What's in a Norm?
Mapping the Norm Definition Process in
the Debate on Sustainable Development

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This article examines the trajectory of sustainable development as an evolving international norm from 1992 to 2012. It observes that sustainable development has been broadly diffused and institutionalized. Yet it is generally recognized that it has not prompted widespread change in the behavior and policy priorities of states: an outcome the article characterizes as a "failure to launch." It explains the stalling of the norm by drawing attention to the protracted norm definition process. It analyzes an original dataset of speeches given at UN conferences on sustainable development, revealing how actors interpret the norm at three different time points. The analysis focuses on the breadth of conceptual consensus that emerges from these actors' interpretations and the depth of behavioral expectations implied by the collective discourse. It suggests that the shifting content and unstable discursive consensus regarding sustainable development has impeded the norm's ability to become a meaningful focal point for coordination and a legitimate constraint on state behavior. Keywords: sustainable development, international norms, norm life cycle.

FROM THE LATE 1980S ONWARD, SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT BECAME A widely accepted policy frame intended to reconcile the principles of economic growth and development with the need for protection of the world's environmental resources. It benefited from the support of powerful norm entrepreneurs who pushed the issue on the world's agenda at the Rio Earth Summit in 1992. It was enshrined in international law with the creation of two high-profile treaties and three nonbinding agreements that attracted over 150 signatories.

But unlike other norms with similar attributes, it is widely recognized that sustainable development has had only lackluster performance in many areas.[1] Twenty years after the watershed Earth Summit, there are major gaps in global sustainability, especially with regard to global environmental goals.[2] Seeking to explain this trajectory, we build on recent work that emphasizes the various pathways that norms can take after their initial articulation, including backsliding, reformulation, and dissolution.[3] We add to this catalogue by characterizing the trajectory of the sustainable development norm as a "failure to launch." Despite a highly promising start,

extensive institutionalization, and possession of many characteristics that scholars identify as favorable to norm acceptance, we note that sustainable development never takes off on the path to effectively constraining state behavior.[4]

Positioning sustainable development as a crucial deviant case that challenges existing theories of norm proliferation, we seek explanations centering on norm definition as a process, rather than on institutionalization as an outcome.[5] Formalizing an underspecified discourse is a tempting strategy for norm promotion in urgent issue areas. However, we argue that whereas the shifting content of the sustainable development norm facilitated its rapid diffusion as a discursive frame, it has also underpinned the norm's disappointing performance. As Harriet Bulkeley et al. note in their review of the sustainable development agenda, "The concept's greatest strength, its tremendous flexibility, may also be one of its core weaknesses."[6]

To do so, we analyze an original dataset of speeches given at UN conferences on sustainable development, revealing how actors interpret the norm at three different time points. Our analysis focuses on the breadth of conceptual consensus that emerges from their interpretations and the depth of behavioral expectations implied by the collective discourse. Our goal is to explain the failure of sustainable development in generating a dynamic that would have reflected and facilitated growing internal consistency and practical impact of the norm. Drawing on work across the rationalist-constructivist divide, we observe that norms can influence state behavior either by becoming focal points for coordination or through gaining increasing legitimacy over time.[7] We connect the lack of specificity and agreement about norm content to its inability to influence behavior along either of these pathways. We suggest that lessons from this case speak to ongoing debates about global sustainability as well as other important areas of global governance.

Norm Definition and Dynamism

Beyond the Norm Life Cycle

Norm-guided actions are embedded in social relations that lead members of a well-defined community to act in accordance with the behavioral standards constituting their shared identity.[8] A norm's impact will be greater if a higher number of actors see themselves constrained by the shared understanding implicit in the norm. The norm life cycle argument describes the process through which norms attain such ever-wider reach. It defines the stages through which a norm passes from its origins to widespread acceptance: emergence, cascade, and internalization.[9] Institutionalization is generally deemed a catalyst along this path. Some authors recognize the fact

that not all norms make it to the final phase of widespread acceptance[10] while others point out that competing norms frequently contradict one another[11] and interfere with the life cycle process. However, the possibility of backsliding in the norm evolution process has been largely neglected in existing accounts.[12]

A quick survey of patterns in international norm promotion shows that it is possible for norms to be institutionalized prior to earning traction in terms of their coherence. In fact, that is a common strategy of those promoting them, in hopes that the norms' increased prominence will secure widespread support over time.[13] Defending that strategy, scholars and policymakers in the field of environmental politics have often argued that "agreements in principle" are valuable because they can be gradually transformed into stronger international law.[14] The argument rests on assumptions about the process of transformation of soft international law into hard law or its practice-driven equivalents.[15] This is also the premise that underlies the scholarship differentiating between norms based on their ability to gain prominence. Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink, for example, argue that norms are more likely to be widely diffused when they have certain intrinsic qualities, including belonging to certain issue areas, benefiting from key framing, or linking to other norms and becoming established at the international level.[16] Relying on the assumption of predictable evolution in norm attributes, however, is a risky strategy by those wishing to promote a norm. In increasingly complex and dense policy environments, further augmented by layers of variously mature institutions, even the most powerful actors lose control over the norm formulation agenda.[17]

To explain the faltering of sustainable development described in the following section, we reach beyond deterministic assumptions about norm promotion in two important ways. First, we question the idea of institutionalization stickiness and highlight the limitations of the norm life cycle model, including its ability to accommodate diverse paths of norm evolution.[18] We introduce evidence that stands contrary to the claim that resonant framing and institutionalization are equally functional and individually sufficient mechanisms for norm promotion.[19] Sustainable development did achieve widespread acceptance by states and institutionalization in treaties and international organizations. But its international support did not result in widespread consistency of action or conformity of behavior. We characterize this outcome as "failure to launch."

This brings us to the second area in which our work departs from past approaches. We note that the first generation of norm scholars often assumed the internal coherence of norms to better examine their effects.[20] As noted by Mona Lena Krook and Jacqui True, early constructivist work often reflected a "crucial tension" between the seemingly static nature of norm content and the dynamic nature of the norm life cycle, keeping silent

on what it means for a norm to be collective or how clear the corresponding behavioral expectations must be.[21] Similarly, the world polity school analyzed the diffusion of universalistic models for behavior without problematizing the emergence, content, or contradictions of these models.[22] More recent literature extends norm scholarship by documenting how norm content shifts at various stages of norm evolution.[23] We reach beyond these insights by examining a key process—norm definition—and how it pervades discussion and contestation at all points in the (re)formulation of the sustainable development norm.

We draw attention to the failure-to-launch process because it holds lessons for other cases where norm building becomes an important part of global governance.[24] This approach echoes other critics, who have suggested the potential "hollowness" of institution building without conceptual clarity.[25] We join still others in noting the linkages between norm definition and norm dynamism—Krook and True argue that "ambiguities that make a norm's evolution possible may also lead to shifts and modifications in its content over time, producing varied effects when translated into practice."[26]

Sustainable Development: A Failure to Launch

Sustainable development initially seemed to have a bright future. Nearly a decade after the foundational Stockholm conference of 1972, the UN established an independent commission in 1983 to look into opportunities to reconcile the twin aims of environmental protection and economic growth. The World Commission on Environment and Development produced the report *Our Common Future* in 1987, highlighting the need for all countries to introduce development strategies that are compatible with ecological sustainability. The biggest contribution of the report was a definition of the core concept of "sustainable development" as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."[27]

This definition reconciled crucial tensions in global debates in the previous decade. It recognized the importance of equity but put the focus on intergenerational equity, leaving aside questions of global equity or redistribution. It called for meeting the "needs of the present"—for example, poverty eradication—without demanding decreased consumption on the part of those in developed countries.[28] And as Steven Bernstein notes in his important work on this topic, it stripped out the "limits to growth" language that was popular in the 1970s, making the concept fully compatible with the emerging neoliberal consensus.[29] In other words, the new definition elided core conflicts and made it possible for a wide variety of actors with different interests to get behind the new norm.

The extensive attempts to engage the norm can be observed in the negotiation of the Rio Declaration on Sustainable Development, Agenda

21, and the UN Commission on Sustainable Development. The1992 Rio conference also produced two widely supported international environmental conventions—the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change and the Convention on Biological Diversity—that referenced the principles of sustainable development. States[30] and international institutions[31] restructured their activities to reflect this new priority.

From a theoretical perspective, sustainable development's wide appeal and institutionalization would suggest that it was poised to follow the norm life cycle. However, it had a limited reach in altering the behavior of key actors that could produce coordinated high-impact action. We offer three points of evidence here. First, a 2012 report by the Stakeholder Forum for a Sustainable Future noted the alarming lack of progress on the environmental protection and poverty reduction goals of the Rio conference.[32] Second, the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) Fifth Global Environmental Outlook Report, which monitors the implementation global environment goals, found little progress or further deterioration on over half of its 320 goals.[33] Similarly, the Millennium Development Goals concerning social equity, poverty, and hunger have met with no progress or deterioration.[34] Third, the Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD) was unfavorably judged in the Secretary-General's report on its progress (2013). The report noted that the institution's "impact on implementation of sustainable development remained weak," and suggested the replacement of the CSD with a high-level political forum more suited to this task.[35]

These three outcomes combine to demonstrate the lack of progress on the agenda of sustainability. This trend led seasoned observers to call this the "implementation gap."[36] We are therefore not alone in asking why there is a general perception that the "norm is staying at the discourse level" and not translating into meaningful practice.[37] Some blame deficiencies in institutional capacity as one of the major reasons for the implementation gap and, admittedly, financing for UNEP has been notoriously weak and unreliable.[38] But this declining capacity is ultimately a function of a decrease in political will and commitment to the norm. Our project asks: How did this political will dissolve in the first place? Why did sustainable development not follow the pattern outlined by the norm life cycle argument? We draw attention to the importance of norm definition and contestation as the process by which norms can be formed, but also weakened.

Studying the Norm Definition Process

Discourse and Norm Definition
We should not treat norm content as a set package that somehow gets promoted, and eventually sold, to international audiences. Many important

attributes of norms—their precision, linkages, extent of support, and framing—are endogenous to the norm definition process. In this section, we directly examine this process to gain insight into why norms develop particular content in the first place. We focus on discourse because it both reflects and structures actors' thinking about the world.[39] The study of discourse uncovers that actors often speak at cross-purposes, with consequences for coalition formation and norm-driven cooperation.[40]

To address this concern, we analyzed high-profile public statements made by states at international conferences on sustainable development.[41] We focused on the input to the norm definition process (i.e., state interpretations of the norm) rather than the output (i.e., the documents that result from interstate negotiations) for two reasons. Outcome documents usually already reflect political compromises and thus provide insufficient information about individual actor preferences or motivations. For example, Principles 2 and 7 of the Rio Declaration are politically ambiguous outcome statements that can be better accounted for by examining state speeches directly, as we show. Second, we note that while others—most notably Bernstein[42]—have relied on output documents, our study is original in its systematic examination of the speeches themselves. This approach might be usefully replicated in other issue areas where such documents exist.

We suggest that changes in the meaning of and consensus on sustainable development help to explain its subsequent performance. We highlight two factors that are crucial in evaluating the dynamics of the norm definition process. First, we note that the breadth of consensus on meaning is analytically distinct from gathering support for institutionalization and needs to be analyzed as a separate process. Second, we examine how deep the behavioral expectations are at any given time point. Are there contradictions or ambiguities in how states define proper behavior? We add to these two elements a final focus on the extent of change over time in the content of the norm. This allows us to consider the protracted nature of the norm definition process, and link the contestation over meaning to norm evolution. In doing so, we avoid the fallacy of assuming that global norm adoption is either uniform or in any way predetermined. In the case of sustainable development, the depth of the consensus reached varied from one conference to another but actors (primarily states) entered the process with the objective of creating new norms, certifying new doctrinal consensus, and setting global standards.[43]

Coding and Analysis

One contribution of this article is that we developed a procedure to study crucial aspects of the norm definition process, drawing on the relationship between interpretations espoused by actors themselves. Our primary

method was content analysis of state speeches. To begin, we coded all of these speeches, proceeding in three steps. First, we coded a selection of speeches to inductively generate a preliminary codebook describing interpretations of "sustainable development" that occurred in our data. We considered it important that this analysis be conducted inductively so as not to let previous academic or policy interpretations bias our coding at this stage.

We identified four important elements of a norm—concept definition, problem definition, justification, and linkages—drawing on previous work.[44] We coded only statements of norm interpretation, not specific policy goals. For example, we would code a statement like "sustainable development requires sovereign control over resources," but would not code a statement such as "we require stronger policy to protect our forests." Table 1 contains an example of our guiding questions for developing the codebook. We sought to code instances where states answer one of these questions. The Appendix contains the complete codebook along with examples of each code.[45]

Table 1 Components of Coding

	Questions for Inductive Coding
Concept definition	How is sustainable development defined? How do the components of environment protection and economic development relate to one another?
Problem definition	How is the problem defined? What causes unsustainable practices?
Justification	How do we justify action on sustainable development? How do we decide what kinds of actions are acceptable?
Linkages	How is sustainable development connected to other international norms? How does the broader international context contribute to the problem? How does it affect our ability to act on the problem?

Second, we employed a research assistant to code the entirety of the 443 speeches from 1992, 2002, and 2012. Since the analysis was carried out inductively, new codes were added and speeches were continuously recoded as the project progressed. The average speech contained approximately seven codes, although speeches could contain as many as fifteen and as few as zero codes. Finally, we recoded approximately 25 percent of the speeches to assess the reliability of our coding procedure. At this stage, several problematic codes were identified and recoded. The final results suggest that our coding is highly reliable across multiple coders. The percentage of agreement between the two coders was 95.5 percent and the Cohen's kappa coefficient was 0.77 when averaged across all variables and years. No code employed in the final analysis had a Cohen's kappa coefficient below 0.65.

The richness of our data allowed us to conduct multiple types of analysis. First, we employed qualitative discourse analysis to examine the meaning of sustainable development to participants in the process. Second, we examined quantitative measures of the frequency with which codes appeared in speeches and their co-occurrence with other codes. Since this data is longitudinal, we were able to look at changes over time in the overall character of the discourse. And third, we drew on state speeches to suggest linkages between ambiguity in the meaning of sustainable development to state-level perceptions regarding lack of clear behavioral expectations, backsliding, broken promises, and absence of legitimacy.

The Protracted Norm Definition Process

Our original data allowed us to explore how states define sustainable development at different points in time. The first observation we can make based on this data is that there are a wide variety of ways to interpret the norm. Our inductive coding identified different interpretations of the concept definition, problem definition, justification for action or proposals, and linkages to other norms.[46] Of these, twenty-two interpretations were present in at least 15 percent of the state speeches in one of the three years we analyzed. The Appendix contains a full list of the codes and the abbreviations that we employed in the subsequent figures.[47]

Our theoretical approach led us to ask two questions regarding these interpretations. First, how much shared understanding and consensus is there among states on each of these interpretations? And second, do these different interpretations cohere as meaningful behavioral expectations? To map the breadth of consensus in the norm definition process, we first calculated the percentage of states employing individual norm interpretations in each of the three time periods. Table 2 shows those norm interpretations that were mentioned by more than 50 percent of states in any given year.[48] This approach allowed us to capture the core of the (non)consensus at each stage, starting with the introduction of sustainable development as a normative frame and ending with the recent move toward green economy.

Table 2 Shifting Interpretations of Sustainable Development

1992	2002	2012
Devel Gap (76%)	Devel Gap (83%)	Green Economy (67%)
Solidarity (66%)	Poverty (55%)	Devel Gap (52%)
Poverty (61%)		
Env and Devel are Symbiotic (52%)		
Global Equity (50%)		

Note: See abbreviations in the Appendix.

The data support our initial observation that the norm definition process did not stop with the Earth Summit in 1992. Scholars suggest that norms are truly internalized when they acquire a taken-for-granted quality and no longer need to be subject to public debate. But the content of sustainable development has been continually contested and subject to chameleon-like redefinition throughout its history, as this coding shows.[49]

While sustainable development is not infinitely malleable, the core of the interstate consensus shifted in significant ways in each period. The interpretation that action on sustainable development is justified as a means to rectify the development gap between states held enduring popularity. But beyond this, we observed significant changes. In 1992, there were five core elements on which there was substantial consensus: development gap, solidarity, poverty, global equity, and a conceptual definition of sustainable development that considers environment and development as symbiotic. By 2002, this consensus had significantly narrowed to include only interpretations related to the development gap and global poverty. The 2012 conference echoed this focus on economic interpretations by again reiterating the importance of the development gap and produced the green economy as a new conceptual interpretation of sustainable development, reinforcing a growing economization of the discourse.[50]

States and Norm Interpretations

Mapping the Debate: 1992–2012

Our second interest was whether the combination of these interpretations cohered as meaningful behavioral expectations. For this second analysis, we combined our frequency measures with a measure of how often these norm interpretations co-occur in the same state speeches. We also present selected examples for speeches to demonstrate the subtle shifts in meaning that may underlie the codes we employed.

In this section, we employ star charts to visualize multivariate observations regarding the extent to which each interpretation of sustainable development is present in state speeches (Figures 1, 2, and 3). Each star represents a different year of analysis. The overall shape of the star allows us to effectively compare how the full set of norm interpretations varies along multiple dimensions in different years. In the star charts, the spokes represent the twenty-two most common norm interpretations, as listed in the Appendix. A line is drawn connecting the data values for each year to each spoke. The data values measure the percentage of states employing that norm interpretation in that particular year. The order of the spokes is determined by the geodesic distance between codes in 1992: spokes that are closer to one another in the figures co-occur more often in the speeches of states.[51]

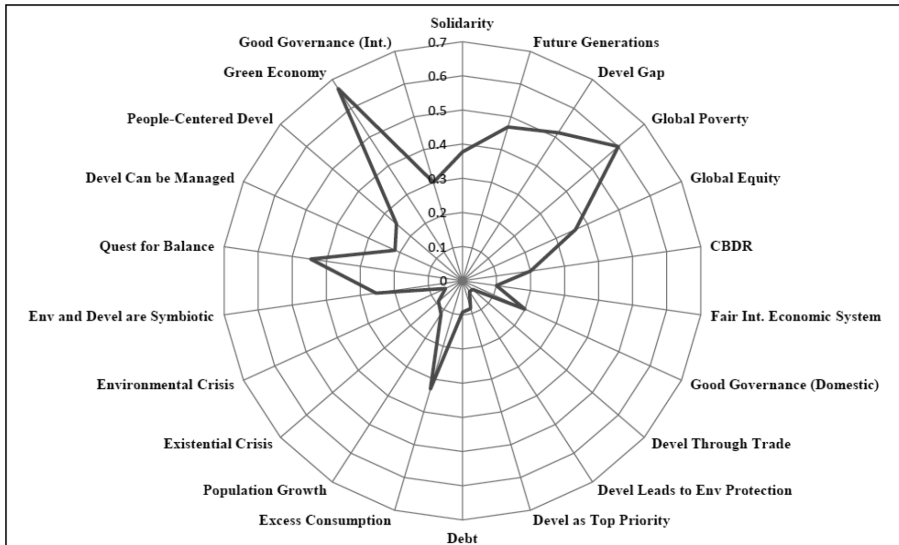**Figure 1 State Interpretations of Sustainable Development, 1992**
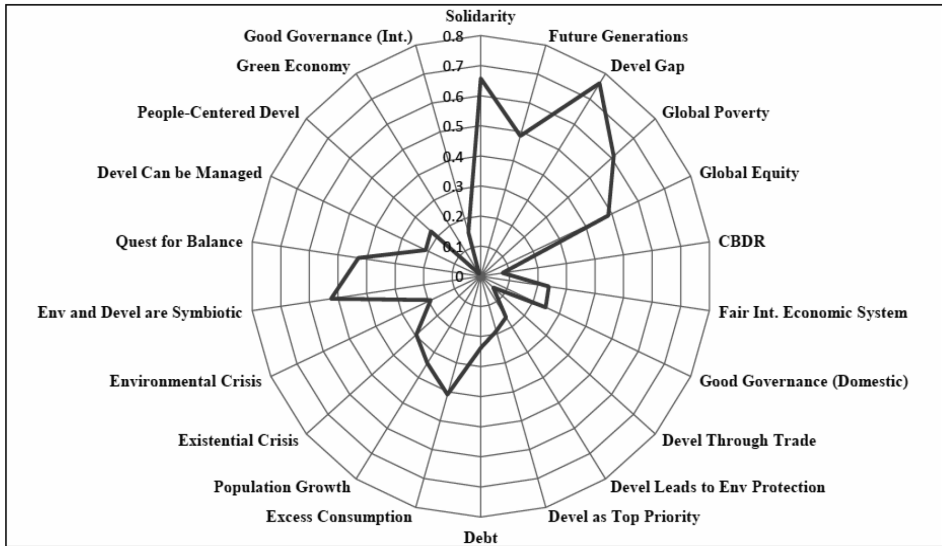
Note: See abbreviations in the Appendix.

Figure 2 State Interpretations of Sustainable Development, 2002
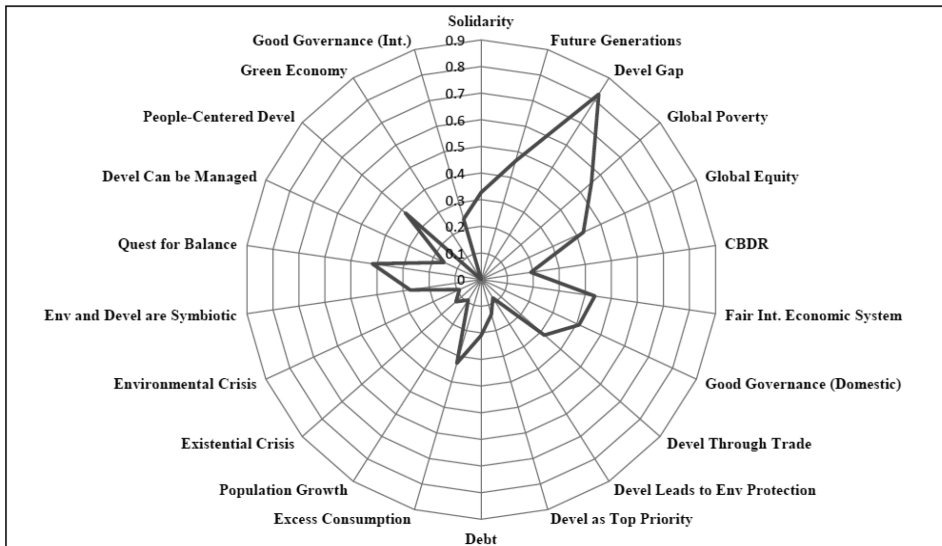
Note: See abbreviations in the Appendix.

Figure 3 State Interpretations of Sustainable Development, 2012

Note: See abbreviations in the Appendix.

These visualizations give us a sense of how well connected the internal elements are and how deeply they penetrate the community of states. They also echo our earlier argument: the norm definition process is continual. Some norm interpretations—such as justifying action in the name of future generations—hold enduring popularity. Others—like justifying action in the name of solidarity and attributing unsustainability to unchecked population growth—lose popularity over time.

The original Rio conference in 1992 was the breakthrough for state acceptance of the sustainable development norm. Our data allowed us insight into the extent to which states were coherent in their interpretations of the norm at that point. Figure 1 visualizes these data. We can observe two conceptual clusters of state interpretations of sustainable development in 1992. On the right side of the diagram, states discussed the concepts of the "development gap," "global poverty," and "global equity" as causes and justifications for action on sustainable development. On the left side of the diagram, states interpreted sustainable development to mean that "environment and development are symbiotic," that it requires a "quest for balance," and that its main causes are both "population growth" and "excess consumption."

The star charts visualize how states tended to fall into one cluster or the other in their interpretation. To simplify, observers have termed this the "North-South Divide" in global environmental politics, and note that the Rio conference was a success because it was able to bridge this gap.[52] Yet we note that it did so by promoting ambiguity in outcome documents, allowing two separate behavioral standards to proliferate. For example, Principle 2 of the Rio Declaration asserts "states have . . . the sovereign right to exploit their own resources pursuant to their own environmental and developmental policies" while also "the responsibility to ensure that activities within their jurisdiction or control do not cause damage to the environment of other states."[53] This ambiguity regarding the relative priority of environmental concerns and development concerns, as well as the role of the international community in setting standards, reflects the two different norm interpretations visualized in Figure 1, with important consequences for norm-driven cooperation.

It is also notable that there was significant conceptual ambiguity within the ideas of "balance" and "symbiosis" as expressed in many state speeches in the left cluster. As others have pointed out, much of the bite in the concept of sustainable development—from an environmental perspective—comes from the idea of natural limits on economic activity.[54] States were deeply divided on this issue. For example, the pursuit of growth could be justified by logic that environmental protection naturally follows development. The US interpretation of "sustainable development" provided support for this argument: "Twenty years ago, some spoke of the limits to growth. Today, we realize that growth is the engine of change and the friend of the environment." In contrast, the interpretation of many European states was more in line with classic Malthusian interpretations of "limits to growth."[55] Thus, even for those states supporting a pro-environmental agenda, the behavioral expectations regarding sequencing of environmental and development policy were very different. While there was broad support for the norm in 1992 and optimism about its success, its behavioral expectations were not deep.

States reconvened ten years later in Johannesburg (2002) to reopen these discussions. For many parties, this was an opportunity to state their disillusionment with the false promise attributed to the sustainable development agenda in 1992. It is notable that mentions of "solidarity" hit an all-time low at this conference (from 66 percent in 1992 to 33 percent in 2002). The discourse among states in 2002 placed the emphasis solidly on the development portion of sustainable development, as Figure 2 reveals.

Mentions of the symbiosis between environment and development dramatically declined from their 1992 levels. By far the most common norm interpretation was that sustainable development requires the recognition of

the "development gap" between Southern and Northern states (87 percent of states). This was supported by linked interpretations regarding the need for a fair international economic system, development through trade, and good domestic governance to support sustainable development. Many developing countries also espoused the idea of "people-centered development" as an alternative to an overly economistic focus.

In several ways, Johannesburg achieved a greater depth of consensus by redefining the norm of sustainable development to focus on fairness, economic growth, and improvement in human well-being in developing countries. This increased the extent of shared understanding regarding the norm content, as state after state espoused these common interpretations. The Kenyan speech is a representative example of the discourse that characterized this newfound agreement: "Although globalization has potential for diverse opportunities, its benefits are unevenly distributed. Its costs are borne by all while its benefits and opportunities are concentrated in a small number of countries in the North."

This redefinition of sustainable development deepened the consensus among many states, leading to greater Southern unity at this conference. At the same time, it also marginalized some developed countries that objected to an interpretation of sustainable development that focuses on fairness or redistribution. References to symbiosis and balance were much less common in these discussions. Rather than deepening consensus on the relationship between environment and development that was left ambiguous in 1992, states often omitted the environmental element in Johannesburg, focusing more on material human well-being as the ultimate objective.

The 2012 Rio+20 conference was viewed as an attempt to reinvigorate the flailing sustainable development agenda. To a large extent, states already recognized the failure to launch when entering the discussion. And once again, states approached this meeting by redefining the concept of sustainable development in the course of their discussions, as Figure 3 shows. Taking place in the context of an international economic crisis, states tended to define "sustainable development" in terms of continued economic growth. We can see this by the enormous and unprecedented popularity of the concept of the "green economy" (87 percent of states). States also expressed increased optimism that "development can be managed" so as to avoid its most adverse effects (33 percent of states in 2012, as opposed to 15 percent in 2002). Interpretations involving economic "fairness" declined dramatically in 2012. So while the discussion still focused on the needs of developing countries, its content was less justice based than in 2002, making it possible to appeal to a wider range of states.

The idea of green economy—the most popular interpretation in 2012—was itself linked to virtually every other idea about sustainable develop-

ment. Secondary accounts suggest that this is again a "deliberate vague-
ness" that allows for each country to implement that concept in its own
way.[56] The green economy encompasses at minimum two very different and
potentially conflicting interpretations of sustainability. On the one hand,
Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) coun-
tries, particularly the European Union (EU), interpret the green economy to
mean an economy that is less resource intensive. On the other hand, some
Latin American countries use the idea of green economy in a more critical
sense to describe an ecological economy in which development is measured
in terms other than economic growth. Thus, our analysis suggests that the
broad consensus on the term may mask very different underlying interpre-
tations, with implications for future performance in this arena.

Discussion

Although beyond the immediate scope of this analysis, our data allow us to
propose several reasons why discursive convergence has not emerged on
the topic of sustainable development. Like others, we observe that the rise
of new powers may have altered the dynamics of international environ-
mental cooperation.[57] But we note that new powers have not rejected the
sustainable development norm but rather have tried to redefine its content,
introducing a protracted norm definition process without norm-explicit
norm contestation. For example, our data show that China and Brazil have
remained central to these discussions, attempting to popularize more
growth-oriented interpretations of the norm rather than withdrawing from
or rejecting the sustainability discourse outright.

    We also observe that as new global norms have arisen—such as good
governance and rights-based approaches—states have tried to incorporate
these new concepts into the sustainable development framework. Actors have
generally tried to reconcile sustainable development with new norms rather
than abandoning it. We argue that both of these dynamics contribute to the
persistence but lack of conceptual clarity that characterizes this discourse.

    Drawing on previous literature, we also suggest several pathways by
which the lack of conceptual clarity is linked to the lack of progress on this
agenda. Scholars argue that norms can influence state behavior via two
pathways: either by becoming focal points for coordination or through
gaining increasing legitimacy over time.[58] We see the lack of conceptual
depth that we document in this article as contributing to an absence of
benchmarks necessary to track and enforce policy change, making it diffi-
cult for sustainable development to become a focal point. The underspeci-
fication of related priorities may have also sent the discursive development
in too many different directions, failing to provide a focal point around
which diverse approaches could converge. As a result, the emergent sus-

tainable development norm was unable to furnish a firm counterpoint to context-specific exemptions, adjustments, and compensations raised by governments, making it difficult for the norm to gain legitimacy.

The speeches that we analyzed provide preliminary evidence of these connections. The frustration with the limited progress and a lack of clarity with which the sustainable development agenda has been defined is palpable in state speeches. Antigua and Barbuda summarized this common refrain well by stating, "The 1992 Rio Declaration was but a nascent being, but now after 20 years of planning, cultivation and implementation, we should have a clearer vision, a better understanding and better defined goals." The Rio+20 conference was marked by many such statements. Many states catalogued the "broken promises" that had been made to them under the guise of sustainable development. Others expressed broader concerns that the entire discussion on sustainable development had become so vacuous as to lose legitimacy.

Conclusion

We observe, along with others, that sustainable development has fallen short of its original promise and goals. In this article, we identified failure to launch as a trajectory whereby the norm of sustainable development was widely diffused and institutionalized without producing eventual internalization. We suggest that other cases—including anticorruption[59] and human security[60]—may also fit this pattern, calling for more attention to the diverse trajectories of international norms.

For practitioners, our research points to the potential limitations of institutionalization as a strategy for securing eventual success of emergent norms, or of specific norm interpretations like the green economy. This approach commonly emphasizes the benefits of securing soft law and agreements in principle, which are expected to gradually transform into stronger binding conventions that eventually will achieve measurable outcomes.[61] Our empirical study suggests that, in the absence of increased normative cohesion, this gradual strengthening is unlikely to take place.

For scholars, this article demonstrates a unique empirical approach for studying the evolution of norms. Our data allowed us to evaluate the different interpretations of a norm and their relationship with one another. As a result, we were able to map and explain the fault lines in the debate over sustainable development and how these changed over time. We linked the protracted norm definition process to the norm's failure to launch, providing preliminary evidence to support the plausibility of this argument. Similar data and methods could be used to study other cases whether the norm definition process is crucial to explaining norm dynamism. ⊕

Appendix Interpretations of Sustainable Development (SD) and Abbreviations

Code	Abbreviation
Environmental protection and development are mutually supportive and symbiotic.	Env and Devel are Symbiotic
SD is about building a green economy.	Green Economy
SD is people-centered development.	People-Centered Devel
Development should be the top priority when acting on SD.	Devel as Top Priority
Development can be managed to reduce environmental damage.	Devel Can be Managed
Development will lead to environmental protection.	Devel Leads to Env Protection
SD requires the recognition of common but differentiated responsibilities.	CBDR
Action on SD is needed to rectify the development gap.	Devel Gap
Action on SD is required in response to the environmental crisis.	Environmental Crisis
Action on SD is required to ensure the future survival of states, peoples, or humanity as a whole.	Existential Crisis
Action on SD is required to protect future generations.	Future Generations
Action on SD is needed to ensure global equity.	Global Equity
Action on SD is about a quest for balance between environment, economic, and social factors.	Quest for Balance
Action on SD requires global solidarity.	Solidarity
SD requires reducing foreign debt owed by developing countries.	Debt
Trade among nations will enhance SD.	Devel Through Trade
SD requires a fair international economic system.	Fair Int. Economic System
Action on SD requires good governance at the state level.	Good Governance (Domestic)
Action on SD requires good governance at the international level.	Good Governance (Int.)
Excess consumption is the root of unsustainability.	Excess Consumption
Global poverty is the root of unsustainability.	Global Poverty
Population growth is the root of unsustainability.	Population Growth

Notes

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3. Jennifer L. Bailey, "Arrested Development: The Fight to End Commercial Whaling as a Case of Failed Norm Change," *European Journal of International Relations* 14, no. 2 (2008): 289-318; Michael Barnett, "Evolution Without Progress? Humanitarianism in World of Hurt," *International Organization* 63, no. (Fall 2009): 621–663; Katharina P. Coleman, "Locating Norm Diplomacy: Venue Change in International Norm Negotiations," *European Journal of International Relations* 19, no. 1 (2013): 163–186; Mona Lena Krook and Jacqui True, "Rethinking the Life Cycles of International Norms: The United Nations and the Global Promotion of Gender Equality," *European Journal of International Relations* 18, no. 1 (2012): 103–127; Diana Panke and Ulrich Petersohn, "Why International Norms Disappear Sometimes," *European Journal of International Relations* 18, no. 4 (2012): 719–742.

4. We view this as a "failure" within the analytical framework of norm evolution. In fact, as our argument shows, since the failure stemmed from the lack of a definitional consensus, this could also be viewed as a sign of growing agency and efficacy of actors in the developing countries, which are fundamentally affected by the outcomes of the sustainable development agenda. Amitav Acharya, "Who Are the Norm Makers? The Asian-African Conference in Bandung and the Evolution of Norms," *Global Governance* 20, no. 3 (2014): 405–417; Eric Helleiner, "Southern Pioneers of International Development," *Global Governance* 20, no. 3 (2014): 375–388.

5. Alexander L. George and Andrew Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005), p. 240; Andrew Bennett and Colin Elman, "Case Study Methods in the International Relations Subfield," *Comparative Political Studies* 40, no. 2 (2007): 176.

6. Harriet Bulkeley et al., "Governing Sustainability: Rio+20 and the Road Beyond," *Environment and Planning C: Government and Policy* 31, no. 6 (2013): 965.

7. Beth A. Simmons, *Mobilizing for Human Rights: International Law in Domestic Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 310.

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9. Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink, "International Norm Dynamics and Political Change," *International Organization* 52, no. 4 (1998): 887–917.

10. Barnett, "Evolution Without Progress?"

11. Stephen D. Krasner, *Sovereignty: Organized Hypocrisy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 54.

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13. Richard Price, *Moral Limits and Possibility in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998); Martha Finnemore, *The Purpose of Intervention: Changing Beliefs About the Use of Force* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004).

14. John J. Kirton and Michael J. Trebilcock, eds., *Hard Choices, Soft Law: Voluntary Standards in Global Trade, Environment, and Social Governance* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004).

15. Ulrika Mörth, *Soft Law in Governance and Regulation: An Interdisciplinary Analysis* (Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar, 2004).

16. Finnemore and Sikkink, "International Norm Dynamics and Political Change." Scholars have documented many cases that fit this pattern, including human rights—Jack Donnely, "Unfinished Business," *PS: Political Science and Politics* 31, no. 3 (1998): 530-534, and Kathryn Sikkink, "Transnational Politics, International Relations Theory, and Human Rights," *PS: Political Science and Politics* 31, no. 3 (1998): 517–523; the landmines ban—Richard Price, "Reversing the Gun Sights: Transnational Civil Society Targets Land Mines," *International Organization* 52, no. 3 (1998): 613–644; women's rights—Keck and Sikkink, *Activists Beyond Borders*; saving child soldiers—Darren Hawkins, "Explaining Costly International Institutions: Persuasion and Enforceable Human Rights Norms," *International Studies Quarterly* 48, no. 4 (2004): 779–804; democratic entitlement—Judith Kelley, "Assessing the Complex Evolution of Norms: The Rise of International Election Monitoring," *International Organization* 62, no. 2 (2008): 221–255.

17. Edgar Grande and Louis W. Pauly, eds., *Complex Sovereignty: Reconstituting Political Authority in the Twenty-first Century* (Toronto, ON: Toronto University Press, 2005).

18. Several previous studies show that norms do not inevitably strengthen over time and highlight alternative ways in which they may evolve. Bailey, "Arrested Development"; Barnett, "Evolution Without Progress?"; Coleman, "Locating Norm Diplomacy"; Krook and True, "Rethinking the Life Cycles of International Norms"; Panke and Petersohn, "Why International Norms Disappear Sometimes"; Susanne Zwingel, "How Do Norms Travel? Theorizing International Women's Rights in Transnational Perspective," *International Studies Quarterly* 56, no. 1 (2012): 115–129.

19. Justin Gest et al., "Tracking the Process of International Norm Emergence: A Comparative Analysis of Six Agendas and Emerging Migrants' Rights," *Global Governance* 19, no. 2 (2013): 155.

20. A parallel argument has been made of the work on "epistemic communities," which has been criticized for underplaying the possibility for disagreement among experts. Lawrence E. Susskind, *Environmental Diplomacy: Negotiating More Effective Global Agreements* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994); Oran R. Young, *International Governance: Protecting the Environment in a Stateless Society* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994).

21. Krook and True, "Rethinking the Life Cycles of International Norms," p. 104.

22. John W. Meyer et al., "World Society and the Nation-state," *American Journal of Sociology* 103, no. 1 (1997): 144–181.

23. For example, Amitav Acharaya examines how norms on cooperative security change as they are localized. Amitav Acharya, *Whose Ideas Matter? Agency and Power in Asian Regionalism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009). J. Samuel Barkin and Bruce Cronin examine the changing rules of sovereignty in the international system at various stages of acceptance. J. Samuel Barkin and Bruce Cronin, "The State and the Nation: Changing Norms and the Rules of Sovereignty in International Relations," *International Organization* 48, no. 1 (1994): 107–130. Michal Ben-Joseph Hirsch examines how changes in the content of the norm on truth and reconciliation commissions facilitated its emergence and institutionalization. Michal Ben-Josef Hirsch, "Ideational Change and the Emergence of the International Norm of Truth and Reconciliation Commissions," *European Journal of International Relations* 20, no. 3 (2014): 810–833. See also Bailey, "Arrested Development";

Krook and True, "Rethinking the Life Cycles of International Norms"; Antje Wiener, "Contested Compliance: Interventions on the Normative Structure of World Politics," *European Journal of International Relations* 10, no. 2 (2004): 189–234; Rodger A. Payne, "Persuasion, Frames and Norm Construction," *European Journal of International Relations* 7, no. 1 (2001): 37–61; Wayne Sandholz, "Dynamics of International Norm Change: Rules Against Wartime Plunder," *European Journal of International Relations* 14, no. 1 (2008): 101–131; Kees Van Kersbergen and Bertsjan Verbeek, "The Politics of International Norms: Subsidiarity and the Imperfect Competence Regime of the European Union," *European Journal of International Relations* 13, no. 2 (2007): 217–238.

24. Fariborz Zelli, Aarti Gupta, and Harro van Asselt, "Institutional Interactions at the Crossroads of Trade and Environment: The Dominance of Liberal Environmentalism?" *Global Governance* 19, no. 1 (2013): 105–118.

25. Mlada Bukovansky, "The Hollowness of Anti-corruption Discourse," *Review of International Political Economy* 13, no. 2 (2006): 181–209.

26. Krook and True, "Rethinking the Life Cycles of International Norms"; Panke and Petersohn, "Why International Norms Disappear Sometimes"; Wiener, "Contested Compliance: Interventions on the Normative Structure of World Politics."

27. The World Commission on Environment and Development, *Our Common Future* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

28. Ibid.

29. Steven Bernstein, *The Compromise of Liberal Environmentalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001).

30. Meyer et al., "World Society and the Nation-state," 144−181.

31. But see Catherine Weaver, *Hypocrisy Trap: The World Bank and the Poverty of Reform* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

32. Stakeholder Forum for a Sustainable Future, "Review of Implementation of Agenda 21 and the Rio Principles," 2012, www.stakeholderforum.org/fileadmin/files/Agenda%2021%20Rio%20principles%20Synthesis_Web.pdf, accessed 4 March 2015.

33. UN Environment Programme, "Measuring Progress: Environmental Goals and Gaps," 2012, www.unep.org/geo/pdfs/geo5/Measuring_progress.pdf, accessed 4 March 2015.

34. UN, "Millennium Development Goals Indicators," 2014, http://mdgs.un.org/unsd/mdg/Default.aspx, accessed 4 March 2015.

35. UN General Assembly, "Lessons Learned from the Commission on Sustainable Development: Report of the Secretary-General," UN Doc. A/67/757 (2013).

36. Felix Dodds, Michael Strauss, and Maurice Strong, *Only One Earth: The Long Road Via Rio to Sustainable Development* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

37. Hans Bruyninckx, "Sustainable Development: The Institutionalization of a Contested Policy Concept," in Michele M. Betsill, Kathryn Hochstetler, and Dimitris Stevis, eds., *Palgrave Advances in International Environmental Politics* (New York: Palgrave, 2006), p. 273.

38. Dodds, Strauss, and Strong, *Only One Earth;* Maria Ivanova, "Moving Forward by Looking Back: Learning from the UNEP's History," in Ken Conca and Geoffrey D. Dabelko, eds., *Green Planet Blues: Four Decades of Global Environmental Politics* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2010): 26–47.

39. Maarten Hajer, "Coalitions, Practices, and Meaning in Environmental Politics: From Acid Rain to BSE," in David Howarth and Jacob Torfing, eds., *Discourse Theory in European Politics: Identity, Policy and Governance* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005): 297–315.

40. Ibid.

41. Peter M. Haas, "UN Conferences and Constructivist Governance of the Environment," *Global Governance* 8, no. 1 (2002): 73–91.

42. Bernstein, *The Compromise of Liberal Environmentalism*.

43. Carl Death, "Summit Theater: Exemplary Governmentality and Environmental Diplomacy in Johannesburg and Copenhagen," *Environmental Politics* 20, no. 1 (2011): 1–19; Haas, "UN Conferences and Constructivist Governance of the Environment," p. 85.

44. Samuel Barkin, "Trade, Sustainable Development, and the Environment," *Global Environmental Politics* 3, no. 4 (2003): 92–97; Ann Florini, "The Evolution of International Norms," *International Studies Quarterly* 40, no. 3 (1996): 363–389; Audie Klotz, *Norms in International Relations: The Struggle Against Apartheid* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995); Simmons, *Mobilizing for Human Rights;* Ann E. Towns, "Norms and Social Hierarchies: Understanding International Policy Diffusion 'from Below,'" *International Organization* 66, no. 2 (2012): 179–209; Antje Wiener, "Contested Meanings of Norms: A Research Framework," *Comparative European Politics* 5, no. 1 (2007): 1; Zwingel, "How Do Norms Travel?"

45. The complete codebook with examples is available online at www.jennifer hadden.com.

46. Yoshiko Herrera and Bear Braumoeller, "Symposium: Discourse and Content Analysis," *Qualitative Methods* 2, no. 1 (Spring 2004): 15–39.

47. The complete codebook with examples is available online at www.jennifer hadden.com.

48. We acknowledge that 50 percent is a somewhat arbitrary threshold, as most of these discussions function by consensus. Our subsequent visualizations take into account a broader range of interpretations and their relationship to one another.

49. Bulkeley et al., "Governing Sustainability."

50. James Meadowcroft, "Reaching the Limits? Developed Country Engagement with Sutainable Development in a Challenging Conjuncture," *Environment and Planning C: Government and Policy* 31, no. 6 (2013): 988–1002.

51. The geodesic distance is the number of relations in the shortest possible walk from one actor to another. When distances were equivalent, spokes were organized alphabetically.

52. Bernstein, *The Compromise of Liberal Environmentalism*.

53. United Nations Environment Programme, "Declaration on Environment and Development," 1992, www.unep.org/documents.multilingual/default.asp?document id=78&articleid=1163 (accessed 16 February 2016).

54. Meadowcroft, "Reaching the Limits?"

55. Ibid.

56. Dodds, Strauss, and Strong, *Only One Earth,* p. 152.

57. Richard Stewart, Michael Oppenheimer, and Bryce Rudyk, "A New Strategy for Global Climate Protection," *Climatic Change* 120, no. 1 (2013): 1–12.

58. Simmons, *Mobilizing for Human Rights;* Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics,* p. 310.

59. Bukovansky, "The Hollowness of Anti-corruption Discourse"; David Leheny, *Think Global, Fear Local: Sex, Violence, and Anxiety in Contemporary Japan* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006).

60. Rhonda E. Howard-Hassmann, "Human Security: Undermining Human Rights?" *Human Rights Quarterly* 34, no. 1 (2012): 88–112.

61. Kirton and Trebilcock, *Hard Choices, Soft Law*.