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Governing the Sustainable Development Goals in the COVID-19 era: Bringing back hierarchic styles of governance?

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ADB Working Paper Series

**GOVERNING THE SUSTAINABLE
DEVELOPMENT GOALS IN THE
COVID-19 ERA: BRINGING BACK
HIERARCHIC STYLES OF GOVERNANCE?**

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Abstract

Adopted in 2015, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were intended to motivate governments and the international community to address the world's most pressing social and environmental challenges. However, most countries are not on pace to achieve the SDGs. The economic and human toll of the COVID-19 pandemic stands to further delay action beyond the SDGs' 2030 target date. Yet, viewed from another perspective, COVID-19 offers an opportunity to improve the governance of, and accelerate progress in, the SDGs. This paper builds upon well-established work on meta-governance to determine what changes in governance could be needed for such an outcome to materialize. More specifically, the paper employs a text analysis of keywords related to hierarchic, market, and network governance styles in high-profile SDG plans from Denmark, Japan, and Viet Nam. The text analysis demonstrates that all three countries potentially rely too heavily on market-oriented governance styles. The paper then contrasts the governance for the SDGs with a qualitative review of more hierarchic styles of governance outlined in the three countries' COVID-19 programs. The paper closes by discussing whether crises such as COVID-19 can lead to more balanced modes of governance to strengthen the political momentum on the SDGs.

Keywords: governance, sustainable development goals, SDGs

JEL Classification: O, Y

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1. INTRODUCTION: THE SDGS AND COVID-19

In 2015, the international community agreed on 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as the centerpiece of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. At the time of this agreement, aspirations ran high that the SDGs would help steer countries down more sustainable development paths. Yet, country performance in the SDGs has not lived up to these expectations. This unfortunate reality is illustrated by reports showing that the majority of countries are making insufficient progress in the SDGs (Bertelsmann Stiftung and Sustainable Development Solutions Network 2018, 2019). It is further demonstrated by models that indicate that at the current rate the global community may achieve the goals by 2073, 43 years later than envisioned originally (Thorne 2020).

Even more troubling than the messages from the above assessments is their timing. The above claims of slow progress were made *prior* to COVID-19, and a real possibility exists that the pandemic will hamper even modest strides on the SDGs. There is also evidence that this might indeed already be happening. For example, COVID-19 has reversed steady declines in global poverty for the first time in three decades (United Nations 2020) and precipitated the “deepest recession since World War II” (World Bank 2020). Add in a global loss of up to 400 million jobs as well as an estimated drop in average income of 10.7% in the first three quarters of 2020 (relative to 2019) and the prospects for a truly sustainable world appear to be further out of reach (International Labour Organization 2020).

It is clear that the pandemic risks a global backtracking of prosperity and quality of life, reducing the prospects of achieving the SDGs. However, there are also audible and optimistic voices that recognize that opportunities may lie in crisis (Duek and Fliss 2020). More specifically, COVID-19 (and its attendant impacts on multiple development dimensions) is creating a window of opportunity through which it may be feasible to transform “business as usual” and place countries on more sustainable development courses. There are many factors that will have to come together if this transformation is to materialize, including increased funding and attitudinal shifts. This paper will nonetheless focus on one particularly important driver of change, namely governance styles.

To sharpen the focus on governance, the paper concentrates on “metagovernance” (Meuleman 2018), and distinguishes between hierarchic, market, and network styles of governance. It then uses a quantitative text analysis to illustrate the relative dominance of market-oriented forms of governance in Denmark, Japan, and Viet Nam’s approach to the SDGs. While this reliance on market rationalities may have motivated companies to invest in innovation and technologies, it has arguably had limited impacts on the environment and other progressive needs under the SDGs. The paper argues that COVID-19 responses and stimulus packages offer an opportunity for governments to reassert authority that they may have unwittingly abandoned. This reclamation of authority may be necessary to accelerate action in the sustainable development agenda and build resilience to COVID-like crises.

2. NEVER LET A GOOD CRISIS GO TO WASTE

The Nobel laureate Paul Romer is credited with observing that “a crisis is a terrible thing to waste.” The sentiment implied in Romer’s observation is that big changes can be difficult in periods of relative calm and normalcy. Further, during these “normal” periods a set of interlocking technical, social, financial, and institutional constraints work together to preserve the status quo. Even more challenging is the fact that, while these constraints may be relatively stable, they are not static; they often move with well-placed actors and vested interests, and thus evolve with those who benefit from retaining the current state of affairs. Collectively this set of reinforcing barriers and supportive benefactors lock in unsustainable development patterns and preclude alternative development paths (Frantzeskaki and Loorbach 2007; Safarzyńska and van den Bergh 2010; Sandén and Azar 2015).

Another sentiment implied in Romer’s claim is that governments need not be locked into this unsustainable course. Systemic shocks can serve as a momentum-breaking factor that can help bring about big and potentially long-lasting changes. These shocks refer to frequently unexpected, one-off occurrences that can break down barriers and weaken interests, preventing wide-ranging reforms (Cowan and Hultén 1996; Hughes et al. 2013; Kinzig et al. 2006; March and Olsen 1989). Such jolts can take the form of natural disasters (the 2011 Fukushima triple disaster), financial crises (the 2007 Lehman banking crisis), landmark events (the 2008 Beijing Olympics), and pandemics like COVID-19. Such windows of opportunity, however, are themselves not permanent. Taking advantage of that opportunity depends on many factors that can help keep these windows open, including *governance*.

3. ON GOVERNANCE

3.1 Defining Governance

While the term “governance” has a long lineage, it has become increasingly common for the development community to underline its role in development over the past three decades. The heightened recognition of the importance of governance has not led to a consensus on the term’s definition. Some definitions suggest governance refers to “the manner in which power is exercised in the management of a country’s economic and social resources for development” (World Bank 1993). Others note that governance is about the way in which governments make a “purposeful effort to guide, steer, control, or manage (sectors or facets of) societies” (Kooiman 2003 p. 2). This government or state-centered perspective is also evident in claims that governance “centres on the institutions and actions of the [sovereign] state” (Jordan 2008 p. 5).

In the case of sustainable development generally and the SDGs specifically, many have carried forward this state-centered perspective by focusing on institutional structures that shape how policies are formulated and implemented. In this view, there is often an emphasis placed on coordination and integration across different sectoral agencies and multiple levels of decision-making. At the core of this view is the sense that the sustainable development agenda requires an integrated and holistic perspective to move forward. Hence, the frequently siloed and segmented structures of institutions can frustrate attempts to craft policies and allocate the resources that are consistent with sustainability principles. What is needed to adopt policies consistent with these principles is a whole-of-government approach (Amanuma et al. 2018).

While this state-centered view still features prominently in work on the SDGs, a recent and fruitful avenue of inquiry has observed that governance of and for sustainable development has increasingly involved other nonstate initiatives and institutions. This more expansive vantage point holds that governance refers to “...the totality of interactions, in which government, other public bodies, private sector and civil society participate, aiming at solving societal problems or creating societal opportunities” (Meuleman 2008 p. 11). This broader perspective has implications for the way that governments and other actors work to achieve societal goals. Olsen et al. (2015), for instance, distinguish between *compliance* and *collaborative* forms of governance and argue that voluntary forms of governance arrangements have increased compared to binding ones. The shift toward these more voluntary forms is evident in the differences in the governance approaches in the outcomes and instruments that have emerged from the Rio Earth Summit in 1992, the UNFCCC, and the more recent SDGs (Olsen et al. 2015).

The trend to look more at governance beyond government is reflected in a similar shift from government action to partnerships, markets, networks, and coalitions of diverse assortments of actors. A similar change is mirrored in the trend towards “reinventing” government and privatization of public goods that much of the world has witnessed in the last few decades since the Washington Consensus and the Thatcher and Reagan years in the 1980s. One way of observing and analyzing trends in governance styles involves using a framework based on metagovernance.

3.2 Metagovernance and Governance Styles

Work on metagovernance distinguishes between three styles of governance: **hierarchical**, **market**, and **network** (Kooiman 2003; Meuleman and Niestroy 2015). A brief description of the main features of these three styles follows:

1. The **hierarchical** style of governance draws upon a state-centered approach and often involves government taking action in a top-down manner (Pahl-wostl 2019). This style frequently places a premium on government-led planning and interventionism in markets to address market failures.
2. The **market** style of governance tends to be nonbinding and voluntary. It takes a more decentralized, hands-off approach to problem solving and public management; steering is achieved by using market-based motivations to induce change such as prices, competition, and economic incentives (Thompson 2003).
3. The **network** style of governance relies on flat organizational structures and networks to coordinate activities as well as benchmarking to motivate progress across a diversity of actors, especially civil society and nongovernmental organizations (Treib et al. 2007).

The above definitions do not fit into watertight categories. There are some similarities between them. Moreover, in practice, different countries often employ hybrid forms, borrowing elements of the three types (Meuleman 2008). Despite the fact that these categories often blur at their boundaries and mix in practice, the metagovernance framework offers a relatively comprehensive framework for classifying modes of governance. In fact, recent work from Meuleman (Meuleman 2008; Meuleman 2018; Meuleman and Niestroy 2015) points to more than 50 dimensions across which these approaches vary. For the purposes of this paper, however, the key characteristics in Table 1 can help illustrate the differences.

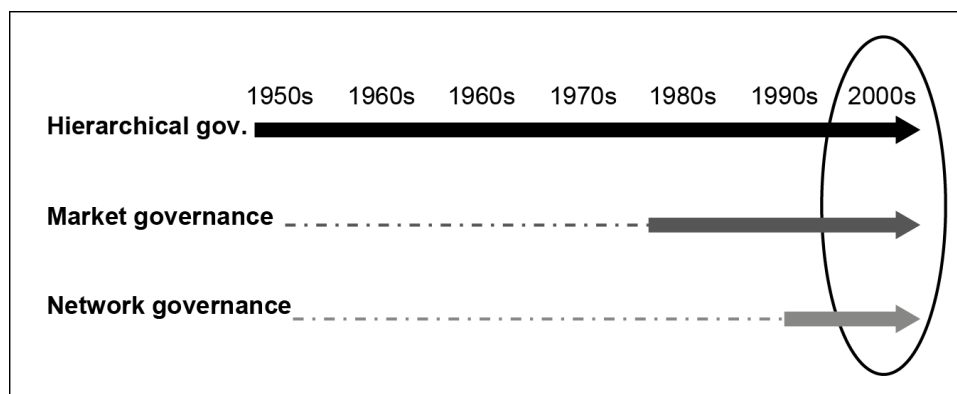
Table 1: Governance Styles and Characteristics

Governance Style/ Characteristic	Hierarchic	Market	Network
Underlying rationale	State provides laws and regulations that SDGs/COVID relief are implemented. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>The state chooses for citizens.</i> 	Market forces help bring together businesses to implement the SDGs/COVID relief cost-effectively. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>The individual chooses for her-/himself.</i> 	Solutions to the SDGs/COVID relief are identified through consultations and participation with a diverse set of groups and individuals. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>People choose based on consensus.</i>
Key actor(s)	Government	Corporations, individuals	Nonstate (NGO), communities
Means for achieving results	Compliance, mandatory, binding	Competition, profit, self-interest, productivity, efficiency	Consensus, negotiated, voluntary
Policy tools and instruments	Law, regulation, ban, fine, directive, penalty, fee, sanction	Trading schemes, credit, tax, incentive, promote, award	Consultation, participation, co-creation, networks, stakeholder engagement

Note: Adapted from Hartley 2005; Jordan 2008; Kooiman 2003; Meuleman 2008, 2015; Pahl-Wostl 2019.

In the era of the SDGs, market and network types of governance have become more common. To some extent, this stands to reason: The 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development was agreed during a period when neoliberalism and advanced liberalism had gained currency in relevant policy circles. The rising popularity of markets and flatter modes of management have also influenced approaches to sustainable development(Kumi et al. 2014; Raco 2005; Reid 2014). For example, countries are increasingly employing voluntary nonbinding regulation on issues ranging from mitigating climate change to minimizing plastic waste.

Figure 1: Governance Styles Over Time (Meuleman 2018)



In many instances, this shift along the continuum may be beneficial for the environment and other progressive concerns. Almost by definition, nonstate styles are nimbler and move quicker than the formalized structures of hierarchic government. Further, market and network styles of governance have been deservedly lauded for widening the playing field so different actors can enter conversations around issues where they might have had less input but possess greater knowledge.

However, market and network styles of governance are not free from criticism. To illustrate this, some have raised concerns about the pricing of environmental goods and services and commodification of nature that allows wealthier segments of society to access resources that the poor cannot afford (Latorre et al. 2015). In a similar vein, others have cautioned that the indiscriminate involvement of the private sector in environmental management is akin to hijacking the sustainability agenda for less noble ends (Martin 2014). A third line of critique has suggested that the SDGs reflect some of these failings by not including a target on alternatives to GDP and thus reifying growth-dominant paradigms (Elder and Olsen 2019).

3.3 Evaluating Governance Styles in SDG Plans and COVID-19 Strategies

Part of the challenge with determining which of the above assessments holds is that it is not so straightforward to evaluate which governance styles dominate. The paper aims to make this task more tractable by using a complementary combination of a qualitative desk study and a quantitative text analysis of key documents in the section that follows.

For the text analysis, the paper relied on a simple counting of key terms associated with hierarchic, market, and network modes of governance in major SDG plans and strategies. The selection of key terms involved reading and rereading governance literature as well as relevant SDG documents. After repeated readings, the representative set of terms in Table 2 were selected as the words to be counted for the different modes of governance; for the actual counting of these terms, proper nouns and headings of tables or figures were only counted once so as to reduce inflated tabulations. Further, because the number of key terms was not the same for each of the three categories, important figures illustrate the number of occurrences for all as well as just the top five of the key terms in each of the governance categories.

The terms in Table 2 are indicative of which approach to governing is in practice at a given time. There are some drawbacks from relying on keywords: Most notably, some terms are valid for more than one governance style. Examples include terms such as “voluntary arrangements” that can imply market or network governance styles. In other cases, terms such as “corporate social responsibility” (CSR) and “participation” could fall into multiple categories. That said, while text analysis is not without weaknesses, it can be a useful way to determine the relative importance of a wide range of difficult-to-measure concepts, such as the political positions of key actors (Garry and Laver 2000). It is also being used to better understand otherwise difficult-to-discern focal points and cross-goal linkages in national SDG reports (Sebestyén et al. 2020). The results of the text analysis begin with a brief introduction to relevant documents in Denmark, Japan, and Viet Nam. A discussion on how frequently terms related to hierarchic, market, and network modes appear in the select SDG documents follows that brief introduction.

After the text analysis of the SDG plans, the types of major policies and actions taken in the wake of COVID-19 in Denmark, Japan, and Viet Nam are summarized. These summaries are qualitative in nature and do not employ text analysis. Even without a quantitative assessment, the summaries demonstrate the contrasts in governance. Though there are clear differences between the three surveyed countries, one of the main themes demonstrated through the text analysis and summary of COVID relief is that the pandemic may be creating an opportunity for governments to reassert authority that could accelerate progress in SDGs.

4. CASE 1: DENMARK

Denmark's government released its SDG Action Plan in 2017 (Udenrigsministeriet 2017). The Action Plan was developed to tailor global SDG targets to Denmark's national context. As such, the Action Plan outlines priority targets, areas where performance is sufficient, and issues where improvement is needed. Though the Action Plan is not solely about governance, much of the discussion concerns implementation and the governance arrangements required to enhance SDG implementation. As such, it offers a useful text for the analysis proposed above.

Hierarchic

Denmark's 2017 SDG Action Plan refers to several terms where hierarchic governance styles support implementation of the SDGs. In total, 95 occurrences of hierarchic terms were counted fitting that characterization—with terms like “protection,” “law,” and “directive” being most common. One of the policy areas where this style of governance is most prevalent is social welfare. The provision of welfare is a central task of the Danish government. The management of this task is anchored in Danish government laws and regulations. The emphasis on hierarchy is also evident in another critical function of the state—to ensure the safety of different segments of society. To some extent, this commitment is codified in the requirement that Parliament needs to report regularly on progress in national laws on matters concerning gender equality, child safety, and chemicals. There are also several references to hierarchic forms of governance helping to bolster security not simply against internal but also against external security threats. Additional evidence of hierarchic styles can be found in discussions on compliance with European Union (EU) regulations—for example, Denmark's approach to command-and-control tools is noted in national transpositions of EU-level regulations.

Market

While hierarchic approaches are indeed common in Denmark's SDG Action Plan, references to market governance styles are even more prominent: There are 122 occurrences of terms falling into the market category. At the most general level, the plan states that it contributes to commercial opportunities for Danish companies. More specifically, CSR is treated as a vehicle to involve the private sector in SDG action. In Denmark, working on CSR is still voluntary, but legal requirements in the Danish Financial Statements Act mean that the largest Danish companies are obliged to submit a CSR statement to the government. It is also worth noting that the themes of this CSR reporting have expanded from human rights to include climate change and environmental sustainability; reporting on employee relations and corruption appears likely to follow in the future. Among the key terms, “growth” is most frequently mentioned (29 times). However, these references often occur in the wider context of employment creation, suggesting that economic growth is not simply about maximizing profits but achieving other social goals. Other market-based rationales and priorities include frequent references to productivity and innovation—often made in the context of technological development.

Network

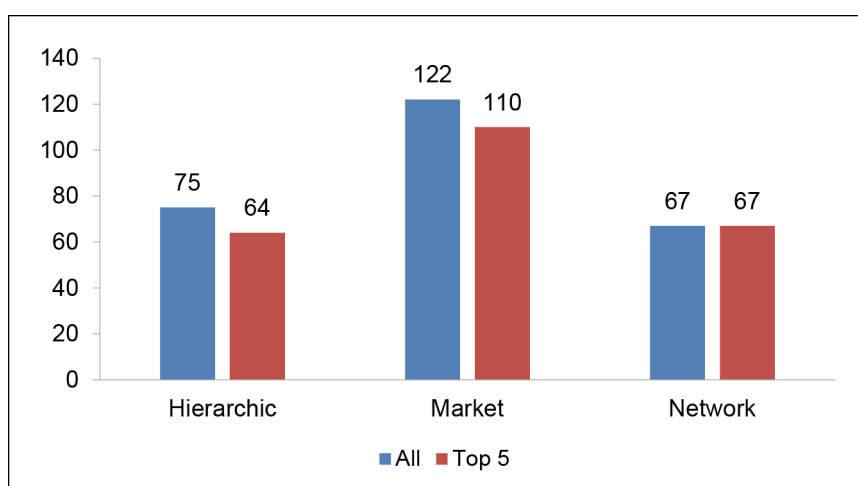
In terms of more networked modes of governance, rights, participation, cooperation, and equality are mentioned consistently but less frequently than other key terms. These references underline principles that Denmark supports and promotes internationally, such as human rights and gender equality. Similar claims are provided

pertaining to how developing countries should work toward increased representation in international economic and financial institutions.

Table 2: Occurrences of Key Terms, Denmark

Hierarchic 95 (64 If Only Using the Top Five Terms)	Market 155 (110 If Only Using the Top Five Terms)	Network 67 (67 If Only Using the Top Five Terms)
law (13), regulation (6), ban (2), fine (0), directive (11), penalty (1), fee (0), sanction (0), grant (0), safety (3), conservation (3), protection (23), welfare (7), duty (9), tax (11), justice (8), rule (0), enforce (0), monitor (0)	credit (0), loan (1), fee (0), incentive (0), promote (0), award (2), partnerships (10), private sector (20), voluntary (3), market (21), trade (12), loan (1), competitiveness (4), technology (17), freedom (12), CSR (6), investment (4), growth (29), export (3), corporate (23)	consultation (0), participation (11), co-creation (0), network (1), stakeholder engagement (0), cooperation (24), voluntary (5), rights (26)

Figure 2: Governance Styles in Denmark’s 2017 Action Plan



4.1 Denmark’s COVID-19 Response

On 13 March, the Danish government became one of the first countries in Europe to institute a lockdown in response to COVID-19. While the country reopened key institutions such as day-care centers and kindergartens less than a month later, business closures, travel bans, and other restrictions led to steep economic losses. To revitalize the economy, the government relied on several interventionist tools and hierarchic approaches, contrasting with the market-oriented governance evident in the case of the SDGs. The highest profile of these interventions was a financial stimulus package totalling DKK285 billion (US\$42 billion). To give the plan a sharper focus, funding was broken up into a number of “relief packages” directed chiefly at businesses and workers (European Commission 2020).

The plan was then implemented through a range of measures touching on both immediate and longer-term needs. For the short term, a holiday package was introduced during the summer of 2020 with reduced- or no-cost train and ferry tickets to boost domestic tourism in and beyond the capital. At the same time, some interventions with potentially even more lasting effects were conducted via the creation

of a new bicycle hub system to facilitate bicycle-friendly routes and cycling experiences that would help people reconnect with nature.

The experience in Denmark suggests that COVID may indeed be creating an opportunity to bring back authority to the state. It underlines, for instance, that governments are not simply pursuing economic growth for private gain. Many of the interventions in fact aim to make people more aware of nature and ways that it can be protected. An important question is what impacts will the repositioning of government interventionism have on the lack of progress on the SDGs.

5. CASE 2: JAPAN

For the case of Japan, text analysis was performed on two SDG documents. The first, the SDGs' Implementation Guiding Principles (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Japan 2019), provides an overview of the current status of the SDGs as well as Japan's visions, priorities, institutional structure, and processes in promoting the SDGs. Based on the Guiding Principles, Japan develops an SDGs Action Plan each year. Hence, the second selected document was the 2021 Action Plan. As the 2021 Action Plan was only available in Japanese, key terms were translated into one or more Japanese words (see Table 4).

Hierarchic

There were 401 occurrences of terms related to hierarchic governance styles. The most frequently occurring term in the hierarchic category was "law," which came up only once in the Guiding Principles but 131 times in the Action Plan. This difference is arguably due to the difference in the nature of the two documents—the Guiding Principles mainly presents the vision and principles while the Action Plan focuses on specific programs and initiatives, many of which are supported by acts and laws. In fact, many of the actions are listed with relevant acts and laws as well as budgets approved by the government. Key terms with strong negative connotations including "sanction," "penalty," "fine," and "duty" were not found at all in these documents, indicating that the implementation of SDGs in Japan does not penalize a lack of action or actions against the SDGs beyond laws and regulations.

Market

The market category is the most commonly represented governance style in the document with 1,238 occurrences. By far the most dominant term here is "promote" (508). This term is used so frequently in part because the word "promote" in Japanese also means to "advance"—anything that needs to be advanced should be "promoted." Therefore, "acts" and "laws" (key terms for a hierarchic governance style) can "promote" measures to enhance gender equality, for example. However, even without counting the term "promote," the dominance of market-style governance is evident with the term "technology" occurring 203 times, "investment" 79 times, and "corporate" 112 times. Frequent occurrence of these terms is largely explained by the fact that the government (in close collaboration with the Japanese private sector) aims to achieve "Society 5.0"—"a human-centered society that balances economic advancement with the resolution of social problems by a system that highly integrates cyberspace and physical space" (Cabinet Office). The Japan Business Federation promotes and integrates this concept in SDGs, calling their initiative "Society 5.0 for SDGs."

Another aspect to note is that Japan presents “Japan SDGs Awards” to stakeholders, including local governments, businesses, and civil society organizations, every year, encouraging stakeholders to take actions related to the SDGs. While this system does not provide financial incentives, it is another trait of market-style governance. The dominance of the market-style terms is in line with remarks made by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan suggesting that the Japanese government seems to avoid direct intervention but rather prefers to play a facilitative role in the implementation of SDGs.

Network

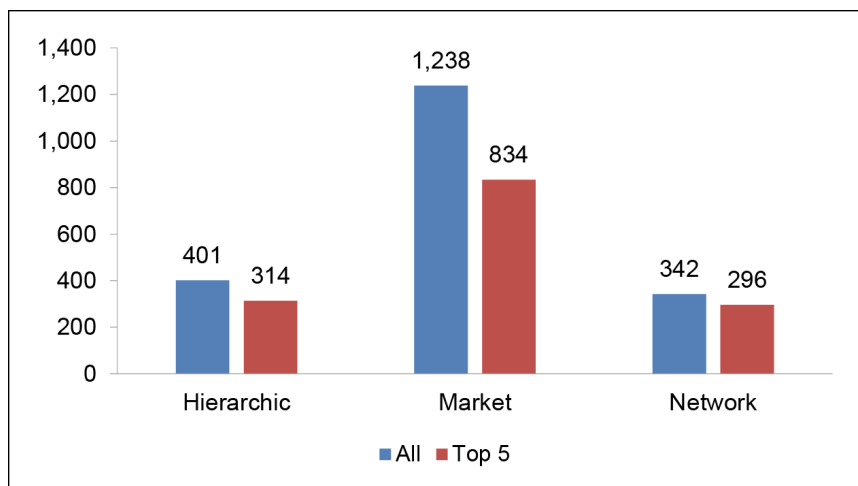
Similarly to the Danish case, where network styles were the least represented, network governance has the fewest references with 342 occurrences in the documents for Japan. The terms often mentioned in this category include “cooperation” (125), “stakeholder” (58), and “participation” (50). Cooperation is mentioned most frequently in the context of international, technical, and development cooperation.

It is nonetheless important to underline a key caveat in this assessment. When looking only at the Guiding Principles, network-style governance terms appear more frequently than hierarchic terms. However, when the Action Plan is included in the analysis, the hierarchic terms become more dominant. This can be attributed to the difference in the nature of the two documents, but it may also mean that principles and approaches described in the Guiding Principles are not translated into concrete actions. The reasons for this may include a lack of skills and experiences of network-style approaches and the limited capacity of civil society in Japan.

Table 3: Occurrence of Key Terms, Japan

Hierarchic 401 (314 If Only Using the Top Five Terms)	Market 1,238 (834 If Only Using the Top Five Terms)	Network 342 (296 If Only Using the Top Five Terms)
law 法 (Except 法令) (1+131), regulation 規制 (0+14), ban 禁止 (0+2), fine 罰金 (0+0), directive 令・法令 (2+10), penalty 罰則 (0+0), sanction 制裁 (0+0), grant 無償・拠出 (0+21), safety 安全・安心 (1+57), conservation 保全 (2+55), protection 保護 (5+37), duty 義務・任務 (0+0), justice 公正・正義・司法 (4+21), rule 規則・ルール (1+2), enforce 執行・施行 (1+11), monitor モニタ・監視 (2+21)	credit クレジット (0+10), loan ローン・貸与・融資 (1+15), tax 税 (0+12), fee 手数料 (0), incentive インセンティブ (0+2), promote 推進 (42+462), award アワード・賞・表彰 (1+10), partnerships パートナiership・協働 (8+28), business ビジネス (6+27), private sector 民間・官民 (15+68), voluntary ボランタリー・自主・自発 (3+10), market マーケット・市場(3+26), trade 貿易 (0+6), competitiveness 競争 (0+16), technology テクノロジー・技術(5+197), freedom 自由? (0+4), CSRCSR・企業の社会的責任 (1+1), investment 投資・投融资(3+76), growth 成長 (2+38), export 輸出 (0+28), corporate 企業・コーポレート (16+96)	consultation 協議 (0+15), participation 参加・参画 (13+37), co-creation 共創 (0+9), network ネットワーク (4+28), stakeholder ステークホルダー・関係者 (29+29), engagement 関与・エンゲージ(0+4), cooperation 協力 (15+110), voluntary ボランタリー・自主・自発(3+10), rights 権 (7+24)

Figure 3: Governance Styles in Japan’s 2019 Revised SDGs Implementation Guiding Principles and 2021 Action Plan



5.1 Japan’s COVID-19 Response

The Japanese government began its response to COVID-19 on 13 February 2020, when it started providing support to returning citizens from abroad. Soon after, response measures included loans to small and medium enterprises (SMEs), an increase in the number of hospital beds for infected patients, and employment support measures. The government put forward several economic support packages, which were substantial, amounting to USD1.1 trillion, equaling 22% of the national GDP (KPMG 2020). Apart from healthcare and support for ailing businesses, Japan did not intervene and lock down the country entirely like many other developed countries. A less heavy-handed interventionist approach was used, combining a national state of emergency, avoidance of the 3Cs (closed spaces, crowded places, and close-contact settings), and then a clear “request” to the population to stay at home and shops and restaurants to suspend business. The reason why Japan took these softer approaches was that there is no provision for emergency powers in the constitution of Japan. Nevertheless, many people complied with this request. In addition, when people or shops and restaurants did not comply with this request, the mass media and people picked up on it and criticized the incompliance, effectively harnessing social pressure to limit people’s behavior.

Tax measures were also used by the government, including payment deferrals and rate reductions. On the employment side, teleworking was promoted and each person residing in Japan received a free mask as well as JPY100,000 from the government and up to JPY10,000 additional financial support per child for households. Other socially aimed interventions included emergency microcredit for households, rent support for troubled households, exemption of social security contributions, reduction or exemption of local property tax, and extension of deadlines for tax filing, extension of consumption tax payments, tax reduction for companies that encourage teleworking, deduction of losses due to cancelled events, stamp tax exemption, and others (KPMG, 2020b).

For businesses, several loan packages were given, including low or no interest and no collateral loans. The government also provided employee leave allowance for SMEs and large enterprises, as well as letting employees take partly paid leave, rather than firing them. There were also safety net loans, loans for crisis response, prefectural

credit programs, and a reduction of restrictions on import and export of goods, and the traditional use of the hanko seal was circumvented in many cases, making interactions with government less bureaucratic and online transactions possible.

From early summer onwards, as the number of people infected with COVID-19 declined, Japan began easing restrictions on the economy, and reopening libraries and museums, schools, theaters, and other entertainment, but limits on mass congregation of people continued to be implemented. Then economic stimulus began to spur domestic consumption through, for instance, the “Go to Travel” campaign to boost domestic tourism in which the government paid more than half the costs of domestic travel bookings, or “Go to Eat,” which encouraged people to eat out and in this way support restaurants and small businesses throughout the country. The government also provided incentives to stimulate consumption expenditures by giving price discounts and voucher or point reward systems to revitalize local economies, supporting agriculture, forest and fisheries, and inbound tourism through strategic promotions. In the long run, it looks like the government is aiming to increase the resilience of the economy by moving production out of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and spreading it across several countries in Asia.

Loans were the most prevalent forms of intervention from the Japanese government. These included low- or zero-interest loans, no-collateral loans, safety net loans, and crisis response loans. As for changes in tax arrangements to provide relief to households and businesses, the interventions included reduction or exemption of local property taxes, tax filing and payment deadline extensions, tax refunds by application for tax loss carrybacks, and tax reduction for SMEs that introduce teleworking. Some of the tax extensions to individuals and corporate payers were made for one year, provided there was at least a 20% decrease in individual or business income in the period Feb 2020 – March 2021.

Lastly, in Japan, a new cabinet was inaugurated in September 2020, and Suga, who took over as prime minister, declared that the country would aim to achieve carbon neutrality by 2050. On 8 December 2020, Suga’s cabinet approved new economic measures based on COVID-19 and the state of the economy. There, realization of a green society was included as one of the measures to be taken to transform the economic structure and realize a virtuous cycle toward the post-COVID-19 era.

6. CASE 3: VIET NAM

The third case, Viet Nam, has made consistent efforts to integrate the SDGs in national development plans. In May 2017, Viet Nam published the most recent attempt to support that integration: the *National Action Plan for the Implementation of the 2030 Development Agenda*. The National Action Plan takes stock of ongoing development strategies and initiatives and assesses their alignment with the SDGs. The 2017 Plan was also used to inform the preparation of Viet Nam’s SDG targets and was included in the country’s first VNR in 2018. It was therefore selected as the key document for the text analysis that follows.

Hierarchic

Terms reflecting hierarchic governance styles are referred to consistently throughout Viet Nam’s 2017 National Action Plan, appearing a total of 249 times. This is not entirely unexpected given Viet Nam’s centralized and top-down approach to public administration. Words such as “law” (59), “regulation” (27), and “protection” (55) are listed repeatedly in the context of SDG 1 (Poverty), 3 (Health), 5 (Gender), 8 (Decent

Work and Economic Growth), 10 (Inequality), and 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions). To a lesser extent, they are also found in relation to SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production), SDG 14 (Life Below Water), and SDG 15 (Life on Land).

Market

Another interesting observation concerns the extent to which market governance styles are reflected in the National Action Plan. Market terms greatly outweigh those representing other governance styles, occurring 363 times throughout the document. Terms such as “business” (72), “promote” (59), “technology” (54), “investment” (51), and “market” (43) were the most frequently recurring, suggesting Viet Nam’s progressive liberalization and wider transition towards a market-oriented economy. Interestingly, while “business” is mainly seen in connection with SDG 8 (Decent Work and Employment) and SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure), the words “promote” and “technology” are referenced multiple times in relation to all the SDGs.

Network

Network types of governance are least represented in Viet Nam’s Action Plan, perhaps indicating that the country intends to direct work to the SDGs primarily through government-or business-led efforts. For instance, although the terms “coordination” and “participation” appear the most out of all words associated with network modes of governance (29 and 19 times, respectively), these expressions are largely used to describe international or regional development activities and the mobilization of selected government-authorized sociopolitical organizations, implying that these actions are guided and managed by central authorities. This perspective is perhaps most clearly reflected by *Target 11.3: By 2030, enhance national capacity for inclusive, sustainable urban planning and development with the participation of communities*, under which the Action Plan indicates that implementation will involve the future design of inclusive processes for community participation in urban management activities. Similarly, although the term “network” appears roughly 15 times throughout the document, it is used in reference to government-directed campaigns for improving the delivery of public services.

Table 4: Occurrence of Key Terms, Viet Nam

Hierarchic 249 (194 If Only Using the Top Five Terms)	Market 363 (243 If Only Using the Top Five Terms)	Network 86 (83 If Only Using the Top Five Terms)
law (59), regulation (27), ban (0), fine (0), directive (1), penalty (1), fee (3), sanction (3), grant (0), safety (9), conservation (15), protection (55), welfare (9), duty (0), tax (8), justice (3), rule (3), enforce (21), monitor (32)	credit (14), loan (3), fee (1), incentive (1), promote (59), award (0), partnerships (4), private sector (10), voluntary (3), market(s) (43), trade (7), loan (3), competitiveness (6), technology(ies) (54), freedom (1), CSR (1), investment (51), growth (11), export (18), corporate (1) business(es) (72)	consultation (5), participation (19), co-creation (0), network(s) (15), stakeholder engagement (0), cooperation (29), voluntary (3), rights (15)

6.1 Viet Nam's COVID-19 Response

Viet Nam has been praised for its early and effective action against COVID-19, starting with the launch of the country's National COVID-19 Response Plan issued in January 2020, which earmarked national and subnational budgets together with social health insurance to defray the costs of health and public safety interventions (United Nations 2020a).

Since its initial epidemic declaration, the country has carried out a number of preventative measures aimed at containing the virus, including enacting border restrictions, limiting travel, and imposing visa controls. Viet Nam's Response Plan has guided the implementation of a robust monitoring and prevention strategy focused on public health education campaigns, contact tracing, rapid rollout of testing, and enforced quarantine to limit the transmission of the virus (Van Nguyen et al. 2021). Public schools were closed in February 2020, followed by the announcement of stricter social distancing guidelines and a country-wide lockdown in April 2020.

Viet Nam has also implemented a number of measures to mitigate the economic impacts of COVID-19, involving a combination of both stimulus and fiscal relief efforts, such as safety net reforms, fee concessions, and interest rate discounts. For instance, in March 2020, the Vietnamese government issued a decree allowing payment deferrals to the country's social insurance program among those affected by COVID-19, which also exempted interest rate charges for past due accounts.

In April 2020, the Government of Viet Nam launched a USD2.6 billion social protection initiative that issued direct cash transfers to retrenched workers and other vulnerable persons (World Bank 2020a). Soft loans were thereafter extended to businesses affected by the pandemic as a means of supplementing the salaries of affected employees. This was coupled with the restructuring of business loans, wage subsidies, and concessions on tax and rental payments as part of a larger effort to support impacted enterprises (World Bank 2020). Broadly defined, all of these interventions are in line with a hierarchic approach to governance.

However, Viet Nam also implemented a suite of measures that combined elements of hierarchic and market-based governance. For instance, in June 2020 the Vietnamese government issued a secondary decree whereby the Viet Nam Central Bank was instructed to reduce interest rates by between 0.25 and 1 percentage points, along with a provision requiring certain lenders to raise the ceiling on deductible interest expenses from 20 to 30%, all with a view towards encouraging greater market liquidity (KPMG 2021). That same month the Ministry of Finance suspended customs duties and associated trade restrictions, such as customs audits and Certificate of Origin requirements for personal protective equipment.

Taken together, these actions have widely been credited as successful, with Viet Nam reporting a significantly lower rate of COVID-19 cases in comparison both to its neighbors in ASEAN and globally (Van Nguyen et al. 2021). Similarly, while the economic toll of the pandemic has been significant—with the country facing its slowest expansion in nearly three decades—Viet Nam's GDP rate in 2020 was cited as being among the world's highest at 2.91%.

7. DISCUSSION

At the time of writing, the pandemic was still ongoing. Denmark, Japan, and Viet Nam had unfortunately faced a new wave of COVID-19 infections in early 2021. Discussions and conclusions about the nature of interventions are still preliminary because both the SDGs and responses to COVID are ongoing. Regardless, we can observe some trends that may inform governance of the SDGs going forward.

Looking at the SDGs and the governance styles promoted in the key national documents in Denmark, Japan, and Viet Nam, the overall trend is consistent in at least these three countries. The governance style most predominant for the SDGs is the market style. Following that style, the three most used terms in the Danish document were “growth,” “corporate,” and “market.” For both the Japanese and Vietnamese cases, the most frequently mentioned key terms were “promote,” “technology,” and “business.” These terms do not on their own reveal details regarding the specific governance instruments and tools used, but they point to the overall predominance of a view in which the market plays an integral role.

Denmark, Japan, and Viet Nam also display a similar trend concerning the second and third most used governance style. This trend remains clear regardless of whether all or only the top five most frequent terms are counted, as the three countries’ diagrams clearly illustrate.

For Denmark, the terms revealing hierarchic approaches to governance style that are most mentioned are “protection,” “law,” and “directive.” For Japan, the hierarchic terms used the most are “conservation,” “protection,” and “law.” For Viet Nam, the most frequent hierarchic terms are “law,” “protection,” and “monitor.” In that sense, there is a clear overlap even regarding the terms, where only Denmark uses “directive” more frequently. This is arguably because Denmark is an EU country and a significant amount of national regulation is based on EU regulatory directives.

For the network style the Japanese classifiers are “cooperation,” “stakeholder,” and “participation” and for Denmark they are “rights,” “cooperation,” and “participation”, while for Viet Nam the most frequently mentioned terms are “participation,” “cooperation,” and “rights.”

For COVID-19, all three countries reaffirm hierarchic governance styles, which stands in contrast to the predominant governance styles for the SDGs. It is not surprising that command-and-control and hierarchic interventionism has become necessary when fast and decisive action has been required to limit the spread of the virus and provide relief to the population who are struggling to make ends meet. Despite the overall trend in the government responses to COVID-19, the three countries display some differences, namely that the dominant government response in Denmark, at least until 2021, was one of direct compensation for lost incomes to the population and direct grants to support vulnerable parts of the population. Japan provided similar kinds of support, but here the policy instruments most used seemed to be different kinds of loans, and the overall approach was to support businesses and, through the now-discontinued campaigns “Go to Travel” and “Go to Eat,” to spur domestic spending. Denmark similarly promoted domestic tourism through transportation rebates and free ferry rides to its many islands. Viet Nam used payment deferrals, preferential loans, and earmarking of the public budget.

8. CONCLUSION: BRINGING GOVERNMENTS BACK INTO GOVERNANCE

The paper has suggested that there may be both positives and negatives to be taken from recent trends in governance. On a positive note, governments could be reasserting their role in governance. The restrengthening of hierarchic governance styles through necessary government interventionism could arguably be good for the SDGs. This is because maintaining a chance of meeting the SDGs by 2030 requires a significant departure from business as usual—changes that market-oriented governance styles on their own seem unable to bring about. There is also a precedence for government interventionism in times of crisis. For example, history has witnessed the dramatic changes in the industrial economy and the retooling of factories during wars and conflicts such as World War II.

Yet a possible concern is that despite being orchestrated by emergency decrees and top-down hierarchic governance styles, much of the stimulus has gone towards resource- or pollution-intensive kinds of investments and plans. There is hence a fear that the opportunity presented by the COVID-19 pandemic could be wasted; instead, the world could continue down a path that is neither environmentally sustainable nor socially equitable.

Another related concern is that governmental interventionism may indeed need to happen for effective COVID recovery and for effective action towards the SDGs, but it should not erode democratic institutions and norms in the process. There are some signs that some countries are “using” COVID-19 as a pretext of governmental interventionism to suspend such democratic institutions that provide checks and balances to authoritarian power grabs. This trend needs to be watched closely in determining the prospects for a sustainable and long-term recovery.

It may also be too early to make a judgment on the longer-term recovery. In early 2021, many countries were also experiencing second or third COVID waves, and a real recovery was not yet observable. A final encouraging development involves recent developments in the Asia and the Pacific region. Over the past two months, the Republic of Korea, Japan, and the PRC, in aiming to become net-zero carbon emission societies by 2050 or 2060, are signaling an important policy direction, where fiscal recovery and stimulus packages cannot be directed to fossil fuel industries without conflicting with ambitious climate goals.

To achieve these climate or other environmental goals, the need to act resolutely may be better accommodated by using a more balanced mix of governance styles, wherein hierarchic types of governance are employed to complement the market. Moreover, hierarchic and market forms can be supplemented by the transparency and accountability that open network governance styles can bring about. This would occur in a mix where government intervention plays a key role in driving a green recovery that remains in harmony with the larger climate and sustainability goals.

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