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Towards integration at last? The sustainable development goals as a network of targets

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ABSTRACT

In 2014, UN Member States proposed a set of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which will succeed the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) as reference goals for the international development community for the period 2015-2030. The proposed goals and targets can be seen as a network, in which links among goals exist through targets that refer to multiple goals. Using network analysis techniques, we show that some thematic areas covered by the SDGs are well connected among one another. Other parts of the network have weaker connections with the rest of the system. The SDGs as a whole are a more integrated system than the MDGs were, which may facilitate policy integration across sectors. However, many of the links among goals that have been documented in biophysical, economic and social dimensions are not explicitly reflected in the SDGs. Beyond the added visibility that the SDGs provide to links among thematic areas, attempts at policy integration across various areas will have to be based on studies of the biophysical, social and economic systems.

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1 Introduction

In 2014, following a decision taken at the Rio+20 Conference and after more than a year of intergovernmental work of what was called an Open Working Group, UN Member States proposed a set of Sustainable Development Goals or SDGs (United Nations, 2014a). The SDGs will succeed the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) as reference goals for the international community for the period 2015-2030. The development of the new set of goals was widely seen as an ambitious challenge, as these goals cover a much broader range of issues than their predecessors, aim to be universal – that is, applicable to all countries and not only developing countries, and have to serve as guideposts for a difficult transition to sustainable development, which has eluded the international community since the Earth Summit in 1992.

Lack of integration across sectors in terms of strategies, policies and implementation has long been perceived as one of the main pitfall of previous approaches to sustainable development. Insufficient understanding and accounting of trade-offs and synergies across sectors have resulted in incoherent policies, adverse impacts of development policies focused on specific sectors on other sectors, and ultimately in diverging outcomes and trends across broad objectives for sustainable development. In terms of the MDGs for example, it is well acknowledged that many of the targets encapsulated in MDG7, which relates to environmental protection, have not been achieved and have in some cases been negatively impacted by policies and actions aiming to achieve other goals (United Nations, 2014b, 2014c; UNEP, 2012). Correspondingly, achieving greater integration at various levels was a core concern of the international community at the Rio+20 conference, held on the 20th anniversary of the Earth Summit, and this is reflected in the outcome of the conference (United Nations, 2012a).

More broadly, previous development agendas have been criticized for failing to fully integrate the key dimension of sustainable consumption and production (SCP), which was identified since the first Earth

Summit as a key ingredient of sustainable development paths. The political difficulty of addressing SCP issues, as well as its weak institutional anchoring due to its cross-cutting and systemic nature and lack of grounding of SCP considerations in other sector policies, have contributed to this outcome (Victor, 2008; Jackson, 2010; United Nations, 2011).

This article explores the extent to which the structure of the proposed goals and associated targets does indeed reflect the objective of better integration across sectors. The proposed goals and targets can be seen as a network, in which links among goals exist through targets that explicitly refer to multiple goals. The objective is to show where links between goals were made by the political process that created the SDGs. The resulting network and mapping, which reflect the results of negotiations in an intergovernmental context, can be thought of as a “political mapping” of the sustainable development universe, as opposed to, for example, a mapping purely based on natural and social science insights about how the system works (see below).

Using network analysis techniques, I show how the SDGs seen through this lens are unequally connected, with some goals being connected to many other goals through multiple targets, while other goals are weakly connected to the rest of the system. I show that two of the proposed goals, SDG 12 on sustainable consumption and production (SCP) and SDG 10 on inequality, provide critical connections among other goals and make the SDGs more tightly linked as a network.

The presence in the set of SDGs of targets that refer to multiple goals and sectors may facilitate integration and policy coherence across sectors, in particular at the level of international development agencies. Such links among goals through targets may also facilitate real mainstreaming of dimensions that previously suffered from not having strong sectoral anchoring in development institutions, such as sustainable consumption and production. However, our mapping also reveals that important links that exist among sustainable development areas through

the biophysical, social and economic systems are not explicitly reflected in the proposed SDGs.

The remainder of this paper is built as follows. Section 2 describes the methodology used for the analysis. In section 3, I present the mapping of the SDGs as a network of related targets. Section 4 discusses the implication of the structure of the SDGs for cross-sectoral integration. Section 5 highlights some of the differences between the mapping presented here and other mappings of the sustainable development universe based on biophysical and socio-economic realities. Section 6 concludes.

2 Methodology

As discussed above, the goals and targets proposed by the OWG can be seen as a network, with links among goals through the targets.

The proposal of the Open Working Group comes in the form of 17 goals, with several targets under each goal, amounting to a total of 169 targets. The basis for the analysis presented here is a matrix that links every target of the SDGs to all the goals to which its wording refers. Thus, each target, in addition to being linked with its own goal, may be linked to other goals. To take an example, target 12.4 under goal 12 of the SDGs, “Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns”, states: “by 2020 achieve environmentally sound management of chemicals and all wastes throughout their life cycle in accordance with agreed international frameworks and significantly reduce their release to air, water and soil to minimize their adverse impacts on human health and the environment”. This target explicitly refers to health, and is recorded as being linked to SDG 3, which reads: “Goal 3. Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages”.

A particularity of the SDGs as proposed by the Open Working Group is that under each of the goals, some of the proposed targets relate to the so-called “means of implementation” (in the sustainable development legislation that has come out of the Earth Summit, this term tends to encompass finance, trade, technology transfer and capacity building). A dedicated

goal, SDG 17, was also dedicated to cross-cutting means of implementation for the whole set of SDGs. For the purpose of this paper, all the targets related to means of implementation are discarded from the analysis. One reason is that we want to focus on links between thematic areas. Another reason is that it is difficult to apply the methodology described above to targets relating to means of implementation. This is not, of course, to say that means of implementation across the set of SDGs do not deserve an analysis of their own. This restriction leaves us with 107 targets under 16 goals (all the SDGs except goal 17).¹

This method, while seemingly straightforward, is of course subject to different interpretations of the wording of the targets. For example, whether a target referring to “hygiene” is recorded as having a link to the health goal depends on whether one considers that hygiene clearly and explicitly belongs to the health area. This implies that the matrix which is the basis for the network analysis may vary slightly according to the sensibility of the coder. However, the number of cases that are open for interpretation is, on experience, relatively limited. The coding of the links between targets and goals was re-examined several times by the author and reviewed by another person, in order to ensure that the same criteria for deciding on the presence of links were applied as uniformly as possible across targets. In addition, the author checked that different coding of the few “borderline” cases does not distort the picture that is presented here in a significant manner. Nonetheless, it is good to keep this caveat in mind when looking at the results presented below.

Once the matrix of links is created, it is used as the basis for 2-mode network analysis (de Nooy et al., 2005). Maps and graphs presented below are derived from simple network analysis techniques.

It is worth emphasizing that the mapping here is not based on consideration of important e.g. economic or physical links between goal areas (for example, between energy use and climate change), but purely

¹ See Table 1 below for a list of the SDGs.

on the wording of the targets. Indeed, one of the main pitfalls that one encounters when establishing the matrix of links is to avoid inferring links that are obvious from socio-economic or physical considerations, but are not made in the SDGs themselves. In section 5, we come back to the difference between these two types of mappings.

3 The SDGs as a network of targets

The map of the SDGs as a network of targets is shown on Figure 1. The sixteen SDGs are represented as broader circles of differing colors, while targets are figured by smaller circles and have the color of the goal under which they figure. For readability reasons, on this general map the targets are not labelled with their numbers as in the report of the Open Working Group. More explicit labels are used below when we examine specific areas of the map. Around each SDG, a number of targets are linked only to that goal, giving rise to flower-like structures around the goals. Other targets are linked with more than their own goal and provide the structure of the network.

Out of the 107 targets, 60 explicitly refer to at least one other goal than the one to which they belong. 19 targets link three goals or more. Such targets create indirect, or “third party” links among goals. For example, target 3.8 under SDG3, which relates to achieving universal health coverage, refers to both inequality and poverty. It is therefore counted as a link between SDG 10 and SDG 1, even though it does not belong to either goal.² Such indirect links are included in all the counts of links among goals provided below.

The map conveys a sense of an unequally knit network, with some goals being linked to many other goals, while others have fewer links with the rest of the network. On first look, the map is reminiscent of traditional “core-periphery” structures, as have been identified in other contexts (e.g. for international trade). While we do not push the comparison here,

it is clear that inequality, SCP, poverty, hunger, education belong to the “core” of the SDG network as defined here.

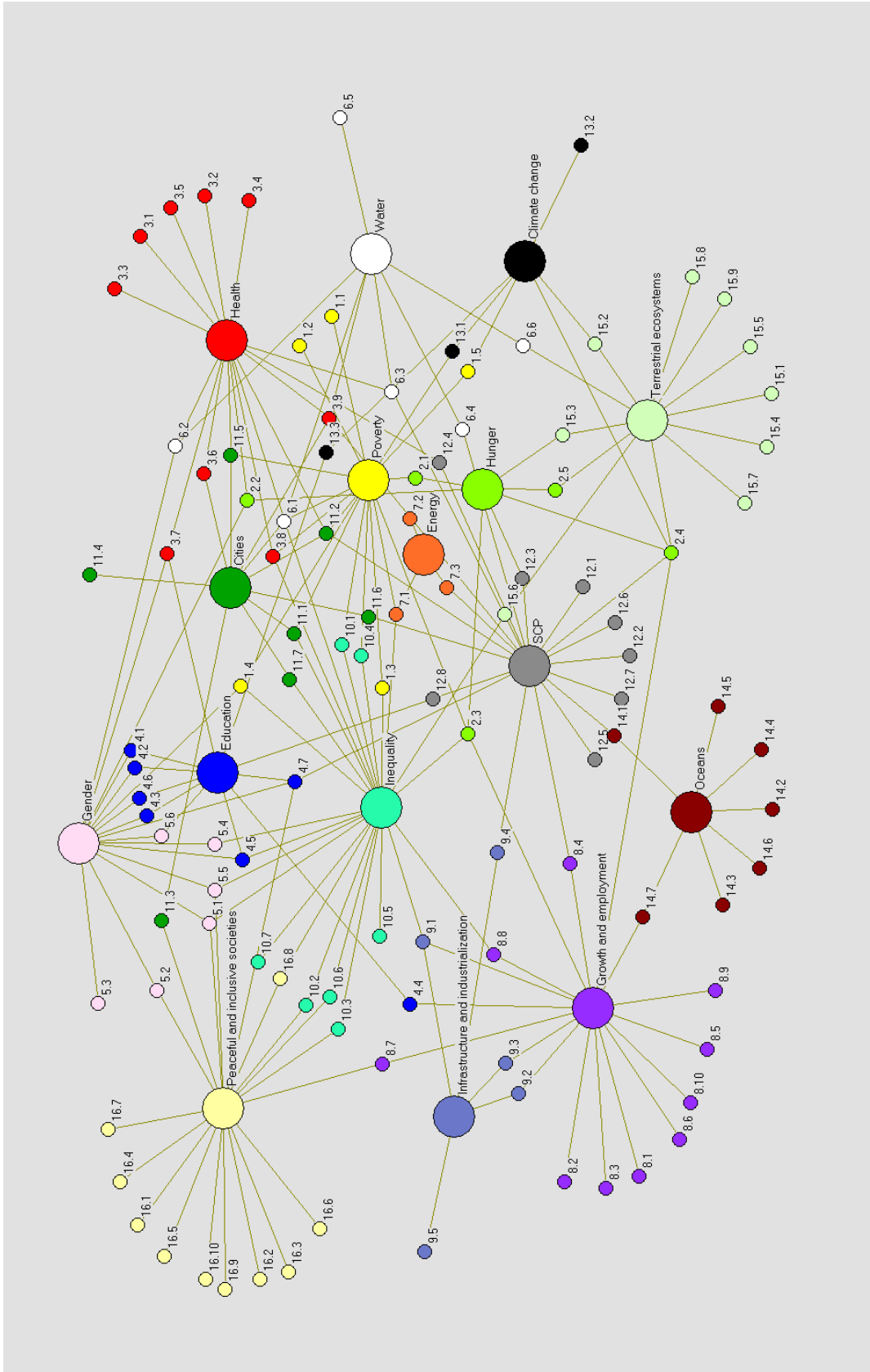
Table 1 and figure 2 provide more aggregate pictures of the links among goals. Table 1 ranks the 16 goals according to the number of other goals to which they are linked. SCP, inequality, poverty and growth and employment top the list and all have links with 10 other goals or more. At the bottom of the list are energy (3 links), infrastructure and industrialization (3 links), and oceans (2 links). In between, SDGs 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 11, 13, 15 and 16 are all connected to 6 to 8 other goals, either directly or indirectly.

Figure 2, which is a 1-mode reduction of the initial network, provides an additional perspective by showing the strengths of the links among the goals. The thicker the link between two goals on the map, the more targets are linking the two goals, directly or through a third goal. The thickest links are between gender and education (SDGs 4 and 5), and between poverty and inequality (SDGs 1 and 10). There are also strong connections between SDG 10 and SDG 16 on peaceful and inclusive societies. Figure 2 once again highlights the centrality of SDG 10 and 12 on inequality and SCP.

Focusing first on SDG12, the map shows where the connections with other goals come from. Interestingly, most of the links come from targets that are listed under other goals. For example, the links between SCP and SDG 6 on water are provided by two targets under the water goal: target 6.3, “*by 2030, improve water quality by reducing pollution, eliminating dumping and minimizing release of hazardous chemicals and materials, halving the proportion of untreated wastewater, and increasing recycling and safe reuse by x% globally*”, and target 6.4, “*by 2030, substantially increase water-use efficiency across all sectors and ensure sustainable withdrawals and supply of freshwater to address water scarcity, and substantially reduce the number of people suffering from water scarcity*”. This means that SCP-related concerns are factored in targets belonging to other goals. Importantly, SCP is linked with SDG 8 on growth and

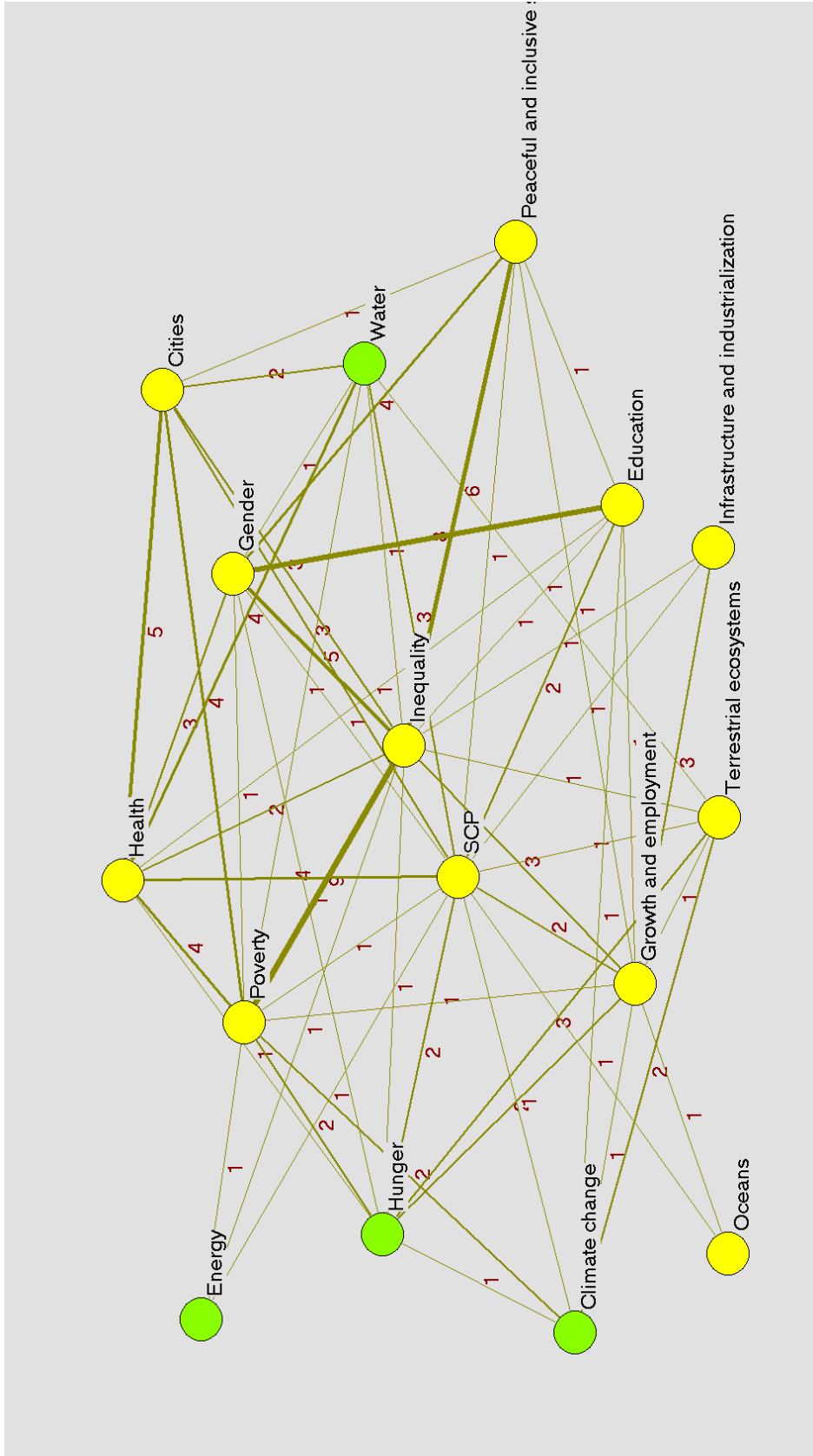
² For other examples, refer to Figures 3 and 4.

Figure 1
The SDGs as a network of targets



Source: Author's elaboration.
Note: targets labels are the numerals which refer to them in the report of the Open Working Group on SDGs.

Figure 2
Links between the SDGs through targets: an aggregated picture



Source: Author's elaboration.

Note: the numbers on the map indicate the number of targets linking different goals. For example, SDG 16 on peaceful and inclusive societies is linked with SDG 5 on gender through four targets. The circles representing the goals on climate, land, energy and water have been singled out for purposes of comparison with other mappings (see below section 5)

Table 1
Links between the SDGs through targets: an aggregated picture

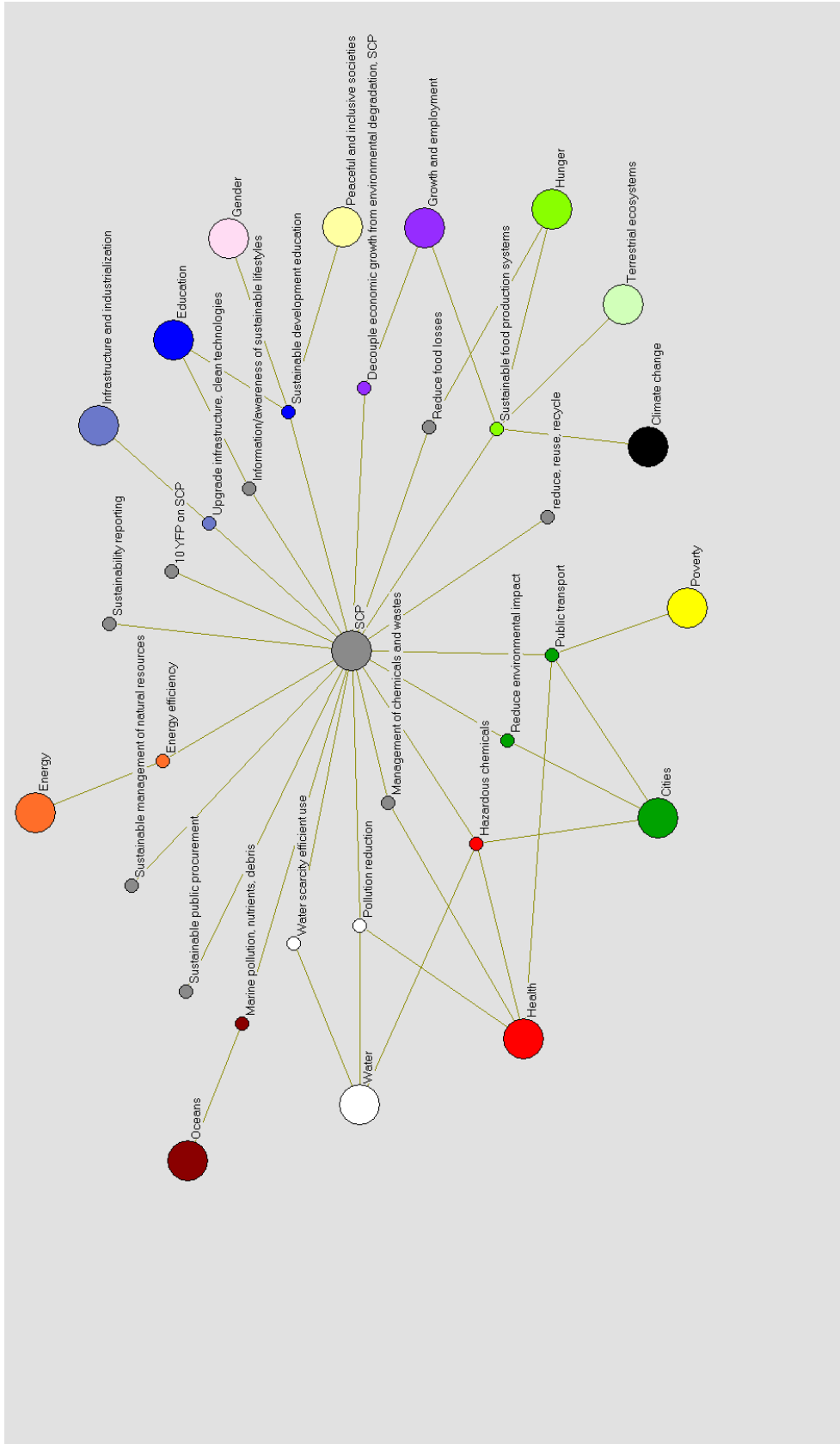
Rank	Sustainable development goal	Number of other goals to which the goal is connected
1	12 – Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns	14
2	10 - Reduce inequality within and among countries	12
3	1. End poverty in all its forms everywhere	10
4	8 - Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all	10
5	2 - End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture	8
6	3 - Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages	8
7	5 - Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls	8
8	4 - Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all	7
9	6 - Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all	7
10	11 - Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable	6
11	13 - Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts	6
12	15 - Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss	6
13	16 - Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels	6
14	7 - Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all	3
15	9 - Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation	3
16	14 - Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development	2

Source: Author's elaboration.

We now describe in more detail the links that exist within the network, focusing on SDG 12 (SCP) and SDG 10 (inequality). For this, we focus on a particular SDG and extract from the broader network the

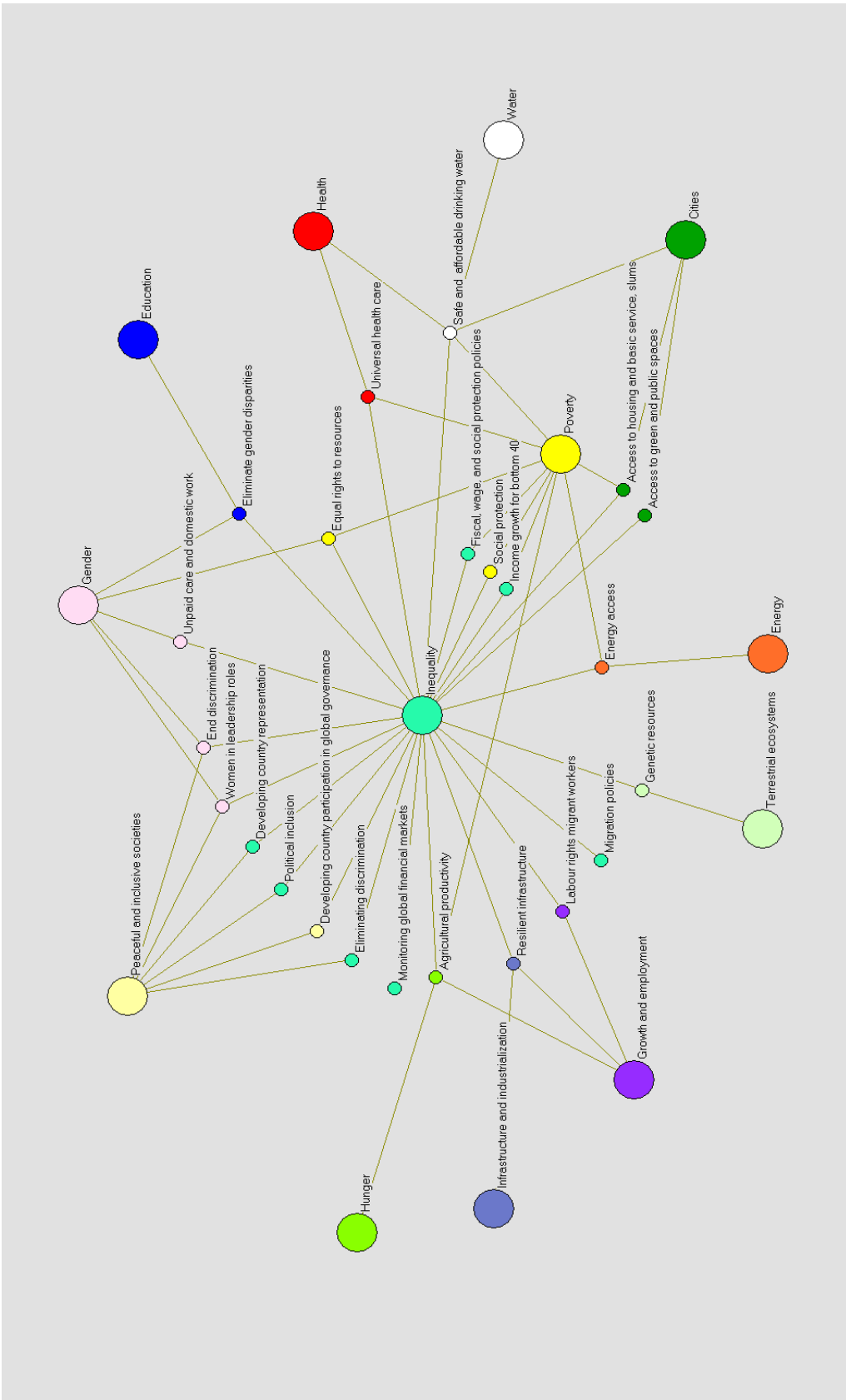
targets with which the goal is linked, as well as the goals to which such targets belong to. The results of this reduction for SDGs 12 and 10 are shown on Figure 3 and Figure 4 respectively.

Figure 3
Links among the goal 12 (SCP) and other goals



Source: Author's elaboration.

Figure 4
Links among goal 10 (inequality) and other goals



Source: Author's elaboration.

employment through target 8.4, “*improve progressively through 2030 global resource efficiency in consumption and production, and endeavour to decouple economic growth from environmental degradation in accordance with the 10-year framework of programmes on sustainable consumption and production with developed countries taking the lead*”.

Turning to SDG 10, Figure 4 shows a similar pattern, indicating that many targets referencing inequality are listed under other goals. Of notice is the strong link between inequality and peaceful and inclusive societies (SDG 16), with no fewer than 6 targets explicitly linking the two, including two from SDG 5 on gender. As can be seen on Figure 2, the strongest numbers of links is with the poverty goal, with 9 links in total. What is interesting is that most of the links between SDG 10 and SDG 1 are though universal access targets on energy, water, health, housing and green space and equal access to resources, which are listed under other goals.

4 The SDGs as an enabler for integration?

Internationally agreed goals and target have both a political value and an instrumental value. For institutions tasked with the monitoring and reviewing of the international development agenda and for the international community that they serve, the goals and targets become a common benchmark against which the course of the human enterprise can be assessed, and provide the basis for cooperation and accountability among nations to achieve a common vision. For development institutions that structure their work around internationally agreed goals in particular, the new goals can be expected to provide a framework around which policy and action aiming to improve human well-being will be justified and organized; this is what happened in international development institutions around the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). As time went by after the Millennium summit, the MDGs were increasingly used to structure the actions of bilateral and

multilateral development agencies, from the broad corporate and sector strategies to project documents.³

Because of these connections, the structure of the set of SDGs, as put forward by the Open Working Group, has implications for policy integration and coherence across areas. As seen above, for many of the thematic areas covered by the SDGs, targets relating to those areas are found not only under their namesake goal (when it exists), but across a range of other goals as well. In designing and monitoring their work, agencies concerned with a specific goal (e.g. education, health, economic growth) will have to take into account targets that refer to other goals, which, due to the normative clout of the SDGs for development work coming forward, may provide stronger incentives than in the past for cross-sector, integrated work. Similarly, for institutions concerned with monitoring and evaluation of progress under the goals, it will be necessary to look at multiple goals – indeed, all those which include targets referring to one institution’s area of interest. This may enable greater integration across goals.

To take a concrete example, we look at the area of health. This area is covered by SDG3: Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages, which includes 9 targets (excluding those on means of implementation). In addition, seven targets under goals 2, 6, 11 and 12 also explicitly refer to health in their wording. These targets can be referred to as “extended” targets for SDG3, as opposed to “core” targets listed under SDG3. The combined list of targets is shown in Table 2. Arguably, institutions concerned with the health sector and operating within the framework of the SDGs will have to consider both

³ Beyond their political and instrumental values, internationally agreed development goals also have an influence on science and science-related policy. The existence of goals and targets contributes to orienting scientific research in specific directions. Among many other examples, this has included improving the measurement of ecological and social phenomena (e.g. climate change and its implications for human societies) and providing directions for public research and development efforts (e.g. for new agricultural technologies and land management practices).

Table 2

"Core" targets and "extended" targets: Example of SDG 3

Rank	Sustainable development goal
"Core" targets: Goal 3. Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages	
3.1	by 2030 reduce the global maternal mortality ratio to less than 70 per 100,000 live births
3.2	by 2030 end preventable deaths of newborns and under-five children
3.3	by 2030 end the epidemics of AIDS, tuberculosis, malaria, and neglected tropical diseases and combat hepatitis, water-borne diseases, and other communicable diseases
3.4	by 2030 reduce by one-third pre-mature mortality from non-communicable diseases (NCDs) through prevention and treatment, and promote mental health and wellbeing
3.5	strengthen prevention and treatment of substance abuse, including narcotic drug abuse and harmful use of alcohol
3.6	by 2020 halve global deaths and injuries from road traffic accidents
3.7	by 2030 ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health care services, including for family planning, information and education, and the integration of reproductive health into national strategies and programmes
3.8	achieve universal health coverage (UHC), including financial risk protection, access to quality essential health care services, and access to safe, effective, quality, and affordable essential medicines and vaccines for all
3.9	by 2030 substantially reduce the number of deaths and illnesses from hazardous chemicals and air, water, and soil pollution and contamination
"Extended" set of targets: Targets from other goals that directly refer to health	
	Goal 2. End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture
2.2	by 2030 end all forms of malnutrition, including achieving by 2025 the internationally agreed targets on stunting and wasting in children under five years of age, and address the nutritional needs of adolescent girls, pregnant and lactating women, and older persons
	Goal 6. Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all
6.1	by 2030, achieve universal and equitable access to safe and affordable drinking water for all
6.2	by 2030, achieve access to adequate and equitable sanitation and hygiene for all, and end open defecation, paying special attention to the needs of women and girls and those in vulnerable situations
6.3	by 2030, improve water quality by reducing pollution, eliminating dumping and minimizing release of hazardous chemicals and materials, halving the proportion of untreated wastewater, and increasing recycling and safe reuse by x% globally
	Goal 11. Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable
11.2	by 2030, provide access to safe, affordable, accessible and sustainable transport systems for all, improving road safety, notably by expanding public transport, with special attention to the needs of those in vulnerable situations, women, children, persons with disabilities and older persons
11.5	by 2030 significantly reduce the number of deaths and the number of affected people and decrease by y% the economic losses relative to GDP caused by disasters, including water-related disasters, with the focus on protecting the poor and people in vulnerable situations
	Goal 12. Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns
12.4	by 2020 achieve environmentally sound management of chemicals and all wastes throughout their life cycle in accordance with agreed international frameworks and significantly reduce their release to air, water and soil to minimize their adverse impacts on human health and the environment

Source: Author's elaboration.

core and extended targets when designing, implementing and monitoring policies.

In addition to this, the structure of the goals themselves may enable cross-sector dialogue and enable greater policy coherence. An example of this is the broad formulation of SDG 2, which adds to traditional targets on hunger explicit references to land management, agricultural production methods and terrestrial ecosystems. The fact that this connection is made, as opposed to, e.g. in the MDGs, may encourage, at least to some degree, all those concerned with hunger-related issues to consider the links between agriculture, nutrition, food security and ecosystems much more closely than was the case. It may also facilitate cross-fertilization, for example by providing incentives for organizations concerned with food security and hunger to hire specialists of related areas mentioned in the targets for SDG 2. Inasmuch as actions in some of these areas have been recognized by past experience as involving trade-offs (for example in the case of biofuels), a broader scope for the goal may be conducive to greater accounting of such trade-offs and enable strategies and policies that are more conducive to synergetic outcomes. This would correct one of the drawbacks of the MDGs, in which “silo” goals encouraged silo policies and did not make links and trade-offs across areas explicit.

Such links among goals through targets may also facilitate real mainstreaming of dimensions that previously suffered from not having strong sectoral anchoring in development institutions. Especially interesting in this context is the existence of many links between SDG 12 on SCP and other goals. As argued in the introduction, until now SCP has suffered from being weakly integrated with other areas of work and addressed as an “add-on” (for example, resource efficiency considerations in various sectors were not often given prominence in development strategies and policies). Should the goals and target stand as they were proposed by the Open Working Group, actors in many sectors will have to work with SCP-related targets under their goals, which may finally enable greater integration of SCP across the board. In particular, the fact that resource efficiency

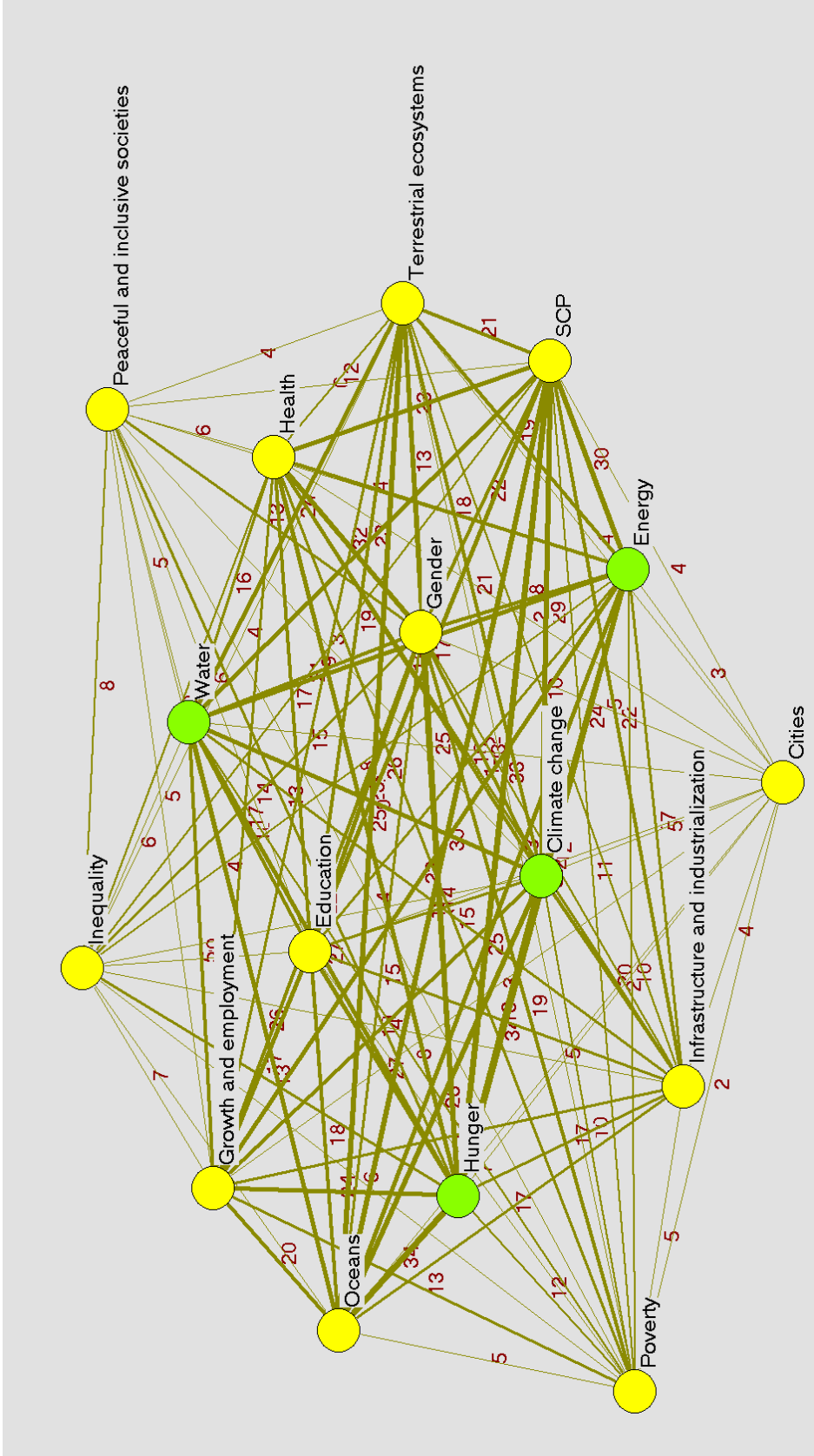
is an integral part of SDG 8 on growth and employment can be seen as quite revolutionary, in that this fundamental aspect of SCP, rather than being seen in isolation from growth, may now be more systematically considered by strategies and policies aiming to spur growth and employment, which have both high priority everywhere and strong anchoring in institutions at all levels.

5 Where are the gaps?

As emphasized above, the set of SDGs that was put forward by the Open Working Group is the result of intergovernmental discussions. As such, it constitutes a normative piece, which frames global goals and targets that the international community sets for itself. As a compromise reflecting a multiplicity of concerns and interests, the set of SDGs taken as a whole is not based on any particular interpretation of the world; nor does it reflect a specific, coherent systemic view of how the socio-economic engine works and delivers outcomes along all the dimensions covered by the goals.

The novelty of the SDGs compared to their predecessors is that they aim to cover the whole sustainable development universe, which includes basically all areas of the human enterprise on Earth. This universe can be mapped in a number of ways, the value of which depends on their instrumental purpose. Since the concept of sustainable development was first adopted by the international community in 1992, several mapping methods, or different ways to “cut the cake”, have been proposed. This includes the framework proposed by Kates (1999); mappings based on the economy-in society-in nature representation of the ecological economics school (Daly, 1991); and hundreds of mappings of sub-systems designed for the purpose of modelling. Sustainable development modelling and scenario work, in particular, has considered links between some SDG areas in great details. For example, models underlying the results of IPCC assessments (IPCC, 2014) or the Global Energy Assessment (IEA, 2013) consider the links between the energy system, the rest of the

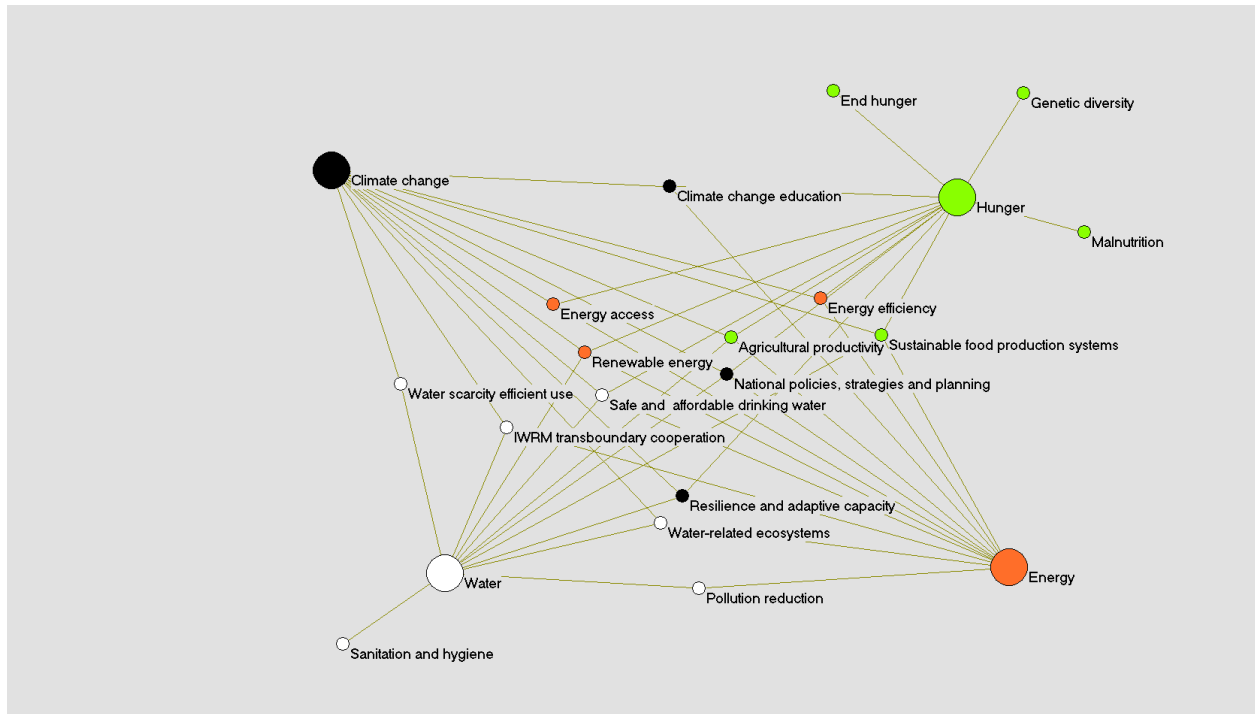
Figure 5
 Links between SDG targets and other goals made by scientists in a review of SDGs: The whole SDG system



Source: Author's elaboration, from data in ICSU-ISSC (2015).

Note: In the ICSU-ISSC paper, the chapter on goal 11 (cities) does not record links with targets under other goals. This explains the lower number of links starting from that goal compared to many other goals.

Figure 6
Links among targets put forward by the ICSU-ISSC scientific review of SDGs



Source: Author's elaboration from data in ICSU-ISSC (2015).

Note: Broader circles indicate goals. Smaller circles indicate targets. Targets are of the same color as the goal to which they belong.

economy, and climate change, along with a range of other dimensions.⁴

Even outside formal modelling, scientists and practitioners alike have mentioned as critical to reflect in the goals and targets strong interconnections among goal areas from the biophysical and socio-economic points of view (Griggs et al., 2014, Weitz et al., 2014, ICSU-ISSC, 2015). Looking at multiple areas in relation to one another can provide critical insights as to the feasibility and ways and means of achieving specific goals. For example, work undertaken in

4 Due to the inherent complexity of the ecological-socio-economic system, there is no universally accepted representation of it and various representations reflect differing world views. For operational purposes, existing models focus on limited sets of dimensions of interest. In particular, our understanding of the possibilities of joint outcomes in more than one dimension (for example, growth, inequality and environment) is limited, and to some extent irreducible (Roehrl, 2013).

the context of the Convention on Biological Diversity (UNCBD, 2012) has made clear that actions to achieve the so-called Aichi targets are critically dependent on actions and policies in other sectors. Similarly, progress on energy efficiency (a target associated with the goal on energy) depends strongly on actions from both producers and consumers in various sectors and on associated regulation, strategies and incentives.

It is thus interesting to contrast the “political” mapping of the SDGs presented above with other mappings based on physical and socio-economic considerations. It is beyond the scope of this paper to explore related differences systematically. In what follows, we focus on a few examples, starting with the whole system and then focusing on a smaller sub-system.

In a recent paper, the International Council for Science and International Social Science Council asked

small groups of expert scientists on each goal in the SDGs to, *inter alia*, mention the links between the goal being considered and targets under all the other goals (ICSU and ISSC, 2015). As this approach is similar to the one which underlies the “political” mapping presented above, it allows for a straightforward comparison with the latter. The results, consolidated by goals, are shown in Figure 5 below. As can be seen from Figure 5, the resulting network is much more densely connected than the one shown in figure 1. Each of the goals links to the majority of targets under the other goals.⁵ This clearly shows that there are many more scientifically meaningful connections among goals than are explicitly reflected in the SDGs.

The contrast between the number of links suggested by science and those explicitly reflected in the SDG targets is even starker when one focuses on sub-parts of the system. As an example, we use the climate, land, energy and water (CLEW) “nexus”, as it is often called. The CLEW nexus has been intensively studied, at different geographic scales and using different modelling tools (see Bazilian et al., 2011, Welsch et al., Skaggs et al., and UN, 2014b for references). The number of links considered by planning and modeling tools as have been applied to CLEW tends to be high. Overall, the sheer number of interactions among the nexus areas mentioned in these studies is enough to show that most of these interactions are not captured by the SDG targets.⁶

If we focus on the CLEW nexus only, the ICSU-ISSC paper (ICSU and ISSC, 2015) suggests links between most of the targets under goals 2, 6, 7 and 13 to other goals in the nexus. The resulting links

among targets in the CLEW network are shown in Figure 6. Some of the targets are actually assessed as linking the four goals; many of them link three of the four goals. This stands in sharp contrast with the limited number of links among the four sectors appearing in Figure 1.

Looking at other parts of the system, another link that is not made by the SDGs is between energy and industrialization. Yet it has long been recognized that use of energy in economic infrastructure drives overall energy consumption, which in turns correlates with climate change drivers and impacts on ecosystems. Any strategy to limit CO₂ emissions, for example, would have to consider this link. Similarly, energy and climate change are weakly linked in the SDGs, even though energy is a critical component of any path aimed at limiting climate change, and most models aiming to shed light on climate change mitigation pathways rely to some extent on representations of the energy system. Another missing link is that between oceans and climate change. While SDG 14 includes a target on limiting ocean acidification, the link is not made with CO₂ emissions (which do not figure explicitly either in SDG 13 on climate change).

Thus, it is clear that the political framework that the SDGs provide does not explicitly reflect the multiplicity of links that matter for policy purposes. Hence, in practice, SDGs will be of limited use in providing guidance to address the various links that exist. This should not come as a surprise. The SDGs, as a political construction for which one parameter was that the goals should be “limited in number”, could not possibly address all the relevant links among goal areas – there are simply too many of them. The absence of some well-recognized links also reflects that agreement on the importance of this links has not been reached in the international political arena. However, for the purpose of reviewing the sustainable development agenda in the future, it will be especially important to keep an eye on these areas and others where strong systemic links are known to exist from a scientific point of view but are not reflected in the goals and targets.

⁵ Because links were recorded by different teams for each goal, the ICSU-ISSC paper may suffer from lack of consistency, in the sense that some teams have been more “generous” in linking a goal with other goals. Also, the linking exercise was not done in a similar fashion for goal 11 (cities), resulting in fewer links from this goal.

⁶ Using a different approach, Weitz et al. (2014, p.46) consider links across targets belonging to the nexus goal areas and distinguish three categories of links: targets that reinforce each other; targets that are dependent on each other; and targets that impose conditions on each other.

A systematic identification of such areas may be a worthy undertaking for the scientific community in coming years. One promising and practical way around this difficulty is suggested by Griggs et al. (2014), who suggest to link some of the existing targets under different SDGs through so-called IPAT equations, thus providing potential cross-checks on what progress on some of the targets imply for others (Griggs et al., 2014).

6 Conclusion

The set of SDGs that was put forward by the Open Working Group can be read as a network of targets connecting the different goal areas. The analysis above has shown that some thematic areas covered by the SDGs are well connected among one another. Other parts of the network have weaker connections with the rest of the system. Overall, one can argue that the SDGs are more connected than their predecessors, the MDGs, were. Provided that the final goals and targets that are going to be agreed in September 2015 keep this feature, this could enable more integrated policies and easier consideration of synergies and trade-off across SDG areas, an aspect that was identified during the last two decades since the Earth Summit as critical for progress on sustainable development. For each area covered by the SDGs, we have suggested that one can quite straightforwardly identify “extended” targets, that is, targets linked with the area in question that are located under other goals. Monitoring of “extended” as well as core targets under any of the goals could facilitate integrated thinking and policy-making. Looking at implications of this for the way development agencies operate would be an important undertaking going forward.

We emphasized that the inclusion of standalone goals on sustainable consumption and production patterns and inequality not only make the SDGs more tightly knit as a network; it also opens the door for easier mainstreaming of these dimensions into other areas and sectors that have stronger institutional standing than SCP has, and from there into strategies and policies relevant to those sectors.

On the other hand, some of the important systemic links among thematic areas, which arguably will have to be considered in any long-term pathway towards sustainable development, are not explicitly made within the political framework of the SDGs. Going forward, alternative means of ensuring that the inter-dependences among sectors that they imply are taken into account in strategy and policy formulation will have to be found. Efforts towards modelling of the SDGs as a biophysical and economic system, with emphasis on the links between sub-components of the system that have not been systematically explored until now, could inform this effort.

Looking at the SDGs as a system sheds a light on those targets that link two or more of the goals. Such targets reflect the recognition by the international community of the importance of links among the goals. One may argue that they represent the biggest departure from previous approaches. The existence of these targets makes what could have been a collection of unrelated goals a system; in a sense, it grounds the political work that the SDGs represent firmer into a reality that is full of trade-offs and interdependences. Almost by construction, such targets are more complicated than others, and may not easily meet requirements for measurability, simplicity, and other criteria that are often put forward in the evaluation literature.⁷ While there are good reasons to look for targets that fit such criteria, this has to be weighed against the value of having “vaguer” targets that make links across goals explicit, as such targets may have very high political and instrumental value.

The analysis in this paper was done at the global level. We believe that similar analysis could be undertaken at the national level as well. Different countries have different priorities, and they are likely to put different emphasis on the various goals and targets depending on their national circumstances. In particular, examining how sectors and links

⁷ For example, the so-called SMART criteria, an often-used acronym that stands for “specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, time-based”.

across sectors that have a critical importance in a given country are reflected in the SDGs at the global level could inform the development community on additional missing links that are not apparent from a global analysis. For example, in the context of a small island state, the relative lack of links between SDG 14 on oceans and other goals may be more problematic than appears at the global level.

Similarly, it would be interesting to see how some important issues that do not have their “own” SDG (e.g. youth, disaster risk reduction, and some population issues) are reflected in the different goals, and what this implies for progress in these areas in practice.

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