



REVIEW ARTICLE

# The Sustainable Development Goals Have Not Really Changed the Discourse of Development

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## ABSTRACT

This commentary intends to make the readers of the Medical Research Archives agree with the author that, in times of extreme human rights neglect and of extreme economic and environmental plunder, extreme planetary measures are needed. It then asks: With only five years to go, do the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) live up to this challenge? <sup>1</sup>

[Disclaimer: Planetary health as a concept supersedes the<sup>2</sup> concept of planetary health if the latter is used as a health sector-centered concept.<sup>2</sup> This commentary takes the former overarching position pointing out why the current development agenda is falling way short of needed binding commitments by United Nations (UN) member states and by the wide range of development practitioners. It takes a human rights and a rights of nature approach].<sup>2</sup>

## The SDGs have never been a planetary agenda for development; now we need one

--In many countries, the SDGs are a too distant reality for ordinary people.

It is never too late to recap on the SDGs.<sup>3</sup> The question is: Are we going to learn? Entering its last 5 years, we cannot simply extend and supplement the original SDGs plan of action. It is not about reformulating, dropping or adding goals, but about a global, planetary-wide systemic reform to remove the major constraints to planetary development as we have them now. Planetary development is much more than the sum total of the SDGs...or any collection of specific targets.

Targets by themselves simply reinforce structural inequalities and social exclusion, i.e., they may bring a statistical victory, but a moral failure since the patterns of exclusion are perpetuated. Enduring inequalities can be and have been overlooked by all SDG targets even if deemed to be possibly met --and some of them may. Paying too much attention to individual SDG indicators leads us to a kind of 'anxious disaster relief mentality', namely applied in haste, geared to immediate results and revocable when funds run short. Actually, as we get closer to 2030, it is now evident that many efforts to achieve the SDG targets are focusing on the 'low-hanging fruit', bypassing and even further excluding the poorest and most excluded populations.

## At this time, the corrections we need to introduce to foster inclusion will simply have to address the causes of the causes

The SDGs have actually tried to combine normative statements of what is desirable with a political statement of what is probably feasible. The SDGs have actually crowded out the basic idea that development at planetary level is about economic transformation. (For instance, disparity reduction rather than poverty reduction would be part of true economic transformation!) The SDGs are failing to distinguish between human rights (HR) and social welfare --the latter seen as raising the standards of living 'in the colonies' through economic growth and development--without 'trickle down'. In short, the SDGs have not been an effective tool, but more like a bandage applied to a malignant tumor.

## Righting the SDGs

--There is no use to be in the driver's seat when one is not the owner of the bus.

The HR framework sees the achievement of the 2025-2030 planetary social development goals centered around an indispensable disparity reduction agenda. Moreover, poverty reduction is seen as a necessary, but not sufficient condition for human development --and human development is a necessary, but not sufficient condition for the realization of HR. Therefore, the achievement so far of the SDGs in parts of the world have

rather been a necessary, but far from a sufficient condition for the progressive realization of economic, social and cultural rights. This has also meant that most of the SDGs can be and have been achieved without any (or only a passing-by) reference to HR.\*<sup>4</sup>

\*: As relates to the Basic Needs Approach<sup>4</sup> and the HR-based Approach to development, while the first approach, including the conventional SDGs approach, is, at best, based on international agreements of *keeping-a-promise*, the second approach is based on ratified international agreements of *meeting-legal-obligations*. This is and will continue to be the fundamental difference between the achievement of the SDGs and the realization of HR. It remains to be seen how this will play out as we get closer to 2030.

A lot of intelligent things are being said about the SDGs --some of it rightfully good. The question is whether good words are followed up by appropriate action, even in the years we have left to 2030. The huge SDGs backlog remaining is frustrating, quite surely due to the fact that the link between the sustainability discourse and the SDGs agenda has been missing all along.\*\* That is where we have to start. Waiting even till the end of 2026 is already a travesty.

\*\* : Think about this: Is there a certain 'tribalism' of the professions as regards SDGs thinking? How responsible are the shortcomings we find in the health, food, environmental and other professionals' education of the gaps we now find in the SDGs? Are we keeping our students ignorant about the role of the social determination of development outcomes?

A shift from quantity to quality and the participation of those rendered poor in the SDG process will be indispensable to achieve the above. Keep in mind that the HR framework<sup>5</sup> puts much more emphasis on the areas neglected by the SDGs such as equal access to social services, to justice, to the rule of law and to good, democratic governance --not forgetting decisive actions on the rights of nature.

## One concern we should not underestimate: We do run the risk of bureaucratizing human rights

--A specter is haunting (not only) Europe: The specter of human rights.

These days, everybody is calling for participation. Fair enough. But if participation will be called for arriving at 17 post 2015 outcome goals and not for implementing the means to be used to reach truly planetary development outcomes, we will, as in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs),<sup>6</sup> end up again addressing symptoms and not causes --and certainly not the causes of the causes.

That is why, in the post 2025 debate, toning down the HR, rights of nature<sup>7</sup> and equality language in an effort to reach consensus will not lead us to the quantum leaps needed, or only to semi-quantum leaps that only go half

the way. Not again! Is this what we want? Or is it better to talk straight?\*\*\*

\*\*\*: Remember the fable of the turtle in the race that, in order to get to the end line, it always had to go half the way left it to go; always going for half leads to infinity and never to the end line.

At a minimum, many claim the SDGs are giving us a shared language and some sense of priority. Yes, but how relevant is this for the post 2025 debate? From what I see so far in this debate, and realistically speaking, as a HR activist, I contend we are most probably in for another five years of struggling from the barricades of the opposition. (I am not sure if this is an optimist's or a pessimist/realist's view: Great things can be achieved from the opposition...).

## No longer a re-action capacity only, but an action capacity

Among other, a three-pronged approach has been suggested:

- Public interest civil society must assume a watchdog function and blame and shame when necessary.\*\*\*\* Why? Because holding people and organizations to account requires teeth, especially in young democracies and fragile states with no mutual checks and balances. Whistleblowing and naming-and-shaming may be the only option when dealing with, for instance, corruption. Insert space  
\*\*\*\*: Watchdogs are a man's best friend: dogs bite. Watchdog civil society organizations are to watch like 'white knights fighting the dark forces of development aid, corruption and incompetence'.
- United Nations agencies must carry out annual HR rankings of countries and of corporations (like UNICEF did for children's issues in the past in its 'Progress of Nations' short-lived series).
- The Universal Periodic Review of the HR Council<sup>8</sup> must also review UN\_agencies and international financial institutions (IFIs), as well as make recommendations that are binding.

Since it is distributional processes that lead to distributional outcomes, we will simply have to work harder:

- to finally embark in an international, planetary, environment for sustainable, human and nature rights-based development;
- to change the unfair rules of the current development game;\*\*\*\*\*
- to topple and replace the prevailing development paradigm; and for these three to succeed,
- to revert the prevailing attitude of being silent on means-to-get-there and instead focusing on ends.
- \*\*\*\*\*: A point in case: we need to go from poverty eradication to disparity reduction,<sup>9</sup> from charity to dignity.

Nothing new above here, is there?

Questions remain as to how much hope we can place on the extra-territorial obligations (ETOs)<sup>10</sup> in the HR realm and on badly needed mandatory global financial

regulations being enforced. Will these be coming our way after 2025? Certainly not if we do not decisively push for them --and the prospects are grim.

What then are the core non-negotiable points for the post 2025 agenda? We have to include the reaffirmation of the primacy of HR and the rights of nature and their practical implementation; we need clear lines of HR accountability and firm benchmarks for disparity reduction and for the progressive realization of all rights worldwide. Without the full operational inclusion of these principles, whatever remains of the post 2015 agenda will replicate the shortcomings of the MDGs. Mark these words.

Therefore, public interest civil society organizations must be careful not to take part-in and accept processes that do not meet these fundamental standards. The formulation of any new global goals must include clear steps and annual benchmarks for the progressive universal realization of HR and the rights of nature in the longer run. This must be accompanied by a commitment to implement effective measures to end the impunity of those who violate these rights. Furthermore, a stand-alone post 2025 equality goal is essential with specific year-by-year benchmarks to be set as part of national progressive realization of HR plans.<sup>11</sup>

## Are the rights of nature being trampled?

--The sad truth is that we pay so much more attention to the global financial crisis than to the ecological crisis.

It is at the local level that all contradictions of Capitalism explode. The capitalist system thrives on these conflicts and uses them to its advantage. Take, for instance, our increasing worries about climate change. In the last several years, the ideologues of the capitalist system --if not denying global warming-- have wanted to sell us the idea of a green economy<sup>12</sup> as the salvation of our model of society. But this does not really mean an inch more than the mercantilization of nature. This is the bottom line of the proposed 'Green Capitalism'.

Or take another example: Transnational corporations (TNCs) playing no minor role, our planet is being exhausted of clean water, fertile soils, strategic minerals, energy and the rich fishing wealth of our oceans. Extractive industries are exploiting and killing all that. As a result, huge corporations suck-in whatever there is. Water is contaminated, energy is squandered, soils are desertified and overfishing is rife.

I fear our hopes for advancing planetary health, i.e., social and environmental justice, are slim. Justice demands a recalibration of power and that requires us to better understand it. Power is hidden and concealed. The peasants who lose land or whose river is polluted by mining may not know the name of the owner or corporation threatening their livelihood. Corporations have systematically and silently appropriated power and authority through lobbying, trade and investment agreements, and through unaccountable expert and lobbying groups and bodies. This concealed corporate

power threatens to become further entrenched. Do the SDGs address this?

Constant vigilance is needed as transnational corporate power moves into ever new arenas and, beware, State and Capital are an 'inseparable duo'. They depend on each other both to dispossess, plunder nature and also to build legitimacy for their ongoing appropriation. For instance, the fateful triangle of big energy, big finance and complicit governments prevents a desperately needed radical response to climate change. Disassembling this fateful triangle requires that we better and more proactively use our creative skills, alternative knowledge and values to overturn neoliberalism by launching practical and feasible alternatives that embody the planetary values of solidarity, social justice, co-operation, HR and democracy we all aspire to.

## A transnational corporations' architecture of impunity

-The power of special interests is far greater than that of the public opinion's sentiment.

Obtaining results, for TNCs, includes achieving political results --and the capacity to obtain them from governments is inexorably growing.\*\*\*\*\* Democracy is gradually succumbing to the disease of neoliberal ideology so that more and more functions of legitimate governments are being taken over by illegitimate, unelected, opaque agents, lobbyist and organizations (think public-private-partnerships (PPPs)).<sup>13</sup> For neoliberals, every aspect of the welfare state is abhorrent, because it consists in taking resources from those rendered rich (when wealth created by those rendered poor accrues to those who do not deserve it). "The rich owe nothing to the poor", they say; nor do the rich owe anything to nature... insert space \*\*\*\*\*: Commercial entities' power is not only in the room of national or international meetings; it is also outside the room, in lobbying, sponsoring, financing good-for-them strategies. They only attend meetings to inform themselves and to perfect their strategy elsewhere. The challenge is: How can we compete with that?

Therefore, among many other reasons, as HR activists, we should care. Why? Because unless and until we can compel TNCs to adopt, among other, 'country-by country' reporting, they will continue to pay --usually quite legally-- minimal taxes in most of the countries where they have branches. With total impunity, they can and do place their profits in low or no-tax jurisdictions and their losses in high-tax ones. At present, if they so choose, they can report simply on the home country where they have their headquarters and then forget to do it in the rest of world.

Much law is now made beyond national borders and, in the international sphere, much of this law concerns ways to allow corporations greater scope and freedom (think multi-stakeholder platforms). Large number of new trade treaties are allowing TNCs to infiltrate executive, legislative and even judicial state functions. Even the

United Nations is now a TNCs target --and the UN agencies welcomes their presence...

Moreover, TNCs ignore conflict of interest issues until the same enter the public discourse. They dismiss such criticism and ridicule any suggestions of its validity. They hire public relations firms to characterize available studies as 'junk science'. They attack scientists, sometimes personally, claiming they are biased against industry (the same for HR activists). They pay scientists to undertake studies that plant doubt. They call-in favors from community groups and professional associations they have supported to discount the critical claims. They begin public relations campaigns to counter the concept. They make self-regulatory pledges to care for the public good and issue promises to change business practices (such as marketing certain products to children). They spend massive amounts to lobby against policy changes that would alter their ability to continue business as usual. They work to have industry figures or supportive political figures installed in key regulatory agencies in order to stall, subvert or weaken all regulatory action.

Furthermore, it is not exactly news that governments have always governed on behalf of certain class interests. But this is different from allowing those interests to actually write the legislation and to make policy directly, including budgetary, financial, labor, social and environmental policy, in place of elected legislators and civil servants. It is also different from allowing corporations to disseminate deception and lies and to undermine the public's right to know. It is further different from allowing such interests to replace the established judiciary with ad-hoc courts in areas such as trade dispute arbitration, even in jurisdictions where the justice system is known to be fair and independent.

TNCs also benefit from the unbalanced commodification of scientific progress (which is contrary to HR aims) in a way that is almost always detrimental to claim holders. This is particularly done through the patent system. It is high time to end the privatization of knowledge that deprives individuals and impoverishes nature, as well as society overall.

Our concern thus is with the damage done as a result of the unbridled commercial freedoms that, since the 1980s, have been recklessly ceded by elected governments to TNCs of all types, whose activities are contributing to the fuel, finance and food crises that now beset us, and are, as said, undermining and displacing healthy food systems.\*\*\*\*\*

\*\*\*\*\*: **A caveat:** Working with the more forward-looking progressive corporations --the 'good ones'-- is still risky. In our experience, the corporations that are most criticized (and dangerous) tend to have the most highly developed public relations machinery. These corporations claim that their aims/purposes are indeed in line with those of UN agencies --and with HR. The problem is made worse if these corporations are used as the 'messengers' for, for example, laudable World Health Organization health messages, because then they whitewash their reputation. Decisions about corporate privileges and roles should be based on what entities are rather than

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what they do. What they do may change (and needs careful ongoing monitoring), but what they are tends to remain the same.

To conclude, I ask you: Where is all this to be found in the SDGs? and do you agree all this has to do with planetary health? So, does this critique rightfully belong in this journal?

For these and so many other reasons, belatedly as it is, it is high time, in the context of the SDGs, to develop

concrete strategies to fight against these actions of TNCs (because the role of transnational corporations does matter for the shortcomings of the SDGs here exposed). I acknowledge that building opposition is not easy with the overhanging danger of more and more repression. We cannot ignore that governments use their armed forces to do this --and even private armies are used by certain TNCs.

Will you join me as a witness and as an active critic?

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