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Achieving Sustainability Goals in Central Asia: The Importance of "the Middle"

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Abstract

As the world passes the midpoint of the 2030 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), clarity about the implementation of this agenda becomes increasingly critical. Equally important is the extent to which the SDG framework is succeeding or failing in different contexts. This study explores the role and importance of the "implementers", mid-level actors that bridge policymaking between national leaderships who set policy and grassroots efforts. Focusing on three SDGs (#2, 6 and 15), thirty (30) such implementers were selected through purposive sampling combined with subsequent reputational strategies. The knowledge and attitudes of these actors toward the goals and progress of their respective nations were evaluated through structured interviews. While the general outlook on their countries' capacity to reach the proposed goals was positive, the detailed review of SDG targets showed signs that those in "the middle" were highly uncertain as to whether these goals could be reached. Considering the critical role of these implementers in translating policy to action, this creates serious concern about the path forward in sustainable development moving toward 2030 and beyond. Moreover, critical reconsideration of the process of implementing the SDGs needs to be undertaken to capitalize on the expertise and strategic capacity of "the middle" of sustainable development.

Keywords: sustainable development goals, implementers, central Asia

1. Introduction

1.1 The Missing Implementers

The purpose of this study is to assess the attitudes of mid-level professionals, academics, and advocates toward the prospects of successful implementation of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This is of major importance for several reasons. First, while there has been a tremendous volume of reports, studies, and media attention about the SDGs themselves, there has been very little in the way of analysis about how the implementation of these goals is progressing. This should be a matter of major concern in that the United Nations and its member states established these 17 SDGs in 2015, with key achievements required for 2020 and 2030. As we are entering 2023, passing the midpoint toward the presumed culmination of this global endeavor, we should have some notion of the everyday challenges and tradeoffs underlying progress towards these goals. In view of the UN reports on climate change, alarms about the relative lack of progress in this area underscore the importance of this question (United Nations Environment Programme, 2022). There is a growing literature about this most important point, noting a disjuncture between political discourse and political action (Biermann et al., 2002); an imbalance between developed and developing nations (Zhao et al., 2022); and implementation measurement challenges (Miola & Schiltz, 2019).

A second reason this issue is important is that, among the analyses that have been made, almost all of them deal with aspects of the SDGs in ways that obscure rather than clarify the local processes of meeting these goals. Indeed, there is work on the broad indicators of the challenges that the SDGs raise, whether those be economic, political, or sustainability issues. While those questions are appropriate, what we are fundamentally dealing with regarding implementation are issues of people, not simply organizations or natural phenomena. Policymakers can create laws and regulations; natural scientists can measure air and water quality; and economists can assess large-scale national and global trends. All of these are important. However, they can only in the broadest sense capture our progress. They leave unanswered the questions about how we are doing today and whether the policy that has been created

is understood and being carried forward by those who know how to do so. (Shulla et al., 2020).

Finally, in those relatively few studies that deal with the SDGs as a social phenomenon, attention tends to gravitate toward two sets of actors, top-level political and agency leaders who set policy, on one hand, and the general public, on the other, expressing their hopes and concerns about how a given policy may impact them (Allen et al., 2021; Ghai & Vivian, 1995; Guan et al., 2019; Horn & Grugel, 2018). Those who are on the front lines of the issue are, however, largely ignored. This is a serious problem insofar as this cadre of people is tasked with interpreting whatever policy is made and finding ways in their nations and localities to carry it out. The fact is, regardless of what high-level leaders propose or how the general public feels about those propositions, this mid-level set of actors will either make the policy work or doom it to failure. This makes their view of the global sustainability crisis expressed in local and national contexts and proposed remedies presumed to address it crucial. With regard to the SDGs, what they think about them, how much they know about the intentions of the goals and their targets, and their view of the prospects of navigating local politics, especially given the relatively short time frame of 15 years, is essential to understand. Put simply, without these Implementers, no speech, no piece of legislation and no good intentions or hopes of a worried public matter. Therefore, the attitudes, knowledge, and beliefs of these individuals are of major importance and imperative to better understand (Westerman et al., 2021).

1.2 Level of Development and the SDGs

Upon the introduction of the Sustainable Development Goals in 2015, it was a general expectation that their implementation would impose special burdens for "poorer" nations. The logic for this very understandable position was that less-developed nations could not afford the level of financial investment that would be required to achieve these goals, hence, "richer" nations had to assist them to make their participation possible (Hulme, 2016). While certainly superficially appealing, the track record to date has not borne this expectation out. Rich countries have not done their part, largely. In a study done of G-20 nations, Kroll and Sliker (2018) report that only a few nations have taken decisive steps to achieve the goals within their own nations. This hardly bodes well for the rest of the planet, one would assume, if the burdens expected early in the process fell disproportionately on the Global South. Moreover, any major effort to transfer resources from the rich to the poor has not materialized. Indeed, in the early 2020s, with economic and political pressures imposed by a variety of factors, including COVID-19 which appears to have fallen disproportionately on many relatively wealthy nations (Worldometers, 2020), the prospect for this trend reversing any time soon seems most unlikely.

However, there were lonely voices early on that argued the counter-intuitive case. Rather than the implementation of the SDGs being a case in which the rich succeed and the poor fail, the incentives for success were at least equal, if not tilted toward developing nations. Indeed, "(t)he Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) could provide a real opportunity for radical transformation in the Least Developed Countries (LDCs)" (International Institute for Environment and Development, 2016). However, "…national SDG implementation processes could all too easily get bogged down in endless debates over bureaucratic procedures of target-setting, delivery and monitoring, and fail to achieve change." While the latter statement is true, bureaucratic wrangling is hardly the exclusive problem of the LDCs. Moreover, while the global performance on SDG implementation is not promising (Gutterres, 2019), there is at least some evidence that LDCs are coping at least as well as others and potentially exceeding the performance of their more developed neighbors (UNDESA, 2020).

Moreover, LDCs have a larger share of the population of the world than developed nations, a far higher birth rate, and are disproportionately impacted by global social phenomena, such as urbanization (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2020). Thus, the potential success of the UN Sustainable Development Goals rests far more with the actions of developing nations as compared to the G-20. Their understanding of the SDGs and their progress emerges, therefore, as critically important.

1.3 Central Asia in a Global Context

Often overlooked in most discussions of comparisons and contrasts of LDCs and More Developed Countries (MDCs), Central Asia stands out in many ways from other nations. While one would have to assign them to the category of developing nations regardless of how that may be defined, the six former republics of the Soviet Union east of the Ural Mountains and west of China are each experiencing change in a far more dynamic fashion than nearly anyone else on the planet. With no history of self-governance, no identification as nations until the 20th Century and virtually no international recognition until the collapse of the USSR, these nations emerged into the 21st Century with a profound deficiency of economic, social, and political capacity (Shahrani, 1993). However, in less than 30 years, these nations have emerged as among the fastest growing nations in the world and an important strategic site for global security (Cooley, 2021). Among European and Central Asian countries, five of the six Central Asian nations grew at rates double, triple, or more compared to their Western European counterparts in

2018 (World Bank, 2018), in pre-pandemic circumstances. Tajikistan had the highest rate of GDP growth in the region at 7.3% and only Ireland exceeded this figure in the World Bank Europe and Central Asia Region report for the year. Turkmenistan came in at 6.2%; Uzbekistan at 5.1%; Kazakhstan at 4.1%; and Kyrgyzstan at 3.5%. Only oil-dependent Azerbaijan (1.4%) had challenges, but this comes after many years of record GDP growth as oil markets surged and is likely to grow substantially in 2022/23 due to rises in global oil prices. This compares with so-called richer nations in the European Union during the same time period, showing anemic rates of economic growth, such as the United Kingdom (1.4%); Belgium (1.5%); France (1.6%); Greece (1.9%) and Italy (0.8%). With regard to social and political factors, several reports note significant "back-sliding" in the region (Putz, 2018; Omelicheva, 2018), but this is hardly a phenomenon restricted to Central Asia. Moreover, the relatively less developed institutional structure of the Central Asian republics makes change both more possible and more necessary (Pomfret, 2019). Indeed, it may well be that Central Asian nations provide a test of the "real opportunity for radical transformation" the International Institute for Environment and Development (2016) imagines.

Therefore, this study examines "Implementers" in two quite contrasting Central Asian nations (Tajikistan and Azerbaijan), as well as Turkey, the sub-regional base of the administration of Central Asia of the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (UN FAO). It explores the attitudes of these selected mid-level officials and advocates and discusses a sense of what difficulties as well as possibilities may exist in the implementation of the UN Sustainable Development Goals for both the Central Asian region and, by implication, for LDCs globally. The SDGs under consideration are those that are the primary responsibility of FAO in the United Nations system, SDG #2 ("Zero Poverty"), SDG #6 ("Clean Water and Sanitation") and SDG #15 ("Life on Land"). Implementers from four different categories are represented, including UN Officials; National Ministry Officials; University/Academic Researchers; and representatives of advocacy groups and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). Focusing on these SDGs related to food production, water use, and food security were particularly important in Central Asia where post-soviet transition and a lack of water-energy-food nexus integration and cross-country coordination have created development challenges (Rakhmatullaev et al, 2018; Qin et al. 2022).

1.4 "Mapping the Middle": Implementers in the Policy Process

In much the same way as Merry (2006:38) identifies those "in the middle" as being powerful, central actors in global policy, Implementers can "look both ways" between global and local goals and "are powerful in that they serve as knowledge brokers between…distinct social worlds. Implementers are the professional class "in the middle" between national political interests and the public and are tasked with the work of translation of transnational goals into workable programs on the ground. They must have sufficient technical expertise to comprehend the requirements of policy and also astute enough to do so in a way that ensures their professional viability. They are the "translators" that make policy implementation possible, while also being aware of how to shift when change is necessary. As Merry (2006:48-49) reports "(t)hese translators work within state systems whose commitment to (policy goals) is at best ambivalent." Implementers live at the "paradox", in Merry's terms, and as we view them in terms of the global movement for SDG implementation, the group that knows best about how well or how poorly the nation is faring in this daunting set of expectations imposed upon them. Indeed, they are perhaps the only ones that can provide an accurate picture of how the SDGs are unfolding at present and of the prospects for fulfillment of the goals in the future. Moreover, they may be the only ones who would be in a position to know if SDG targets made sense as paths forward. As such, if any assessment is to be made of SDG implementation in Central Asia, the reactions of the Implementers are required.

This ability to "translate" is crucial. Marsh and McConnell (2010) report that in the policy arena, political leaders claim "success" absent criteria. Moreover, Dye (2005:332) asks, "Does the government know what it is doing? Generally speaking, no. Unfortunately, governments have done very little to answer (this) most basic question."

What, then, do Implementers do in an environment in which the established leadership does not know what it is doing? Among other things, they establish design coalitions, relational structures of actors who advocate for specific policy design elements, as Haeig, Sewerin, and Schmidt (2020) suggest. Haeig et al. also note that they become "policy entrepreneurs", setting agendas (Kingdon, 1984). They establish epistemic communities around specific policy alternatives (Haas, 1992; Zito, 2018). They arrange discourse coalitions among knowledgeable people about technical aspects of policy (Steensland, 2008). Finally, they develop instrument constituencies that can measure and assess policy (Simons & Voß, 2017; Béland & Howell, 2016).

Clearly, Implementers are "different" actors in the policy process, but no policy can be translated without them. Thus, with regard to the delicate balance that these people in the middle must play and given both the urgency and complexity of the policy process with regard to the SDGs, it becomes crucial to determine how they see the process and the outcomes on which so much of the world depends. Moreover, Central Asian nations, as LDCs, but

relatively new and growing nations, present an ideal circumstance to examine these Implementers. It is in this relative lack of predetermined institutional parameters in which policy actors, such as academics, scientists, and mid-level officials can have the greatest impact. Indeed, in regions like Central Asia, the lack of set processes for policy implementation, including democratic deliberation, heightens the centrality of "the middle". As such, we can look at Central Asia as the optimal place and having optimal conditions to examine SDG implementation.

1.5 Implementers in the Policy Process: Research Questions

By assumption, Implementers see policy differently. It is their livelihood, and they must lend practicality to policy pronouncements for them to be real. Thus, their positions on matters of the UN Sustainable Development Goals and their potential are important to understand. However, we must know more. Do their attitudes toward the SDGs vary within and between Implementers, i.e., the types of positions they hold? Do they vary by country, suggesting that individual national differences may suggest different policy outcomes? Data on these questions were collected in three Eurasian nations (Azerbaijan, Tajikistan, and Turkey) by examining Implementers in depth.

2. Research Design

2.1 Methodology

Working with the UN FAO Headquarters in Rome and through the field offices of the Central Asia Sub-Region of FAO in Dushanbe, Tajikistan; Baku, Azerbaijan; and Ankara, Turkey, an interview schedule was developed that explores respondent attitudes toward the SDGs in general; focuses on SDGs #2 Zero Hunger, #6 Clean Water and Sanitation, and #15 Life on Land, key SDG's aligned with the mission of the UN FAO; and then explores SDG related issues specific to FAO programs. A purposive sample combined with a reputational sampling procedure (see Hunter, 1953; Grossman, 1986; Palinkas et al., 2013) was drawn including professionals and advocates in the three countries under study. These professionals came from the network of relationships each office maintains when it develops projects and conducts events in-country. Associates in each regional office were asked to develop a list of approximately 10 "Implementers each", with roughly equal representation in four categories: UN (non-FAO) officials serving in the country; middle-management executives in the national ministries with responsibility for implementing the SDGs and meeting SDG targets; academics and external researchers whose work is either driven by or related to the SDGs; and representatives of advocacy groups interested in SDG subject matter and topics as well as engaged in work specific to SDGs #2, #6, and #15. The sample of 10 per nation, or a total of 30 respondents was somewhat arbitrary, there being no a priori known population of such Implementers from which a representational sample could be drawn. However, as this tends to be a highly select group of respondents within any one nation and given the degree of interaction between the members of each national capital, ten respondents drawn from these groups would likely be a very large fraction of this group. It is, therefore, reasonable to regard these respondents as representative of the research target group. It is also a network to which the FAO professional reaches out when it is time for FAO to engage the field. Thus, it represents a unique window through which to examine the relationship between UN policy and action in the field.

The research protocol required a bi-lingual FAO staff person to conduct a personal interview with each respondent lasting about one-half hour. The interview included a 56-question instrument in English that was translated by the staff person into the local language except in those cases in which the respondent was fluent in English, an event that was clearly not the case in the majority of cases. Therefore, it required the staff person to translate responses from the local language back into English which was then submitted to the researcher. The items utilized were a combination of fixed-choice scaling questions and open-ended explorations. Insofar as knowledge of the SDGs and related subject matter was one of the foci of inquiry, each substantive fixed-choice items had a "Don't Know/Not Sure" option to assess the degree to which the attitudes toward the SDGs under review were a function of knowledge about those topics and/or the structure of the SDGs themselves. Upon completion of the interview, the FAO staff member recorded information about the subject, translated the answers as necessary, and submitted it to the researcher for analysis.

Interviews began with a few general questions about the SDGs, then quickly moved into specific explorations of SDGs #2, #6, and #15 and the extent to which respondents believed their country was doing "a good job" of addressing the goal. This was followed by a series of questions exploring responses to each of the UN-established targets for each SDG, provided verbatim in one of the official UN languages, translated into the local language only when the respondent lacked the ability to read and understand them in the official language.

2.2 Characteristics of the Sample

Of the 30 interviews requested by the researcher, 27 interviews were ultimately completed and usable for the purposes of the research which began in the spring of 2020. Progress on the interviews was significantly impacted

by office closings in the region due to COVID-19. As a consequence, it took far longer to collect these 27 interviews than was originally planned, with the data still being submitted into 2021. Still, the response rate of 90% was considered highly satisfactory, as was the roughly equal distribution by country of the respondents themselves, especially considering the stresses of the time period.

Among the 27 respondents, 11 came from Azerbaijan, 9 came from Turkey, and 7 came from Tajikistan. The lesser number of interviews in the last case was due to a relatively smaller respondent pool from which to draw in Tajikistan, not the local office nor staff person's lack of diligence. Of these 27 usable responses, 3 were categorized as UN Officials; 7 were from National Ministries; 6 were from the Academic/Professional Research community; and 11 came from Advocacy/NGO groups. Table 1 shows the distribution of cases across site and category.

Table 1. Distribution of respondents across site and category

Site	UN Official	Ministry Official	University / Academia	Advocacy / NGO	
Tajikistan	1	1	1	4	7
Azerbaijan	2	2	2	5	11
Turkey	--	4	3	2	9
Totals	3	7	6	11	n=27

3. Data Analysis

The first set of substantive questions in the interview concerned the extent to which the respondent was familiar with the SDGs and measured their attitudes toward them. Not surprisingly, given the respondents in question, 24 of 27 (88.9%) reported that they were "Familiar" or "Very Familiar" with the SDGs on a 5-point Likert scale. Likewise, most respondents (96.2%) considered that the SDGs provided "great" or "some" chance to improve the conditions of people of the world. While interesting, it stands to reason that people with the positions involved would tend to have a higher degree of familiarity with the SDGs and, as it was their role, to regard the SDGs as having some potential for adding value to life on earth. More important to this analysis was the extent to which these people in the "middle" saw the performance of their own country. Table 2 displays these data.

Table 2. "In general terms, how is [your country] doing…" with each SDG

	SDG #2	%	SDG #6	%	SDG #15	%
Very Poor Job	0	0	0	0	1	3.8
Poor Job	1	3.8	4	15.4	3	11.5
Fair Job	10	38.5	6	23.1	9	34.6
Good Job	9	34.6	13	50	8	30.8
Excellent Job	3	11.5	3	11.5	3	11.5
Don't Know/Not Sure	3	11.5	0	0	2	7.7
Total	26	100	26	100	26	100

3.1 SDG #2: "Zero Hunger"

While it is notable that the plurality (46.1%) of the respondents considers their country as doing a "Good" or "Excellent" job in achieving "Zero Hunger", the "Don't Know/Not Sure" response (11.5%) was troubling, given that these individuals work with the SDGs themselves, either as a primary or otherwise major part of their jobs.

To explore this question further, the same phenomenon was found with regard to the eight SDG Targets, ranging from "Food Security" to "Ensuring Commodity Markets" (Table 3).

Table 3. SDG #2 "In your opinion will [your country] meet this target?"

	T1		T2		T3		T4		T5		T6		T7		T8	
	X	%	X	%	X	%	X	%	X	%	X	%	X	%	X	%
No	7	26.9	9	36.0	7	26.9	9	36.0	10	40.0	8	33.3	7	26.9	7	26.9
Yes	8	30.8	7	28.0	6	23.1	6	24.0	6	24.0	12	50.0	6	23.1	11	42.3
DK/NS	11	42.3	9	36.0	13	50.0	10	40.0	9	36.0	4	16.7	13	50.0	8	30.8
Total	26	100	25	100	26	100	25	100	25	100	24	100	26	100	26	100

Key: T1=Ensure access to safe, nutritious food

T2=End all forms of malnutrition

T3=Double agricultural productivity and incomes of small-scale food producers

T4=Ensure sustainable food production systems and implement resilient agricultural practices

T5=Maintain the genetic diversity of seeds, cultivated plants and farmed and domesticated animals and their related wild species

T6=Increase investment in rural infrastructure in particular least developed countries

T7=Correct and prevent trade restrictions and distortions in world agricultural markets

T8=Adopt measures to ensure the proper functioning of food commodity markets

Respondents were asked if they believed their country would meet the goal as stated in the official UN mandate by 2020 or 2030, as appropriate. Among the eight targets, the plurality of respondents reported that "Ensuring access" (T1) would be met (30.8% said "Yes") with a very substantial group (26.9%) saying "No". Regarding T2, a plurality (36%) indicated their country would not "end all forms of malnutrition". Similarly, a plurality of respondents felt that agricultural productivity and incomes would not be doubled (T3). With regard to ensuring sustainable food production (T4), those respondents that gave an answer believed their nation would meet the target. This level of optimism is held with regard to T5 ("Maintaining genetic diversity"). However, pessimism on T6 (Increasing rural investment) reached 50%. Opinion was roughly equal on T7 ("Prevent trade restrictions") and became decidedly negative (42.3%) on T8 ("Proper functioning of food commodity markets").

Given the nature of the sample population, some disagreement among this set of experts is understandable. However, somewhat surprising is the level of response to the "Don't Know/Not Sure" option. In 5 of the 8 targets, this was the modal response category. This is troubling, in the sense that it begs the question if these people "Don't Know", who in their country does? This issue will be explored with regard to target areas in other SDGs in our analysis. SDG#6 "Clean Water and Sanitation" data are presented in Table 4.

3.2 SDG #6: "Clean Water and Sanitation"

The responses on SDG #6 were generally more positive than those of SDG #2. Table 2 showed that a majority (61.5%) of the sample believed that their country was doing a "Good" or "Excellent" job of ensuring clean water and sanitation. This may be indicative of a greater level of knowledge about water issues, which should be evident by examining the targets for SDG #6.

Table 4. SDG #6 "In your opinion will [your country] meet this target?"

	T1		T2		T3		T4		T5		T6		T7		T8	
	X	%	X	%	X	%	X	%	X	%	X	%	X	%	X	%
No	8	30.8	4	15.4	7	26.9	7	26.9	7	26.9	14	53.8	5	19.2	6	23.1
Yes	12	46.2	8	30.8	12	46.2	11	42.3	12	46.2	5	19.2	13	50.0	16	61.5
DK/NS	6	23.1	14	53.8	7	26.9	8	30.8	7	26.9	7	26.9	8	30.8	4	15.4
Total	26	100	26	100	26	100	26	100	26	100	26	100	26	100	26	100

Key: T1=Universal and equitable access to safe and affordable drinking water

T2=Access to adequate and equitable sanitation and hygiene

T3=Improve water quality by reducing pollution,

T4=Increase water-use efficiency

T5=Implement integrated water resources management at all levels,

T6=Protect and restore water-related ecosystems,

T7=Expand international cooperation and capacity-building support to developing countries

T8=Support and strengthen the participation of local communities in improving water and sanitation management

Among the eight targets defined by the United Nations, the respective nations in the study are doing a more promising job on SDG #6 than they did on SDG #2. In seven of the eight targets, at least a plurality of respondents making a choice expressed the expectation that their nation would meet that standard by the date indicated. This sentiment was strongest with regard to "Support and Strengthen the participation of local communities in improving water and sanitation management", garnering 61.5% of the 27 respondents. Other targets that showed strong affirmation were ensuring "Universal and equitable access" (T1=46.2%); "reducing pollution" (T3=46.2%); "increasing water efficiency" (T4=42.3%); "implementing integrated water management" (T5=46.2%); and "expanding international cooperation and capacity building to developing countries" (T7=50%). With that said, there is still a compelling and even troubling lack of knowledge about the targets, with "Don't know/Not Sure" being the second most frequently occurring response in 3 of the 8 targets, reaching a high of 53.8% concerning achieving "access to adequate and equitable sanitation and hygiene for all" (T2) by 2030. This is stunning, given the nature of the respondent group and the centrality of the issue to the purposes of SDG #6. To lack knowledge or be unsure as to whether one's nation will be able to provide adequate sanitation would seem to be a major consideration in the sustainability repertoire of the nations of Central Asia. Further exploration of this point will be made with regard to data collected on SDG #15.

3.3 SDG #15: "Life on Land"

Again, the plurality of respondents in Table 2 thought their country was doing an "Excellent" or "Good" job at "Life on Land", although not nearly as high as compared to SDG #6. With regard to targets, however, there was considerably more pessimism about reaching the expected standards, with only two of the twelve targets associated with SDG #15 reaching plurality status on the expectation that the nation will meet the target in the designated time frame, including "end poaching and trafficking of protected species of flora and fauna" (T7=53.8%) and "increasing financial resources" (T10=28.0%). The "No" response exceeded the "Yes" response in six of the twelve target areas. But the most common response by far, was "Don't know/Not Sure", which showed a strong pattern of response across the table, exhibiting strong pluralities or majorities in six targets, conservation of mountain ecosystems (T4=50%); promotion of fair and equitable sharing of benefits concerning the use of genetic resources" (T6=53.8%); integration of ecosystem values (T8=46.2%); financing of conservation management (T10=52%); mobilization of conservation resources (T11=52%); and combating species poaching (T12=41.7%).

Table 5. SDG #15 "In your opinion will [your country] meet this target?"

	T1		T2		T3		T4		T5		T6	
	X	%	X	%	X	%	X	%	X	%	X	%
No	11	42.3	10	40.0	10	40.0	6	23.1	12	46.2	6	23.1
Yes	6	23.1	6	24.0	8	32.0	7	26.9	7	26.9	6	23.1
DK/NS	9	34.6	9	36.0	7	28.0	13	50.0	7	26.9	14	53.8
Total	26	100	25	100	25	100	26	100	26	100	26	100

	T7		T8		T9		T10		T11		T12	
	X	%	X	%	X	%	X	%	X	%	X	%
No	6	23.1	10	38.5	8	30.8	5	20.0	3	12.5	7	29.2
Yes	14	53.8	8	30.8	6	23.1	7	28.0	9	37.5	7	29.2
DK/NS	6	23.1	8	30.8	12	46.2	13	52.0	12	50.0	10	41.7
Total	26	100	26	100	26	100	25	100	24	100	24	100

Key: T1=Ensure the conservation, restoration, and sustainable use of terrestrial and inland freshwater ecosystems

T2=Implementation of sustainable management of all types of forests

T3=Combat desertification

T4=Conservation of mountain ecosystems

T5=Action to reduce the degradation of natural habitats

T6=Fair and equitable sharing of the benefits

T7=End poaching and trafficking of protected species of flora and fauna

T8=Prevent the introduction and significantly reduce the impact of invasive alien species

T9=Integrate ecosystem and biodiversity values

T10=Increase financial resources

T11=Mobilize conservation resources

T12=Support efforts to combat poaching and trafficking of protected species

Taken together, the data show a complex pattern of response. These respondents, those that implement policy on the ground, express guarded satisfaction about the progress of their country in terms of the three Sustainable Development Goals under examination by 2030. Having said this, the degree to which their country is meeting the specific targets required to achieve these goals is far less optimistic. Indeed, the level of "Don't Know/Not Sure" response across the SDGs considered is, given the nature of this group, potentially alarming. This issue will be considered in greater depth in Section 4 "Discussion". While it may be of some interest to examine target data by nation, this presents two confounding issues. First, the cell sizes in each target will likely be very small, making it difficult to recognize meaningful trends. Moreover, the challenges the SDGs aim to resolve are not national ones. They are global. As such, it would be meaningless if one country was seen as doing better or worse than another. Indeed, the regional perspective would be of greater value, both in analytical as well as "real world" terms when speaking about the SDGs.

4. Discussion

The actors "in the middle", i.e., the Implementers in our study, most certainly can "look both ways". Caught "in the paradox" between vague policy goals and requirements for action, one can expect, on one hand, a relatively clearer understanding of what is involved in policy implementation than the institutional leaders who proclaim such policy. On the other hand, they are also intimately aware of the problems and pitfalls of such implementation.

The data show both dimensions of this tension. On one hand, the Implementers recognize the progress their country

has made with respect to SDGs #2, #6, and #15. While there is some variability by individual SDG and while this may be attributable to differences by nation, a substantial plurality views this progress as "Good" to "Excellent" in each case. When we add the "Fair" category to the analysis, the overwhelming majority of the respondents recognize that there is movement in terms of the basic thrust of the individual SDG. Having said this, the implementation of the individual SDGs in terms of "targets" appears to break down completely. Not only is the question of whether their nation will meet the target more often answered in the negative than one might expect, given their relative optimism in terms of progress being made as well as the knowledge these respondents possess, there is a high degree of uncertainty shown as to whether a specific SDG target will be reached. Indeed, in 12 of 28 SDG targets, "Don't Know/Not Sure" is the modal response. This is perplexing, as if these respondents "Don't Know" whether an individual target will be reached, who does?

At least part of the answer to this question is a function of the nature of the sample. These are professionals, essentially being asked to make predictions about the future. To be sure, these people create the future quite apart from the politicians and policy makers who make assurances and assumptions about it. However, a potentially more compelling answer is that these "targets", like the SDGs themselves, were created for political in addition to substantive reasons. Consequently, they may be very difficult to interpret in practical terms, particularly for these most practical of respondents. The alternative explanation might be that there may be a disconnect between their opinions about their nation reaching the goal and its operational details. This is unlikely. Again, if these people don't understand the connection between the goal and the targets, the problem is likely to be in the presumed connection between them, not with the respondents themselves.

A quick review of the structure of the SDG targets lend support to the notion that the reason Implementors struggle with making predictions about the targets because they are not understandable, at least in terms of providing guidance as to how to meet the broader goals for these most pragmatic respondents. A few examples point this out rather dramatically. In SDG #2, the world is asked to: "By 2030, double the agricultural productivity and incomes of small-scale food producers, in particular women, indigenous peoples, family farmers, pastoralists, and fishers, including through secure and equal access to land, other productive resources and inputs, knowledge, financial services, markets, and opportunities for value addition and non-farm employment." SDG #15 asks us to "Promote fair and equitable sharing of benefits arising from the utilization of genetic resources and promote appropriate access to such resources, as internationally agreed."

Given the complexity, multiple foci, and convoluted language of these targets, our respondents may be forgiven for a "Don't Know/Not Sure" responses. While reflection may indeed provide some idea of what they are seeking, their ambiguity does little to advance the cause of global achievement of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals. In addition to the complexity of the language, the ideas and real-world change that each goal promotes are in and of themselves complex and contradictory, making the work of implementers central. This underscores the importance and unquestionable requirement for a group of "translators" capable of discerning between the wheat and the chaff of any policy in any realm. It is, indeed, why this group of professionals are both worthy of and necessary to better understand.

5. Summary and Conclusions

This paper sought to gain an understanding of how the nations of Central Asia as a whole are doing in working toward fulfillment of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals one-third of the way toward the 2030 end date. Specifically, we attempted to look at this through the eyes of those most centrally responsible for achieving these Goals, the Implementers, those living in the "paradox" of policy and politics.

One inference we can draw is, in general terms, our Central Asian Implementers generally feel as if their nations will succeed in meeting the Goals, at least in terms of SDG #2 ("Zero Hunger"); SDG #6 ("Clean Water and Sanitation"); and SDG #15 ("Life on Land"). This can be seen to be very welcome news, for both Central Asia and for LDCs, to the extent that the responses of Central Asians are indicators of trends elsewhere. Moreover, given the importance of LDCs in meeting global goals, identifying this progress may provide some incentive to other nations in refocusing and reenergizing their efforts to meet this level of achievement.

On the other hand, the process by which the United Nations developed targets for the achievement of these goals is deeply flawed. At best, they did no good, at least for this most necessary group of professional policy experts. At worst, they held back progress toward achievement, making it unnecessarily difficult to see whether the target was being met. Not only was this point made clear in our research, but it echoes the literature, both in academic exploration of the issues of SDG implementation as well as the published reports by the UN and other agencies about the lack of consistency of performance both within and across nations. Indeed, there is evidence that the Covid-19 pandemic inhibited progress to some degree. But we would argue this is only true at the margins. The

great structural flaw is the political context of the SDGs that impedes the work of those tasked to achieve them.

In the course of this study, a number of questions arose that call for further research. One obvious focus would be to examine the extent to which these findings in Central Asia also represent LDCs in other areas. Accordingly, this group of researchers are currently preparing similar examinations of these issues in Latin America and Africa. Beyond that, it is clearly the case this examination also needs to be done with MDCs, as we approach 2030. Based on our data, while not conclusive, they do lend some support to the notion that LDCs are "ahead" of larger, richer countries and it is important to know if that is the case. Additionally, there is a need for more research on policy implementation itself, inclusive of but not restricted to sustainability issues. What are the areas of resistance in global policy implementation? What strategies work well, which work less well? What defines success in policy implementation? There is the emerging field of Implementation Science, and it would be very useful to engage some of these approaches focused on global SDG implementation.

Most important of all, we —as a global family— need the UN Sustainability Goals to be successful. As we saw again the summer of 2022's drought-driven fires raging with high temperatures all over the world, this issue is critical for our common future. To be sure, few people believe there will be a clear-cut "success" or "failure" as a result of the SDG process between 2015-2030. As the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were a precursor to the SDGs, we can expect a new round of goals at some point after 2030. Given this, it becomes of paramount importance that we learn as much as possible about this round of global action, its successes and failures, victories, and losses. Also, we need to better understand what works and why. These questions are certainly important for the academic literature. Much more important, of course, is the future of our species and its survival. To that end, learning all we can is worthy of all of our efforts.

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