# The sustainable development goals: A universalist promise for the future

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ABSTRACT

The Sustainable Development Goals (*Agenda 2030*) have evoked optimism but have also been criticized for reproducing a universal template grounded in a western and neoliberal ideology. Identifying three strands of responses/critiques on the SDGs from a review of literature across several disciplines, I analyze what they have to say in the light of histories of past development work. I analyze how universalism is understood differently in different disciplinary approaches and how, despite its limitations, *Agenda 2030* might provide a platform to meet current challenges across the world and a framework to talk across different geographies and disciplines. While a delinking from current development and global economic structures are needed for change, I explore how the SDGs can be used to redeploy development to change those very structures. I argue that decolonizing development calls for changing development structures from inside out as much as finding new ways of being outside it.

## 1. Introduction

The Sustainable Development Goals (*Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*) have evoked optimism but also been criticized for reproducing a universal template grounded in a western and neoliberal ideology. The genealogy of mainstream development with its focus on economic growth is evident in the goals. Postcolonial scholarship has drawn attention to how 'development' has embodied in a subtler way, the hierarchy of colonialization's civilizing mission (Cooper and Stoler, 1997:35; Escobar, 1995). The SDGs are seen by many as an extension of this universalist development agenda, promoted by the global North, supported by elites in the South and built on 'a globally instituted neoliberalism' (McMichael, 2017).

Yet, as critics too acknowledge, *Agenda 2030*'s principles of people, planet, prosperity, peace and partnership, go beyond past postcolonial ambitions to develop that which is not developed, to one that addresses a common future for all (McMichael, 2017). The challenges are universal: to address environmental, economic and social goals together and that these goals are meant for all countries, in the global North and the South. Absent since the 1970s, the discourse of inequality and justice, once again characterizes the global development agenda (Ziai, 2016:199). Compared to the much-criticized *Millennium Development Goals* that preceded *Agenda 2030*, the process of defining the new goals was anchored in human rights principles and, within the limitations of global arenas, regarded as an unusually inclusive process.

Work towards the SDGs is taking place amidst the intensifying urgency of climate change, biodiversity loss, epidemics, migration and wars that call for redressal across national borders. Across the world, national interests, far-right political parties, ideologies and social movements, deploying the language of culture and tradition are increasingly exercising influence, threatening the rights of

minorities and dismissing climate change (see Chatterji, 2019; Lockwood, 2018; Scoones, 2018). Sustainability with justice calls for very different world(s)[1] and universalism than what we have today.

In this article, I probe the promises and deceits of universalism in the SDGs. I ask whether despite its limitations, *Agenda 2030* provides a platform to take on current challenges and enable conversations across North/South geographies and across disciplines to change development itself. Fanon (1963), one of the most influential anti-imperialist theorists, proposed a universalism where every man and woman would have his or her human dignity recognized by others. Does development have to be jettisoned to reach this universalism and to 'change the terms of the conversation,' as some argue (Mignolo, 2016)? Or can it be redeployed?

Going beyond epistemological critiques of development, the central question in this paper is how we may work towards political strategies, organization and practice by drawing on existing development structures and the strengths of different disciplines and fields for transformation(s) that go beyond general calls for more civil society and grassroots democracy. New social imaginaries and utopias are needed to guide deliberate transformation for sustainable futures (Riedy & Waddock, 2022). But, 'real utopias' need clear headed, rigorous and viable alternatives to existing social institutions that embody our deepest aspirations but also take seriously the problem of practical design and accessible waystations to help us move in the right direction (Wright, 2011: 37). I ask, what kind of (universal) space, language and tools (with particular attention to indicators that are at the heart of the SDGs) can the SDGs provide as waystations to achieve a much-needed transformation to a sustainable world with dignity for all?

I review literature on development histories, that is, I 'walk backwards into the future' (Ramos et al., 2019: 23) to analyze how the development machinery has responded to struggles for change in the past and, undertake a review of current literature on the SDGs across several disciplines to explore its possibilities today. In the latter, I identify three major responses/critiques to the SDGs in the literature, reflecting different epistemological approaches – from the more accepted mainstream development approach to those that were highly critical of the foundations of the SDGs themselves. Proponents of different approaches tend to remain within their theoretical framings (and journals), foreclosing a much-needed conversation on development.

A major source of contention among them is on the central place accorded to indicators in reaching the SDGs; conventionally taken as objective and universal accounts of reality, but in fact shown to be instrumental in shaping world views and reality (c.f. Desrosières, 1998; Porter, 1995). SDG indicators, critics contend, reinforce the denial of politics and inequalities inherent in the SDGs. Following Beckert (2013), I explore how we may regard indicators as 'fictional expectations' in work towards future utopias, where underlying the imagination of a certain future state is a story of how the present will be transformed through several causally linked steps. Thinking of indicators as 'fictions,' of what could be, would provide orientation in decision-making despite the uncertainty inherent in the situation and be a source of creativity.

Bringing the three approaches to the SDGs into conversation in the light of past development histories, I analyze how development spaces created by the SDGs and their language of human rights may provide grounds for change and how the depoliticized use of indicators, might be turned around for radical openings. My question is not directed at the intrinsic merits of universalizing or relativizing ideologies or visions. I focus on the ways in which the goals and indicators may or may not be 'contact zones' (Pratt, 1992) to be harnessed for political projects by different people; contact zones that came into being because of diverse aspects and relations and could lead to new ones. After Pratt (1991), contact zones are social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power. I show how while some, such as global North actors or commercial interests may dominate certain forums, other actors determine to varying extents what gets absorbed into their own and what it gets used for (see Horn and Grugel ahead). I analyze ahead how the new language of the SDGs in these contact zones makes way for challenging the dominance of some, especially the global North.

I argue that rather than disengaging from the apparatus of development completely, the conversation around the SDGs can enable us to redeploy development for emancipatory and progressive ends as one way to 'change the terms of the conversation' itself. Paraphrasing the philosopher, Goodman (1978), worldmaking as we know it, starts not from nothing but from worlds already at hand; the making is remaking.

## 2. Methods and material

The approach to theory in this paper is eclectic though I situate myself within post and decolonial feminist and critical development studies and thus speak to the preoccupations of this tradition with greater confidence than it can to those outside it. From the global South but based in a university in the global North, I too inhabit different worlds and yet also a common world with many connections between them. this also makes me acutely aware, at the personal and wider level, of questions of race, gender and nationality. My position as a social scientist at a natural science university has prompted the need to speak across different disciplinary languages and has evoked a sense of urgency to go beyond development critiques to imagine a future in practical and concrete ways, by also using the infrastructure we have today. In this case, I turn to the SDGs as 'waystations' (Wright, 2011) towards new futures. Since the SDGs relate to a wide constituency, I draw on different bodies of literature and speak to and make claims of relevance to a wider interdisciplinary audience.

I discuss critiques of universal development (Section 3), the context of universalism today (Section 4) and analyze development histories (Section 5) to identify development spaces, the language and tools employed in struggles for change. Given the centrality of

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[1] My use of the plural world(s) is to indicate that though we make different worlds, we also inhabit a common world where we interact and that is inextricably linked across geographies, class and other dimensions. These concern both geographies and dimensions of power as well as different disciplines.

the indicators in development and in *Agenda 2030*, I review social science literature to discuss conceptual claims and defining characteristics of indicators that I analyze later in relation to the SDGs.

Section 6 (*SDGs and their critiques)* is based on the analysis of a large database of articles, chapters, books and grey literature on the SDGs.[2] I carried out digital searches in Google Scholar and Web of Science for the period from 2015 to 2020 for phrases such as SDGs (259 articles)/MDGs (75 articles/chapters) and associated words such as sustainability (259)/indicators (262- this included a number of books)/ targets (192)/ policy (300)/universalism (89)/development (968 – not all had to do with the SDGs directly even though the SDGs or MDGs were mentioned in passing and we sifted through them to see what would be relevant to the questions (see below) I posed to the literature). This literature led us to a range of journals beyond the development and environmental journals and disciplines with which we had started.

The final database included grey literature that was categorized separately (approximately 40 reports from organizations that included UNDP, ICSU, WHO, World Bank). The digital searches were supplemented by my experience of previous work in this field as well as by scouring the reference lists of the literature we found. I also looked up UN websites for how they wrote about and presented the SDGs and questions on them. There appears to be a degree of overlap between academic and policy-focused research in this field, though I have focused largely on academic texts in the review.

I studied the literature for the following questions: the background and history of the SDGs,[3] what different authors characterized as positive and negative about the goals, how they perceived the question of scale (local/regional/national/ international) in relation to how the work of sustainability needed to be carried out, the role of the state and on where (and on what actors) responsibility and accountability needed to lie. I examined how the literature dealt with the role of the civil society as well as with global North/South dichotomies. Since the indicators emerged to be an important point of discussion, I paid special attention to what various scholars wrote on indicators *vis a vis* the SDGs.

Because the question of sustainability has been taken up in relation to many different disciplines, I draw on different though sometimes overlapping bodies of literature to conceptualize and reflect on the SDGs. Most of the literature came from what has come to be called Sustainability Sciences (mainly, though not only, ecologists, biologists and economists), from scholars of International Relations (often political scientists) and finally from a variety of disciplines and fields including Development and Environmental Studies (sociology, anthropology, geography and political science). Among the more frequently cited journals were *Sustainability, Nature Geoscience, World Development, Development and Change, Globalizations, Global Policy*. Although there is overlap, overall, different approaches were found in different journals and they rarely referred to each other, a conversation that I believe is needed to address transformation in a rigorous and collaborative way. The methodology of this article is an attempt to carry out a conversation drawing on and across these different strands and looking back to the heterogeneous history of development to find openings for the future.

## 3. Universalism and its discontents

Colonization and the wealth of scientific discoveries about the natural world, categorized as separate from the social, gave rise to a 'planetary consciousness' (Pratt, 1992:15–37). This fuelled the enlightenment in Europe and characterizes the organization of the modern(global) world today. This planetary consciousness, reinforced by an apprehension of climate change and global environmental crises, also underpins the SDGs. The separation of nature and culture/society that modern thinking implies is recognized by the SDGs as something that needs redressing. The philosophical basis of the modern world, Enlightenment humanism, was based on the idea of the exercise of reason and universality of rights. It brought into being a new idea of statehood and eventually the nation, the artifice that frames the global community that agreed upon the SDGs. As many post colonial scholars have shown, enlightenment and scientific universal knowledge were not something that merely arose from the West and transferred to the rest of the world. They arose from the work of actors across the world. But this knowledge is also inseparable from colonization and imperial domination (McClintock, 1995; Rajan, 2006), a legacy that continues to haunt the SDGs today.

Postcolonial scholars have argued that in the decades following World War II, also the period of decolonization, development served as a bridge between the North and South. Many saw the hegemonic hold of Western imperialism (Escobar, 1995) being made possible by wanting to improve those considered not yet developed. Postcolonial feminists (e.g. Mohanty, 1988) brought attention to androcentric and Eurocentric ideologies in development programs that labelled all third world women as victims, reproducing divides between the idea of the progressive North as a role model for the patriarchal and oppressive South.

Critics argue that the focus on technological solutions based on a positivistic science claimed objective knowledge on development and the environment, but that the quantitative measures and indicators they used were in fact highly subjective where the West was the template. This ostensibly objective approach rendered core concerns of development - injustice, power and alternative ways of living - as technical matters to be solved through development (Ferguson, 1990; Li, 2007). Such 'post-development' thinking is a critique of universal assumptions of progress based on western-driven models (models that also underpin many SDGs). The universal path to development came to be seen as being dictated by a 'neoliberal' ideology, wrapped up in an abstract language of business and finance (Moretti and Pestre, 2015; Watts, 2003). I go on to look at this context more closely.

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[2] I would like to thank Mia Ågren for her invaluable help with the digital searches and compiling the database.
[3] finding surprisingly little on the politics of the writing itself that I otherwise heard discussed (pers comm) among those who had been involved. Exceptions include Fukuda Parr and Mucchala, 2020.

## 4. The context of universalism today: economic globalization, national interests and endangered liberties

The SDGs have been launched in a context where states are being reconfigured by the privatizing of decisions once held to be part of the public arena, and an enhanced ability of capitalists, especially in the financial arena, to set norms regulating state behavior. Corporations are important, yet not accountable for environmental destruction (Banerjee, 2003). Business interests and companies are being regarded as important actors in development and the previous focus on raising official donor contributions is surpassed by the call for private finance to fund the SDGs. Any analysis of the SDGs must be attentive to the possibilities and risks of the emerging development finance regime that they are helping legitimate, making accountability and responsibility for development difficult to pin down (Mawdsley, 2018).

Movements from around the world have rejected mainstream development and the universalist humanitarian discourse on which the SDGs are seen to be based. Other ways of thinking

– indigenous cosmologies, ecofeminism, de-growth movements – have called for re-localization and grassroots democracy, to eschew global structures and the division of nature and culture. Mignolo, influential proponent of decolonial theory, calls to disengage with structures of development (2016), arguing (2006) that the aim of decolonial thought is to show that most people (who are oppressed and racialized) do not think in terms of, and neither do they care about things like universal human rights (as advocated by the SDGs) which are based on an imperial view of humanity. Invoking Fanon, he calls instead to privilege human dignity which he sees as constantly denied by the rhetoric of modernity in which basic dignity takes second place to progress and participation in formal structures and institutions such as citizenship or rule of law. Hiding in development discourse, critics see the imposition of the powerful.

International and humanist sentiments (epitomized by the SDGs) have also been countered by the rise of protectionist politics by states, the embrace of nationalism over regional or global integration and appeals for security often at the expense of civil liberties (Scoones, 2018). In a resurgence of national interests in the global North, voices have argued to direct spending at home rather than on development aid (Gulrajani, 2017). Populist movements, right-wing Republicans in the US, Brexit in Britain and far-right groups in Europe (Brubaker, 2017; Rodrik, 2018) epitomize ethno-national/cultural cleavages and the repudiation/aggression against immigrants and refugees. Right-wing populism is pronounced in climate change denialism and defense of fossil fuels, which have undergone a global resurgence in recent years (Farrell, 2016).

In the global South, governments such as in China and India have formed an avowed postcolonial identity around a sense of being a victim of Western imperialism. They have appropriated ideas and technologies such as sovereignty and nationalism, combining that with stories of historical greatness and pre-Westernized civilizational-national culture. However, within their sovereign space they act imperially, 'acknowledging cultural difference, but erasing political identities [defined as secessionist]'(Anand, 2012:68–83).

Countries both 'developing' and 'developed' are facing rising discontents with globalization and elite cosmopolitanism, prolonged economic, health and humanitarian crises and rising insecurities (Park, 2017) due to pandemics and war. Pointing to this 'converging divergence,' Horner and Hulme (2019) call for a 'global' approach to development given the increasing differentiation within and overlap across global North and South societies. Others (Almeny, 2019; Bangura, 2019) caution that persistent inequalities between the global North and South still haunt development. Development policies have created new inequalities in countries in the global South (Almeny, 2019) and climate programs have helped displace responsibility for climate change from the global North to the South (Arora-Jonsson, Westholm, & Temu, 2016). International arenas continue to be dominated by global North actors (see Nhamo and Nhamo, 2017).

Given North/South and racial inequalities as well as the privileging of the market and technologies over justice in development, can the internationally agreed to *Agenda 2030* act as a platform for local and global collectives in their struggles for justice, dignity and sustainability? To answer this question, it is important to 'walk backwards' (Ramos et al., 2019) to understand the future. Thus, in the next section, I analyze the histories of the spaces, language and tools of a universal development to understand their part in creating political strategies, organization and practice in emancipatory struggles for change. I pay especial attention to the history of indicators as they are seen as a quintessential tool to measure SDG success.

## 5. Spaces, language and tools of development

The post-WWII decolonization period was a period of new geopolitics and the assertion of new identities from the international to local spheres. As is evident from the discussion above, North/South inequalities are embedded in development relations. Kumar (2010) writes that in the modern period, new nation-states in Europe, rather than dissolving empire could be seen as continuing as miniature empires, or existed alongside empires in their relations to each other and to the world outside the west. Such powerful actors are seen as driving a neoliberal growth agenda for development. Yet, a closer look at the ground also reveals heterogeneity important to consider when discussing the SDGs. Further, while the nation state is the cornerstone of the SDG edifice, development work has always traversed such boundaries.

### 5.1. From geopolitical to local spaces

The SDGs represent an international platform for development. International spaces have rightfully been criticized in the past for failing labor in favor of bourgeois elites in the global South (Larsen, 2000). But research also indicates how beginning in the postwar period, international and regional agreements and international conferences provided the space and a platform for nations and groups to negotiate their identities, to reconceptualize their place in the world and forge solidarities over a range of issues. As scholarship has

shown (Cooper & Packard, 1997; Craggs, 2014; Pasha, 2012), for the global South, spaces created through development were significant 'contact zones' in negotiating national identities.

Communities have invoked universal rights calling upon an international sphere or on structures supported by international development to press their claims in face of local inequalities and oppressions (Keck & Sikkink, 1998). World Women's Conferences helped connect women's groups and legitimize rights and participation in decision-making across different levels and devise strategies across national borders (Basu, 1995; Bunch, 2012). Development venues also became spaces for development critiques. In the 1990s such critique, especially from global South civil society led to a 'paradigm shift in development thinking' (Shakleton, 2002) that eventually culminated in the emphasis on sustainability, participation, gender-equality and justice in the development lexicon evident in the SDGs today.

The 'universal' language of modernity and democracy created new situations. Chatterjee brings attention to how more and more people in the global South have a stake in the modern development regime…perhaps in different ways from ideas of citizenship in western liberal democracies, but nonetheless as citizens relating to and using enlightenment notions of rights, modernity and development (2012:45). Feminist research on encounters around development programs have shown to produce active, dissident, political actors who can provide the ground for mobilization of political society in which marginalized subjects make claims on the state, negotiate entitlements, and contest social hierarchies (Lingam, 2002). Universal and 'common discourses' such as these can be powerful in building consensus on issues and in creating spaces where scripts can be disrupted (Martello & Jasanoff, 2004).

Anthropologists emphasize the messiness of development practice, to how 'development' actors connect across boundaries, without erasing difference between the global North and South, the public and voluntary, as they strive to reconstruct, interpret, manipulate the image of the development project (e.g. Mosse, 2005; Rottenburg, 2009; Sharma, 2006). Criticizing scholars who reject all development in place of alternatives, Pieck (2011) and Laurie (2005) show how activists and indigenous groups can find it expedient not to reject projects and interventions, but instead to engage them to create new alliances that cut across scale. The language of justice and rights has been crucial in these efforts.

## 5.2. The ambiguous language of development

(Re)definitions of community and indigenous identities are not separate from transnational development discourses. The theoretical project of distinguishing between what might be the local, indigenous, the modern, traditional, or neoliberal is far from simple. No cultures and natures are wholly isolated (Arora-Jonsson, 2016:101). A simple binary of surrendering to western ideals versus indigenist resistance will necessarily have major difficulties in finding space for sensitive studies of how 'modern' ideas (Sarkar, 1997) about development, participation or women's empowerment (such as those found in the SDGs) are called upon by people in their struggles for justice. Indigenous groups have called upon notions of 'sovereignty,' associated with a universalist western agenda (Alfred, 2002; Barker, 2005) to legitimize and shape their claims. Women in remote villages in India have used the universal (and foreign) terminology of 'women's rights' to make claims in their struggles against injustice (Arora-Jonsson, 2013:129). While development policies may be driven by universalizing economic models and thought, development's ambiguous language (e.g., one that promotes participation while it seeks to capitalize on it or that speaks of gender equality and sustainability while its structures circumvent it), also ensures that its practices are diverse and multiple.

As described in Section 3, the lexicon of universal principles was co-opted into the depoliticized realm of development. But human-centered approaches also made their way into the MDGs (Gabay & Ilcan, 2017) and eventually into the SDGs: for example in SDG 5 and 10 on gender and other inequalities or in 16 on just institutions. Feminists' engagement with development has changed development on the ground (as discussed above) but also on the inside, by femocrats within development organizations (Resurrección & Elmhirst, 2020). More recently, feminists have brought attention to the need to read SDG 5 targets in a range of fields, including for example forests (Arora-Jonsson et al., 2019).

The two sections above highlight how development discourses - on local management, gender-equality, people's participation and justice - have opened spaces for communities to forward their claims and interests in the messy politics of development practice and have provided an international space from which to challenge local inequalities. An understanding of these histories is crucial for conceptualizing the possibilities for *Agenda 2030* to reorient development work towards sustainability and justice. I now turn to the focus on indicators, a primary tool in development work that aims towards universalism but also one with the potential to erase differences and impose an oppressive template on varied and heterogenous contexts.

## 5.3. Tools of development and the focus on indicators

As research shows, numbers are not benign or representative of 'reality.' They smuggle in a new social order and web of belief. Indicators produce reality, affecting both those quantifying and what is being quantified (see Desrosières, 1998; Espeland & Sauder, 2007; Porter, 1995). Numbers discipline, control and change realities. Within development, indicators based on a western template have often been imposed on countries in the global South with little attention to contextual realities (Rottenburg, 2015). They can serve to depoliticize potentially political issues or alter the distribution of power in global governance and development and establish epistemic authority of powerful global institutions (Davis, 2012; Erkkilä & Piironen, 2014; Satterthwaite, 2011).

But, as scholars point out, indicators also provide guidance in times of uncertainty for people wanting to speak to each other in limited forums. Numbers promise universalism and indicators are sought after to provide one number for a range of different situations. In a historical study of indicators, Porter (2015) comments on how the need to calculate and quantify, to render different phenomena commensurable with one another, has been driven by a desire for a common metric to make conversation possible, a

'common discourse' (Martello & Jasanoff, 2004) for change. This has been an important issue within international development. Indicators seek to make different phenomena commensurate and create relations among things that seem fundamentally different (Espeland & Stevens, 1998).

While SDG indicators can be seen to stem from a 'neoliberal' background that encourages competition as a moral value, shared statistics and indicators assume a shared worldview and terms and sharing could be argued as good, because only by sharing something, we can see what we disagree upon (Davies, 2015). For example, the Human Development Index developed in the 1990s broadened the discussion on development beyond the economic, incorporating broader notions of sustainability into measures of development (Sagar & Najam, 1998). It recognized that human beings are the primary ends as well as the principal means of development, an aspect neglected in the analyses of growth and development in the years following WWII (Anand & Sen, 2000). In the words of Martello and Jasanoff (2004), the index created a 'common' or universal discourse on human wellbeing that made it possible to change the existing script.

Indicators mask underlying politics. Yet, "the technical game" may be "the only code available for carrying out transcultural negotiations under postcolonial conditions and the norm of reciprocity" (Rottenburg, 2009:142). The shared 'official script' of development (Mosse, 2005) or 'meta-code' as opposed to the varied 'cultural codes' (Rottenburg, 2009) is itself situated and contextual 'but pragmatically treated as universal in order to make communication in 'heterogenous trading zones' (as the *Agenda 2030* might be seen) possible (Rottenburg, 2015:17). Scholars have argued that indicators are useful in bridging broad concepts of human development and environmental sustainability, fields and literatures that tend to be separate but need to learn much from each other (Neumayer, 2012; Sagar & Najam, 1998). Similarly, Joshi et al. (2015) point to how modelling across scale can reveal not just contexts with nothing in common, but shared characteristics that may be explained better as parts of a structural problem. Such modelling across scale may also be used not only to ascertain shared characteristics but to uncover important *connections* across the globe including unequal and oppressive relations highlighted by post and decolonial scholars. Either as uncovering such connections or in their role as creating 'fictional expectations' (c.f. Beckert, 2013), processes around the production of 'universal' indicators across different geographies, could have the potential to create new forms of knowledge and action across the globe.

However, scholars warn that phenomena that can easily be quantified are considered, while more difficult and structural causes are ignored, since they are not seen (Espeland & Stevens, 1998:314). This is exemplified by Gerrets (2015) study of Malaria funding where all focus was on the symptoms rather than underlying problems of health information systems. It is thus important to be aware of the limits and shortcomings of the constructedness of the quantified performance information and that people also rely on other forms of judgment, even in their use of indicators (Mugler, 2015).

There is the need for both quantitative and qualitative understandings. Indicators need to be coupled with qualitative information derived in context, counting what we know and knowing what to count (Yamin, 2019:52). This is needed to ensure that improving the accountability of development actors through the creation of transparent standards is not frustrated by the logics of audit (Satterthwaite, 2011: 873). Espeland (2015) advocates studying the narratives created through indicators to help understand how actors make sense of their worlds, which is crucial for understanding the impact of quantification.

Such an approach also makes it evident that indicators cannot be static and need constant work so as not to fall into conceptual complacency (Sagar & Najam, 1998). It is important to consider the "by-products and implications of the actions they call for" (Porter, 2015:55). While they are meant to bridge places and issues, to be effective, some have emphasized the importance of a more modest approach, that is, restricting their use to local, well-constrained situations (Sterzel, 2015:318).

Indicators have been used in numerous ways, for advocacy by less powerful actors in the production of knowledge and social justice well as in demanding state accountability. For example, agreements on numerical targets for child mortality make it an effective advocacy tool even while there may be disagreement on its parameters (Lange & Klasen, 2017). Progressive gender-equality policies in Sweden were enabled by statistics and indicators on wage differences, labor time and education (c.f. Akanji, 2008). People and not just states and agencies have used indicators to improve service delivery by the government by pointing to quantitative accountability. In a review of literature on quantification, Menniken and Espeland (2019: 231) show how statistics helped make visible homosexuality as a universal category that enabled political organization, shaping the modern gay rights movement. Similarly, Latino participation in the US Census helped to secure greater political and economic power. Groups use statistics to appeal to and resist state and economic power in a variety of ways. Visibility is both a product of power and a strategy to rectify it. Even when public statistics are shown to be wrong, the fact that these numbers exist in the first place have made the gap between universal objectives and practice visible, and underlying conflicts or measurement problems possible to deal with (Zenker, 2015:123).

### 5.4. Messy politics on the ground – complicating development scripts

In sum, analyzing the spaces, language and tools of development and their use in everyday development on the ground, away from the depoliticized policy and program documents, reveals local contexts that are highly political.

This politics can get obscured in overarching critiques of neoliberalism. While the critique of neoliberal policies is important, the conceptual proliferation of 'neoliberal' development as a critique can lead to the overidentification, under a single and misleading label, of different sets of phenomena that are not only different but often also in contradiction to one another (Venugopal, 2015). The danger lies in that differences between unconnected phenomena are clubbed together and discussed with all too predictable effects, obscuring the details and complexity of the processes involved. Larner (2003) calls for a careful study of all that is called neoliberal to overcome the hopelessness generated by models that do not work well enough. She writes that because the neoliberal project is seen as a monolith, 'as a unified set of policies or political ideology, the apparently mundane practices of how 'neoliberal' spaces, states, subjects are constituted is lost (511).' Little attention is paid to the different variants of development, to the hybrid nature of

contemporary policies and programs, or to the multiple and contradictory aspects of neoliberal spaces, techniques, and subjects, both in the global North and South.

Civil society, indigenous networks, movements for food sovereignty as well as alternative development networks and bureaucrats often converge in different permutations across the international, national, regional and local spheres (Forte, 2002; Laurie, 2005; Pieck, 2011) to defy the labelling of development and market interventions as universal 'neoliberal' imperatives. There is a need to change existing relations and structures, but given the entanglements of our times, the question of what structures to disengage from or how development structures and tools may instead be used for new and radical purposes needs more discussion. I turn to the critiques of the SDGs and the indicators at the center of their differences and reflect on how they may be used for other, quietly radical objectives.

## 6. The SDGs and critiques

The critique of the MDGs led to an intensive and inclusive goal-setting process for the SDGs that involved a wide array of people and a global community consisting of governments, civil society and the private sector. Koehler (2016) calls the goals a stunning achievement for their ambition of transformation, and because the *Agenda* succeeded in marrying the goals around economic and/or social development with that of the environment, a process that began in 1972 with the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment. Fukuda-Parr (2015) reports on how the agreement led to a 'rare sense of euphoria' among not only government delegates but also civil society activists.

There are seventeen SDGs.[4] Several are expected to come to grips with what are normally regarded as specifically 'natural phenomena' and defined in what may be seen as the modern western episteme and language of science – water and sanitation(6), climate change(13), marine environments(14), life on land(15). Broadly, the economic focus of many, including Decent work and Economic growth(8) and Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure(9) embeds them in the dominant positivistic scientific paradigm that are seen to build on neutral and objective assessments of phenomena such as the economy or public infrastructure. At the same time, the language of some, such as Gender-equality(5), Reduced Inequalities(10) and Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions(16) can be seen as striving towards solidarity and political action in questions of justice and human rights where subjectivity cannot be ignored. The overall emphasis placed on synergies and connections between the goals and the willingness to bridge the environmental social/economic divide, opens up for the imperative and potential for natural and social scientists as well as myriad of other groups to work together.

Each SDG is divided into a number of targets and each target has indicators to measure success. The indicators are developed under the aegis of the Inter-Agency and Expert Group on SDG Indicators (IAEG-SDGs). Indicators are meant 'to mobilize actors, as a report card of progress and management tool.'[5] The High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) is the institution that under the auspices of the UN General Assembly (GA) and the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) has been given the central role in overseeing follow-up and review of the SDGs at the global level (UNGA, 2015). Governments have committed 'to fully engage in conducting regular and inclusive reviews of progress at sub- national, national, regional and global levels' as part of the process (UNGA, 2015:para77) and the review system is envisioned as a multilevel one (Karlsson-Vinkhuyzen, 2018).

Based on the reading of the literature on the SDGs, I identified three major responses/critiques: 1) Scholars within the mainstream development paradigm and from within what has come to be called sustainability sciences, focus largely on questions of implementation and scientific efficacy. They aspire to better quantitively grounded science that could be applied universally to many different contexts. 2) The second 'internationalist approach' calls for institutional/structural change to ensure a global community and better collaborative international institutions in order to respond to universal aspirations such as human rights. 3) The third takes a critical stance against the universal neoliberal ideology being promoted by the SDGs and regards them as reproducing a flawed development paradigm. Below, I review these discussions on the SDGs in light of the spaces, language and tools they potentially provide for the needed transformation.

### 6.1. Better science for implementation: critiques from within

There have been apprehensions about SDG implementation and measurements (Hák, 2016; Jacob, 2017). The lack of scientific data for indicators, weaknesses in monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, problems around technology transfers and development aid have been at the forefront of what are often regarded as implementation challenges. To assess change and to see if implementation is going in the right direction, proponents of this approach (often from within sustainability sciences) call for strengthening the performance measurement system of *Agenda 2030*. Scholars have proposed alternative indices and modelling approaches for well-being and SDG implementation (Costanza, 2016) and the need for a shared understanding on how the SDGs might be operationalized (Sachs, 2019). They see the need for systems dynamics models that would assess interactions and synergies over space and time, causes and effects, as well as stocks and flows (Constanza et al., 2016). Le Blanc (2015) proposes network analysis to study commonalities between the themes and targets of the SDGs, and the need to model the SDGs as a biophysical and economic system to be able to deal with the goals structurally.

Others have criticized conceptualization failures. Bengtsson (2018) point out that SDG 12 on consumption did not heed the

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[4] https://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/sustainable-development-goals.html
[5] The set of global indicators 'will be complemented by indicators at the regional and national levels which will be developed by Member States' (UN 2015, 32).

research on sustainable consumption in its conceptualization and has avoided going all the way that it could have. Sachs (2019) and Karlsson-Vinkhuyzen (2018) bring attention to the need to reflect on accountability and policy integration by national and international bodies responsible for the goals. They show that goal 17[6] that acknowledges the need for partnerships and integration does little to show how the actors involved in partnerships would be held accountable or work with policy integration.

The thrust of this stream of thinking does not question the framework but directs attention to problems of accountability, implementation, indices and suitable models. Scholarship has focused extensively on producing better and more rigorous and relevant indicators. They call for strengthening the science behind the SDGs and experts as imperative in developing a conceptual framework for selecting appropriate indicators for targets from existing sets or formulating new ones and providing knowledge required for designing, implementing and monitoring the SDGs. Many see transformations as requiring complementary actions by governments, civil society, science and business (see Sachs, 2019).

### 6.2. Need for institutional change: not global or international enough

A different line of thought focusses on the limits of the SDG institutional framework. Scholars of International Relations have criticized the lack of a centralized governance structure at the international level (Cimadamore, 2016:132) as well as concrete global social governance reform measures (Pogge & Sengupta, 2016). Earth system governance scholars (Kanie & Biermann, 2017) identify the detachment of the SDGs from the international legal system and binding obligations as major limitations of their weak institutional status. They call for more formal commitments and benchmarks, the mobilization of resources to achieve and govern the SDGs, and the need for integration with other international agreements.

According to Deacon (2016), *Agenda 2030* has nothing to say on global taxation or to challenge worrying international trade developments. Brisset (2017) suggests forcing institutions to devise a new global tax system and a mechanism that would allow developing countries like those of the Caribbean to collect funds from transnational organizations that often find ways to avoid national tax requirements. Cimadamore (2016) observes that international poverty law and human rights approaches can team up in the search for accountability in the realization of the SDGs and use the process of transformative lawyering to hold states to account. He argues that since states are units from which goals and targets ought to be reached, there is a need to find ways to make their commitment to eradicate poverty (as part of the strategy of the SDGs) enforceable under a reliable and effective system with high levels of decentralization and that this is logically possible.

Pogge and Sengupta (2016) argue that the solution should not have been to dilute the SDGs by aiming for whatever is feasible with national resources, specifying instead, the responsibilities of wealthy countries and enterprises toward making sustainable development work.[7] The concepts of partnership (SDG 17) and universalism would then have been more meaningful, rather than what they fear they are likely to become: a smokescreen for obscuring extreme global inequalities. Fukuda-Parr and Hegstad (2018) emphasize the need for a global collective for these issues and the responsibility – and hence also accountability – of international organizations and rule-making bodies and a more serious approach to inequalities between countries.

The crucial points argued for here are that the SDGs are simply not international enough, emphasizing the importance of geopolitical spaces, cooperation and of civil-society organizations. The appearance of questions of equality, justice and dignity in official documents were, in fact, primarily the result of civil society voices in the negotiations whose interventions shaped procedural rules that enhanced opportunities for grassroots groups to participate in future negotiations (Cummings, 2016).

### 6.3. The Neoliberal Critique: a not so hidden template

There are many versions of the critique of the neoliberal template of the SDGs. They adopt different analytical perspectives though most draw on Foucauldian and post-structural arguments of governmentality in varied fields. Weber (2017) regards the entire *Agenda 2030* a neoliberal project, congruent with modernization theory, that if implemented, would be used against legitimate and necessary protests and contestations over development initiatives and alternatives. She proposes that to 'leave no one behind' implies that no one will be/ought to be outside/excluded from this neoliberal agenda. Brisset (2017) posits that the ideas of progress underlying the SDGs engender a universalist Western vision that privileges Western power and shapes global economic and institutional arrangements that favor powerful Western stakeholders.

Gasper (2019) point to how business interests at the heart of neoliberal governance steer several SDGs, especially SDG 12 on 'responsible consumption and production,' arguing that the faith in new technologies and a production centered approach leaves leverage with the elite. However, they hope that since SDG 12 emerged as a standalone goal due to a push by global South countries to build pressure on developed countries, it also opens up a space to discuss its trajectory in the future.

Gabay and Ilcan (2017) criticize the reproduction of the underlying development agenda in the SDGs for the way in which individuals continue to be made into objects in need of help and then constructed as active subjects, responsible for their own development.[8] They comment on the tendency for global partnership calls in SDG 17 to innovate, connect, and be creative, as designed to

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[6] https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdg17.

[7] The phrase 'to be done in accordance with national circumstances/law' in several SDGs (such as property ownership for women in SDG 5) belies hopes for real change.

[8] For e.g. they cite the launching of the SDGs in Action mobile phone app as one way affective way of forming public intimacy around the goals for those with access to technologies forming intimate connections to both other individuals, but also corporate and governmental actors.

induce movement towards certain kinds of market-friendly subjectivity. Development sociologists, Sexsmith and McMichael (2015) find it puzzling that SDG visioning continues to assign principal responsibility to states for the post-2015 development agenda. They suggest reorienting planning to accommodate the global dimensions of current crises, especially the rights of land users, migrants and stateless workers.

Fletcher and Rammelt (2016) decry 'decoupling' in the SDG agenda, that is, divorcing of economic growth from its ecological impact. They call it a 'fantasy' that functions to obfuscate fundamental tensions among the goals of poverty alleviation, environmental sustainability, and profitable enterprise that the *Agenda* is intended to reconcile. In this way, decoupling serves to sustain faith in the possibility of attaining sustainable development within the context of a neoliberal capitalist economy that necessitates continual growth to confront inherent contradictions. Mignolo (2016) argues that while it would be difficult to argue with the framework and the goals, for the U.N. to 'change the terms of the conversation,' they would need to delink from the very structures that created and sustain it. He advocates working with alternative movements outside these structures.

The most egregious criticism on the universal appeal and danger of the SDGs has coalesced around debates on indicators, meant to monitor development progress.

*6.4. The battle over numbers: the will to universalize*

Indicators lie at the heart of the debates on the universalism of the SDGs. Scholars from within what I have identified as the first approach have emphasized the need to find the right indicators and refine them further, highlighted the lack or missing data in most countries needed for the indicators to function, brought attention to measurement challenges and to the need to find models for better synergies between different goals. Discussions have focused on evaluation methods, the imperatives of developing an index and dashboard for the assessment of national SDG baselines[9] and the conundrums of trying to measure the immeasurable (Dang, 2019; Hák, 2016; Schmidt-Traub, 2017). Several suggest models, step by step processual methods and new indices and dashboards (e.g. Le Blanc, 2015; Costanza, 2016). Some believe that the development of SDGs is a process of both scientific knowledge production and of political norm-creation and that if the process of indicators development was well designed and performed, both perspectives would be bridged in a final indicator framework (Hák, 2016:569; Rametsteiner, 2011).

This thinking sidesteps important questions that the other two approaches point to – of the politics and situatedness of science and the indicators. Death and Gabay (2015) argue that techniques of measuring, indexing, benchmarking, and auditing in the SDGs are not neutral, but are deeply political ways of inscribing a particular view of the world -most frequently a neo-liberal world of competitive states and entrepreneurial individuals amenable to rankings and zero-sum market exchanges. They fear that 'development is already highly bureaucratized and technologized, 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.'.

The inclusive political process of developing the SDGs is seen as being undermined by the much more technical process of producing the global indicators under the (IAEG-SDGs) (McNeill, 2019), epitomizing the tensions between moral ambitions in the language of human rights and having to present them in the language of (development) goals (Pogge & Sengupta, 2016:93). Besides the pitfalls of a technical process, there is concern about indicators in relation to the fascination with big data.[10] As traditional data sources such as national surveys appear to be insufficient, statisticians are considering whether big data may be used for the SDG indicators as the basis of democratic change. The idea with big data is that it can be used by everyone including communities, civil society organizations for democracy.

However, scholars (e.g. Mahajan, 2019) bring attention to the serious implications of such data for the ability of states to know and act upon their development problems on their own terms. Gabay and Ilcan (2017) write that apart from the 'predictive fallacy' of big data, whereby 'all data provide oligoptic view of the world' (Kitchen, 2014:4), the data produced tends to be what the organizations collating it, wish to see. They warn of the shimmer of big data that lends itself to a kind of universalism achieved by data and numbers where the citizen is summoned to act rather than responded to. This is of significance especially in relation to data used in indicator measurements.

For many, the universality of the indicators is questionable. King (2017) questions the relevance of the global indicators in education, as in his view, reaching them was unimaginable for many developing countries while close to routine or inconsequential for many OECD countries, thus being potentially unacceptable for both constituencies. According to him, the translation of the goal of 'ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities' to indicators had resulted in 'the rather quantitative global indicator tail wagging the rather quality-oriented SDG 4 dog.' In contrast to the sustainability researchers whose strategies address the imperative of addressing the systemic and structural problems to be addressed by the SDGs, Sexsmith and McMichael (2015) suggest complementing (or perhaps even replacing) universal global targets with locally owned, democratically developed plans for envisioning and implementing transformative social change. Ahead, I discuss how these differing approaches may be useful together.

The SDGs and their indicators invite a great deal of criticism. The two ends of the critique highlight two opposing epistemes in relation to the question of universalism and the SDGs – from one that leads to science and (objective) criteria for implementation, to the third that argues that given subjectivity of the template itself, what is needed is to delink from current structures altogether. In what

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[9] Countries are expected to report on these global indicators and the results appear in the UN's annual *Sustainable Development Goals Report.*

[10] In simple terms, big data is the collective noun for all new digital data arising from our digital activities and not necessarily based on survey data collected for a specific purpose.

follows, I draw on some of the points of tension in these approaches, on what we know from the histories of development as well as on emerging research on the implementation of the SDGs, to make provisional propositions on how, despite its many limitations, the *Agenda* can help to carve out new relations in geopolitics and on the ground, in order to change the present.

## 7. Using the SDG framework to change development

Given what we know about how spaces, language and tools of development have been mobilized on the ground as discussed in Section 5, here I discuss four ways in which the SDGs can provide important grounds for change: 1) in the expanded platforms they provide to connect across place, 2) in the (ambiguous) new language of justice and 3) that for the first time, the development gaze has also turned to the global North. 4) Given the history of the use of indicators, the infrastructures, science and labor invested in them, I argue that a critical perspective rather than discarding them, could be mobilized to enable indicators to act as 'contact zones,' and go beyond their role as a universalizing tool to respond to sustainability aspirations.

### 7.1. An international infrastructure and platform

The focus on business interests in sustainable development, on the decoupling of the environment and economy justified by technology and the weaknesses of international governance have led to calls to delink with current structures underpinning the SDGs that are seen as capitalist, neoliberal and colonial (Mignolo, 2016). Economic growth is sought to be decoupled from its environmental impact in several goals and targets (e.g.Fletcher & Rammelt, 2016). Yet, the simultaneous acknowledgement of the detrimental effects of industrial and financial growth on the environment and peoples in other goals and targets creates a tension in the *Agenda* that provides impetus for change.

As the history of development outlined above indicates, discarding the SDG infrastructure altogether entails disregarding an *international infrastructure and platform*. I argue that this universal space provides a 'contact zone,' vital for addressing environmental and social issues within nations and across borders. The highly globalized world economy and the prevailing profit-based hierarchy described in Section 4 is, as IR scholars point out, not something that can be overturned in single countries but needs to be based on a solidarity across national borders. As history shows (Section 5), such spaces provided the platform for nations and groups to reconceptualize their place in the world and forge solidarities (Cooper & Packard, 1997; Craggs, 2014; Keck & Sikkink, 1998) and communities have called upon an international sphere to challenge local inequalities and oppressions (Laurie, 2005; Baker, 2005). SDG discussions have taken place under the strong influence of a Global South voice forged in the struggle against the imposition by the IMF and the World Bank in the 1980 s and 1990 s (Deacon, 2016:80; Fukuda-Parr & Muchhala, 2020). Colombia with the support of Guatemala and Saudi Arabia proposed the idea of the goals that were officially introduced at the Rio+ 20 conference (Hák, 2016:566; Caballero, 2019). The *Agenda 2030* enables such meeting places and networks across borders and demands attention across disciplines.

### 7.2. A new language of justice

While the current economic system centered on growth, liberalization and the special position accorded to business interests, also in the SDGs, is unlikely to advance a radical and transformatory agenda, the new language of justice and human rights in the SDGs ('a common discourse') and the history of development's messy practices suggests that change is possible not only by disengaging (e.g., Mignolo, 2006/16) but also by engaging and changing current structures in everyday practice. Research on development practice (e.g., Forte, 2002; Lingam, 2002; Mosse, 2005; Pieck, 2011; Rottenburg, 2009; Sharma, 2006) makes it evident that locally grounded alternative movements have used the infrastructure that the development framework provides to anchor protests in local and international spaces and 'universal' values such human rights has been vital in challenging populist and nationalist oppression in national, regional and local settings.

Death and Gabay (2015) write that the *language* of markets that pervades several SDG targets and goals continues to make individuals into objects that need help and then into market friendly neoliberal subjects. While this holds, the discussion above and in Section 5 also indicates that subjects are never merely objects. People make use of and subvert projects and programs to very different ends (Chatterjee, 2012; Laurie, 2005; Pieck, 2011; Sarkar, 1997; Sharma, 2006). The language of development (and equality/justice) can give people the leverage as they invoke a common discourse (Martello and Jasanoff, 2013) to forge a very different development than that imagined by policy documents while radical language of resistance and the grassroots can reproduce binaries and maintain the status-quo (Arora-Jonsson, 2013).

The language of justice in goals such as the SDG 16 were the result of years of political, strategic and scholarly work by human rights advocates, development practitioners and academics. According to Satterthwaite and Dhital (2019), the promise of SDG 16 lies beyond the technocratic realms of development programming, by insisting that people's own experience of justice – and injustice – must remain at the center of efforts to assess progress toward a world where no one is 'left behind.' Much like in the past, the *Agenda 2030* language of human rights could be used 'subversively, to systematically and radically reconceptualize the role of the state' (Koehler, 2016:157) by building on the 'positive, norm-setting role of international declarations, visions and principles, which in the past have changed the world' (Jolly et al., 2009).

### 7.3. Bringing the global North into the discussion

Importantly, unlike before, the language of sustainability brings *the global North into the discussion* on development, as the subject of

development and needing to change. Ziai (2016) cites a respondent from the global South as saying, "if we adopt the concept of sustainability, the industrialized countries are developing countries' because the resource use and environmental pollution caused by these countries indicate that this model of society cannot be universalized." Initial attempts to create indicators of progress have unearthed notable challenges for global North countries in relation to the environment (SDG 13, 14 and 15), on consumption (SDG12) as well as on agricultural systems, malnutrition and development cooperation (Horner & Hulme, 2019:370). Tracing connections across the North and South has also questioned the otherwise self-evident notion of gender-equal North as compared to the South, bringing to light the specificities of place but also the imprint of international connections (Arora-Jonsson, 2009). The universality of the SDGs brings these contradictions to light – and up for discussion. This means going past the assumption of the North as the self-evident norm. In this different approach, bringing attention to the heterogeneities in both the North and South, 'development' is up for debate in a way that it was not before.

In the new and shifting geopolitical climate, the *Agenda* provides a space where North-South binaries, rather than being reaffirmed can be challenged. As I show above, Western hegemony is increasingly questioned (Horn & Grugel, 2018:76). Development aspirations in the global South do not necessarily cohere around Western ideals. Using examples from Ecuador, they write that 'strategies to tackle inequality and poverty at home are being designed in accordance with domestic visions of what development should mean and draw on a diversity of different approaches – indigeneity, framed as development alternatives or adapted from neoliberalism, Keynesianism, developmentalism. In other words, in the everyday practice of 'development' - bureaucrats, activists and communities borrow and adapt from the SDGs, not as a coherent agenda but as 'a set of ideas or global scripts, the meaning of which is open to interpretation.'.

### 7.4. Indicators as fictional expectations and contact zones

It is clear from the research on indicators that they can never be taken as completely true or objective. There can never be a *final* framework that would encompass normative and scientific criteria. Research also indicates that the need for numbers and the faith in indicators cannot be rejected completely. Given the immense resources invested in developing indicators as well as the history of the role of measurements and indicators, I argue that this infrastructure should be used as the space for discussion and action across scales, not with the goal of a final framework but as a platform for ongoing discussions on 'locally owned, democratically developed plans (*and indicators*) for envisioning and implementing transformative social change' (c.f.Sexsmith & McMichael, 2015:593). In a survey of change agents, Riedy and Waddock (2022) demonstrate the need for new social imaginaries for transformation for sustainable futures but argue that such transformation is possible only when actors nurture shared visions of desirable futures, explore real practices that may support awakening and create tangible stories[11] to guide collective action.

Drawing on the role of indicators as providing a space to disagree (Davies, 2015), I argue that the most vital function that the infrastructure around the SDG indicators can offer is to help to understand how different interests participate in the production of reality on indicators. For example, disagreements over the criteria for SDG 14 (Life below water) showed minimal overlap even among 'experts' within the IAEG. Statisticians concentrated on outcomes, legal experts on behaviors, and scientists balanced between outcomes, behaviors and interlinkages (Dahl, 2015). Acknowledging these differences in an inclusive discussion, also across scales would keep the conversation open and has the potential to bring light to the contested politics of what is being indicated.

The indicators also help in imagining future states and how the present may be transformed. This touches on the 'universalism' of the SDGs. Earlier, I cited King who argues that the SDG 4 indicators on education would not be relevant to the North or South – the bar being too low or too high. In an interesting study of the application of indicators in the cities of Gothenburg and Manchester, Hansson (2019) found that officials felt that the indicators were a burden and lacked clear purpose, the bar being too low and reductionist. Yet, it was the relation to the world outside due to the universality of the indicators that is interesting to note. The authors observe interesting reactions among the officials that point to new situations. There was surprise or even skepticism from global North officials at the novelty of being subjected, for the first time, to global goals, alongside the global South. It was also a novel experience of being subjected to indicators formulated with someone else (global South) in mind. Arguably, this makes them commensurate with others in the global South, inverting or raising a discussion on the development template so far.

If not taken as static and final, but as objects of discussion that brings different constituencies together at and across different scales (N/S, regional/national/local) and across different fields (human development, environmental sustainability), indicators that are at the heart of apparently irreconcilable differences on the SDGs, could provide a platform for a continuous conversation between science (as the backdrop to indicators), the spaces in which they are embedded as well as geopolitical inequalities. This approach entails using the indicators, not only for quantification but importantly for the processes around them – the narratives and embodied experiences that help understand how actors make sense of their worlds, crucial for understanding the impact of quantification (Espeland, 2015:57). Indicators could be restricted to local, well-constrained situations (Sterzel, 2015) and yet discussed across scale to mobilize support. They need not be set in stone (King, 2017) but always in the making.

This calls for an inclusive process that would enable people to leverage quantitative accountability. In the past, groups have mobilized statistics on violence on women, child mortality, inequalities, discrimination of indigenous communities or poverty for attention in nationalist politics. Indicators help to acknowledge and potentially support issues of importance across the globe (c.f. Davies, 2015) and bring on to a global agenda, support for issues as different constituencies identify what is important for them. Dhar (2018), for example, uses the SDG country strategies as a leverage to show how India needs greater attention to gender equality by

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[11] Including those around indicators, I would argue

comparing India's strategy with others. Iterative discussions on indicators could promote participation and engage people across scales in both inclusive and exclusive participatory spaces (see Wright, 2011 for the many examples of participatory methodologies across scale). Research (Arora-Jonsson, 2013) has shown that participation in joint forums as suggested by the sustainability researchers as well as participation in exclusive spaces and outside of the mainstream (as advocated by critics), are both needed in widening spaces for democracy.

Used in such a way, SDGs (and indicators) could provide a language for conversations across scale about nations, groups and people's needs and actions - and in doing so change the terms of the conversation.

## 8. Conclusion

The SDGs are premised on principles of solidarity, human rights and an internationalism that echoes a humanist universalism that can be traced to the enlightenment project- that also has its roots in colonial relations. Development is not free of its history of global inequalities and focus on growth dominated by powerful global actors. It is clear from the literature analyzed that there is consensus on the need to transform our world(s). What sets the different positions apart is how and the scale at which it is might be done. While some advocate the importance of a systemic approach and public, private and civil society collaboration (e.g., Sachs, 2019), others believe that only by disengaging with private and corporate interests and a focus on the grassroots (Mignolo, 2016) is a new world possible. Given the context that we live in today (pandemics, climate change, populist movements that endanger minority rights) what might the universal development project offer, whether it might be possible to redeploy development to (re)make the world and what kind of space, language and tools that the SDGs may offer in order to do so?

The analysis shows how the SDGs are a result of the contradictory histories of development and contending tensions – of the focus on growth, the imperative of a human centered approach and justice as well as environmental sustainability. I have argued that we need to work through that history, look to its heterogeneity and use current structures to open new spaces rather than jettison its framework entirely. The history of development indicates that decolonizing development happens from the inside as well as from the outside.

This is confirmed by the heterogenous and dynamic world of development that exists if you turn your gaze away from the templates of international agencies and global or national structures. Mainstream development, premised on economic growth has been a modernist and ecological process -the damming of rivers, conservation, forest production and agricultural projects have reinforced the separation of nature-culture. However, politics on the ground tell a different story and cannot easily be squeezed into theoretical preoccupations– whether based on scientific models or neoliberal critiques.

Condemning development (and quantification) altogether disregards heterogeneity and differentiated practices, gives too much power to certain areas and actors and ignores how the international domain can also be called upon and be responsive to people who seek to interpret and create sovereign territorial space, such as indigenous groups. Categorizing all development under the umbrella of Western hegemony and the neoliberal agenda would commit the same sort of essentialist generalization post-development theorists reject. It would diminish the importance of the ambiguities in the language of universal rights and modernity, ignoring its emancipatory dimensions. The question thus becomes not to jettison universalism altogether but to discuss its very make-up. There is a need for a collective platform to hold accountable networks and institutions (especially financial) that extend beyond the nation state. The SDGs provide important spaces to do so.

It is in our interest to use them as contact zones where local imaginaries may meet, collective imaginaries constructed and/or debated. These contact zones could provide spaces where indicators are 'fictional expectations' of what could be and used to sort out how the present will be transformed through several causally linked steps in specific places, but in light of their connections across the North and South. Indicators, measurements and models could be used as tools for carrying on a conversation in a continuous process towards *Agenda* principles rather than a final framework. Such spaces and tools to discuss visions for desirable futures across geographies are sorely needed, for as (colonial) history so clearly reveals, efforts towards sustainable development or climate action in any one place, will have impacts on distant others.

The universalism of the agenda has potential to bridge the social and biophysical just as it brings the global South and North in one frame, potentially, bringing to light historical patterns of discrimination and unsustainabilities and questioning current relations. Horner and Hulme (2019) call for a global approach to development due to the shifting geographies of within-country inequalities, also in the North. Beyond the need for new spatial referents for development, I believe that bringing the North into a development agenda applicable to all, makes visible their role in creating or subverting inequalities, globally but also within their own borders.

A universal agenda offers the possibility, not necessarily of an objective and unchanging framework applicable in the same way to all, but where 'development' is situated in a wider frame that spans local, national and global contexts and its histories, inequalities and effects are acknowledged. The *Agenda* could offer groups in the global South and North to fashion a new socially just redistributive and regulatory global economic and social policy with stronger institutions of global social governance based on a diversity that could challenge nationalist politics. This, I believe is a pragmatic approach to current trends that bring with it an infrastructure that could be used for different purposes, for moving away from singular conceptions of radical and a pragmatic approach to transforming neoliberal practices. Development for many is as post-development scholars and others point out, very much about how we may live differently. A history presages development as we know it, but sustainability also demands that we take this history and use its institutions to our advantage.

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