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Realizing the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development – engaging national parliaments?

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the role of national parliaments in policy processes related to the realization of the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development, adopted in the UN General Assembly in 2015. We outline three main roles of parliaments in the case of national policy-making based on intergovernmental agreements: legislative and policy approval, citizen representation, and accountability. The cases of Sweden and Ghana are examined with regard to those roles, looking for factors that impact the degree of parliamentary involvement with the 2030 Agenda. The cases show that while formal features of political systems impact how parliaments exercise those roles, political choice among policy-making elites and voters is an equally important factor shaping how those roles play out. Yet, political choice can in turn be circumscribed by competing domains, issues and actors in national 2030 Agenda processes. Even if the two countries chosen for comparison are dissimilar with regard to substantive challenges faced in realizing the 2030 Agenda, they are alike with regard to weak involvement of their parliament in policy-making related to the 2030 Agenda thus far. The conclusion puts forward possible implications of a lack of parliamentary involvement for the domestic democratic legitimacy and realization of the 2030 Agenda.

1. Introduction

The 2030 Agenda and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were adopted in the UN General Assembly in 2015 by all UN member state governments. Key UN documents of the 2030 Agenda emphasize adaptation to national circumstances and national ownership of its implementation processes. Broad thematic and national consultations constituted an unprecedented attempt by the UN to legitimize the 2030 Agenda among a range of stakeholders. Five years after its adoption, policy-making processes related to the 2030 Agenda revolve around adaptation of the SDGs to national and local circumstances, implementation, and review processes. This involves deep challenges for national-level policy-making due to the encompassing long-term scope of the 2030

Agenda, comprising societal, economic, and environmental dimensions of sustainability and containing 232 indicators to measure progress towards the SDGs. Ultimately, global achievement of the SDGs depends on their implementation at national and local levels.

This article aims to advance the study of policy-making at the global-national interface by examining the role of national parliaments in policy processes related to the national adaptation of the 2030 Agenda. The main question addressed is: what factors influence how parliaments have thus far become involved in policy-making related to the 2030 Agenda? A second question concerns the implications of parliamentary involvement (or a lack thereof) for the legitimacy of the 2030 Agenda. Parliamentary deliberation and decision-making are important both for the domestic democratic legitimacy of intergovernmental non-binding agreements and for the realization of such agreements, given that those require budgetary and other long-term decisions. Indeed, a recent article in the present journal puts it succinctly: "parliament matters for policy and policy matters for legitimacy" (Prosser and Denniss 2015). Policy-wise, the non-binding UN General Assembly Resolution *Transforming Our World. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, acknowledges that parliaments have an essential role to play for the 2030 Agenda "through their enactment of legislation and adoption of budgets and their role in ensuring accountability for the effective implementation of our commitments" (§45). This view is shared in an early study of ways in which parliament in Bangladesh could engage with the SDGs to support their realization (Datta and Rabbany 2016). While there is an expanding range of policy handbooks on how parliaments ought to engage with the SDGs published by the UN (e.g. UNDP et al. 2017), the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU 2016) and civil society organizations (e.g. Together 2030 2018), scholarly publications that like the present article examine the actual role of parliaments for the 2030 Agenda empirically are in short supply. One important exception is an overview that finds nascent parliamentary involvement with the SDGs in 64 out of 153 examined countries. Of the latter, 32 have some form of parliamentary body dedicated to SDG issues whereas in 13 countries parliament deals with budget issues related to the SDGs (Fitsilis and De Vrieze 2019). That overview provides an informative broader background to the in-depth case studies conducted in this article.

In order to empirically explore factors that influence the nature of parliamentary involvement in policy processes related to the 2030 Agenda, we make a qualitative comparative study of the role of parliament in two countries, namely Sweden and Ghana. The reasoning behind the choice of countries is the following. The 2030 Agenda is supposed to be realized by all countries regardless of political system or socio-economic circumstances. At the same time, for a study of parliaments to make sense on normative grounds, we restrict our cases to countries classified as democratic and free (Freedom House 2019) but that differ markedly in terms of socio-economic development. Sweden is a high-income country while Ghana is a lower middle-income country. According to the widely cited Bertelsmann SDG-index 2018, Sweden ranks number 1 and Ghana number 101 in terms of capacity to realize the SDGs (Sachs et al. 2018). Consequently, the two countries face quite different substantive challenges with regard to the 2030 Agenda. Moreover, the governments of both countries have since 2015 declared high political ambitions with regard to the 2030 Agenda, as well as inclusive approaches to its realization, which increases the likelihood of parliamentary involvement. This means

that if we do not find much substantive parliamentary involvement in these two countries, it is unlikely we find more in others.

Our main contribution is to the emergent field of research on sustainable development policy pursued through the 2030 Agenda and beyond. This field still lacks studies of political institutions exploring how the 2030 Agenda is brought into national policy-making processes. The exception is recent literature dealing specifically with accountability and the 2030 Agenda (e.g. Bexell and Jönsson 2017, 2019; Karlsson-Vinkhuyzen, Dahl, and Persson 2018; Ocampo and Gómez-Arteaga 2016; Persson, Weitz, and Nilsson 2016). In this literature, parliaments are listed as one of the key actors able to hold governments to account for (lack of) attempts to fulfil the 2030 Agenda. Beyond being present on such lists, parliaments have not been given research attention in their own right. While accountability is clearly a key function of parliaments, we argue for a broader understanding of the role of parliaments for the 2030 Agenda and we empirically study their role thus far. In broader perspective, we also contribute to literature on legitimacy in global governance. The challenges of realizing intergovernmental agreements have long been a topic of concern for researchers as well as policymakers. Many international organizations are contested and their perceived legitimacy deficits may weaken compliance with their agreements (Tallberg, Bäckstrand, and Scholte 2018). However, research on legitimacy in global governance has not paid much attention to the role of national parliaments in processes through which global governance policies are integrated into domestic politics. Instead, research has mainly concerned inter-parliamentary cooperation in networks such as the Inter-Parliamentary Union on the international stage (Šabič 2008; Jönsson and Johnsson 2018). To the extent that national parliaments have been studied with regard to policies adopted by intergovernmental organizations, the focus has almost exclusively been on the European Union (e.g. Tsakatika 2007; Auel and Christiansen 2015).

This article concerns the time period from 2012, when SDG-consultations began, until 2019. Most attention is devoted to the period after the formal adoption of the 2030 Agenda in 2015. Our empirical material is of two main kinds: policy documents and interviews. Policy documents consist of progress reports, implementation guides, written statements, policy recommendations and meeting summaries from the UN, governments and civil society organizations (CSOs). Material from the two parliaments in our case studies are, however, not entirely identical. While the Swedish parliament has a search engine enabling thematic searches of parliamentary proceedings, the search engine of the Ghanaian parliament covers less comprehensive material (cf. Osei and Malang 2018, 410). Consequently, parts of our comparative analysis rest on somewhat different kinds of policy material. Moreover, we provide new empirical material through our interviews. We have conducted 33 interviews in Sweden and 21 interviews in Ghana[1] with key informants working with the SDGs in various policy-making capacities, such as government officials at ministries and government agencies, members of parliament (MPs), statistical experts, CSO representatives and UN representatives.[2] Interviews have given us insights on national level processes on the 2030 Agenda beyond what is available in policy documents, including critique and external observations on such processes.[3] As explained below, our unit of analysis is a parliamentary role rather than the institution of parliament in its entirety or the full policy-making process. Neither do we investigate the role of political parties per se, even if party politics is mentioned in the analysis.

The next section sets the stage for our case studies by identifying three main roles of parliaments in the case of national policy-making based on intergovernmental agreements. After that, we examine the cases of Sweden and Ghana with regard to each of those roles. The conclusion advances factors we have found to influence the nature of parliamentary involvement. It also discusses possible implications for democratic legitimacy of the low level of parliamentary involvement that we observe in both countries and provides policy recommendations.

2. Parliaments and the 2030 Agenda: legislative and policy approval, citizen representation, and accountability

This section first identifies central roles to be performed by parliament in the case of intergovernmental agreements and then suggests factors expected to influence the nature of parliamentary involvement in the two countries in focus of this article. Research on parliaments brings to the fore a set of key roles that this institution is supposed to fulfil, even if there is great variation with regard to how those roles are carried out in practice. Parliament is the institutional arena through which societies realize representative democracy on a day-to-day basis. It is the central political institution in chains of delegation of power, from voters to those who govern (Bergman and Strøm 2004; Lindvall 2019). Regardless of the type of electoral system, a main function of parliament is to represent the varied and conflicting interests existing in society as a whole (Barkan 2013, 253). Parliament takes legislative decisions and is supposed to hold the government accountable for its performance on behalf of the public (Strøm 2000; Müller, Bergman, and Strøm 2003). Clearly, the kind of political accountability that parliaments are able to demand is the most comprehensive in scope, insofar as the government taken as a whole is accountable to the representatives of a demo for all policy areas and linkages between policy areas (Tsakatika 2007, 557). To be effective, accountability requires information on the basis of which parliaments can hold governments accountable for their performance (or lack thereof) (Barkan 2013, 253; Malang 2018). Moreover, legislative research has over the past decade brought increasing attention to the parliament-citizen relationship beyond elections in light of broader debates on the quality of representative democracy (Leston-Bandeira 2012; Hendriks and Kay 2019).

The role of national parliaments in international affairs is primarily carried out at the domestic level, while underpinned by international engagement of individual MPs (Jönsson and Johnsson 2018; Malang 2018). Direct participation by national parliaments in policy adoption processes in intergovernmental organizations is rare, and primarily indirect through international parliamentary organs such as the Inter-Parliamentary Union. With regard to international conventions, the school of democratic intergovernmentalism emphasizes the legitimating power of parliamentary ratification where signatory states act as representatives of their people, particularly in the case of the European Union. Through ratification, parliament in this view becomes an element in a chain of conferring legitimacy upon intergovernmental decisions (Keohane, Macedo, and Moravcsik 2009). A key role for parliaments with regard to intergovernmental policies is to scrutinize how governments live up to commitments made in intergovernmental fora. However, being a resolution adopted in the UN General Assembly, the 2030 Agenda is not legally binding and does not demand formal ratification by national parliaments.

Instead of using the term "law-making", we, therefore, use the broader term "legislative and policy approval" which includes both legislative decisions, approval of the government's budget bill and non-legal action plans suggested to parliament by government.

On the above basis, we posit the following three parliamentary roles to be central for the domestic democratic legitimacy of the 2030 Agenda: legislative and policy approval, citizen representation, and accountability. These do not constitute an exhaustive list of parliamentary roles, but we argue they are of particular importance in the case of creating domestic legitimacy of nonbinding intergovernmental agreements. In the 2030 Agenda context, *legislative and policy approval* can occur through parliamentary decisions on laws, budgets, and policies in which the SDGs or the broader 2030 Agenda are referenced. In particular, the SDGs and their 232 quantitative indicators require adaptation to national circumstances. Bearing in mind that the power to initiate policy-making lies with government, parliamentary approval of SDG indicators and action plans contributes to broaden political ownership of the 2030 Agenda. Further, potential goal conflicts require authoritative democratic decisions on how the SDGs should be understood in relation to policies of domestic political origin. The parliamentary role of *representation* means in the SDG context to represent citizens' views on priorities and trade-offs related to the SDGs. The parliament is an arena where trade-offs between values can be negotiated publicly (Tsakatika 2007). Democratic processes involve articulation of specific interests as well as aggregation of a broad range of those interests into a greater whole (Jönsson and Johnsson 2018). As concerns *accountability*, horizontal peer review among governments in the annual UN High-level Political Forum on the 2030 Agenda intersects with hierarchical accountability of domestic politics where parliament is mandated to oversee government policy (Bexell and Jönsson 2019). While other actors also monitor governments' performance, parliaments have the formal ability to vote governments out of power. In this way, parliament can force the executive power to be accountable also between elections (Barkan 2013, 253; Bergman and Strøm 2004).

We expect both institutional factors related to the political system and actor-centred factors to shape the nature of parliamentary involvement with the 2030 Agenda with regard to these three roles. Despite similarities between Sweden and Ghana in terms of having democratic multi-party systems and unicameral parliaments with elections every four years, there are several differences. Sweden has a proportional electoral system where the prime minister is dependent on support in the Swedish parliament (Möller 2016). Ghana is a republic with strong presidential power through direct elections and a Westminister-type "winner-takes-it-all" parliamentary system (Bogaards 2013; Barkan 2013). Ghana is a young democracy with a less institutionalized referral system than Sweden where consensus building is key (Lundberg 2015). Even though Ghana has had a multi-party system since 1992, it has a history of no-party government. This means that political competition revolves more strongly than in Sweden around the individual who runs for political office, rather than around parties (Bogaards 2013, 265–267). Moreover, large socio-economic differences imply that the involvement of intergovernmental organizations in policy processes is quite different in the two countries, with likely implications for the engagement of parliaments. While Ghana strives towards full development policy ownership and becoming aid-free (Ahrin 2016; Brown 2017), we expect involvement of its parliament to be weak due to strong presidential power and to deep involvement of several UN bodies in Ghana's attempts at reaching the SDGs (UN 2018). We expect involvement of the Swedish parliament with the 2030 Agenda to be slow but

increasing due to institutional factors such as the referral system and the strong parliamentary committee structure which does not lend itself well to holistic policy frameworks such as the 2030 Agenda.

In sum, possible institutional factors of importance for parliamentary engagement with the 2030 Agenda concern the strength of the executive in relation to parliament, the democratic qualities of the country at hand, the parliamentary committee system and the extent of consultation procedures during policy-making. Actor-centred factors include the degrees of government ambition for the 2030 Agenda, of initiative by individual MPs, of politicization around the 2030 Agenda and of voter interest. We now turn to empirically investigating how parliaments have become engaged in policy processes related to the 2030 Agenda in Sweden and Ghana respectively.

3. National parliaments and the 2030 Agenda in Sweden and Ghana

3.1 . Legislative and policy approval

3.1.1. Sweden

The 2030 Agenda has not been the object of Swedish parliamentary policy approval or legislation in its own right. While the global consultations conducted before the adoption of the SDGs were the most extensive ones to date in terms of outreach beyond governments, they mainly involved Swedish elites active in the realm of international development cooperation. UN-supported national consultations were not conducted in high-income countries. For its part, the Swedish government at the time invited a variety of stakeholder groups to a dozen shorter consultation sessions. Some MPs (Interview 3, 2015; Interviews 11, 15, 2016) felt they had been well informed by the government but not involved enough in the consultation process as such. A few had been invited to consultation events, but, as one MP puts it "one person can only do so much" (Interview 3, 2015). Tellingly, MPs were invited to dialogues together with the range of other stakeholders as "a member of your organization" rather than in their specific capacity (Interview 4, 2015). After the adoption of the 2030 Agenda in the UN, the Social Democrat/Green Party government declared its ambition that Sweden would be a role model with regard to implementation of the 2030 Agenda. The government decided that the 2030 Agenda would become aligned with existing governmental structures and each minister was assigned responsibility for its implementation within his or her domain. Prime Minister Stefan Löfven also created an informal High-level Group of nine countries aiming to provide leadership on implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

In terms of hard law, no legislation containing the term "2030 Agenda" or "Sustainable Development Goals" could yet be found in domestic law as of late 2019. Instead, the Government has made use of the referral system to prepare a policy plan on how to work with the 2030 Agenda at home and abroad. In 2016, the Government appointed a delegation instructed to produce a plan for Swedish realization of the 2030 Agenda, producing a final report in March 2019. This was in line with the Swedish policy-making process' emphasis on the preparatory phase of fact investigation and deliberation aiming towards agreement across political parties before formal policy approval (Lundberg 2015; Möller 2016). The final report was distributed through the referral system in which public agencies, interest organizations and other stakeholders can issue opinions.

This preparatory phase has been critiqued for being prolonged. Moreover, a number of interviewees claimed it was a challenge to integrate SDG ambitions into parliament's issue-bound committee structure (e.g. Interviews 3, 4, 2015; Interview 23, 2017). The term "2030 Agenda" appears at least once in 119 proposals submitted by parliamentary committees to the full parliament for decision between 2015 and 2018. However, it is mainly mentioned in passing. The term was most frequently used in proposals issued by the Committee on Foreign Affairs, followed by the Committee on Environment and Agriculture and the Committee on Industry and Trade. This indicates that at least until 2018, the 2030 Agenda was mainly dealt with in terms of an international (development cooperation) issue belonging to the domain of parliament's Committee on Foreign Affairs.

Since 2016, the Swedish Government's budget bills have to an increasing extent mentioned the 2030 Agenda among the key long-term policy goals to be implemented under several different areas of state expenditures. These bills have been adopted by parliament but do not have the status of law under the Swedish legal system. Despite having adopted the budget, MPs agreed that there was little discussion about the SDGs in parliament and that most MPs still had limited knowledge about the goals. Opposition party MPs emphasized that the government is supposed to govern the country and that parliament is supposed to react to government proposals on how to do so (Interview 32, 2018). "In order to create political ownership and processes in parliament, we need to receive something to work with from the government" (Interviews 31, 32, 2018). For them, the rationale for rapid parliamentary involvement was the long-term nature of the 2030 Agenda, warranting parliamentary decisions on budgets, priorities, action plans, laws and review mechanisms. It should be noted that one MP was self-critical with regard to being reactive rather than proactive (Interview 3, 2015). At the same time, policy documents (e.g. Agenda 2030-Delegation 2018) as well as our interviews highlight that the substance of the 2030 Agenda overlaps with several parliamentary-adopted long-term Swedish goal systems. In sum, institutional factors related to a slow referral system in combination with actor-centred factors such as strong government ownership of the 2030 Agenda and a lack of parliamentary proactivity implied little parliamentary involvement with the 2030 Agenda until 2020. A government proposal on policy guidelines on the 2030 Agenda scheduled to be submitted to parliament in 2020 means that this will be changing in the future.

3.1.2. Ghana
Similar to Sweden, the adoption of the 2030 Agenda in the UN in 2015 was not an item for the Ghanaian parliament to consider. For its part, the Government of Ghana played a significant role in the development of the SDGs at the global level by providing feed-back from UN-driven national consultations in Ghana. However, the UN General Assembly decision coincided with national elections, leading to a few statements on the SDGs in election debates. The main opposition party (the New Patriotic Party), the then governing National Democratic Congress and the People's National Convention all ensured that the SDGs would be incorporated into their policies, if their party was voted into power.[4] In parliamentary debate, the then Minority Leader claimed that Parliament was part of the success story of the Millennium Development Goals and that Parliament should continue its role in ensuring government policies comply with the SDGs. The parliamentary Majority Leader suggested to scrutinize implementation through new committees.[5] The SDGs were aligned with national policy through a mapping process which involved

public administration officers charged with planning and budgeting. SDGs targets and indicators were reviewed and adapted to suit Ghana's development context (NDPC 2018; UN 2018). At the time, Ghana was already implementing its own national development framework, the Ghana Shared Growth and Development Agenda (2014-2017). According to several interviewees (e.g. Interview 2, 2017; Interviews 13, 18, 2018) and policy documents (e.g. NDPC 2018), 70% of the SDGs already aligned with existing policies. Hence, the *President's Coordinated Programme of Economic and Social Development Policies* (2017-2024) reflects the SDGs and forms the basis for medium-term national development policy frameworks.

In terms of formal SDG policy approval, the role of the parliament has thus far been limited to approval of the government's annual budget bill. This bill has increasingly integrated government plans for the realization of the SDGs. In 2017 and 2018, the national budget listed SDGs supported through different budget expenditures and provided plans for how the government intended to use the budget to push the SDG process forward (Government of Ghana 2017). This was claimed to be the first budget in Africa relating financial expenses to the SDGs (NDPC 2018, 5; Ofori-Atta 2018). Following that, the Ministry of Finance developed a system that allows for the tracking of budget allocations at the level of SDG targets. It also issued separate SDG Budget Reports in 2018 and 2019 (Ghana Ministry of Finance 2019). As concerns parliament, the 2019 SDGs Budget Report suggests that "Ghana should consider a legislative framework for the SDGs. This would ensure that attainment of the Goals is anchored in Parliament's oversight of the national budget" (Ghana Ministry of Finance 2019, 82).

Beyond the budget, searches for "2030 Agenda" or "Sustainable Development Goals" in the (albeit incomplete) search engine of acts, bills and other legislative instruments adopted by Parliament do not yield any results. Other key institutional developments since 2016 have not involved parliament. Ghana's former President Mahama (2012–2016) was appointed co-chair with Norway's Prime Minister Solberg of the UN "SDG Advocates", a group of celebrities and politicians selected to campaign globally for the SDGs. This position was transferred to President Akufo-Addo in 2017 and renewed in 2019 (Yeboa 2019), putting pressure on domestic achievements (Interview 7, 2017). Below the President, a High-level Ministerial Committee provides strategic direction for the implementation of the SDGs with a "whole-of-government" approach. The National Development and Planning Commission (NDPC), the SDGs Implementation Coordination Committee, and the SDGs Technical Committee coordinate work in collaboration with development partners, CSOs and philanthropic organizations (NDPC 2018, 4–5). Ghana has also decided to assume a leadership role in African Union advocacy on implementation of the SDGs. To conclude, in Ghana, policy adaptation has been a matter for public administration rather than politics. Despite socio-economic differences, interviewees of both Sweden and Ghana find a high degree of overlap between pre-existing domestic policies and the 2030 Agenda. Strong executive political ownership of the 2030 Agenda has meant that parliamentary policy approval thus far has revolved around accepting the government's budget proposals.

3.2. Citizen representation

3.2.1. Sweden

Several actors have called for more parliamentary involvement in policy-making related to the SDGs (Interview 25, 2017; Interviews 29, 31, 32, 2018; Agenda 2030 Delegation 2017; Arkelsten 2017/18; Hjerling 2018). At the same time, there was agreement among MPs that voters rarely or never brought up issues in terms of the 2030 Agenda with them (Interview 15, 2016; Interviews 31, 32, 33, 2018). This does not mean that its substance is not important to Swedish voters, but that the 2030 Agenda in itself is not central. In 2016, 41% of Swedish citizens had heard about the SDGs while in 2017 the number was 42% and in 2018 50%. The percentage who could mention one or more of the goals was 24% in 2018 (Gullers grupp 2018). CSO representatives have repeatedly argued for the need for a national public campaign to increase knowledge on the 2030 Agenda (e.g. Rogeman 2017). Several Swedish CSOs have been active in advocacy on the 2030 Agenda since its adoption in 2015, including attempts to disseminate knowledge. One CSO representative noted that even among Swedish CSOs there was low awareness on the 2030 Agenda (Interview 25, 2017).

Soon after its adoption, we interviewed MPs who conveyed that there was not much disagreement among political parties on the 2030 Agenda, i.e. there was a low degree of politicization around it. Only sexual and reproductive health rights created some discussions where one party (the Sweden Democrats) had a diverging position on how far to go on these issues. Interviewees from different political sides agreed that conflicts revolved around how to reach the SDGs rather than the SDGs as such (Interview 11, 2016; Interviews 31, 32, 33, 2018). "Everyone wishes to eradicate hunger but the appropriate means to do so differ between my party and other parties, for instance concerning the role of free trade […] The 2030 Agenda has not added any new conflict dimensions to the ones already existing between political parties" (Interview 31, 2018). One MP thought that the lack of political conflict depended on its high level of abstraction that far, taking time before it would become "hands-on" Swedish policy (Interview 4, 2015). While the European Union (EU) influences Swedish politics much in general, it was not mentioned in our material as an arena of key importance for parliamentary engagement with the 2030 Agenda. The European Commission has issued a reflection paper, *Towards a Sustainable Europe by 2030,* suggesting how to integrate the SDGs in EU affairs (European Commission 2019). This was not brought up by any interviewees when asked about the role of parliaments.

Despite increasing attention among policy elites to potential goal conflicts, there was limited public debate on the 2030 Agenda in conjunction with Swedish general elections in 2018. It is noteworthy, however, that an MP of the Swedish Liberal Party argued for abandoning the 2030 Agenda as guiding policy and instead put the focus on UN conventions related to democracy and human rights. In response, the Minister for Climate and International Development argued for the need for a holistic approach to the 2030 Agenda. Opposition party representatives called for broader agreement between political parties on priorities for the 2030 Agenda in light of the short time horizon until 2030 (*Omvärlden* 2018). Due to a political compromise enabling the formation of a new Social Democrat/ Green Party government in January 2019, Swedish development cooperation policy did increase attention to democracy promotion, mirroring the influence of the Liberal and Centrist parties (*Omvärlden* 2019). In sum, actor-centred factors impacted how parliament has

engaged. Swedish parliamentarians find themselves caught between, on the one hand, a government that wishes to be a leader with regard to the 2030 Agenda, and, on the other hand, party politics and voters who rarely bring up the 2030 Agenda with them.

3.2.2. Ghana

In Ghana, awareness of the SDGs is low among the general public (Interviews 11, 13, 16, 17, 2018; Government of Ghana 2019, 118). This is partly because of the country's multitude of languages (Interviews 4, 8, 2017) and due to delays in spreading knowledge because of a wish to coordinate messages about different policy plans in order to "avoid confusion" (Interview 2, 2017). This is changing with awareness campaigns rolled out in 2019 (Government of Ghana 2019). Still, for most Ghanaian voters, national elections are primarily about local and regional development, which is not thought of in terms of the SDGs. One interviewee (Interview 15, 2018) stated that MPs visit their constituencies very frequently and assist projects at district and regional levels (Interview 15, 2018; Osei and Malang 2018). The same person pointed out that MPs may use such visits to promote themselves by being associated with projects related to the SDGs (cf. Barkan 2013, 253). Interestingly, another interviewee (Interview 18, 2018) said that "the parliament represents the local people", but then criticized parliamentarians for being more interested in what happens at the national level rather than at the local level. These views should be understood in the wider political context. Re-current peaceful and fair elections have consolidated democracy and significant progress has been made in poverty reduction. At the same time, persistent corruption and increasing inequalities impact how policies are translated into practice (UN 2018, 3; Bessey 2019). As a result, mistrust in politicians is outspoken and probably has roots in the earlier no-party system (see Bogaards 2013, 266). Tellingly, one of the recommendations from the UN-conducted national consultations on localization of the 2030 Agenda in Ghana was to depoliticize development issues, as politics was "not helping the development process" (UN 2014, 17). This, in essence, speaks against involvement of the parliament, being a site of political contention.

Since the election in 2016, we have not found any significant politicized debates about the substance of the SDGs in Ghana. Nonetheless, in our material, we can identify tensions related to their implementation between the political opposition and the ruling party. One of our interviewees argued that all political parties agree that the SDGs have to be achieved regardless of which party is in power. The problem is resources. "But if the money is not there, nothing will happen" (Interview 19, 2018). Yet another interviewee saw a division between those in power and the opposition. This was viewed as a weakness because the SDGs need broad consensus for delivering (Interview 11, 2018). Partisan interests in combination with low levels of information and awareness of the SDGs among MPs were considered weaknesses by several interviewees (also see Amankwa 2019). Our interviewees did not express critique of the SDGs as such, however. Their main concern was that the SDGs are too ambitious and difficult to fulfil in a Ghanaian context (Interview 6, 2017). One MP advocated a specialized SDG-committee in parliament, for example by turning the Poverty Reduction Committee into an SDG-committee: "Everything is about poverty reduction!" (Interview 16, 2018). This differs from Sweden where most references to the 2030 Agenda could be found in parliament's Committee on Foreign Affairs. One interviewee (Interview 16, 2018) alluded to committee silos in the Ghanaian parliament and stated that cooperation will not happen unless the Speaker so decides.

Like in Sweden, CSOs actively seek to engage the public on the 2030 Agenda. CSOs are invited to take part in national committees working with the SDGs. CSOs also self-organize, notably in the CSO Platform on SDGs established in 2015. By the end of 2017, more than 150 local and international CSOs worked in SDG-clusters in order to raise awareness of the SDGs and to promote community engagement at the district level (NDPC 2018; UN 2018, 7). The UN has taken an active role in promoting the 2030 Agenda through the United Nations Sustainable Development Partnership (UNSDP), but also by training journalists in SDGs reporting and by translating SDG-messages into local languages (UN 2016; Interview 9, 2017). Even so, one of the interviewees (Interview 20, 2018) thought that there had not been any conscious efforts to spread knowledge among the population, indicating a persistent gap between the urban-based elite and the general public. In sum, the SDGs are not a central issue in representational chains between voters and parliamentarians. Neither has there been any politicization which has increased voter interest in the 2030 Agenda. Rather, other development actors such as the UN and civil society have sought to engage the public in national 2030 Agenda affairs in Ghana.

3.3. Accountability

3.3.1. Sweden

Regardless of political affiliation, our interviewees emphasized parliament's monitoring role with regard to SDG realization by present and future governments. MPs considered parliament's supervisory role to be increasingly central as the 2030 deadline approaches (Interviews 3, 4, 2015; Interviews 11, 15, 2016; Interviews 31, 32, 33 2018). Interviewees mention several means through which parliament could exercise monitoring: formal questions to responsible ministers in parliamentary plenary, individual MP motions, interpellation debates, seminars with public hearings, and opinions in committee reports (e.g. Interview 33, 2018). Thus far, only a few attempts at using parliamentary procedures for monitoring of government ambitions on the 2030 Agenda have been made. One opposition party MP has stood out by criticizing the lack of parliamentary involvement through putting a formal question on this matter in parliament to the minister in charge of national implementation. In addition, every second year, the Government issues a written communication to parliament, reporting on how it works with the parliamentary adopted *Policy on Global Development*, now aligned with the 2030 Agenda. This has placed monitoring of the 2030 Agenda primarily with the Committee on Foreign Affairs, limiting monitoring efforts by other parliamentary committees (Interview 33, 2018).

Accountability measures specifically geared towards the 2030 Agenda can been discerned in two non-parliamentary arenas. One is intergovernmental, namely the UN High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development, where the Swedish government reported in 2017 (Bexell and Jönsson 2019; Swedish Government 2017). While it is beyond the scope of this article to detail that reporting process, our material bears witness of a lack of involvement of the Swedish Parliament in it. Without parliamentary involvement and unknown among the general public, the reporting process remained an elite project by the government for an international audience, including of international CSOs. Reporting at best provided the groundwork for future domestic accountability. Yet, in light of the long-term nature of the 2030 Agenda, a concern raised by interviewees was that future

governments could not be held accountable on the basis of prior governments' SDG ambitions (Interview 23, 2018). If there had been a long-term parliamentary decision, that could serve as a ground for governmental accountability until 2030. The second arena is domestic civil society. Thus far, CSOs have been more active in monitoring government than has parliament with regard to the 2030 Agenda. Our interviews show that there are high expectations on and among Swedish CSOs that they should act as watchdogs in relation to the government's work towards the 2030 Agenda (Interview 6, 2015; Interviews 7, 13, 16, 2016; Interview 25, 2017; Interviews 28, 29, 2018; Concord Sweden 2018). Several CSOs have voiced critique arguing that the government is too slow in implementation attempts related to the SDGs. After the Swedish general election in 2018, CSO representatives pointed to the need for a new government to step up efforts on the 2030 Agenda if Sweden was at all to be considered a role model (e.g. Tibblin 2018). In conclusion, a lack of a sense of political ownership among MPs for the 2030 Agenda implies few attempts at monitoring implementation.

3.3.2. Ghana

All interviewees highlighted the essential role of the Ghanaian parliament in ensuring governmental accountability for SDG implementation, but they also pointed out that there is not yet much to oversee in this regard. One interviewee said that there is a lack of independence of parliament, which in turn weakens its supervisory role. Knowledge among MPs about the SDGs was not considered sufficient to hold the government accountable or to track the budget, according to several interviewees (Interviews 11, 13, 16, 17, 2018). "It is a joke when it comes to issues of accountability in this country. We have all the fine-print policies and laws. As to whether we are actively involved in promoting accountability is another thing altogether" (Interview 16, 2018). However, an indicator baseline report was published in June 2018 and the Government of Ghana presented a Voluntary National Review at the UN High-level Political Forum in New York in July 2019. The leadership of Parliament was listed among stakeholders who could review a draft of the Voluntary National Review (Government of Ghana 2019, xv, 36). In late 2019, the Parliament decided to establish an Ad Hoc Committee charged with oversight of Ghana's progress on the SDGs. The seven-member committee will scrutinize progress reports from ministries and advise parliament on budget matters to ensure the government seeks to fulfil the SDGs.[6]

Several interviewees (Interviews 14, 18, 20, 2018) highlighted accountability challenges related to the quality of statistics, quantitative indicators and data collection in Ghana. For example, one interviewee (Interview 12, 2018) used the principle of "leave no one behind" to illustrate difficulties of data disaggregation along geographic locations in order to identify the most vulnerable groups. The Ghana Statistical Service and the NDPC have created an SDG Data Roadmap, which is expected to facilitate monitoring (UN 2018, 6). Also, the Minister of Planning intends to use the Voluntary National Review to increase public awareness, citizen participation and national ownership of the SDGs (Government of Ghana 2019). And as one interviewee put it: "Ghana likes being the best student in the class. So I think the SDGs will make the government work harder on reporting" (Interview 4, 2018). Moreover, participation of CSOs in SDG work was considered important for transparency and accountability (Interview 13, 2018). Even so, the changing development landscape in Ghana with less reliance on foreign aid has affected the roles of civil society

spanning across service provision, advocacy and being represented in various state committees (Ahrin 2016, 559). CSOs fill many gaps but are dependent on dwindling donor support, making broad outreach difficult (Interview 17, 2018). To conclude, a lack of institutional arrangements specifically centred on monitoring the SDGs and their indicators has meant little parliamentary involvement thus far. Actor-centred factors such as low voter interest underpin a lack of MP initiative. Instead, CSOs have taken upon themselves to monitor government. This may be changing with the establishment of a parliamentary SDG-committee in Ghana, taking advantage of formal institutional structures.

4. Conclusions

The encompassing scope of the 2030 Agenda and its 17 SDGs raises great challenges for countries aiming to take them seriously, in international cooperation as well as domestically. This article has examined the role of national parliaments in policy processes related to the national adaptation of the 2030 Agenda in Sweden and Ghana. We find that even if the two countries chosen for comparison are dissimilar with regard to the substantive challenges faced in realizing the 2030 Agenda, they are alike with regard to weak involvement of their parliament in policy-making related to the 2030 Agenda thus far. Below we discuss factors that influence how parliaments have become involved in policy-making related to the 2030 Agenda, possible implications of a lack of parliamentary involvement and provide policy recommendations and suggestions for further research.

As expected, formal institutional factors related to the national political system have shaped how parliaments exercise their roles with regard to the 2030 Agenda. In the case of Sweden, policy planning through the referral system has characterized policy-making on the 2030 Agenda thus far. While neither Sweden nor Ghana have made the SDGs part of hard law, both parliaments have approved government budget bills that frame expenses in terms of the SDGs. The formal budget process is the main way in which parliaments have been engaged, subject to strong political ownership of the 2030 Agenda by the executive in each country. In this respect, socio-economic differences between the two countries turn out not to make a difference for parliamentary involvement. Such differences do matter however with regard to how the 2030 Agenda during its first few years was approached by parliament. In Sweden, references to the 2030 Agenda most often appeared in deliberations by the Committee on Foreign Affairs, framed as a matter of international development cooperation despite the government's holistic ambitions. In Ghana, the 2030 Agenda has been mainly associated with the Poverty Reduction Committee and domestic politics. An institutional factor that has limited parliamentary involvement is that parliamentary committees in both countries primarily work in silos in terms of the issue areas covered.

Actor-centred factors that we expected to influence how parliaments engage with the 2030 Agenda also appear influential albeit more unpredictable than institutional factors. In the case of Ghana, a new president can change political priorities quite substantially once in power without involving parliament. None of the parliaments has been a been driver of initiatives on the 2030 Agenda. In the Swedish case, political power has shifted from the parliament to the government over the last three decades, giving the government strong agenda-setting power (Lindvall 2019). In the case of Ghana, we have as expected found the UN to be an influential actor in terms of achievement of the SDGs.

Even if Ghana has strong policy-making ownership (Brown 2017), it has long-standing collaboration with the UN and other external actors. This is in line with our expectations on the influence of socio-economic differences for how parliaments become engaged in relation to other actors in development. Moreover, a lack of politicization in both countries is likely to have contributed to low parliamentary involvement in combination with low knowledge of the 2030 Agenda among the general public in its capacity as voters.

Our empirical material also points to a third cluster of factors shaping parliamentary involvement, namely that of competing domains. This includes factors such as the relative influence of other actors, other political levels and other pressing issues on the national political agenda. In both countries, CSOs appear to have had more influence than parliaments on the respective government's work with the 2030 Agenda. Our material shows that a substantial part of SDG work has involved cooperation between the government, the UN, and CSOs rather than involving the Ghanaian parliament. There is also a large urban-rural divide in Ghana, making national and local political levels detached for many citizens. In addition, there is a continuous stream of competing political issues, short-term as well as long-term. In Sweden, extensive migration flows in 2015–2016 is one example of the factor of issue competition in national politics (Lindvall 2019). Overall, factors related to competing domains and issues seem to limit the extent to which actor-centred factors shape parliamentary involvement with the 2030 Agenda, reinforcing the influence of institutional factors instead.

What are the possible implications of a lack of substantive parliamentary involvement for the domestic democratic legitimacy of the 2030 Agenda? With regard to legislative and policy approval, a lack of parliamentary involvement implies that there are no long-term democratic decisions made on its implementation, stretching beyond election cycles and government change. Yet, politically unpopular decisions are likely to be needed in light of the demands of the 2030 Agenda. In other words, a lack of parliamentary policy approval may restrain its implementation. With regard to citizen representation, if domestic representative political institutions do not engage with the 2030 Agenda there is a risk that a gap is created between what governments do in intergovernmental bodies and what kind of policies citizens support. Moreover, a lack of parliamentary involvement implies that accountability through parliamentary oversight will not be strong with regard to government performance in relation to the 2030 Agenda. The monitoring functions of parliament are less likely to be invoked for scrutinizing national realization if parliament has not obtained a basic level of political ownership of the 2030 Agenda (cf. Jönsson and Bexell 2020). In the longer run, it remains to be seen whether the 2030 Agenda exemplifies the general de-parliamentarization of modern politics, pointed to in earlier research on national parliaments in West European countries such as Sweden (e.g. Bergman and Strøm 2004).

As concerns policy implications, our study shows that there is reason to take proactive measures to strengthen the role of national parliaments in the case of the 2030 Agenda. Governments should seek broad political agreement in parliament on policy plans for the implementation of the SDGs until 2030, aiming to avoid reconsideration of SDG policy priorities after each national election. Parliamentarians should on their own initiative make use of their monitoring powers to put the spotlight on how the government fares with regard to realizing the SDGs. In light of the importance of

institutional factors, political debate on the state budget is a good opportunity to raise issues of political priorities (see also IPU 2016; Together 2030 2018). Another opportunity is the creation of a parliamentary committee dedicated to the 2030 Agenda as has been done in Ghana and several other countries. Alternatively, an existing parliamentary committee can be assigned the task to monitor implementation of the SDGs. This was the case for instance in the Australian Senate's Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee and the UK House of Commons International Development Committee in 2019. Both examples, however, bear witness of the tendency among donor countries to regard the SDGs as a matter of international affairs. Ideally, institutional arrangements should mirror the fact that the SDGs imply substantive domestic challenges to all countries. Reaching out to voters, parliamentarians can more explicitly refer to the 2030 Agenda when debating sustainable development politics in order to spread knowledge about its existence. As suggested by Datta and Rabbany (2016) in the case of Bangladesh, parliaments can hold hearings and request plenary reports which can increase attention to the SDGs among the public, media and civil society. Moreover, our case studies have pointed to the influence of CSOs on national SDG work. Domestic civil society should use its advocacy power towards government to argue for the importance of increased parliamentary ownership of the 2030 Agenda (see also Together 2030 2018).

This article has provided a foundation for comparisons across parliaments in different kinds of countries in order to nurture continued research on the role of political institutions for the realization of the 2030 Agenda. In the realm of sustainable development, policies adopted at global, national and local levels compete for political attention. Many parliaments across the world have begun to engage with the SDGs and the broader 2030 Agenda in various ways. Additional comparative case studies can contribute to broader systematic knowledge on legitimacy challenges involved as national parliaments are faced with intergovernmental decisions that governments have agreed on. A next step for social science research is also to study how the globally adopted 2030 Agenda is taken from the national level to the local municipal policy-making level. There, representative political institutions will continue to face legitimacy challenges related to the 2030 Agenda in light of diverging views on the best route to a more sustainable world.

Notes

1. We would like to thank our research assistant Pasko M. Kisic for conducting interviews in Accra in 2017 and 2018.
2. We do not cite each of these interviews. Yet, all are important in terms of constituting the broader empirical knowledge on which our analysis builds. We refer to interviewees by the numbering used in our own interview records. For reasons of anonymity, we do not include a list of interviewees.
3. Mirroring usage in our empirical material, we mix the terms "2030 Agenda" and "SDGs" throughout this article, even if strictly speaking the 2030 Agenda contains a broader set of ambitions than the seventeen SDGs.
4. http://citifmonline.com/2016/07/22/well-prioritise-devt-goals-in-our-manifestoes-parties/
5. https://new-ndpc-static1.s3.amazonaws.com/CACHES/PUBLICATIONS/2016/02/13/ Minority+Leader%27s+Speech.pdf, last accessed 20 January 2020.
6. https://www.parliament.gh/news?CO=66, last accessed 19 December 2019.

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