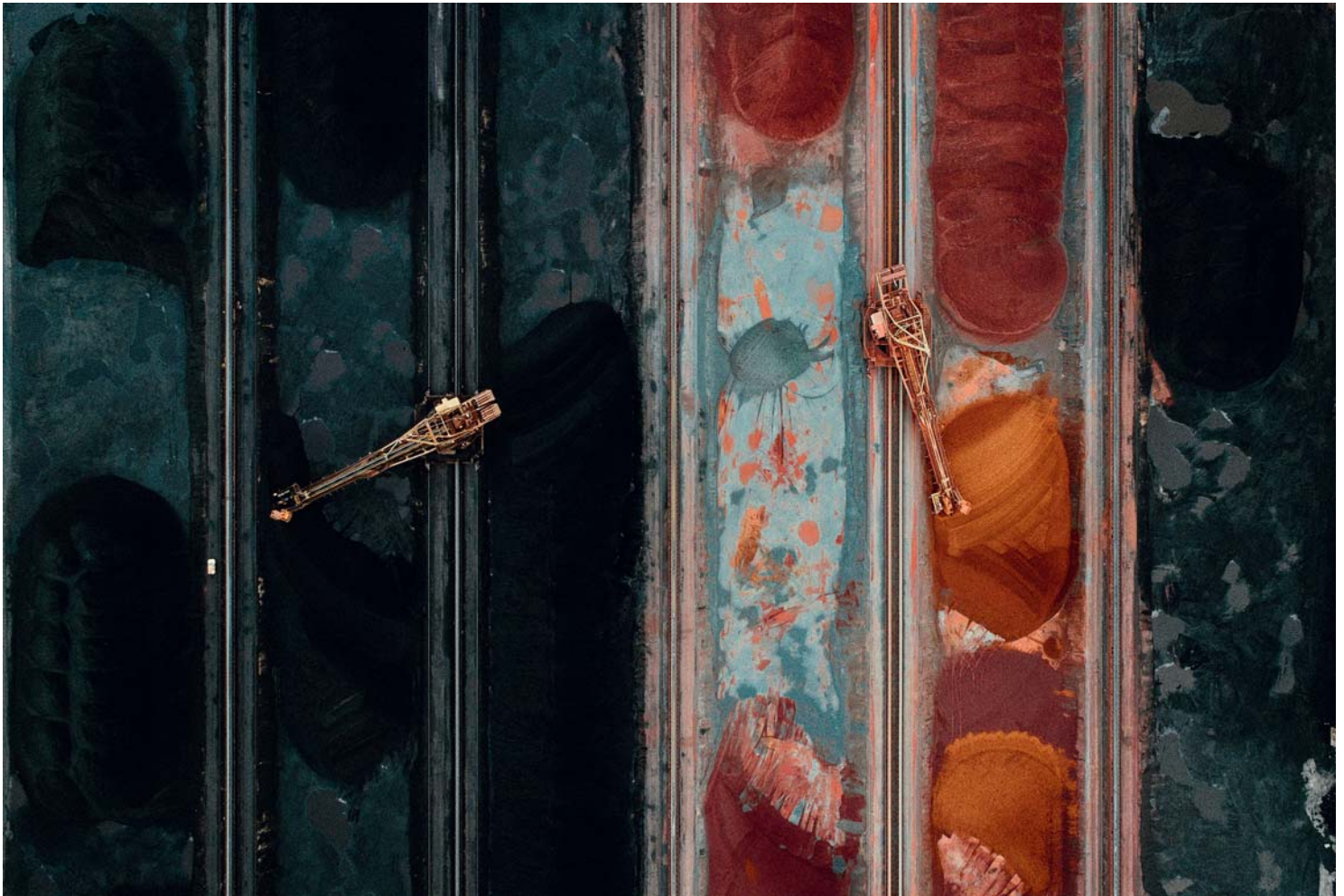


# GAIiA 1 | 2019

ECOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES FOR SCIENCE AND SOCIETY  
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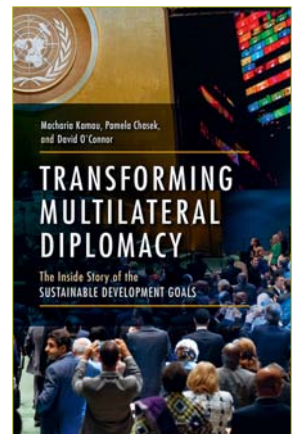
- WISSENSCHAFT ALS KONFLIKTLÖSERIN
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# A new paradigm for global sustainability governance

Inside look from the trenches of the SDGs negotiation arena

*The process of setting the Sustainable Development Goals through the United Nations marks a sea change in how the UN conducts multilateral diplomacy. Key participants from governments, the UN Secretariat, and civil society tell their story of the tedious negotiations.*

Frank Biermann



Kamau, M., P. Chasek, D. O'Connor (Eds.). 2018. *Transforming multilateral diplomacy: The inside story of the Sustainable Development Goals*. London: Routledge. 354 pp., 29.99 GBP, ISBN 978-0-8133-5086-8

In 2015, the United Nations General Assembly agreed on a new policy vision for the next 15 years: the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*. At the centre of this *Agenda* are 17 broad *Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)* with 169 more concrete targets. This approach of setting global goals through the United Nations is not without precedent and has been pioneered earlier, for instance in the *Millennium Development Goals* that had been set for the previous 15-year period. And yet, the *SDGs* are novel in many ways: by addressing not only developing countries but also industrialized countries in the Global North; by covering an extremely wide variety of human activities and concerns; and by building on the legitimacy of a complex multilateral process that included the views of numerous stakeholders and governments. With the *SDGs*, many observers agree that the United Nations have embarked on a new policy approach of “governing through goals”. Undoubtedly, the new “global goals” have attained a central position in current global sustainability governance.

## Key players tell an inside story

How was this new policy development possible? How did these goals come about in tedious negotiations, and what were the key

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actors and their interests in this process that lasted only three years from 2012 to 2015? Those who wanted to learn the details about these negotiations had either to consult shorter articles and blogs by a few insiders or to rely on a few academic studies that lack the deep insights from the trenches of the negotiation arena. Given this situation, *Transforming Multilateral Diplomacy: The Inside Story of the Sustainable Development Goals*, fills a major gap.

The book is written by three prominent experts with deep inside knowledge. Ambassador Macharia Kamau served as the co-chair of the open working group that negotiated the *SDGs* and became afterwards the co-facilitator of the intergovernmental negotiations that developed the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*. Pamela Chasek is a leading expert on sustainable development policies, not the least as a founding editor of the *Earth Negotiations Bulletin* and author of several accessible books on global sustainability governance. David O'Connor was during these negotiations chief of the Policy and Analysis Branch within the UN Secretariat's Department of Economic and Social Affairs, and hence adds an important perspective from inside the UN system. It would hardly be possible to find a better informed team of authoritative authors for this inside story.

## Diplomatic history in global sustainability governance

In short, *Transforming Multilateral Diplomacy* is a compelling contribution to the genre of diplomatic history in global sus-

tainability governance. The book offers a wealth of details of the daily ups and downs in the negotiations, along with manifold insights in actors' perspectives that have not been known to a wider public so far. The authors provide some background about the earlier *Millennium Development Goals*, and then follow the negotiations starting with the *2012 UN Conference on Sustainable Development* (also known as *Rio plus 20 Conference*), including detailed analyses of various actor groups, negotiation tactics and the emergence of each of the 17 goals.

*Transforming Multilateral Diplomacy* has no overarching academic ambition, and references to theoretical work in international relations or global governance are rare. That does not mean that the authors refrain from causal statements, and their views on the key explanatory factors for the eventual agreements and policy outcomes are clear. One key explanation that the book offers is that indeed, the negotiation of the *SDGs* indicates a transformation of multilateral diplomacy. This transformation includes several structural changes, for instance the innovative grouping of countries in pairs or trios to keep the number of negotiating parties small. Also, the involvement of civil society and other non-state actors, while not novel per se, might have increased the legitimacy, buy-in and increasing enthusiasm for the goals over the last years. *Transforming Multilateral Diplomacy* also brings

numerous insights about the nitty-gritty details of negotiations that make it essential reading for practitioners in diplomacy or global civil society, for instance regarding the innovation that textual changes were no longer negotiated in plenary session on major screens – encouraging public posturing and intransigence of governments – but entered rather in iterative new drafts by the co-chairs, who kept “holding the pen” throughout the process.

### Objective analysis and personal autobiography

One unique element of this book is the inherent combination of objective analysis and personal autobiography, given that Ambassador Macharia Kamau doubles here as the book's lead author and as key player in the negotiations that are analysed. Hence we find numerous autobiographic parts which are, at first confusingly, formulated in the third person singular. For instance, Kamau et al. write that “Kamau had been intellectually and emotionally drained after the SDG negotiations. He couldn't imag-

ine himself back in the game and taking on such an onerous task. But after a three-week holiday,” Kamau et al. continue, “he began to feel mentally recharged and believed that he could see the process through” (p. 213). Such oddities of Kamau writing about Kamau, however, are inevitable given the tripartite composition of the author team and their own personal role in the process that they are analysing; after some initial confusion the reader gets used to this approach and even enjoys the many memorable autobiographic passages.

Given that the first author, Ambassador Kamau, had himself co-chaired the working group that developed the SDGs, a strong critique of the process under his leadership or its outcome is hardly to be expected. Indeed, the book ends in a more or less positive assessment of the SDGs and sees much promise in this novel approach. It even states that “this unique process restored faith in multilateralism and has opened the door to changing the way that UN negotiations are conducted”. It is still too early in the follow-up process to judge this optimis-

tic claim. Yet, the rather quick and smooth negotiation of these all-encompassing, complex and contested global goals could indeed point to the conclusion that a new wind is blowing at UN headquarters in New York.

### Conclusion

In sum, *Transforming Multilateral Diplomacy* is a so far unparalleled contribution to our understanding of the negotiations that led to the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* and the 17 goals. It is essential reading for scholars and students who engage in research on this new chapter in the history of global sustainability governance. The book has also much value for practitioners in international negotiations, from diplomats who prepare for UN processes to the many civil society representatives who wish to better understand the at times confusing practices within the UN. Last but not least, this book is essential reading for all those who seek to engage with the SDGs in national or local settings and look for a better understanding of the negotiation history that led to these amazing 17 global goals.

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