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## Editorial

# Global Politics, the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals

## Política Global, Agenda 2030 e Objetivos de Desenvolvimento Sustentável

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### Abstract

The publication of a special dossier of *Meridiano 47 – Journal of Global Politics* about the Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals places Brazil and the Global South in the debates on one of the most relevant subjects that have been fueling journals, papers, and international conferences all over the world. This dossier is a genuine intellectual contribution to the debates on the impacts of the 2030 Agenda by debating Challenges to the Global Politics regarding the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs, such as territorialization and levels of implementation, orchestration and accountability, the transformative potential of the SDGs, conciliating research with learning and outreach activities and problematizing the theme of indicators. Also, by giving a clear cut of the Brazilian perspective on global politics of the SDG.

### Resumo

A publicação de um dossiê especial do *Meridiano 47 – Journal of Global Studies* sobre a Agenda 2030 e os Objetivos de Desenvolvimento Sustentável insere o Brasil e o Sul Global nos debates sobre um dos assuntos mais relevantes e que têm animado periódicos, artigos e conferências internacionais no mundo todo. De fato, esse dossiê é uma genuína contribuição intelectual para as discussões sobre os impactos da Agenda 2030, debatendo os desafios à política global em relação à Agenda 2030 e aos ODS, como territorialização e níveis de implementação, orquestração e prestação de contas, potencial transformador dos ODS, conciliação entre pesquisa e atividades de aprendizagem e extensão, bem como problematizando o tema dos indicadores. Além disso, busca fornecer recorte claro da perspectiva brasileira sobre a política global dos ODS.

**Palavras-chave:** Objetivos de Desenvolvimento Sustentável; Agenda 2030; Desenvolvimento; Política Global.

**Keywords:** Sustainable Development Goals; 2030 Agenda; Development; Global Politics.

The publication of a special dossier of *Meridiano 47 – Journal of Global Politics* about the Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals places Brazil and the Global South at the center of

one of the most relevant subjects that have been fueling journals, papers, and international conferences all over the world. This dossier is a genuine intellectual contribution to the debates on the impacts of the 2030 Agenda on international relations, responding to what Amitav Acharya and Barry Buzan propose about living under “shared fates” in this post-Western world order:

“as humankind occupies its planet ever more densely, with interdependence and development both rising and becoming more complex on the back of increasing interaction capacity, this condition makes humankind structurally more vulnerable to the range of shared fates” (ACHARYA & BUZAN 2019, 273)

What Acharya, Buzan, and most of the prominent IR scholars could not acknowledge until this point is that some Brazilian intellectuals had already identified that same matter of “shared fates” when looking to Brazilian reality and reflecting on Brazilian international relations towards the so-called Third World. For example, Milton Santos (2001) criticized the pervasive effects of globalization that generates a “shared fate” for the poor population around the world; or Celso Furtado (2002) discovered that the Brazilian economic crisis was, in fact, part of a “shared fate” of other countries in our Latin American neighborhood; and Josué de Castro (1965; 1967) provided a narrative about people living at the *mangues* of Recife that recognized they were, in fact, part of a global problem so powerful as to unveil a geopolitics of famine.

There are no “shared fates” more dramatic than these related to poverty, structural economic crisis, and famine. A perfect common ground for the ideas of Castro, Santos, and Furtado was the need to find a new development model that was less unequal and more inclusive. These are all questions that the 2030 Agenda and the SDG are trying to re-center to create this utopia for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

## Challenges to the Global Politics regarding the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs

This dossier was based on a multidisciplinary and critical perspective to analyze the challenges of global politics to achieve sustainable development. The diversity of themes and approaches as part of IR disciplinary identity opens possibilities to discuss the concept of development broadly. The papers presented in this special edition of M47 use and approach the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs in different ways. Of course, there remain many themes and questions to be addressed appropriately in the future. This editorial tries to organize some of the main challenges faced by Global Politics under the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) context considering more recent debates on the matter.<sup>1</sup>

**Territorialization and levels of implementation.** The building of localization frameworks in different realities in the Global North and South (KABIR SARKAR2020), and the appropriation and

<sup>1</sup> During a recent symposium, the latest and most critical topics regarding future research on the SDGs were addressed. One important conclusion was the need to open the space for different approaches and visions from different parts of the world to advance in qualifying the debates on the topic. For further info: <https://globalgoalsproject.eu/globalgoals2020/>

nationalization of the global goals from the perspective of particular national demands and local development planning and policies, are some of the most significant challenges for the formulation of public policies for sustainable development (OKITASARI, M; KATRAMIZ 2020). Also, the need to deal with multiple interests from public and private actors, without compromising the required actions or justifying any SDG-washing behavior, will demand critical coordinated efforts across governmental levels.

The SDGs provide numerous incentives for collaboration, including novel constellations of private and public efforts, bottom-up and network initiatives powerful enough to exercise some normative authority by orchestrating the building of national standards, the presentation of demands to international organizations, and the advancement of processes for formulating and implementing public policies (KUHN, D.; KIM, 2020). Particularly, the role of the private sector has gained relevance by “playing a critical role in addressing the challenges of the Anthropocene and providing potential solutions to address the SDGs.” But there is some doubt—, mainly in the Global South—that the private sector could be this ‘change-maker’ capable to “to support the development of purpose-driven businesses” (RAVEN; DAHLMANN; STUBBS; ALBUQUERQUE 2020).

**Orchestration and accountability.** Governance instruments at global, regional, national, and local levels around the 17 goals are crucial to generate coherence in public policies, international cooperation, and effective responses to the urgent need to achieve the SDGs. The dynamics that emerge from this process change the existing institutional landscapes daily, but there are still some critical challenges. The High-Level Political Forum risks failing in its task if it is not sufficiently equipped. While in-depth reforms are necessary, these would be difficult to realize in the current political context. Improvements to the everyday working methods and practices, however, are possible (BEISHEM 2020). On the other hand, the voluntary national reviews on the SDGs provide an assessment of the current levels of goal fulfillment and the directions for the future and enable political accountability between decision-makers and citizens by making government performance more transparent (BEXELL & JÖNSSON 2020).

**Transformative Potential of the SDGs.** The SDGs, when compared to previous development agendas, have a universal aspiration and turn all nations into ‘developing’ countries. One of the critical and more relevant aspects is *inclusiveness*: advancing the interests of the poorest, the most vulnerable, and marginalized people and aligning social justice with protecting Earth’s life-supporting systems. To achieve these goals, an “increased level of polycentricity” in the United Nations and other international organizations must give “local communities the global voice” they need to fulfill this transformative potential of the SDGs (GOEGELE 2020).

**Conciliate research with learning and outreach activities.** The SDGs open the challenge of learning, developing, and outreaching new actions and activities to overcome the “silo logic” of dealing individually with each of the SDGs and to improve applied research on SDG synergies to inform policy and provide evidence-based recommendations on how to solve practical problems surrounding the 17 SDGs and beyond. Accounts from the humanities and qualitative social sciences approaches, including discursive and interpretative work and social network analysis and integrated

assessment models, can contribute considerably to this mission. Such work can show how theories can help us to understand goal-based governance both through ideal normative political theory and social scientific research on social norms, which identify, spread, effect, and change explanations for the (in)effectiveness of the goals and targets, informing both qualitative and quantitative empirical research (GREEN 2020).

**Problematizing Indicators.** Considering there are still gaps in indicators constructions, conceptually, and statistically speaking, the debate on methods of measurement is fundamental to figure out the best suited and robust enough indicators to identify and trace the impacts of the SDGs on local realities. At the same time, the politics of global goals demands indicators that could communicate global and national governance arrangements. One of the most recent studies dealing with “indicator custodianship” aims to “increase global level institutional cooperation and effectiveness” (VAN DRIEL; BIERMANN; KIM; VILGE 2020; DOUSSIS & ESPA 2020). Moreover, in a global context of renewed conservatism and disbelief on the legitimacy of scientific knowledge have made indicators and methods of measurement, a shield of protection in cyber warfare within this frame of the information society. Doubts anchored in emotions of distrust and skepticism regarding the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs could fight back, valuing science and traditional knowledge, as well as evidence-based analysis and social technologies as powerful forces of social transformation. In sum, indicators must be seen as a positive tool to erect confidence-building mechanisms related to the 2030 Agenda implementation in Brazil and worldwide.

## A Brazilian perspective on global politics of the SDG

The Brazilian perspective on SDG implementation is that the economic growth, technological changes, and the accelerated urbanization process that the world has experienced in the last two centuries have brought improvements in people’s life expectations and wellbeing. However, this process did not happen without exploiting people and natural resources, increased pollution, and widening social and economic inequalities. The world, in turn, has been seeking to correct such trends, produce responses to the contradictions of progress, and, more recently, to avoid environmental collapse. In international politics, the consolidation of human rights—in a broad sense, encompassing rights that significantly extrapolate the right to protection of life and the body—and the urgency to deal with climate change are the most decisive political and institutional advances experienced in past decades.

In the same sense, the SDGs, approved at the 70th General Assembly of the United Nations (UN) in September 2015, can be considered the most ambitious global initiative aimed at economic development, social development, and environmental protection, poverty and inequalities reduction, improving the economic and social conditions of peoples integrated to the promotion of human rights.

Today, the most relevant discussions on the SDGs are focused on the different processes that could lead to the implementation of the Agenda. The debates that informed the construction of the SDGs, which originated more concretely at the Rio+20 Meetings, were rich and allowed the building

of a broad agenda that is more responsive to the demands of different countries, populations, and social organizations than previous efforts. However, the dilemmas and difficulties encountered in its implementation deserve significantly greater attention and political effort.

The approval of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs impacts different aspects of Brazilian international relations. From the understanding it promotes about financing for development, the mechanisms for international development cooperation and official AID assistance, planning and implementation of public policies, to the way it builds international norms and rules, the 2030 Agenda is an essential policy framework. Likewise, it raises criticisms about the conceptions of sustainable development and reflections on the controversies related to the economic, social, and environmental setbacks experienced in different parts of the planet, but particularly under Jair Bolsonaro's Presidency.

Many studies have also pointed out gaps and silences, and possible internal contradictions to the SDGs themselves. Indeed, more in-depth and less passionate studies are still needed. Most importantly, it is urgent to build, through interactions between science and innovation, public policies, and activism answers to the most significant problems experienced by humanity, which, to a large extent, are pointed out by the 2030 Agenda.

The eternal human desire for progress, development, and emancipation places us on a mission to understand the global development agendas in their historical perspective—by considering the forces that stimulate advances and those that impose setbacks. These questions lead us to another issue that runs through the emergence of the SDGs: understanding how the concept of sustainable development has evolved in international studies and how it is connected to the search for balance between economic, environmental, and social development.

Just as critical as reflecting on the concept and operability of sustainable development is the need to understand the weight and role of international politics and economics in building the means necessary to achieve the objectives and targets built with the approval of the SDGs. In this sense, the understanding of how the regulatory framework established with the SDGs and its set of targets will influence the internationalization of these commitments and the implementation of policies aimed at sustainable development gain relevance.

This is when the most current outlines of the debates on the 2030 Agenda arise; specifically, the understandings that global dilemmas impact the implementation of goals related to poverty alleviation, access to health and education, gender equality, violence reduction, etc. Identifying how to overcome these dilemmas and move towards implementing the SDGs is a challenge that will require responses at all levels and from different actors. Answers must be sought in the traditional forms of international governance, in the current public policy, cooperation, and international aid models, and by stimulating innovations in the various fields of science and public interventions.

In the broad universe that the concept of sustainable development encompasses, environmental sustainability is highlighted. This point deserves relevance due to the urgency of combating climate change and the social and economic effects produced by environmental degradation. The different ways in which countries have dealt with the environment will directly affect their populations, but they can also affect global wellbeing. Another issue that deserves emphasis in international development

and which is highlighted in the SDGs is the need to deal with the problem of increasing economic and social inequality, due to its perverse effects on almost all the objectives that make up the Agenda.

We should acknowledge that the publication of this dossier during the most severe international health emergency in a century, with the outbreak of COVID-19, significantly reinforces the importance of dealing urgently with the multiple problems associated with underdevelopment and the way we exploit natural resources. The pandemic is showing the need to build more accessible and resolvable health systems, to reduce the social vulnerabilities that afflict billions of people, and to develop healthier ways of interacting with the environment.

Finally, in Brazil, there are some interesting initiatives on progress, such as the elaboration of a dictionary of SDG terms aiming to amalgamate a Global South perspective on the matter; the development of meaningful research on local realities and their connections with the SDGs; the incorporation of the Agenda by local governments, non-governmental organizations, and universities, as opposed to the negationist and anti-sustainability Agenda of the federal government; the construction of an “SDG 18” on racial equality as a tool to help fighting racism in the country; and the constitution of a Brazilian Public Universities Network on the 2030 Agenda.

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