Setting sustainability agenda:

a process of compromise making

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1. Introduction

This paper examines how local actors set local sustainability agenda. By relying on the economies of worth (EoW) theory (Boltanski and Thevenot 1991, 1999, 2006). We explain how actors may dwell upon multiple worlds to decide what is valuable, what is not valuable, and to promote their views. Because of the divergent priorities of multi-actors (Public, private, and CSOs), critical moments and disagreements may arise, in the context of setting sustainability agendas guided by SDGs. SDGs is addressed in abundance across different disciplines, especially from a multi-actors perspective (Mena & Palazzo 2012, Liu et al., 2018, Gray & Purdy 2018; Raymond & Kenter 2016; Reed et al., 2017a), with an emphasis that it is difficult to achieve a collective agreement that brings together different views (Kenter et al., 2014, Ferraro et al., 2015, Reinecke & Ansari 2015, Ranger et al., 2016, Gray & Purdy 2018). Nonetheless, there is evidence that multi actors reach to collective agreements (Finch el al 2017; Reinecke & Ansari 2015). The collective agreement that is demonstrated in a compromise, can be considered as an ongoing process that temporarily resolves criticisms or disputes.

Agenda-setting is a political interactive process that entails multiple actors (Michael Howlett & Benjamin Cashore 2020). Agenda setting is a conflictive and competitive process, it is contingent on competing entries and different views on policy agenda (Dearing and Rogers, 1996). However, we lack knowledge about how the agenda setting process works in SDGs

policy. Furthermore, we lack a proper understanding of how multi-actors shape common mutually accepted priorities, in the context of setting sustainability agendas. We therefore address this lack of understanding.

Our paper poses a main research question, which is; ***How do local policy makers set sustainability agenda?***. To answer this question, we chose to focus on the Wallonia region in Belgium. The Wallonia region is one of the regions, beside the Flemish region and the Brussels capital, which came into existence due to the federalization of the state of Belgium.

This paper offers a nuanced analysis of agenda setting for sustainability guided by SDGs, where multiple actors are engaged for the purpose of setting the agenda. The multiple actors have divergent interests and logics that we argue may clash in moments of disagreement or converge in a collective compromise. We explain how this happens and why. We consider the critical moments at the local level where actors engage in justifications to specify which order of worth plays a role in setting the SDGs' agenda.

2. Theoretical Framework: Economies of Worth

Actors hold different logical principles of coherence, which are mobilized to select priorities about a certain situation or topic (Patriotta, Gond, & Schultz, 2011). The principles of coherence proposed in an analytical grammar known as the 'common worlds' (Thévenot, Moody, & Lafaye, 2000). The seven common worlds are; Civic, Fame, Market, Industrial, Domestic, Inspired, and Green.

According to Boltanski and Thévenot, actors interact to justify what is good or bad, valuable or not (Boltanski, 2011), thus, the interplay of the common worlds generates moments of disagreements that emerge across actors in certain social settings.

For example, the Civic world will reject competition value, while the Market world will favor such value. Private sector actors value money as the major worth, while CSOs actors value the collective interest and environmental problems, regardless of any economic considerations. And so, two actors may conceive what is worthy or less worthy in very different ways, contingent to the order of worth.

EoW is significant for our paper as it renders concrete vocabulary and analytical components for analyzing the moral basis of the organizational actions and linking it with the individual interests and aspirations (Blokker 2011). EoW facilitates zooming into "the reasons of acting" that individuals may give to others, or to themselves (Boltanski 2005 p:20).

Compromise is one of the solutions of the disagreement (Boltanski & Thévenot 2006), and a form of arrangement where the common good replaces any opposition between two common worlds and ties them together in favor of common good. The compromise brings together different common worlds to deal with certain situations. For instance, an architect with an inspired perspective aims to build a non conventional property, while an opposition may arise from the industrial world, which eventually can be solved through bringing in the market orientation (market world).

With regard to sustainable priorities, if articulated in ecological terms that means the environment is a significant measure of worth and ought to be favored. However, some actors

may promote industrial concerns to be the priority, other actors may argue that civic concerns should come first regardless of economic costs.

3. Empirical Setting

We chose to focus on local governments in the Wallonia region in Belgium, because the former are the key players with significant impact on the sustainable development of cities (Tang et al., 2019), which is even more important given the economic evolution of the Wallonia region, as it was the main iron and coal producing industrial district in the world. The serious crisis that hit the industry has led the government to relaunching economic growth to address the crisis' consequences. Concretely, Wallonia has committed to several economic plans that varied in its focus, such as digitalisation, public administration reform, ICT infrastructures integration, and human capital training on digital literacy (Vanmarsenille & Desdemoustier 2018).

Moreover, the Wallonia government launched a long-term recovery plan coined the "Marshall Plan" in 2005, as well as the Digital Wallonia strategy in 2015, which is geared to drive the high-tech sector (Esposito et al., 2021). Alongside these territorial development initiatives, Wallonia has pursued specific sustainability policies, such as the regional sustainable development strategy and the creation of roadmaps for local actors to use to achieve the SDGs.

Notwithstanding existing plans, the region has recently been targeted as a priority investment area in Europe due to significant socio-economic challenges associated with sustainable transitions and achieving climate neutrality by 2050. In this context, three Wallonia territories (Tournai, Mons, and Charleroi) were identified due to their high industrial greenhouse gas emissions linked to cement, chemical, and electricity production and simultaneous economic

issues such as substantial unemployment. Therefore, Wallonia is a key region for the Just Sustainable Transition processes unraveling currently in Europe (EC, 2020).

Wallonia is an interesting region to study for several reasons. First, due to the institutional setting in Belgium, Wallonia has strong regional power related to its sustainable territorial development. Relatedly, the region has a significant influence on local development, creating a novel dynamic between national, regional, and local levels of policy. Second, as one of selected regions targeted through the Just Transition Fund mechanism, operating between 2021–2027.

Finally, the institutional complexity of the Belgian context that has emerged due to the federalization process makes the Wallonia region a very interesting empirical site. Our empirical setting will offer important analytical and empirical nuances on how municipal actors along with other actors coming from different sectors shape agreements about sustainability priorities.

4. Methodology

We embrace an exploratory, pluralistic inquiry driven by debate across the engaged actors. We triangulated the data collection, which included semi structured interviews and documents analysis. (1) *semi structured-interviews*: We conducted (n=20) conducted in 2022. The interviewees were selected through snowball sampling technique, included actors from the regional government of Wallonia, and the municipalities under the jurisdiction of the Wallonia region. The profile of the interviewees was selected based on the involvement of interviewees in setting sustainability agenda at the local level (municipalities). We designed the interviews' guide around three main sections: first the role of the interviewee in setting sustainability

priorities, and the overall governance climate of sustainable development strategies, second, the notion of sustainability, and the way in which actors engage in debates and justifications, and third interactions amongst diverse actors, including local communities, and across multiple levels. (2) We reviewed *several documents*, included the second regional sustainability strategy, the local barometers about sustainability plans, the PSTs for some municipalities, the regional decree, and webpages[1] dedicated for sustainable development in Belgium, such as the framework for National Sustainable Development Strategy (NSDS) with a focus on the Wallon region. Of course part of documents' review included the global documents related to sustainable development, such as the SDGs, and Brundtland commission report.

Data analysis we ran a qualitative coding of the transcripts and identified the redundant elements that correspond to the common words that appeared in the responses of the interviewees and in the documents. Qualitative coding allowed us to structure the data globally based on the Boltanski and Thevenot framework. We then zoomed into the structured data based on Patriotta, Gond, and Schultz (2011), and built a first list of the worlds that appeared in the data.

We extended the coding by adding terms that appeared in the documents as well as in the interviews' transcripts to refer to specific common worlds, and this was the second step of analysis. Precisely, we operationalised the analytical framework into a number of codes to be

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[1] https://www.developpementdurable.be/fr/news/la-wallonie-en-route-vers-les-17-sdg-bilan-des-progres
https://developpementdurable.wallonie.be/concept-objectifs-strategie/strategie
http://www.federation-wallonie-bruxelles.be/index.php?id=93&no_cache=1&tx_cfwbdatacerbere_pi1%5BcaId%5D=3201
https://www.uvcw.be/environnement/actus/art-2049
https://perspective.brussels/nl/plannen-reglementen-en-handleidingen/de-strategische-plannen/het-gewestelijk-ontwikkelingsplan-gewop
https://www.duurzameontwikkeling.be/n
https://www.covenantofmayors.eu/en/
https://journeytozerostories.neste.com/sustainability/9-breakthroughs-sustainability-world-needs-focus-next?gclid=CjwKCAjw8sCRBhA6EiwA6_IF4SmEI4sMQlWYc8TN_7hel-5TCyelU4viMpCV24dXLZVtAmGwbDzChxoCLC4QAvD_BwE
https://developpementdurable.wallonie.be/
https://etaamb.openjustice.be/fr/decret-du-27-juin-2013_n2013203948.html

applied. We mobilized the analytical framework to create categories that captured sustainability priorities, choices and viewpoints aligned with the orders of worth. As a result, we captured a hybridity of the orders of worth, in a specific configuration that exists in the process of setting the sustainability agenda.

5. Findings

5.1 Mapping the Multiple Economies of Worth

Our analysis detects the existence of multiple economies of worth *(Green, Civic, Industrial),* which play out a major role in setting sustainability agenda. The ***green world*** emerged significantly, as actors dwelled on the risks of pollution and emissions as concrete facts. Actors think that efforts should be intensified to effectively undertake the appropriate measures to combat the aforementioned risks. In addition, actors are not convinced that climate emergencies receive enough attention from policy makers or formulate durable actions.

Actors showed a clear tendency to contribute to discussions of setting sustainability agenda. There was a willingness among actors to participate in setting the agenda, which can be inferred as an indication of the realm of duty and responsibility, as actors were motivated to freely participate as part of a collective, which implies the significance of the ***civic world.*** Externally, local governments formulate working groups of citizens to contribute to sustainability priorities. Generally, that took a participatory approach, where the sense of duty played a major role, which suggests the influence of the civic world. Yet, the final approval of the sustainability agenda remains subject to political negotiation and consent. Therefore, Our findings suggest that the ***civic world*** remains influential.

We found out that there is a technical dimension. Quite a few actors advocated that it is imperative that sustainability priorities should be precise and useful for local communities, examples include public local parks, small projects, etc.

The industrial views were demonstrated with arguments that discussions about sustainability priorities should lead to concrete plans with specific timelines, regardless whether sustainability ideas will be a public garden or a waste management project. We suggest that the technical dimension is salient and applied in a very nuanced way, where precision, usefulness and efficiency are valued, and therefore the ***industrial world*** exists.

5.2 Moments of Critiques

Justifications coming from the green economy of worth predominated largely sustainability agenda. The environment related issues were like opium for the vast majority of actors, who evoked serious concerns about biodiversity, gas emissions, etc. However, the green world was challenged, as a few actors raised doubts about the extent to which sustainability projects can achieve tangible results in protecting the environment or reducing climate change damages at all. Criticizing the heavy focus on the green world brings into attention that green advocates focus on risks and fears, and do not necessarily think rationally. This may jeopardize the possibility to concretely design projects yielding real results.

The heavy focus on environment oriented projects, derived from fears and emotions rather than being scientific with clear benchmarks, likely lead to falling short to forecast outcomes in the

long run. The critical moments that the green world faces do not mean that the green world is absorbed by other worlds, Rather, the green world sustains its resilience and prominence.

The critical moments of testing the industrial world is the extent to which sustainability projects can in reality function effectively without dwelling on instruments, using technology excessively. Criticizing industrial orientation stems from the trade off of the industrial world, precisely, the standardized procedure, rigid unclear terms with little input from local communities.

Proponents of the industrial world tend to refer to the delivery of precise projects for the local communities. In the context of setting a sustainability agenda, proponents advocated for clarity and precision of projects, without associating sustainability only with appealing notions, or with concerns regarding climate change.

The test of the industrial orientations led to a very selective and focused mobilization of few industrial oriented elements. Precisely, setting clear targets that are functional, with a long term planning to generate concrete positive impacts on the environment.

Criticisms of the civic world included 'greenwashing' concerns. Opponents view the appeal for protecting the environment as a collective interest can be a double edge sword. The mounting criticisms revolve around the possibility that politicians may manipulate the concerns about climate change to use for narrow interests or for election. We captured more critical reflection regarding the civic orientation of sustainability agenda, which is the extent to which sustainability projects generate collective benefits or reflect a collective will. The test of the civic

world centers on the concept of including people to voice their actual priorities with regard to sustainability projects.

Actors favored the civic orientation of sustainability agenda, nonetheless, the association of green concerns and the common interests created doubts that agendas will remain rhetoric and symbolic. The criticisms were further layered when actors raised the political manipulation of sustainability. As a result of exchanges, actors essentially marginalize some elements of a specific economy of worth, while they focus on some other elements, in a form of compromise.

5.3 Facilitating Mechanisms

Our findings demonstrate that actors exchanged divergent priorities, which come from different logics of actions, and therefore create moments of disagreements. The latter settle through shaping a compromise composed of different worlds. We stretched our analysis and identified a set of mechanisms that facilitate the process of shaping a collective compromise.

We identified *reflection* as a major mechanism. Most of the green views were laid out immensely discussing climate change. Thanks to reflection, green oriented actors offered reasons behind their views and preferences. The reasons entail tangible facts such as gas emission, pollution, biodiversity, renewable energies, etc. By reflecting on facts, green actors provided reasons for their own views. The concrete reasons gave the green proponents the legitimacy to lay rigorously their undertaking of what a sustainability plan should include.

Reflection helps the green proponents to push for their preferences, and to intrigue the counter arguments to reconcile the latter's views to overcome disagreements. That said, reflection proved

significant to pave the way for other actors to lay open their views as we outline in the subsequent section.

Actors were willing to exchange views about what is valuable and what is not to be part of the sustainability agenda. Several actors were engaged despite the divergent interests that spanned across different sectors, of which actors represent. The engaging and interactive atmosphere was one of the major features that interviewees repeatedly mentioned. We therefore identify *engagement* as a major mechanism that creates a conducive atmosphere of exchange and participation despite the different perspectives. Essentially, engagement facilitated creating an ecosystem through which actors were open to express their views.

Our analysis reveals that actors intend to alter their views after the collective interaction. We therefore identify *alteration* as a significant mechanism that enables actors to shape a collective compromise consisting of a certain configuration of different orders of worth.

Alteration along with the reflection and engagement mechanisms establish an atmosphere conducive to reaching the compromise which is the outcome of the discussions. We next present the compromise composed of different orders of worth.

5.4 Multi-Economies of Worth Compromise

When actors get together for the purpose of setting a sustainability agenda, divergent perspectives clash. We showed earlier where do the divergent perspectives come from in

alignment with the EoW framework. By stretching our analysis, we find out that despite disagreements, actors collectively interact in a particular fashion to shape a compromise.

The compromise is based on blending elements coming from different orders of worth to eventually align all priorities togethers in a particular configuration. The compromise demonstrates the actors' capacity to use orders of worth in a context of setting an agenda, in a specific way, which led to a collective compromise composed of *green world, civic world,* and *industrial world.*

6. Discussion

We showed in our paper why agenda setting is complex and conflictual in the sustainability setting, SDGs policy. Complex because there are multiple actors with different interests, different logics interact. Conflictual because the different logics are competing in a context of setting the agenda. Thanks to EOW, we unpack the tensions, which provides a grammar to do so, which contributes to the methodology of mapping EOWs, then we explain how actors cope with this complexity and conflictuality to reach an agreement about sustainability agenda. We identify a way to solve the conflicts among actors through a set of mechanisms that facilitate shaping a compromise which is the agenda setting. We present the process in a model that illustrates the way in which actors interact, in an ongoing process of compromise making in the context of agenda setting. We therefore extend the notion of compromise in the context of SDGs.

Figure (1) our model that explains how local actors formulate sustainability plans.

Worthiness of environment projects
Concreteness of projects

CSOs

GREEN

Compromise
on
SDG
Agenda

Engagement >> Reflection >> Alteration

Engagement >> Reflection >> Alteration

CIVIC

INDUSTRIAL

PUBLIC AUTHORITIES

Engagement >> Reflection >> Alteration

BUSINESSES

Political aspect
Public inclusion
Collective will

Standardized procedures
Rigid terms with little input
from local communities