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The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Quantification, and the Production of Expertise

Main Takeaways:

- *Knowledge production in global governance has undergone five major changes: universalization, mono-disciplinarity, brokerage, datafication, marketization*
- *These trends respond to and reflect the increasing complexity of contemporary global issues, which poses further challenges to practitioners in international organisations*
- *More efforts are needed by researchers and practitioners alike to enhance the impact of knowledge*
- *At the same time, one should be aware of the limitations of looking at the world – and progress towards reaching the SDGs – through highly technical, complex and multiple forms of measurements. When all thinking focuses on the measurements, this hampers a deeper reflection on the problems themselves and on the assumptions that inform SDGs governance.*

On 23 November 2021, the Graduate Institute's Global Governance Centre, United Nations Office at Geneva (UNOG), and the Republic and Canton of Geneva invited Sotiria Grek, Professor in Global Education Governance at the University of Edinburgh and convened an International Geneva Luncheon (see insert below) to address the nature of these changes. Annabelle Littoz-Monnet, Professor in International Relations at the Graduate Institute, chaired the event. Agi Veres (UNDP) acted as discussant and the seminar's participants included a diverse mix of senior-level staff from different United Nations agencies, representatives from non-governmental organisations, and scholars.

Knowledge production and mobilization is central to global governance. International organisations rely on, produce, and base their work on the knowledge and measurement of the issues, which their policies and programmes address. The actors, politics, technologies, and organisational structures that organize this - the 'epistemic infrastructure' of global governance - has evolved over time. In her presentation, Professor Grek has revealed key changes in the global infrastructure of knowledge production in relation to the development, implementation, and measurement of the SDGs. She pointed to five characteristics that characterize SDGs expert knowledge today.



Universal context

Contemporary expert knowledge in global governance aims to be global and universal, rather than context specific. In order to build legitimacy, such knowledge is premised on participatory and inclusive processes, whereby decision-makers become part of the knowledge infrastructure. International organisations produce SDGs indicators and visualizations that invite different actors to contribute to the aims and the processes of measurement. The appearance of universality, moreover, allows more intersection across policy arenas. SDGs expert knowledge fashions itself as universal, transversal and global.

Mono-disciplinarity

In SDGs governance, economics has emerged as the single dominating discipline, the 'great unifier', through which all problems are seen and evaluated. Economists are centrally positioned within international organisations and more largely in the contemporary knowledge infrastructure. As problems are approached through an economic lens, preference has been given to the creation of instruments that 'count' reality and evaluate the worth of global programmes through cost-benefit types of analysis.

Brokerage

International organisations act as brokers between knowledge production and policy work. This role allows them to adopt different identities for different audiences and creates bridges between technocratic and political accountability, giving them further legitimation as purveyors of technocracy *and* democracy.

Datified accountability and users' reflexivity

In new expert forms, we observe a shift from social to datified accountability, with accountability mechanisms becoming connected to the data itself. There is an increasingly large role for users in the data visualizations produced by International Organisations. Rather than static country rankings, novel tools invite countries and people to make their own visualizations, thereby engaging the users themselves. Contemporary data visualizations also act as devices of alignment, in the sense that they facilitate agreements and consensus. Such devices have for instance made it possible to secure buy-in from countries and other global governance actors to specific programmes.

Market of indicators

The growth of indicators has been accompanied by the emergence of a market-like system for evaluating them. Different indicators measure issues such as poverty and education and compete for users according to a market logic. The quality of indicators is not assessed based on how well they reflect reality, but according to their market share. That is, the number of countries that choose to follow an indicator is the primary quality check.



Three main themes then emerged during the discussion with the audience. Sotiria Grek's presentation was followed by comments from the designated discussant, Agi Veres (UNDP), after which the floor was opened to all participants.

Governing complexity

The new infrastructure of knowledge production reflects and responds to the increasing complexity of the issues that international organisations and other actors in global governance address. The discussion revealed at least three aspects:

- *Drawing conclusions from data.* Different organisations can look at the same data, conduct similar analyses, and yet reach different conclusions because of issue and knowledge complexity. The relationship between the quantity of knowledge available and the quality of policy decisions is therefore not straightforward.
- *Connecting changes in knowledge to policy and programme implementation.* Little is known about how to ensure that the use of novel forms of knowledge is reflected into the making of policy.
- *Complexification of indicators and metrics.* Not only are global phenomena complex, but the way these are being measured and 'seen' is also increasingly composite and intricate. While the present multitude of indicators may better reflect the complexity of given issues, this way of appraising and measuring the world can also hamper change or implementation. For instance, there is a time lag between changes at the level of policy, and such changes being reflected in the indicators - an inherent difficulty built into working with and from indicators. Moreover, the question was raised of whether issues themselves really are more complex, or whether it is simply the way we approach, measure and evaluate problems through intricate measurements and techniques that has become highly technical. Finally, the idea that it is precisely the inability to have an overview of everything that maintains and keeps the infrastructure growing was raised. There are always gaps and inconsistencies to be addressed and built upon.

Enhancing the impact of knowledge

Some participants noted the need to ensure that the knowledge produced addresses societal needs. Along the spectrum of knowledge production and usage, more attention is needed on identifying what purpose knowledge is intended to and should serve. Others emphasized the importance of knowledge management once the knowledge is produced. The right knowledge needs to reach the right people, and at the right time. There was a general agreement that better understanding is needed about how to manage knowledge, in order to ensure that it is actively shared with the people for whom it is most relevant.

Problems with the SDGs' 'knowledge infrastructure'

One participant pointed to the geopolitical and strategic context within which knowledge production takes place and warned against leaving such considerations out of the discussion. Governments can use and manipulate the brokerage function of international organisations to their own benefit. Several participants problematized the mono-disciplinary character and the dominance of



economists. Economists have a particular approach to the world, premised on the assumption of growth and constant improvement, which is troubling when left virtually unchallenged in central arenas of global governance. Currently, there is nothing that goes against the prevalence of economic modelling and the creation of proxies, scarce data, and dubious numbers that accompany it. There is a high degree of acceptance of this approach, even though, as one participant emphasized, the objectivity and validity of the data should be questioned.

About the International Geneva Luncheons

The International Geneva Luncheons are a seminar series co-organized by the Graduate Institute's Global Governance Centre and the United Nations Office at Geneva with the generous support of the Republic and Canton of Geneva. The seminars convene international scholars conducting innovative research relevant to international organisations, senior policy practitioners from across various Geneva-based United Nations entities and non-governmental organisations to discuss informally across broad institutional and thematic lines. The seminar series offers a unique and constructive space for policy-practitioners and scholars to take a step back from their daily activities and reflect critically on the challenges and transformations of our contemporary governance arrangements and their future.

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