The Impact of Decentralization on Creating Enabling Environments: Whole-of-Society Implementation of the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

Simo Krsmanovic (Canada)

Abstract

Does the degree of decentralisation in a state impact its implementation of the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2030 Agenda)? The 2030 Agenda calls for a commitment from states to pursue the creation of an enabling environment for sustainable development at all levels and by all actors (United Nations 2015, para 63). To achieve this, there are requirements for coordination and complimentary actions between governments, civil society and businesses to ensure involvement across a wide range of sectors and communities. This study aims to analyse how decentralised governance structures affect the ways states create enabling environments to support cooperative implementation of the 2030 Agenda. To date, little research analyses how levels of decentralisation and systems of governance influence implementation of the 2030 Agenda and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This study is to contribute towards this analysis through a multiple case study of three federations (Canada, Switzerland, and Germany) and their federal sustainable development implementation strategies. It finds that these decentralised states use common frameworks and multi-level governance arrangements to manage jurisdictional barriers and competing priorities between their levels of government. Canada, Switzerland, and Germany all demonstrate common challenges in supporting cooperative implementation of the 2030 Agenda among their state and non-state actors due to complex administrative processes and competing priorities, making it difficult to coordinate the mutual dependency between their levels of government and align strategic planning across jurisdictions. They address these challenges in a number of similar and unique ways.

Keywords: Sustainable Development Goals; Governance; Decentralization; Multi-level Governance; Regional Development; Subnational Governments

Introduction

In 2015, all 193 United Nations (UN) member states adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2030 Agenda) and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as a framework and plan of action for people, planet and prosperity. The 2030 Agenda recognises an indivisible balance across the three dimensions of sustainable development: economic, social and environmental – with its goals ranging from ending poverty and hunger to reducing inequalities and taking urgent climate action. The 2030 Agenda is an ambitious global framework designed to coordinate national action on sustainable development through time-bound indicators, targets and objectives that require collaborative partnerships. It calls for a commitment to pursue an enabling

environment for sustainable development at all levels and by all actors (UN 2015, para 63). Achieving the necessary cross-sectoral collaboration and coherence requires complementary actions across all stakeholder groups including governments, civil society and businesses and for them to mobilise under a shared understanding of how collective action can be operationalised (Sachs et al., 2019).

Many national governments around the world are looking at ways to achieve these goals by either mainstreaming the SDGs into their existing government plans, or by developing entirely new plans and strategies aimed at specifically addressing the 2030 Agenda and its SDGs. For example, the Government of Mexico and the Government of Canada launched national strategies for implementing the 2030 Agenda in November 2019 (Government of Mexico, 2019) and in February 2021 (Government of Canada, 2021), respectively.

These strategies highlight several actions that respective federal governments are taking to implement the 2030 Agenda, including mechanisms to mobilise their stakeholder groups to create an inclusive, enabling environment that leverages all sectors of society. Both strategies focus on the importance of multi-stakeholder partnerships with reference to the unique challenges they face as federations in creating harmony across their three levels of government (federal, regional and local). For example, Mexico's 2030 Agenda national strategy underscores challenges the federal government faces in creating public policies that work efficiently across federal and subnational levels of government due to jurisdictional barriers, which can result in sectoral and disjointed approaches (Government of Mexico, 2019).

This study aims to explore how countries with decentralised systems of governance (specifically Canada, Switzerland and Germany) are creating enabling environments to support whole-of-society implementation of the 2030 Agenda. To date, there is a lack of research exploring the effects of governance systems and degrees of decentralisation on the creation of enabling environments to achieve the 2030 Agenda and its SDGs. While all countries are reviewing their progress on implementing the Goals and targets through a common Global Indicator Framework, the 2030 Agenda calls for countries to define success based on their own unique characteristics and national contexts. This study aims to review how decentralised systems of governance could impact a state's ability to create an enabling environment when implementing the 2030 Agenda and to identify potential global and domestic barriers and their impact on achieving the SDGs. While this will not be a comprehensive investigation given the unique and often complex systems of governance that exist around the world, this study will attempt to provide a preliminary analysis to support future studies.

This study first presents a brief overview and definition of decentralisation, outlining its main types and forms using internationally recognised definitions from the Organization for Cooperation and Development (OECD). It acknowledges the large extent and variation of subnational autonomy that can exist in both federal and unitary states and for this reason does not attempt to develop rigid guidelines, categorise nor rank countries by their degrees of decentralisation.

The study will then outline the selection criteria for the three federal states that were selected for the case study, including Canada, Switzerland and Germany. The states are all found to be highly fiscally, administratively and politically decentralised and rank among the highest scoring states on the Regional Authority Index (RAI), which is a recognised index for measuring states' regional autonomy (Cole et al., 2019) (OECD, 2019). The study then analyses the 2030 Agenda implementation strategies of the selected federal states and their approaches to creating an enabling environment. Using a qualitative analysis of these case studies, this paper will finally assess evidence for or against the argument that decentralised states require unique institutional frameworks that support cooperative implementation of the 2030 Agenda and that recognise and account for subnational, administrative and jurisdictional barriers at the local and regional levels. Through a multiple-case study on the 2030 Agenda sustainable development strategies of Canada, Switzerland and Germany, it is demonstrated that these decentralised states have common frameworks and multi-level governance (MLG) arrangements specifically to work around jurisdictional barriers between their levels of government in empowering stakeholders and implementing the SDGs. As a result of their federal governance structures, the three states demonstrate common challenges to support cooperative implementation of the 2030 Agenda among its state and non-state actors. These challenges include: 1) complex administrative processes to operationalise collective and complementary action between government and non-government stakeholders and 2) competing priorities making it difficult to align strategic planning across jurisdictions.

Canada, Switzerland and Germany are all found to use MLG arrangements to coordinate collective action on the SDGs and manage shared responsibilities across levels of government. In these cases, these arrangements have created challenges in coordinating mutual dependence between levels of government and complex administrative processes to coordinate collective action given the breadth of stakeholders involved and the broad framework of the 2030 Agenda. This study aims to answer the following questions: 1) how are these states approaching the creation of an enabling environment for implementation of the 2030 Agenda; 2) while decentralised and federal states vary widely in their political systems and processes, do these states face common challenges associated with their decentralised governance structures; and 3) does decentralisation matter in the effective implementation of the SDGs?

Decentralization- What it is and Why It Matters?

Terms and Concepts

According to the OECD (2019, p. 11), decentralisation refers to the transfer of powers, and some degree of autonomy, from central governments to subnational entities (for example provinces, other regional governments, municipalities, etc.). While this definition captures the essence of decentralisation in a straightforward sense, decentralisation is a complex process that involves constructing relationships between all levels of government to create strong cooperation and coherence in implementing national directives and mandates. Degrees of decentralisation are varied, and depend on the level of political, administrative and fiscal powers that are transferred from central to subnational governments. For the purpose of this study:

- Political decentralisation is characterised by the OECD as "setting the legal basis of decentralisation, which refers to the way in which subnational administrators are selected – i.e. by appointment or by election." (2020, p. 18).

- Administrative decentralisation is characterised by the OECD as transferring "operational responsibility from a higher level to a lower level of organisation" without transferring full decision-making power (2020, p. 18). Administrative decentralisation does not transfer full decision-making power and can be further divided into administrative delegation and devolution (OECD, 2020).

    - Administrative delegation provides some autonomy by shifting the responsibility of service delivery and administration from the national to subnational level (OECD, 2020).

    - Administrative devolution provides autonomy through the transfer of decision-making and fiscal responsibility to subnational governments, with only indirect control from central governments (2020, p. 19).

- Fiscal decentralisation is characterised by the OECD as devolving "spending and revenue responsibilities from central governments to subnational tiers of government" (2020, p. 19).

The system of "mutual dependence" between national and subnational governments as a result of decentralisation defines a state's institutional structure, culture and relationships, which can create challenges for central governments in implementing national mandates and complex frameworks (Devas and Delay, 2006). For example, countries with high degrees of decentralisation may experience fragmented or overlapping public policies, a lack of administrative capacity to manage jurisdictional cooperation and underfunded responsibilities given competing priorities and budgets (OECD, 2019).

Decentralisation can exist in different structural arrangements depending on if the system of governance of a state is federal or unitary. The terms 'federalism,' 'federal states' and 'federations' refer to a system of shared sovereignty between the central federal government, and its self-governing subnational entities. The system is characterised by one or more constitutions that divides political authority between a central government and its regional and subnational governments. The self-governing, subnational governments are entitled to binding decisions that may not be altered by the central, federal government, and are granted separate powers and responsibilities (Reich, 2021). Based on the classification by the Forum of Federations, there are 25 federal countries in the world today (Forum of Federations, 2022). Collectively they include roughly 40 percent of the world's total population and cover 45 percent of the world's landmass although literature on the precise taxonomy of federalism is ambiguous, and open to interpretation given the large variety of federal forms and structures that exist (Hueglin, 2013).

In contrast to federal states, a unitary state is characterised by a central government with greater degrees of political authority and sovereignty that is not shared with its subnational governments. This does not mean that subnational governments in unitary states do not have autonomy or decision-making power, but rather the granted autonomy has been directly delegated to them by the central government. For this reason, subnational entities in unitary states can be characterised by either high or low degrees of political sovereignty and autonomy, creating large variation in their degrees of decentralisation (OECD, 2019).

Why It Matters

In 2019, a Decade of Action was called forward by the UN Secretary-General during the UN High-Level Political Forum for Sustainable Development, calling on all sectors of society to mobilise for a decade of action on three levels: global action, local action, people action (2019). Understanding the common barriers between these institutional levels will support a more comprehensive dialogue of what is required of states with complex governance systems to support whole-of-society action and accelerate sustainable solutions.

In the context of the 2030 Agenda, the transfer of powers as a result of decentralisation is an important mechanism that empowers subnational governments to implement the SDGs in their own local contexts as the level of government closest to the individual. Local implementation is integral to achieving the 2030 Agenda and operationalising national sustainable development policies. Given the nature of the broad Agenda, measured through its 169 targets and 232 unique indicators, implementing the SDGs is a complex undertaking that requires coherence between all levels of government, from national to local, to link the 17 SDGs and their targets and indicators with existing plans, strategies, policies and goals (Fourie, 2018). This study hypothesises this process to be much more challenging in states characterised by large and complex democracies with decentralised systems of governance, such as those found in many federal states. While federal states are more decentralised than unitary states, it is important to note that this is not always the case, and that this distinction could also be partly attributed to federalism being more common in developed countries (Treisman, 2006).

Collaborative partnerships are an integral component of achieving the 2030 Agenda, and is most notably measured through SDG 17: Partnerships for the Goals, and its targets and indicators. The next section of this study will analyse the 2030 Agenda national implementation strategies and sustainable development strategies of three federations. It will look to determine how decentralisation impacts their respective federal implementation of the SDGs – in particular, how a few of the most decentralised, federal states are implementing enabling environments to ensure inclusive participation from all sectors of society. Despite this study's focus on developed economies from the global North, enhanced partnerships between the global North and the global South are instrumental in achieving the 2030 Agenda given the interconnected nature of the SDGs and the broad framework of the 2030 Agenda, which requires joint action and the sharing of best-practices at all levels. It is for this reason that enhanced partnerships should be a major outcome of the "Why it Matters" 2022 Conference to further our understanding of the complexities involved in SDG implementation, and how factors like systems of governance influence the ability

to leverage and accelerate complimentary action at the speed and scale required to achieve the SDGs.

It is to be noted that there is no clear-cut standard by which states are ranked by their degree of decentralisation, given the complexity of defining, attributing and interpreting appropriate indicators. The RAI is used in this study to provide a general idea of the states that are among the most decentralised. It measures regional autonomy in its dataset across a number of dimensions including institutional depth, policy scope, fiscal autonomy and law making – among other dimensions – and aggregates scores to the country-level (Schakel, 2022). Among the variety of indexes of decentralisation, the RAI is considered as the current international standard (Cole et al., 2019), and is used by the OECD in measuring decentralisation (OECD, 2019). The federal states that were selected for this study were chosen based on governance systems characterised by political, administrative and fiscal decentralisation and their high annual scores of regional authority aggregated by country under the RAI. Given the positive correlation between government effectiveness and high scores on the RAI (OECD, 2019), developed, federal countries were among the highest scoring in the index, and it is for this reason that the states chosen for this case study are all federations. This study does not aim to generalise its results using the dichotomy of federal and unitary states but does recognise that decentralisation is more common in federal systems, and for this reason also recognises that federal states will share many common governance characteristics.

Creating Enabling Environments in Decentralized States- A Case Study of Canada, Switzerland, and Germany

While most states are mainstreaming the SDGs into their existing government sustainable development plans and strategies, a number of states are developing entirely new plans dedicated to implementation of the 2030 Agenda and its SDGs. This section of the study seeks to analyse the sustainable development plans and 2030 Agenda national strategies of three federal states whose scores of aggregated regional autonomy rank highly on the RAI: Canada, Switzerland and Germany. It will first look to provide a brief overview of each states' governance structure and characteristics of their political, fiscal and administrative decentralisation. It will then provide an overview of the initiatives, mechanisms and approaches highlighted in their plans and strategies that support creating an enabling environment for cooperative implementation of the 2030 Agenda. It will aim to answer the first aforementioned research question: how are decentralised states approaching creating an enabling environment for implementation of the 2030 Agenda?

Canada

Overview of Decentralised Governance in Canada

Canada is a federation characterised by its cultural diversity and is considered by many to be one of the world's most decentralised federations (Simeon, 2002) (Bird and Tassonyi, 2003). Canada is made up of ten provinces and three territories at the regional level, all of which vary greatly in

size and economies. Sovereignty in Canada is shared between federal and regional governments, with both holding legislative and executive power, granting authority for both levels of government to enact and implement their own legislation (Simeon, 2002).

While Canada's provinces and territories are highly decentralised, its local governments are centralised in comparison, as they fall under the exclusive jurisdiction of the provinces (The Constitution Act, 1982, section 92[8]). In addition to its federal, regional and local governments, Indigenous governments exist across Canada, and their inherent right to self-government is recognised under Canada's constitutional framework (The Constitution Act, 1982, section 35). Conceptualising a jurisdictional framework between Indigenous and non-Indigenous governments in the context of Canada's settler-colonial history remains a challenge (Pasternak, 2014) and an ongoing process that the Government of Canada recognises as part of its evolving system of cooperative federalism and distinct orders of government (Justice Canada, 2021).

In addition to highly decentralised legislative and executive powers, Canada is also very fiscally decentralised. Provinces have access to almost all tax bases, and significant revenue raising powers. This is further supported by an equalisation system that compensates provinces with tax revenues if they fall below the minimum national standard (Department of Finance, 2011). Given its decentralised governance structure, implementation of the 2030 Agenda in Canada requires coherent policies and complementary action among all its levels of government.

Canada's 2030 Agenda National Strategy and Federal Implementation Plan

Since the inception of the 2030 Agenda, the federal Government of Canada has released a number of products to support its implementation of the 2030 Agenda. In 2019, the Government of Canada launched *Towards Canada's 2030 Agenda National Strategy,* an interim strategy developed through nationwide consultations. To contribute towards an enabling environment and a whole-of-Canada strategy, it recognises the shared responsibility of sustainable development between all three levels of government, with federal actions on the SDGs aimed to complement and support initiatives taken by other Canadian levels of government (Employment and Social Development Canada [ESDC], 2019). It recognises the important role that provincial and territorial government policy makers and regulators play in advancing sustainable development, given their jurisdictional lead over a number of key policy areas (for example education, skills development, health systems, justice, social services, road safety, affordable housing and sustainable infrastructure). Provinces and territories as well as local governments are responsible for measuring and aligning their progress and reporting on the 2030 Agenda. In the interim strategy, the Government of Canada identifies existing forums such as Federal-Provincial-Territorial Ministers' Roundtables as a potential means for collaboration and for sharing best practices on the SDGs (ESDC, 2019). Given the political decentralisation in Canada, and competing priorities between the federal and provincial governments, co-implementing and administering whole-of-government and whole-of-society policies among a wide network of stakeholders in Canada is often a complex and challenging process, usually with difficulty in creating formal structures to manage all relationships (Tamtik, 2016).

In 2021, the Government of Canada launched *Moving Forward Together: Canada's 2030 Agenda National Strategy* and *Canada's Federal Implementation Plan for the 2030 Agenda*, which acknowledge the responsibility of all Canadians in implementing the 2030 Agenda, under the guiding leadership of the federal government. The explicit objective of the national strategy aims to create and foster an enabling environment for ongoing dialogue and participation for all sectors of Canadian society to take action to implement the 2030 Agenda (ESDC, 2021).

The strategy outlines the roles and responsibilities for all sectors of Canadian society and includes the federal government's core objectives for engagement and action to support the creation of an enabling environment. This includes supporting federal policy coherence and accountability through the identification of departmental leads and co-leads for each of the 17 SDGs, including their roles and responsibilities. It also includes the administration of an SDG Funding Program amounting to $4.6 million annually to support governments and stakeholders in implementing the SDGs, including through supporting a national SDG forum that brings together diverse stakeholders to collaborate on innovative approaches to advance progress on the 2030 Agenda in Canada. The Government of Canada engages closely with three National Indigenous Organisations through funding agreements to support engagement capacity with Indigenous Peoples and to ensure Indigenous perspectives are integrated in Canada's implementation of the 2030 Agenda. The federal government will also establish an external advisory committee for sustainable development that is representative of different segments of society to advise the federal government (ESDC, 2021).

Switzerland

Overview of Decentralised Governance in Switzerland

Switzerland, like Canada, is a culturally diverse federation characterized by complex governance between its three layers of government. Its federal structure includes over 2,000 communes at the local level, 26 cantons at the regional level and the confederation – or the national level of government (Dafflon, 1999). The confederation and cantons each hold their own constitutions, which express subnational sovereignty for its cantons and communes. All three levels of government in Switzerland maintain executive, legislative and judicial powers and all hold the right to revenue raising and levying tax (Dafflon, 1999).

Unlike Canada, communes at the local level in Switzerland are highly decentralised. In principle, the administration of public services is largely granted to communes, with cantons only taking over responsibilities that communes themselves cannot carry out (Leptien, 2013). This level of decentralisation is likely the result of the many constitutions held at the regional level that grant communes the power to coordinate and finance these services. Federal legislation in Switzerland is often delivered in the form of frameworks that avoid excessive detail to leave room for interpretation by cantons. This level of autonomy allows for horizontal cooperation between local and regional levels of government to support for fiscal equivalence as well as the efficient use of public services that require inter-communal or inter-cantonal cooperation (Dafflon, 1999). Like in Canada, equalisation policies are used to address regional disparities, such as population size,

and economies. However, in the past there has been a low dependency from cantons and communes on transfer payments reflecting a large degree of financial autonomy across all levels of government (Dafflon, 1999).

Switzerland's 2030 Sustainable Development Strategy

In 2021, the Government of Switzerland launched its *2030 Sustainable Development Strategy* (SDS), setting guidelines for its sustainability policies, and cementing sustainable development as a priority area for all federal policies. The SDS is not solely a 2030 Agenda strategy, but rather uses the 2030 Agenda as a reference framework to guide federal policies and provide strategic direction for areas under federal purview (Federal Office for Spatial Development [ARE], 2021). Similar to Canada's 2030 Agenda National Strategy, it recognises that successful implementation of the 2030 Agenda requires whole-of-society action, given the degree of competencies and jurisdictional authority among its decentralised levels of government. For this reason, it invites Swiss cantons, communes, stakeholders and its general population to join the confederation in pursuit of the SDGs (ARE, 2021).

Through the SDS, the confederation aims to create an enabling environment for whole-of-society implementation of the 2030 Agenda, but as mentioned above, recognises both cantons and communes as similarly responsible to support creating an enabling environment given their level of decentralisation and jurisdiction over a number of key services and policy areas (ARE, 2021). The Swiss confederation is implementing a number of mechanisms to support the creation of an enabling environment. Federally, this includes the appointment of a 2030 Agenda Steering Committee made-up of high-level representatives of the leading federal departments responsible for implementing the 2030 Agenda to support cross-sectoral tasks and policies. The committee not only coordinates all federal departments in implementing the 2030 Agenda, but also consults with cantons, communes and all other stakeholders such as those representing civil society, academia and businesses (ARE, 2021).

A key federal concern noted in the SDS is applying the principles of sustainable development at all levels of Swiss government, given cantons and communes are primarily responsible for many policy areas of relevance to the 2030 Agenda. To address this, the confederation will be using a few structured tripartite cooperation mechanisms to coordinate cooperative and complementary action between their three levels of government. This includes through their Conference of Cantonal Governments (representing the 26 Swiss cantons), the Conferences of Cantonal Directors (representing different cantonal policy areas), the Cantonal Sustainable Development Network (representing cantonal and federal governments) and communal networks that engage both locally as well as internationally. The SDS notes that coordination between Switzerland's three levels of government is still developing and being further strengthened (ARE, 2021).

The SDS recognises the integral role of civil society, academia, businesses and other whole-of-society stakeholders in creating synergies for sustainable development. The mechanisms it uses to promote partnerships and dialogue include active consultation on plans and reports, an annual Sustainable Development Forum as well as the appointment of a 2030 Agenda Advisory Group.

The objective of the advisory group is to represent the interests of non-state actors and ensure effective cooperation and complementary action with all levels of Swiss government. The members of the advisory group represent different sectors of society, including academia, civil society, business and youth (ARE, 2021).

Germany

Overview of Decentralised Governance in Germany

Germany is a federation with three levels of government represented by the federal level, the Länder at the regional level and its local level of government. Under its constitution, Germany's subnational governments have high levels of autonomy with all three levels of government having their own distinct legislative, executive and judiciary bodies (Basic Law for the Federal Republic of Germany, Articles 71, 72, 73 & 74). While the federal government is responsible for much of the policy formulation in Germany, the Länder is mostly responsible for policy implementation and service delivery (Fleischer et al., 2018).

Given that the Länder have autonomy over their organisational structure, there is a high degree of variation amongst Germany's regional governments. Administration of the Länder is usually characterised by a two or three-tier system including a central level, meso-level and lower level (the two-tier system is usually without the meso-level) (Fleischer et al., 2018). While local governments in Germany are considered part of the Länder, they are a distinct third level of government that is similarly administered in a two-tiered system – characterised by counties at the upper level and municipalities at the lower level. Based on this dualistic model, the implementation of legal provisions from the Länder is delegated to local governments. Decentralisation in Germany requires high levels of collaboration through both vertical and horizontal collaboration to organise collective and complementary policy implementation. This is organised through both formal and informal channels such as the Conference of Prime Ministers, Treaties between Länder, working groups and advisory boards, among others (Fleischer et al., 2018).

Germany has high degrees of fiscal decentralisation with all three levels of government maintaining expenditure and revenue raising authorities. Three quarter of all tax revenues are shared between the three levels of government, with each level of government also collecting some taxes separately. Similar to Canada and Switzerland, financial equalisation payments are made to support financially weaker Länder, and also in the form of grants administered from the federal to the local level (Fleischer et al., 2018).

Germany's Sustainable Development Strategy

In 2016, the Government of Germany launched its first *German Sustainable Development Strategy* (GSDS), with additional updates launched in 2018 and most recently in 2021. The GSDS is the central framework for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and its SDGs in Germany, and is considered a continuous work in progress (Government of Germany, 2021). The vision of

the GSDS is a sustainable Germany that is characterised by a high quality of life, effective environmental protection and inclusive opportunities for the equal participation of everyone in all areas and at all levels (Government of Germany, 2021, p. 15). It has six sustainability principles and six areas of transformation informed by dialogues held with German stakeholders, organisations and individuals.

The GSDS aims to support the creation of an enabling environment and recognises that implementing the 2030 Agenda requires action and a commitment from all political levels, stakeholders and the public (Government of Germany, 2021). It recognises governance as a key lever for its implementation, with each level of government – federal, Länder and local government – having a joint responsibility given their level of autonomy in the German federal system. Given the authority of the Länder to pass and administer legislation on sustainable development, they are recognised as critical in achieving Germany's sustainability targets, and are called on to develop their own sustainable development strategies and to align them with the GSDS (eleven Länder are currently in the process of developing sustainable development strategies) (Government of Germany, 2021). In 2019, the Federal Chancellor and the Länder Heads of Governments issued a joint declaration on working together to achieve the SDGs, with both intending to align their political activities with the federal strategy (Government of Germany, 2021). Local governments are also recognised as a driving force for implementing the SDGs in their own contexts. Given that local governments have high degrees of authority and that sustainability communications primarily occur at the level of the Länder, it is argued in the GSDS that further contributions should be made by municipalities to support the alignment of sustainability objectives (Government of Germany, 2021). A number of mechanisms are used to support cooperation and complementary action horizontally as well as vertically between Germany's three levels of government. At the federal level, minsters are appointed to serve as Ministry Coordinators for Sustainable Development to support policy coherence across federal ministries. At the Länder level of government, several forums are used to support coordination between the federal government and the Länder including the Federation-Länder Exchange on Sustainable Development, which supports the alignment of sustainability directives and the Regional Hubs for Sustainability Strategies, which coordinate local action on the SDGs between all levels of government and stakeholders. There are a number of umbrella organisations that support dialogue on sustainability at the local level, including the Association of German Cities, the Association of German Counties and the German Association of Towns and Municipalities (Government of Germany, 2021).

The GSDS aims to integrate a multi-stakeholder approach as an important principle in achieving the SDGs. Mechanisms have been created to support stakeholders in taking cooperative and complementary action. These include a Sustainability Forum held annually to support dialogue between the government and stakeholders on the 2030 Agenda and the creation of a Dialogue Group consisting of 15 institutions representing the fields of business, environment, society and international affairs to discuss and advise on sustainable development with the federal government. To support the integration of scientific expertise into 2030 Agenda planning, the Scientific Platform for Sustainability 2030 was launched to support implementation of the GSDS (Government of Germany, 2021).

Results

The findings from this case study suggest that Canada, Switzerland and Germany as decentralised states have unique institutional frameworks and MLG arrangements in place, both formally and informally, to navigate the jurisdictional barriers between their levels of government to support an enabling environment for the SDGs. The division of power embedded in their federal and regional constitutions has granted high degrees of autonomy to their local and regional governments. As a result of their federal governance structures, the three states show that they face common challenges in creating an enabling environment to support cooperative implementation of the 2030 Agenda and its SDGs.

These challenges are characterised by 1) complex administrative processes to operationalise collective and complementary action between government and non-government stakeholders and 2) competing priorities making it difficult to align strategic planning across jurisdictions. This section of the study will aim to answer the second and third research questions: "do these federal states face common challenges associated with their decentralised governance structures when creating an enabling environment to implement the 2030 Agenda," and "does decentralisation matter in the effective implementation of the SDGs?"

Multi-level Governance and Complex Administrative Processes

In decentralised states, and notably federations, a lack of clear and effective administrative processes can often result in disjointed information, conflicting objectives and the loss of developing ideas (Kerber and Eckardt, 2007). While a state's system of governance creates the architecture that guides the coordination of its policies and frameworks, it is the regular administrative practices that operationalise engagement and action (Tamtik, 2016). The broad policy and growing stakeholder base of the 2030 Agenda requires administrative processes that are incredibly complex as they aim to navigate policy sectors, levels of government, stakeholders and the public, in a way that is responsive to the ever-changing landscape of sustainability priorities. These administrative processes require formal structures and MLG arrangements between all actors to ensure clear and transparent collaboration.

The decision-making processes involved in the implementation of public policies are becoming increasingly complex, with individual governments lacking the resources and governance structures to address modern policy challenges (Daniell and Kay, 2017). The MLG approach is a process gaining traction in recent decades (Allain-Dupré, 2020) characterised by frequent interactions between state and non-state actors to tackle complex challenges and policies that require effective partnerships, such as climate change, the Covid-19 crisis, or in this case the 2030 Agenda. Its dynamics take into account the roles and responsibilities of all levels of government and their competing jurisdictions to leverage optimal action on shared goals, with examples such as Germany's Federation-Länder Exchange on Sustainable Development, and Switzerland's Conferences of Cantonal Directors. MLG has become an imperative in addressing complex policies and in understanding decentralisation mechanics (Allain-Dupré, 2020). While MLG supports cooperative governance in decentralised states when coordinating broad and

complex frameworks like the 2030 Agenda, it can also present obstacles including clear lines of accountability and competing priorities between levels of government (Daniell and Kay, 2017). Canada, Switzerland and Germany all use MLG arrangements to coordinate collective action on the SDGs and manage shared responsibilities across levels of government. In these cases, these arrangements have created similar challenges as a result of decentralised governance. These challenges include difficulty in coordinating the mutual dependence between national and sub-national governments and their respective public policies and complex administrative processes to coordinate collective action given the breadth of stakeholders involved and the broad framework of the 2030 Agenda.

In the case of Germany, MLG arrangements are used to support coordination between their federal and Länder governments, given the authority of the Länder to pass and administer legislation on sustainable development. With sustainability as a joint responsibility among all levels of government, Germany's GSDS calls for both the Länder and local governments to develop and align their own unique sustainability strategies in collaboration with local, regional and federal governments (Government of Germany, 2021). The mutual dependence of levels of government in Germany creates a need for interconnected strategies and plans that cannot be mandated at any given level and are non-binding. In addition to a reliance on cooperation, the level of administration required to coordinate joint strategies and action between local, regional and federal levels, in collaboration with stakeholders, creates a web of administrative processes across competing jurisdictions.

Similar administrative challenges associated with MLG arrangements are reflected in both the Swiss SDS and Canada's 2030 Agenda National Strategy as a result of their decentralised governance. In Switzerland, many of the levers to implement sustainability policies are administered at the local level but require regular collaboration. This includes through inter-communal, inter-cantonal and tripartite cooperation mechanisms with the federal government – in addition to stakeholder dialogues that are administered at all levels of government to advise and support policy action and reporting (ARE, 2022). Canada faces similarly complex administrative processes given the autonomy and jurisdiction of its provinces and territories in key sustainability policy areas as well as its ongoing engagement with Indigenous Peoples and governments on sustainability policies and frameworks, which also require horizontal collaboration amongst local, provincial, territorial and federal governments (Bowie, 2013).

All three states aim to create similar formal MLG arrangements to streamline their administrative processes – for example through 2030 Agenda advisory committees, sustainability forums and inter- and intra-governmental processes, among others – creating an incredibly extensive network of organisations with competing levels of authority that can make it difficult to track how day-to-day progress is being operationalised. This is especially true when one considers the vast assortment of informal coordination arrangements that are happening in tandem between government and non-government actors on the 2030 Agenda that are not outlined in the national strategies (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2020).

Competing Priorities and Jurisdictions

Political decentralisation creates a potential for competing priorities and depending on the constitutional arrangement between regional and local governments can make it difficult to align strategic sustainability frameworks. Given the degrees of political, administrative and fiscal decentralisation characterised in Canada, Switzerland and Germany, the three states share similar challenges in aligning their 2030 Agenda national strategies and frameworks with those of their local and regional governments. The different jurisdictions, regional characteristics, population dynamics and economies often create competing priorities for their constituents in comparison to other levels of government, for example at the federal level. Political autonomy also creates additional challenges noting that priorities and political interests are also susceptible to change along party lines, which can impact the ability to align sustainability efforts (Hickmann, 2021).

In the case of Switzerland, the SDS notes the concern of applying aligned sustainability principles across all three levels of government, given the level of autonomy of its cantons and communes (ARE, 2021). These challenges are addressed in similar ways in both Germany's GSDS and Canada's 2030 Agenda National Strategy, which both call on its local and regional governments, as equally responsible implementers, to track and report on their progress in implementing the 2030 Agenda and its SDGs and to align their work at all levels (Government of Germany, 2021) (ESDC, 2021).

All three states use MLG arrangements to support alignment of their sustainability priorities with their governments including sustainability forums and federal-regional-local cooperation mechanisms. In the case of Germany, the GSDS addresses this challenge at the Länder level of government through a formal joint declaration on working together to achieve the SDGs, with both federal and Länder governments intending to align their political activities with the federal strategy (Government of Germany, 2021). In this case, Länder governments function in a similar role as partner states with their federal government to achieve cooperative objectives. Despite this progress, challenges in aligning sustainability priorities remain, with the GSDS arguing that further contributions should be made by municipalities to support the alignment of German sustainability objectives (Government of Germany, 2021).

Canada, Switzerland and Germany have all clearly identified the shared jurisdictional responsibility for the 2030 Agenda among levels of government. Successful implementation will require coordinated and cooperative action – through strategic planning and policymaking or other instruments – that can address unique domestic contexts. Each of the three states seeks to progress towards the SDGs through these various instruments, some similar and others not. In the states analysed in the above case study, it is clear that decentralisation has a significant impact on the frameworks needed to coordinate collective action among levels of government and non-state actors on the 2030 Agenda. The findings also suggest that the three decentralised states face similar challenges relating to administrative complexity, subnational autonomy and managing competing priorities and jurisdictions. While in these cases of Canada, Switzerland and Germany it is clear that decentralisation matters in their effective implementation of the 2030

Agenda, further research is required with a greater number of case studies to determine the extent to which it plays a role in other states' SDG implementation efforts.

While the three states in this case study represent states that have made domestic progress and are seen as global leaders in implementing the 2030 Agenda and its SDGs, these findings suggest administrative and political complexities inherently reflected along governance lines and their relationship in coordinating complex policies, like the 2030 Agenda. The broad nature of the 2030 Agenda, and the administrative challenge of coordinating the sheer volume of diverse stakeholders across its 17 SDGs, is a separate, yet equally important discussion in conversations on implementing enabling environments in decentralised states.

Research Limitations

It is noted that while these findings cannot be attributed to all decentralised states, given the sample size in the case study and the variety of governance systems that exist among both federal and unitary states, they are suggestive of common challenges associated with implementing broad and complex frameworks amongst whole-of-society stakeholders. This study recognises that the states that were selected represent highly developed economies given the positive correlation between government effectiveness and high scores on the RAI. This is not reflective of the experiences of all federations or decentralised states (OECD, 2019). It also recognises the complexity of measuring decentralisation, and the potential ambiguity in interpreting its indicators. Given the findings of the case study, more research is needed with additional states representing diverse economic status and both the Global North and the Global South to provide a more comprehensive analysis on the extent to which decentralised governance impacts enabling environments for the SDGs. This future research would also contribute to the broader discussion as to how a country-level analysis, grouped via similar systems of governance, might offer insights to better understand and compare progress across countries in implementing the 2030 Agenda and highlight new pathways for inclusive partnerships.

Conclusion

Achieving the 2030 Agenda and its SDGs requires a tremendous undertaking at all levels and across all stakeholder groups – from local governments to international organisations. The administration of such an undertaking at the national level is incredibly complex given the local and regional discrepancies that exist within a state, and its own competing priorities and jurisdictions.

This article has analysed and discussed the impacts of decentralisation on a state's ability to create an enabling environment for collective and complementary action on the SDGs through a case study of three federations including Canada, Switzerland and Germany. Its aim is to contribute towards an understanding of how systems of governance affect the way in which national governments address global challenges, with a specific focus on decentralised governance. Using a qualitative analysis, this paper seeks evidence for or against the argument that decentralised states require unique institutional frameworks that support cooperative

implementation of the 2030 Agenda and that recognise and account for subnational, administrative and jurisdictional barriers at the local and regional levels. It aims to answer the following research questions: 1) how are these states approaching and creating an enabling environment for implementation of the 2030 Agenda; 2) while decentralised and federal states vary widely in their political systems and processes, do these states face common challenges associated with their decentralised governance structures; and 3) does decentralisation matter in the effective implementation of the SDGs?

The findings suggest that Canada, Switzerland and Germany as decentralised states have unique institutional frameworks and MLG arrangements in place, both formally and informally, to navigate the jurisdictional barriers between their levels of government to support an enabling environment for the SDGs. The division of power embedded in their federal and regional constitutions has granted high degrees of autonomy to their local and regional governments. As a result of their federal governance structures, the three states show that they face common challenges in creating an enabling environment characterised by 1) complex administrative processes to operationalise collective and complementary action between government and non-government stakeholders and 2) competing priorities making it difficult to align strategic planning across jurisdictions.

Given the degrees of political, administrative and fiscal decentralisation characterised in Canada, Switzerland and Germany, the three states share similar challenges in aligning their 2030 Agenda national strategies and frameworks with those of their local and regional governments. Canada, Switzerland and Germany are all found to use MLG arrangements to coordinate collective action on the SDGs and manage shared responsibilities. In these cases, these arrangements have created challenges as a result of decentralised governance including difficulties in coordinating mutual dependence between levels of government and complex administrative processes to coordinate collective action given the breadth of stakeholders involved and the broad framework of the 2030 Agenda. The mutual dependence in policies and relations among levels of government creates a need for interconnected strategies and plans that cannot be mandated at any given level and are non-binding, and the horizontal and vertical coordination among stakeholder groups creates an incredibly extensive network of organisations with competing levels of authority that can make it difficult to track how day-to-day progress on the 2030 Agenda is being operationalised. The different internal jurisdictions, regional characteristics, population dynamics and economies of each of the states can create competitive priorities between the different levels of government. For example, regional authorities may seek to meet the direct demands of their constituents while federal authorities navigate the challenge of creating functional policy for the nation at large.

While facing common challenges, due to the different national contexts and governance frameworks, the three states address these challenges in similar and unique ways. While Canada, Switzerland and Germany recognise joint responsibility and call on all levels of government in implementing the 2030 Agenda in their 2030 Agenda national strategies, Germany uses a joint declaration between its federal and Länder levels of government to align political activities and action on the SDGs (Government of Germany, 2021). All three states use similar formal MLG

arrangements to coordinate collective action on the SDGs including 2030 Agenda advisory committees and annual, national SDG forums to bring together whole-of-society actors to coordinate action and report on progress. Germany and Switzerland use arrangements such as the Federation-Länder Exchange on Sustainable Development (Government of Germany, 2021), and the Conferences of Cantonal Directors to coordinate action with all levels of government (ARE, 2021), while Canada uses an SDG Funding Program to support governments and stakeholders in coordinating and implementing the SDGs including funding arrangements with National Indigenous Organisations to support engagement capacity with Indigenous Peoples and to ensure Indigenous perspectives are integrated in Canada's implementation of the 2030 Agenda (ESDC, 2021).

From the case study, it is clear that decentralisation has a significant impact on the frameworks needed to create an enabling environment to coordinate collective and complimentary action among all levels of government and non-state actors on the 2030 Agenda in Canada, Switzerland and Germany. Further research is required with a greater number of case studies to determine the extent to which decentralisation plays a role in other states' SDG implementation efforts, using both developed and developing states to account for a greater degree of varying political and socio-economic characteristics, among others.

The findings highlight factors that could improve our understanding of global barriers and their impact on progress to date in achieving the SDGs. According to the OECD (2019) and RAI country-level aggregated data (Schakel, 2022), RAI-scores for American, European and Asian states has been increasing significantly since 1950, with "average regional authority 55% higher in 2010 than in 1950" and 64 percent of all states covered experiencing a net increase in the rate of regional authority (Schakel, 2022 p.79). Given that this data demonstrates a significant trend in increasing levels of decentralisation around the world, there is a need to further understand the unique challenges faced by decentralised states in the implementation of complex frameworks like the 2030 Agenda. While global indicators are used to measure progress, they do not capture the complexities that exist in the day-to-day administration between various levels of government in achieving the SDGs. Creating partnerships and forums between decentralised states, specifically to address their common administrative and jurisdictional challenges is one potential avenue to support information exchange and best practices in the field. Collaborative solutions, evergreen strategies and equitable partnerships are all essential components if we are to accelerate global action to achieve the 2030 Agenda and its SDGs at a more ambitious pace.

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