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# Doing biopolitics differently? Radical potential in the post-2015 MDG and SDG debates

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## **Abstract**

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) have been critiqued as an ambitious project which sought to produce entrepreneurial neoliberal subjects. From this perspective the opportunities and dangers of the post-2015 debates acquire a more urgent importance than the cynical dismissal of the MDGs as 'minimum development goals'. This article identifies two potentially radical shifts in development discourse offered by the proposals for global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): first, that they might be genuinely global and hence destabilise long-standing divisions between 'developed' and 'developing' societies; and second that they might challenge existing growth paths of resource-intensive development. Two scenarios are offered through which these potential shifts are manifesting: first, a status-quo and growth-orientated outcome to the post-2015 agenda, and second, a more radical revisioning of development as a transformative project of global sustainability. However, even such an apparently attractive prospect as the latter has potential dangers, whether or not it is possible, which this article highlights. Whatever the outcome of the negotiations over the post-2015 SDGs, therefore, the process can tell us something about the opportunities and limits of processes of reform. The stakes could not be higher: whether a renewed and reshaped development project can drive future developmental governmentalities in radically new directions.

## **Keywords**

Development, governmentality, biopolitics, MDGs, SDGs, sustainability

## **Introduction**

Critical discussions about the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) have proliferated over the last decade, variously fretting over the technical details, worrying about their lack of ambition, or seeking to question their underlying assumptions and teleological narrative. This article begins from the latter line of critique, identifying the MDGs as an ambitious and broadly hegemonic attempt to rearticulate the development project and produce entrepreneurial neoliberal subjects. As such the high-profile debates and negotiations between 2012 and 2015 over the future of the MDGs and the post-2015 development architecture are significant because of their potential to reshape development governmentalities. With potential replacements to the MDGs crystallising in 2014 around proposals for a new set of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Open Working Group, 2014), two key tenets of mainstream development policy – that development is something for, and occurs in, the ‘developing world’; and that it is primarily orientated towards and driven by economic growth – are facing challenges. This article assesses some of the stakes in these proposals and debates, and considers critical perspectives on these potentially radical challenges to neoliberal hegemony and mainstream development discourses.

The post-2015 debates, at the time of writing, are encapsulated by the coming together of two processes leading to the adoption in September 2014 by the UN General Assembly of the Open Working Group proposals on SDGs as the basis for the post-2015 development agenda. The first process was the official and semi-official UN mandated consultations on the construction of a post-2015 development framework. The most high profile of these was the United Nations High Level Panel (HLP), established by UN Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon in July 2012. It was co-chaired by three national leaders; David Cameron (UK), Ellen Johnson Sirleaf (Liberia) and Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (Indonesia), and reported on 31 May 2013 (UN, 2013). The second process arose from the ‘Rio+20’ UN Conference on Sustainable Development held in Brazil in 2012, whose outcome document entitled *The Future We Want* contained an agreement to develop a set of SDGs which will converge with the post-2015 development agenda, a process which culminated in a final report in July 2014 (Open Working Group, 2014). Throughout 2014 and 2015 negotiations on the post-2015 development agenda will continue, working toward a Global Summit in September 2015 to agree on a new UN development agenda.

Most critical commentators are sceptical of anything radically different emerging from these UN processes – and they may well be correct (for example, see Bello, 2013;

Sexsmith and McMichael, this volume). However, there are at least a few reasons why broader structural features of global politics may encourage more flux in the contemporary politics of development. The so-called 'rise of the South' (UNDP, 2013) is increasingly complicating the image of a uni-polar world in which Western 'civilisation' is hegemonic (Green et al, 2012; Hurrell and Sengupta, 2012). The protracted financial and economic crises since 2007, and their continuing fall-out, have stimulated a revival of interest in discussions of the contradictions of capitalism, the green economy in all its forms, and alternative models of development (Green et al, 2012; Marglin and Banuri, 2013; Tienhaara, 2014). Accelerating concentrations of greenhouse gases means an increasingly chaotic and unpredictable climate, and the potential – perhaps even necessity – of radical socio-economic transformation (Barry, 2012; UN, 2013: 4; UNDP, 2007). Together, these shifts mean that global politics in the era of the Anthropocene is likely to look rather different than it has hitherto, where the human population of more than 7 billion people is placing unprecedented stresses on natural, social, political and economic systems (Murphy, 2012: 137; Stewart 2012).

Given this context, the negotiations over the post-2015 SDGs can therefore tell us something about broader shifts in the global politics of development – and the potential and limits of processes of reform – whatever their actual outcome. The stakes are whether a renewed and reshaped development project can drive future developmental governmentalities in radically new directions. The following sections locate this article in the context of broader critiques of the MDGs, before highlighting two potentially radical challenges raised by the post-2015 debates: the first concerning their global scope, the second their challenge to resource-intensive development paths. Two scenarios are then sketched out: one in which little comes of these radical challenges, and an alternative in which they transform development discourse in quite far-reaching ways. The final section brings a critical perspective to bear on some of the dangers posed by this second scenario of a 'brave new world' of genuinely global sustainable development, highlighting risks including the co-optation of the environmental agenda by green growth discourses and the extension of data-driven technocratic developmental expertise.

### **Critiquing the MDGs: An ambitious global project**

We start from a position of critique, in contrast to the deluge of literature which accompanied the MDGs without challenging their political, social, cultural or spatial biases, which Saith called 'the juggernaut of all bandwagons' (2006: 1167). Yet even the considerable volume of critical debate on the MDGs has tended to be trapped within the

developmental logic of the goals themselves. For example, much of the critical discourse revolved around how the goals left out key components of the development agenda, such as inequality (Saith, 2006), human rights (Fukuda-Parr and Hulme, 2011; Fukuda-Parr and Yamin, 2013) and gender (Antrobus, 2005). Others presented a broader political economy critique, questioning how achievable the goals could be in a global economy structurally configured to deliver returns for monopoly capitalist interests (Amin, 2006). From this perspective the goals sought to make developing country governments responsible for their own development, rather than address the global structural forces which make development so elusive (Bello, 2013; Fougner, 2008). Whilst these critiques raise many important points they have a tendency to present the MDGs as a fudge, a diminished and de-politicised (Ziai, 2011) set of goals which failed to deal with 'real' developmental needs, without questioning the broader discourse of development itself.

Yet it is possible to interpret the MDGs not simply as at risk of missing their targets, or of promoting an impoverished and partial version of development, but rather as an ambitious series of biopolitical and material interventions into the lives, bodies and spaces of the developmental subjects summoned by the goals i.e. young women, slum-dwellers, the hungry, and so on (Gabay, 2012; see also Jaeger, 2010; Tosa, 2009). In this sense the MDGs are an attempt at wide-scale social, cultural and spatial engineering through the remaking of developmental subjects, inscribing the MDG vision of development on peoples' bodies, their self-knowledge, the places in which they live and work, and how they live and work. For instance, the effort to reduce HIV/AIDS prevalence is framed within a context which relates risky sexual behaviour to female insecurity, to be addressed by encouraging at-risk (i.e. all) young women to enter into monogamous, heterosexual relationships with men who can act as their guardians. What could be more ambitious than efforts to transform notions of the family, sexuality, and loving relationships (Gabay, 2012: 1256-1258)? One unforeseen aspect of these efforts is that recent extreme forms of formalised homophobia in some African countries have emerged in a context of prolonged developmental interventions linking HIV/Aids with 'risky' sexual behaviour and promoting monogamous heterosexual relationships.

This interpretation of the MDGs not as a diminished form of development but as an ambitious and global project of 'supercharged development' and social engineering has resonances with earlier critical scholarship on the hubris of modernist development and the production of the 'Third World' (see Escobar, 1995; Ferguson, 1994; Sachs, 1992; Scott, 1998). Often grouped under the label 'post-development', this line of argument has been

influenced by Michel Foucault and views development as a discursive formation of power/knowledge which deploys rationalities of government (or governmentalities) in order to shape the politics of life and death (or biopolitics) in ways which are far less neutral or technical than they are sometimes presented. From this perspective it is less easy to dismiss the post-2015 reform debates as insignificant, inadequate and reductive; for Foucault power is productive of new forms of knowledge, truth and subjectivity (see Death, 2010; Gabay, 2013). Inspired by recent calls for critical scholarship to consider how hitherto hegemonic forms of power/knowledge could be reshaped and transformed in progressive new directions (Ferguson, 2011; see also Death and Gabay, 2014; Ziai, 2013), this article seeks to highlight the ambitious, transformative and even radical potential of the post-2015 debates – as well as the dangers this poses.

### **Reforming the MDGs: GDGs and SDGs**

Since 2012 efforts to negotiate a post-2015 agenda have taken on new energy, with discussions centring on proposals for a new set of Global Development Goals (GDGs) or Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These proposals, we suggest, have the potential to reformulate the vision and scope of development as an idea and set of practices, and how the notion of human progress is codified and enacted in the international community. In this section we draw attention to two potentially radical challenges they present to existing development discourse, one related to its global scope, another to its model of resource consumption.

#### *Global development goals*

The MDGs were intended to be global goals. However, they ended up primarily framing development in terms of the reduction of extreme poverty in absolute terms (Fukuda-Parr and Hulme, 2011). By omitting targets on inequality or relative poverty (or a host of other human development indicators) the MDGs had little apparent relevance to countries in Europe, North America, Japan or Australasia. Only one goal really applied to the so-called ‘developed’ nations (MDG8, the goal calling for the establishment of a ‘global compact’) and that was rather vague and unspecific, with no measurable or time-bound targets (Boltz et al, 2013; Hulme and Wilkinson, 2012: 4-5; Stewart, 2012: 170-1). The global focus of the MDGs quickly became targets for certain parts of the world, and they have been commonly interpreted in terms of targets for individual regions and countries (Easterly, 2009: 34;

Vandemoortele, 2014: 224). As such the MDG frame of reference has been accused of ‘not provid[ing] a global template, merely “our” agenda for “them”’ (Saith, 2006: 1184).

Some of the proposals for post-2015 goals, in contrast, have sought to recapture the genuinely global scope of the original Millennium Declaration. The proposals for 17 SDGs is framed as explicitly ‘global in nature and universally applicable’ (Open Working Group, 2014). The inclusion of proposed targets on income inequality, financial regulation, labour rights, obesity, climate change, sustainable production and consumption and so on present challenges for industrialised countries as well as poorer countries, and might do more to challenge the labels of ‘developed’ and ‘developing’ than decades of academic critique (Bello, 2013: 99; Marglin and Banuri, 2013; Vandemoortele, 2014: 225-6; Ziai, 2013).<sup>1</sup> As Saith observes, the existing approach of the MDGs ‘tends to ghettoize the problem of development and locates it firmly in the third world — as if development is fundamentally and exclusively an issue of absolute levels of living. Whatever happened to poverty and deprivation in the advanced economies? Are they to be silenced?’ (Saith, 2006: 1184). In contrast, genuinely global development goals might start to fundamentally challenge the way in which development ‘reproduces endlessly the separation between reformers and those to be reformed’ (Escobar, 1995: 53-4).<sup>2</sup>

### *Sustainable development goals (SDGs)*

The second radical challenge concerns the question of the environmental sustainability of existing patterns of resource consumption. The proposed SDGs contain targets on climate change, sustainable production and consumption, food waste, renewable energy, and conserving the oceans and forests (Open Working Group, 2014). They also recognise the importance of living in harmony with ‘Mother Earth’ and the rights of nature. A truly ‘green economy’ – defined by UNEP as ‘low carbon, resource efficient, and socially inclusive’ (UNEP, 2011: 16) and promoted at Rio+20 as one of the important tools available for achieving sustainable development – would present significant challenges to existing models of development as growth, fuelled by the ever-more intensive extraction of natural resources (Death, 2014; Loewe, 2012; Melamedd and Ladd, 2013; Tienhaara, 2014).

The final report of the High Level Panel emphasised the importance of environmental sustainability to the achievement of any new development goals. Identifying five ‘big, transformative shifts’ which will lie behind the post-2015 development agenda, the second of these proposes to ‘put sustainable development at the core’ (UN, 2013). They propose goals on (v) ensuring food security and good nutrition; (vi) achieving universal access to water and



sanitation; (vii) securing sustainable energy; and (ix) managing natural resource assets sustainably (UN, 2013: chapter 3). Climate change is repeatedly stressed as the ‘one trend ... which will determine whether or not we can deliver on our ambitions’ (UN, 2013: executive summary).

As with the rhetoric surrounding the Millennium Declaration in 2000, there has been no shortage of ambitious and radical proposals for the post-2015 goals. The European Commission released its proposal for global development goals in February 2013, *A Decent Life for All: Ending poverty and giving the world a sustainable future*, which made the case for addressing environmental sustainability simultaneously with eliminating poverty, and producing ‘a limited set of goals that address quantitative and qualitative targets, and apply to all countries while taking into account different national capacities and levels of development’.<sup>3</sup> Jeffrey Sachs, a long-standing champion of the MDG approach, proposed four pillars for the post-2015 goals: to end poverty in all its forms; ensure social inclusion; address the environmental agenda, including biodiversity, climate change and oceans; and governance to support the first three goals. At an ODI seminar, in response to a question on the role of developed countries, Sachs ‘called for goals that apply to all countries, noting that even rich countries face sustainable development challenges and experience inequality’.<sup>4</sup> As such, there seems to be some degree of consensus emerging that the post-2015 development architecture should be structured around a single set of goals which will impose meaningful targets on all countries, and which will work to transition countries onto more sustainable paths of resource consumption.

### **The implications: new development governmentalities?**

What do these proposals mean for the politics of development? What should we make of the post-2015 proposals from the critical perspective set out at the start of this article, which viewed the MDGs as an ambitious global project of biopolitical social engineering? As it is still unclear what will emerge in the final post-2015 development ‘deal’, we sketch two scenarios, considering some of their potential drivers and implications.

#### *The status quo? Development as growth*

The post-2015 development architecture may well end up looking broadly the same as the current one, with poorly integrated goals on environment and development and a dominant focus on reducing extreme poverty. However, even in this minimal case it seems likely that ‘growth’ will be a central theme of whatever comes next – a change of emphasis

from the MDGs. As Hulme and Wilkinson (2013) point out, economic growth was absent from the MDGs with the IMF and World Bank reserving the issue for their own national-level developmental strategies. This time around growth peppers the High Level Panel communiqués, and runs through the final report (UN, 2013).<sup>5</sup> David Cameron, for instance, has long been advocating a growth-as-development strategy. The proposed SDGs include targets on continued economic growth (goal 8) and industrialization (goal 9) (Open Working Group, 2014).

In response, many non-state groups and some parts of the UN family are vigorously fighting against an unadulterated focus on growth at the expense of poverty, inequality and sustainability. The World We Want campaign, co-led by the civil society coalition the Global Call to Action against Poverty (GCAP) and the UN Development Group, have made inequality, progressive taxation and other redistributive measures central to the broader post-2015 discussions.<sup>6</sup> Whilst not exclusive of growth, this approach sets out a quite distinct perspective on what would produce socially equitable development, best summarised in Amitabh Behar's (one of GCAP's three global co-chairs) address to the 68<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the UN General Assembly in September 2013. He called for a 'new paradigm, with justice as its driving principle' which would tackle the structural roots of poverty, 'not just its manifestations', including rights to water, land and forests (Behar, 2013; see also Bello 2013). The campaign's chances are slim, however, given the opposition of key players in the post-2015 process, such as Cameron, as well as other powerful states such as the US who would view an inequality-based development agenda as a politically unpalatable threat to their consumption-based national economy (Hulme and Wilkinson, 2013; Vandemoortele, 2014: 228). It is no doubt revealing that the final report of the HLP prioritises growth which 'leaves no-one behind' and the eradication of extreme poverty, but contains no specific goal on inequality (UN, 2013).

It therefore seems likely that a dominant emphasis on growth will be at the heart of the post-2015 development architecture. Despite the apparent rupture, this would also involve important continuities with the logics and rationalities of pre-2015 developmentalism. An economic growth model would continue to divide the world into 'developed' and 'developing' blocs, which has dominated development thinking since the 1950s, with all the pathologies such a distinction brings into being (see Escobar, 1995; Pieterse, 2000; Sachs, 1992). Indeed, despite the HLP stating that the 'quantum leap forward in economic opportunities' needed to eradicate extreme poverty will represent 'a challenge for every country on earth' (UN, 2013: Executive Summary), the report itself remains littered with lists

of commitments specific to ‘developed’ and ‘developing’ countries, for example by calling on ‘developed countries to fulfil their side of the bargain’ by making ‘concrete efforts towards the target of 0.7% of gross national product (GNP) as official development assistance to developing countries’ (UN, 2013: executive summary, and target 12d; see also Sexsmith and McMichael, this volume). This leaves the impression that ‘developed’ state governments still perceive themselves as more ‘grown (up)’ than their ‘developing’ country counterparts.

The politics of the growth agenda is rendered more complex by the fact that – in addition to figures like David Cameron – many developing country (and particularly African) leaders are also calling for a growth focus (Bangura, 2012; Leone et al, 2013). It is of course hard to deny that reductions in extreme poverty in places like India and China have, at least in part, been on the back of sustained economic growth, and even many radical environmentalists defend the right to growth of the poorest countries in the world (e.g. Barry, 2012). However, it is also observable that neither the economic growth of the 1960s nor the 2000s in Africa has diminished extreme poverty to the degree that the doctrine of neoliberal ‘trickle-down growth’ predicts. Indeed, recent surveys have suggested that despite all of the ‘Africa Rising’ rhetoric, lived poverty remains stubbornly unchanged across the continent, and is even higher in some places than a decade ago (Dulani, Mattes and Logan, 2013). As such the African enthusiasm for growth may not have much to do with poverty reduction; rather it might be a product of elite accumulation strategies, extraversion, and the dominance of mainstream discourses of development economics. Alternatively, it could signal a desire to shift the MDG agenda away from ‘development-as-poverty-reduction’ and back to an older concept of development as industrialisation and modernisation (Bangura, 2012; Bello, 2013; Fukuda-Parr and Hulme, 2011).

What would become of the sustainability agenda in this growth-focussed scenario? It would not necessarily derail it, as since its earliest formulations the very idea of sustainable development contained a commitment to continued economic growth (Death, 2010: 43). Yet it is likely that more explicitly ‘green’ targets would continue to have a low international profile. The prevailing view, encapsulated by a participant in a leadership meeting on environmental sustainability, is that labelling goals as ‘environmental’ automatically flags them as ‘last priority’ for many governments, and that whilst ‘butterflies and bees are important’, attention is always likely to focus upon economic growth and poverty (Recio et al, 2013: 6). The revival of interest in the ‘green economy’ after the financial crisis is at least in part due to a belief that the commoditisation of ecosystem services, carbon markets,

forestry schemes, 'clean technology' and ecotourism all represent new sources of capitalist appropriation and accumulation (Death, 2014; Tienhaara, 2014).

This scenario is thus primarily one in which the status quo, and existing development categories and assumptions, remain unchanged. Whether it is a reinvigorated growth agenda or a continuation of the extreme poverty reduction project, both overlay a modernisation paradigm which continues to view development as a teleological and bifurcated process (Ziai, 2013). Furthermore, whether it is the more naked capital accumulation strategies of the growth agenda, or the human development logics of socio-behavioural reform which have informed the MDGs, both perpetuate the neoliberal developmentalism which individualises poverty at causal and diagnostic levels, and imagines countries somewhere along a familiar growth-path to a 'developed' stage of 'high mass consumption'.

#### *Global sustainable development goals*

The second scenario is a quite different-looking development discourse emerging from the post-2015 process, with a set of universal goals focused on the social, environmental, and political transformation of all countries, taking into account national circumstances, approaches and visions. This is development as a 'process of collective self-discovery – in rich and poor countries alike' (Vandemoortele, 2014: 224). There are manifold examples of quite radically transformative statements even in some of the mainstream proposals. For example, despite the continued focus on income-related poverty indicators, the proposed first SDG target is to 'end poverty in all its forms everywhere' (Open Working Group, 2014) – a striking contrast to the MDGs first target on halving the proportion of those living on under \$1.25 per day. The final report of the High Level Panel observes that it is 'unrealistic to think we can help another one billion people to lift themselves out of poverty by growing their national economies without making structural changes in the *world economy* [emphasis in original]. There is an urgent need for developed countries to re-imagine their growth models' (UN, 2013: 5). Acknowledging that over the last twenty years, as one UN rapporteur described it, the environmental and development debates have been largely 'taking place in different rooms' (Recio et al, 2013: 5), the HLP report proclaimed that '[t]he moment is right to merge the social, economic and environmental dimensions of sustainability guiding international development' (UN, 2013: 5). Accordingly the SDG goal 13 is to 'take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts', whilst 'acknowledging that the UNFCCC is the primary international, intergovernmental forum for negotiating the global response to climate change' (Open Working Group, 2014).

Of course, it is important not to be carried away by the ambition and rhetoric of reports and proposals such as these. A radical challenge to existing development paths is highly unlikely, by definition, given the power of vested interests to keep existing growth models, and divisions between ‘developed’ and ‘developing’ countries, in place. It is hard to see the US signing up to a binding set of global goals for all countries that included targets on equality and environmental sustainability; the same could also be said for India and China. The difficulties of agreeing on international action have been evident in the climate change negotiations, where China and India in particular have opposed legal targets for developing countries, and the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities has been emphasised (Hurrell and Sengupta, 2012). In the early stages of discussions on the SDGs India made it clear that sustainable development targets should only apply to developed countries, with a senior negotiator stating publicly that ‘[w]e are against mandatory SDGs for all nations’ (Chauhan, 2012).

However, the possibility of a new more universal compact is not without precedent. In the climate negotiations the Durban Platform agreed in 2009 at COP17 promises that a new multilateral treaty will be agreed by 2015 and in force by 2020, and the new treaty will involve all countries, not just the developed world. Despite opposition by India and China, and despite the outcome being downgraded from a ‘legal outcome’ to an ‘agreed outcome with legal force’, it is clear that the previous framework for the multilateral climate negotiations – track I developed countries with legal responsibilities, and track II developing countries with an unlimited right to emit – has gone (Hurrell and Sengupta, 2012). If this could happen in the infamously sclerotic climate negotiations, then perhaps it is possible that the post-2015 development agenda could include global targets of relevance to all countries, further challenging the long-established binary distinction between ‘developed’ and ‘developing’ countries.

Moreover, there are an increasing number of champions for a more radical ‘green’ agenda. In Latin America a critique of economic growth and a focus on ‘living well’ (*buen vivir*) has emerged from the ALBA coalition (the Bolivarian Alliance for the Americas, which includes Antigua and Barbuda, Bolivia, Cuba, Dominica, Ecuador, Nicaragua, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, and Venezuela) (Muhr, 2012; 2013; Stevenson, 2014; Ziai, 2013: 134). It is amongst these countries that calls for ‘a set of sustainable development goals (SDGs) that include poverty eradication – rather than a set of poverty eradication goals that include sustainability’ (Hulme and Wilkinson, 2013) are strongest. Although it is unlikely that the SDG agenda could shift the post-2015 discussion entirely away from a focus on

growth, the radical potential of the ‘green’ or ‘buen vivir’ discourse lies in the argument that we should think about growth more in terms of human potential, healthcare, leisure time, public transport, education, local food production and so on rather than the volume of monetary transactions or produced commodities. Whilst members of the ALBA coalition have largely continued to follow extractive and unsustainable development paths, the discursive challenge to ‘normal’ development is considerable. As Barry argues, ‘the axiomatic and wide-spread inculcation of the idea of “economic growth” as a *permanent feature of an economy* serves the interests of a minority not a majority in societies’ (Barry, 2012: 151), and he suggests that ‘[w]hat a post-growth position needs to present is a vision of a better, improved and more advanced society’ (ibid: 19).

Such principles – for so long in the realm of the ‘loony left’ or ‘tree-hugging greens’ – are now beginning to enjoy more widespread currency, including some ‘developed’ countries such as France and the UK. The 2008 Sarkozy *Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress*, authored by Joseph Stiglitz and Amartya Sen (2009), and Tim Jackson’s widely cited *Prosperity Without Growth* (2009) report for the Sustainable Development Commission in the UK, both sought to challenge the predominance of GDP growth as an indicator of development (Fioramonti, 2013). The OECD are promoting a ‘Better Life’ index which uses a dashboard of indicators which can be adjusted according to user preferences, further destabilising the notion of a linear and teleological path to development as ‘modernisation’.<sup>7</sup>

Another example is a set of proposals from the UK Overseas Development Institute which suggest a three tiered approach to the post-2015 development goals.

Firstly, it is agreed that there is an imperative to meet the basic needs and rights of the world’s poorest people and eradicate poverty now and into the future. Secondly, in moving beyond extreme poverty, the framework will probably aim to drive improvements in the efficiency of resource use to provide for a growing and more prosperous global population. And thirdly, at a global level, the framework may confront the need to reshape production and consumption patterns so that they are consistent with planetary boundaries well into the future (Melamedd and Ladd, 2013: 1).

When discussing what these would entail, the authors suggest that eradicating extreme poverty is the easiest and most immediate goal, and doesn’t involve challenges to the existing model of resource use. However, in terms of ‘sustained prosperity for all’, they suggest it will require programmes to ‘increase access by some people to the resources used for

consumption and production, incentivise all governments to develop resource-efficient pathways for future consumption and production, and incentivise some governments to reduce the resources consumed in current production and consumption patterns' (Melamedd and Ladd, 2013: 5). Even before they begin to discuss the really challenging issues of long-term global commons (the atmosphere, the oceans, etc), therefore, this framework entails quite radical changes to existing development models, of the sort that prompted George Bush Senior to declare in 1992 that 'the American way of life is not up for negotiations. Period' (Deen, 2012).

We are of course a long way from an outcome which reflects either the ALBA or the ODI positions. Here we merely raise them to signal that the post-2015 debate does have (perhaps surprisingly) radical potential, and concrete proposals that critical thinkers and progressives might welcome. These proposals pose one of the strongest challenges in recent years to the modernisation paradigm of linear, universal and extractive development paths, and crucially they would require transformations in *all* countries not just the Global South. They include goals on sustainable and equitable consumption and production, and signal a wider view of poverty than primarily income-related. If they could shift the discussion of growth away from just economic growth towards the growth of human potential, flourishing, opportunities (even happiness?) then they might actually begin to frame the development agenda in terms of the kind of 'world we want'.

Recognising this radical potential within the mainstream institutions of international society is unfamiliar, and perhaps even uncomfortable, for critical theorists. However, one of the points of critical analysis is to show how the world does not have to be the way it is, and cynicism should not blind us to the potential for change, even through quite reformist processes. James Ferguson has called for critical theorists to address the sorts of 'left arts of government' or 'progressive governmentalities' that might be both politically desirable and possible in changing global circumstances (Ferguson, 2011: 64). Picking up this challenge, our suggestion here is that some of the proposals for global SDGs present opportunities to contest and destabilise two of the most profound and enduring features of development discourse: the division between 'developed' and 'developing', and the growth-orientated development model of intensive resource extraction.

### **A new global eco-governmentality?**

Of course, whatever these potentialities, a critical attitude cannot stop short of constant critique.<sup>8</sup> A revived and radicalised post-2015 development architecture structured

around global sustainable development goals also has political dangers. Some of these are signalled in the caution of countries like India and others towards binding SDGs. They are particularly worried about the threat of eco-tariffs on exports from the global South, and the imposition of a one-size-fits-all vision of the means and ends of development, neglecting the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities (Chauhan, 2012; Khor, 2011). Indeed, there is a risk of neglecting the world's poorest and most vulnerable amid a new discursive obsession with rising powers, green technologies, and ecological modernisation.

However, there are also two concerns of a more fundamental nature which the final sections of this article highlight. These are the co-optation of the environmental agenda into green growth discourses, and an exacerbation of the MDGs' biopolitical and neoliberal governmentalities as they become even more globally entrenched.

### *Environment or development?*

The prospect of meaningful SDGs raises once more the question of the relationship between environment and development that has so bedevilled UN negotiations from the Stockholm Conference in 1972, through the Brundtland Report, the Rio 'Earth Summit' and to the Rio+20 conference in 2012 (Death, 2010; Hurrell and Sengupta, 2012; Sachs, 1992; Simon, 1998). This is frequently portrayed as a zero-sum struggle between economic growth and environmental protection, as the classic environmental framing of the environment as a set of *limits to growth* in the 1970s made clear. This was reiterated in the 2007 UNDP Human Development Report, which suggested that climate change could reverse the gains of the MDGs and threaten 'what could be the onset of [a] major human development reversal in our lifetime' (UNDP, 2007: 1; see also UNDP, 2013: 3, 6). At stake in this dispute is whether 'the environment' is a component of development (i.e. should sustainability issues be included as a goal within a broader development agenda, such as MDG7), or is a safe and healthy environment a *prerequisite* for development, which must come prior to goals on education, health, income, equity, etc? As Boltz et al express it, '[i]s environmental integrity a dimension of development on par with economic and social concerns? Or is it a requisite condition?' (2013: 2).

These are fundamental issues which go to the heart of how 'environment' and 'development' are defined, and they also depend upon which issues we are talking about, whether the focus is clean water and sanitation or climate change, species protection or industrial pollution, and so on. Whilst it may be easy to agree in principle that all these are interlinked, in practice the trade-offs between resource extraction (for example, of oil from



the Niger Delta or beneath the Arctic ice) and long-term environmental sustainability (as fossil-fuelled greenhouse gases drive temperature predictions upwards) are difficult and politically entrenched.

The danger in the post-2015 process is that there is little sign so far of these issues being faced directly – instead the ‘motherhood-and-apple-pie’ approach of sustainable development as a win-win concept is being promoted, most obviously through the guise of the ‘green economy’ (Barry, 2012; Sachs, 1992; UN, 2013: 8; Tienhaara, 2014). Who could disagree with the idea of an economy that is fuelled by low carbon, efficient, high-tech industry in which externalities are fully accounted for?

But the appeal to a green economy risks masking deeper contradictions and antagonisms. For some, a green economy is akin to the vision conveyed by the Brundtland Report and *Agenda 21*: an almost Keynesian position in which states should invest in cleaner, greener services and industries, and in so doing they would be able to provide clean air and water, safe and sufficient food, efficient public transport, and so on. For others, a green economy is about managing and protecting against the risks of climate disasters, increasing pollution, resource depletion (including peak oil), environmental migration and so on. A third alternative, and increasingly the mainstream view, is that the green economy is really about fuelling ‘green growth’. Given rising prices of raw materials and natural resources on the world market – oil, gas, food stuffs, and land – as well as widely predicted shortages in resources like freshwater, many investors have sensed there is money to be made in securing and intensifying natural resource extraction (Death, 2014).

In this context many environmentalists are worried about the relationship between environment and development in the post-2015 debates. At best the process is likely to produce a vague and consensual declaration and set of targets which fail to directly address the political trade-offs, contradictions and value judgements that the politics of environmental sustainability requires, such as the urgent need to transition economies away from fossil fuels. The history of the discourse of sustainable development is instructive here, described as ‘polite meaningless words’ by Middleton and O’Keefe (2001; see also Death, 2010: 14). At worst, however, many environmentalists are concerned that that the environmental movement is still not strong enough to resist or contest the prophets of economic growth, and that mainstreaming sustainability will dilute commitments to genuine ecological protection. Martin Khor of the Third World Network warned in 2013 that since both environment and development processes have their own histories and actors, it may be difficult to bring them together productively and evenly (Leone et al, 2013: 7). For Sexsmith and McMichael (in this

issue: 16), this is likely to produce ‘a Faustian bargain that subordinates environmental processes and relations to the economism underpinning development thinking’.

*Global eco-governmentality?*

The second major concern with an expanded and radicalised post-2015 agenda returns directly to the critique posed of the MDGs by Gabay (2012) and others. If the MDGs are an ambitious project of global social-engineering, producing new forms of subjectivity and biopolitics, then this would be even truer of radicalised and more global SDGs. If power relations are inevitable components of development programmes, then perhaps we should prefer humility and reversibility over hubristic mega-schemes for revisioning global development (Scott, 1998)?

There are many potential lines of anarchist or governmentality-inspired critique of ambitious development engineering. James Ferguson (1994) famously critiqued the workings of development projects as an ‘anti-politics machine’ in rural Lesotho. James Scott (1998) noted the inability of top-down statist projects to accommodate and reward the evolved strategies of local populations in managing their environments. Here we draw attention to just one potential danger of a re-invigorated project of planetary social engineering in the name of global sustainable development: what Fukuda-Parr and Yamin (2013) refer to as the ‘power of numbers’.

The target and indicator rationality of the MDGs is one particularly problematic and worrying aspect of development discourse which has remained unchallenged by the post-2015 debates (Sexsmith and McMichael, this volume; Ilcan and Lacey, this volume). Theorists of governmentality have argued that techniques of measuring, indexing, benchmarking and auditing are not themselves neutral but are rather deeply political ways of inscribing a particular view of the world – most frequently a neoliberal world of competitive states and entrepreneurial individuals amenable to rankings and zero-sum market exchanges (Abrahamsen, 2004; Fougner, 2008; Jaeger, 2010; Murphy, 2012: 134; Tosa, 2009). As Abrahamsen argues ‘various types of auditing technologies are instruments of a new form of governance and power, designed to engender new forms of conduct. They become technologies for the creation of new kinds of subjectivities, of self-managed individuals and states who render themselves auditable’ (2004: 1463). This can have all sorts of implications – for example re-inscribing discourses of ‘failed’ or ‘irresponsible’ states, extending the authority of states into areas and over populations they have hitherto only partially governed, and facilitating the penetration of capital into new markets (Death and Gabay, 2014). Such

techniques can also blunt more directly political, democratic and agonistic forms of engagement. Jaeger argues that '[b]iopolitical global governance is not inherently oppressive or harmful, but often well intended, indeed seeking to thwart overt oppression by fostering freedom and accountability. However, by implicating typical modern remedies against power in its own game, it dissimulates how its own powers may blunt legal recourse or political opposition' (2010: 80).

Many of these concerns are recurring themes for critical theorists (see Death and Gabay, 2014: 4-5), and Timothy Luke has warned that, under a global capitalist environmental governmentality, 'the health of global populations as well as the survival of the planet itself necessitate that a green spreadsheet be draped over Nature, generating an elaborate ecomarket of global reach and scope' (Luke 1997: 94; see also Escobar, 1995: 202; Scott, 1998: 11-53). Development is already highly bureaucratised and technologised, and proposals for global SDGs would further accelerate these trends to the point where the natural world itself could become entirely framed in reductive and calculative terms. As such we should treat with some caution the call from the HLP final report for a 'data revolution' including 'innovative initiatives to use mobile technology and other advances to enable real-time monitoring of development results' (UN, 2013: 23 and 55-6; see also discussion in Sexsmith and McMichael, this issue: 7). For Fukuda-Parr and Yamin, pursuing the MDG 'agenda by numerical targeting, simplification, reification and abstraction of quantification creates perverse effects' (2013: 63). It is true that new technologies have democratic as well as bureaucratic potential – the UN attempt to gather perspectives on the post-2015 agenda through online submissions in *The World We Want* project is one potential example – but the 'big data' aspirations of development technicians remain largely in the hands of the biggest states and international institutions like the World Bank. As such critical perspectives on the dangers of development governmentalities are still urgently required.

## **Conclusion**

Recent debates about the shape of the post-2015 development architecture are likely to have considerable influence in framing development governmentalities over the coming decades. How they are resolved will have considerable significance: both as evidence of prevailing trends in how the international community imagines such things as growth, progress, the human community and empowerment, and as a potentially significant step down a particular development path. The relationship between growth, progress, development and change goes to the heart of what is at stake in these debates, and poses important questions

for what might be thought of as a progressive political project (Pieterse, 2000), as well as for ‘the very idea of North–South relations as a structuring feature of the international system’ (Hurrell and Sengupta, 2012: 480).

This article has focussed on the possible emergence of a new set of sustainable development goals which have a global project of economic transformation and environmental sustainability at their heart. Notwithstanding the power of hegemonic neoliberal development discourses, there are ways in which biopolitics – the government of the life and health of populations – might be done differently. Whilst the radical potential discussed here may not be realised, drawing attention to its positive and negative implications is an important task of critical scholarship. Many critical theorists may well object that any development intervention relying upon targets and indicators, within a broadly capitalist and statist system, is politically suspect. There are indeed troubling aspects of these rationalities, some of which we have discussed above. However, a dogmatic opposition to particular techniques and technologies, such as global targets and UN institutions, is not a particularly critical attitude (Ferguson, 2011: 666). In this article we have tried to remain open to the idea that the post-2015 development discourse could be animated by more radical political projects which seek to question the underlying rationality of development, the categories of ‘developed’ and ‘developing’, and the failure of economic growth to bring social justice, political freedoms and ecological sustainability. Whilst such a possibility is inevitably accompanied by parallel dangers – of which the co-optation of the environmental agenda and the triumph of data-driven technocratic development expertise are of particular concern – in our current condition a lack of radical ambition would be ultimately more disappointing. It is certainly true that a post-2015 development agenda which includes the aims of ‘ending poverty in all its forms everywhere’ and ‘ensuring sustainable consumption and production’ (Open Working Group, 2014) smacks of hubris, but the opportunity to secure intergovernmental agreement on such ambitious targets is something that many progressive and radical activists would be reluctant to miss. In this regard perhaps the current juncture needs a little bit more hubris and a little bit more willingness to challenge prevailing development discourses, rather than less.

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C.Death & C.Gabay *Doing Biopolitics Differently?*

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<sup>1</sup> For further details on the content of some of these discussions see the 'topics' listed on the World We Want website (<http://www.worldwewant2015.org/topics>). The World We Want is a jointly organised UN-civil society initiative to consult a broad range of civil society voices on the post-2015 development framework.

<sup>2</sup> However, we should be cognisant of the fact that this would still represent new sites of struggle and contestation. The inclusion of issues like obesity in any new developmental compact would not *a priori* constitute the redundancy of developmental binaries, but would simply allow for potentially different conditions of existence for such a compact to emerge and be operationalised. As much as it could lead to a dissolution of the North/South or modern/pre-modern binaries which have plagued developmental thinking, it is equally possible that obesity rates might be used to delegitimise certain dietary habits in the Global South thus re-establishing these binaries (Guthmann, 2011; Vandemoortele, 2014: 226; Ziai, 2013).

<sup>3</sup> IISD, 'EC Issues Proposal for Post-2015 Agenda', <http://post2015.iisd.org/news/ec-issues-proposal-for-post-2015-agenda/> (accessed 24 October 2014).

<sup>4</sup> IISD, 'UN Adviser Proposes Four Pillars for Post-2015 Goals', <http://uncsd.iisd.org/news/un-adviser-proposes-four-pillars-for-post-2015-goals/> (accessed 24 October 2014).

<sup>5</sup> See <http://www.un.org/sg/management/hlppost2015.shtml> (accessed 24 October 2014).

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.worldwewant2015.org/> (accessed 24 October 2014).

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.oecdbetterlifeindex.org/> (accessed 24 October 2014).

<sup>8</sup> For an extended discussion of our particular view of critical theory, see Death and Gabay, 2014: 3-6.