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**The myth of global sustainability: Environmental
limits and (de)growth in the time of SDGs**

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Abstract

The elevation of sustainability from being one of the more peripheral goals in the MDGs to titular status in the SDGs could be interpreted as a sign that the international development sector has finally recognized the gravity of the ecological challenge facing humanity. Similarly, the geographic and conceptual shift from the MDGs' focus on the developing world to SDGs' global framing could be read as an acknowledgement that sustainability is not a problem that needs to be tackled 'out there' but systemic in nature. Nevertheless, the paper argues that the SDGs are unlikely to bring about the necessary transformations as long as the primacy of economic growth is not challenged. This cannot be achieved by simply recognizing the validity of environmental limits and adapting a degrowth position. It is also necessary to recognize that transformation to sustainability is inherently a conflictual process.

Keywords

Sustainable Development Goals; limits; degrowth; environmental conflict; Earthrise.

The myth of global sustainability

Environmental limits and (de)growth in the time of SDGs

1 Earthrise

Marking humanity's first view of its home planet from outer space, "so tiny in the heavens" according to William Anders, the astronaut who shot the now commonly recognized photograph from the Apollo 8 mission of 1968, *Earthrise* was an important stepping stone towards contemporary environmental consciousness (Nicks 1970: 14 quoted in (Cosgrove 1994)). Fragile yet awe inspiring, the image of the planet did much to counter the idea that natural resources are ever abundant. It also acted as a graphic representation that concrete boundaries might exist on how much humanity could expect to consume. During the intervening half century, environmental change has gradually become an increasingly important concern, one that is captured most effectively by the concept of sustainable development.

Nevertheless, it was somewhat surprising that when the Millennium Development Goals reached their sell-by date, the international development bureaucracy turned to sustainable development as its framing concept, coming up with the Sustainable Development Goals (Chasek et al. 2016). After all, the environment was a relatively marginal concern for the MDGs, occupying only one of the eight goals (Anand 2006). Narrow and highly technical, MDG 7 was the ultimate demonstration of how the overall significance of environmental problems were misjudged as an add-on concern rather than a systemic crisis.

The elevation of sustainable development from a marginal goal to titular status seemed at first as a much needed corrective, one that could hold the promise of overcoming the MDGs myriad shortcomings (Saith 2006). It not only put the environmental challenge facing humanity front and centre of global initiatives.

It also did so without making the challenge of sustainability seem as one solely reserved for the world's poorer nations, as had been the case with the MDGs. In fact, throughout the 17 goals of the SDGs, the framing of many socio-economic issues as universal concerns — e.g. guaranteeing equal rights for and treatment of women not simply as an issue in the developing world but a global one — is hugely significant. As such, it is possible to argue that the deterioration of critical ecosystems epitomizes challenges that require the type of global attention promised by the SDGs.

Nevertheless, the SDGs cannot be seen as the harbinger of a much-needed sea change in the ways in which environmental concerns are integrated into development policy and planning. This is because they continue an approach that is fixated on the primacy of economic growth, seeing it as an unquestionable necessity for both developing *and* developed countries. While economic growth is indeed a key component of development and structural transformation, seeing it as a solution to the environmental crises emerging from economic growth is only be possible if the environmental limits imposed by the planet are disregarded.

2 Limits to whose growth?

Just five days before the Apollo 8 mission took off for the moon on 21 December 1968 the United Nations General Assembly adopted Resolution 2398 (XXIII) on the ‘Problems of the human environment’ (Handl 2012). It noted that ‘the relationship between man and his environment is undergoing profound changes in the wake of modern scientific and technological developments’ (ibid., 2). The same resolution also called for the convening in 1972 of a United Nations Conference on the Environment. The Stockholm Conference as it has come to be commonly known thus placed the question of the environment on the firmament of international politics.

The last element of the constellation of events that prepared the ground for modern environmental consciousness came also in 1972 in the shape of the Club of Rome report (Meadows et al. 1972). While the report has come to be synonymous with its forceful argument that humanity would soon run into natural limits of its economic expansion if it continued to grow exponentially, the authors were also concerned more broadly with poverty and well-being. Their recommendations were as clear as they were alarming:

1. If the present growth trends in world population, industrialization, pollution, food production, and resource depletion continue unchanged, the limits to growth on this planet will be reached sometime within the next one hundred years. The most probable result will be a rather sudden and uncontrollable decline in both population and industrial capacity.
2. It is possible to alter these growth trends and to establish a condition of ecological and economic stability that is sustainable far into the future. The state of global equilibrium could be designed so that the basic material needs of each person on earth are satisfied and each person has an equal opportunity to realize his individual human potential.
3. If the world's people decide to strive for this second outcome rather than the first, the sooner they begin working to attain it, the greater will be their chances of success (ibid., 24).

The Stockholm Conference can in many ways be seen as the first major attempt at “working to attain” the second outcome. Despite the Club of Rome Report’s optimistic phrasing with “world’s people”, the Stockholm conference was an arena of division and if there was any doubt that environmental change was a political issue, the event did plenty to disprove it. At the organizational stage, many developing countries balked at the idea of an international meeting on the environment with the fear that any resulting decision would impinge on their aspirations for development. In spearheading the developing world’s position, Indian Prime Minister Indra Gandhi declared that “environmental problems of developing countries are not the side effects of excessive industrialization but reflect the inadequacy of development” (Lasulaws 2012). While taking a firmly pro-growth strategy for the developing world, Indra Gandhi had not been as charitable on the developed world. In fact, she put the exploitative nature of capitalist development — both at home in developed

countries and in the (former) colonies — at the centre of her critique. She argued both that “advanced countries of today have reached their present affluence by their domination over other races and countries, the exploitation of their own natural resources” and that the “riches and the labour of the colonized countries played no small part in the industrialization and prosperity of the West” (ibid.)

These two statements by Indira Gandhi laid bare the division facing humanity as the United Nations tried to galvanize action on the environment. The developing world was not only not willing to give up on the idea of growth itself but was also highlighting the interconnections between the exploitation of nature and developing country labour as central to the problem. For the developed world, giving up on the idea of growth — especially one fuelled by cheap resources and labour from the developing world — would have been anathema for it would challenge the post-World War II societal consensus built around the promise of ever increased prosperity (Offe 1996). It was the continuity in the overall expansion and (partial) trickling down of wealth that kept the distributional demands of the socialist challenge to the prevailing order at bay. Growth had to be preserved as an objective for the developed world as well without fundamentally altering its underlying dynamics.

Indira Gandhi had also asked what has now become a highly controversial question: aren’t “poverty and need the greatest polluters?” While opinions differ regarding its exact wording when it was delivered (Ramesh 2017), there is reason to believe that she asked the question as part of an attempt to bolster the pro-growth position of India and the rest of the developing world. The final declaration of the conference took this view wholly on board:

In the developing countries most of the environmental problems are caused by under-development. Millions continue to live far below the minimum levels required for a decent human existence, deprived of adequate food and clothing, shelter and education, health and sanitation. Therefore, the developing countries must direct their efforts to development, bearing in mind their priorities and the need to safeguard and improve the environment (UNEP 1997: 82).

In other words, following Indira Gandhi’s provocation, the Stockholm Conference had not declared growth itself as a source of environmental degradation. Rather it was the absence of growth in developing countries that had to be solved if sustainability were to be attained. However, arguing that absence of growth alone was the cause of environmental degradation would of course not be sufficient within the context of the developed world. After all, the Stockholm Conference had been convened precisely because their unchecked growth had caused environmental problems.

How could more growth be legitimized in the developed world? The solution was found in the language as to why participation in the Stockholm Conference in particular and international co-operation in general on the environment would be in the self-interest of “developing countries [who] might be able to avoid the kinds of costly mistakes industrialized countries had made during their own process of economic and social development” (Linnér and Selin 2017: 62). With this rhetorical sleight of hand, the environmental

problems associated with industrialization were reduced to the status of correctible mistakes rather than structural features.

The next decade was relatively unproductive in terms of the development of environmental consciousness, though the problems identified by the Club of Rome report were certainly becoming harder to ignore. As part of the road leading to a much bigger intergovernmental meeting, the Rio Earth Summit of 1992, the Brundtland Commission was charged with the task of coming up with a shared vision for the future of environmental politics. The division between developing and developed countries evident in 1972 had of course not gone away but only intensified. The challenge of the Brundtland Commission was therefore even greater. In tackling this challenge, its report entitled *Our Common Future* (Brundtland Commission 1987) made effective use of the imagery of *Earthrise*.

In the middle of the twentieth century, we saw our planet from space for the first time. Historians may eventually find that this vision had a greater impact on thought than did the Copernican revolution of the 16th century, which upset humans' self-image by revealing that the Earth is not the center of the universe. From space, we see a small and fragile ball dominated not by human activity and edifice but by a pattern of clouds, oceans, greenery, and soils. Humanity's ability to fit its activities into that pattern is changing planetary systems fundamentally (ibid.: 308).

Our Common Future discussed this issue of 'fit' as if it is merely a biological fact: humanity as a whole is failing to live within its planet's available resources. This abstract and ahistorical view of humanity and its relationship with its physical environment made it possible to paper over the differential responsibilities in creating the crisis, making it seem not only as if humanity as a whole has created the problem but also that the price for overshooting the physical limits of the planet would be shared equally by all. By so doing, the Brundtland Commission meld together the geological notion of 'one earth' with the political construction of 'one world', which gave the report its subtitle: *From One Earth to One World*, continuing with the political strategy of downplaying the fundamentally different positions and interests of developing and developed countries that was so effective back in Stockholm.

The famous definition of the commission at once set an impossibly ambitious long-term goal — ensuring that future generations can meet their needs without limiting the aspirations of the present — in a way that did not differentiate between nations or classes. A closer look, however, revealed that what was proposed was simply more economic growth:

If large parts of the developing world are to avert economic, social and environmental catastrophes, it is essential that global economic growth be revitalized. In practical terms, this means more rapid economic growth in *both industrial and developing countries*, free market access for the products of developing countries, lower interest rates, greater technological transfer, and significantly larger capital flows, both concessional and commercial" (Brundtland Commission 1987:89; added italics).

This undifferentiated focus on the need for more growth is the thread that connects the Stockholm Conference and the concept of sustainable development. The Brundtland Report prepared the ground for the Rio Earth Summit of 1992, which did give the impression that the environmental crisis facing humanity might finally be confronted with concentrated action. Despite its enormous symbolic significance, however, Rio demonstrated that the divisions of the Stockholm Conference had not gone away. This was demonstrated most effectively by the declaration of President George H. W. Bush that the US was not willing to “negotiate the American way of life” (Jordan 1994).

The intervening years — despite follow-up summits as well as attempts to deal with specific questions such as climate change — achieved very little in terms of dealing with the worsening environmental crisis. This is mainly because the assumption that additional growth will simply lead to more sustainability is fundamentally mistaken. For instance, poor people are not necessarily ‘less green’ than affluent ones as the ‘post-materialism’ thesis argues (Inglehart 1981). The opposite is more likely to be the case in many instances as demonstrated by Martinez Alier’s ‘environmentalism of the poor’ (Martinez-Alier 2014). Similarly, developed countries are not more sustainable than poorer ones as posited by the Environmental Kuznets Curve (Dinda 2004). In addition to lack of reliable data, the idea of an inverse-U curve showing the relationship between per capita income and sustainability suffers from a fallacy of composition for assuming that all countries will be able to outsource resource extraction and dirty industries to other locations as had been the case with developed countries. Moreover, belief in the ability of technology and markets to create a delinking between economic growth to create a ‘circular economy’ (Giampietro and Funtowicz 2020) is essentially a ‘folk tale’.

3 Sustainable Development and its Goals

By early 2010s, it had become evident not only that the MDGs were not going to be sufficient even if they were successful by their own standards but that seeing environmental degradation as a separate concern that can be dealt once the development question is resolved would no longer be tenable. It is within this context that the SDGs were introduced in a document entitled “Transforming Our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”.

The SDGs differed from the MDGs that they superseded in two broad ways. The first is the global ambition of the goals. As argued earlier, the 1970s discussion on environmentalism had irked developing countries as it gave the impression that the problem was theirs to solve. This criticism was also applicable to the way in which sustainability was added onto the idea of development — making it seem as if it was primarily a burden for developing countries since the developed ones no longer needed development (though they needed growth!) Short of renaming sustainable development, recognizing its reach to the entire world was therefore a welcome move. As Fukuda-Parr argued, the SDGs are “as relevant for the USA as for Liberia” and Agenda 2030 makes this transition very clear:

This is an Agenda of unprecedented scope and significance. It is accepted by all countries and is applicable to all, taking into account different national realities, capacities and levels of development and respecting national policies and priorities. These are universal goals and targets which involve the entire world, developed and developing countries alike (Fukuda-Parr 2016).

The MDGs had taken a rather narrow view of environmental problems, dedicating only one, and very narrowly conceived, goal to it. The SDGs have certainly addressed this criticism — not only the goals themselves are named after sustainable development but 10 of the 17 individual goals mention sustainability with another 2 referring to the related concept of resilience (Liverman 2018). Many of the 169 targets also deal with a vast array of environmental issues — including forestry, fisheries, urbanization, and climate change — again in a way that shows that these are concerns for both developing and developed countries.

Furthermore, there is not only a nod towards the developing-developed country tensions that emerged back in Stockholm in the framing of the SDGs as a ‘win-win’ solution, but also to the ‘common but differentiated responsibilities’ framing that came out of the Rio Earth Summit. This is not only reiterated but there’s also a clear acknowledgement of the different ways in which many developing countries frame the issue, which rejects a solely instrumental view of nature (as resources, as ecosystem services, etc):

We recognize that there are different approaches, visions, models and tools available to each country, in accordance with its national circumstances and priorities, to achieve sustainable development; home and that “Mother Earth” is a common expression in a number of countries and regions (United Nations 2015: paragraph 59)

While Fukuda-Parr (2016), Liverman (2018) and others do overall take a positive reading of the SDGs, their affirmations — even if they were to be accepted — concern the overall process from which the SDGs emerged (e.g. concerns of the ‘South’ were taken more seriously), the non-technical and non-reductive framing of their goals (e.g. gender equality), the more political nature of its framing (e.g. the inclusion of the reduction of inequality within and between nations) and the overall ambitiousness of its design (e.g. to end poverty!). Looking strictly at the environmental question in light of the preceding discussion, however, it is harder to be optimistic. This is partly because there is deep conceptual confusion in the Agenda 2030 document. To wit:

We envisage a world in which every country enjoys sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth and decent work for all. A world in which consumption and production patterns and use of all natural resources — from air to land, from rivers, lakes and aquifers to oceans and seas — are sustainable (United Nations 2015: paragraph 7)

The invocation of sustainability in one sentence twice in different formulations — sustained and sustainable — is a red flag. Sustainable growth, furthermore, is a very different idea than sustainable development. Sustainable resource use is yet another different matter. What does sustainable development mean for the SDGs? There are several different ways in which the concept is used throughout the goals.

One is sustainability as a scientific concept, perhaps the most meaningful attempt to recognize that ecological limits to growth might indeed be real. Target 14.4 is a good example:

By 2020, effectively regulate harvesting and end overfishing, illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing and destructive fishing practices and implement science-based management plans, in order to restore fish stocks in the shortest time feasible, at least to levels that can produce maximum sustainable yield as determined by their biological characteristics (United Nations 2015)

What is notable here is not the problematic use of ‘science-based’, which begs the question ‘as opposed to what?’ If the opposite of ‘science-based’ is ‘political’, this would not only go against the fundamentally political nature of environmental change but also demonstrate worrying ignorance of decades of research — from political ecology and science and technology studies — showing that the distinction between ‘scientific’ and ‘political’ are simply untenable upon closer scrutiny. Rather, it is important to recognize that ‘sustainable yield’ is useful here — despite its major shortcomings (Finley and Oreskes 2013; Larkin 1977) — for it recognizes that oceans are not limitless sources of fish catch. It also lends itself to a measurable indicator (14.4.1 Proportion of fish stocks within biologically sustainable levels) even though ‘biologically sustainable levels’ are simultaneously scientific and political economic in the way they should be understood.

In the above example, the concept of ‘sustainable maximum yield’ allows for the possibility of negotiating how much fish and by which countries should be caught at a given moment and place. In other instances, however, the SDGs

are far too vague in their use of sustainability to have any meaningful usage even if they are tied to seemingly measurable indicators. Take 12.2, for instance, which aims to “By 2030, achieve the sustainable management and efficient use of natural resources”. Putting aside the risibly ambitious deadline — 2030! — of the goal, the terms ‘sustainable management’ and ‘efficient’ are so subjective as to render them useless. The SDGs’ attempt to tie them to measurable indicators mainly serves as a distraction:

12.2.1

Material footprint, material footprint per capita, and material footprint per GDP

12.2.2

Domestic material consumption, domestic material consumption per capita, and domestic material consumption per GDP (United Nations 2015)

‘Material footprint’, ‘domestic material consumption per capita’, etc., are certainly some of the commonly accepted ways of measuring impact. But how much impact is sustainable? Who decides what is appropriate level of consumption, appropriate rate of resource use to qualify as efficient, and desirable distribution of outcomes between regions and communities? At least the Brundtland Definition had the virtue of sounding lofty in its evasiveness. The SDGs, in comparison, are technical and hollow.

There are also occasions when the SDGs use the term of sustainable development essentially as an empty signifier, as if trying to show that Esty’s criticism from two decades prior that it was a “buzzword devoid of content” was still very much accurate (Esty 2001: 74). For instance, Target 16.B wishes to “Promote and enforce non-discriminatory laws and policies for sustainable development” (United Nations 2015). The meaning of this becomes clearer — demonstrating that the goal has basically nothing to do with any conventional imagination of sustainability — when we look at the way in which it would be measured:

16.B.1

Proportion of population reporting having personally felt discriminated against or harassed in the previous 12 months on the basis of a ground of discrimination prohibited under international human rights law (United Nations 2015)

However, the worst abuse of the concept of sustainable occurs when it basically means ‘to continue’ or ‘to maintain’. Target 10.1, for instance, aims to “progressively achieve [by 2030] and sustain income growth of the bottom 40 per cent of the population at a rate higher than the national average” (ibid.) Income growth for the poor is a laudable idea in and of itself — it does not need to be gilded with the term sustain. An even worse instance can be found in Target 17.4

Assist developing countries in attaining long-term debt sustainability through coordinated policies aimed at fostering debt financing, debt relief and debt restructuring, as appropriate, and address the external debt of highly indebted poor countries to reduce debt distress (ibid.)

Again, dealing with the debts accumulated by developing countries is a worthy initiative. Putting aside the criticism that in many cases — such as

highly indebted countries — the most ethical way of dealing with the problem of debt is debt cancellation, which is not brought up, the goal simply appropriates the concept of sustainability for a perverse end. What is being continued here is basically the continued suffering of developing countries that have to pay back debts often accrued under illegitimate rulers or under duress caused in many ways by the lenders themselves.

Ultimately, the use of ‘sustain’ as ‘continue’ takes its purest form in relation to economic growth in Target 8.1. While qualifying references to ‘national circumstances’ as well as the relatively high ‘allocation’ to the least developed countries might at first distract us from it, an obvious question emerges: why do all countries require growth?

Sustain per capita economic growth in accordance with national circumstances and, in particular, at least 7 per cent gross domestic product growth per annum in the least developed countries (ibid.)

The term is not any more meaningful when invoked within the context of sustainable tourism in Target 8.9 (“By 2030, devise and implement policies to promote sustainable tourism that creates jobs and promotes local culture and products”, *ibid.*), meaning, as revealed from its metrics, a straightforward increase in tourism (e.g. 8.9.1 Tourism direct GDP as a proportion of total GDP and in growth rate). Why would tourism — as opposed to agriculture or even industry — be sustainable in and of itself? Whereas certain types of tourism can indeed incentivize environmental protection, this is at best a problematic relationship and overlooks a bigger problem (Büscher and Fletcher 2017). ‘Eco-tourism’ or ‘cultural tourism’ in many cases is built around international air travel, which is a major contributor to climate change. Therefore, even if we were to assume that tourism might be ‘sustainable’ on the ground, its consumers’ ecological footprints are likely to be the opposite.

Despite the global nature of the SDGs, however, its view of the environmental crisis facing humanity is narrow. As the previous section demonstrated, the mainstream consensus on how to transition to greenness depends on more growth to do its magic in both developing and developed countries. In practice, however, the SDGs do very little to correct the mistakes. For instance, the plight of environmental defenders (Scheidel et al. 2020) gets very little attention even though Target 16.1 aims to “Significantly reduce all forms of violence and related death rates everywhere”. Similarly, there is no mention of the key role played by indigenous peoples in some of the most critical ecosystems around the world in managing and protecting them. Goal 15 reads as follows:

Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss (United Nations 2015)

None of its targets nor any other goal pays any meaningful attention to poor and marginalized groups who do the bulk of defending these ecosystems. Just as their role is not included, of course, the main drivers of ecosystem degradation which come from the consumption needs of affluent communities in these regions and beyond are obscured. One could of course argue that

expecting the SDGs to list all and every marginalized group or highlight every destructive practice — e.g. razing of the Amazon to make space for cattle ranching to meet the increased meat consumption in the West — might not be realistic. Then again, with 17 goals and 169 targets, the decision not to specifically refer to indigenous people or environmental defenders ends up looking like a sin of commission rather than omission.

In fairness, it is not that the SDGs do not pay any attention to the interconnections between consumption and production. Target 12.1 seeks to

Implement the 10-year framework of programmes on sustainable consumption and production, all countries taking action, with developed countries taking the lead, taking into account the development and capabilities of developing countries (ibid.)

A 10-year programme for sustainable consumption and production could of course be a massively ambitious and transformative agenda, especially if it connects the needs and interests of developing and developed countries. It could, for example, finance stringent monitoring systems in tropics against drivers of deforestation, be it bovine agriculture, flex foods or hydrocarbon and minerals extraction, while creating compensation mechanisms for developing countries' lost revenues. To finance such resource transfers, it could introduce new taxation mechanisms based on food miles as well as on overall consumption to not only reduce consumption in the West but also to create a mechanism to create environmental justice between developed countries that have already used up resources and transformed global systems and developing countries that have suffered first from the initial colonial dynamics and now from the ecological impacts of their development. Unfortunately, the indicator for Goal 12.1 is essentially window dressing, equating progress with the act of target setting:

Number of countries with sustainable consumption and production (SCP) national action plans or SCP mainstreamed as a priority or a target into national policies (ibid.)

Beyond setting goals, the SDGs pay significant attention to education as a key to achieving sustainable development. This might seem common sensical enough. However, it is now clear that environmental degradation is (no longer) driven by lack of knowledge or education that certain behaviours and choices lead to unsustainable outcomes. As already argued, communities that depend on their ecosystems for their socio-economic and cultural survival know — and have always known — their interdependence with nature and the importance maintaining this relationship. Their ecosystems are destroyed primarily by forces emanating from outside — extractive industries, dam building projects carrying electricity and water to more affluent citizen-consumers elsewhere, deforestation in the name of monoculture plantations, etc. If and when they are complicit or active supporters of these processes, this is not because they do not *know* what the ecological implications of their actions will be. The immiserating effects of their actions reflect their fundamental lack of choice rather than inadequacy of their education (Arsel et al. 2019; Orta-Martinez et al. 2018).

For the affluent consumers, the picture is different. Again, their decisions are not motivated by lack of knowledge and education. It is no longer possible to argue, for instance, that Dutch consumers take flights whose cost are not much more than the sandwiches they purchase on board to tourist destinations because they have not heard about climate change. Having become dependent on conspicuous consumption that was made possible by uneven international development and accultured into a political system whose legitimacy depends on the maintenance of the illusion that such lifestyles can be perennial, mere education is unlikely to transform what are political choices that reflect historical structures. Yet, the SDGs repeatedly return to this naive expectation that if only we could provide more education, things would get better. For example:

4.7 By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development.

12.8 By 2030, ensure that people everywhere have the relevant information and awareness for sustainable development and lifestyles in harmony with nature (United Nations 2015).

If individual citizens are expected to change their behaviours — which the SDGs assume that they do not realize are unsustainable — how are corporations expected to take a leap towards sustainability? The authors of the SDGs seem to believe that it is simply a matter of minding one's ps and qs. If the international community asks these actors to change their behaviour and reduce their environmental impacts, they would certainly oblige! Thus Target 9.2 wants to 'promote' sustainable industrialization as if it is the latest fashion trend that might just catch on. What sustainable industrialization means in practice, why it hasn't been realized before, what the implications are of such a transformation (to labour, especially) are simply left unanswered:

9.2 Promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and, by 2030, significantly raise industry's share of employment and gross domestic product, in line with national circumstances, and double its share in least developed countries (ibid.)

But sometimes promotion is not enough. Corporate actors might be set in their ways, perhaps feeling reluctant to change. In such cases, the SDGs take a firmer tone, not simply promoting but *encouraging* corporations to be more responsible:

12.6 Encourage companies, especially large and transnational companies, to adopt sustainable practices and to integrate sustainability information into their reporting cycle (ibid.)

The SDGS repeatedly extort all actors in the nicest possible way — Recognize! Value! Facilitate! — to do the right thing. What would happen if corporations — note the choice of the SDGs to use companies instead, as if the main drivers of global ecosystem collapse are small businesses — were to

ignore all this promotion and encouragement, however, remains unclear. The SDGs are mum on the question of implementation and enforcement.

Goal 13 on climate change (“Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts*” *ibid.*) brings together all of these weaknesses into sharp relief. This is the only goal that comes with its own asterisk, which takes us to the following disclaimer: “Acknowledging that the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change is the primary international, intergovernmental forum for negotiating the global response to climate change”. This serves less as an attempt to heighten the centrality of the UNFCCC process — which has been a colossal failure at any rate — and more to draw attention to the long-standing critique that the tackling of the environmental crisis by the United Nations systems suffers from shocking levels of turf wars, fragmentation and lack of co-ordination (Ivanova 2012).

At a certain level, of course, a goal on climate change alone does not make sense despite its massive significance because climate change is not an ontological unity — it is not a unified dynamic — either in its genesis or its impact. It emanates just as much from changes in forest use in Kalimantan as choice of supermarket packaging material used in Kansas City. When climate changes, this can mean floods in Mozambique or stronger winds in the Maldives. A single unified goal can give the illusion of concentrated action but in practice climate change epitomizes the multifaceted nature of the political economy of environmental change. And tweaking existing policy frameworks (17.14 Enhance policy coherence for sustainable development; United Nations 2015) are unlikely to rise up to the challenge of taking meaningful action on climate change.

The breakdown of the overall goal itself does not live up to its ‘urgent’ billing. Its first component calls for additional resilience and adaptive capacity in relation to climate change-related disasters (Target 13.1), since the authors of the goal seem to understand that the international community is unlikely to make the required drastic changes. The next two goals mainly serve to illustrate the criticisms already made above (“13.2 Integrate climate change measures into national policies, strategies and planning” and “13.3 Improve education, awareness-raising and human and institutional...”; *ibid.*) . Target 13.a is essentially an exercise in wishful thinking that by throwing money at the problem (to ‘capitalize’ the Green Climate Fund) the suffering of the developing countries in the face of climate disasters could be reduced. With the last entry under this heading, though, the SDGs give the impression that if only “women, youth, and local and marginalized communities” knew how to draft plans, adapt agendas and set indicators in their communities, they would not be so hard hit by the climate change problem!

13.b Promote mechanisms for raising capacity for effective climate change-related planning and management in least developed countries and small island developing States, including focusing on women, youth and local and marginalized communities (*ibid.*)

The milquetoast approach of Goal 13 is clearly not because Agenda 2030 does take climate change seriously. It rightly states that:

Climate change is one of the greatest challenges of our time and its adverse impacts undermine the ability of all countries to achieve sustainable development. Increases in global temperature, sea level rise, ocean acidification and other climate change impacts are seriously affecting coastal areas and low-lying coastal countries, including many least developed countries and small island developing States. The survival of many societies, and of the biological support systems of the planet, is at risk (ibid.)

But this is not the whole story. The challenge is indeed great but it needs to be understood within its right context. It is now clear that much of the accumulated impact of human activity is in fact due to economic activity that took place in the West since the Industrial Revolution (McNeill 2000). The impact of countries that have been rapidly developing in the past few decades have been relatively smaller, though this is now beginning to change dramatically. For example, between 1750-2006, US's share of global cumulative emissions was 27.7 per cent. This stands in stark contrast with 2.5 per cent for India and 8.4 per cent for China (Monasterksy 2009: 1094). The importance of historical patterns is further emphasized if per capita figures are taken into consideration. While China has now become the largest emitter of carbon as a country, its per capita emissions stand at roughly one fourth of the US. The ratios between many other developing countries and the US are even greater.

By not recognizing these historical inequalities and by simply doubling down on economic growth to somehow become greener, the SDGs are essentially setting up the world for catastrophic failure. Encouraging major oil companies to not produce so much oil cannot be expected to lead to sustainability. Nor can pleading with — or educating! — the US leadership and the electorate that vote for them to change their behaviour will result in meeting the targets of the Paris agreement, which were grossly insufficient to begin with. Impacts of climate change might indeed be globally felt, but its solution cannot emerge from repeating the words 'global' and 'sustainable development' like a mantra.

4 The Earth is one, the world is not

It is possible to draw a clear line from *Earthrise*'s depiction of a fragile planet to Brundtland Commission's 'One Earth' formulation and to Agenda 2030's idea of global sustainability. This planetary framing has more recently returned to its geological significance as awareness of the extent to which human action has transformed the earth has solidified, giving our current era the designation of the Anthropocene. If *Earthrise* was the picture that defined the fragility of planet earth in the 1970s, Steffen et al.'s steeply upward sloping graphs on 'The Great Acceleration' (Steffen et al. 2015) that synthesize socio-economic trends (e.g. population, GDP, number of dams) and earth-systems trends (e.g. CO2 emissions, tropical forest loss, shrimp aquaculture) are performing the same task in the 21st century.

Another, more worrying, line can be drawn from the 1970s to our current world regarding concern for the planet and its future generations of human communities. Around the same time as Stockholm Conference and the Club of Rome report, Garrett Hardin (of the tragedy of commons fame) had written a series of articles attacking the ideas of international equality and solidarity, even titling one of them as 'The case against helping the poor' (Hardin 1974). Hardin's message was as clear as it was odiously divisive. Whereas progressive forces saw the earth as a 'spaceship' (Höhler 2016), Hardin saw it as a lifeboat left behind by a sinking ship most of whose passengers had to be abandoned to their fate in the ocean. For him, accepting the idea of 'One World' — which would mean trying to fit all the passengers of the ship into the lifeboat — would be tantamount to humanity committing mass suicide. "Fortunate minorities" [for Harding, Americans] had to protect themselves and this meant that "international granaries and lax immigration policies must be rejected" if something were to be saved for "future generations". The election of authoritarian populist leaders around the world, who use resource scarcity and environmental change to build a political project of nationalism and xenophobia, shows that just as the 'One World' vision of the 1970s has survived and evolved, the 'lifeboat ethics' of Hardin too has made it to the 21st century.

It is therefore important not to downplay the main achievement of the concept of sustainable development, which was to bring together the international community to recognize that environmental change was indeed a major concern that had to be addressed collectively. Recognition alone, however, does not suffice and the belief that further economic growth at a *global* level can tackle the crisis is simply untenable in light of the Anthropocene. More growth at the global level — regardless of how it's tweaked via technology and policy — simply cannot deliver sustainability (and would exacerbate poverty and vulnerability). What is needed is a new framing of the global environmental crisis that has the flexibility to make space for economic growth in certain regions while creating the conditions for broader intra- and inter-national redistribution of wealth and resources.

Unfortunately, the decline of class — both as an analytical and political concept — has meant that progressive forces have been unable to rise up to this important challenge. The literature on degrowth — particularly in its ‘mainstream’ manifestation — has emerged to fill this gap (D’Alisa, Demaria, and Kallis 2014). Its ascension — as demonstrated by exponential growth in scholarly, policy and activist literature, a master’s programme and its own large bi-annual conference — is built on two related qualities. First, unlike sustainable development, degrowth scholars and activists are deeply sceptical of growth itself and have sought to redeem the idea of limits from its Malthusian infamy (Kallis 2019). Second, degrowth went beyond the ecological restrictions around growth, also challenging the (lack of) social meaning in a growth-centred economy. Sustainable development was not very successful at recognizing the limited utility of growth after a certain point, since the ‘social’ dimension in its tri-partite formulation was underdeveloped compared to the economic and ecological. In building its critique, degrowth and its more developing world-friendly restatement post-growth have borrowed liberally from post-development and, more recently, decolonial scholarship.

Degrowth is indeed correct in challenging growth for the sake of growth. However, the concept — at least in its ‘mainstream presentation’ — is no more successful than the SDGs in articulating a theory of change, instead relying on consciousness raising, exhortation and ultimately wishful thinking to complete a transition to a more sustainable world. Economically, it does not deal with the necessary structural transformations that need to take place in developing countries to improve the productivity and well-being of workers. Degrowth literature has had little to say about real-world experiments in achieving this type of transformation, instead choosing to fixate on putative ‘alternatives to development’. The case of Ecuador where an attempt was made during the tenure of Rafael Correa to transition away from primary commodity exports is a key example in this regard. Degrowth or post-growth is not equipped to recognize the need for resource-rich countries to go deeper into extractives-led development in order to achieve both ecological sustainability and socio-political stability (Arsel, Hogenboom, and Pellegrini 2016). Instead, its proponents have focused almost exclusively on unrealistic economic development strategies (e.g. eco-tourism), compensation mechanisms for foregone income when extractive processes are abandoned (e.g. the Yasuni-ITT initiative), and on *buen vivir*, the alternative conceptualization of well-being that increased socio-economic development would enable (Arsel 2012).

Politically, degrowth has not engaged with real-world dynamics of class politics, reducing class interests to class grievances. In other words, instead of theorizing how class-based demands against the ills of unsustainable economic growth could be articulated and advanced, degrowth has simply chosen to highlight the problem of growth and proposed to abandon it altogether. Who would stop growth and through what concrete political practices are questions that have so far received scant attention. In their absence, there is rich empirical evidence — though it remains largely ignored — to suggest that much of what we see as environmental movements against the negative effects of economic growth are in fact class-based struggles (Arsel et al. 2019; Pellegrini and Arsel 2018). Closer scrutiny of these movements shows that they

are calling not to cancel growth but to make it redistributive. They do so because environmental impacts of growth are only one of the ways in which inequalities built into capitalist development manifest themselves. Degrowth literature has not recognized that many environmentalists — not just in the developing world but globally — fight against sources of environmental degradation not necessarily to stop economic growth itself but to make it more inclusive and redistributive.

It is therefore possible to characterize the contemporary state of the politics of environment and development as one of wishful thinking. Pragmatists are content to go along with the myth offered by the SDGs that more growth will solve environmental problems, believing somehow that the drastic changes needed can either be implemented gradually or postponed for a more amenable moment in the future. Radical critics of the incrementalism of the SDGs are increasingly gravitating towards a degrowth position, which, while having the virtue of recognizing the concrete limits to global growth, do not have a political project to achieve meaningful economic redistribution to create economic justice and equity. Both positions are united by their lofty belief — epitomized in the lamentation — of the Brundtland Report that the “Earth is one, but the world is not (1987: 27) that class divisions and power inequalities need to be removed or at least put aside prior to making the dramatic changes necessary to achieve sustainability. What is needed, instead, is a more down-to-earth approach that recognizes that the environment is not an exception to the rule that radical change necessitates conflict.

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