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Revealing narratives on the SDGs implementation in the Scandinavian countries

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List of abbreviations

EP - European Parliament

EU - European Union

GPF - Government Pension Fund Global

ICSU - International Council for Science

IIED - International Institute for Environment and Development

IISD - International Institute for Sustainable Development

IUCN - International Union for Conservation of Nature

NAP - National Action Plan

NSDS - National Sustainable Development Strategy

OECD - Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

SDG - Sustainable Development Goals

SDSN - Sustainable Development Solutions Network

UNCED - United Nations Conference on Environment and Development

UNDESA - United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs

UNDP - United Nations Development Programme

UNEP - United Nations Environment Programme

UNWCED - UN World Commission on Environment and Development

WHO - World Health Organization

1. Introducing the sustainable development issue: definition and concepts

Six years have passed since the UN member states adopted Sustainable Development Goals in September 2015. Since then, the concept of sustainable development has become a frequently discussed theme in governmental policies and developmental visions of Think tanks all over the world. Although, beyond blueprints, guidelines and drawing a future course of action, the real progress on the ground is far from satisfactory. According to the Sustainable Development Solutions Network and the Bertelsmann Stiftung, the governments in different countries perceive the Goals very differently and have different approaches to include the SDGs in the national agendas.¹ Some countries have created special coordination units, revised policies and action plans, and introduced monitoring systems, while others lag behind on some or all of these issues.

What is being consistent is that the Scandinavian countries, Norway, Sweden and Denmark are in the global elite when it comes to being closest to achieving many of the Sustainable Development Goals² and many countries look up to them as a role model. The Scandinavian countries have established strong collaborations across the Nordic region and between the governments and non-governmental organizations to follow the SDGs framework. In its turn, the NGOs being influential development actors, also became increasingly involved in promoting sustainable development.³ The NGOs playing supportive roles to the government, in some cases, can be more effective in defining the grass-root level developmental priorities. The idea of this research is to find out what are these priorities and the narratives the governments and the national NGOs create and promote on the SDGs implementation in the Scandinavian countries.

Development is a controversial topic, filled with uncertainties and controversy. The policy narratives help to deal with this uncertainty and aim to bring some stability among other things into policymaking process. And when thinking about sustainable development, without a doubt, the Scandinavian countries play a role in producing a specific type of narratives with aims to stabilize and promote a specific way of doing policy. Thus, it is important to follow what are the

¹ Sachs, J., Schmidt-Traub, G., Kroll, C., Lafortune, G., Fuller, G. *Sustainable Development Report 2019*. New York: Bertelsmann Stiftung and Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN), 2019.

² Larsen, M. & Alslund-Lanthén, E. *Bumps on the Road to 2030*. Nordic Council of Ministers. 2017. Retrieved from <https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1138263/FULLTEXT01.pdf>

³ Pacheco-Vega R. *NGOs and Sustainable Development*. In: Anheier H.K., Toepler S. (eds) *International Encyclopedia of Civil Society*. Springer, New York, NY. 2010.

narratives promoted by both the NGOs and the governments in the Scandinavian countries and which narratives they set on the agenda in regard to the SDGs implementation.

There is a variety of material published on the debate over the SDGs. The available information on the topic of sustainable development implementation is provided by the Bertelsmann Stiftung, SDSN, IISD, IIED, OECD, UNDP, UNCED, UNDESA and country-based reports. The most recent literature on the topic of the SDGs implementation is introduced in the form of annual and mid-term reports, statistical data, resource books or covers the progress of the specific countries and sections of the SDGs. Numerous reports have been made on identifying successful practices of the SDGs that provided guidance on how to develop and implement strategies for sustainable development, provided examples of the processes and mechanisms, case materials that have been shown to work in some countries.

The Scandinavian countries and its public institutions have a long tradition in promoting and applying sustainable development practices. No wonder, that in the numerous reports on the best practices of the sustainable development implementation, the Scandinavian countries are being presented as an example. What is interesting is that those reports on best practices of the Scandinavian countries are mainly the works performed by the outside actors such as the UN, the Bertelsmann Stiftung, the OECD and etc., and these available reports lack a representation of the perspectives and views of the Scandinavian governments and the national NGOs on the SDGs implementation themselves.

Although, there are the reports and works of the Scandinavian governments and the national NGOs such as the Concord Sweden, the Norwegian Forum for Development and Environment, the Danish 92 Group and many others who present the overview of the SDGs implementation processes in the Scandinavian countries, the works vary in its content, as some of them focus on the particular goal and not the SDGs overall, or focus either on the government framework or other aspect of the SDGs implementation. Therefore, the purpose of this thesis is to address this shortcoming in the development literature by undertaking a comprehensive study that analyzes the narratives on the SDGs implementation in the Scandinavian countries prominent in the state and the national NGOs reports.

The idea of this research is to discover the narratives that the Scandinavian governments and the national NGOs create on the SDGs implementation, whether there are conflicting narratives, whether there is a critique of the SDGs implementation practices, or whether there are

success stories. The study will focus both on the government work in sustainable development implementation, and on the NGOs at the national level, focus on the narratives they create in relation to the SDGs implementation, how the NGOs interact with the governments, how they communicate arguments about the SDGs, how they evaluate the implementation of the SDGs. The idea is to study not only the success story of Scandinavian countries, but also discover if there is something they could do better according to the governmental reports and the national NGOs.

The significance of the research lies in finding out the narratives on the SDGs implementation that the Scandinavian governments and the national NGOs put on the agenda. The findings will be of value to anyone who wants to learn the experience of the Scandinavian countries in advancing and implementing the SDGs, what had an impact on their success, what is lacking in their strategies to fully achieve the SDGs, and most importantly what is the story promoted on the SDGs implementation from the perspective of both the government and the national NGOs stances. This is of great importance as the whole world looks up to the Scandinavian countries experience in sustainable development advancement in hope to find answers and certainty in the times of high instability. The research topic is relevant and up to date, as the issue of sustainable development and the SDGs achievement is an important theme nowadays and will become even more recurring in the coming years.

Objectives of the research:

- To research the narratives regarding the SDGs implementation promoted by the governments and the national NGOs in the Scandinavian countries
- To find out whether there are conflicting storylines between the Scandinavian countries, or between the national NGOs and the governments
- To generate new insights and expand what we know about the experience of the Scandinavian countries in advocating for sustainable development other than its high ranking in sustainability compared to other countries

In order to address the above mentioned objectives the research will attempt to answer the following research question: How is the SDGs implementation being narrated by the national NGOs and the governments in the Scandinavian countries?

The thesis will be structured as follows: abstract, introduction, literature review, theoretical framework and research methodology, three chapters on data analysis and main findings, conclusion and bibliography. First, the study will present an introduction into the research where

the key issues and concepts will be discussed more broadly in the literature review. Theoretical framework chapter will discuss the theory and methodology applied in this research. The first and second chapters will follow with the analysis of the narratives on the SDGs implementation in the Scandinavian countries, with the data retrieved from the governmental and the national NGOs reports on sustainable development implementation, and finding out the common and opposing patterns, recommendations, views, policies. The analytical chapters will present the data grouped into the sub-topics such as ‘Frontrunners in the SDGs implementation’, ‘Preparedness for implementing the SDGs’, ‘Cooperation with stakeholders’, ‘Universal welfare’, ‘Environmental narratives’, ‘Sustainable consumption and production’, and ‘Development assistance’. Some of these sub-chapters are more general and refer to the SDGs implementation in the Scandinavian countries as a whole, while others represent the narratives connected to the specific SDGs. This will be described more elaborately later in the text. In the third section, the findings from the first two chapters will be analyzed. Finally, in the conclusion, the main findings will be summarized.

2. Literature review

In recent years, there has been an increasing interest in the concept of sustainable development and the ways it could be implemented for improving the wellbeing of all the people. The number of research studies, articles and publications on the sustainable development issue has been increasing as it plays a crucial part in the further growth of societies.⁴ Much uncertainty still exists worldwide about the way institutions and individuals should function in order to promote sustainable development, support the present needs of the population and provide the ability for future generations to meet their own needs, and this creates a barrier to implementation. The Scandinavian countries, consistently scoring in the top of the SDGs implementation index, certainly promote some kind of a narrative on the way the sustainable development implementation should be approached, however the literature lacks the material on defining what are these narratives the Scandinavian countries create.

The goal of this literature review is to examine the existing literature on the topic of sustainable development, the SDGs framework, its research, and its implementation in the Scandinavian countries. First, the literature review will discuss the emergence and progress of the concept of sustainable development, its strategies, policies and implementation overall, introduce the general concepts. Afterwards, it will focus mainly on the literature of current practices of sustainable development implementation in the Scandinavian countries and how it is represented in the literature. This literature review is not an attempt to be comprehensive in relation to the implementation of the SDGs worldwide, as it is more concentrated on finding out the narratives the Scandinavian countries create about its approach.

Sustainable development has become a famous concept in today's world. However, despite its popularity, the concept of sustainable development still seems unclear and many people wonder where did it come from and what it means in practice.⁵ Thus, for the sake of having the big picture, the concepts of sustainability and sustainable development will be discussed first.

The concept of sustainable development was first introduced on the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, held in Stockholm in 1972. However, it did not connect

⁴ Myklebust, J.P. "Research is more focused on Sustainable Development Goals." Accessed on September 10, 2021. <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20190405090658546>

⁵ Mensah, J. "Sustainable development: Meaning, history, principles, pillars, and implications for human action: Literature review." *Cogent Social Sciences*, 5, no. 1 (2019).

sustainable development with environment at that time, but it acknowledged the need to change mostly economically oriented development policies.⁶ Since the Stockholm Conference the concepts of sustainability, sustainable development, development in accordance with the environment were increasingly used in publications.

According to Costanza “...sustainability is a relationship between dynamic human economic systems and dynamic, but slower, ecological systems, in which: (a) human life can develop indefinitely; (b) human individuals can flourish; (c) human culture can develop and (d) effects of human activities remain within bounds so as not to destroy the diversity, complexity and functioning of the ecological life-support system”, while Babier defines sustainability as a balance between three interconnected systems: biological, economic and social.⁷ According to Stoddart, sustainability is an efficient distribution of resources intra-generationally and inter-generationally in a finite ecosystem.⁸ The concept of sustainable development as a socio-economic approach found its roots in the 1980’ World Conservation Strategy by the International Union for Conservation of Nature as an approach to solve serious environmental problems caused by human activities. According to the scholars, there is a clear distinction between the terms ‘sustainability’ and ‘sustainable development’. The sustainability is understood as result, as an endpoint, while sustainable development is seen as a process of getting there.⁹

In 1987, the UN World Commission on Environment and Development under the commission led by Gro Harlem Brundtland (then Prime Minister of Norway), published the report ‘Our Common Future’, better known as the Brundtland Report, which set out the widely known today concept of sustainable development. Perhaps the main achievement of this report was the introduction of the concept of sustainable development into a wide circulation. The most cited and common definition of the concept of sustainable development is the one presented in the Brundtland Report– “sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without the compromising ability of the future generations to meet their own needs”.¹⁰ The report

⁶ Mebratu, D. “Sustainability and sustainable development: historical and conceptual review.” *Environmental impact assessment review*, 18, no 6, (1998): 493 – 520.

⁷ FAO. “Concepts and issues of sustainability in countries in transition - an institutional concept of sustainability as a basis for the network.” Accessed June 25, 2021, <http://www.fao.org/3/AD238E/ad238e08.htm>

⁸ Stoddart, H., Schneeberger, K., Dodds, F., Shaw, A., Bottero, M., Cornforth, J., & White, R. *A pocket guide to sustainable development governance*. Stakeholder Forum, 2011.

⁹ UNESCO. “Sustainable Development.” Accessed on July 15, 2021. <https://en.unesco.org/themes/education-sustainable-development/what-is-esd/sd>

¹⁰ World Commission on Environment and Development. “Our Common Future.” Accessed on July 15, 2021. <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/5987our-common-future.pdf>. P. 16.

and subsequent conferences led to the adoption of the UN program “Agenda 21”, which became the basis for the development of all kinds of national programs for the transition to sustainable development, which to date have more than a hundred countries around the world. Economic development and environment sustainability were presented in the report as an interdependent mechanism that could be profitable to everyone, “a more ecological approach to economics and a more economic approach to ecology will be beneficial in order to maintain our life support systems and the aesthetic qualities of the environment”.¹¹ The Brundtland report rejected the contradictory notion of either environment protection or economic growth, on the contrary such development was seen as mutually reinforcing.¹² However, this definition is very brief, simple and clear, and the concept has been widely popularized, from the outset the sustainable development paradigm has also been actively criticized by some scholars.

The main criticism of the Brundtland report relies on sustainable development that is based on the economic growth, rather than on the environmental sustainability and human development advocated by the IUCN. The concept was also criticized by its inability to provide coherent and consistent characterization of the problems and objectives in the report.¹³ This understanding of sustainable development, while being all-encompassing, is open to misunderstanding and can be interpreted in various ways, which resulted in the policies, that let the political and personal preferences to be in place.¹⁴ The reason and critique why the concept of sustainable development is perceived as a cliché is because it is too broadly formulated and does not provide specific targets and timeframes. While such definition should only be perceived as a general guideline and more in-depth analysis and detailed objectives should be drawn for each individual country, nevertheless, the concept of sustainable development is acknowledged by scholars as a core concept that calls for improving the conditions people leave in, together with preserving environmental sustainability.¹⁵

The concept of sustainable development was discussed at the UN Conference on Sustainable Development in New York in 2015 and as a result, the resolution “Transforming our

¹¹ Costanza, R. “What is ecological economics?”, *Ecological Economics*, 1, no. 1 (1989): pp. 1-8.

¹² Barbier, E.B. “The concept of sustainable economic development”, *Environmental Conservation*, 14, no. 2 (1987): pp. 101-110.

¹³ Lélé, S.M. “Sustainable development: A critical review”, *World Development*, 19, no. 6 (June 1991): pp. 607-621.

¹⁴ Ekins, P. “Beyond Growth: the Real Priorities of Sustainable Development”, *Environmental Conservation*, 16, no.1 (1989): pp.5-6.

¹⁵ Mensah, J. “Sustainable development: Meaning, history, principles, pillars, and implications for human action: Literature review.” *Cogent Social Sciences*, 5, no. 1 (2019).

world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development” with 17 new Sustainable Development Goals and 169 corresponding targets to be achieved by 2030 was adopted by all UN Member States.¹⁶ The 2030 Agenda called for action by all countries and provided a framework that is needed to achieve peace and prosperity, while protecting the environment and tackling climate change. The Millennium Development Goals, which were mostly targeted for the developing countries, preceded the 17 Sustainable Development Goals, which are now have to be implemented by all UN member countries, and include all aspects of life on Earth that need to be enhanced and balanced for everyone to live in a sustainable and safe environment.

The SDGs to be achieved by 2030¹⁷:

Goal 1: No Poverty - End poverty in all its forms everywhere

Goal 2: Zero Hunger - End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture

Goal 3: Good Health and Well-being - Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages

Goal 4: Quality Education - Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all

Goal 5: Gender Equality - Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls

Goal 6: Clean Water and Sanitation - Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all

Goal 7: Affordable and Clean Energy - Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all

Goal 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth - Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all

Goal 9: Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure - Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation

Goal 10: Reduced Inequality - Reduce inequality within and among countries

Goal 11: Sustainable Cities - Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable

¹⁶ UN. “Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.” Accessed on July 25, 2021. <https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda>

¹⁷ UNDP. “The SDGs in Action.” Accessed on July 15, 2021. <https://www.undp.org/sustainable-development-goals>

Goal 12: Responsible Consumption and Production - Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns

Goal 13: Climate Action - Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts

Goal 14: Life Below Water - Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development

Goal 15: Life on land - Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss

Goal 16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions - Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels

Goal 17: Partnerships to achieve the Goal - Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development

The adoption of the 17 SDGs was followed by a critique from a number of scientists, scholars, environmentalists. According to the research done by the International Council for Science only 29% of 169 targets are well-defined and scientifically rigorous, 54% require more clarification and 17% are weakly explained and require further work.¹⁸ Another downside of the SDGs framework was revealed during a recent study by Randers et al. where he created a simulation model of Earth and measured how much environmental damage would follow from achieving the 14 socio-economic goals of the SDGs and how it would conflict with 3 environmental goals (SDGs 13, 14 and 15). The study indicated that socio-economic and environmental SDGs can not be achieved together nor by 2030 neither by 2050, one would always conflict with another.¹⁹ However, authors recognized that the model they created is not perfect and better assessment could be performed in the future, it does not limit its usefulness as an exploratory tool. Hickel supports the critique of the SDGs, by arguing that the Goal 8 jeopardizes the whole SDGs framework and needs specific changes, in particular that the measurement of the economic growth through GDP has to be removed.²⁰ Another research conducted by Moyer et al. agrees that

¹⁸ Stokstad, E. "Sustainable goals from UN under fire." *Science*, 347, no 6223, (2015): 702–703.

¹⁹ Randers, J., Johan, R., Per-Espen S., Ulrich G., David C., Sarah E. C., and Jonathan D. "Achieving the 17 Sustainable Development Goals within 9 Planetary Boundaries." *Global Sustainability*, 2, (2019).

²⁰ Hickel, J. "The contradiction of the sustainable development goals: Growth versus ecology on a finite planet." *Sustainable Development*, 27, no 5, (September/October 2019): 873-884.

the world will not achieve the SDGs by 2030 either.²¹ The socio-economic inequalities among the countries make it harder for some countries to achieve the SDGs as the priorities the developing countries have on their agenda are different from those the developed countries have. Especially with the Covid-19 pandemic these inequalities became more salient, making two-thirds of the SDGs unlikely to be met by 2030 according to Naidoo and Fisher.²²

The main feature of the SDGs is that the goals are interlinked with each other and depend on each other heavily, and here comes the complexity of the SDGs implementation.²³ Monkelbaan argues that the linkages between the SDGs and its targets are both integrated and explicit, and the SDGs could be seen as a ‘network of targets’.²⁴ According to Le Blanc addressing one goal can have unintended impact on another goals if they are pursued separately²⁵, thus there is a need to always be careful to support the balance and achieve the goals in an integrated way so the desired results can be achieved for many goals. For example, addressing the climate change issue can have impact on the development of renewable energy, life on land and below water. Similarly, achieving Goal 1 – ending poverty, is impossible without progress on Goal 2 – achieving food security.

While the interlinkages of the goals that foster positive change are optimistic, these interdependences can also have negative spillovers. The evidence review produced by several scholars in the sustainability field revealed the shortcomings of such interconnectedness. It found out that climate change can impede 16 SDGs, while preventing climate change can enhance all 17 SDGs, but also challenge achieving 12 of them.²⁶ Furthermore, the SDGs can contain conflicting stakeholders’ interests which can result in lack of cooperation by those stakeholders. For instance, striving to move to renewable energy would mean consuming less of fossil fuels, which will not be welcomed by the big stakeholders in oil sector. Although it is clear that the Goals are interconnected, according to Nilsson and Constanza the SDG framework does not reflect those interlinkages and the Goals are presented using ‘silo approach’ and addressed separately without possible links with other Goals, making the framework internally inconsistent and not

²¹ Moyer, J.D., Hedden, S. “Are we on the right path to achieve the sustainable development goals?” *World Development*, 127, (2020).

²² Naidoo, R., Fisher, B. *Sustainable Development Goals. Pandemic Reset*. Springer, 2020.

²³ Tosun, J., Leininger, J. “Governing the interlinkages between the sustainable development goals: Approaches to attain policy integration.” *Global Challenges*, 1, no 9, 2017.

²⁴ Monkelbaan, J. *Governance for the Sustainable Development Goals*. Springer, 2019.

²⁵ Le Blanc, D. “Towards integration at last? The sustainable development goals as a network of targets.” *Sustainable Development*, 23, (2015): 176–187.

²⁶ Fusco Nerini, F., Sovacool, B., Hughes, N. et al. “Connecting climate action with other Sustainable Development Goals.” *Nature Sustainability* 2, (2019): 674–680.

sustainable.²⁷ To avoid such inconsistencies the authors argue that the bottom-up target setting is required, so the SDG framework also follows an interlinking approach where the links between the goals and targets are represented. Another approach was developed by Nilsson, Griggs and Visbeck who created a map with seven possible types of SDGs interactions from the most positive to the most negative to help policymakers develop national and local SDGs action plans with the most possible positive interactions and minimized negative interactions.²⁸

Another challenge in achieving the SDGs according to Spahn, is ensuring accountability and monitoring of the SDGs, as the Goals suggest cooperation between different stakeholders.²⁹ It is deemed challenging and unclear how to monitor the progress in the initial SDGs setting and with many actors participating in the process, Breuer et al. mentions the need to create a feedback mechanism among countries and stakeholders to hold each other accountable.³⁰ Salvia et al. strongly believes that success of the SDGs directly depends on the strength of the collaboration between the actors.³¹ While Rashed and Shah also agree, that the lack of monitoring and measurable indicators, lack of effective partnerships, complicated connections between the goals and targets are some of the challenges that private sector faces when working with the SDGs.³² Although the SDGs promote partnerships for achieving the Goals, the ICSU study found that the SDGs framework does not make it clear, what kind and how many actors and social groups need to be mobilized to deliver the goals.³³ Furthermore, not all of the Goals contain quantifiable targets, making it harder to track the progress. As noted in Lamichhane et al. “if we cannot measure the sustainable development, we cannot improve it”.³⁴ However, not all of the scholars are pessimistic of the SDGs framework. According to Leal Filho et al. although the SDGs contain many

²⁷ ICSU, ISSC. *Review of the Sustainable Development Goals: The Science Perspective*. Paris: International Council for Science, 2015.

²⁸ Nilsson, M., Griggs, D., Visbeck, M. “Policy: Map the interactions between Sustainable Development Goals.” *Nature* 534, (2016): 320–322.

²⁹ Spahn, A. “The first generation to end poverty and the last to save the planet? - Western individualism, human rights and the value of nature in the ethics of global sustainable development.” *Sustainability*, 10, (2018).

³⁰ Breuer, A., Janetschek, H., Malerba, D. *Translating sustainable development goal (SDG) Interdependencies into policy advice: Sustainability*. Bonn, Germany: MDPI German Development Institute (DIE), 2019.

³¹ Salvia, A.L., Filho, W.L., Brandli, L.L., Griebel, S.P. “Assessing research trends related to Sustainable Development Goals: local and global issues.” *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 28, (January 2019): 841-849.

³² Rashed, A.H., Shah, A. “The role of private sector in the implementation of sustainable development goals.” *Environment, Development and Sustainability* 23, (2021): 2931–2948.

³³ ICSU, ISSC. *Review of the Sustainable Development Goals: The Science Perspective*. Paris: International Council for Science, 2015.

³⁴ Lamichhane, S., Gedik, R., Bhutta, M., Erenay, B. “Benchmarking OECD countries’ sustainable development performance: A goal-specific principal component analysis approach.” *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 287, (March 2021). P. 50.

challenges, they also offer many opportunities, and what is needed is the collective work of the governments and other stakeholders to develop metrics, criteria and other steps needed to overcome the inconsistencies and imperfections that the SDGs framework contains.³⁵ Further research by the ICSU precisely presented a comprehensive and science-based analysis of the several SDGs interactions and possible trade-offs in order to prompt dialogue among policymakers on the importance of interactions in developing strategies and action plans.³⁶

There is a variety of material published on the topic of sustainable development debate. One of the concepts used in discussions about the SDGs implementation is the concept of strategic planning. It caused a lot of debate as it is seen as a key feature, step-by-step manual in achieving the goals, when in reality there is no such formula or approach, because of the differences in social, economic and political development of the countries, and in fact, strategic planning can be inflexible, discourage new strategies from emerging and focus on short term, rather than long term goals.³⁷ So, instead the action plans for each individual country should be planned. For this, National Sustainable Development Strategy were proposed by the UN as a driver, so the governments could determine their individual nationally owned way towards sustainable development taking into consideration country's historical, cultural, political, ecological and social capacity.³⁸ And that is the approach the Scandinavian countries follow. The Scandinavian countries while having some kind of the NSDS for each country, are also a part of the effective partnership in the Nordic Council where they coordinate their efforts to overcome challenges towards the SDGs together.

Although many years have passed since the UNCED in 1992 regarding the adoption of the NSDS little guidance have been available on how to fulfil this strategy. That is why the UNDESA developed a document, which provided the framework for systematic approach in implementing the sustainable development and was aimed to foster informed decision-making process, develop procedures and legislative frameworks, institutionalize processes for implementation, tackle inter-

³⁵ Leal Filho, W., Tripathi, S.K., Andrade Guerra, J. B. S. O. D., Giné-Garriga, R., Orlovic Lovren V., Willats, J. "Using the sustainable development goals towards a better understanding of sustainability challenges." *International Journal of Sustainable Development & World Ecology*, 26, no 2, (2019): 179-190.

³⁶ ICSU. A guide to SDG interactions: from science to implementation. 2019.

³⁷ Mintzberg, H. *The Rise and Fall of Strategic Planning*. New York: The Free Press, 1994.

³⁸ Swanson, D., Pinter, L. *National Strategies for Sustainable Development. Challenges, Approaches and Innovations in Strategic and Co-ordinated Action*. IISD, 2004.

related economic and social problems, present timetables for actions, appoint institutions in charge, manage finances.³⁹

Numerous reports have been made on identifying successful practices of the NSDS based on the analysis of past and current best practices of different countries.⁴⁰ The OECD analyzed the progress of its member countries and provided guidance on how to implement sustainable development, providing examples of the approaches, case studies and best-practices that have worked in its member countries.⁴¹ The “Good Practices in the National Sustainable Development Strategies of OECD countries” helped to determine key principles and methods used in sustainable development implementation. By sharing experiences and insights, and discussing what works and what does not, the idea is that the countries can improve the content and implementation of the NSDSs as much work remains to be done to achieve sustainability in all spheres.

Most of the reports and resource books at some point refer to the practices of the Scandinavian countries as an example. The recent analysis on implementing the SDGs in Europe introduced comparative overview of the SDGs governance arrangement in the EU Member States. The study also provided a summarized data on the activities and policy developments at the EU level.⁴² And after analyzing the material provided in this report, it can be seen that the Scandinavian countries have more governmental arrangements and instruments in place to implement the SDGs practices, which is consistently noted in this report. However, as this report is focused purely on the government framework on the SDGs implementation, it falls out on the positions and views of the civil society sector and the national NGOs on the work of the government.

Although, there are reports that provide the information on the views of the national NGOs on the implementation of the SDGs, they are mostly focusing on the particular goal and not the SDGs overall.⁴³ However, some reports do contain the collective narrative on the challenges the

³⁹ UNDESA. Guidance in Preparing a National Sustainable Development Strategy: managing sustainable development in the new millennium. 2002.

⁴⁰ Dalal-Clayton, B., Bass, S. *Sustainable Development Strategies. A Resource Book*. Earthscan Publications Ltd, 2002.

⁴¹ OECD-DAC. *The DAC Guidelines: strategies for sustainable development: Guidance for Development Cooperation*. Development Cooperation Committee, 2001. Retrieved from <http://www.sourceOECD.org> on November 2019.

⁴² Policy Department, Directorate-General for External Policies. *Europe’s approach to implementing the Sustainable Development Goals: good practices and the way forward*. European Parliament, 2019.

⁴³ Group 92. Implementation of SDG 12 in the Nordic countries. 2019.

Scandinavian countries face in achieving the SDGs,⁴⁴ and these findings will be used in this study, the objective of this study is to go a little further. One of the closest reports to producing an analysis of the narratives on the SDGs implementation in the Scandinavian countries are the ones produced by the Nordic CSOs.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, no matter how compiling they can be, the reports contain only the analysis of the National Action Plans and the assessment of the government work.⁴⁶ The field research performed by Deloitte also does provide significant input into the literature on sustainable development practices in Scandinavian countries by focusing on the government initiatives on the local level and allows to see that the SDGs plan for the local level is not in place in all the Scandinavian countries yet and most work is performed on a national level.⁴⁷ This report will also be of use for the research as it provides critical analysis based on the interviews with the municipal leaders directly working in the field.

As the concept of sustainable development is relatively new, the most recent literature on the SDGs implementation is introduced in the form of annual or mid-term reports, statistical data, resource books and covers the progress of the specific countries and sections of the SDGs. And there is a number of works on the best practices of the Scandinavian countries. However, there has been little attention given to the NGOs and the government's narratives on the SDGs implementation. Therefore, the purpose of this thesis is to address this shortcoming in the sustainable development literature by undertaking a comprehensive study on the SDGs narratives in the Scandinavian countries. The idea is to focus both on the government narratives on the SDGs implementation, and on the NGOs. To focus on what kind of narratives do they create in relation to the SDGs implementation. How do the NGOs interact with the governments, how do they communicate arguments about the SDGs, how do they evaluate the implementation of the SDGs. Study not the success story of the Scandinavian countries, but if there is something they could do better according to the governmental reports and the national NGOs.

⁴⁴ Larsen, M., Alslund-Lanthen, E. *Bumps on the Road to 2030*. Nordic Council of Ministers, 2017. <https://doi.org/10.6027/ANP2017-738>

⁴⁵ Halonen, M., Persson, A., Sepponen, S., Siebert, C.K., Brockl, M., Vaahtera, A., Quinn, S., Trimmer, C. and Isokangas, A. *Sustainable Development Action – the Nordic Way. Implementation of the Global 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in Nordic Cooperation*. Nordic Council of Ministers. 2017.

⁴⁶ Danish 92 Group, Concord Sweden, Finnish Development NGOs and Norwegian Forum for Development and Environment. *Nordic Matrix. National Action Plans for the Sustainable Development Goals*. 2020.

⁴⁷ Deloitte. *From global goals to local action Nordic report*. 2018.

3. Theoretical framework

The objectives of the research are to explore what are the narratives on the SDGs implementation promoted by the national NGOs and the governments in the Scandinavian countries, to discover whether there are conflicting narratives between the Scandinavian countries, or between the NGOs and the governments.

The focus of the research will be on the Scandinavian countries: Sweden, Denmark, Norway, as they consistently score in the top of the SDGs index.⁴⁸ The national NGOs for this study were selected through stakeholder mapping on the basis of having participated directly in advocacy relating to the SDGs implementation. The research concentrated on the time period of 2015, from the time the SDGs were adopted to 2020, but earlier references were made where appropriate. The analysis was based on documentary sources relying on official documents to capture the motivations and opinions of the key actors involved in the SDGs implementation in the Scandinavian countries.

The methodology in this study was based on a qualitative framework with the application of the narrative theory and the narrative analysis of the SDGs implementation. This research has undertaken interpretivist approach.

As was mentioned earlier the research was based on the narrative theory. There are many ways to think about and understand the narrative theory. Whenever people read books and news stories, watch documentaries and movies, talk with someone, every time they engage with some degree of the narrative theory, as narration is found whenever someone tells us about something. The narrative theory helps to find the narratives and explore how these narratives work with each other, find out what kind of ‘story’ and ‘discourse’ the narratives create. It helps to understand how “sentences turn into narrative”,⁴⁹ and how the narratives create impacts on a reader.

The founding works of the narrative theory are the major works of Kristeva, Barthes, Genette, Propp and a number of others who put the beginning for the use of the narrative theory in literary studies.⁵⁰ Although, initially the narrative theory was used mostly in literary studies, gradually it moved beyond literary studies and became central to film studies, history, psychology,

⁴⁸ Bring, J., Agerskov, U. *Nordic Sustainable Development Indicators – in the light of Agenda 2030*. Nordic Statistical Meeting, 2019.

⁴⁹ Fludernik, M. *An introduction to Narratology*. New York: Routledge, 2009. P. 8.

⁵⁰ Puckett, K. *Narrative Theory: A critical Introduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016.

cultural studies, cultural analysis and beyond.⁵¹ Nowadays, narrative is all around us, and the application of the narrative theory continues to grow extensively and applies to a larger number of disciplines.⁵² Roe, Miskimmon, Roselle, Rhodes and others are the ones who applied the narrative theory in the field of public policy and social sciences through the research on the budgetary, pension reform and human rights issues.⁵³

The aim of the narrative theory is “to study texts, broadly defined, in as far as they are narratives”.⁵⁴ The narrative theory implies that “texts are designed by authors to affect readers in particular ways”.⁵⁵ And as the object of this study were the reports of the national NGOs and the governments on the topic of SDGs implementation, the narrative theory helped to explain the narratives and the discourse the national NGOs and the governments create about the SDGs implementation in the Scandinavian countries, which are considered as some kind of a role model when it comes to sustainable development. These reports are the instruments that fulfill political agenda and political purposes through the promotion of narratives.⁵⁶ And the narratives that are commonly used in describing and analyzing any kind of policy issues are a force in themselves.⁵⁷

In its turn, narrative analysis that was used in this research supported the application of the narrative theory. For the narrative analysis to be conducted a number of texts and a plurality of voices need to be analyzed for the result to be legitimate.⁵⁸ Thus, a large number of key reports of the national NGOs and the governments were taken into account. It is important to take into account the national NGOs together with the governments, because nowadays the national NGOs have access to a vast audience through the means of technologies. Barthwal-Datta also agrees that the study of narratives must include NGOs both as narrators and interpreters of state’s narratives.⁵⁹

⁵¹ Bal, M. *Narratology. Introduction to the Theory of Narrative. Second edition.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press Incorporated, 1997.

⁵² Richardson, B. “Recent concepts of Narrative and the Narratives of Narrative Theory”. *Style* 34, no 2, (2000).

⁵³ Rhodes, R.A.W. *Narrative Policy Analysis. Cases in Decentred Policy.* Southampton: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.

⁵⁴ Fischer, F., Miller G.J., Sidney M.S. *Handbook of Public Policy Analysis. Theory, Politics, and Methods.* CRC Press, 2007. P. 252.

⁵⁵ Herman, D. et al. *Narrative Theory. Core Concepts and Critical Debates.* Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2012. P. 5.

⁵⁶ Coste, D. “Narrative theory” accessed February 8, 2021. <https://oxfordre.com/literature/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.001.0001/acrefore-9780190201098-e-116#acrefore-9780190201098-e-116-div1-3>

⁵⁷ Roe, E. *Narrative Policy Analysis. Theory and Practice.* Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1994.

⁵⁸ Hampton, G. “Narrative Policy Analysis and the Integration of Public Involvement in Decision-making”. *Policy Science*, 42, (2009).

⁵⁹ Miskimmon, A., O’Loughlin, B., Roselle, L. “Strategic Narratives: a response”. *Critical Studies on Security* 3, no 3, (2015).

Moreover, the NGOs among other institutions are more trusted by the informed public rather than the governments and the media⁶⁰, thus the narratives promoted by the NGOs have more influence in the international system. Particularly, considering that the Scandinavian countries are the world leaders when it comes to implementing the sustainable development practices, they have the means to construct and shape the behaviour of other international actors through the narration and influence over other actors' understandings of how the things should develop and what priorities and policies are needed.

Moreover, this research will bring some novelty to the literature on the SDGs practices, as it will present the analysis of the Scandinavian approach from the perspective of the national NGOs and the governments, whether it will be a critique of this approach, showing that not everything is perfect, or recommendations on what could be done better according to different actors. And this way it will also address the gap in the literature, which is mostly consisted of the best practices of the Scandinavian approach.

The key concepts which will be used throughout this study will be discussed below. The first one and the most important to define is the 'narrative' itself. The narrative in this study will consist of the discourse which projects certain opinions, positions, concepts and views of the national NGOs and the governments on the topic of the SDGs implementation.⁶¹ It is a whole set of what is said by different actors on the topic of sustainable development implementation, whether these things are complementing or conflicting with each other.⁶² The study will be looking at the way the material in those reports is provided and organized, how it is given shape and how it is put together, as this is the key to understand the narratives and its influence on the perception of the information. The narratives help us to make sense of the diversity and complexity of events and opinions in the world.

The existing literature on the topic of sustainable development implementation, the best practices and success stories of Scandinavian countries is plentiful, but at the same time when taking a closer look at it, we can see that this literature is mostly presented by the outside actors such as the UN, OECD and others. Thus, the information provided there can not fully reflect the

⁶⁰ Edelman. "20 years of trust." Accessed on February 27, 2021. <https://www.edelman.com/20yearsoftrust/>

⁶¹ Puckett, K. *Narrative Theory: A critical Introduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016.

⁶² Coste, D. "Narrative theory" accessed February 8, 2021. <https://oxfordre.com/literature/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.001.0001/acrefore-9780190201098-e-116#acrefore-9780190201098-e-116-div1-3>

views and opinions of the actors from the Scandinavian countries on its experience in sustainable development practices. At the same time there is a limited literature on the Scandinavian approach in the SDGs implementation from the perspective of the national NGOs and the governments themselves. Therefore, the objective of this research is to find out those views and narratives on the SDGs implementation from the perspective of the governments and the national NGOs. And with the help of the narrative theory and the narrative analysis there is expectation it will be possible to fulfill this objective.

As was mentioned earlier this research will undertake interpretivist approach. The study will perform the narrative analysis and will use the concepts of narrative throughout this research. The narrative theory by Rimmon-Kenan has developed three aspects to study any narrative: story, text and narration.⁶³ Here, when studying story, the narrative analysis focuses on the set of events and recommendations, actors and plot of the story that are being narrated. In studying texts, the focus is on how, when, and which way the story is presented. When studying narration, the focus is on the narrator itself. And while texts are available immediately, the story and narration have to be studied and analyzed through the text with the help of the narrative analysis and the prism of the narrative theory.

To perform the narrative analysis, first, we will need to identify the narratives. In this study as the unit of analysis ‘constructed narratives’ will be taken. Constructed narratives are the narratives showing a position of an organization or a group of organizations on a specific policy issue, a shared understanding of policy perspectives.⁶⁴ Only after the constructed narratives has been identified, the narrative analysis starts. According to Roe, the narrative analysis has four steps. At first, we need to define what is the ‘story’ in the text and identify the dominant narratives in those texts. The second step is to identify ‘counterstories’, which are narratives that are contrary to the dominant. During the third step, we need to compare two sets of narratives and create a ‘metanarrative’ from that, which will unite two contrary sets of narratives to some kind of consensus. Simply speaking a metanarrative is a new narrative which stabilizes two conflicting narratives in a way that makes it possible to work out a solution to the problem. Finally, during the

⁶³ Fischer, F., Miller G.J., Sidney M.S. *Handbook of Public Policy Analysis. Theory, Politics, and Methods*. CRC Press, 2007.

⁶⁴ Roe, E. *Narrative Policy Analysis. Theory and Practice*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1994.

last step we need to determine how the metanarrative makes it possible to come up with a solution to the problem on the issue of disagreement.

This research can have some drawbacks in its approach due to the limited access to the documents in the national languages and limited timeframe for the performance of the research. Although this does limit the potential scope and outcome of the research, however, it does not limit the potential significance of the research, as the key documents are available in English language. Another limitation is the performance of the document analysis, as the documents and reports are the only source of information in this research, which gives a limited view on some issues. Furthermore, one of the main limitations was that as any other analyst I might have missed things. It is very challenging to code qualitative data, as naturally one might not catch every piece of information contained in a rich passage, and some texts are more difficult than the others. Sometimes there is such a strong discussion related to one code that it is possible to miss other codes that should apply. Therefore, if there were at least two analysts the results might have been more comprehensive, however it does not imply that the results of this research are not reliable. Furthermore, as this research was limited in time, it did not include reports published later than January 2021, thus it might have missed some insights from the recent publications.

4. Methods

As was mentioned earlier the methodology in this study was based on a qualitative framework with application of the narrative theory and the narrative analysis of the SDGs implementation, as this kind of analysis is the most suitable approach in studying the narratives. The aim of this research was to discover the underlying narratives on the SDGs implementation produced by the Scandinavian governments and the national NGOs. To achieve this aim the qualitative data from secondary sources such as the key NGOs submissions and state reports were used.

The NGOs for this study were selected through stakeholder mapping on the basis of having participated directly in advocacy relating to SDGs implementation. The analysis helped to identify key NGOs and CSOs in the Scandinavian countries, which play significant role in advocating sustainable development practices and participating in a dialogue with the governments for advancement of the SDGs implementation. The validity of the chosen NGOs is acknowledged by the European Economic and Social Committee platform on SDGs Member state activity⁶⁵ and the European Sustainable Development Network⁶⁶, where the chosen NGOs are referred to as accredited national CSOs representatives such as Global Focus, Danish 92 Group. Two to four key NGOs and CSOs were selected for each case study country, Sweden, Norway and Denmark. In total, twelve NGO reports were used in the analysis. Each of the selected stakeholder is either representing a coalition of the NGOs focusing on the sustainable development research, or it is a sole organization, but either way they had been taking part in an open dialogue with the government on the issues regarding the SDGs implementation through the means of publishing their recommendations and views, seminars, workshops, round tables with the government representatives etc. The diversity among the chosen NGOs allows for a plurality of voices to be represented.

The study focused on the Scandinavian countries, Norway, Sweden and Denmark, as they collectively top the charts in the SDGs implementation and its public institutions have a long tradition in promoting and applying sustainable development practices. No wonder, that in the numerous reports on the best practices of the sustainable development implementation, the

⁶⁵ EESC. SDG Member State activity (country fiche). <https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/policies/policy-areas/sustainable-development/sdgs/member-state-activity>

⁶⁶ ESDN. Country profiles. <https://www.esdn.eu/country-profiles>

Scandinavian countries are being presented as an example. Many countries look up to the them as a role model. Today it is fair to say that the Scandinavian countries traditionally contribute to the promotion and improvement of the concept of sustainable development around the world. Thus, it is important to follow what are those narratives and stories promoted by the Scandinavian countries and which narratives they set on the agenda in regard to the SDGs implementation.

The research concentrated on the time period from 2015, when the SDGs were adopted, to 2020, but earlier references were made where appropriate. Although, there were numerous reports connected with the topic of sustainable development, only the ones reflecting on the implementation of the SDGs were taken into consideration during the study. These were mostly the assessment and critique of the government framework on the SDGs implementation, or the review of challenges in implementing the SDGs and proposal and recommendations from the NGOs.

On the other hand, for the second part of the analysis the governmental reports were used for the study. The state reports and publications were retrieved from the official governmental sources available in the English language, such as the websites of different ministries and units and the EU resources for sharing the sustainable development implementation practices. For the analysis of the governmental reports, on the opposite, were selected the ones with the focus on the results and the work done on the SDGs implementation. In the end, two to three reports for each case study country were chosen, ten in total. The chosen reports consisted of the Voluntary National reports, and the ones conducted by the Ministries and national statistical bureaus, which were performed by different units, thus allowing for a plurality of views to be represented.

After the mapping process, the NGOs and the governmental reports were used to perform the narrative analysis. To perform the narrative analysis, first, we needed to identify the narratives. In this study as the unit of analysis ‘constructed narratives’ were taken. Constructed narratives are the narratives showing a position of an organization or a group of organizations on a specific policy issue, in this case on the SDGs implementation, and a shared understanding of policy perspectives.⁶⁷ Only after the constructed narratives has been identified, the narrative analysis started. According to Roe, the narrative analysis has four steps. At first, we define what is the ‘story’ in the text and identified the dominant narratives in those texts. In the second step we identified the ‘counterstories’, which are the narratives that are contrary to the dominant. During

⁶⁷ Roe, E. *Narrative Policy Analysis. Theory and Practice*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1994. P. 253

the third step, we compared two sets of narratives and created a ‘metanarrative’ from that, which united two contrary sets of narratives to some kind of consensus. Finally, during the last step we determined how the metanarrative makes it possible to come up with a solution to the problem on the issue of disagreement.⁶⁸ The narrative analysis also involved coding the retrieved data in order to categorize the findings and gain an understanding of the stakeholders’ perceptions.

The structured coding was applied for the analysis in the MaxQDA software, where the topics of interest to look for in the texts were identified beforehand and the codes were put in the forms of questions, to make it easier to find answers to the questions later on. At the same time through the process of coding I was open to the data speaking to me, allowing to suggest new topics of interest. After completing the coding, the analysis of the data and its interpretation has followed. The analysis involved uncovering patterns and trends in the data and interpretation involved uncovering meaning.

The SDGs narratives were grouped into sub-chapters that reflected the most frequently mentioned narratives in the chosen reports and thematically are common for all three countries Norway, Sweden and Denmark. ‘Frontrunners in the SDGs implementation’ - reflected the thread that the Scandinavian countries have almost achieved the SDGs and included the narratives from all of the SDGs. ‘Preparedness for implementing the SDGs’ – also reflected the narratives from all the SDGs about the state and readiness of the SDGs implementation. ‘Universal welfare’ thread – is a reflection of a more aggregate narratives concerning gender equality, health services and accessible quality education, availability of social services, non-discrimination and decent work. It referred to the implementation of the SDGs 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 8 and 10. ‘Environmental narratives’ connected to the SDGs 6, 7, 14 and 15, reflecting on the implementation of these Goals in the Scandinavian countries. While ‘Sustainable consumption and production’ referred to the SDGs 12 and 13. ‘Cooperation with stakeholders’ sub-topic – included the narratives on the importance of cooperation between countries, regions, civil society, academia and businesses and connects with the SDG 17. And ‘Development assistance’ thread focused on the Scandinavian countries’ contribution to the SDGs implementation worldwide and the SDGs 16 and 17.

The narrative analysis was applied in this research as it could accurately distinguish the dominant and conflicting narratives, which allowed to understand the views of both sides, the narratives of the national NGOs and the governments on the SDGs implementation in the

⁶⁸ Roe, E. *Narrative Policy Analysis. Theory and Practice*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1994. P. 155

Scandinavian countries. The narrative analysis is becoming a more frequently used approach in social sciences⁶⁹, although in the current context there has not been much research done. This way, this research will contribute to the literature on the SDGs implementation, especially in the framework of presenting an overview of the narratives on the Scandinavian SDGs implementation according to the national NGOs and the governments.

⁶⁹ Barabasch, A. “The narrative approach in research and its use for policy advice”. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 37, no 4, (2018): 468-481.

5. Revealing the narratives on the SDGs implementation in the Scandinavian countries

In the following chapters the findings of the conducted study will be presented through three stages. The aim of this analysis is to unveil the narratives present by the Scandinavian governments and the national NGOs on the SDGs implementation through the official reports and publications on the SDGs issue, discover the trends of views to which the actors tend to lean towards to, reveal the most prominent storylines, as well as the paradoxes and disagreements present in the analyzed material, which are exposed through the lack of position consistency in the SDGs implementation in the Scandinavian governments and the national NGOs. The analysis is structured thematically, first the state and the national NGOs narratives are presented separately, following with the comparative narrative analysis.

5.1 The governmental narratives on the SDGs implementation

With a growing pressure of the climate change crisis and the upcoming deadline for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, the need for transition to sustainable development has become more topical. In the current literature there are more and more research on the sustainable development issues being published from year to year, although there is still much to discover and implement. As was stated earlier this study aimed at studying the narratives of the selected Scandinavian countries, as they are perceived as the leaders in implementing the SDGs and sustainable development practices. The aim is to find out what do Norway, Sweden and Denmark themselves say about its role and stance regarding the UN 2030 Agenda. Expectedly, the results would be confirming the well-known story of the Scandinavian countries being the leaders in implementing the sustainable development practices and almost achieving the SDGs.

Frontrunners in the SDGs implementation

The governmental storyline and narratives are based on the conviction that the Scandinavian countries are the frontrunners in the SDGs implementation and have almost achieved the Goals. This storyline is significantly manifested in the governmental reports. In the analyzed reports, there is a visible thread, which presents bold statements about the success of the

Scandinavian countries. This analysis supported the notion that “self-reporting usually does not highlight the weaknesses of the national approaches”⁷⁰, as the governmental reports, as a result, highlighted mostly the positive aspects of the SDGs implementation.

The leading position of Norway, Sweden and Denmark in the SDGs achievement is highlighted in the numerous reports by the Bertelsmann Stiftung, the SDSN, the Yale Center’s Environmental Performance Index, the SDG Index and several others: “The Nordic countries collectively top the charts in terms of all global sustainability rankings. The region is looked to as leading by example, sending strong signals on human rights, social and welfare levels...”.⁷¹ Although such results rely on the statistical data available in UN and OECD databases, they also have a number of shortcomings that need to be addressed to present a more complete assessment.⁷² However, the favourable position in achieving the SDGs has been acknowledged by the Scandinavian governments as well. As indicated in the Swedish governmental report to the UN High Level Political Forum on sustainable development:

“Sweden has a favourable starting position for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. The peaceful and democratic conditions that have long characterised the country and that encompass a developed culture of collaboration between the different societal actors are essential, politically, economically and socially. An important reason why Sweden has a good starting position is that its economic development over time has been strong. This is rooted in a favourable business climate and a dynamic private sector with an international outlook and extensive trade relations. The social partners have been well organised and have had an explicit focus on finding solutions through negotiations. Democratic-political means have enabled Sweden to develop a welfare model with the ambition of guaranteeing all its people access to good health, schooling and education, a good environment, housing and employment. An active gender

⁷⁰ Policy Department, Directorate-General for External Policies. *Europe’s approach to implementing the Sustainable Development Goals: good practices and the way forward*. European Parliament, 2019. P. 18.

⁷¹ Halonen, M., Persson, A., Sepponen, S., Siebert, C.K., Brockl, M., Vaahtera, A., Quinn, S., Trimmer, C. and Isokangas, A. *Sustainable Development Action – the Nordic Way. Implementation of the Global 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in Nordic Cooperation*. Nordic Council of Ministers. 2017. P. 63.

⁷² Statistics Denmark. *Statistical follow-up on the 2030 Agenda – Denmark*. 2017. P. 8.

equality policy has helped to reduce the disparities between women and men in society.”⁷³

This storyline is arising from the position that the Scandinavian countries have been developing sustainable solutions for a long time, which can be noticed in the text above in “peaceful and democratic conditions that have long characterised the country’. The cited above fragment is describing public goods established over time in Sweden but which can also refer to other Scandinavian countries, without a doubt allow for the easier integration of the SDGs framework into policy.

The same storyline about the favourable position for achieving the SDGs and being “at the very top of the leaderboard in terms of being on track for achieving the SDGs”⁷⁴ is present in the reports of Norway and Denmark governments as well. As presented by the Danish Ministry of Finance in the Voluntary National report on the SDGs:

“Denmark is uniquely positioned to achieve and promote the 2030 Agenda and the 17 SDGs... We have a strong economy and low unemployment combined with green energy, healthcare and education for all, gender equality, freedom of speech and a social safety net that supports those furthest behind.”⁷⁵

The Norway report by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs also follows this thread stating that “Norway is playing a leading role in a number of areas, including ocean management, global health, education, and anti-corruption”.⁷⁶ The governmental reports also include bold statements that Sweden “meets the global criteria for economic gender equality to 100 per cent”⁷⁷, while Denmark claims to provide equal access to education and healthcare where remedies do not depend on economic or social status, and Norway has “active employment policies that help vulnerable

⁷³ Sweden and the 2030 Agenda – Report to the UN High Level Political Forum 2017 on Sustainable Development. 2017. P. 5.

⁷⁴ Ministry of finance. Report for the Voluntary National review. Denmark’s implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. June 2017. P. 13.

⁷⁵ Ministry of finance. Report for the Voluntary National review. Denmark’s implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. June 2017. P. 5.

⁷⁶ Norwegian Ministry of Finance, Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. One year closer 2018. Norway’s progress toward the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. P. 5.

⁷⁷ Statistics Sweden. Implementation of the 2030 Agenda in Sweden Statistical Review 2019. P. 10.

groups to enter the labour market”⁷⁸. These narratives on “comparatively good conditions for achieving the 2030 Agenda and a responsibility to contribute to the global implementation of the Agenda”⁷⁹ contribute to storyline of the Scandinavian countries being frontrunners in achieving the SDGs and positioning themselves as “leading by example”⁸⁰.

Preparedness for implementing the SDGs

It is fair to say that the Scandinavian countries have traditionally contributed to the promotion and improvement of the concept of sustainable development around the world from the beginning. The states of the region are the permanent participants and often initiators of summits and conferences on the sustainable development issues. Not a single thematic event is complete without reports and proposals from the representatives of the three Scandinavian countries: Norway, Sweden, Denmark. Therefore, it was no surprise that the Scandinavian countries have supported the SDGs framework and adopted “the system of ownership of the Goals”⁸¹ within ministries, to ensure the responsibility for the specific SDGs and its inclusion in the government policies and strategies. Another measure is the adoption of the National Action Plan with “national targets that are measurable and quantifiable”.⁸²

Cooperation with stakeholders

The selected Scandinavian countries actively cooperate with each other and its partner countries on the issues of sustainability, political and economic spheres of life through the Nordic Council of Ministers and other forums, however, they also have strongly developed civil society sector which has always had interest in being involved in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.⁸³ As indicated in the report by the Nordic Council of Ministers:

⁷⁸ Norwegian Ministry of Finance, Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. One year closer 2019. Norway’s progress toward the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. P. 4.

⁷⁹ Swedish delegation for the 2030 Agenda. Summary Sweden. 2019. P. 10.

⁸⁰ Halonen, M., Persson, A., Sepponen, S., Siebert, C.K., Brockl, M., Vaahtera, A., Quinn, S., Trimmer, C. and Isokangas, A. *Sustainable Development Action – the Nordic Way. Implementation of the Global 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in Nordic Cooperation*. Nordic Council of Ministers. 2017. P. 63.

⁸¹ Halonen, M., Persson, A., Sepponen, S., Siebert, C.K., Brockl, M., Vaahtera, A., Quinn, S., Trimmer, C. and Isokangas, A. *Sustainable Development Action – the Nordic Way. Implementation of the Global 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in Nordic Cooperation*. Nordic Council of Ministers. 2017. P. 39.

⁸² Ministry of finance. Report for the Voluntary National review. Denmark’s implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. June 2017. P. 10.

⁸³ Norway. Voluntary National Review presented at the High Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development. 2016, P. 6.

“The mapping also shows considerable interest in and readiness for Nordic cooperation, including political will and an interest in joint Nordic action on SDGs among a wide spectrum of stakeholders, covering representatives of government, the private sector and civic society.”⁸⁴

In the analyzed governmental reports, the narrative on the need for cooperation with other stakeholders is prominent among others. Such cooperation took place in various forms through panel discussions, conferences like the Conference on the Danish Follow up on the SDGs⁸⁵, working groups, multi-stakeholder forum such as the Dialogue Forum for Growth and Corporate Responsibility⁸⁶, or the one organized by the Swedish Leadership for Sustainable Development⁸⁷ which engaged private sector, civil society, academia and businesses, as everyone agreed that “all ideas, knowledge, experience and capital are needed to take advantage of the opportunities and deliver the solutions to the challenges that the SDGs present”.⁸⁸ However, despite the recognition of the need for stakeholders participation, there was no formal consultation plan or schedule established, and regardless of the stakeholders consultations the input from the civil society organizations have not been taken into account when establishing action plans.⁸⁹

Universal welfare

The analysis also revealed that the storyline in the state reports focused mostly on the assessment of the current progress of the SDGs implementation in the Scandinavian countries rather than on the challenges. According to the governmental reports due to the Scandinavian countries having long tradition of democratic development and universal welfare model, Swedish government claims to have achieved gender equality to 100 per cent, while Norway due to its

⁸⁴ Halonen, M., Persson, A., Sepponen, S., Siebert, C.K., Brockl, M., Vaahtera, A., Quinn, S., Trimmer, C. and Isokangas, A. *Sustainable Development Action – the Nordic Way. Implementation of the Global 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in Nordic Cooperation*. Nordic Council of Ministers. 2017. P. 98.

⁸⁵ Ministry of finance. Report for the Voluntary National review. Denmark’s implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. June 2017. P. 36.

⁸⁶ Halonen, M., Persson, A., Sepponen, S., Siebert, C.K., Brockl, M., Vaahtera, A., Quinn, S., Trimmer, C. and Isokangas, A. *Sustainable Development Action – the Nordic Way. Implementation of the Global 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in Nordic Cooperation*. Nordic Council of Ministers. 2017. P. 23.

⁸⁷ Sweden and the 2030 Agenda – Report to the UN High Level Political Forum 2017 on Sustainable Development. 2017. P. 57.

⁸⁸ Ministry of finance. Report for the Voluntary National review. Denmark’s implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. June 2017. P. 37.

⁸⁹ Halonen, M., Persson, A., Sepponen, S., Siebert, C.K., Brockl, M., Vaahtera, A., Quinn, S., Trimmer, C. and Isokangas, A. *Sustainable Development Action – the Nordic Way. Implementation of the Global 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in Nordic Cooperation*. Nordic Council of Ministers. 2017. P. 42.

employment policies has low rate of unemployment and vulnerable groups easily enter the labour market.⁹⁰ At the same time, although Norway is known to have a high standard of living, “the number of children growing up in low-income families has increased in recent decades. About 10.7 per cent of all children live in families with persistent low income”⁹¹ and in Sweden “inequality between groups has been increasing in economic area, as well as housing, health and exposure to violence”⁹². Such observations while not being so prominent in the analyzed reports, still create some kind of a disagreement between the thread of the ‘frontrunners in the SDGs implementation, gender equality and equal access to welfare services’ and the thread of ‘rising level of inequality and poverty’. The data received in the process of analysis and coding revealed uneven distribution between these threads with the ones on being ‘frontrunners in the SDGs implementation’ prevailing more than on half.

Environmental narratives

This ‘frontrunners in implementing the SDGs’ thread is prominent in assessing the environmental goals as well.

“Norway has a very high proportion of renewable energy in its energy mix compared to other countries, due to a combination of policy and natural conditions. Almost all of our electricity production (99 per cent) comes from renewable energy sources, mainly from hydroelectric power generation. The share of renewable energy in Norway’s total energy consumption (including transport) is around 69 per cent.”⁹³

The fragment indicates the Norway government’s successful transition to renewable energy to 99 per cent, complementing the storyline to being close to achieving the SDGs. The same positive trend continues when it comes to the greenhouse gas emissions efficiency as Norway is among the countries where emissions per unit of GDP are the lowest.⁹⁴ According to the reports

⁹⁰ Norwegian Ministry of Finance, Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. One year closer 2019. Norway’s progress toward the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. P. 4.

⁹¹ Norwegian Ministry of Finance, Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. One year closer 2019. Norway’s progress toward the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. P. 22.

⁹² Statistics Sweden. Implementation of the 2030 Agenda in Sweden Statistical Review 2019. P. 12.

⁹³ Norwegian Ministry of Finance, Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. One year closer 2018. Norway’s progress toward the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. P. 29.

⁹⁴ Norway. Voluntary National Review presented at the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development. 2016, P. 20.

of the Swedish government, emissions of greenhouse gases has been on decrease due to altered energy sources as well. Later in the text, however, it is also stated that “Sweden will not meet the target of zero net emissions of greenhouse gases by 2045 under the existing and adopted instruments and measures”.⁹⁵

Nature and marine protection, fishing industry are important spheres for the Scandinavian countries and the governments are known to pay special attention to preserving it.

“Marine protection comprises 13.8 per cent of Sweden’s total marine area, including the exclusive economic zone. This means that Sweden meets the global target of conserving at least 10 per cent of coastal and marine areas by 2020. (Goal 14)”⁹⁶

However, later in the text it is mentioned that Sweden will not meet the target of sustainable use of oceans and marine resources by 2020 and “problems remain concerning excessive fertilization, dangerous substances, weak fish stocks, alien species and an impact on sensitive ocean environments”.⁹⁷ Similarly, the Danish government has also experienced positive changes in the forest protection as “in 2016, water-related ecosystems like forests and wetlands etc. represent a larger proportion of the total area compared with 2011”, but regardless of the slight increase, “the average proportion of forests out of total land is much below the EU average of about 37 per cent”.⁹⁸ The analysis revealed that such pattern is observed throughout all of the governmental reports. First, the positive introduction of the SDGs implementation is presented, while the negative aspects and challenges in the SDGs implementation are left in the end.

Sustainable consumption and production

Another common challenge that all the Scandinavian countries have to face is achieving sustainable production and consumption. The governments are aware of this problem thus the countries establish “national plans and strategies in place to promote sustainable consumption and production, including the global 10-year framework and the Swedish environmental objectives system” as in the case of Sweden.⁹⁹ However, the amount of waste continues to grow and currently,

⁹⁵ Statistics Sweden. Implementation of the 2030 Agenda in Sweden Statistical Review 2019. P. 6.

⁹⁶ Statistics Sweden. Implementation of the 2030 Agenda in Sweden Statistical Review 2019. P. 6.

⁹⁷ Statistics Sweden. Implementation of the 2030 Agenda in Sweden Statistical Review 2019. P. 6.

⁹⁸ Statistics Denmark. Statistical follow-up on the 2030 Agenda – Denmark. 2017. P. 31.

⁹⁹ Sweden and the 2030 Agenda – Report to the UN High Level Political Forum 2017 on Sustainable Development. 2017. P. 34.

one third of edible food is wasted every year in the Scandinavian countries.¹⁰⁰ Regardless of this, due to collection and treatment procedures the environmental footprint has been on decrease and the impact of waste on health and the environment is decreasing as well.¹⁰¹ It is interesting to point out, that although the governmental officials acknowledge that the goal of sustainable consumption and production is one of the most difficult for the Scandinavian countries to achieve,¹⁰² the governmental reports do not focus much on this issue.

Development assistance

Public awareness of the environmental challenges is widespread in the Scandinavian countries, and the adoption of the SDGs agenda has been accepted by the population positively. The general public and civil society play a crucial part in the implementation of the SDGs, therefore the governments increase awareness of the SDGs through its inclusion in the school curriculum, through social media and various events, making public aware that “the SDGs exist and it is within our power to reach them”.¹⁰³ Moreover, the Scandinavian countries from the position of ‘frontrunners in implementing the SDGs’ assist developing countries through Official Development Assistance, economic cooperation, trade and investments.

“Danish authorities use their experience and expertise within legislation, regulation and implementation of sustainable societal solutions and welfare to assist a number of developing countries who are confronted with fundamental social and value choices related to the SDGs.”¹⁰⁴

The narratives on the ODA to the developing countries have been met throughout the reports, although it was the Norwegian government who put special emphasis on this aspect of the SDGs implementation. For the most part these were the narratives on the positive impact on the Scandinavian ODA, which focused on the financial contribution it provided to the developing

¹⁰⁰ Norwegian Ministry of Finance, Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. One year closer 2018. Norway’s progress toward the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. P. 38.

¹⁰¹ Norway. Voluntary National Review presented at the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development. 2016, P. 20.

¹⁰² Bexell, M., Jonsson, K. Swedish Responsibility and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. EBA expert group for aid. 2016. P. 36.

¹⁰³ Norwegian Ministry of Finance, Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. One year closer 2018. Norway’s progress toward the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. P. 9.

¹⁰⁴ Ministry of finance. Report for the Voluntary National review. Denmark’s implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. June 2017. P. 30.

countries in the framework of various governmental and the UN programmes for education, strengthening the tax systems, good governance promotion etc. All three countries acknowledged the importance of the ODA in driving the sustainable development implementation and all Scandinavian countries are known to “meet the UN goal of providing 0,7% of GNI in ODA”.¹⁰⁵

Summary

The main goal of the state reports on the SDGs implementation is to assess the current situation and progress made in achieving the Goals, recognize the challenges the governments face and the lessons learned and present the strategies on how the governments plan to overcome the challenges. In reality the opposite can be noticed as when looking through the state reports the main idea you get is the recognition of the work in progress and the belief that the government is on the right track and timing.

To sum up, the retrieved data supported the expectations. Taking into account that the analyzed reports are the governmental reports conducted by the Ministries, they have mostly focused on presenting the positive sides of the SDGs implementation and have left a smaller part to revealing the challenges the governments face in the implementation process.

The dominant narratives in the state reports are those portraying the positive image of the Scandinavian model on the universal welfare, high standard of living, gender and economic equality, nationwide access to electricity and clean water, high share of renewable energy, sustainable ecosystems etc. So, these are the narratives which are well known and widely accepted, these are exactly the narratives which exist in the UN, the OECD, the SDSN reports, and which form the widely known belief that the Scandinavian countries have almost achieved the SDGs. But one needs to look deeper to know that even though the Scandinavian countries do have favourable position due to their long history and culture of sustainable development which was discussed in the ‘Frontrunners in the SDGs implementation’ sub-topic, these countries also have gaps and challenges in other spheres rather than universal healthcare and education, equality and social welfare.

The counter-narratives in the governmental reports are exactly those spheres that need further development, and which are less displayed in the reports such as those that the

¹⁰⁵ Ministry of finance. Report for the Voluntary National review. Denmark’s implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. June 2017. P. 5.

Scandinavian countries are “far away from the targets for a number of indicators”.¹⁰⁶ The Swedish Voluntary National report acknowledged that there are challenges in “reducing differences and disparities on the labour market, including differences in pay between women and men. Persons with a disability, newly arrived immigrants, those born outside Europe and certain older people and young people have greater difficulty than others in establishing themselves on the labour market”¹⁰⁷, while the Danish Voluntary National report stated that “Inequality has been increasing in Denmark within the past 25 years, but primarily since the beginning of the millennium”¹⁰⁸. Furthermore, there has been a trend in a rise of relative poverty in Denmark, as stated by the Statistics Denmark it is “most notable among the 20–29-year-olds”.¹⁰⁹ The issue of sustainable consumption and production while being one of the most challenging, does not receive the desired coverage and attention that is needed in the governmental reports, despite the fact that “the amount of waste continues to grow at the same pace as GDP”.¹¹⁰ Moreover, despite the recognition of some challenges in the state reports, the governments do not provide proposals to overcome the challenges neither do they explain obstacles that prevent them from achieving the Goals.

The story that the governmental reports have told, based on the narratives from the reports, was the recognition of the superior position of the Scandinavian countries compared to the other countries in relation to the SDGs, the opportunity for the Scandinavian countries to lead by the example, and the statements of the facts on where the countries currently stand in achieving the SDGs, what progress has been made. Once in while the narratives on the need for further improvement have also been mentioned. But the main storyline was that the countries are on track in achieving the SDGs. The governmental reports have supported well established opinion about the success of the Scandinavian countries in achieving the SDGs. The results of the first part of the analysis have met the expectations for the governmental reports and have also provided useful data for the further analysis.

¹⁰⁶ Statistics Denmark. Statistical follow-up on the 2030 Agenda – Denmark. 2017. P. 7.

¹⁰⁷ Sweden and the 2030 Agenda – Report to the UN High Level Political Forum 2017 on Sustainable Development. 2017. P. 28.

¹⁰⁸ Ministry of finance. Report for the Voluntary National review. Denmark’s implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. June 2017. P. 74

¹⁰⁹ Statistics Denmark. Statistical follow-up on the 2030 Agenda – Denmark. 2017. P. 16.

¹¹⁰ Norwegian Ministry of Finance, Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. One year closer 2018. Norway’s progress toward the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. P. 38.

5.2 The national NGOs narratives on the SDGs implementation

Frontrunners in achieving the SDGS

The results of the second part of the research based on the national NGOs reports demonstrated that the story about the success of the Scandinavian countries in achieving sustainable development is far from reality. It is visible from the number of narratives in the analysis which argue that even though the Scandinavian countries are placed high among other countries in having achieved the SDGs, there are many challenges they have to face and overcome before they could be thought to succeed in implementing the SDGs. The results indicate that the image of the Scandinavian SDGs implementation portrayed by the NGOs and the one portrayed by the government are two different images. The NGOs harshly criticize the government in having a small progress in some of the SDGs, while acknowledging the good work done in the other SDGs.

“Progress has been made in some areas since we reported in 2019 on Denmark’s accomplishment to meet the SDGs. But in other areas, things are moving too slowly – or even in the wrong direction – without this being attributable to the spread of the Corona virus....No country in the world, including Denmark, is close to being able to achieve all the Sustainable Development Goals in 2030 with the current efforts”¹¹¹;

This fragment states the alarming position of Denmark in achieving Agenda 2030, but also reflects the current position of the other Scandinavian countries and the world as a whole. Similar narrative is present in all of the national NGOs reports on the current SDGs progress that were used in this study. This is a clear indication and contradiction to the widespread belief that the Scandinavian countries are close to achieving the SDGs, the storyline promoted in the governmental reports. This text is also unique as it specifically indicates the complexity of achieving the SDGs with ‘current efforts’, providing a possibility that this is still possible if some changes in the implementation framework are made. It points out the challenges that need to be overcome later in the text:

¹¹¹ Danish Group 92 and Global Focus. Spotlight Report. Denmark’s challenges in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals – in the Shadow of the Covid-19 crisis. 2020. P. 7.

“We lack political action in relation to the climate ambitions and inequality. The links between biodiversity; a healthy environment on earth, including the oceans; and climate change, are not at all considered in political plans or in our everyday lives. Our consumption and production lead to enormous loss of resources. Inequality is rising and we are enacting legislation, which discriminates against minorities and challenges international conventions. An ever-smaller portion of total income goes to the poorest population groups. Money for public goods disappears in tax havens”.¹¹²

The acknowledgement and the mapping of such problems is a significant step towards changing the attitude to implementing the SDGs. The national NGOs repeatedly point out in the reports the parts of the SDGs implementation that need further work and improvement. The story about the success of the Scandinavian countries in implementing the SDGs is one of the most prominent in the SDGs discourse, therefore the discussion of the weaknesses and challenges that the Scandinavian countries meet on the way to the SDGs achievement is an important theme. It is laying foundation for the thread in the analysis of the national NGOs reports, a storyline about the challenges and weak spots in the SDGs implementation in the Scandinavian countries that we can trace.

Preparedness for implementing the SDGs

One of the main approaches to establish the national SDGs framework is to produce a National Action Plan or National Strategy, taking the SDGs framework as a basis, but taking into account national social, economic and environmental peculiarities. While the Scandinavian countries are prominent leaders among other countries in the SDGs Index for countries' preparedness for realizing the SDGs, not all the Scandinavian countries had such National Action plans ready and are still in process of producing them.

“Putting the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development into practice will not be possible unless the political commitments by member states are translated into bold

¹¹² Danish Group 92 and Global Focus. Spotlight Report. Denmark's challenges in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals – in the Shadow of the Covid-19 crisis. 2020. P. 8.

politics, into updated strategies and resource allocation, and into strengthening civil society organizations and creating space for their work”¹¹³

The critique of the NGOs on the national SDGs framework can be summed up in this fragment above. The importance of establishing action plans and national strategies, the need in dedicating resources for the implementation have been discussed since the adoption of the MDGs first, and also later with the adoption of the SDGs, in numerous reports by researchers and the organizations like the UN, the OECD and etc. However, the Scandinavian governments did not establish new strategies for the SDGs implementation until recently. According to Stockholm Environment Institute Sweden’s approach to SDGs implementation needs changes in domestic policy and cross-sectoral implementation approach.¹¹⁴ The Swedish National Action Plan (NAP) 2018-2020 does not present an overarching strategy for the SDGs, it only presents a list of policies already in place and does not contain any targets, measures and long-term strategy towards 2030, it does not specify as who is responsible for each Goal, rather than the whole government. It lacks follow-up and reporting framework. The Norway NAP, on the other hand, until recently was presented as part of the national budget reporting, which was criticized by the OECD and the Norad as being ineffective and “not well-suited format for reporting on the SDGs and policy coherence”.¹¹⁵ As in the national budget reporting each department focused on the success stories, rather than challenges and policy dilemmas. At the same time the Danish government was also condemned by the NGOs, as its 2017 NAP was “based on a general understanding that Denmark is basically doing well regarding the SDGs...the NAP is not elaborated based on a baseline or gap analysis for Denmark and includes no Theory of Change.”¹¹⁶ Furthermore, no specific financial allocations to the SDGs were mentioned, making it unclear how sufficient financing will be ensured. All of the challenges and critique presented in the text such as lack of political commitment, the need for updated strategies are the challenges that all Scandinavian countries need to overcome and the national NGOs repeatedly argue for that in their reports.

¹¹³ Concord Sweden. Champions to be? Making the 2030 Agenda a Reality. 2016. P. 6.

¹¹⁴ Danish 92 Group, Concord Sweden, Finnish Development NGOs and Norwegian Forum for Development and Environment. Nordic Matrix. National Action Plans for the Sustainable Development Goals. 2020. P. 4.

¹¹⁵ Danish 92 Group, Concord Sweden, Finnish Development NGOs and Norwegian Forum for Development and Environment. Nordic Matrix. National Action Plans for the Sustainable Development Goals. 2020. P. 7.

¹¹⁶ Danish 92 Group, Concord Sweden, Finnish Development NGOs and Norwegian Forum for Development and Environment. Nordic Matrix. National Action Plans for the Sustainable Development Goals. 2020. P. 3.

Universal welfare

As the Scandinavian countries are among the wealthiest and economically stable countries with well-developed social institutes, these countries have almost achieved some of the SDGs related to social welfare and inclusion, but according to several studies of the national NGOs the situation is not stable.

“The Danish labour market has not become more inclusive. Social rights for persons with disabilities have been weakened with the government’s ambition of opening more employment possibilities, which, until now, has not led to including more persons with disabilities in the labour market.”¹¹⁷

Moreover, the refugees have been left out from the labour market either. While in Sweden there has also been several cases of abuse of migrant workers in the working environment.¹¹⁸ When looking at the education sector there have been some decline in the performance of the students which is now below the OECD average. And inequalities still exist in access to the education system in Denmark for various social groups, which requires more data to make sure that students represent the composition of the population at large.¹¹⁹ Thus, the reports are pointing out some challenges that are still present in the Scandinavian countries in the social inclusion and education sectors: ‘even if Sweden is ranked number one we should not relax, far from it’¹²⁰, which contributes to the storyline on the weak spots in the SDGs implementation in the Scandinavian NGOs reports.

Another social challenge in the SDGs implementation that the Scandinavian countries meet was mentioned several times in the analyzed national NGOs publications. Regardless of the wealth of the Scandinavian countries, the social benefit rates are low, and in some countries, they do not even meet standards for minimum income which lead to 60000 children in Denmark living in

¹¹⁷ Action Aid Denmark. What Will Denmark Look Like In 2030? Civil Society Reviews Denmark’s Efforts to Implement the Sustainable Development Goals. 2017. P. 22.

¹¹⁸ Stockholm Environment Institute. Sustainable Development Goals for Sweden: Insights on Setting a National Agenda. 2015. P. 14.

¹¹⁹ Action Aid Denmark. What Will Denmark Look Like In 2030? Civil Society Reviews Denmark’s Efforts to Implement the Sustainable Development Goals. 2017. P. 12.

¹²⁰ Bexell, M., Jonsson, K. Swedish Responsibility and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. EBA expert group for aid. 2016. P. 38.

poverty and unequal participation in society.¹²¹ This case is also connected with the children background as immigrants, making up more than half of children living in low-income families. Unequal access of migrant families to labour market, education and social benefits is the reality people live in, while the Danish government refuses to introduce a policy to fight poverty.¹²²

“Denmark's problem of ‘the working poor’ is growing. Atypical work with less social rights and protection is still a big and ever-growing problem. The goal of equal pay for equal work is still far away and progress is at a standstill. The wage gap between men and women is still high (15.7 % in 2016) and the effort to reduce the wage gap, especially in female dominated branches, has, as yet, shown no results.”¹²³

The study by the SEI revealed the same trend in Sweden, where income inequality has experienced the largest increase among the OECD countries in the period of 1985-2020.¹²⁴ The data in the texts reveals that the Scandinavian countries also do experience the same problems as developing countries related to inequality issues, discrimination on ethnic and social background, poverty and low income, although to the lesser degree. For rich Scandinavian countries it should be easy to reach the UN Goals, however according to the texts above the efforts to reduce the wage gap and ensure welfare services and appropriate workplaces are low.

Sustainable consumption and production

The Scandinavian countries are renowned supporters of sustainable development and have achieved significant results in sustainable energy production and raising public awareness on the SDGs framework. However, they are facing great challenges in meeting several environmental Goals. The trend of increasing emissions per capita was recognized in the studies of Action Aid Denmark, FORUM, the SEI. One of the most precise fragments, indicating the inconsistency between the government and the national NGOs narrative is presented in the report on the SDGs implementation assessment in Norway.

¹²¹ Danish Group 92 and Global Focus. Spotlight Report. Denmark’s challenges in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals – in the Shadow of the Covid-19 crisis. 2020. P. 12.

¹²² Action Aid Denmark. What Will Denmark Look Like In 2030? Civil Society Reviews Denmark’s Efforts to Implement the Sustainable Development Goals. 2017. P. 6.

¹²³ Action Aid Denmark. What Will Denmark Look Like In 2030? Civil Society Reviews Denmark’s Efforts to Implement the Sustainable Development Goals. 2017. P. 22.

¹²⁴ Stockholm Environment Institute. Sustainable Development Goals for Sweden: Insights on Setting a National Agenda. 2015. P. 14.

“In the reporting on the SDGs in the national budget with respect to Goal 13, the government states that, according to the OECD, Norway is “among the countries with the highest taxes on fossil fuel energy”, that “the use of instruments has had a significant impact on greenhouse gas emissions in Norway”, and that “Norway is among the countries with the lowest emissions of greenhouse gases per unit produced” (Report. St. No. 1 (2016-2017) 2017 National Budget, pages 154-155). The government does not mention that total Norwegian greenhouse gas emissions increased between 2014 and 2015, that Norway has one of the highest emissions per person in Europe and that, under current measures, we are far from reaching the target.”¹²⁵

This fragment indicates that there is no consensus between what is presented in the state reports, and what the situation really is. This depends on the data and methods selected for the analysis, and angle from where to look at, as international organizations, governments, national NGOs use different indicators to measure the progress of the same SDGs and targets.¹²⁶ The government reporting above states that Norway has one of the highest taxes on fossil fuel energy, however, without adding that the total number of emissions produced have increased anyway, make it seem to be a good instrument in efforts to reduce a total number of emissions. The report also does not mention that Norway contributes to climate change through its oil exports which undermines the transition to renewable energy, while at the same time the budget for renewable energy has been reduced by half. This text is interesting as it reveals the contradiction in what the government presents in the reports and how it acts. While the government states it uses different instruments to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, on the other hand, it also indirectly subsidizes oil extraction through exploration merger schemes, which is contrary to international climate commitments.¹²⁷ In Denmark there has also been little progress made on environmental taxes, as it is seen as a ‘job killer’.¹²⁸

¹²⁵ Norwegian Forum for Development and Environment. 17 goals - 1 future. How the UN Sustainable Development Goals can be reached in and with Norway by 2030. 2017. P. 127.

¹²⁶ Statistics Sweden. Implementation of the 2030 Agenda in Sweden Statistical Review 2019. P. 136.

¹²⁷ Norwegian Forum for Development and Environment. 17 goals - 1 future. How the UN Sustainable Development Goals can be reached in and with Norway by 2030. 2017. P. 122.

¹²⁸ Action Aid Denmark. What Will Denmark Look Like In 2030? Civil Society Reviews Denmark’s Efforts to Implement the Sustainable Development Goals. 2017. P. 40.

The increase of fossil fuel and greenhouse gas emissions together with unsustainable consumption and production patterns and increasing electricity consumption contributes to the high ecological footprint of the Scandinavian countries, emphasizing that “it would take four globes to sustain the world if all countries had an ecological footprint the size of Denmark”.¹²⁹ Indeed, all three Scandinavian countries and its governments acknowledge that the targets related to sustainable consumption and production are among the most difficult goals to achieve, however there have been no progress in this.

“In its 2016 reporting, the Norwegian government acknowledged in the national budget, the High-Level Political Forum Report (HLPF) and the Ministry of Climate and Environment budget proposal (KLD) that the goal of sustainable consumption and production is one of the most challenging goals for Norway to achieve at the national level. However, the measures presented as examples do not show any plans to stimulate a generally lower consumption pattern among Norwegian consumers, despite the fact that it is clear that most Norwegians use far more resources per capita than the capacity of the planet can tolerate.”¹³⁰

This fragment indicates that there are no effective measures implemented by the government to reduce impacts from the consumption. This issue is supported in the report of the SEI, where the scholars argue that Sweden “is still not acting to reduce impacts from its consumption along international supply chains (Target 12.2). Sweden has strong regulations and policies on key domestic impacts of production (Target 12.4), but existing national objectives on air pollution and chemicals will not be reached with current trends”.¹³¹ The challenge of unsustainable consumption and production refers not only to the waste produced, but also to the increasing air pollution and electricity consumption which is expected to increase further in the coming years due to urbanization. Norway has the “world’s second highest per capita electricity

¹²⁹ Danish Group 92 and Global Focus. Spotlight Report. Denmark’s challenges in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals – in the Shadow of the Covid-19 crisis. 2020. P. 12.

¹³⁰ Norwegian Forum for Development and Environment. 17 goals - 1 future. How the UN Sustainable Development Goals can be reached in and with Norway by 2030. 2017. P. 119.

¹³¹ Stockholm Environment Institute. Sustainable Development Goals for Sweden: Insights on Setting a National Agenda. 2015. P. 14.

consumption”¹³² and Denmark have been establishing large data centers which will increase electricity consumption further. According to the Action Aid Denmark study, although the Scandinavian countries develop the production of renewable energy, further growth of electricity consumption slows down the transition to the renewable energy. The same issue relates to the greenhouse gas emission, as Norway has already had high emissions for several decades that far exceed the Norway’s share of the world’s population, it would need to cut 585 percent of its emissions by 2030, which is impossible.¹³³

Environmental narratives

The challenges in protecting marine and forest ecosystems supports the thread of the weaknesses in the management of environmental SDGs, as the Scandinavian countries still face challenges fighting with destructive fishing and there is a need for updated marine and nature conservation strategy.

“Norway lags far behind when it comes to marine conservation. Meanwhile, petroleum extraction and mining pose increasing danger to important areas of marine life in Norwegian waters. More intensive efforts are needed by the Norwegian government to ensure that the unique marine ecosystems that Norway manages for posterity is cared for.”¹³⁴

The reality is Norway did not establish a plan on how to effectively manage marine areas and preserve at least 10 percent of coastal areas. At the same time, the NGOs study found out about the dumping of hazardous mining waste in the water, which is contrary to the environmental regulations. According to the study by the Danish Society for Nature conservation, Denmark also lags behind on the SDGs connected to the climate change and environmental protection. While Sweden risks not to be on track to cut the emissions in the sea from agriculture, industry and wastewater treatment plants with existing policy measures. The close connection between the outdated and ineffective policy measures and as a result inability to meet several SDGs is a

¹³² Norwegian Forum for Development and Environment. 17 goals - 1 future. How the UN Sustainable Development Goals can be reached in and with Norway by 2030. 2017. P. 63.

¹³³ Norwegian Forum for Development and Environment. 17 goals - 1 future. How the UN Sustainable Development Goals can be reached in and with Norway by 2030. 2017. P. 126.

¹³⁴ Norwegian Forum for Development and Environment. 17 goals - 1 future. How the UN Sustainable Development Goals can be reached in and with Norway by 2030. 2016. P. 104.

storyline that is strongly emphasized by the national NGOs. Most precisely it is described in the fragment below.

“There is a lack of adequate policy, strategy, financing and action plan for biodiversity in Denmark. Denmark has the EU's lowest share of Natura 2000 protected nature (8.3%), against the European average of 18% and it is decreasing. Less than 3% of Denmark’s forest area has nature as its purpose. Growth in Danish forests is done for production purposes, not for biodiversity.”¹³⁵

Another example indicating how unavailable or ineffective policies halt the progress concerns the forestry conservation sector. As a result, the Danish governmental contributions to the environmental programmes and sustainable forest management have been cut by third. On the other hand, Norway also performs contradictory strategies. The Government Pension Fund Global (GPF, the Norwegian sovereign wealth fund), invests “far more in activities that destroy the rainforest than the Government contributes financially to fund rainforest conservation”.¹³⁶ According to the research by FORUM, the GPF also provides subsidies to cutting forests that are biologically valuable, but economically of little value, which is contrary to the Aichi Biodiversity Target 3. The repeating narrative regarding the forests conservation and its economic value, little value, is alarming.

Development assistance

The Scandinavian countries being frontrunners in the SDGs implementation play a significant role in producing a certain way of doing policy and they themselves acknowledge their position as leaders in the SDGs implementation which other countries should follow. However, according to the studies of the national NGOs there are several misconducts in their SDGs framework which contradict the SDGs implementation and principles of sustainable development and have impact worldwide. This way the GPF, a renowned figure in the investment sector, is found guilty in investing heavily in “activities that promote harmful consumption and undermine

¹³⁵ Danish Group 92. Civil Society Shadow Reporting on Denmark’s SDG performance. 2017. P. 9.

¹³⁶ Norwegian Forum for Development and Environment. 17 goals - 1 future. How the UN Sustainable Development Goals can be reached in and with Norway by 2030. 2016. P. 21.

development, especially women's and children's rights"¹³⁷, such as investments in the alcohol industry and the funding of the oil exploration merger schemes. However, as the GPFG plays a huge role in establishing trends in the investment sphere, scholars believe, its investments in the renewable energy for example, would have made the markets follow this tendency worldwide and make a positive impact.

Furthermore, the Scandinavian countries when providing ODA or financial aid to the developing countries have to ensure transparent mechanisms for this and support the measures which undermine possible interventions of outside actors in the process beforehand. Still, such reform and norms have not been established, which allows multinational companies to use tax havens and avoid taxes. According to the Action Aid Denmark the numbers are unbelievable as "developing countries lose more money due to the use of tax havens than they receive in official development assistance".¹³⁸

Cooperation with stakeholders

The acknowledgement of the challenges and problems in implementing the SDGs by the national NGOs is an effective instrument to prompt further development. As the main role and goal of the NGOs and the reports they produce on the SDGs implementation is exactly to be a critical watch dog, advocate for further progress, and provide proposals for the governments to be more effective. This text reveals the importance of the NGOs in advocating for the SDGs implementation.

"Without an active and vibrant civil society, we will not achieve the SDGs. The work of NGO's, human rights defenders, journalists, climate activists, and others is essential, if we want sustainable change for everyone all over the world. Civil society is often excluded when it comes to international negotiations or procedures. International relations are often far too disconnected from civil society."¹³⁹

¹³⁷ Norwegian Forum for Development and Environment. 17 goals - 1 future. How the UN Sustainable Development Goals can be reached in and with Norway by 2030. 2017. P. 40.

¹³⁸ Action Aid Denmark. What Will Denmark Look Like In 2030? Civil Society Reviews Denmark's Efforts to Implement the Sustainable Development Goals. 2017. P. 41.

¹³⁹ Action Aid Denmark. What Will Denmark Look Like In 2030? Civil Society Reviews Denmark's Efforts to Implement the Sustainable Development Goals. 017. P. 5.

The NGOs in the Scandinavian countries have consistently been working on the SDGs by conducting the analysis based on multistakeholder consultations, by taking part in the dialogues and round tables with the Ministries and have been following negotiations on the Climate change and Financing for development, but at the same time the NGOs are also often excluded and lack access to transparent national budgets and resources. And there is no strategy for including stakeholders in the cooperation with the governments. Therefore, the NGOs consistently in each report remind the importance of their participation in the stages of planning, implementation and reporting processes, as they often work closer to the most vulnerable groups of people than the governments and are aware of their needs.¹⁴⁰ Several studies by FORUM and Concord Sweden pointed out the significance of the vital role of the NGOs in reaching the SDGs, as they contribute its expertise in making sure the governments fulfill their commitments to the SDGs.¹⁴¹ It was underlined in the reports that “countries’ achievement of the Goals also rests on CSOs being able to promote and operate as watchdogs engaging with national and local governments.”¹⁴² The national case studies by Concord in “Champions to be”, showed the connection between the inclusive civil society participation and more prosperous the SDGs implementation.¹⁴³

As a response to the challenges that the national NGOs pointed out in the governmental SDGs framework, the NGOs also included a set of recommendations for the SDG implementation in their reports, which can be distinguished as another storyline. The recommendations proposed were solutions to the governments’ failures in the SDGs implementation. The most frequently mentioned recommendations related to the need to establish updated NAP and concrete measurements for each goal, the need to change the approach of the state reporting on the SDGs, to highlight not only current state of affairs, but also present concrete steps on how to overcome challenges, the need to continuously work on universal welfare, gender equality and human rights, and of course the suggestions on how to deal with environmental problems.

Summary

The main role of the NGOs reports is to objectively assess the state and process of the SDGs implementation in the Scandinavian countries, play a watch-dog role, propose fact-based

¹⁴⁰ Danish Group 92 and Global Focus. Spotlight Report. Denmark’s challenges in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. 2019. P. 3.

¹⁴¹ Concord Sweden. Champions to be? Making the 2030 Agenda a Reality. 2016. P. 33.

¹⁴² Norwegian Forum for Development and Environment. 17 goals - 1 future. How the UN Sustainable Development Goals can be reached in and with Norway by 2030. 2016. P. 21.

¹⁴³ Concord Sweden. Champions to be? Making the 2030 Agenda a Reality. 2016. P. 30.

recommendations to the governments and provide knowledge to the general public. As a result, the storyline of the chosen reports had mainly focus on assessing the implementation of the SDGs and on the provision of the proposals to the governments.

Overall, the results of the analysis of the chosen NGOs reports met the expectations. The dominant narratives of the NGOs reports on the SDGs implementation were the critique and the focal points which were repeated throughout the reports as the main topic for consideration and further progress. These are broad topics which comprise of the narratives on unsustainable consumption and production, weak or non-coordinated cooperation between stakeholders, the challenges in supporting universal welfare and equality and contradicting governmental measures such as advocating for renewable energy while financing oil merger schemes and providing subsidies for cutting forests. However, the high number of shortcomings recognized by the NGOs in the implementation of the SDGs, explain the respectively high number of the recommendations proposed to the governments in the reports.

5.3 The analysis of the national NGOs and the governmental narratives on the SDGs implementation

The analysis chapter focused on the storylines that the Scandinavian governments and the national NGOs create on the SDGs implementation and discovered what are the conflicting narratives between them.

Frontrunners in achieving the SDGs

The analysis revealed that the governmental narratives prevail the national NGOs narratives by more than half when it comes to the positive narratives on the SDGs implementation. The narratives reflecting the positive image of the SDGs implementation directly stated the countries' favourable position in the SDGs implementation as in "Denmark is uniquely positioned to achieve and promote the 2030 Agenda and the 17 SDGs".¹⁴⁴ While the narratives on the positive trend implied the support of the SDGs implementation, whether it occurred in the past, in the present, or it referred to the upcoming developments. The greater number of 'frontrunners in

¹⁴⁴ Ministry of finance. Report for the Voluntary National review. Denmark's implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. June 2017. P. 5.

implementing the SDGs' thread in the state reports supported the nature of the governmental reports where they position themselves in the best possible light. It also implies that such narratives on the positive image and positive trend in the SDGs implementation in the Scandinavian countries are the dominant narratives in the governmental reports. At the same time, it supported the notion that the self-reporting mostly highlights the strengths of its implementation, rather than the weaknesses.

On the other hand, the analysis discovered that the national NGOs reports contained more narratives portraying the negative image and negative trend in the SDGs implementation than the governmental reports. The narratives portraying the negative image of the SDGs implementation acknowledged the favourable position of the Scandinavian countries, but also emphasized that they were far from achieving the Goals and there was still much work to do: "Rich countries – including Denmark – do not to a sufficient degree live up to their special responsibility for delivering on the SDGs. Among other things, we lack political action in relation to the climate ambitions and inequality"¹⁴⁵. While the narratives on the negative trend in the Scandinavian countries expressed the critique of the SDGs implementations, showed how the government failed in implementing sustainable development practices and what it could have done better.

“Norway indirectly subsidizes oil extraction through, among other programs, the exploration merger scheme. Granting money to map petroleum deposits sends a clear signal that Norway does not intend to accept its share of the responsibility for reducing global greenhouse gas emissions. Given that we know that we cannot extract this oil and still comply with international climate commitments, it is inappropriate to set aside these grants.”¹⁴⁶

Such narratives were more predominant in the national NGOs reports. This supports the role of the NGOs as watch dogs that assess the situation critically and independently. The critique of the SDGs implementation in the NGOs reports has been based on the governmental reports on the SDGs implementation. It is interesting that exactly the narratives that were mentioned as

¹⁴⁵ Danish Group 92 and Global Focus. Spotlight Report. Denmark's challenges in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals – in the Shadow of the Covid-19 crisis. 2020. P. 8.

¹⁴⁶ Norwegian Forum for Development and Environment. 17 goals - 1 future. How the UN Sustainable Development Goals can be reached in and with Norway by 2030. 2017. P. 122.

portraying the positive image on the Scandinavian model in the governmental reports has been contradicted by the national NGOs.

Preparedness for realizing the SDGs

The state reports recognized a high priority of the SDGs implementation for the governments and acknowledged the importance of establishing the NAP and ownership of the Goals by the Ministries and departments. However, the national NGOs disproved those statements with critique that “NAP is a list of actions or policies already in place, and is not as forward looking and ambitious as expected... has no benchmarks, milestones or long term strategy towards 2030”¹⁴⁷ and as for the ownership and responsibility of the SDGs by the Ministries “the quality and scope of SDG reporting varies greatly between departments and is generally generic”¹⁴⁸.

Universal welfare

The Scandinavian countries are known to have a universal welfare, economic and gender equality and working anti-discrimination laws. The state reports present bold statements as Sweden have achieved gender equality to 100 per cent¹⁴⁹, and Denmark is a frontrunner in gender equality and provides equal access to education and healthcare¹⁵⁰. At the same time, all the national NGOs argue that the countries still have challenges to overcome as “inequality in health exists in Denmark as certain population groups are more vulnerable and access health care to a lesser degree than the average population groups”¹⁵¹ and “the reduction of income disparities in Sweden, including the differences in income between women and men, and increasing the disposable income of certain vulnerable groups”¹⁵² is a relevant challenge for the Swedish government.

Sustainable consumption and production

Furthermore, the governmental reports have also positioned the Scandinavian countries as having a high standard of living and sustainable management of resources for food production.¹⁵³

¹⁴⁷ Danish 92 Group, Concord Sweden, Finnish Development NGOs and Norwegian Forum for Development and Environment. Nordic Matrix. National Action Plans for the Sustainable Development Goals. 2020 P. 4.

¹⁴⁸ Danish 92 Group, Concord Sweden, Finnish Development NGOs and Norwegian Forum for Development and Environment. Nordic Matrix. National Action Plans for the Sustainable Development Goals. 2020 P. 7.

¹⁴⁹ Statistics Sweden. Implementation of the 2030 Agenda in Sweden Statistical Review 2019. P. 10.

¹⁵⁰ Ministry of finance. Report for the Voluntary National review. Denmark’s implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. June 2017. P. 22.

¹⁵¹ Action Aid Denmark. What Will Denmark Look Like In 2030? Civil Society Reviews Denmark’s Efforts to Implement the Sustainable Development Goals. 2017. P. 10.

¹⁵² Sweden and the 2030 Agenda – Report to the UN High Level Political Forum 2017 on Sustainable Development. 2017. P. 19.

¹⁵³ Norwegian Ministry of Finance, Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. One year closer 2019. Norway’s progress toward the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. P. 22.

However, according to the data revealed by the NGOs, the high standard of living in the Scandinavian countries is unsustainable in terms of consumption and production as “it would take four globes to sustain the world if all countries had an ecological footprint the size of Denmark, and that each Danish citizen every year produces 800 kilogram of trash – 300 kilogram more than the average EU-citizen”.¹⁵⁴ Although, the governmental officials acknowledge such problem, it appeared that “the measures presented as examples do not show any plans to stimulate a generally lower consumption pattern among Norwegian consumers”.¹⁵⁵

Development assistance

The Scandinavian governments position themselves as frontrunners in the SDGs implementation and strive to lead other countries by example, based on “comparatively good conditions for achieving the 2030 Agenda, it has a responsibility to contribute to the global implementation of the Agenda”.¹⁵⁶ Thus, the support to the developing countries through the ODA “has increased and in 2018 it was at just over SEK 3.5 billion. Sweden’s total commitment in 2018 was SEK 7 billion, an increase of 50 per cent from 2015.”¹⁵⁷ However, the national NGOs reports argue the opposite that even though according to the state reports the share of the ODA have increased from year to year, this did not take into account inflation, and when the amount of money in the ODA have been recalculated taking inflation into account, the real ODA assistance has stayed at the same level, or even shrank a little.¹⁵⁸ Moreover, the Scandinavian countries have been introducing various programmes for good governance and tax systems in the developing countries, yet the big amount of money is being lost through tax havens “by multinational companies and the world’s richest people, depriving countries of crucial tax revenue. Developing countries are disproportionately disadvantaged by this”¹⁵⁹ and the tax systems have not become transparent.

Environmental narratives

The Scandinavian countries rely heavily on the sea for its fishing industry and the governments established “strict regulations concerning discharges of hazardous substances and

¹⁵⁴ Danish Group 92 and Global Focus. Spotlight Report. Denmark’s challenges in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals – in the Shadow of the Covid-19 crisis. 2020. P. 12.

¹⁵⁵ Norwegian Forum for Development and Environment. 17 goals - 1 future. How the UN Sustainable Development Goals can be reached in and with Norway by 2030. 2017. P. 119.

¹⁵⁶ Swedish delegation for the 2030 Agenda. Summary Sweden. 2019. P. 10.

¹⁵⁷ Statistics Sweden. Implementation of the 2030 Agenda in Sweden Statistical Review 2019. P. 77.

¹⁵⁸ Norwegian Forum for Development and Environment. 17 goals - 1 future. How the UN Sustainable Development Goals can be reached in and with Norway by 2030. 2017. P. 127.

¹⁵⁹ Action Aid Denmark. What Will Denmark Look Like In 2030? Civil Society Reviews Denmark’s Efforts to Implement the Sustainable Development Goals. 2017. P. 41.

water pollution”¹⁶⁰, while dumping of waste is completely eradicated. However, in the analyzed NGOs reports the overfishing and marine litter is recognized as one of the main challenges in achieving the SDGs for the Scandinavian countries. Despite having strict regulations on water contamination, “at the same time it is continuing to allow the dumping of mining waste in the sea and is initiating mining on the sea-bed”.¹⁶¹ Moreover, other unsustainable practices that contradict the policies for preserving biodiversity, and in fact aimed at the opposite, have also been presented in the NGOs reports. It appeared that “growth in Danish forests is done for production purposes, not for biodiversity”¹⁶² and that the GPFG “invests far more in activities that destroy the rainforest than the Government contributes financially to fund rainforest conservation”¹⁶³.

Summary

When looking at the narratives on the SDGs implementation in the state reports and the national NGOs reports, the dominant narratives in the governmental reports were the ones recognizing the Scandinavian countries being the frontrunners and having the leading role in the SDGs implementation and were mainly presented in the state reports. On the other side, the counter narratives were the narratives criticizing the implementation of the SDGs by the Scandinavian countries and questioning the widespread narrative of the Scandinavian countries having almost achieved the SDGs.

As a result of comparing two sets of narratives, a metanarrative has been developed. On the one hand, the storyline is about the Scandinavian countries as having almost achieved the SDGs, on the other hand, the storyline is about showing that there is still much work to do to achieve the Goals. The metanarrative could combine both the recognition of the unique position of the Scandinavian countries compared to the others, which is true due to the long history of advancing and advocating for sustainable development, strong economic development, dynamic civil society, private and business sector and partnerships among these sectors; and also the recognition of the need to develop further and work hard on the implementation of all of the Goals, not only the ones where the Scandinavian countries are already doing good. This metanarrative

¹⁶⁰ Norwegian Ministry of Finance, Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. One year closer 2019. Norway’s progress toward the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. P. 42.

¹⁶¹ Norwegian Forum for Development and Environment. 17 goals - 1 future. How the UN Sustainable Development Goals can be reached in and with Norway by 2030. 2017. P. 138.

¹⁶² Danish Group 92. Civil Society Shadow Reporting on Denmark’s SDG performance. 2017. P. 9.

¹⁶³ Norwegian Forum for Development and Environment. 17 goals - 1 future. How the UN Sustainable Development Goals can be reached in and with Norway by 2030. 2016. P. 21.

should mainly be accepted by the governments, as they should have the ability to acknowledge the limited progress they have at the moment on the Goals, be open to work with the civil society and other stakeholders and be ready to take responsibility for introducing new regulations in all sectors and at all levels. As for the NGOs, they should continue working as a watch dog for the governmental work and hold them accountable, as they are one of the drivers advancing development.

While the final results of the study are not innovative nor surprising, the research revealed how different the story on one issue can be. The state reports focused mostly on the positive aspects of the SDGs implementation, while leaving out important information on the challenges that are present in the Scandinavian countries. Such approach indeed makes an impression that the Scandinavian countries almost achieved the SDGs. While the national NGOs fulfilled their role as independent observers and presented the overview of the challenges the governments face and pointed at the spheres where the governments do not put much attention.

Although the national NGOs reports are publicly available and are also targeted for the general public and international community, the state reports seem to have more influence, as the Scandinavian countries' postulation that they are close to achieving the SDGs is a more widespread story. This success story is mostly presented in the reports on the SDGs implementation of the outside actors such as the UN, the OECD etc. and it is important that the true story is being told in the reports of the strong international actors.

6. Conclusion

After the adoption of the UN Sustainable Development Goals, the concept of sustainable development has become a frequently discussed theme in the governmental policies and developmental visions of think tanks all over the world. In the current literature there are more and more studies and research on the sustainable development issues being published from year to year. The Scandinavian countries and its public institutions have a long tradition in promoting and applying sustainable development practices. No wonder, that in the numerous reports on the best practices of the sustainable development implementation, the Scandinavian countries are being presented as an example. What is interesting is that those reports on best practices of the Scandinavian countries are mainly the works performed by the outside actors such as the UN, the Bertelsmann Stiftung, the OECD and etc., and these available reports lack a representation of the perspectives and views of the Scandinavian governments and the national NGOs on the SDGs implementation themselves.

Although, there are the reports and works of the Scandinavian governments and the national NGOs such as the Concord Sweden, the Norwegian Forum for Development and Environment, the Danish 92 Group and many others who present the overview of the SDGs implementation processes in the Scandinavian countries, the works vary in its content, as some of them focus on the particular goal and not the SDGs overall, or focus either on the government framework or other aspect of the SDGs implementation.

Therefore, this thesis is driven by the urge to discover a more nuanced narratives and stories of the SDGs implementation in the Scandinavian countries, whether it be the success stories, critique of their approach, trends or possible paradoxes, but with a special focus on the perspectives and views of the Scandinavian governments and the national NGOs themselves. Expectedly, the results would be confirming the well-known story of the Scandinavian countries being the leaders in implementing the sustainable development practices and almost achieving the SDGs. However, as the outcome of the analysis, the study found it clear that there is a disagreement between the governmental and the national NGOs reports and different storyline is being promoted in both cases.

The results indicated that the state reports in assessing their own progress were naturally more focused on the positive aspects of the SDGs implementation, thus portraying the

Scandinavian model as being frontrunners in the SDGs and being close to achieving the Goals. This storyline was significantly manifested in the governmental reports. Throughout the texts a strong thread presenting bold statements about the success of the Scandinavian countries has been mentioned. The narratives on achieving gender equality, equal access to education and healthcare to 100 per cent, being frontrunners in the SDGs and leading the world by example, having strict regulations and completely eliminating dumping of waste, are the examples of the narratives promoted throughout the state reports. It supported the notion that self-reporting usually does not draw attention to the weaknesses of the national implementation, as the governmental reports highlighted mostly the positive aspects of the SDGs implementation. Although, the aim of the state reports is to assess the current progress in the SDGs implementation and recognize the weak spots, the state reports have left a smaller part to revealing the challenges.

Whereas the national NGOs playing the watch dog role, critically assessed the governments' work in the SDGs implementation and portrayed a different picture on the state of the SDGs implementation in the Scandinavian countries. The analysis of the national NGOs reports revealed that even though the Scandinavian countries have the favourable position and a good start for implementing the SDGs, there are also many challenges the Scandinavian countries need to overcome before they could be thought to succeed in implementing the SDGs. The results indicate that the image of the Scandinavian SDGs implementation portrayed by the NGOs and the one portrayed by the government are two different images. The NGOs harshly criticize the government in having a small progress in some of the SDGs, while acknowledging the good work done in the other SDGs. What is interesting is that the national NGOs in their reports criticize exactly those statements by the governmental reports and provide additional data on exactly those targets which are being presented as already achieved by the state reports. This way, while the state reports describe working policies that are in place to enable vulnerable people into the labour market, the NGOs provide the statistics that since the adoption of such policies it had no positive effect, moreover, it became even harder to get in. Another example is the governments' confidence that the dumping of waste is completely eliminated, however at the same time, the government itself finances the oil exploration merger schemes which dump chemicals and waste into the sea. As a result, such statements create a disagreement between what is promoted by the state and the NGOs, which make one question is the reason behind this is different research methods or the states' willingness to promote only the positive aspects of the SDGs implementation. However,

discovering how is it that the state reports and the national NGOs present different data on the same issue is a topic for another research.

By analyzing the governmental and the national NGOs reports on the SDGs implementation in the Scandinavian countries, this thesis has shown how the SDGs implementation is being narrated differently by the national NGOs and the governments. In sum, the storyline in the state reports supported the well-known story of the Scandinavian countries being frontrunners in the SDGs implementation and close to achieving the Goals. On the other hand, the national NGOs reports provided new data and promoted the narrative that even though the Scandinavian countries have favourable position, there is still much to do to achieve the Goals. Such storyline is something new and not that widespread in the international discourse. The results of the study matched my expectations, the codes that were chosen for the research allowed to cover many aspects in the texts. What was surprising to find out is that some narratives in the NGOs assessment of the SDGs implementation totally contradicted those in the state reports.

Overall, the results of this research have been fruitful and it is believed it will be a valuable addition to the current literature and research on the SDGs implementation as it performed the analysis of the state and the national NGOs reports from the Scandinavian countries. Although the reports used in this study constitute a solid unit of information by themselves, the findings from this research presented a wholesome excerpt of the most prominent parts in the reports. In the context of having a need to quickly create an understanding on the situation of the SDGs implementation in the Scandinavian countries from the perspective of the governments and the group of the national NGOs, addressing to this research this would be the right match.

The main conclusion that could be drawn from this is that the Scandinavian countries still lack coherent and standard monitoring and measurement systems, which is apparent from the differing data in the reports. However, such recommendation on establishing concrete monitoring and measurement methods has been proposed when adopting the SDGs framework. This issue creates difficulties both for the governments to track their progress and to the national NGOs to do their job as watchdogs and assess the work of the government based on such measurement. Currently, all the Scandinavian countries are in the process of establishing national NAP, and this would be a great advantage if the governments took into consideration some of the proposals discussed in this study on the establishment of the ‘feedback mechanism’ among the countries and

stakeholders to hold each other accountable. This is of huge importance, as once was noted “if we cannot measure the sustainable development, we cannot improve it”.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶⁴ Lamichhane, S., Gedik, R., Bhutta, M., Erenay, B. “Benchmarking OECD countries’ sustainable development performance: A goal-specific principal component analysis approach.” *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 287, (March 2021).

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