Jean Monnet Sustainable Development Goals Network

Roundtable 3 Report

Members of the Jean Monnet Sustainable Development Goals Network met for a comprehensive round of meetings from 24-27 February 2020 in Melbourne. The suite of meetings included a Roundtable attended by members of the Network, a public seminar on Sustainable Development Goal 11 as part of the Network's public seminar series hosted by the EU Centre of Excellence at RMIT University, the Network's second Policy Dialogue, and the third Early Career Researchers' Workshop.

One of the main purposes of the meeting was to review and update work to date, determine shifts in approaches if necessary, and map final steps in the lead-up to the conclusion of the project at the end of 2020.

Day 1

Day 1 of the Roundtable focused on the following themes:
- Changes to the global context since the inception of the Jean Monnet Sustainable Development Goals Network's project *The EU's role in the implementation of the SDGs in Asia Pacific* and the impact these changes on the project/project conceptualisation
- Revisiting the Network's conceptual framework
- Deliverables and timelines

Changes to the global context since the inception of the Jean Monnet Sustainable Development Goals Network's project

Session 1 of Day 1 set out the context for reporting on the project. Professor Wilson as host provided an overarching summary of developments in the macro geopolitical context since the inception of the project in 2017 and raised questions regarding the impact of those developments on the project and the project conceptualisation. His summary drew attention to the acceleration of pace of changes that had taken place since the last Roundtable as recent as October 2019, noting in particular the following changes in EU focus and policy, and more broadly in the geopolitical space:
- a new EU Commission with a new program
- the question of the future of long-standing alliances such as NATO
- the future of the EU and its member states in the face of the withdrawal of the UK from the EU on 31 January 2020.

In the context of the withdrawal of the UK from the EU he noted the possible impact on the status of one of the Network partners in the project, the University of Glasgow, in relation to its membership.

The observation was made that since 2017, there had been a shift towards a stronger emphasis on putting the interest of the nation-state first, making the implementation of global actions necessary to achieve global goals more difficult, e.g. the withdrawal of the US from the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement (TPP) impedes the harmonisation in trade relations between the a number of Asia Pacific countries and the US.

It was further noted that tensions between key global players had increased, leading to a re-emergence of hard power, i.e. coercive tactics such as threat or use of military force, economic pressure/sanctions, as a key tool in the arena of international relations.

Moreover, a shift to authoritarian tendencies coupled with increased reliance on military power in a number of nation-states globally, including in the EU and some of those in which Network members' projects were situated, was observed. Such developments then pose the question how the EU as a normative power responds to and deals with this systematic shift from the UN/EU model of cooperation and governance.

Drawing on the experiences of the Network members from their projects, a secondary focus emerged on trade as a major driver of aid projects globally and trade and military power as guarantors of stability. This raised the question whether the SDGs could offer an alternative way of achieving stability through equity and led to a consideration of the new European Commission President's program for 2019-2024, 'A union that strives for more'.

The program comprises six priority areas:
- the European Green Deal,
- An economy that works for the people,
- A Europe fit for the Digital Age,
- Promoting our European way of life,
- A stronger Europe in the World, and
- A new push for European democracy, aimed at positioning the EU as an active geopolitical actor and a voice for normative power and liberal democracy, which is a useful first step in the current situation where the development of a coherent approach to global issues is required.

A final item to be considered in the project's exploration of EU development measures was the question of EU versus member state contributions, given that overseas aid was predominantly a member state competence: in terms of financial contributions some member state's contributions were greater than EU contributions. This raised the question whether it would be useful to explore whether there were qualitative differences between EU and individual member state actions and whether these differences resulted in different outcomes.

Revisiting and updating the Network's conceptual framework
Session 2 offered the Network members the opportunity to revisit the framework adopted previously to guide the research collaboration in the light of further work undertaken since its adoption.

The most recent iteration post Roundtable 2 encompassed two sets of conceptual propositions. The first draws on Jeffery Sachs (2015) to focus attention on the broad objective of transformation at the same time as it offers a conceptual map for linking across individual SDGs. It recognises the complexity of a global agenda with 17 Goals, each goal again comprising of

multiple targets, and the risk of fragmentation in both analysis and in designing programs of action.

The second conceptual approach engaged with the challenge of framing and coordinating decision-making and action to address global challenges. It draws on work by Ben Cashore and colleagues to understand the 'good governance norm complex' and its implications in decision-making and action and the reasons this approach is most likely to end in failure.

At the conclusion of a lively and in-depth discussion, the Network members reaffirmed both propositions as fit for purpose in light with minor changes. The Network members agreed on the following working conclusions emerging in this project.

The Jean Monnet Network on SDGs in the Asia-Pacific is focused on the United Nations' global agenda for transformation, which is articulated through the 17 SDGs and their targets. The Global Agenda as a whole proposes the development of universal public services, decent livelihoods for all, serious climate action, and reconciliation amongst diverse peoples. The project team acknowledges that this Agenda depends on the recognition of the centrality of values and social innovation alongside technocratic solutions and new technologies to solve 'wicked' problems. More specifically, it seems that the project is demonstrating:

1. Whilst it was a historical achievement to adopt the SDGs, it is not useful to think about the 17 SDGs as individual goals and targets, it is more useful to look at them as layers of an inter-connected transformational global agenda.
2. An important focus for implementation of the SDGs is place (recognising the importance of decisions being made at appropriate levels).
3. There needs to be a focus on universal public services as crucial, and possibly a shift from a narrow focus on the public to a broader focus on universal community needs?
4. Inherent contradictions (political, moral/value and technical) in the SDGS should be made explicit, not blurred.
5. There is the overwhelming importance of climate action as an entry point to understanding and acting on this transformational agenda.
6. Making progress is more than just about our technocratic ability, there is a need for the recognition of moral issues/values in driving decision-making.
7. We have extra-ordinary technocratic capacity – the question is how it is utilised to support the UN global agenda (in contrast to making a profit).

Deliverables and timelines

Session 3 focused on the concrete outputs of the project. In line with the deliverables as set out in the project documentation, the Network members discussed the desirability, feasibility, format and details of events to be held and publications to be produced until the conclusion of the project.

Day Two

Session 1 on Day 2 was led by EU Centre core staff and consisted of an overview of the EU's engagement in the Asia Pacific in the following areas:
- the EU and AP intergovernmental organisations
- the EU and AP nations
- the EU and NGOs
- EU thematic focus in AP

It set out the uneven nature of the EU's engagement in the Asia Pacific region and limitation in the messaging of the EU in relation to implementation of the SDGs in the region. This session laid the groundwork for the discussion in Session 2 of Day 2 which provided the Network members with a space to situate the knowledge and experiences gained from their individual projects within a broader context of transformation to frame the new knowledge gained through learning from their own and others' projects.

A robust discussion on the nature of transformation, the desirability of transformations, the place of morals and values and the tension between technological capabilities and morals/values, the fact that transformations and the measurement of transformations are context-dependent or, in other words, place-based and thus take different forms in different places, and the fact that many governments integrate a sustainable agenda into governmental programs without being explicit about this it, the group determined the following framework for the new knowledge

- SDGs as a framework for desired transformation: sustainability, social justice, and equity.
- EU as a focal point and source of support, initiatives and examples on SDGs issues.

Next Steps

Session 3 of Day 2 served as a final preparation session for the Policy Dialogue and the ECR workshop and more broadly, as an initial planning session for the Final Policy Dialogue, ECR workshop and framing of the conference to be held later in the year. Attention was given also to the framing of the outstanding policy briefs accompanying the Network seminar series on each individual SDG, and finally, to a discussion of issues and opportunities which had emerged in the course of the Roundtable.