusion of the principle of ‘common but differentiated responsibilities’. The latter implies that responsibility for taking action should be differentiated in proportion to the responsibility for causing the problem and to an actor’s degree of capability (Chasek et al., 2016, p.6). The principle is much debated in the field of climate negotiations, but it is downplayed in both outcome documents – even if it is mentioned more often in the AAAA than in Transforming Our World. For example, the AAAA states that

... we are encouraged by the commitment of the Conference of the Parties to reaching an ambitious agreement in Paris in 2015 that is applicable to all parties and that reflects the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities, in light of different national circumstances. (§59)

Disagreements on the role of the principle and the fear held by low-income countries that they would to be disadvantaged without it led to a focus on the SDGs in their entirety in Addis Ababa instead of a focus on development issues in a more narrow sense. The latter had been the case in previous conferences of development financing in Monterrey and Doha (Fejerskov, 2016, p.12). Yet, during intergovernmental post-2015 negotiations, discussions continued on whether the principle applies to the entire sustainable development agenda, as argued by developing countries, or only to its environmental parts, as argued by industrialised countries. In the end, no clear agreement was reached on this matter. Governments only agreed to ‘reaffirm all the principles of the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, including, inter alia, the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities’ (Transforming Our World §12; Chasek et al., 2016).
In summary, the documents do not explicitly assign blame in terms of agency or acknowledge contemporary implications or of historical causes of structural problems, such as debt, trade, environmental pollution and climate change. We see two concerns related to this. One is that root causes of the problems might not be appropriately acknowledged or understood. As a result, solutions risk addressing symptoms rather than causes. Another is that power relations remain implicit, while the power to influence the processes that produce unjust outcomes can be a factor that distinguishes degrees of responsibility, correlating with an agent’s position within those structural processes (cf. Young, 2006).

**Distributing SDG obligations**

Our second sense of responsibility implies that an actor is required to undertake specific tasks in a forward-looking meaning. To bear such prospective responsibility is to have obligations due to a role that one fills, to have role-responsibility. This, we find, is the predominant sense of responsibility characterising the two outcome documents. The overarching source of obligations in both documents is the political agreement made by states in the UN General Assembly. The documents proclaim a strong political commitment on the part of the ‘We’ speaking throughout the text, that is, heads of state and government. This ‘We’ explicitly recognises its political–institutional obligations for realising the commitments made. Legal sources do not play a significant role in the documents for the matter of justifying the allocation of obligations. While the AAAA primarily deals with political–institutional and financial obligations, *Transforming Our World* is in addition informed by moral notions through the obligation of ‘leaving no behind’ (Preamble; §4) and the pledge to foster ‘an ethic of global citizenship and shared responsibility’ (§36). Both documents mention ‘solidarity’ as an ethical source of obligations.

At a more concrete level, cutting across political and moral dimensions, the capacity principle is key in both outcome documents rather than connectedness principles such as global citizenship. Accordingly, different categories of states are allocated different responsibilities depending on their capacities: ‘All countries take action, with developed countries taking the lead, taking into account the development and capabilities of developing countries’ (Transforming Our World, §28; cf. AAAA §8). This also includes an obligation for high-income states to increase the capacity of developing countries to realise the goals. Clearly, increasing ‘response-ability’ is a central ambition laid out in both documents (Fukuda-Parr and McNeill, 2015). Distributing obligations on the basis of capacities is, at least on paper, a clearer and more agent-focused principle than solidarity or political agreement. Capacity can be understood in material, institutional and knowledge terms. The inclusion of the capacity principle is a result of developing country demands, related to a perceived lack of capacity to achieve the SDGs (cf. Pogge and Sengupta, 2015, p.89). Arguably, neglect of the capacity principle would have weakened the obligations of richer countries.
Our conceptual framework points us towards a number of future challenges and concerns stemming from the way obligations are framed in the two SDG documents. A first concern stems from the ambitious and holistic approach creating seemingly boundless obligations for governments. The documents’ language is aspirational with frequent use of phrases such as ‘We will make every effort to meet the needs of all communities . . . ’, ‘We will strive to . . . ’, ‘We will work towards . . . ’ and so on. Above all, being a globally agreed political outcome, document language is often vague and imprecise. The preamble of Transforming Our World shows that the 2030 Agenda is not only an encompassing project but also that realising it is supposed to be a collective endeavour based on moral commitment. The document emphasises a commitment to poverty eradication and sustainability through a single framework with universal goals applicable to all countries. ‘This Agenda is a plan of action for people, planet and prosperity. It also seeks to strengthen universal peace in larger freedom […] All countries and all stakeholders, acting in collaborative partnership, will implement this plan’ (Transforming Our World, Preamble). ‘The scale and ambition of the new Agenda requires a revitalized Global Partnership to ensure its implementation. We fully commit to this’ (Transforming Our World, §39).

In contrast to the MDGs, the new goals entail obligations also with regard to domestic issues of high-income countries, such as reducing inequality and promoting sustainable consumption. Thus, in light of the SDGs’ broad scope, and the indeterminate language of UN summit documents, a clear allocation of obligations at national levels will eventually be a precondition for goal attainment. We also caution that the encompassing nature of the goals is likely to give rise to goal conflicts at all governance levels. Such conflicts could appear, for instance, between the target to ‘Significantly increase the exports of developing countries, in particular with a view to doubling the least developed countries’ share of global exports by 2020’ (SDG Target 17.11) and several of the targets under Goal 12, ‘Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns’.

A second concern is the balance between, on the one hand, quite unlimited obligations on the part of governments, and, on the other hand, repeated respect for national circumstances. This tension provides extensive freedom of interpretation when the SDGs are to be adapted to country-level settings. Notions of self-determination and national sovereignty remain central in the documents. In this respect, we find a strong legacy from previous UN summit declarations, such as the United Nations Millennium Declaration of 2000, and outcome documents of the financing for development conferences in Monterrey (Monterrey Consensus, 2003) and Doha (Doha Declaration, 2009). This can strengthen national ownership of the SDGs at the country level but also weakens the international mandate to pressure reluctant states. Transforming Our World brings up the principle of national ownership of the new agenda several times, in contrast to the Millennium Declaration where this was not expressed. The obligations adopted by governments in the UN are open to modification by nationally specific circumstances:
We reiterate that each country has primary responsibility for its own economic and social development and that the role of national policies and development strategies cannot be overemphasized. We will respect each country’s policy space and leadership to implement policies for poverty eradication and sustainable development, while remaining consistent with relevant international rules and commitments. (AAAA §9; cf. Transforming Our World §41, 55)

In addition, the institutions of global cooperation are assigned a complementary role to the national level. In all, we find an overarching tension between international demands to build country capacity, on the one hand, and national ownership in order to safeguard sovereign decision-making, on the other hand. This highlights the contentious role of obligations in international politics.

A third concern is the vague nature of the obligations assigned to non-governmental actors. Clearly, public institutional obligations predominate at the expense of non-state obligations. Transforming Our World (§45) makes reference not only to governments but also to domestic public actors such as national parliaments, regional and local authorities, and sub-regional institutions. The obligations assigned to a range of non-state actors are broad and open-ended. Without formally being party to the outcome documents, such actors are assigned ambitious tasks by governments. For instance, a ‘revitalized Global Partnership’ will bring together governments, civil society, the private sector, the UN system and others in order to support implementation of the goals (Transforming Our World §60). The business sector, civil society, the scientific community, academia, philanthropy and foundations, and others, will ‘be important’ to mobilise knowledge, expertise and financial resources, to ‘complement’ the efforts of governments, ‘in particular in developing countries’ (AAAA §10). In Transforming Our World, governments ‘call on all businesses to apply their creativity and innovation to solving sustainable development challenges’ (§67). Non-state obligations carry a particular risk of disappearing in country-level contexts, as they are voluntary-based and require initiative from those actors. Also, regulating business responsibility through mandatory rules is politically sensitive and the issue taps into a contentious debate on corporate social responsibility (Kolks, 2016). Tensions between mandatory and voluntary SDG responsibility will be persistent, as they originate in deeper disagreements on the role of states and markets in sustainability affairs.

A final concern is the lack of attention in the documents to obligations of individuals. Though this is to be expected in an intergovernmental agreement, it is worth noting in light of our framework’s distinction between individual and institutional obligations. In particular, when the SDGs are to be taken on at the national level, they will tap into policies and regulations impacting individual obligations in several issue realms, not the least as regards environmental matters and taxation. The AAAA does not at all mention individuals having obligations. Transforming Our World mentions individual obligations once, in relation to production and consumption patterns: ‘Governments, international organizations, the business sector and other non-state actors and individuals must contribute to changing unsustainable consumption and production
patterns’ (Transforming Our World, §28). We posit that, for the future, individual citizens are pivotal in two main capacities: as consumers whose everyday lifestyle decisions impact sustainable development; and as voters who hold current and future politicians accountable for SDG realisation (see the next section). In the ideal case, the relationship between political–institutional and individual obligations is one of mutual reinforcement. For instance, governmental regulation and taxes can facilitate sustainable consumption decisions on the part of individuals. In the reverse case, the global SDG agreement can serve as a normative point of leverage for citizens towards governments that do not set out to fulfil their obligations.

In summary, this section has established that the predominant sense of responsibility in the outcome documents is forward-looking obligations on the part of governments having adopted the documents. The section has raised a set of concerns stemming from the strong focus on political–institutional public obligations characterising the documents in light of the formidable task of implementing the new agenda. Finally, we note that the two documents contain seeds of a changing global development agenda with regard to obligations in two main ways: firstly, they make demands on all countries, rich and poor, including on the domestic affairs of high-income countries; secondly, the documents merge development and environment affairs into one global agenda, challenging the traditional institutionalised division of work on these two realms in the UN system and in many countries.

**Accountability by numbers**

The third sense of responsibility that our framework distinguishes is accountability. It refers to someone having to answer for the way in which that person or organisation carries out its obligations. This section brings up concerns that emerge from the way accountability is framed in the two SDG documents. Accountability in the retrospective sense is clearly distinguishable in those documents, albeit not given as much space as responsibility in the forward-looking sense of ‘obligation’. Transforming Our World (§72–91; cf. Goal 17) and the AAAA (Part III) establish that review is voluntary-based and country-led and that the outcome from national-level reviews will be the foundation for regional- and global-level reviews. Follow-up and review are expected to promote accountability to citizens and support effective international cooperation. The AAAA identifies a broad range of agents expected to be active in follow-up and review (§130). At the global level, peer accountability among countries is organised through the new UN High-Level Political Forum, under the auspices of the Economic and Social Council. Its first round of voluntary national SDG reviews took place in July 2016 with 22 countries reporting on progress. This resulted in a Ministerial Declaration commending the countries that had reported on their early efforts of working towards the SDGs.

A first concern is that this voluntary-based peer review leads to unsystematic accountability, being based on country-led national processes and therefore subject to domestic political considerations and political will. Already during post-2015
negotiations, follow-up and review were politically contentious topics (Donald and Way, 2016). This was partly due to MDG experiences, particularly with regard to the lack of monitoring of MDG 8 on the obligations of rich countries. Agreement on means of implementation, underpinning future accountability demands, was not part of the creation of the MDGs. The Monterrey Consensus of the International Conference on Financing for Development was adopted two years after the Millennium Declaration of 2000. Similarly, the Doha Declaration on Financing for Development was adopted a few years after the World Summit Outcome resolution (2005). In contrast, in an unusual sequence, the means of reaching the SDGs were formally adopted before the goals, mirroring the importance attached to agreement on means of implementation on the part of developing country governments (cf. Fejerskov, 2016). The AAAA is more elaborated than its predecessors on financing for development with regard to follow-up and review. At the same time, there was resistance among many countries towards global peer review, which watered down the writings on review in the final draft of Transforming Our World (Donald and Way, 2016).

A second concern is that quantitative indicators have strong steering effects also before and beyond the evaluation phase. In March 2016, the UN Statistical Commission’s Inter-Agency and Expert Group on Sustainable Development Goals Indicators agreed on 230 indicators to monitor the 169 targets of the 17 SDGs. This set of indicators will continue to be developed over time. The development of indicators should be thought of not only as a technical process but also as a political one. Measurement involves trade-offs between, on the one hand, weak statistical data availability in many countries, and on the other, pinpointing urgent needs. Research shows that a key strength of MDG indicators (60 in number) was to put the spotlight on important objectives by identifying measurable outcomes. For instance, the targets for water, child survival, sanitation and maternal health succeeded in drawing attention to and increase donor funding for long-neglected issues. Yet, measurability also proved to be a source of unintended distortion by creating inappropriate incentives and displacing attention from other objectives (Fukuda-Parr et al., 2014). For example, despite increase in primary school enrolment, issues of quality and equity were lacking in measurement. This undermined the desired impact of the MDG goal on education (Unterhalter, 2014).

A related concern, acknowledged in Transforming Our World, is the lack of reliable data necessary to measure progress: ‘We recognize that baseline data for several of the targets remains unavailable, and we call for increased support for strengthening data collection and capacity-building in Member States, to develop national and global baselines where they do not yet exist’ (§57). Moreover, neglected groups and issues might disappear in national averages if data are not disaggregated, which threatens the idea of ‘leaving no one behind’, the overall ambition of the 2030 Agenda. When ‘count-ability’ becomes a guiding governance principle, the ‘power of numbers’ is reinforced in development governance. Once set, numerical targets increasingly become seen as value neutral (Fukuda-Parr et al., 2014; Hansen and Muhlen-Schulte, 2012; Hickel, 2016). Furthermore, the administrative resources and large costs of collecting the data
should also be recognised as a challenge for accountability by numbers. In one estimate, the cost of measuring the 169 SDG targets is almost twice the total annual sum spent globally on official development assistance (Jerven, 2014).

A final concern that our framework points us towards is that the current focus on quantitative indicators and data collection shadows the obligations within which indicators are embedded. As shown in the previous section, SDG obligations are broader than what is mirrored through review processes centred on SDG indicators. Some of those obligations are difficult to measure and politically contentious, such as global solidarity and a ‘just, equitable, tolerant, open and socially inclusive world’ (Transforming Our World §36 and §8). Yet, for one ambition repeated in the documents, namely human rights, a set of international legal obligations and related accountability venues already exists. There are many general references to the international human rights regime in Transforming Our World. For instance, §10 states that

> [t]he new Agenda is guided by the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations, including full respect for international law. It is grounded in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, international human rights treaties, the Millennium Declaration and the 2005 World Summit Outcome. It is informed by other instruments such as the Declaration on the Right to Development.

Despite this, in terms of follow-up and review, the lack of references to the legally binding obligations of international human rights law and its national and international institutions is striking. Accountability is a cornerstone of the international human rights regime, making clear who is accountable (governments) to whom (citizens) and for what (human rights). In addition, mechanisms exist, albeit weak, for holding duty-bearers accountable. Several of the existing human rights treaty bodies and special procedures issue recommendations based on large amounts of information on issues at the heart of the SDGs (Donald and Way, 2016). Yet, instead of further engagement with international human rights law, the two SDG documents provide in the international realm only for politically based peer accountability. This is reflected in the creation of the High Level Political Forum as the central UN platform for SDG review.

In sum, strong global review mechanisms are lacking, giving primacy to nationally organised follow-up, which is subject to institutional capacity and political will. This section has raised concerns related to accountability being shaped by a large number of quantitative indicators and pointed to the ambiguous relationship between SDG review and the international human rights system.

Conclusions

The challenges involved in realising global political agreements on joint SDGs will be the topic of research for many years to come. Our three-fold conceptual framework has enabled us to identify key issues and concerns emerging from the way responsibility is framed in two key SDG documents. We have shown, first, that the causal sense of
responsibility is the least visible one in SDG documents, masking root causes of the problems to be addressed and neglecting how power relations and historical circumstances affect current degrees of responsibility. Second, responsibility in the sense of obligation predominates in the two documents. We have raised concerns stemming from the encompassing holistic SDG framework creating seemingly boundless obligations likely to give rise to goal conflicts at all governance levels. Other concerns – given the strong emphasis on national-level implementation – are the vague nature of the obligations assigned to non-governmental actors and the lack of attention in the documents to obligations of individuals. Third, responsibility in the sense of accountability is also prominent in the two documents. Concerns raised were that the voluntary-based nature of the SDGs leads to weak and unsystematic accountability and that quantitative indicators have strong, often unintended, steering effects also before and beyond the evaluation phase. We highlighted the weak role of human rights obligations and procedures in sections on SDG review, despite strong writings on human rights in earlier parts of the two documents.

In what ways do the two documents contain seeds of a changing global development agenda with regard to responsibility? The title *Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* establishes an ambition to obtain far-reaching global change for the coming 15 years. The scope of the agenda challenges the traditional and institutionalised division of obligations in the UN system and in many countries, in terms of both issue areas and geographical coverage. A key change from the MDGs is that the global goals now assign rich countries obligations to be fulfilled in their domestic realms. Another change in comparison to earlier summit agreements is that the two SDG documents contain more elaborate follow-up and review sections, including the creation of a new global forum for the purpose of SDG review. Yet, responsibility in all its three senses remains state-centric with great room for state sovereignty, self-regulation and respect for national circumstances.

Our conceptual framework has facilitated a first step towards a systematic exploration of responsibility in SDG summit outcome documents, showing that it is empirically possible to distinguish the three senses of responsibility. Next, however, the framework needs to become more fine-grained in order to develop into a fully fledged analytical tool supporting more nuanced empirical inquiry and critical analysis. Its relevance for studying other issue realms also needs to be assessed. Our framework enables us to show that the three senses of responsibility build on each other. Notions of historical causality of current problems often influence the identification of obligations, and to be effective, demands on accountability presuppose that obligations are clearly identified beforehand. The concerns we have raised point to several directions for future research. The causal sense of responsibility points to questions on the role of historical legacies for present obligations. To what extent do past activities causing, for instance, contemporary economic inequalities lead to greater SDG obligations on the part of governments, international organisations or even business associations? With regard to obligations, a task for political theorists will be to debate what limits, if any, are
justifiable to draw around obligations in light of the encompassing SDG agenda. In what ways can abstract theoretical principles provide guidance when faced with goal conflicts or limited resources? In the case of accountability, researchers should continue examining the development of SDG review processes nationally and internationally with an eye to what agents are held accountable, for what and to whom. We hope this article contributes to continued theoretical and empirical debates on these and other questions that are key to understanding the politics of sustainable development.

Funding
This work was supported by the Swedish Research Council Formas [grant number 942-2015-447: Realising the Post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals: Whose Responsibility?]

Notes on contributors
Magdalena Bexell is Associate Professor at the Department of Political Science, Lund University. Her research concerns responsibility in international relations and legitimacy in public-private cooperation in global governance. She is the editor of Global Governance, Legitimacy and Legitimation (Routledge), co-editor of Democracy and Public-Private Partnerships in Global Governance (Palgrave) and has published in journals such as Globalizations, International Feminist Journal of Politics and Global Governance.

Kristina Jönsson is Associate Professor at the Department of Political Science, Lund University. Her current research concerns legitimacy and responsibility in global governance with a special focus on the UN Sustainable Development Goals and global health. Her previous work concerned politics and policy-making in South-East Asia. She has published in journals such as Third World Quarterly, Globalizations, Health Policy and Planning, Health Policy, and Asian Survey.

ORCID
Magdalena Bexell http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9987-1177
Kristina Jönsson http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6908-4666

References
Berensmann, K., C. Brandi, H. Janus, N. Keijzer and S. Weinlich, 2015, Goal 17: Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalise the global partnership for sustainable development, in M. Loewe and N. Rippin, eds, Translating an Ambitious Vision into Global
Transformation. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, German Development Institute, Discussion Paper 7.


World Summit Outcome resolution, 2005, United Nations, (A/RES/60/1).

