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Walter Leal Filho, Claudio R. P. Vasconcelos, Maria Alzira Pimenta Dinis & Laís Viera Trevisan

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## Commentary - empty promises: why declarations and international cooperation on sustainable development often fail to deliver

Walter Leal Filho <sup>a,b</sup>, Claudio R. P. Vasconcelos <sup>c,d</sup>, Maria Alzira Pimenta Dinis <sup>e</sup> and Laís Viera Trevisan <sup>f</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Department of Natural Sciences, Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester, UK; <sup>b</sup>European School of Sustainability Science and Research, Hamburg University of Applied Sciences, Hamburg, Germany; <sup>c</sup>Department of Production Engineering, Federal University of Paraíba, João Pessoa, Brazil; <sup>d</sup>Algorithmic Research Centre, University of Minho, Guimarães, Portugal; <sup>e</sup>UFP Energy, Environment and Health Research Unit (FP-ENAS), University Fernando Pessoa, Porto, Portugal; <sup>f</sup>School of Administration, Federal University of Rio Grande Do Sul, Porto Alegre, Brazil

### ABSTRACT

Over the past decades, many declarations on sustainable development (SD) have been produced, various of which led to no real changes or improvements. This article discusses the role of declarations and international cooperation on SD, outlining their evolution. It also highlights the reasons why instruments and international cooperation have failed to meet their targets and specifies measures that may be deployed so that they may yield the SD's expected benefits. To this end, it is recommended that more significant efforts be made to operationalise the commitments established in the declarations and international cooperation. Also, it is important to develop and implement SD follow-up strategies, once these have been agreed upon. The implications of this article to society and other studies are two-fold. Firstly, it shows the need for greater care when writing declarations on SD, since they are not always followed up and do not fulfill their purposes. Secondly, it is important to mobilise the relevant actors so that the actions the SD declarations expected to trigger, through international cooperation, are implemented. Moreover, future declarations and commitments should ideally have institutions and infrastructures in place to implement the SD actions called upon. The evidence gathered in this article also points out the need to intensify investment in education, science, technology, and innovation, while encouraging the expansion of international cooperation strategies aimed at supporting the declarations and promoting SD.

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### Introduction

Since the end of the 18<sup>th</sup>-century mankind has been changing the Earth in an unprecedented way, by radically modifying the landscape, increasing natural resource use, aggravating stratospheric ozone depletion, ecosystem loss, ocean acidification, worsening climate change, and threatening the planet's resilience (Griggs et al. 2013; Steffen et al. 2015; Bengtsson et al. 2018). Considering these severe global issues, humanity's current environmental footprint is not sustainable in the long term (Hoekstra and Wiedmann 2014). This emerging planetary history era has been called 'Anthropocene' (Steffen et al. 2011), 'the great acceleration,' 'thresholds,' or 'tipping points' (Pálsson et al. 2013). In the face of increasing human pressures and shocks, there is a growing need for sustainable development (SD) (Geissdoerfer et al. 2018); otherwise, Earth's systems will collapse (Griggs et al. 2013).

Since 1972, several events have tried to deal with the aspects of SD, mainly promoted by the United Nations (UN). Since its establishment after World War II, the UN play a coordination role in defining and implementing strategies to manage crises at the global

level (Bellantuono et al. 2022). Academia has also approached the topic in many ways, resulting in several different opinions concerning definitions of SD. The Brundtland Report definition has been the most widely accepted and cited (Bradley 2019). The concept of SD is defined by the World Commission on Environment and Development (1987, p. 41) as 'development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs'. From this definition, SD could be understood as the improvement of the quality of life and well-being of both present and future generations without exhausting natural resources (Biswas et al. 2021). Nevertheless, other global problems affecting SD, such as wars and violence, right-wing and religious extremism, the continued existence of slavery, gender inequalities, racism and xenophobia, displacement, and forced migration, among others, only played a subordinated role in the Brundtland Report (Fuchs 2017).

More recently, in 2015, as a continuation of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the 2030 Agenda and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals

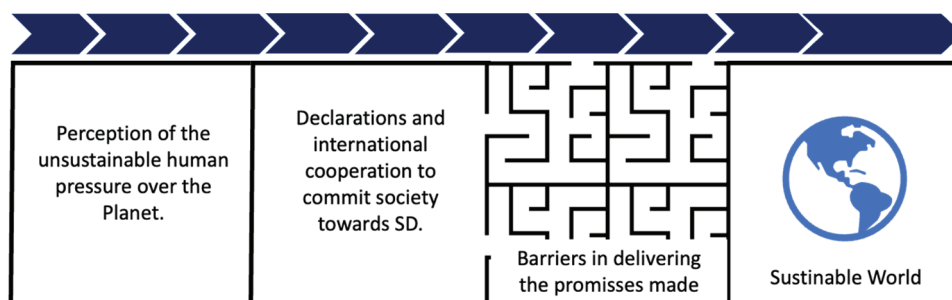
(SDGs) were formulated. Governments were expected to use these goals to face the environmental, social, and economic challenges in their respective communities (Choi et al. 2020). However, much like the MDGs, the SDGs have ended up as vague, weak, meaningless, or mere tautologies (Stafford-Smith 2014; Stokstad 2015; Holden et al. 2017). The UN calls for international cooperation to advance the global SDGs goals, but what happens is that the parties do not even agree on the problems themselves. Then, while wanting the world to develop in a sustainable way, when it comes to actions the future is faced in a less pragmatic way (Kerekes 2021).

Addressing global issues is challenging since SD must be assessed from a multi-dimensional perspective (Choi et al. 2020). Therefore, without recognising that sustainability challenges are often characterised as perverse, wicked, complex, and transdisciplinary problems (Rittel and Webber 1973; Klein 2004; Lawrence and Després 2004), this transformation cannot be accomplished by individuals acting alone. It has been increasingly relevant that policy, education, and practice, support and guide sustainability-oriented societies (Yarime et al. 2012). In this regard, transnational partnerships are necessary for the effective promotion of SD (Beisheim and Liese 2014; Leal Filho et al. 2022c) and employing a transdisciplinary approach that brings together academic and non-academic actors (Jacobi et al. 2022). For this purpose, each nation, state, or country has the critical responsibility of mobilising and raising financial resources, in addition to promoting new partnerships between the private sector and civil society (Jayasooria 2016; Filho et al. 2022; Leal Filho et al. 2022b, 2022c), which may involve governments, universities, companies, and non-governmental organisation (Sachs 2012). It highlights the need to exploit long-term sustainable multi-stakeholder partnerships for SD (Choi et al. 2020) to address global challenges, promote innovative solutions, and transform society based on the specific skills and outcomes each member can contribute (El-Jardali et al. 2018).

## Method

Since the early 1980s, multilateral organisations, such as the UN, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), World Health Organization (WHO), Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), and World Bank, have formed teams of experts to study and report on the situation regarding the level of degradation of the planet and the risks associated with the maintenance of human life and their core sub-systems, i.e., economic, social, health, educational, etc. (UNDP 1997; [WHO] World Health Organization 1997; Wals 2014; Michelsen and Wells 2017). Since the cemented perception that the human race faces risks to its lasting survival, nation states and various organizations were called to formulate and sign declarations and commitments aimed at the operationalisation of the SD, as an alternative to the installed crisis (Lotz-Sisitka 2009; Lozano et al. 2013b; Golebiowska et al. 2021). However, despite the efforts and advances in the implementation of SD initiatives, many studies have been observing that the fact of becoming a signatory to some institutional commitment is not necessarily related to the embellishing of effective SD initiatives to promote the necessary changes (Grindsted 2011; Adlong 2013; Lozano et al. 2013a, 2015; Alghamdi et al. 2017; Dlouhá et al. 2018). In this sense, failure in the implementation of SD agendas is reported, while a set of barriers that have hindered the implementation of actions necessary to achieve the goals for SD are listed. The conceptual overview of this paper is shown in Figure 1.

This article aimed at discussing the role of declarations and international cooperation on SD, outlining its evolution and describing measures to be deployed in assisting the expected benefits. This descriptive study was conducted through an extensive critical literature review related to declarations and commitments signed by multilateral organizations, as well as international cooperation strategies, both undertaken to accelerate the achievement of SD agendas. A compilation of prominent authors operating in the field of sustainability according to the Google Scholar platform is also presented.



**Figure 1.** Conceptual framework of the study.

## Is there a limit to how many declarations are necessary for sustainable development?

SD, anchoring environment, economy, and society pillars (Mensah and Ricart Casadevall 2019), has in the past been considered a vague political goal. However, although the debates on sustainability reflect the growing awareness that human activity's negative impact on the environment goes back a long time (Konold and Schwietring 2021), there has been no real significant advancement. Over the past five decades, numerous initiatives, declarations, and international agreements have been made public for many years to promote SD.

Over time, SD has evolved from a single-factor element concentrating on ecological sustainability to the MDGs and SDGs of today, becoming broader and more universal (Shi et al. 2019). More recently, the implementation of the SDGs calls for accelerating sustainable solutions (UN 2021a), with a focus on the climate emergency, partly guided by the recent Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC 2021) report. IPCC now uses the so-called shared socio-economic pathways to investigate how global society, demographics, and economics will evolve in the

coming century, influencing the world. Motivated by the COVID-19 pandemic and its disrupting effects on the worldwide economy, there seems to be a sense of urgency that calls for immediate action towards fostering sustainability and tackling climate change. Countries are being asked to work towards carbon emission reduction targets to achieve net-zero emissions by the middle of the century (UN 2021b).

While the number of SD institutional declarations, intentions, or agreements produced until now is considered significant (see Figure 2), the progress achieved so far is clearly not so, due to the reasons explored in this article. The scrutinization of efforts to effectively implement the declarations to advance SD needs to be made effective, relying on promoting sustainability change in a broader societal context, while simultaneously advancing global learning for SD. This also includes investing more in non-formal and adult learning (Nordén and Avery 2021). To move towards sustainability, it is equally essential to consider the fundamental need to distribute and control power and further collaboration within societies, more than investing in empty discourses of change. Substantial changes also need to be pursued by the key players

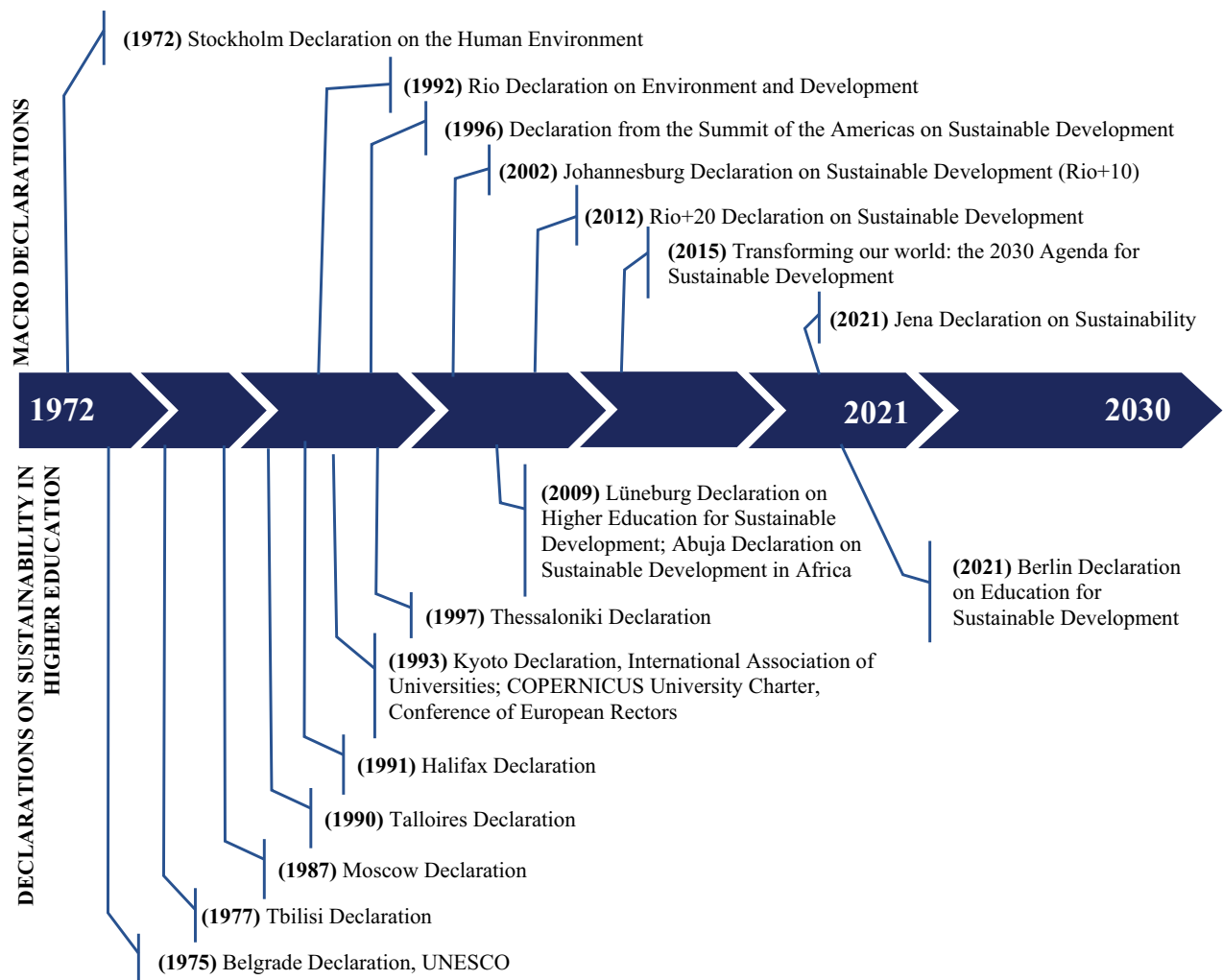


Figure 2. Some landmark declarations on Sustainable Development.

and stakeholders, such as the UN, governments, the private sector, and society, to foster a broader consciousness of SD, translating its concepts into action and increasing public participation (Mensah and Ricart Casadevall 2019).

Among the many efforts made to pursue SD, declarations – nearly always connected with events – have been a popular tool over the past five decades. There have been two primary sorts of declarations in the field of SD:

Category 1 – Macro Declarations: these are wide-ranging declarations with an enormous scope.

Category 2 – Declarations on education for SD with a more specific remit

Declarations are issued for various reasons: to capitalise on the enthusiasm of those attending an event to make it ‘historical’, to draw attention to important issues, or to generate media interest. Often, as a combination of these motivations. Nevertheless, despite the popularity of declarations, a critical assessment of their effectiveness shows that many of such documents failed to implement what they have aimed at. Figure 2 presents a set of relevant declarations on SD.

Taken by their face value, the declarations in Figure 2 could have served the purpose of significantly advancing the cause of sustainability as a whole and sustainability in higher education in particular. Yet, they have largely failed to do so. There are some reasons for this, as summarised in Table 1.

Moreover, the fact that many declarations do not draw from previous ones, means that much duplication is seen, and their messages tend to become diluted. On the other hand, a tangible way to move the cause of sustainability forward is by undertaking research and performing innovation also reflected in the publication of findings. In this context, a list of scientists publishing on sustainability-related issues, listed by Google Scholar, a well-known scientific knowledge platform, has shown that a reported set of 10 authors have been significantly contributing to the conversation on SD, with relevant publications being mentioned in this platform (Table 2).

The table serves the purpose of illustrating some of the work performed by the academics which have been very active in undertaking studies and research on matters related to sustainable development.

Evidence suggests that sustainability topics addressed by the above-mentioned authors, among other issues, such as science education, research, and innovation advances, can help deliver the actions required to meet the SDGs, while enhancing economic growth, reducing environmental impacts, and developing more sustainable products and services (Sachs et al. 2019; Adenle et al. 2020).

### The role played by international cooperation in sustainable development

No single country can handle problems such as global climate change, biodiversity preservation, and ecosystem services, water and food shortages, transboundary pollution and waste accumulation, and rapid population expansion, on its own, without the commitment of international collaboration through the constitution of networks or in the form of international accords, such as environmental protection and other environmental treaties and declarations (Leal Filho et al. 2022c). The establishment and operation of appropriate international organisations and initiatives, as well as the harmonisation of national legislation, can contribute to achieving the SDGs (Safonov and Piskulova 2018; Leal Filho et al. 2022c). The global operationalisation of the 2030 Agenda requires an engaged and collaborative global partnership that includes international governments, markets, civil societies, scientific communities, and the United Nations, to cite a few actors considered critical to maintaining the momentum on the SDGs Agenda (UN 2015; Georgeson and Maslin 2018; Sachs et al. 2019; Leal Filho et al. 2022c).

The achievement of the SDGs needs to rely on international cooperation at all levels, in order to advance. International collaborative partnerships (Leal Filho et al. 2022b) are vital in this respect because they are able to foster cooperation between public, private, and third sectors and involve local and regional associations, addressing inequality growing deficits (Leal

**Table 1.** Reasons why sustainable development declarations have largely failed to deliver.

Item	Impacts
Wide scope	Most declarations have a broad scope making their implementation unrealistic.
Ambition	Declarations are often too ambitious and usually call for wide-ranging actions whose implementation is not simple.
Restricted Information	Declarations are, on the one hand, agreed upon but not widely disseminated, so the information is often restricted to a small group of people.
Repetition	Many declarations do not significantly differ from previous ones, providing few insights that can be seen as a new contribution to the debate on sustainable development.
Lack of resources	Declarations usually do not have a provision of funding or personnel to oversee their implementation.
Deficiencies in coordination	Declarations are usually announced but often have no organisational framework to coordinate the implementation of the measures they list
Limited participation	Usually deriving from events, many declarations have not catered for the participation of the relevant stakeholders, especially some key people and organisations, which could have assisted in their implementation.



**Table 2.** A set of sustainability researchers in the google research platform (2022).

No.	Name	Organization	Country	H-Index	Citations
1	Leal Filho, Walter	HAW Hamburg & Manchester Metropolitan University	Germany/ UK	57	14154
2	Wu, Yenchun Jim	National Taiwan Normal University	Taiwan	49	8557
3	Caeiro, Sandra Sofia Ferreira da Silva	Universidade Aberta	Portugal	38	5973
4	Vasant, Pandian	Ton Duc Thang University	Vietnam	35	5371
5	Mulder, Karel	The Hague University of Applied Science/Delft University of Technology	Netherlands	34	5821
6	Rieckmann, Marco	University of Vechta	Germany	29	5713
7	Dabija, Dan-Cristian	Babes-Bolyai University Cluj- Napoca	Romania	28	2532
8	El Bilal, Hamid	International Centre for Advanced Mediterranean Agronomic Studies (CIHEAM- Bari)	Italy	25	2939
9	Guerra, José Baltazar Salgueirinho Osório de Andrade	Universidade do Sul de Santa Catarina	Brazil	22	1882
10	Ribeiro, Priscilla Cristina Cabral	Fluminense Federal University	Brazil	18	1853

Filho et al. 2022c). Despite the sustainability motto of 'think globally, act locally' and widespread agreement on the importance of bottom-up action for attaining the SDGs, there is less agreement on how to initiate and implement local efforts. Mobilising new change agents for the SDGs requires governance, science, technology, and innovation based on a critical examination of experiences gleaned from decades of work in the field of SD, where international partnership collaborations play an essential role (Leal Filho et al. 2022c). Adenle et al. (2020, p. 3) outline that 'new policies that recognise the benefits of science, technology, and innovation (STI) and their potential risks are needed to implement the SDG agenda successfully by 2030.' The same authors also acknowledge the several challenges and barriers involved in implementing SDGs. However, they stress the need for the global community to induce STI across multiple sectors, providing new investments in research and innovation and policy design, to assist society in overcoming the existing barriers. According to Moallemi et al. (2019), a participative and inclusive government agenda, called Local Agenda 2030, is required, relying on international cooperation to downscaling the SDGs by defining locally relevant indicators and setting sustainable targets, then laying out solid plans to face barriers on SD.

Education and research may be considered the basis of SD worldwide. Aiming to advance toward wide dissemination of knowledge and innovation, the education area has been assisting the use of massive open online courses (MOOC) as a strategy to address a framework of international cooperation focused on achieving the SDGs. This allows us to provide the possibility to adopt a high-quality education schedule for people who do not have the financial, travel, or temporary availability to do so. While adapting to innovative approaches with active learning strategies that enable students to develop professional skills in response to current demands, the role of non-governmental development organisations in implementing this educational model within their education

projects is crucial. Specifically in developing countries, looking for common ground from various angles, thus contributing to eradicating the barrier of educational abandonment (Sosa-Diaz and Fernandez-Sanchez 2020), a recognised human right worldwide in the Declaration of Human Rights. Universities are a key factor in the development of regions and play a significant role in education, fostering closer links to SD at the local level (Leal Filho et al. 2022a).

The Declaration on the Right to Development says in article 3 that 'States have the primary responsibility for the creation of national and international conditions favourable to the realisation of the right to development' (UN 1986). Ocampo (2015) states that it is possible to differentiate three basic objectives of international cooperation in the economic and social spheres: (1) manage the interdependence between countries; (2) promote standard social norms and criteria and the associated provision of a minimum level of social services for all citizens of the world, and (3) reduce international inequalities, in particular, the different levels of economic development between countries.

The consolidation of international cooperation can only be achieved with a serious effort in planning and investments (Leal Filho et al. 2022b, 2022c). According to Cristina Lagarde, a former Managing Director of the International Monetary Fund, the SDGs must be funded for economic and ethical reasons, with significant tax consequences (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD 2018). Countries must raise more revenue more equitably. Furthermore, the international community as a whole must work to eliminate tax evasion and avoidance. However, the signs in this respect indicate that although SD raises global interest, countries do not seem to move forward and the financial system's shift to sustainability is not taking place on the required scale (Filho et al. 2022; Inter-Agency Task Force on Financing for Development 2022). Ziolo and Sergi (2019, p. 1) state that adequate financing is a necessary condition to carry out an affluent

operationalisation of the 2030 Agenda and admit that 'Financial markets face challenges in matching financial products and services to the needs of SD'. The future of SD depends on these resource gaps being fully addressed to combat the present worldwide imbalances (Leal Filho et al. 2022b).

## Conclusions and suggestions

The past lessons show that, in order to yield the expected benefits, future declarations and international commitment on SD should avoid the mistakes of the past, essentially in respect of scope and means to supervise efficient implementation. It makes little sense to pursue the preparation of declarations at events, which are likely to fade away with time. Instead, it may be more appropriate to consider the pitfalls listed in Table 1, so that these are not repeated. In particular:


- i) reflect if a declaration is the best tool to address specific SD issues or to document an event and if it does not repeat what previous declarations have intended;
- ii) if deemed necessary, have a clearer goal, as opposed to an expansive ambition;
- iii) consult and engage the right actors in conceiving a declaration and effective international cooperation to ensure robustness and support for implementation;
- iv) identify potential sources of support for the goals set in the declarations, through international cooperation.

Moreover, future declarations, along with SD international cooperation, should involve institutions and infrastructures to implement the SD actions. Beyond that, schedules for the delivery or to monitor progress should be taken into account to add a sense of commitment to SD implementation. Previous experiences suggest that the deployment of the above measures can ensure that SD-related declarations and international collaboration will in fact deliver and will represent, in the end, more than just a set of empty promises.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## ORCID

Walter Leal Filho  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1241-5225>  
 Claudio R. P. Vasconcelos  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8353-6406>  
 Maria Alzira Pimenta Dinis  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2198-6740>  
 Laís Viera Trevisan  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3673-6573>

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