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Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals through good enough governance

Lessons from Argentine and Brazilian Municipalities

Alcanzar los Objetivos de Desarrollo Sostenible a través de la gobernanza suficientemente buena

Lecciones de municipalidades argentinas y brasileñas

Atingindo os Objetivos de Desenvolvimento Sustentável através da governança suficientemente boa

Lições de municipalidades argentinas e brasileiras

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Abstract

This article analyses how two environmental "good enough-governance" approaches in climate change vulnerable areas in Argentine (Pampa biome) and Brazilian (Amazon biome) municipalities have the potential of contributing to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals 12 (responsible consumption and production), 13 (climate action), 15 (life on land), 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions), and 17 (partnerships for the goals). Local public officials from Brazil often by-pass frustrating bureaucracy by transferring their own public responsibilities to NGOs (subsidiarity principle). Argentine public servants, on the other hand, are frequently filling the gaps left by the fragile vertical integration of environmental actions through bottom-up, horizontal initiatives among municipalities. Both approaches show strengths but also fragilities, such as the lack of policy continuity. In spite of the socio-environmental differences, many Brazilian and Argentine local agents are developing a common array of individual and social "soft skills" which are usually attributed to NGOs: goal-oriented, innovative thinking, teamwork, integration and flexibility, all necessary to the localization of the Agenda 2030. Environmental institutions and norms at the local level could be rearranged to worship these soft skills in the public sector by putting people at the centre of adaptive decision-making through capacity development, career incentives and accountability.

Keywords: Argentina, Brazil, good enough governance, Sustainable Development Goals

Resumen

Este artículo analiza de qué manera dos casos de «gobernanza suficientemente buena» a nivel local en áreas vulnerables al cambio climático de Argentina (Bioma Pampa) y Brasil (Bioma Amazónico) poseen potencial para alcanzar los Objetivos de Desarrollo Sostenible 12 (Producción y Consumo Responsables), 13 (Acción por el Clima), 15 (Vida de Ecosistemas Terrestres), 16 (Paz, Justicia e Instituciones Fuertes) y 17 (Alianzas para lograr los Objetivos). En Brasil, funcionarios municipales a menudo huyen de la frustrante burocracia transfiriendo sus responsabilidades a ONG (principio de subsidiaridad). En Argentina, muchos de los agentes entrevistados enfrentan la frágil integración vertical de políticas ambientales por cuenta propia: las municipalidades se están integrando de manera horizontal y desde la base. A pesar de las diferencias socioambientales entre ambos casos, los funcionarios brasileños y argentinos entrevistados parecen estar desarrollando un conjunto de atributos individuales en común, frecuentemente atribuidos a las ONG, como enfocarse en los resultados, pensamiento innovador, trabajo en equipo y flexibilidad. A partir de la perspectiva de la gobernanza suficientemente buena, organizaciones y reglas ambientales deberían estimular ese tipo de habilidades «blandas» que favorecen la integración, colocando a las personas en el centro de cualquier reestructuración institucional y a través del desarrollo de las capacidades, de incentivos profesionales y de responsabilización.

Palabras clave: Argentina, Brasil, gobernanza suficientemente buena, Objetivos de Desarrollo Sostenible

Resumo

Este artigo analisa como dois casos de "governança suficientemente boa" em nível local em áreas vulneráveis às mudanças climáticas na Argentina (Bioma Pampa) e Brasil (Bioma Amazônia) têm potencial para atingir os Objetivos de Desenvolvimento Sustentável 12 (Produção e Consumo Responsáveis), 13 (Ação Climática), 15 (Vida dos Ecossistemas Terrestres), 16 (Paz, Justiça e Instituições Fortes) e 17 (Parcerias para alcançar os Objetivos). No Brasil, as autoridades municipais frequentemente fogem da burocracia frustrante, transferindo suas responsabilidades para as ONGs (princípio da subsidiariedade). Na Argentina, muitos dos agentes entrevistados enfrentam a frágil integração vertical das políticas ambientais por conta própria: os municípios estão

se integrando horizontalmente e de baixo para cima. Apesar das diferenças socioambientais entre as duas regiões de estudo, os agentes públicos brasileiros e argentinos parecem estar desenvolvendo um conjunto de atributos individuais comuns, frequentemente atribuídos a ONGs, como foco em resultados, pensamento inovador, trabalho em equipe e flexibilidade. Na luz da abordagem da governança suficientemente boa, organizações e regras ambientais poderiam estimular esse tipo de habilidades "flexíveis" que favorecem a integração, colocando as pessoas no centro de qualquer reestruturação institucional e através do desenvolvimento de habilidades, incentivos profissionais e responsabilidade.

Palavras-chave: Argentina, Brasil, governança suficientemente boa, Objetivos de Desenvolvimento Sustentável

1. Introduction

The commissioning of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) has brought attention and agreement from countries around the world through one common framework to protect socio-ecological systems from global pressing concerns, for the equitable benefit of current and future generations[1]. The SDGs and the 2030 Agenda pose ambitious challenges with complex interlinkages between its 17 goals and 169 targets to be met by 2030[2]. The goals comprise a wide spectrum of sustainable development dimensions, such as poverty eradication, food security, health, education, gender equality, climate change, sanitation, water, and energy security[3].

Two main aspects shaped the context of the 2030 Agenda: the results of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the changes in how sustainable development is conceptualized. According to Lopes and others[3] the lessons learned from the MDGs set the stage for the SDGs. The structure of the MDGs (eight goals set in 2000 to be met by 2015) was repeated and expanded in the SDGs (17 goals set in 2015 to be met in 2030). The simplicity of how the eight MDGs were structured facilitated the engagement of multiple stakeholders from different sectors regardless of governmental action, resulting in significant contributions[4]. Consequently, SDG 16 (peace, justice, and strong institutions) is a novel component to domestic goals setting, which includes governance and institutions, encouraging the participation of the private sector, local governments and the civil society. On the other hand, the achievements of the millennium goals were marked by geographic imbalance and persistent inequality of wealth, health, and education between the rich and the poor, and between the urban and the rural areas[5]. This understanding defined priorities for the post-2015 goals, leading to the “leave no one behind” commitment[1].

Also, some authors[3] point out that the 2030 Agenda is based on recent conceptualizations of sustainable development that include “meeting the needs of the present while safeguarding Earth’s life-support system, on which the welfare of current and future generations depends”[6]. This definition departs from the traditional weak sustainability trinomial (economy, environment and social), which assumed that limitless wealth and wellbeing could be generated without any impacts to social and environmental systems, and that natural capital could be replaced by labour and technology. The recognition of Earth’s boundaries is a novel key component of sustainable development conceptualization that shapes the SDGs, in which social, environmental and economic aspects are approached in an integrated and indivisible manner. This definition is based on 21st century research about the interconnections of earth systems and the multi-scalar nature of the common pool of resources[7][8], the global processes established in the Anthropocene[7] and the planetary limits and its tipping elements[9][10]. Due to these interconnections, the SDGs often address overlapping issues with both positive and negative externalities (synergies and trade-offs) that will either support or hinder the achievement of more than one target.

In this context, bringing about horizontal integration for successful environmental policy-making at the local level ultimately depends on the synergies and

trade-offs generated by diverse bureaucratic cultures[11]. Accordingly, this article analyses two contrasting environmental governance and horizontal integration strategies —horizontal integration being defined as the collaboration between different regulatory bodies at the same level of governance at the local scale (municipalities) in climate change (SDG 13) vulnerable regions of Brazil and Argentina, where biodiversity is genuinely threatened by the advance of soybean monocultures and deforestation (SDG 15). Partnerships (SDG 17) are not solely about formal structures and institutional arrangements: they are as much about the various parts and processes of government to work together for integration[12]. While both the case studies presented in this article focus on areas that are devoted to agriculture and vulnerable to climate change, their socio-environmental differences are striking: the Coronel Suárez and Guaminí Municipalities are located at the "marginal" areas of the Pampa biome in the Buenos Aires Province of Argentina, while the Santarém and Monte Alegre Municipalities belong to the Pará State, in the Lower Amazon region of Brazil.

Our point of departure is that the existence of norms and governments, in the ordinary, positivistic sense of the term, is no longer sufficient to perform the function of environmental governance for achieving the SDG effectively at the local level. This is especially true when dealing with the internalisation at the national, subnational and regional scale of the Sustainable Development Goals 12 (responsible consumption and production), 13 (climate action), 15 (life on land) and 17 (partnerships for the goals)[13]. While this is widely accepted in the scientific community[14][15], not surprisingly, there is some resistance to accept it in the norm-oriented policy community, especially among practitioners dealing face-to-face with political conflict and bargaining, lack of transparent information and limited resources[16].

The SDGs also propose a shift in governance that goes side by side with a new management model, which is closer in its essence to the third sector than to the traditional bureaucratic instances. In other words, the 2030 Agenda consolidates a change in global governance approaches in the new millennium, shifting from a rule and norms-based to an objectives-based, more pragmatic and flexible model.

A norm-setting approach, which in general terms failed to achieve its objectives, had been generally adopted in the 1990s after large conferences and conventions were spearheaded by the United Nations. The Agenda 21, for example, as a result of the Rio de Janeiro Earth Summit, provided an extensive programmatic blueprint for the implementation of sustainable development with several principles, national and international objectives and policy recommendations[17][18].

Other regulatory frameworks included intergovernmental panels, the Kyoto Protocol, and, relevant to this discussion, the United Nations guidelines on sustainable consumption that led to the Marrakesh Process in the early 2000s[19]. These models, while pragmatic in establishing governance as a process guided by technical management, had difficulties in finding legitimacy at different levels of authority, as well as institutional capacity and political will at the national and local levels to be effectively realized[3][18]. They also involved long negotiation processes and weak implementation, such as the case of the Kyoto Protocol.

The new model based on objectives brought by the MDGs and the SDGs, on the other hand, allowed for nations to select their priorities and plan for resources to be allocated into these priorities, encouraging capacity building and partnerships. The frameworks also gained popularity and facilitated agreement between member states of the UN due to the flexibility allowed by the back-casting approach and its non-legally binding objectives[4][19].

In this new, ad hoc political model based on objectives, the ideas of "good enough governance", horizontal integration and subsidiarity, which will be used as a conceptual basis for this study, provide a platform for questioning the realism of the old, long menu of institutional changes and capacity-building initiatives traditionally deemed as important (or even essential) for environmental governance and development[20][21]. In that regard, we agree with Grindle[22] when she argues that even the more "flexible" concept of good enough-governance frequently falls short of being a tool to explore what, specifically, needs to be done in any real world context, especially in the developing world. Given the limited

resources of money, time, knowledge, and human and organizational capacities, we believe practitioners are correct to search for pragmatic, tailored ways to move towards better socio-environmental governance in their climate change vulnerable country contexts.

Our main objective is to explore the potential that good enough governance strategies have *on the ground* to contribute to the achievement of the SDG at the local level. Additionally, we aim at demonstrating to which extent both the Buenos Aires Province, in Argentina, and the state of Pará, in Brazil, challenge the good environmental governance magical top-down "receipts" through bottom-up approaches and solutions.

Through two case studies in which we performed a series of semi-structured interviews conducted in the two regions in different time periods, we will illustrate the way those regions are undergoing rapid demographics and land use changes, thus constituting clear examples of the challenges that the dynamics of socio-productive systems pose to both social actors and government officers at all levels. Our main hypothesis is that recognizing and worshipping what local actors are doing by themselves[23], even if they are not openly aware of the Agenda 2030, is vital to foster the achievement of the SDG. Since risk relates to the perception of the actors *directly* affected by climatic disturbances[24][25][26][27][28], our second hypothesis is that it is also important to understand to what extent local government officers consider risk in their planning, management, and execution of adaptation strategies[14][29][30][31]. Accordingly, this study uses semi-structured interviews to undertake a *qualitative* analysis of the perceptions of local public servants about the political-institutional and environmental challenges related to land-use and family agriculture management in the two study areas.

The first part of this article presents a conceptual framework, including the key concepts of environmental governance, subsidiarity, good-enough governance and horizontal integration. The second part briefly describes the context of the studies, including a description of the national and subnational environmental governance landscapes in which our fieldworks were conducted, as well as our Methodology. In the Results and Final Remarks sections we analyse the pros and cons of horizontal integration and/or subsidiarity strategies at the municipal level.

2. Conceptual framework

Vertical integration implies that different levels of government —from national/federal to state/provincial and local— better connect local and regional agendas with national policies[13]. Horizontal integration, on the other hand, is defined as collaboration between different regulatory bodies at the same level of governance[11][32]. It implies the breaking of rigid structures and mentalities in international, national and local administrations. Thus, instead of being the only function of a particular sector, in horizontal integration the pursuit of sustainability has to be embraced collaboratively[13]. Governance, according to Delmas and Young[20], "is a social function centred on efforts to steer societies or human groups away from collectively undesirable outcomes and toward socially desirable". In that regard, *good governance* refers to governments and societies' capacity to enhance the effectiveness and legitimacy of policies, and to their ability to implement them[22][33][34][35]. To this end, international development agencies have developed ever-lengthening lists of criteria to be implemented in local development projects to achieve good governance[36][37][38]. Additionally, the use of the term "governance" has become commonplace, even a buzzword, in the discipline of public policy in general, and in environmental policy in particular[21][39]. As a consequence, the concept of "good enough governance" arose as a platform for questioning the long menu of institutional changes and capacity-building initiatives currently deemed important (or essential) for environmental governance and development[20][21][23][33]. Nevertheless, even the good enough governance approach falls short of being a tool to explore what, specifically, needs to be done in any real-world context. As this paper shows, the proliferation of formal procedures has opened a gap between discourse and practice among public servants in dealing with environmental and social issues in the Brazilian Amazon[40], leading to the application of the subsidiarity principle.

According to Bursztyn[33], subsidiarity can be defined as the strategy of delegating national responsibilities to institutions at a lower territorial levels (decentralisation), including non-state organisations, all the potentially "delegable" instances, thus guaranteeing the primacy of the public interest. Several privatization processes have taken place under the umbrella of the subsidiarity principle. The paradox, according the authors, is that in order to subsidize (thus assuring the primacy of public interest) national administrations need to be "strong" and solid and able to guarantee the systematic application of rules and regulations, instead of needing to be directly present in every instance as executive organs[33][41][42]. In Argentina, on the other hand, public servants are creating horizontal integration strategies to replace frustrating "formal" procedures at the municipal level.

3. Methods

The research had a predominantly qualitative approach, based on case studies of four localities which have experienced problems with extreme climate events in recent years with direct effects on small-scale agriculture and fishing. After an initial scanning of Brazil's and Argentina's multi-scale environmental regulation landscapes, a total of 75 semi-structured and in-depth institutional interviews were carried out with public government officers to analyse their perceptions of environmental and rural challenges faced by their municipalities, located in Santarém and Monte Alegre, Pará (26 interviews), and in Guaminí and Coronel Suárez, Buenos Aires (seven interviews in each district, a total of 14). In addition, around 15 semi-structured interviews were made with a non-random sample of NGOs in Brazil, and with a total of 20 family-farmers in both countries (10 in each country) to double-check information. All interviews were conducted under an ethical commitment of confidentiality and anonymity. The themes guiding the interviews were: i) existing environmental policies in the region, ii) capillarity of the institution, iii) characterization of human resources; iv) availability of resources for policy implementation; v) inter-institutional cooperation and integration; vi) operational limitations; vii) main outcomes; viii) lifespan (how long the institution, project or programme lasts); ix) rotation/turnover of public servants or practitioners; x) policy implementation continuity; xi) participation in policy and decision-making; and xii) perceptions of the main local environmental challenges. No direct questions were asked regarding the internalization of the SDG in each country, since the case studies were conducted before the Agenda 2030 had been widely disseminated in both study regions. Therefore, this paper analyses the potential of good enough governance strategies to the implementation of a set of SDGs in an indirect way, and not through the direct perceptions of the interviewed actors.

4. The context of the case studies

4.1. Two contrasting environmental governance landscapes

At the international level, Brazil, host of an important percentage of the Amazon rainforest, has long exhibited a clear regional leadership in terms of environmental legislation and climate change international negotiations. At the time of our field research, in 2012, both the national and the Pará state administrations were in the hands of the Workers' Party (PT), with president Lula da Silva carrying an intense environmental agenda in the Amazon region with strong synergies with the Pará governor. In spite of this environmental harmony between administrative levels, violent attacks by economic interest groups against traditional communities and environmentalists continued to be blatant. And while chronic violence has worsened (leading to the death of indigenous leaders, among others), hard-conquered environmental policies are backtracking, following a series of measures by the latest federal governments (Michel Temer and Jair Bolsonaro), including the weakening of environmental monitoring and control in protected areas and the dismantling of participatory organs and the Brazilian Ministry of the Environment[3]. Argentina, on the other hand, has traditionally had a far weaker bargaining power in environmental and climate-related international negotiations, and the situation remained unaltered in the year of our research (2016) during the presidency of right-center Mauricio Macri. Macri belonged to the same political party than the governor

of the Buenos Aires province, generating synergies similar to the ones between national and state governments in Brazil four years earlier. At the national level, and differently from Argentina, which is highly centralized and dependent on Buenos Aires, Brazilian sub-national governments have played an important role in establishing and implementing environmental and climate policies in the country. In the past decade, climate legislation has been approved in several Brazilian states (for instance, São Paulo, Minas Gerais and Rio de Janeiro) and municipal districts (such as São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro and Curitiba). The first state law was created by the state of Amazonas, which also established a dedicated body to deal with climate change issues (phased out due to budget constraints, Simoni and others[31]). Brazil also exhibits a strong presence of local, national and international NGOs dealing with climate change and sustainable development, especially in the Amazon and Mata Atlântica regions. These NGOs are frequent receptors of attributions and responsibilities delegated by local state agencies, which are eager to unburden their agendas (and sometimes to put their private interests first).

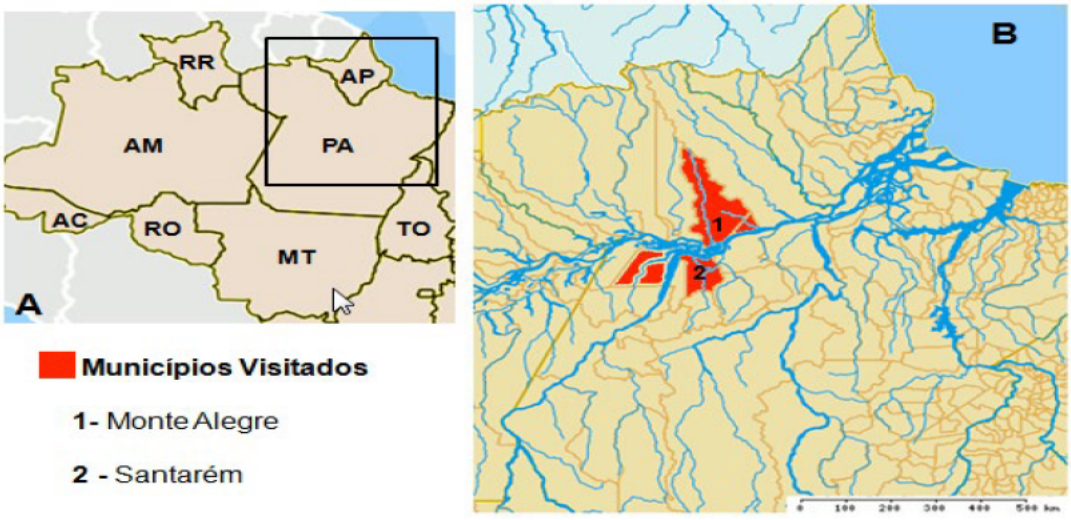
In Argentina, a new initiative has tried to fill the lack of genuine vertical integration of environmental related policies at the national and sub-national governmental levels: the Network of Argentinian Cities on Climate Change (RAMCC, in Spanish) seeks to mobilize environmental commitments from mayors (*intendentes*, in Spanish). Differently from the Brazilian CidadesSustentaveis.org network, created by the third sector, the RAMCC initiative is a product of formal government organs at the municipal level. As of 2018, it was integrated by a network of 153 municipalities (including our case study municipalities of Coronel Suárez and Guaminí), which provides technical support to local governments to achieve sustainable development in accordance with the recommendations of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). Specific objectives of this initiative, which has established partnerships with other municipalities from Latin America, are to foster citizen participation, as well as coordination between government, the private sector and civil society.

4.1.1 The Lower Amazon region of Brazil

The continued deforestation in the Amazon could lead to the irreversible change of its tropical forests and the major loss of its biodiversity. The Amazon ecosystems harbour about 10 to 15% of land biodiversity; its abundant rainfall makes the region an important heat source for the atmosphere; it stores an estimated 150 to 200 billion tons of carbon; and it presents a mosaic of ethnological and linguistic diversity[43]. The municipality of Santarém is the political, economic, and social centre of the Lower Amazon mesoregion, composed of 12 municipalities, covering an area of 340,452 km^2, with an estimated population of 707,000 inhabitants[44]. The region still has a dense cover of native vegetation, notwithstanding significant human occupation concentrated in the Santarém microregion (66% of the population) and the Obidos microregion (25% of the population), where the municipality of Monte Alegre is located (Figure 1). The region is characterized by traditional and industrial fishing in the *várzea* wetlands, and uplands with dense forests and extensive natural grasslands, rich in nutrients. In these areas, small-scale annual agriculture and cattle ranching predominate.

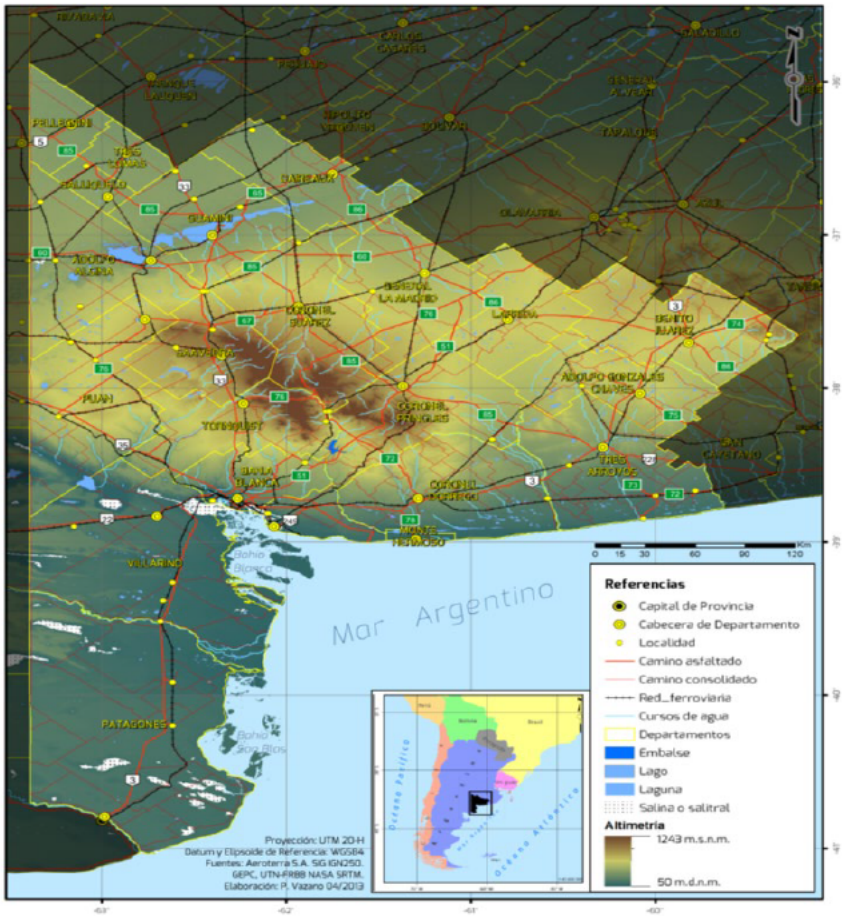
The Lower Amazon territory is considered to be one of the main frontiers of agricultural expansion[45]. The paving of the BR-163 highway has motivated the growth of rice and soybean farming, as well as the increase in pastures and illegal logging. This factor has brought serious social, environmental, and economic impacts, such as: concentration of land and income, increase in migration, increase in rural violence, pollution of rivers, increase in forest fragmentation and degradation, dependence on monocultures, and low efficiency and economic use of non-timber forest products. As habitat destruction trends interact with climate change, the concern is that the Amazon will be caught up in a set of “feedback loops” that could dramatically speed up the pace of forest lost and degradation and bring the Amazon Biome to a point of no return. This threshold, also referred to as a tipping point, may occur when Amazonian forests die and are progressively replaced by fire-prone brush and savanna (ecological tipping point), and rainfall is inhibited on a regional scale (climatic tipping point)[43].

Figure 1. Location of the Lower Amazon microregion (A) and the municipalities studied (B)



Source: prepared by the authors from the tool 3IGEO.

Figure 2. Coronel Suárez and Guaminí (enclosed in the oval) are both located in the marginal Pampas and are the focus of our study in Argentina.



Source: Adapted from Schroeder[50].

4.1.2 The "Marginal" Pampas of Argentina

The grasslands of the Southern Cone of South America are one of the few ecosystems of temperate prairies and savannas in the world, and are considered as a conservation priority[46]. Also known as the "Pampas", the grasslands cover an area of approximately a million square kilometers, shared by Paraguay, Uruguay, Brazil, and Argentina. The greatest proportion of the grasslands is located in Argentina (58%), followed by Uruguay and Brazil 20% and 18%, respectively, and Paraguay with 4%. The Pampa provides ecosystem services that are currently threatened by profound territorial transformations favoring large-scale monoculture (especially soybean)[47]. Even when the Pampa biome has not the same natural exuberance than the Amazonia or the Pantanal biomes, the ecosystem services it provides are of high ecological value: i) environmental services (climate regulation, erosion control, flood prevention, nutrient recycling, conservation of natural species), ii) cultural services (gaucho traditions and values, and ways of life related to livestock activity), and iii) services linked to the aesthetics of nature and landscape[48].

The Southern Cone grasslands are home to 35 million inhabitants with a population density of 35 people per km^2, which is superior to the average population density of each of these countries. As it is common in other temperate prairies, ecosystems such as these have been replaced by intensive agricultural activity; this activity itself is an economic pillar at the national level, but it has also brought profound transformation and fragmentation of these grasslands, with severe impacts on biodiversity. These activities, together with more recent forestations for commercial purposes and urbanization have transformed 68% of the region's grasslands. The regional governments are frequently ineffective regarding the conservation of biodiversity in the remaining natural grasslands; consequently, the protected natural areas correspond to less than 2% of the total area. Furthermore, there is very little margin for future development of these areas, due to the fact that more than 95% of the lands are privately owned, and dedicated to production. From a physical point of view, the Southwestern Buenos Aires Province (SWBAP) —where Guaminí and Coronel Suárez are located— is as a transition area between two distinctly different regions: Pampa and Patagonia. It represents 25% of Buenos Aires Province which belongs to sub-wet-dry and semi-arid regions of Argentina, with climatic and soil characteristics that set it apart and place it in a position with clearly lower comparative advantages over the rest of the Province[47][49]. SWBAP municipalities have shown, in recent decades, a strong trend towards rural depopulation, according to census data. Continuous droughts lasting for more than fifteen years, coupled with indiscriminate deforestation, along with aggressive tillage practices and the use of agrotoxics linked to soybean production have exacerbated the decline of economic outcomes which have produced, apart from resource exploitation, soil degradation, which endangered the continuity of agricultural livestock production[50].

5. Results

In the case of Brazil, the studied municipalities of Santarém and Monte Alegre depicted a shadowy scenario where the long list of bureaucratic constraints that state and local government agencies face constitute obstacles to public management efficiency, clearly threatening the potential for the local achievement of SDG 16 (strong institutions). Consequently, many local public officials have chosen to just by-pass them, by transferring their public responsibilities to the very active NGOs in the region, which is an indirect way of implementing SDG 16. Those NGOs fill the gaps opened by the (in)action or inefficiency of local state agencies[24][50].

Like in many other countries of Latin America, NGOs clearly flourish on the fertile ground that public servants willingly relinquish. State agencies operating at every level frequently delegate functions and resources to the so-called third sector. This happens for different reasons, ranging from pragmatism and flexibility to the lack of human resources, incompetence, and even lethargy and corruption. State agencies are locally seen as entities which fabricate solutions to inexistent problems and which leave genuine problems unresolved.

On the other hand, NGOs suffer from severe limitations to carry the burden of policy-making and policy-implementation, since they are busy with solving three main types of problems: i. Diversification of production strategies, such as agroforestry and permaculture training, income diversification, technologies for small-scale forest production, fishing agreements, and capacity building for fostering cooperation and associative skills among end-users; ii. Conservation projects such as fire control training, environmental education, and ecotourism; and iii. Bargaining priorities with the public sector. NGOs faced those challenges through innovative management strategies, which interviewees from the lower Amazon region described as: a high power of popular mobilization (a capacity to engage communities through common and meaningful objectives); simplified administrative procedures, with no functional overlaps; problem-oriented (commitment to actions and results), a people-centered approach, organizational culture of accountability and of sharing responsibilities and expectations; commitment to bottom-up participation, valuing collective consensus-building; valuing traditional knowledge, practices, and lifestyles and effective communication with the targeted populations (local communities).

Local NGO initiatives valued the participation of family farmers, fishermen and collectors, and riverine dwellers in the collective construction of actions directly connected to their production and ways of life. Responsibility for conducting the project and taking actions is shared and the results are collective victories for conservation and for personal, community, and sustainable development.

All studied organisations worked directly or indirectly with some state agencies, and these entities generally managed to bridge planned and executed policies in contact with target populations. None of the organizations declared explicitly to work directly with climatic change issues. During the interviews, however, they could easily relate their actions and strategies to the vulnerabilities created by the negative impacts of climatic change, such as fire-control strategies, agroecological production, conservation efforts and youth education.

It is important to note that most NGOs operating in the lower Amazon region have funding difficulties and problems with the continuity of their actions, availability of human resources, and adequate technical staff for preparation, execution, monitoring, and financial accountability of projects. A strong commitment of the people in charge of these organizations to the cause of their work is evident, many of them working with low salaries and limited conditions of infrastructure and support material. A sense of responsibility, transparency, collective effort, and participation permeate their discourse and action.

The second case study, conducted in the municipalities of Guaminí and Coronel Suárez, in the southwestern region of Buenos Aires Province (SWBAP), demonstrated that local practitioners have managed to build spaces for exchange and cooperation between governmental agencies and the local private sectors, as well as articulating governance efforts with other cities, of all sizes, along the country, thus stimulating collaborative solutions for sustainability. Being significant smaller cities (when compared with our Brazilian case studies) and located in a biome with far less international visibility and interest from donors and environmental organisations, NGOs are almost absent in the region. As a consequence, gaps and inaction from higher governmental levels are being filled by municipalities themselves. Interviewed environmental officers showed atypical profiles, sometimes coming from the third sector.

As common factors contributing to good enough governance in the Buenos Aires municipalities, government officers faced with the dual challenges of urban and rural areas displayed an array of individual and social “soft skills” and new adaptive decision-making strategies often identified with NGOs governance style. Not surprisingly, interviewed officers identified as positive several aspects that are usual in NGOs agendas, such as flexible and simplified administrative and bureaucratic procedures, facilitated by the relatively small size of local towns and the extensive dialogue networks established among neighbours; problem-oriented strategies (commitment to actions and results); a people-centred, an organizational culture of sharing of responsibilities and expectations; commitment to bottom-up participation / valuing collective consensus-building; valuing traditional knowledge, practices, and lifestyles; effective communication and sensitisation

strategies face to face with the targeted populations (brokers).

Similar to the Brazilian case, none of the Argentine practitioners and public servants identified their responsibilities as being directly linked to climatic change. They preferred expressions such as environmental protection, conservation, and sustainable practices. During the interviews, they frequently described their actions and strategies as related to climatic change mitigation and adaptation strategies, such as recycling, renewable energies, agroecological production (especially regarding the avoidance of agrotoxics and low-tillage strategies), the local design and construction of solar energy water warmers (*calefones solares*, in Spanish) installed in roofs of the neighbours' houses, conservation efforts and the implementation of environmental awareness projects in local schools.

At the same time, interviews with public servants from Guaminí and Coronel Suárez revealed a series of obstacles also identified in the Brazilian case studies, such as limited financial (evidenced through low-wages and short-termed, unstable work contracts) and human resources to implement sustainability projects and a marked lack of reliable, disaggregated environmental data. Interviewed Brazilian and Argentine officers admitted to be struggling with several additional negative factors for the principles of good enough governance processes, such as excess of bureaucracy, low representativeness, lack of policy continuity and, in spite of efforts such as the RAMCC, the lack of inter-institutional cooperation. Results also point out that achieving a genuine horizontal integration for sustainability requires to overcome complex multi-level, multi-actor challenges regarding team building and participation, financial resources, accountability, transparency, and, above all, overcome historical, cultural, and behavioural barriers.

5.1. Shared fragilities

Interviewed practitioners from both the government and the third sector in Monte Alegre and Santarém identified the following fragilities in state agencies (at federal, state and local levels) dealing with climate change in the Lower Amazon and the Pampas regions (Table 1).

Table 1. Institutional fragilities threatening good enough-governance among state agencies common to the studied Municipalities (reflecting interviewees' perceptions).

Limited human resources	• Limited technical capabilities (in quantity and quality) • Lack of commitment • Frustration (mainly due to organizational communication problems) • Low self-esteem and motivation levels • Lack of a career plan • Favoritism
Rotation/Turnover of officials	• Short-term actions not prioritized by planning • Lack of leadership • Lack of accountability • Unclear objectives/wasted efforts
Excessive bureaucracy for execution of actions	• Emergency actions prioritized • Preventative actions and planning given low priority • Wasted efforts
Lifespan (time of existence)	• Lack of continuity • Lack of accountability

Lack of continuity of actions	• Priority for actions with immediate effects/high visibility • Emergency assistance, to the detriment of long-term capacity building • Wasted efforts
Weak inter-institutional cooperation	• Even inter-institutional actions are poorly cooperative • Poor communication
Limited material resources	• Asymmetries in infrastructure and technical staff among institutions with different mandates (conservation, enforcement, and environmental monitoring institutions) = actions weakened and/or diluted along the way
Unsatisfactory Results	• Barriers/institutional flaws perpetrated • Lack of accountability
Low legitimacy and participation levels	• Low popular participation in construction of collective actions • Lack of real involvement by end-users

Source: Fieldwork (2010/2016).

6. Discussion

This study sought to explore the potential that good enough-governance strategies have *on the ground* to contribute to the achievement of the SDG at the local level. Additionally, we aimed at demonstrating to which extent both the Buenos Aires Province, in Argentina, and the state of Pará, in Brazil, challenge the good environmental governance magical top-down "receipts" through bottom-up approaches and solutions.

Our research confirmed that most national environmental governance institutions from Brazil and Argentina are slow in the achievement of their objectives, fragmented and lacking continuity, all traits that limit the potential for localizing the SDG at the national level, making top-down receipts virtually useless. On the other hand, interviewees made clear distinctions between the performance of public agencies at the federal and local levels, and non-governmental organizations: their views of the role of municipalities and local NGOs were significantly more positive than those about national state-led institutions. In consequence, the creation of new public policies and institutions to effectively manage climate change risk among family farmers in the Amazon region of Brazil should not be the priority for the achievement of the SDG. Rather, bottom-up approaches and solutions rooted in positive bureaucratic cultures should be better understood in order to put people at the centre of the implementation of socioenvironmental policies, as well as to promote genuine dialogue and cooperation between sectors, fostering the integration promoted by the Agenda 2030. In the Argentine case, where national and subnational environmental governance legislation and institutions seem to be less developed than in Brazil, the urgency of reality has forced municipalities to seek creative options based on solidarity and collaboration, such as horizontal integration strategies and a network of local governments. In parallel, the less favourable institutional situation of the third sector has prevented decision-makers from the Argentine government to further implement the subsidiarity principle by delegating tasks to non-governmental organisations[33][51].

In Brazil, the subsidiarity principle has clearly guided the decentralization of many of the attributions of public agencies, which have been transferred from the national to the subnational and municipal spheres and even to the third sector —which is not always prepared to carry the burden by itself.

Among the negative consequences of the subsidiarity principle in Brazil is the growing vulnerability of some public organs that must face the negative practices of many local agencies, such as the prevalence of private agendas over public interests, and the lack of accountability and transparency[42]. Accordingly, scholars and practitioners must assume more realistic expectations about how much good governance can be expected in poor countries struggling with a plethora of demands on their capacities to pursue change[33][52]. What is needed to achieve "good enough governance" in the studied regions is the strengthening and/or re-structuring of already existing governance instances. This requires some innovative approaches. To start with, it demands deeper knowledge of the organizational culture and of the perception of involved actors (especially end-users) on the impact of governance instances on their everyday lives. The study of perceptions is vital because adaptive capacity to climatic and social-economic risks depends on the understanding that the involved actors have of those risks and of the institutions created to deal with them[47][53]. In other words, it is vital to put a human face to sustainability challenges.

7. Conclusion

The implementation of the sustainability agenda at the local level, including the SDG, will not be an easy and straightforward process and tends to face a number of challenges. However, if smart and flexible management approaches are applied, these challenges can be transformed into opportunities. The integration of public policies into a cohesive sustainable development strategy and localization of the SDGs by incorporating bottom-up, community-based contributions, gained further importance in both countries. These strategies may prove to be important tools to support the fragile, non-binding global level agendas that are threatened by national political instability.

Achieving significant results in sustainable development will require the ability to address different realities through a good enough governance approach. This, however, is not simply about financing new technologies or fostering only economic growth, as the weak definition of sustainability states[3]. Rather, it is about recognizing planetary limits and about balancing the demands of social and economic development at local level, with smart environmental management and innovative leadership, including tailor-made and customizable approaches that can distinguish between different municipality-types. As the studied municipalities show, to be effectively enhanced, sustainability must be understood, localized, customized and, last but not least, humanized.

Successful public servants are those who allow peers and citizens to understand global sustainability challenges, to localize climate change impacts and to customize solutions, so that citizens feel that they also need to be part of the effort. The case of the studied municipalities in Argentina evidences that, despite limited resources, bureaucratic obstacles and a poor non-governmental landscape, they managed to be the drivers of innovative sustainable development at the local level. Facing the fragile vertical integration (international, national, subnational and local) of the environmental agenda in their country, the studied municipalities from Argentina opted to reinforce their horizontal integration across sectors and among other municipalities (local level). In the case of Brazil, even though there are advanced environmental governance systems at the national and subnational levels, political constraints at the national level and marked inequality threaten the overarching goal of the Agenda 2030 of leaving no one behind. As our case study in Pará State shows, the traditional subsidiarity principle still reigns as an emergency solution in the region. Which leads us to the question: Should governments be held accountable for letting non-state actors conduct environmental sustainability-related activities? After all, NGOs are filling the space for action left out by government. This growing influence of non-state actors is welcomed in the developing world, but issues such as transparency and accountability will have to come into play and new mechanisms of social control may emerge as a result of this new configuration.

The heavy state machine in countries such as Brazil and Argentina, plus their non-action in remote areas such as the ones exemplified in the lower Amazon region, need urgent solution, which is not simple to reach and implement. Their own sustainability and

maintenance are at risk. As a consequence, it is safe to say that institutional analysis environmental governance instances in the Brazilian Amazon and in the Argentine´s Pampas confirm our hypothesis that it is people with leadership skills, and not necessarily bureaucratic structures, who are at the centre of "good enough governance". However, it is important to remember that actions that are too dependent on charisma and leadership of individuals —as frequently happens in these areas— will tend to be weak from an institutional basis, such actions cannot guarantee long-term continuity, which are necessary to face climate change challenges. The personification of an institution into an individual or group of individuals constitutes a clear institutional fragility.

Good governance institutions should not rely on individuals for their continuity, even those exhibiting an array of positive "soft skills". The development of science and knowledge, planning and action necessary to respond to socio-environmental challenges, including those posed by climatic change, requires long-term strategies that come from organizations suited to manage long-term issues.

Institutions that deal with socio-environmental sustainability issues need to be reliable, inclusive and steady. In that regard, Brazilian state agencies face excessive bureaucratic checkpoints that slow down much needed solutions in the fight against corruption. Democratic and horizontal spaces for sustainability may be facilitated by state agencies, but building consensus on strategic actions and priorities maybe challenged by fragmented interests that not necessarily respond to collective interests and needs. This is the case of long-term, costly strategies for responding to collective demands, which require the legitimacy of democratic processes.

Who is to be held accountable for compensating the lack of action of governments when climate change affected people's call for urgent assistance? What are all the elements that construct good enough-governance for the outlined cases, where both governmental and non-governmental actors suffer from low salaries, lack of skills and/or training, and the lack of stability and career plans? How shall horizontal integration actions be effectively part of local and regional governance practices, given all the historical and cultural singularities attributed to each place? Such questions remain to be answered in the journey of understanding good enough-governance and local demands, limited resources and common challenges. But one point remains clear: good institutional development for achieving the SDGs will not flourish with temporary and improvised arrangements that cover gaps in the public sector.

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Author contribution statement

Gabriela Litre, Jane Simoni and Marcel Bursztyn conceived and designed the analysis; Gabriela Litre (Pampa Biome) and Jane Simoni (Amazon biome) collected the data; Gabriela Litre, Jane Simoni, Marcel Bursztyn and Rafael Morais Reis performed the analysis and jointly wrote the paper.

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