SDG: Sustainable Development Goals or Strategic Directors of Policy Genuineness? A discourse analysis of western European states in the legitimation of the SDGs

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Abstract:

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have been criticized for being 'too ambitious' and 'ambiguous' (Lim, Jørgensen, Wyborn, 2018 ; Hák, Janoušková, Moldan, 2016). The failing of the SDGs is globally visible. This study will focus on the ineffective SDG implementation in western Europe. Specifically, western European countries are 'political entrepreneurs' being regarded as capable of adequately addressing global challenges (Silander 2019 ; Silander 2020 ; Mintrom 2020). However, the failing of the SDGs causes reputational damage to their title as policy entrepreneur. Rhetorical legitimation theory has argued that legitimacy conveys in texts produced by organizations (Halliday, Block-Lieb, Carruthers 2010). This study therefore aims to answer the following research question: *What has been the role of Western-European states as policy entrepreneurs in the legitimation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)?* A total of 12 Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) will be examined through discourse analysis to interpret the rhetoric applied in the VNRs given the social context in which they originated. This thesis will argue that western European countries have played an active role in legitimizing the SDGs. Nevertheless, the position western European states took in the process has shifted, simultaneously with the social context, over time.

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1. Introduction:

Imagine being the head of a developing state. Whilst you try your best, you struggle to provide your citizens with a proper level of development. A significant share of your citizens is living in poverty and does not have access to clean water, food, or the educative system. You see countries in western Europe being able to reach high levels of development and you aspire the same in your country. At a certain point, western Europe promises to not leave your country behind in sustainable development. Together, you draft a set of seventeen goals to eradicate poverty, hunger, illiteracy, etc. Given that western Europe itself is already on the right track to reach these goals, you deem them a credible actor. However, your country and its citizens appear to be, in the end, left out. You realize that an empty promise was made. This is the current reality of the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). To clarify, the UN SDGs are a set of seventeen goals adopted in 2015 ranging from 'zero hunger' and 'reduced inequalities' to 'climate action' and 'gender equality'. *Leaving no one behind* is the universal principle on which the SDGs are based. The latter refers to every single person that currently faces discrimination or any form or inequality. Both developing countries as the developed countries can thus progress by implementing the SDGs. The SDGs are universal goals which entail shared responsibility on a global scale. Ideally, the SDGs would be achieved by 2030. Important to note is that the UN itself does not hold hard power to globally implement the SDGs nor to sanction countries that refrain from SDG implementation. Therefore, the UN relies on individual countries to implement and achieve the SDGs (Nye Jr 2007). However, the 2030 goal will, almost certainly, not be reached. The SDGs are criticized for being too ambitious and unfeasible (Lim, Jørgensen, Wyborn, 2018; Mariani et al. 2022). Moreover, the implementation of the SDGs in national contexts is underdeveloped; in both the developed as underdeveloped world (Lim, Jørgensen, Wyborn, 2018; Mariani et al. 2022). Those left out in 2015, will probably still be left out in 2030.

The simple fact that despite the SDGs people will still be left out, poses a serious threat to the legitimacy of both the SDG project and the actors involved. The credibility of the SDGs and those responsible for proper implementation will be affected. For the SDGs itself, non-fulfillment causes an erosion of trust and ultimately limits the chances of similar projects to be drafted in the future. Considering the actors involved, failure to comply with the SDGs harms the reputation of states and raises questions on the capacity of governments to implement the seventeen goals. The principle of shared responsibility would imply that all actors are to blame for the non-fulfillment of the SDGs. However, certain countries may suffer more severe reputational damage than others. Throughout history, western Europe has gained the reputation of 'policy entrepreneur'. To clarify, policy entrepreneurs are ambitious policy innovators who take the lead in reshaping the international status-quo for the purpose of growth and prosperity (Karlsson and Silander 2020, 7; Silander 2024, 105-106). Western Europe has responded adequately to global challenges (Silander 2020, 185- 190; Silander 2019, 245-256). Therefore, western Europe has been an example for other countries to follow suit. Hence, western European countries are expected to be the frontrunners of national level SDG implementation. It is odd that western Europe may not be able to achieve the 2030 agenda. This thesis will therefore seek to answer the following research question:

"*What has been the role of western European states as policy entrepreneurs in the legitimation of the Sustainable Development Goals?*"

This research has both academic as societal relevance. In the academic sphere, the thesis can add to the literature on policy entrepreneurship as it connects the concept to the SDGs and their implementation process. Connecting these two concepts can contribute to the understanding of policy entrepreneur behavior in international politics and norm making. The study also holds

societal relevance as it provides insights in the legitimacy of western Europe as policy entrepreneur, which may be negatively affected in case of non-fulfilment of the SDGs.

The following structure is applied to answer the research question listed above. First, chapter two will delve into the existing literature on the SDGs and political entrepreneurship. Next, chapter three will introduce the theory of rhetorical legitimation and, stemming from the theory, propose two hypotheses. Chapter four elaborates on discourse analysis as a method and Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) as data. The results of the analysis will be presented in chapter 5. A critical reflection of these results is covered in chapter 6 'discussion'. Final remarks and suggestions for further research will be included in the conclusion.

2. Literature Review:

This chapter will outline the academic debate in which the study is situated. The first section will provide background information on the SDGs. Next, the role of different member states in the formulation process of the SDGs is discussed. Specific attention is drawn to the role of western Europe in international politics in section three. The last section will address the implementation phase of the SDGs.

2.1 Historical Background of the SDGs

In September 2015, The UN adopted the 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development. The UN SDGs were drafted as a follow-up on the UN Millenium Development Goals (MDGs). These MDGs focused on the 'grand challenges' such as poverty and hunger, illiteracy, and diseases. The SDGs covers these unfinished challenges in the first eight goals. Important lessons learned from the MDGs were also included in the 2030 agenda. In the remaining eleven goals, the SDGs include challenges ranging from inclusivity, equity, global partnerships, and equality (Briant Carant 2016, 16; Kumar, Kumar, and Vivekadhish 2016).

The 2030 agenda has been referred to in the literature as an urgent agenda. Filho et al. stress how the problems and challenges addressed in the SDGs are the most urgent society must solve (Filho 2018, 131). According to Nonet, the adoption of the SDG agenda by the UN member states in itself is a signal of urgency. The goals are a call for action to end poverty, hunger, and inequality (Nonet 2022, 945). The progress of the SDGs is internationally evaluated by an independent group of scientists. In the first report, published in September 2019, the scientists have reinforced the call for action since little progress was made. Winiwarter believes the 2019 report to show the ongoing urgence of the 2030 agenda (Winiwarter 2020, 690). The article by Nonet adds to the latter by stating that the data provided by the scientists highlights the urgency for member states to apply a systematic approach to the SDGs (Nonet 2022, 946).

Another frequent connotation of the SDGs in the literature is the universality of the 2030 agenda. When considering the formulation of the goals, stakeholders were directly involved in the process through consultations. Civil societies, international organizations, academics, the private sector, etc. from around the world engaged in the consultations by providing their expertise and knowledge. For this reason, Kumar, Kumar, and Vivekadhish deem the SDGs to be a people-centered development agenda (Kumar, Kumar, Vivekadhish 2016). In the words of Briant Carant, the consultations allowed for a geographically fair, equitable, and balanced development agenda (Briant Carant 2016, 26). Nonet regards the SDGs as a historical milestone. Given that all UN member states signed the 2030 agenda and that stakeholders from varying positions in society were included, the SDGs can be considered the most 'all-encompassing, ambitious, as well as action-oriented agenda for progress on a global scale, ever agreed upon by humankind (Nonet 2022, 945-946)'. Under the slogan 'leaving no one behind' the SDGs try to overcome a challenge which the MDGs were unable to do. Namely, effective development aid from *The West* to developing countries (Kumar, Kumar, Vivekadhish 2016; Nonet 2022, 946).

Building on the universal nature of the SDGs, the following section will outline the role of different member states' governments in drafting the SDGs.

2.2 Role of Different Member States in Drafting the SDGs

As noted earlier, an open and inclusive decision-making process was adopted during the formulation phase of the SDGs. The general purpose of this decision-making method was to guarantee access for all the member states in the decision-making process. However, the inevitable consequence of an access-for-all approach is the wide variety of ideas. This, in turn, may render establishing priorities harder. A large list of stakeholders and country-specific circumstances directly results into diverging priorities (Kharas and Zhang 2014, 28). Mistrust has also been diverging the North-South cooperation in the SDG negotiations. Historical inequalities between the two have complicated establishing mutually acceptable rules of the games (Chasek and Wagner 2016, 405). The next section will therefore outline the role of both southern and western member states in the SDG formulation process.

2.2.1   The Global South

The Global South has initiated the idea of the SDGs and thus played a fundamental role in drafting the 2030 agenda. Brazil, Colombia, and Guatemala have initiated the idea of the SDGs (Fukunda-Parr and Muchhala 2020, 6). Moreover, Brazil was the host and chair of the Rio+20 conference, which was the UN conference on sustainable development. In doing so, Brazil deepened their influence and ties with the UN (Abdenur 2014, 1883; Chasek and Wagner 2016, 400). During Rio+20, Colombia initiated the general idea of the SDGs (Gasper 2019, 124). The Colombian Minister of Foreign Affairs insisted that the outcomes of the Rio+20 conference would be incorporated in a new development agenda, as a follow-up of the MDGs (Chasek and Wagner 2016, 400). Colombia remained an active actor in the formulation of the SDGs as part of the coalition (Gasper 2019, 125). The coalition existed of thirty countries of which twenty

seats were assigned to The Global South. Asia and Africa were both allocated seven seats. Latin America and the Caribbean got six seats (Chasek and Wagner 2016, 403). The Global South was also represented as Kenia was the co-facilitator during multilateral negotiations (Gasper 2019, 126). Within the coalition, African countries insisted on the inclusion of industrialization as a tool for sustainable economies. Additionally, developing countries have advocated, both individually as collectively, for the stand-alone goal of global partnerships of sustainable development. Lastly, developing countries urged for the inclusion of a goal on inequality as they outlined the importance of advocacy and civil-society networks in achieving equality (Fakunda-Parr and Muchhala 2020, 7-8).

Nevertheless, Gasper points out that the South has not fully operated as a unified block and has encountered differing opinions and views (Gasper 2019, 122). Fukunda-Parr and Muchhala explain this dominant role of the South through the discontent of these countries on being left out by the West in the MDGs (Fukunda-Parr and Muchhala 2020, 5). The SDGs are considered an example of the resurgence of the South who no longer accepted a Northern-led development agenda (Gasper 2019, 123). Gupta and Vegelin argue that the South has succeeded in creating a southern-led agenda as the SDGs articulate how the developing countries should act in order to make the South better off (Gupta and Vegelin 2016, 445). However, Gasper proposes a nuance, the SDGs should not be regarded as a Southern power-grab but simply as a global consensus agenda (Gasper 2019, 126).

2.2.2   The West

The role of The West in the formulation of the SDGs has been significant. The main reason behind their active role is that the founding fathers of the UN are solely western countries. These great powers have created the UN as a formal substitute of existing alliances. In a way, the UN was regarded solely a consultative and support body (Gasper 2019, 122). For the most

part during the existence of the UN, the US, UK, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, and Canada, formed the global cabinet. In short, these seven countries believed themselves to be entitled to decide without consulting other countries (Gasper 2019, 123).

Gupta and Vegelin have analyzed the extent to which the SDG agenda has been influenced by the interest of the rich and developed countries. It becomes apparent that the SDGs indeed inhabit a focus on economic growth, which is in favor of western countries (Gupta and Vegelin 2016, 444). Fukunda-Parr and Muchhala illustrate how several European countries, the US, Canada, and Israel made deliberate efforts to frame the issue of industrialization through a lens of social protection and educational opportunities. In doing so, the West avoided having to implement structural changes in their own economies, whilst providing tools for the South to enhance their economies (Fukunda-Parr and Muchhala 2020, 7). The case brought forward by Fukunda-Parr and Muchhala shows how The West indeed applies their status as founding father to shape the SDGs in a manner that suits their preferences and needs.

The western influence in the formulation of the SDGs is also indicated by the Neoliberal principles on which the goals are build. Even though the SDGs are framed as a universal project, the goals rest on specific ideological premises in favor of the West. Underlying to the 'leaving no one behind' is a liberal variant of capitalist development. Particularly, in the 2030 agenda, policies are market-based and commercially oriented (Weber 2017, 401). In line with the arguments listed above, Novelli states that the SDGs were created in a period of a unipolar western led US hegemony. Ultimately, the SDGs are the social face of an overwhelmingly western led developmental program (Novelli 2023, 1).

The next section will delve into the western Europe as an actor in international politics to clarify their role in the 2030 agenda.

2.3 Role of western Europe in International Politics

Western Europe is considered an important and active actor in the international political sphere. Over time, the EU has accumulated a reputation of new, bold, innovative, and ambitious leadership. This so-called 'European Leadership' has been successfully pushing moral issues on the agenda and has served as an example for countries outside of Europe to follow suit (Silander 2024, 115; Karlsson and Silander 2020, 74, 118). Therefore, The EU is capable of shaping what is ought to be normal, thus setting the international status quo (Diez 2005, 616). Ian Manners has introduced the European leadership role through the concept of *Normative Power Europe.* Manners illustrates how the EU has a strong commitment to diffusion of universal norms and principles throughout their member states and the world (Manners 2002, 241). The developmental and foreign policy of the union is built upon democracy standards and the rule of law. These practices have created a European identity of good governance (Manners 2002, 241). Ultimately, Manners argues that the EU both has the power to change norms in the international system and the responsibility to extend these norms (Manners 2002, 252). Controversially, Kavalski points out that the EU fails to implement their universal norms in countries outside of Europe. Kavalski's argument implies that the EU is solely a political entrepreneur on its own continent (Kavalski 2013, 251). Another claim is brought forward by Diez who highlights the importance of the narrative of 'normative power Europe' for the EU itself. To clarify, the EU benefits from this reputation in the international political sphere as it grants a sense of superiority. Aggestam argues to move beyond the concept of 'normative power Europe' and advocates for 'Ethical Power Europe'. In contrast to the normative power claim, which focusses on passive power, Ethical Power Europe is related to the active exercise of EU power (Aggestam 2008, 3-4). Ethical power is therefore occupied with concrete policies and programs of the EU. All in all, these three concepts of EU power inhabit a sense of superiority of EU values and the duty to spread these norms internationally.

The last section will illustrate the role of western Europe as policy entrepreneur in the implementation phase of the SDGs.

2.4 SDG implementation in western Europe

The implementation of the SDGs on a national level is underdeveloped in both the Global South as The West. On the national levels, Sachs et al. indicate difficulties at government-level on the implementation of the 17 goals. In fact, as governments have limited time and resources, difficulties arise when prioritizing one of the goals above another (Sachs et al. 2019). Bexell and Jönsson also determined that national SDG adaption comes with tension between addressing all 17 (Bexell, Jönsson, 2021).

Even if the capacity and interconnection issue would be solved, effective national level implementation would not be guaranteed. Lim et al. deem the SDGs to be overly ambitious, therefore being insufficient (Lim, Jørgensen, Wyborn, 2018). Mariani et al. even refer to sustainable development as a 'wicked problem' implying that even though the efforts made through the SDGs, the issues may never be solved (Mariani et al. 2022). In addition, Hák et al. state the conceptual framework of the goals to be ambiguous, which in turn hinders effectiveness (Hák, Janoušková, Moldan, 2016).

When zooming in at the implementation of the SDGs in developed countries as western Europe, scholars such as Bali and Yang-Wallentin highlight the need for emphasis on the environmental and social SDGs throughout these countries (Bali, Yang-Wallentin, 2020). However, Moyen and Hedden state that in order to achieve these targets, developed countries should reform their domestic and international policies and policy prioritization (Moyen, Hedden, 2020). Other scholars focus on the SDG implementation mechanisms in corporate businesses in the western world. Heras-Saizarbitoria et al. indicate only a small share of businesses to publish data on their SDG implementation. Moreover, if they disclose information, this is mostly on a SDG that has been implemented in their strategy for years

(Heras-Saizarbitoria et al. 2022). In line, Manes-Rossi and Nicolo found that the implementation of the SDGs in corporate businesses in developed countries are rather symbolic of nature (Manes-Rossi, Nicolo, 2022). Bexell and Jönsson point out that in 2015-2016 developed countries focused on legitimizing the implementation of the SDGs to their citizens (Bexell, Jönsson, 2021). Wang and Huang found an increase in research and interest on sustainable development during the Covid-19 pandemic, as it caused massive effects on global health (Wang, Huang, 2021). The necessity of the SDGs became apparent during this period.

All in all, the national level implementation of the SDGs in western Europe is not satisfactory nor effective. This is conflicting with their reputation of policy entrepreneur. Whereas western Europe is usually an ambitious and resolute actor, they are failing when it comes to national level SDG implantation.

3. Theoretical Framework:

This chapter will explore the concept of political entrepreneurship and the theory of rhetorical legitimation which form the foundation of the thesis. Stemming from the latter, interpretations and assumptions for this thesis will be outlined. The theoretical grounding has shaped the formulation of the hypotheses, listed at the end of this chapter.

3.1 Political Entrepreneurship

The concept of political entrepreneurship elaborates on the position of western Europe in international politics as described in the former chapter. A policy entrepreneur is defined as an 'important risk taker, innovator, and responder to challenges' (Aflaki, Petridou, and Miles 2015, 2 ; Karlsson and Silander 2020, 7 ; Mintrom 2020, 13 ; Silander 2024, 105-106). Therefore, policy entrepreneurs are deemed important for growth and prosperity (Karlsson and Silander 2020, 7 ; Silander 2024, 105-106). Besides, policy entrepreneurs are ambitious to

innovate policy, have a strong social acuity, are credible actors, acquire sociability, and are tenacious (Mintrom 2020, 9). These characteristics are sustained and enforced through coalition building and collaboration with other credible actors, and by emphasizing past accomplishments of the entrepreneur (Mintrom 2020, 1). The stereotypical policy entrepreneur is a state leader. Namely, these actors are highly visible and inhabit hard power (Aflaki, Petridou, and Miles 2015, 6). Policy entrepreneurship can therefore be studied in a top-down perspective. The desired policy innovation is of a rather general nature including generic political goals or political rules with the aim of reshaping the institutional status-quo (Aflaki, Petridou, and Miles 2015, 8-10). Entrepreneurs emerge either by opportunity or by necessity. In this case the motives of the entrepreneurs differ. Entrepreneurs by opportunity voluntarily partake in the policy process, whereas entrepreneurs by necessity are forced to participate for personal survival (Zahariadis, Herweg, and Zohlnhöfer 2023, 113-114). Political entrepreneurship is also time related. A policy entrepreneur is a role an actor can take up in a specific policy process at a specific time' (Christopoulos and Ingold 2015, 478). Whereas older studies were occupied with studying political entrepreneurship in the economic sector or on economic issues, more recent contributions have acknowledged the presence of policy entrepreneurs in the social and humanitarian sector (Karlsson and Silander 2020, 7 ; Karlsson, Silander, and Silander 2018, 7).

In the context of this thesis, western European governments are considered a policy entrepreneur. The SDGs are an example of an ambitious and innovative policy project. The SDGs clearly portray a top-down approach given that the member states with their hard power are responsible for SDG implementation at the national level. western Europe aspires to reshape the international status quo by translating the universal and broad norms of the SDGs into concrete and tangible policies. The failing of SDG implementation serves as an indication that western Europe, as policy entrepreneur, is incapable to reshape the international status

quo. The more the implementation of the SDGs appeared to be failing, the more western Europe felt the need to protect their status as policy entrepreneur.

3.2 Rhetorical Legitimation

The theory on rhetorical legitimation presents a strategy for policy entrepreneurs to maintain or strengthen their status as credible and trustworthy actors. Rhetoric is a political instrument to persuade people to accept policy decisions or practice. Rhetoric is hence not related to moral standards but is involved with safeguarding and promoting interests. The rhetorical embeddedness of ideas is essential for the legitimacy of the policy itself as larger acceptance rates lead to increased legitimacy (Jansson 2018, 318-322). In turn, policy entrepreneurs will benefit from greater legitimacy of their ideas. If their ideals are considered legitimate, their status as policy entrepreneur will be sustained. Rhetorical legitimation implies that 'legitimacy not only inheres in organizations, but also conveys in the texts they produce'. Texts are thus a means for organizations or governments to build, increase, or sustain their legitimacy (Halliday, Block-Lieb, Garruthers 2010). Rhetorical legitimation theory provides three practical manners in which legitimacy can be enhanced through rhetoric. Firstly, legitimacy can be strengthened if criticisms regarding the legitimacy of the organization are debunked in the text. By stating why the criticisms are of no relevance organizations or states can enhance their legitimacy. Secondly, organizations are able to match the format and content of the text to a specific goal. To clarify, if the format and context are presented in the form of an international convention document, the texts inherit a sense of diplomacy and authority which enhances legitimacy. Besides, if the context is based on scientific research, the text holds a sense of accuracy which in turn enhances legitimacy. Diplomacy, authority, and accuracy are merged into the term *legitimacy strengthening senses.* Third, the style and language of a text is related to the time and context in which the texts originate. This implies that organizations match their use of

language to different target audiences in different moments in time. For example, in times of crisis, organizations may apply a rather serious, firm, and decisive use of language to sustain public trust. Contrarily, in times of prosperity, an organization possibly applies an optimistic and enthusiastic use of language (Halliday, Block-Lieb, Garruthers 2010, 85-103).

Rhetorical legitimation theory is applicable for this thesis as western Europe can use this rhetorical strategy to enhance the legitimacy of their status as policy entrepreneur. The failing of the SDG implementation in their national context has threatened their reputation as policy entrepreneur. As being a policy entrepreneur comes with a level of prestige and pride, it is expected that western Europe will try to preserve this status. It is in the interest of western Europe that the public is convinced of the advancement of SDG national level implementation. This study therefore expects that western Europe has strategically implemented rhetorical legitimation in the text they have published on national level SDG implementation. Rhetorical legitimation is reflected in these texts through efforts of western Europe to debunk criticisms on SDG implementation. Next, rhetorical legitimation can be identified if the format and content of the text are matched to a specific goal. Lastly, it is expected that the rhetoric applied in texts published by western European governments differs over time, as the failing of the SDGs became apparent.

The thesis will test the following hypotheses:

H1: western European states have attempted to legitimize the Sustainable Development Goals through in texts by:

  a. *Debunking criticism on the legitimacy of the Sustainable Development Goals and/or their position of policy entrepreneur;*

b. Matching the format and content of the documents to legitimacy strengthening senses such as diplomacy, authority, or accuracy.

H2: *western European states have modified the rhetoric in their texts as the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals appeared to be underdeveloped.*

The next chapter will elaborate on the Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) as data for this thesis and will introduce the method of discourse analysis.

4. Methodology:

This chapter will elaborate on the chosen method and accompanying data to test the two hypotheses listed in the former chapter. First, Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) will be presented as the data. Next, discourse analysis will be justified as a suitable method.

4.1 Voluntary National Reports (VNRs)

VNRs are both country-lead and country-driven reports to track the progress of SDG implementation at both the national and sub-national level. These VNRs aim at sharing experiences, providing lessons learned and best practices, and report on upcoming challenges regarding the 2030 agenda (United Nations, n.d.). Besides the educative purpose of the VNRs, the rhetoric legitimation theory suggests that VNRs may be a strategic tool for western Europe to justify their national level SDG implementation progress. The voluntary nature of the VNRs implies that governments will only publish these reports if they believe it to have any positive impact or added value. For western Europe publishing a VNR provides the opportunity to convince the public of the advancement of their national level implementation. The VNRs are thus considered to provide a proper dataset for studying the rhetorical legitimation attempts of western Europe.

This thesis will analyze a total of 12 VNRs from 6 different countries as listed in table 1. Three of these countries are considered as a western European policy entrepreneur: Germany, France, and the Netherlands. These three are specifically chosen as they have been publishing VNRs the most frequent from all western European countries. Additionally, the three countries signed the Treaty of Rome which laid the foundation for the modern-day European Union. Furthermore, both Germany as France are part of the 'global cabinet' within the UN (Gasper 2019, 122). These three countries represent western European policy entrepreneurship considering them to be ambitious and innovative actors (Mintrom 2020, 9).

VNRs from two different timeframes have been selected in order to detect a change over time as suggested in H2. The first timeframe covers the period shortly after the implementation of the SDGs, whereas the second timeframe includes their most recently published VNRs. The largest part of the analysis will be the six VNRs from the western European countries since the research question deals with the role of western Europe and legitimation. However, in order to test if western European countries as policy entrepreneurs play a distinct role in the legitimation of the SDGs, three non-European countries have been included as a tool for comparison. These three are Colombia, Ethiopia, and the Philippines. Writing and publishing a VNRs is done on a voluntary basis. This caused that the possibilities for selecting non-western European countries were limited. Three criteria were of importance; location, SDG index score, and timeframe. Colombia, Ethiopia, and the Philippines were the only three possible countries that matched the criteria. The countries are situated on three different continents, which allows for three different societal contexts. Moreover, all three score significantly less on the SDG index than the three western European countries (see table 1). This index ranks countries from most progressive in national level implementation, to least progressive. Finally, Colombia, Ethiopia, and The Philippines have published VNRs in the exact same timeframe as the western European countries. The latter safeguards that the VNRs are written and published within the same global

context and global challenges such as the Covid pandemic. By analyzing the VNRs of these non-European countries, the thesis can establish possible differences in rhetorical SDG legitimation between western European and non-European countries.

Country	SDG Index Score	Publication Date	
France	79.97	2016	(France 2016)
Germany	82.00	2016	(Germany 2016)
The Netherlands	78.65	2017	(The Netherlands 2017)
Colombia	69.03	2016	(Colombia 2016)
Ethiopia	52.29	2017	(Ethiopia 2017)
Philippines	64.10	2016	(Philippines 2016)
France	82.05	2023	(France 2023)
Germany	83.29	2021	(Germany 2021)
The Netherlands	79.42	2022	(The Netherlands 2022)
Colombia	69.88	2021	(Colombia 2021)
Ethiopia	54.55	2022	(Ethiopia 2022)
Philippines	67.14	2022	(Philippines 2022)

Table 1: List of VNRs included in this research.

4.2 Discourse Analysis

Discourse is the process of generating meaning through language. As language evolves in a particular setting, context is crucial to understand the generated meaning. The study of discourse analysis is occupied with understanding how language is used in social context as a tool for creating meaning (Vine 2023, 5). Discourse analysis seeks to identify genres or recurrent patterns of interests embedded in text (Suddaby and Greenwood 2005, 40). By incorporating societal context, discourse analysis can generate understanding of how language is strategically used to achieve a certain goal (Vine 2023, 3). Discourse analysis takes factors such as who is transmitting the message, the target audience, and the purpose of the text in account (Vine 2023, 5).

Discourse and rhetoric are intertwined since both concepts focus on societal context and view language as a social practice (Halliday, Block-Lieb, Garruthers 2010, 79 ; Suddaby and Greenwood 2005, 39). Discourse analysis is closely related to rhetorical legitimation theory. In rhetorical legitimation theory, texts are considered an extension of legitimacy. Moreover, the rhetoric applied in texts is a political tool to manipulate meaning to convince the public of a certain idea (Halliday, Block-Lieb, Garruthers 2010). The transmitter of the meaning, the target audience, and the purpose of the text are important factors in discourse analysis. For this thesis, discourse analysis can unravel how western Europe, considering their social status as policy entrepreneur and the failing of the 2030 agenda, publishes VNRs to provide the public with a nuanced perspective on national level SDG implementation. In line with H1, discourse analysis may detect attempts of debunking criticisms of legitimation. Additionally, discourse analysis can spot strategical use of format and content in the VNRs. As expected in H2, discourse analysis can establish if the rhetoric dominant in the VNRs of western European states has shifted over time alongside the failing of national level implementation progress. Lastly, discourse analysis can determine if western European countries as policy entrepreneurs are distinct from non-European states in their implementation of rhetorical legitimation strategies.

The analysis of the thesis will be done in the following steps. First, the VNRs will be analyzed country per country, in the order as presented in table 1. Text passages and sentences have been selected from the VNRs based on the hypotheses and are included in the coding scheme (see table 2). To clarify, for H1.a the coding scheme has been categorized in *'Debunking criticisms of SDG legitimacy'* and *'Debunking criticisms on national level implementation legitimacy'*. For H1.b. the division has been as follows: *'Legitimacy strengthening sense through a diplomatic approach', 'Legitimacy strengthening sense through an authority approach',* and *'Legitimacy strengthening sense through an accuracy approach'.* Based on H2, the coding scheme separates between a *'Rhetoric of optimism'* and a *'Rhetoric of urge'.* The

coding scheme will include data from all twelve VNRs and forms the backbone of the thesis. Second, based on the coding scheme possible patterns and/or regularities can be indicated. Most importantly, the coding scheme includes the data that provide possible support or disprove for the hypotheses of this thesis. Given the fact that the method of this research is a discourse analysis, societal context has to be taken into account whilst both selecting the sentences and paragraphs, as well as whilst looking for patterns and regularities.

Important to mention is that the two VNRs of The Kingdom of The Netherlands include sections on SDG implementation in Aruba, Curacao, and Sint Maarten. For this thesis on western European policy entrepreneurs, only the sections on the mainland of The Netherlands have been included in the analysis. Secondly, the VNRs of Colombia and France are only published in their national language. With these different languages comes different contexts. For discourse analysis, the researcher must be careful with interpretating the language of these four VNRs.

5. Results:

This chapter will discuss the results gathered from the analysis of the VNRs. The chapter is structured around the two hypotheses. Section 1 will delve into the findings on western European efforts to debunk criticisms and the incorporation of legitimacy strengthening senses. Section 2 will list the findings on western Europe and their rhetoric of optimism and urge in the VNRs. Lastly, section 3 will include the findings on the VNRs of Colombia, Ethiopia, and the Philippines. This last section therefore determines if western European countries are the sole applicants of rhetorical legitimation given their status as policy entrepreneurs.

5.1 Western European states and legitimacy strengthening strategies in their VNRs

Following from the methodology, the VNRs have been analyzed on the western European countries' efforts to debunk criticism on national level SDG implementation. France focusses on its active involvement in international and multilateral organizations. The French government places emphasis on their pioneering role in international conferences such as the COP21 or the Conference of Parties of the United Nations Framework Agreement on Climate Change (France 2016, 9, 38). Ultimately, France refers to itself as *the champion of the global coalition* (France 2023, 94). In the case of Germany, a strong emphasis is placed on their involvement in international and multilateral organizations such as the G7, G20, and the EU. Germany points out how their active role in these organizations are a means of affirming responsibility and contributes to the international dialogue on sustainable development (Germany 2016, 2, 20, 33). The Netherlands is more subtle in noting their status as role model in their VNRs. The main focus is placed on their role in development aid and partnerships. However, an undertone of superiority is detected. For example, phrases such as 'thanks to The Netherlands,… (The Netherlands 2017, 5, 20)' or 'Thanks to its solid position, The Netherlands was able to … (The Netherlands 2022, 8)' were included as a means to claim recognition of Dutch efforts to SDG implementation at the global context. These results indicate a clear pattern throughout the three countries. These countries stress their status as role model to debunk criticisms of ineffective national level implementation of the SDGs.

Furthermore, the SDG slogan *leaving no one behind* is remarkably present in the VNRs of western Europe. The Netherlands has used the catchphrase eleven times in the 2022 VNR (The Netherlands 2022). Besides, France included the slogan ten times in their 2023 VNR (France 2023). In the same style, Germany stated in its 2021 VNR that 'it is crucial to accommodate the right of countries in the Global South (Germany 2021, 83). In doing so, the western European show solidarity with developing countries. The current failing of national level SDG implementation affects developing countries the hardest. This has led to criticisms

of the SDGs being a western led project aiming to make the West better off (Weber 2017, 401; Novelli 2023, 1). By implementing the slogan, western European states take responsibility as policy entrepreneurs to help countries that are currently lesser-off.

Significant indications of legitimacy strengthening strategies by western European countries are found in their VNRs leading to strong support for H1.a. Western European efforts to debunk criticisms on the legitimacy of the SDGs and its implementation are done through exaggerations of these countries status as role models and found in the reoccurring use of the catchphrase *'leave no one behind'*.

For H1.b this study has analyzed the format and content of the VNRs as possibilities to strengthen legitimacy. During the analysis sentences that had a diplomatic, authoritative, or scientific connotation have been highlighted. To illustrate, France included syntheses of the Contributory Conference initiated by the Open Diplomacy Institute with lessons learned and recommendations (France 2023). These sections are found after the in-dept evaluation of an SDG. The inclusion of these syntheses is a strategic move for strengthening legitimacy since this enhances a sense of diplomacy which makes France come across as a considerate and cooperative actor. In the German VNRs the word *dialogue* prevails. As a matter of fact, the word *dialogue* is found twenty-nine times in the 2016 VNR, and forty-one times in the 2021 VNR (Germany 2016 ; Germany 2021). This hammering on engaging in conversations with other countries and stakeholders renders Germany an image of an inclusive and reasonable actor. The Dutch 2017 VNR states that working together is part of the Dutch DNA (The Netherlands 2017, 14). A sense of diplomacy is incorporated here through a narrative of working together and engaging in partnerships. However, the Dutch 2022 VNR does not include a significant diplomatic aspect or narrative. This radical change could be explained through the SDG index. The position of The Netherlands on this ranking has deteriorated from

a 13th place in 2017 to a 17th place in 2022 (Sachs et al. 2017, 10 ; Sachs et al. 2022 , 14). The Netherlands has possibly responded to this situation fueled by an urge to proof oneself instead of an urge to work together.

The second legitimacy strengthening sense that was expected to be present in the VNRs was authority. However, no sentences or paragraphs that implied a sense of authority of western Europe in SDG implementation were found in the VNRs. Evidence thus falls short to support hypothesis 1.b. This implies that western European countries have not stressed the authoritative role they inhabit on the global scale as policy entrepreneur to legitimize national level SDG implementation. The 2030 agenda is a collective and universal project. Western European countries may have refrained from applying an authoritative narrative in their VNRs in line with the collective nature of the SDGs.

The third legitimacy strengthening sense studies was accuracy. Here, the analysis has highlighted scientific and statistical based sentences and paragraphs. The 2023 French VNR serves as a proper example. This particular VNR introduces every individual SDG evaluation with a page full of statistics on the implementation of the specific SDG (France 2023). Moreover, the 2023 VNR incorporates a chapter on the methodology (France 2023, 110-156). Here, the way the evaluation is conducted is explained and justified which allows for transparency, ultimately enhancing legitimacy. Both France and Germany stress their monetary power as policy entrepreneur in their VNRs. Particular attention is drawn to the amount of donations these two countries make to international initiatives and funds. To illustrate, France has pointed out to be the fifth largest donor in global development aid (France 2016, 8). In addition, Germany is the third largest donor in this category and belongs to one of the largest donors in the climate sector (Germany 2016, 10, 48). This trend intensified in the 2021 German VNR where the German government mentions to be 'the second-largest bilateral donor' in

development assistance, the International Criminal Court, Aid for Trade, and the international water sector (Germany 2021, 60, 71, 114, 117). By stressing the financial efforts western Europe has invested in helping other countries with their SDG implementation, they show their role as driving force in global SDG implementation to the public. In turn, this strengthens the legitimacy of their role as policy entrepreneur. Considering the Dutch context, accuracy is mostly sought by consulting Statistics Netherlands, which is the independent governmental organization for statistics in The Netherlands. Moreover, lesser attention is paid to the monetary effort the Netherlands has put into development aid. Specifically, the Netherlands focusses on the amount of people aided through Dutch investments, instead of the amount of money invested. For example, the 2022 VNR states that 'we supported more than 264,000 jobs and 16,700 business plans and helped improve the working conditions of nearly 2.8 million agricultural and factory workers (The Netherlands 2022, 45)'. The latter can be connected to the missing diplomatic or partnership aspect in the 2022 Dutch VNR. By stating how many people have been better off as a direct result of Dutch efforts, the Netherlands may hope to regain their status as policy entrepreneur and to obscure their deterioration in the SDG ranking.

The above listed results provide moderate evidence in support of H1.b. Two out of three legitimacy strengthening senses were widely incorporated in the VNRs. By structuring the format and content around diplomatic and statistical aspects, legitimacy is expected to be enhanced.

5.2 Rhetoric in western European States' VNRs throughout 2016-2023

For this second hypothesis, the analysis has highlighted sentences or paragraphs that have either an optimistic or an urging tone. The 2016 VNR of Germany highlights that 'we are living in a world of new and diverse opportunities' and that the SDGs are 'a milestone in the recent history of the United Nations' (Germany 2016, 2). However, in their 2021 VNR Germany stated that

'action to date falls far short (Germany 2021, 8)' and 'the trend has been moving in the wrong direction (Germany 2021, 47), and even that 'the current state of progress is worrying (Germany 2021, 124)'. This radical shift in rhetoric took place in a timespan of only five years. This shift in rhetoric is even more prominent in the case of The Netherlands. In their 2017 VNR, the Dutch government expressed optimism by claiming that 'a year and a half after the UN Sustainable Development Summit, all four countries of the Kingdom are on track to meet the challenges in achieving the SDGs (The Netherlands 2017, 15)'. In this VNR from the first timeframe, no evident urging rhetoric is indicated. Nevertheless, The Netherlands shifts to an urging tone in their 2022 VNR. Namely, the Dutch government comes back to their statement made in 2017 by acknowledging that despite the enthusiasm, there is a serious challenge ahead (The Netherlands 2022, 25, 40). In contrast to Germany and The Netherlands, who are rather negative in their second timeframe VNRs, France does apply a rhetoric of urge but is more positively focused. To clarify, the 2023 French VNR applies a rhetoric of urge through emphasizing the universal and collective nature of the SDGs and the need to work closely together (France 2023). The positive outlook of France can be connected to their focus on a diplomatic narrative in the 2023 French VNR, which also supports the use of partnerships in SDG implementation.

Next, the analysis sought for a possible pattern in how western European countries refer to their status as policy entrepreneur over time. The most evident example can be found in the 2022 Dutch VNR which says that The Netherlands scores high in international rankings, being 11th globally (The Netherlands 2022, 28). In the French context, the 2023 VNR declares the ambition of France to become a 'green state' and to become the first state to refrain from fossil fuels (France 2023, 4, 34). Germany has included a similar goal by stating that they would like to become 'one of the most efficient and environmentally sound economies in the world (Germany 2016, 34). Regardless of the shift in narrative from optimistic to urging, clear references of western Europe as being policy entrepreneurs are still found in both timeframes.

Ultimately, these VNRs have been used as a tool to depict and exaggerate the position of these three countries in the SDG index, which is in the global top 20th.

Within the scope from 2016 to 2023, a significant change from overly optimistic VNRs to urge-focused VNRs is found. Whereas optimism prevails in the VNRs of the first timeframe, the VNRs in the second timeframe mostly stress the need to step-up the implementation process of the SDGs. The latter is in line with the expectation of hypothesis 2. Hence, strong support for this hypothesis is found. These results imply that actors indeed match the rhetoric in their texts to the social context in which these texts emerge.

5.3 Rhetorical Legitimacy Strategies of Non-western European States

The last section of the analysis has applied the same approach of coding on VNRs of non-western European states. The main purpose is to establish if being a policy entrepreneur generates a different approach to writing a VNR. It is expected that western European states are the sole utilizers of rhetorical legitimation strategies. Throughout the analysis, limited sentences that tried to debunk criticisms could be highlighted. In line, no clear evidence of legitimacy strengthening senses such as diplomacy or authority was found. Nevertheless, the VNRs do include a clear section on the methodology behind their research similar to the VNR format of the western European countries. This finding is conflicting with the expectation that non-western European countries do not utilize rhetorical legitimation. Still, the UN has provided universal guidelines for conducting a VNR, which calls for a sound methodology.

More strikingly, Colombia, Ethiopia, and the Philippines acknowledged their submissive position in relation to western Europe in national level SDG implementation. For example, Ethiopia stated that it 'wishes to learn from other countries in achieving the SDGs pertaining to women (Ethiopia 2017, 30).' Ethiopia also expresses to have benefitted from

financial support from the G20 (Ethiopia 2022, 122). In like manner, Colombia lists the gap between their national level SDG implementation as a middle-income country, and developed countries who are further ahead (Colombia 2016, 15, 61). Hence, both Ethiopia and Colombia highlight the support of western European countries in helping them to stay on track. This implies that non-western European countries are dependent on the help of western European policy entrepreneurs in achieving effective SDG implementation. This ultimately enhances the legitimacy of western Europe as policy entrepreneur.

Since no strong evidence was found in support of both hypotheses in the VNRs of Colombia, Ethiopia, and the Philippines, the analysis has determined that western Europe, in their role as policy entrepreneur, solely utilizes rhetorical legitimation strategies.

6. Discussion:

This chapter will evaluate the results as presented in the former chapter. This thesis seeks to unravel the role of western European states in the legitimation of the SDGs with the underlying goal of preserving their status as policy entrepreneur. The results chapter has highlighted how western European states have attempted to debunk criticisms on the SDG legitimacy in their VNRs. Besides, these states have incorporated content and format features of diplomatic documents and relied on statistics to come across as accurate. A shift from an optimistic rhetoric in timeframe 1 to an urging rhetoric in timeframe 2 has been detected.

The results indicate that the theory of rhetorical legitimation is indeed applicable on the VNRs of western Europeans states. The thesis has indicated that in the case of western European states rhetorical legitimation is utilized as a strategic tool to sustain their position as policy entrepreneurs. Thus, a clear connection between the two has been found. The results also contribute to the two concepts individually. In the case of rhetorical legitimation, the results are valuable as they provide a cross-cultural picture. For political entrepreneurship, the results

illustrate the behavioral differences of policy entrepreneurs in 'good' and 'bad' times. Besides the academic significance of the study, the results also have a practical implication since it provides insights in the politics behind the SDG implementation process. The analysis of the VNRs has illustrated how language is a political tool. Through these VNRs, countries have been able to communicate and manipulate meaning based on their individual SDG implementation progress. Even though western European countries have not been on track with implementing the SDGs, they have been able to limit reputational damage through the language and tone of their VNR.

However, this thesis has limitations on certain aspects. One should be aware of these limitations to put the results in perspective. Firstly, the scope of the research is rather small given the fact that only three western-European countries are put under study of whom six documents are included. The dataset is therefore limited. If VNRs from more western European countries had been included, the results may have differed or shown other patterns. Unfortunately, no other western European country has published VNRs in the applied timeframes, which made including other countries impossible. Another significant limitation is found in the theory of rhetorical legitimation. The theory and hypothesis of these thesis are based on solely one academic publication from 2010. This could lead to accuracy issues, as no other authors or publications in support of the Halliday, Block-Lieb, and Carruthers article are included. However, since evidence in support for both these hypotheses is found, the negative consequences of the limitation are limited.

This thesis can also inspire scholars for future research. Whereas this study has delved into the role of western European countries in the legitimation of the SDGs, future work could focus on whether these efforts indeed have raised the legitimacy of the SDGs or credibility of western Europe as policy entrepreneur. This can contribute to the understanding of concrete results policy entrepreneurs can generate. Another interesting recommendation for future studies is to

apply the theory of rhetorical legitimation on UN published SDG reports. This can distinguish the UN as an international organization from policy entrepreneurial member states in western Europe. Such a study is relevant to establish if the UN itself also applies rhetorical legitimation as a strategic tool to enhance legitimacy.

7. Conclusion:

To answer the research question: *"What has been the role of western European states as policy entrepreneurs in the legitimation of the Sustainable Development Goals?"* this study has conducted a discourse analysis on VNRs from three western European countries. The analysis has brought forward evidence in support for both hypotheses. It can be concluded that western Europe overall played an active role in legitimizing the SDGs from 2015 onwards. This can be found in the numerous efforts made to debunk criticisms. Besides, diplomatic and statistical aspects are included to strengthen credibility and legitimacy. Additionally, the results have indicated that the role of western European as policy entrepreneurs in the legitimation of the SDGs has shifted. Right after 2015, western Europe took an optimistic and enthusiastic position regarding SDG implementation. A couple of years later, from 2020 onwards, when it became apparent that SDG implementation was falling behind, western Europe shifted to an urging and stringent position. Nevertheless, western Europe stayed a prominent and active actor in SDG legitimation. As elaborated in the discussion section, this research has studied if rhetorical legitimation was applied but raises the question to what extend rhetorical legitimacy has been successful in strengthening legitimacy. Further research should test if legitimacy was indeed enhanced through these VNRs to generate a clear understanding of the relation between policy entrepreneurship and legitimation strategies.

A deliberate choice for discourse analysis has been made for several reasons. The fact that western European countries are considered policy entrepreneurs indicates a social hierarchy

among UN member states. Moreover, the fact that the SDG implementation process is not on track adds important societal context which may have impacted the behavior of western European states. The theory of rhetorical legitimation includes the assumption that legitimacy conveys in texts. Besides, the rhetoric applied in the texts may change over time. Again, the importance of social context and the meaning of language is apparent. The expectations of the thesis have been formulated in two hypotheses. In short, the thesis expected western Europe to debunk legitimacy criticisms in their VNRs (H1.1), and to apply format and content from the diplomatic sector or to rely on statistics and scientific evidence (H1.2). Secondly, a shift in rhetoric from optimistic to urging in the western European VNRs was expected in the timeframe 2016-2023 (H2). Strong evidence has been found in support of both the hypotheses.

This thesis is a relevant contribution to both the academic field as the real world. To illustrate, the thesis has provided evidence in support of the argument made by Halliday, Block-Lieb, and Carruthers 2010 on rhetorical legitimation. In the case of policy entrepreneurship, the thesis has elaborated on the role of western Europe as policy entrepreneur in the context of the SDGs. On a practical side, the thesis unravels a piece of the politics behind the SDG implementation process given the context that this process appears to be underdeveloped. The VNRs are thus utilized as a strategic political tool.

How can one assure that 'no one will be left behind' in the future? These VNRs have served as a white lie of western Europe to the rest of the world. In a way, these VNRs are published to limit the damage done since SDG implementation is failing. However, this white lie does not justify leaving others behind. From now on, western Europe should not make a promise which they cannot fulfil. The 2030 agenda is crafted as a universal and collective agenda. By leaving others behind, western Europe will simultaneously be behind. The only way forward is together.

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