CHAPTER 7

IMPLEMENTING SDG AGENDA 2030: THE NEED FOR A REGULATIVE ORDER?

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Introduction

In 2015, the United Nations (UN) adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which set out 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These goals, their associated sub-targets, and the suggested implementation strategies can be understood as a global democratic attempt to curb the excesses of capital within a neoliberal order. The agenda also placed new demands on the industrialised world, particularly the wealthiest states. Yet, 10 years later, an urgent question remains: has the 2030 Agenda succeeded in constraining the dynamics of global hyper-marketisation? (Slobodian, 2025).

This chapter engages with three interrelated themes: (1) implementation strategies and their framing as either normative or regulative orders; (2) the prospects of achieving the SDGs within the present global context; and (3) the implications of the new Trump-led liberal order for SDG implementation.

Recent assessments highlight the gravity of the challenge. According to the "Sustainable Development Report 2024",

> On average, only 16 per cent of the SDG targets are on track to be met globally by 2030, with the remaining 84 per cent showing limited progress or a reversal of progress. At the global level, SDG progress has been stagnant since 2020, with SDG 2 (Zero Hunger), SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), SDG 14 (Life Below Water), SDG 15 (Life on Land), and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions) particularly off track. (Sachs et al., 2024:viii)

The persistence of this stagnation raises fundamental questions. Why has implementation failed? Why has the near-unanimous commitment of states not translated into transformative action? Why have the normative and moral imperatives embedded in the SDGs proven insufficient to generate the political will and institutional change required?

One explanation lies in the global diffusion of neoliberal ideology, which has systematically reduced the capacity of states to intervene directly in economic systems. Neoliberal restructuring has left states with few instruments beyond market mechanisms, and these mechanisms have consistently proven inadequate for realising the SDGs. Indeed, markets often provide perverse incentives that exacerbate inequality, entrench unsustainable practices, and erode prospects for social and ecological transformation.

The Kyoto Protocol of 1997 and its 2005 extension represented the last legally binding global agreement on climate action (United Nations Climate Change, 1997). Since then, the international order has relied primarily on voluntary commitments, soft governance tools, and market-based instruments. Yet experience has demonstrated that commitments towards ‘greening’ the economy tend to collapse when profit margins diminish or when public funding is insufficient.

This chapter focuses specifically on the climate and biodiversity goals, SDG 13, 14, and 15. These goals starkly illustrate how democratic demands for sustainability are undermined by the limited regulatory capacity of neoliberal states. The central question, therefore, is: what alternative strategies and political configurations might make the achievement of these goals feasible? In response, this chapter argues for the establishment of a new regulative order, an institutional framework that translates the normative commitments of the SDGs into enforceable mechanisms capable of reshaping socio-technical systems and accelerating transitions.

A normative vs regulative order

The question of how states can intervene more decisively in the economy, disciplining capital flows, shaping markets, and reorienting investment, is central to understanding the failures of SDG implementation. Such intervention requires not only new instruments of governance but also a rethinking of the relationship between normative and regulative orders.

Talcott Parsons, in *The Structure of Social Action*, identified three interlinked modes of action: technology, economy, and politics (Parsons, 1979:549). These systems, however, cannot be understood in isolation. They are structured and guided by underlying forms of regulation, rules, and expectations that bind actors together, which, in turn, are tied to the normative order. Parsons (1979, 1990) argued that the normative order constitutes a system of values, rules, and shared expectations that evolve within democracies and gain legitimacy through common consent. Shared values, obligations, and sentiments of loyalty enable societies to maintain stability, engage in collective deliberation, and accept authoritative decisions, even when such decisions conflict with individual interests.

Building on this, Scott (1987:37) emphasised that normative rules add a prescriptive and obligatory dimension to social life, shaping conduct through internalised values as much as through external sanctions. He proposed a typology of institutional authority consisting of three 'pillars': normative, cultural-cognitive, and regulative. The regulatory pillar is explicitly coercive, relying on formal law, sanctions, and enforcement. Its legitimacy rests on democratic lawmaking and the rule of law, interpreted and implemented by legal institutions such as courts and police. When legality and democratic legitimacy reinforce one another, the regulative order provides a foundation for stable governance.

Neoliberalism and the weakening of normative commitments

Yet in practice, normative and regulative orders have been eroded by neoliberal restructuring. Within neoliberal ideology, democracy is often depicted as a threat to the rationality of the market. Faith in the collective value of public institutions has been weakened, leaving the market as the dominant mechanism of governance. The consequence is a growing misuse of power: democratic institutions are hollowed out, while far-right movements mobilise around demands for privatisation, deregulation, and an increasingly weakened state.

Business ethics: Between Porter and Bakan

The debate within business ethics highlights this tension. Porter and Kramer's (2011) notion of "shared value" assumes that business and society ultimately benefit from the same outcomes, suggesting that firms can align profitability with social progress. By contrast, Bakan's influential critique in *The Corporation* (2004) frames corporations as machines for externalising costs, with a singular focus on shareholder value. From this perspective, corporate responsibility is little more than a tool of public relations, designed to secure legitimacy without altering harmful practices. This divergence reflects the broader dilemma: can voluntary, normative commitments, such as Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), meaningfully redirect capital towards sustainability, or is coercive regulation required?

The limits of international normative agreements

International institutions have historically relied on treaties as a substitute for binding legislation. As Baber and Bartlett (2011:654) note, treaties represent the closest equivalent to global legislation, requiring negotiation followed by domestic ratification. The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), for example, was negotiated at the 1992 Earth Summit but only entered into force after ratification by 50 states.

Yet treaties remain weak instruments, dependent on voluntary compliance. Even within the European Union (EU), where regulations and directives are legally binding, legitimacy often falters if democratic deliberation and value consensus are lacking. Moreover, global trade regimes frequently undermine state sovereignty by prioritising the protection of capital. Investor-State Dispute Settlement (ISDS), for instance, allows corporations to sue governments for regulatory changes that threaten investments, thereby privileging private capital over democratic decision-making (Thrasher, 2022).

Normative vs regulative tools for sustainability

The key question, then, is whether normative order (voluntary commitments, CSR, ESG frameworks) can provide adequate incentives for sustainable action, or whether a stronger regulative order, with legal sanctions, monitoring, and enforcement, is required. In that respect, the EU provides a useful taxonomy:

- Regulations are binding legislative acts applied across the Union.
- Directives are binding in terms of goals but leave discretion to states on implementation.
- Decisions are binding on specific actors (e.g. states or firms).
- Recommendations and Opinions are non-binding instruments expressing preferred actions (European Union, 2025).

In this taxonomy, normative order aligns with recommendations, opinions, and voluntary CSR practices, while regulative order corresponds to binding regulations, directives, and enforceable decisions. Both orders require institutional support, but the neoliberal turn has tilted the balance decisively towards normative instruments, undermining the state's regulatory capacity.

Business ethics, CSR and ESG debates

The question of whether business can meaningfully contribute to sustainable development raises a longstanding debate within the field of business ethics. Central here are the competing visions of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and the more recent frameworks of Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG). Both have shaped global discourse on the role of firms in advancing the SDGs.

Shareholder vs stakeholder orientations

The foundational divide in business ethics has often been cast in terms of shareholder primacy versus stakeholder theory. Milton Friedman (1970) argued that the sole social responsibility of business is to increase profits within the rules of the game, leaving other societal goals to politics and government. By contrast, Edward Freeman's stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984; Freeman & Reed, 1983) posits that businesses create value through relationships with a broader set of actors, including employees, communities, and the environment.

Stakeholder theory thus expands the scope of responsibility beyond financial returns to include "People" and "Planet" alongside "Profit, the so-called Triple Bottom Line" (Elkington, 1997). Yet this perspective is not without critics. Scholars have questioned its vagueness: which stakeholders should be prioritised, on what grounds, and with what authority? (Mitchell, 1997; Sjåfjell, 2017, 2020). Mitchell's influential framework suggests three criteria for identifying stakeholders – power, legitimacy, and urgency – though operationalising these criteria remains contested.

CSR as normative commitment

The rise of CSR in the 1990s was partly driven by reports such as South Africa's King Report, which called for ethical standards in corporate governance (Judin, 2020). CSR has often been framed as a voluntary, normative approach to sustainability, emphasising transparency and self-regulation. UN initiatives such as the Global Compact (UN, 2000; UN Global Compact, 2025) provide reporting frameworks that encourage firms to disclose practices related to labour rights, environmental impact, and anti-corruption measures (Ruggie, 2008, 2011).

Yet critics like Bakan (2004) argue that CSR frequently functions as a form of 'greenwashing', a public relations strategy that legitimises harmful practices rather than transforming them. From this perspective, CSR lacks the regulatory teeth needed to discipline capital, serving instead to protect business-as-usual operations.

ESG and the governance turn

More recently, ESG frameworks have gained prominence, particularly within financial markets. Unlike CSR, which emphasises voluntary ethical commitments, ESG integrates sustainability criteria into investment decision-making. In this literature, the concept of 'governance' replaces profit as the third pillar, alongside environmental and social considerations (Eccles & Viviers, 2011; Eccles et al., 2020). ESG thus reframes sustainability in terms of risk management, investor responsibility, and fiduciary duty.

Despite its popularity in academic and public discourse, ESG remains deeply contested. Studies have found that ESG ratings vary across providers, raising questions of consistency and reliability (Eccles & Stroehle, 2018). Critics also highlight that ESG practices often fail to produce substantive environmental or social improvements, instead generating bureaucratic reporting exercises that may divert attention from structural change. The prevalence of greenwashing within ESG reporting confirms that normative commitments, absent regulation, often remain symbolic (USC Annenberg Center for Climate Journalism and Communication, 2023).

From normative to regulative approaches

The shareholder–stakeholder debate, the limits of CSR, and the contested nature of ESG converge on a central question: can normative commitments by businesses drive transformative change, or is a shift towards binding regulative orders essential?

The evidence suggests that while CSR and ESG have introduced valuable frameworks for sustainability, they remain constrained by voluntary compliance. Within a neoliberal order, businesses are unlikely to subordinate profit motives to ecological or social concerns without coercive regulatory frameworks. Thus, the debate over CSR and ESG ultimately highlights the limits of normative order and underscores the need for regulative orders, binding laws, sanctions, and monitoring mechanisms to ensure meaningful progress on SDGs.

Planetary boundaries, climate and biodiversity evidence

The failures of SDG implementation are most evident in the domains of climate action (SDG 13) and biodiversity protection (SDGs 14 and 15). These goals directly confront the ecological limits of human activity, yet the available evidence suggests that global governance structures remain far from adequate.

Research from the Stockholm Resilience Centre (2024) highlights the concept of ‘planetary boundaries’, ecological thresholds within which humanity can operate safely. Recent updates conclude that six of nine boundaries have already been transgressed, including climate change, biodiversity loss, land-system change, freshwater use, and biogeochemical cycles (Richardson et al., 2023). Ocean acidification is approaching critical levels, while atmospheric aerosol loading has exceeded safe limits regionally. Only stratospheric ozone has shown some recovery, illustrating the rare success of binding international regulation.

This evidence underscores a systemic crisis: humanity is consuming natural resources and altering ecosystems at a pace far beyond the Earth’s regenerative capacity. The persistence of these trends directly undermines the viability of the SDGs.

Climate change: The warming planet

Data from the Copernicus Climate Change Service (C3S) confirms that 2024 was the warmest year on record globally, with the annual mean temperature surpassing 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels for the first time (Copernicus Climate Change Service, 2025). The Mauna Loa Observatory in Hawaii measured atmospheric CO_2 concentrations at 427 ppm in February 2025, a level 52 per cent higher than in 1750 (Global Monitoring Laboratory, 2025).

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's (IPCC) (2023) report concludes with "high confidence" that human activity, primarily greenhouse gas emissions, has unequivocally caused global warming, producing widespread and adverse impacts on ecosystems and communities. Vulnerable populations, who have historically contributed least to emissions, are disproportionately affected. These findings make clear that SDG 13 will not be met by 2030. Even where individual European states have reduced emissions since 1990, global emissions continue to rise, with major producers such as Norway (oil) and South Africa (coal) showing little political willingness to shift decisively.

Biodiversity loss: The sixth mass extinction?

Parallel to climate change, biodiversity loss has accelerated dramatically. The Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES, 2019, 2024) warns that 14 of 18 categories of "nature's contributions to people" have declined since 1970. Genetic diversity and ecosystem integrity are collapsing, threatening the biosphere's ability to regulate planetary systems.

The Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (2022) sought to address these trends, setting targets to protect 30 per cent of land and sea by 2030 and to restore degraded ecosystems. Yet implementation remains weak. More than 1,000 researchers recently warned the Norwegian Parliament that its biodiversity commitments lack effective enforcement tools (Vandvik, 2025). This disjuncture between knowledge and political action epitomises the SDG impasse.

The knowledge–action gap

Critically, the challenge is not a deficit of scientific knowledge. Climate and biodiversity science have provided clear roadmaps for decades. Rather, the crisis reflects a failure of governance: normative commitments and voluntary reporting schemes (CSR, ESG) have proven insufficient, while strong regulative frameworks remain politically contested. The result is a widening gap between what we know must be done and what governments and markets are willing to implement. The pursuit of the SDGs does not unfold in a political vacuum. Recent global developments illustrate how shifts in governance, ideology, and power relations actively undermine the conditions necessary for sustainability transitions.

The return of Trump-era politics has reasserted a deregulatory agenda hostile to climate action and biodiversity protection. In March 2025, the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) announced plans to roll back more than two dozen environmental rules, including regulations on emissions from cars and power plants, and limits on soot and mercury pollution (Copley et al., 2025). EPA Administrator Lee Zeldin described this as the "most consequential day of deregulation in U.S. history". While framed as deregulation in the service of economic freedom, these measures represent a direct assault on the regulative order underpinning SDG 13 (climate action).

The administration has also sought to redefine its international role. In a meeting with African leaders, the US Energy Secretary declared that "fossil fuels are the future", explicitly endorsing coal as a development path for Africa (Bearak, 2025). By dismantling initiatives such as Power Africa, launched under the Obama administration, the US signalled its abandonment of multilateral frameworks in favour of a return to fossil fuel geopolitics.

In the United Kingdom (UK), the Conservative Party under Kemi Badenoch became the first major political force to openly question the country's legally binding 2050 net zero target (Jones, 2025). Although the Labour government has maintained climate commitments, it has faced criticism from civil society organisations such as the Green

Alliance, which accuse it of downplaying the extent of ecological degradation. The push for mandatory nature-risk reporting reflects an attempt by civil society to create binding obligations on business, but the political consensus around climate ambition is fracturing.

The EU has often been portrayed as a leader in climate and biodiversity governance. Initiatives such as the European Green Deal (European Commission, n.d.), the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD) (European Commission, 2025a), and the EU Taxonomy for Sustainable Activities (European Commission, 2025b) represent significant attempts to embed regulative order into economic systems. However, business groups have resisted these measures, denouncing them as excessive bureaucracy and lobbying for "simplification packages" aimed at weakening reporting obligations (European Commission, 2025c). Thus, while the EU has demonstrated regulatory ambition, the backlash reveals the fragility of its political consensus. Regulatory frameworks risk dilution under pressure from business interests and populist political currents, threatening the credibility of Europe's leadership.

Norway exemplifies the contradictions of sustainability governance in resource-rich states. Despite ambitious commitments to emission reductions and electrification, the political establishment continues to support fossil fuel expansion. In January 2025, right-wing leader Sylvi Listhaug declared that the Norwegian oil industry should operate "for at least 100 years", while Conservative Party deputy leader Tina Bru dismissed the notion of "oil shame". At its March 2025 National Assembly, the Conservative Party approved new exploration in sensitive fisheries areas off Nordland and Troms.

These positions reflect a powerful political narrative that frames fossil fuels as essential to national prosperity, even as Norway positions itself as a global leader in climate diplomacy. The result is a policy duality: climate ambition on paper, coupled with continued fossil fuel extraction in practice.

In contrast, African states face a stark dilemma: whether to pursue fossil fuel development to meet urgent energy needs or to invest in renewable alternatives. The Trump administration's encouragement of coal development underscores the geopolitical pressure to adopt carbon-intensive pathways. At the same time, structural inequalities in global finance limit the capacity of African states to fund renewable transitions at scale. This tension reflects the broader asymmetry of the global economy: the Global South is disproportionately burdened by climate impacts while constrained by the legacy of Northern overconsumption.

A global political backlash against SDGs

Taken together, these developments illustrate the rise of a global backlash against the SDGs, particularly those relating to climate and biodiversity. Across contexts, governments are retreating from binding commitments, privileging economic competitiveness, and reasserting fossil fuel dependency. The normative legitimacy of the SDGs is therefore increasingly undermined, while the regulative orders required for enforcement are systematically dismantled or weakened.

The result is a widening gulf between the global consensus expressed in Agenda 2030 and the actual trajectories of national and international politics. The very period in which transformative action is most urgently required is thus characterised by fragmentation, rollback, and resistance.

Concluding reflections

The evidence presented in this chapter points to a sobering conclusion: the SDGs will not be achieved by 2030. Despite the global consensus surrounding Agenda 2030, progress has stalled across most targets, with climate and biodiversity goals alarmingly off track. The persistence of this shortfall reflects not a lack of knowledge but rather the inadequacy of governance structures dominated by neoliberal ideology.

The reliance on normative orders, voluntary commitments, CSR initiatives, ESG frameworks, and reporting obligations has proven insufficient to confront the systemic drivers of ecological degradation. While such instruments may generate transparency and dialogue, they lack the coercive capacity required to alter entrenched patterns of capital accumulation, resource extraction, and overconsumption. In practice, normative tools often function as instruments of greenwashing, legitimising the status quo while masking structural inaction.

If the SDGs are to retain credibility as a global framework, they must be supported by a stronger regulative order. This entails the use of binding legislation, enforceable sanctions, and institutional mechanisms capable of disciplining market behaviour. Regulatory measures must extend beyond reporting to include taxation, prohibitions, and binding emission reduction targets, alongside mechanisms for monitoring and enforcement at national and international levels.

Such a regulative order would necessarily require states to reclaim policy space eroded by neoliberal restructuring. It would also demand the revitalisation of democratic legitimacy: regulations must be grounded in public consent and supported by participatory institutions. In this sense, strengthening regulation does not mean weakening democracy, but rather extending it, making democratic institutions capable of shaping markets in alignment with ecological and social imperatives.

Achieving such a transformation will require broadening democracy beyond its narrow liberal form, creating space for social solidarity economies and forms of knowledge production grounded in diverse cultural and ecological realities. As this chapter has argued, knowledge is not only descriptive but also constitutive: it shapes the boundaries of what is politically possible. Academic, civic, and institutional knowledge must therefore play a critical role in legitimising stronger regulatory frameworks and in mobilising societies towards transformative change.

A warning and a possibility

The global political context, however, points in the opposite direction. Deregulation in the US, backsliding in the UK, contradictions in Norway, and the continued dependence within Africa on fossil fuel development all indicate a growing backlash against sustainability governance. The emergence of this anti-SDG politics highlights the fragility of the current normative consensus and the urgent need to defend and expand regulatory institutions.

Yet there remain grounds for cautious optimism. The EU continues to advance ambitious regulatory frameworks, and global investment in renewables has accelerated, with 92 per cent of new electricity capacity in 2024 deriving from renewable sources (UN News, 2025). These developments suggest that when states and institutions commit to a regulative order, grounded in democratic legitimacy, meaningful progress is possible.

The SDG crisis thus confronts us with a stark choice: either to continue down the path of weak normative commitments, risking further ecological breakdown and social inequality, or to embrace a transformative regulative order that re-embeds markets within democratic institutions. The challenge is not merely technical or economic but profoundly political: it requires confronting neoliberal ideology, reclaiming the regulatory state, and reimagining democracy itself. Only through such a transformation can the vision of Agenda 2030 – a world that balances human wellbeing with the limits of the Earth's ecosystems – move from aspiration to reality.

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