Setting sustainability agenda at the local level: a process of compromise making

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Abstract

This paper examines how local actors set the sustainability agenda. By relying on the economies of worth, we explain how actors dwell upon multiple worlds to evaluate what is valuable, what is not valuable, and to promote their views. Empirically, we draw evidence from the Walloon region in Belgium, by investigating how multiple actors discuss their views in an attempt to set a sustainability agenda. We outline the multiple worlds that actors refer to during their interaction, the moments of critiques and how a compromise is shaped where the green world is given a significant prominence. Furthermore, we identify a set of mechanisms that facilitated the multi-actor interaction to shape a collective compromise as a continuous process.

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Points for practitioners

(1) Local governments play a crucial role in sustainability policies due to their proximity to local communities, enabling the development of tailored solutions, and direct engagement with citizens to address local environmental and social challenges.

(2) Agenda-setting in local sustainability policies is intricate and frequently contentious due to the diverse values, interests, and preferences of all involved stakeholders.

(3) Drawing on Boltanski and Thévenot's orders of worth theory, this paper offers researchers and practitioners an approach to unpack and understand the varied values, interests, and preferences of all involved stakeholders.

(4) This paper identifies and elucidates three mechanisms (reflection, engagement, and alteration) that facilitate interactions among stakeholders, allowing them to reach a compromise on a shared sustainability agenda.

Introduction

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) constitute the United Nations Agenda for Sustainable Development (Agenda 2030). The SDGs, entitled "Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development" with 17 goals,[1] provides a framework to address social, economic, and environmental challenges. The subscribing states commenced, at multiple levels—regional, national, and local—the process of making sustainable[2] public policies guided by the SDGs, which is a difficult task, especially for local governments (Bisogno et al., 2023).

Agenda setting is the first crucial phase of policymaking. The policy agenda refers to the issues that rise to the attention of policymakers, potentially leading to the inclusion of these issues on the policy agenda (Peters, 2001). In the context of the SDGs, the sustainability agenda refers to a combination of issues that cover and balance the three dimensions of sustainable development: economy, environment, and society. The issues that arise on the agenda offer an opportunity to prioritize systemic change toward a sustainable future. However, setting agenda is a complex nonlinear process that considers interrelated elements, including context, institutional structures, political will, resources, and the historical policy trajectory (Princen, 2007; Princen and Rhinard, 2006). The complexity of agenda setting is also due to problems and issues that are not easily defined or formulated (Littoz-Monnet, 2012, Princen, 2007).

To set the SDGs agenda, multiple actors (public, private, civil society) engage to discuss sustainability priorities. The engagement of multiple actors implies that agenda setting becomes conflictual as shaping agenda issues resonates with the values, interests and preferences of all actors involved in the policymaking (Peters, 1994). Shaping issues

happens in a dynamic argument and complex interaction between agenda setting actors (Fukuda-Parr, 2016), which may lead to conflicts. Actors' interests may change or shift during interaction to allocate attention to certain issues, which determine policy outcomes (Princen, 2012).

It is therefore important to understand the process of setting the SDG agenda through which actors argue and justify the issues of attention. In this paper we delve into this process at the local level, and in particular ask: *How do local actors set the SDG agenda?*

To answer this question, we mobilize Boltanski and Thévenot's (1991, 1999) socio-political theory known as justification theory and interchangeably referred to as economies of worth (EoW). The EoW has proved to be very useful in explaining the multiplicity of reasoning and therefore how actors make choices in the policy domain (Esposito et al., 2023). The EoW enables us to analyze the different justifications and arguments between actors at the local level about the issues they believe should be on the sustainability agenda. We therefore nuance the analysis to reveal the interactions that local actors shape for the purpose of arguing and justifying the issues to add to the sustainability agenda. In doing so, we explain where issues come from, why actors allocate attention to certain issues more than others, and why interactions may clash in moments of disagreement or converge in a collective agreement.

In addition, we integrate agenda setting which shows the complexity of the policy-making process, where issues emerge and disappear from the agenda during the interaction process (Capano and Howlett, 2020; Princen, 2012). We draw our empirical evidence from the calls to set the SDGs agenda at the local level initiated by the Walloon Region[3] in Belgium. The calls represented an opportunity for the issues requiring attention at the local level to be added to the regional SDGs strategy.

Our paper has multiple contributions. First, we contribute to the EoW by advancing the notion of compromise, as an ongoing process in setting a sustainability agenda. Second, we propose a theoretical model that illustrates how multiple actors engage in a process to shape a collective compromise in the context of setting a sustainability agenda. As part of our model, we identify a set of mechanisms that facilitate the shaping of a collective compromise. Lastly, we link the SDGs with the agenda setting phase, offering a novel and nuanced perspective on how and why certain issues gain attention more than others.

We structure the paper as follows. The first part reviews and specifies the object of the analysis and presents the analytical framework based on justification theory. The second part outlines the empirical setting, data and methods, and the third part presents the findings. The final section is the discussion and concluding remarks.

Explaining SDG agenda setting at the local level through the lens of justification theory

The SDGs framework builds on the reviews of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)[4]. The MDGs' reviews stressed a few points: the overlap in global governance, sustainable production and consumption,[5] and strengthening of implementation approaches

(Yiu and Saner, 2014). Conceptually, the MDGs have shortcomings as the outcomes are defined without the possible journey to achieve the objectives (Yiu and Saner, 2014), with no reference to the preparatory conditions of the goals, but specifying the destination without recognizing the differences in national priorities.

In terms of design, the multiple objectives are specified in many different ways; some are set out in proportional terms[6] and other objectives are set out in terms of completion.[7] Most importantly, the MDGs were designed by technocrats, with limited consultation with other experts, a process that was widely criticized.

Consistent with this background, scholarship discussed the role of agenda setting in formulating public policy, which is essential for its survival (van der Ploeg, 1984). However, the accelerating challenges of climate change exceed the scope of governments, and require different ways of governing (Kemp et al., 2007) sustainability challenges. Agenda setting refers to the way in which issues rise to the attention of policymakers, possibly leading to the inclusion of these issues on the policy agenda (Peters, 2001). Kingdon (1995: 3) defines an agenda as "the list of subjects or problems which governmental officials are paying some serious attention to at any given time".

Cohen et al. (1972) introduced agenda setting as a concept in policy science and the first phase of the public policy cycle. They argued that the issues on the agenda are determined as a result of a complex interaction between policymakers, the media, interest groups and the public. Several actors engage in this complex collaborative approach, examples of actors include public administration, the private sector, and civil society organizations (CSOs).

The private sector orientation in sustainability has mostly focused on social responsibility, shareholders, employees, customers, suppliers, and communities (Freeman, 2010), which are vital to address sustainability challenges (Freudenreich et al., 2020).

Civil Society Organizations comprise a powerful actor in governance (Arda and Banerjee, 2021), mandated to advocate for the common good and to defend the collective interest of communities (Anheier, 2004). Civil Society Organizations therefore can play an influencing role to shape sustainability outcomes according to their orientation (Fougère and Solitander, 2020).

Agenda setting has its roots in American studies, where it stands on its own in the context of US politics (Cobb and Elder, 1972). In EU studies, agenda setting has become a subject of systematic inquiry with the contribution of some notable scholars (Peters, 1994, 2001; Pollack, 1997). A growing literature developed later, which studies the rise of issues on the EU agenda. Rather, EU scholars contend that agenda setting is particularly significant in the EU political system, since it facilitates the existence of two agenda-setting actors: the political elites and experts (Peters, 2001; Princen and Rhinard, 2006).

Peters (2001) argues that the government's agenda is complex as it is determined by the preferences of policymakers, and is affected by external factors such as economic conditions and public opinion. Peters suggests that it is difficult to achieve stability in the policy agenda, rather it is constantly evolving. Peters emphasizes on the significance of examining agenda setting to be able to understand how policy decisions are made and how political power is distributed in society.

Pollack (1997) considers agenda setting as a supranational delegation and agency for directing community politics and policies. He classified agendas into two types. The first type is formal or procedural agenda, which refers to the commission right and the European parliament conditional right to set the council's formal agenda. The informal agenda is the second type, which is an informal setting power of actors who might be delegated to set the agenda. Pollack stresses that regardless of the type of agenda, the setting power is influenced by the institutional and political frameworks within which polities operate.

Other scholars (e.g Princen, 2007) have expanded the original theory, identifying more types of agenda setting, such as vertical agenda-setting, where issues move from local to national agendas, and horizontal agenda-setting, where issues move across policy domains. In our case, we will only focus on the vertical (local) agenda.

An integral part of agenda setting is issue identification, which is defined as the set of issues that receives serious attention in a polity. Issues include problems and new topics that policy actors try to push to prominence or to keep them off the agenda (Peters, 1994, 2001; Princen, 2007). Policy issues are defined through a complex political process, where issues are influenced by the broader values and preferences, such as societal concerns, environment concerns, etc. Therefore, the process of issue identification may lead to conflicts over the prominence of issues on the agenda.

Boltanski and Thévenot's (1991, 2006) theory or justification offers an important grammar that helps researchers to understand the logic behind the specific issues that actors identify in a given policy issue. Unpacking the logics that stand behind the issues that policymakers choose, helps to explain the coexisting of multiple issues of different concerns. Boltanski and Thévenot identified in the justification theory (interchangeably referred to as economies of worth or orders of worth or worlds) seven economies of worth (civic, fame, market, industrial, domestic, inspired, and green).[8] Economies of worth permit researchers to identify and categorize how actors interact in a given policy domain to identify policy issues.

The EoW is a very useful tool to explain how multi local actors (public, private, CSOs) identify issues to shape the SDG agenda at the local level based on their divergent orientations. A concrete example can be that justifying the choice of an issue in economic terms means that financial resources are the relevant measure of worth and ought to be favored when that issue is evaluated. Another example can be that justifying an issue in ecological terms means that environmental considerations are the relevant measure of worth that ought to be selected when an issue is evaluated. 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 CSO actors value the collective interest and environmental problems, regardless of any economic considerations. In other words, EoW reveals the divergent understandings of worth across actors (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006) and grasps the multiple justifications exchanged during interactions that explain the choice of an issue to be on the agenda.

As a result of those interactions, disagreement may arise between actors about what is valuable, and what is not valuable. Boltanski and Thévenot (2006) proposed three[9] different solutions for the disagreement: compromise[10] is one of the solutions. Compromise

is a form of arrangement to replace any opposition between two common worlds and blend them together in a particular configuration.

We therefore explain through EoW lens the justificatory arguments that multi actors at the local level shape during their interaction to identify issues on the vertical agenda—local. Furthermore, we show how those actors address disagreements during interactions and how they shape a compromise to solve such disagreements.

Data and methods

Empirical setting

Our focus is on local governments in the Walloon region in Belgium, because of their central role in sustainability. The Walloon region is a very interesting empirical site for different reasons. First, the region has experienced a serious economic decline after being the main iron- and coal-producing industrial district in the world. The economic decline has led the government to commit to several economic plans, such as digitalisation, public administration reform, ICT infrastructures integration, and upgrading human capacities. The second reason is the institutional complexity of the Belgian context owing to federalization.[11] Third, the Walloon government launched a long-term recovery plan coined the "Marshall Plan" in 2005, as well as the Digital Walloon strategy in 2015, which is geared to drive the high-tech sector. Alongside this, Walloon has pursued specific sustainability policies, such as the regional sustainability strategy and the creation of roadmaps for local actors to achieve the SDGs.

Moreover, the region has recently been targeted as a priority investment area in Europe owing to significant socio-economic challenges associated with sustainable transitions and achieving climate neutrality by 2050. In this context, three Walloon territories[12] were identified owing to their high industrial greenhouse gas emissions linked to cement, chemical, and electricity production and simultaneous economic issues such as substantial unemployment. Therefore, Walloon is one of the selected regions targeted through the Just Transition Fund mechanism, unraveling currently in Europe, operating between 2021 and 2027.

Data sources

We triangulated the data collection sources, including documents analysis and semi-structured interviews. We conducted 22 semi-structured interviews. We selected the interviewees through the snowball technique[13] (Parker et al., 2019). The interviewees include actors from the regional government of Walloon, and the municipalities[14] under the jurisdiction of the Walloon region. The profile of the interviewees[15] was selected based on the involvement of interviewees in sustainability in general and in setting sustainability agenda at the local level (municipalities) in particular. The interviewees have multidisciplinary backgrounds, such as environment, economy, management, and social science. Most of the interviewees have been working full time in sustainability-related roles for at least the past three years.

We asked the interviewees about their role in setting sustainability agenda and the overall climate of agenda setting, the way in which actors engage in debates and justifications, in multi-actor interactions, and multi-level interactions.[16]

We conducted the interviews in hybrid mode, with some interviews in person[17] but some other interviews online.[18] The average duration of each interview was 60 min. We transcribed the interviews and communicated via email the written transcripts with the interviewees for validation.

We conducted a documents review since this data source has high analytical potential in qualitative research to make sense of the setting under investigation. We enriched our research as we paid careful attention to the language used in the texts, how the texts are constructed, and the functions of those documents in relation to setting a sustainability agenda. We reviewed several documents,[19] including the second regional sustainability strategy, the local barometers about sustainability plans, the regional decree, and webpages[20] dedicated to sustainable development in Belgium, such as the framework for National Sustainable Development Strategy with a focus on the Walloon region. Part of the documents' review included the global documents related to sustainable development, such as the SDGs, and the Brundtland commission report, and the index report on the countries' progress toward the SDGs.

Data analysis

Drawing on Arda and Banerjee (2021), we analyzed our data based on a structured protocol through which we distinguished the relationship between codes. First, we performed manual qualitative axial coding of the transcripts to identify terms, or descriptors, all revolving around sustainability and the SDGs, the overall ecosystem of sustainability at the local level, the interaction between the local level and the regional level. By this we mean the thematic focus of sustainability, the approaches to make plans and sustainability, actors involved, and the tools that all levels of governance (regional level, local level) mobilized. The tools included calls for projects, regulations, regional decrees, administrative reports, and financial subsidies. Phrases and terms were coded to highlight concepts and patterns of meaning within the data. Those descriptors constituted the initial codes, which were constantly compared with documentary data to identify patterns, and were subject to validation by multiple open discussions among researchers.

The internal validation discussions were iterative and resulted in the organized data structure we present in Table 2. Second, we looked for codes across interviews that could be grouped into common themes. For example, terms and phrases on the consultation, engagement, negotiations, and exchanges of multiple actors in the process of setting the sustainability agenda could be grouped under a theme of multi-sector collaboration for setting the sustainability agenda forming a set of first-order categories. Third, we identified links among first-order themes to develop distinct patterns in the process of setting the sustainability agenda. For example, terms containing instances of consultations, brainstorming, the internal steering committee, and the population pool fell under a theme called the "external citizens-level approach and internal municipality

level approach". This step of analysis led us to identify the instruments, topics, and choices about setting sustainability agenda.

Drawing on the Boltanski and Thevenot framework of EoW, we organized patterns and themes and aligned that with the common worlds. This step allowed us to identify the dominant economies of worth prominent in setting the sustainability agenda by Walloon multiple actors, where we explain the approach, different choices of issues, viewpoints, and justificatory arguments. For example, the green economy of worth appeared significant when actors referred to environment protection, climate emergency, while the industrial economy of worth also emerged as important since actors stressed efficiency and precision to inform SDG-oriented projects.

To clarify, keywords used by actors to justify their views often served as indicators of the underlying economy of worth. The distinction between economies of worth that actors held and expressed in different terms became clear when we analyzed moments of disagreements about economies of worth held by actors. To discern the detailed dynamics of interaction, we started from the literature to identify how actors tackled disagreements (such as compromises, clarification, local clarification). During this procedure of aligning data with the theory, we noted our hunches (Locke et al., 2008). It became increasingly necessary to push the analysis further to discern how and why actors arrived at a common compromise. For this step the researchers engaged in reading the transcripts of interviews to make sense of the words mentioned by the interviewees and therefore to detect the patterns of interaction across actors (Patton, 2002). As a result, the underlying mechanisms emerged from the analysis to explain the dynamics that facilitate the process of shaping a compromise after being engaged in justificatory arguments.

Findings

Our findings illustrate how actors engage in a complex participatory approach to set the SDGs agenda, through shaping a collective compromise informed by three economies of worth (green, civic, industrial) that play a role in a specific configuration. Multiple actors shape a compromise after being engaged in justifications, which we found out was facilitated through specific mechanisms. We next map out the economies of worth underpinned the compromise and the justifications accordingly. Then we present the facilitating mechanisms.

Green economy of worth justifications

The justifications of favoring green world-related aspects were mainly about the dramatic decline of ecological systems. We detected the dominance of the *green world*, which emerged significantly, as actors dwelled on the risks of pollution and emissions as concrete facts. Actors referred to the decline of the ecological ecosystem as evidence to focus only on climate change themes. The ecological-related concerns led green-oriented actors to religiously promote only climate-related themes. However, the prominence of the green world does not subside peak moments, which entails questioning the possibility

of realizing real tangible results vis-à-vis the deterioration of climate change. Green-oriented issues were very important to the actors who talked about climate change and environment in an emotional way, especially when mentioning future generations' needs. Therefore, actors raised doubts about how or to what extent sustainability projects can in practice protect the environment or reduce climate change damage at all.

The green world was challenged by the concretization and operationalization of environment-related projects that will generate real benefits. 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. And so according to the opponents, this may jeopardize the possibility of concretely designing projects that could effectively lead to real results.

Thus, the heavy focus on environment-oriented themes, derived from fears and emotions rather than being scientific with clear benchmarks, will probably lead to falling short in forecasting 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.[21]

Civic economy of worth justifications

Local actors developed a specific approach to set the SDG agenda. The approach entails various voluntary activities at two levels: the internal—municipality—level, and the external level—citizens. The activities, at both levels, entail brainstorming sessions, working groups, meetings, and multi-sector consultations.

The internal level activities entail discussions among the staff of local governments, regarding sustainability themes and issues guided by the SDGs. The engaged staff showed collaboration and willingness to learn more about the SDGs. As a result, the engaged actors reach a consensus about the SDG agenda. Nonetheless, the internal consensus does not mean the adaptation of the agenda, rather an important requirement to share sustainability themes with politicians for approval.

We learned that the overall atmosphere of the internal discussions was very positive, with a clear tendency of the staff to contribute to discussions. The willingness to participate can be inferred as an indication of the realm of duty and responsibility. The staff was motivated to freely participate as part of a collective that seeks the common good, which implies that the *civic world* is significant here.

At the external level, local governments formulated working groups of citizens to participate in the discussions, in a participatory approach, where the sense of duty plays a major role, which suggests the influence of the civic world. The political dimension of the approach of setting the agenda has been reflected by the political discussions of the SDG agenda. Following the consensus, the final approval of the sustainability agenda remains subject to political negotiation and political consent. Therefore, our findings suggest that the *civic world* remains influential.

Actors understand that if the themes are not approved at the political level, that means the themes cannot be embraced, which is according to them acceptable since the worth that played the major role is representation and the legitimate elected politicians.

Criticisms coming from the civic world included concerns about "greenwashing". Opponents view the appeal to protect 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 around climate change for narrow interests or to improve their election prospects. We captured more critical reflection regarding the civic orientation of the sustainability agenda, which is the extent to which sustainability projects generate collective benefits or even reflect a collective will. The test of the civic world also centers on the concept of including people to enable them to voice their actual interests. In addition, some actors repeatedly raised concerns or questions around the actual benefits of the projects for the local community.

Actors favored the civic orientation of sustainability agenda, nonetheless the association of green concerns and the common interests created fears and doubts that projects will remain rhetoric and symbolic. The criticisms were further layered when actors raised the issue of political manipulation of sustainability. As a result of exchanges, actors marginalized some elements of a specific economy of worth, while they focused on some other elements, in a form of compromise.[22]

Industrial economy of worth justifications

We found out that there is a technical dimension besides the political dimension. Quite a few actors advocated for precision and usefulness of sustainability themes; examples include public local parks, small projects, etc. The industrial views were demonstrated by arguments that sustainability themes should be concrete, with clear plans and specific timelines, regardless of whether sustainability ideas will be a public garden or a waste management project.

That said, 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.

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

Proponents of the industrial world tend to refer to the delivery of useful and precise projects for the local communities, and advocate for clarity and precision of themes, without associating sustainability only with appealing notions or rhetoric.

The test of the industrial orientations led to a very selective and focused mobilization of a few elements coming from the industrial world. Namely, setting clear and specific targets that are functional, and long-term planning to generate concrete positive impacts.[23]

Collective compromise

Despite the disagreements we outlined above, actors interact in a particular fashion to shape a compromise. The compromise is based on blending elements coming from

different orders of worth to align views in a particular configuration. The compromise demonstrates the capacity of actors to refer to orders of worth in a specific way, and eventually shape a collective compromise composed of the green world, civic world, and industrial world.

The multi-order of worth compromise is anchored on a hybrid of the three economies of worth that we identified above with a specific configuration: the green world, as a dominant world, combined with the civic world, with particular elements coming from the industrial world. There is a clear dominance of the green world as actors are very concerned about the appalling deterioration of the ecological systems and climate change.

The civic world dominated the political dimension, through the sense of duty and solidarity to contribute to setting the SDG agenda. While the industrial world influenced the technical dimension of the approach, where precision and usefulness are valued.

Reaching a compromise entails a collective agreement about common concerns. In the process of setting SDG agenda; the dominating world is green, which brings all actors together who have serious concerns about climate change. The concerns about climate change have united all actors around a common purpose, and have moreover allowed for the combination of specific elements that we aligned with the other economies of worth.

Facilitating mechanisms

We stretched our analysis further and identified a set of underlying mechanisms,[24] reflection, engagement and alteration that fundamentally facilitate the interaction and exchanges across actors, who succeeded to lay out their views and orientations thanks to these mechanisms, which eventually facilitated the shaping of a collective compromise. The underlying mechanisms help the actors to rethink and re-shift their views to reach a moment of agreement. And so, we argue that the underlying mechanisms facilitate the reaching of a collective perspective on setting the SDG agenda. The collective perspective explained through the EoW lens is basically shaping a compromise combined by multiple orders of worth.

Reflection. We identified *reflection* as a major mechanism that green views were demonstrated through. Most of the green views were laid out immensely discussing climate change. Green-oriented actors offered reasons behind their views. The reasons entail tangible facts such as gas emissions and pollution amongst many others. By reflecting on facts, green actors provided reasons for their own views. The concrete reasons, moreover, gave the green proponents the legitimacy to rigorously lay out the facts associated with their undertaking of what a sustainability plan should include. Reflection helps the green proponents to push for their preferences, and to stimulate, the counter arguments to reconcile the latter's views to overcome disagreements. That said, reflection proved significant also to pave the way for other actors to lay open their views as we outline next.

Engagement. Our analysis suggests that actors were willing to exchange views about what is valuable and what is not to be part of the sustainability agenda. Actors were engaged despite the divergent interests that spanned the different sectors that actors

represented. 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. Engagement facilitated the creation of an ecosystem through which actors were open to express their views.

Alteration. 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 that consists of a certain configuration of different orders of worth.

In other words, alteration along with the reflection and engagement mechanisms establish an atmosphere conducive to reach a compromise, which is the outcome of the discussions.

Based on our data analysis, we present in Figure 1 our model that explains how multiple actors set the sustainability agenda. However, it is important to note that the figure represents the views of public administrators only.

Discussion

Sustainability research aims to shed light on complex societal challenges, and to understand how such challenges are addressed in different contexts. Because challenges are complex, agenda setting is vital to decide what is valuable, and what is not. Yet, setting a sustainability agenda is complex and conflictual, as it entails defining what constitutes problems (Peters, 2001).

The process of setting the agenda becomes even more complex and conflictual with growing concerns about climate change at play. We explained in our paper why agenda setting is conflictual in SDGs policy, and how actors cope with complexity to reach an agreement.

The complexity of setting the agenda requires that multiple actors interact and express their issues of concern. Multiple actors have different interests stemming from different logics. The different logics are competing, which makes the process of interaction to set the SDG agenda conflictual. Thanks to EoW theory, which provides an analytical grammar, we unpacked the justifications in setting the SDG agenda. By this we contribute to the methodology of mapping EoWs in specific settings, which provides a tool to understand and unpack the complexity and conflictuality of setting the agenda.

As part of unpacking the EoW that played a role in setting the SDG agenda, we provided a way to solve the critical moments among actors, through a set of mechanisms that facilitate the shaping of a compromise, which is anchored in specific economies of worth.

We present the process of compromise making for the SDG agenda in a model that explains how actors interact. By explaining the compromise making in contexts of SDGs agenda-setting, we extend the notion of compromise in this context.

Our findings show that the critical moments settled as actors engage in shaping a collective compromise, which reflects a different re-configuration of mobilizing the orders of worth mapped in the empirical analysis. Concretely, the green world dominated

completely in the beginning, and the proponents attempted to exclude arguments coming from other worlds. However, some other participants introduced industrial elements and civic orientations. Both industrial and civic worlds were challenged. Nonetheless, discussions evolved and layered in different exchanges to feed into a collective compromise thanks to specific mechanisms.

Reflection, engagement, and alteration are the mechanisms that underlie the discussions and facilitate the shaping of a compromise that is built on elements coming from the civic world, the industrial world, and the dominance of the green world.

Our paper has focused on how local actors set sustainability agenda. We argued that setting an agenda is a complex exercise, which entails discussions. We situated those discussions based on the Justification theory of Boltanski and Thevenot (1991, 1999). The discussions reflect that actors retain a capacity to confront each other by expressing their themes and interests in reference to divergent and conflicting logics and conventions. Our first contribution includes mapping the economies of worth (green, civic, and industrial) that actors referred to when setting the SDG agenda in the case of the Walloon region.

By mapping the economies of worth, we revealed moments of critiques that actors experienced. We highlighted which critiques were raised about each economy of worth, which is the second contribution of the paper. The critical moments did not remove the economies of worth from the process of setting the agenda; rather they fashioned the utilization of those economies of worth in a particular configuration, precisely, by retaining the green world as a dominant overarching world, accompanied by elements coming from the civic world. The industrial elements (such as precision and usefulness) are supposed to balance out the excessively emotional-based focus on environment, climate change, etc. The civic world also has important prominence in setting the agenda, but through focusing on the sense of duty, without falling into the trap of greenwashing, and therefore having rhetoric and symbolic slogans without concrete achievements. The process of shaping a compromise, in a particular configuration, to base the sustainability agenda is our third contribution.

The fourth contribution of the paper is the identification of a set of mechanisms that played a facilitating role in shaping a collective compromise. The mechanisms moreover exposed the actors' capacities to work across three orders of worth, and to move from one order of worth to another, as required for complex situations like setting the SDG agenda.

Concluding remarks

Sustainability agenda setting is complex and conflictual, because it is set by multiple actors, who have divergent interests and different logics. The different logics are competing and therefore conflictual. We mobilized the EoW to show how this complexity happens while actors interact and justify their choices by referring to the EoWs. Our paper reveals how the justifications generate moments of critiques, which settle in a compromise. We explained the latter in an interactive process, facilitated by a set of mechanisms, which we captured based on our empirical analysis.

Our paper offers significant contributions that we presented earlier; however, it has limitations. We are aware of the limitations of a single case analysis in terms of

generalizability of findings in relation to different geographies, cultures, contexts, legal systems, institutional actors and policy frameworks. However, we believe that our findings make a contribution to the literature through in-depth and up-close analysis and theoretical bridge-building. We therefore welcome and urge more studies examining additional substantive issues about setting sustainability agenda at the local level—as well as processes of compromise making—in new geographical areas and in new multi-level settings that also take into consideration relationships with international and supranational organizations such as the UN and the EU. A greater comparative focus on the role of international and organizations, national governments, public administrations, firms, local citizens and CSOs of various kinds is certainly needed.

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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. The goals include 169 targets, 232 indicators including 43 means of implementation.
2. We use sustainability interchangeably with sustainable development and SDGs.
3. The Walloon region is one of the regions, beside the Flemish region and the Brussels capital, which came into existence with the federalization of the state of Belgium.
4. The United Nations Development Programme, United Nations Environment Programme, World Health Organization, United Nations Children's Fund, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, and other development agencies converged the development agenda into Millennium Declaration and Millennium Development Goals.
5. With the need to change behaviors in all countries to efficiently use resources and assets.
6. For example, rescuing the proportion of people who live in poverty or hunger.
7. For example, universal primary education, gender equality.
8. We present in Table 1 a synthesis of the EoW framework (see online for tables and figures).
9. Clarification and local arrangement.
10. We focus on compromise only since we do not have evidence about clarification and local arrangement.

11. The three distinct regions in Belgium were assigned to manage many aspects such as employment, scientific research, etc. In parallel with the three territorial regions, three linguistic communities were created, the French community, the Flemish community, and the German-speaking community. As a result of the federalization process, a three-tiered system was made up of the federal state (king, regions), the three regions and the three communities. By law, the institutional and political layers are equal, and can intervene on an equal footing but in different areas. The communal powers are very broad, and tackle everything that comes under the category "communal interest". Municipalities' power covers the municipal interest, that is mostly related to the collective interests and needs of citizens. Because of the multi-layered institutional system changes, we assume that there are a lot of interesting nuances that can be revealed through investigating the Walloon region.
12. Tournai, Mons, and Charleroi.
13. The snowball technique is a popular method of sampling in qualitative research, where the researcher starts with a small number of initial contacts, who fit the research scope and criteria. The initial contacts are invited to become participants in the research. The agreeable participants are then asked to recommend other relevant contacts and who potentially might also be willing participants, who then in turn recommend other potential participants, and so on.
14. The municipalities include: Wanze, Hainut, Mouscron, Ottignies, Namur, Louvain la Neuve, Mons, dAmay, La Louviere, Verviers, Pepinster, Chaudfontaine, and Liège.
15. Directors, officers, and subordinates from both regional level and local level, including intercommunal.
16. The interview guide is provided in Annex 2 in the Supporting Information.
17. At the municipalities' premises.
18. Through team meetings.
19. Some documents were provided by the interviewees from the region and the municipalities, while some other documents we found on the internet.
20. 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
21. We provide illustrative quotes about the existence of a green economy of worth in Table 3.
22. We provide illustrative quotations about the existence of civic economy of worth in Table 4.
23. We provide illustrative quotations about the existence of an industrial economy of worth in Table 5. In Table 6 we provide illustrative quotations about the critiques of economies of worth.
24. We provide illustrative quotations in Table 7 about the interaction dynamics which helped to identify the mechanisms.

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