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Absent, Obscured, and Hidden: An interdisciplinary analysis of visual race, ethnicity, and gender in UNDP representations of inequality

Gian-Louis Hernandez¹ and Albert Denk²

Abstract: This study covers visual analyses of digital media to explore issues of inequality in development discourse. Using web-based articles presented by the United Nations Development Programme as our central object of research, we show the extent to which discourses on sustainable development represent ethnicity, gender, and race. This paper argues that representations can be interpreted as an integral part of systemic inequality. We demonstrate that the discursive formation reflects and encourages a specific approach to sustainable development, especially regarding inequality reduction. This approach is based on the four analytical categories: absence, arrangement, essentialization, and obscuration. This work encourages further interdisciplinary research and argues for a methodologically combined inequality analysis.

Introduction

Inequality research is an umbrella term for divergent, often isolated research approaches. Popular approaches include economic comparisons within and among countries, political system comparisons at both the international and regional levels, or social science typifications of class, strata, and milieu (see, for example, Alvaredo 2018; Berger and Schmidt 2004; Cowell 2011; Hurst, Fitz Gibbon, and Nurse 2016; Milanovic 2012; Piketty 2020). The current paper combines critical discourse analysis of text and visuals and development studies. Our main argument is that the SDGs and their representation by UNDP problematically reflect extant power relations between marginalized and dominant groups, particularly regarding inequality reduction. The areas of ethnicity, gender, and race have emerged as representative of systemic inequality. These three categories of analysis reflect hegemonic power asymmetries that do not lead to a reduction but to maintaining the status quo. Building upon this, we advocate for intersectional and interdependent inequality research.

This article focuses on representation within the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). This specialized agency is one of the central actors in the international field of development policy. In contrast to previous studies, which dealt exclusively with the annual development reports of the program (Telleria 2020), we would like to pursue a new approach by studying a comparison of norms and representations. As a basis for norms, we refer to the UN Agenda 2030 with its core, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These can be interpreted as a current global contract between all 193 member states of the United Nations. By 2030, all states want to have achieved the normative goals. This agenda explicitly includes the issue of inequalities for the first time through a specific goal. Here, a universal understanding of inequality is assumed without further definition. However, inequalities are contextually specific, affecting different kinds

of people differently. For example, those racialized as non-White experience marginalization to a higher degree (Macedo and Gounari 2006), while a critical awareness of Whiteness is completely ignored in the UN agenda. This paper understands inequality as a relationship between social positions which can be described in terms of privilege and marginalization regarding participation in societies (Kuhlmann, Mogge-Grotjahn, and Balz 2018, 11–15). Taking the United Nations' norm-setting as a starting point, we are interested in how inequalities are reflected in representation. In doing so, we draw on the program's online content, which attempts to reflect the norms comprehensively and visually. This is advantageous over, for example, policy analysis of annual reports, as it incorporates the visual and textual levels, allowing for nuanced insights. The underlying research question remains: How do specific forms of inequality manifest in representations of sustainable development?

One limitation of this approach is the lack of focus on social class. However, web-based articles on the matter provide too little data as a basis for analysis. Such a class analysis would be beyond the scope of our research project. This is in no way to negate the effectiveness of this category. No conclusive class attributions can be made about the persons depicted or the photographers and text writers from the underlying material. At the same time, it should be noted that the category of class is not mentioned by UNDP and is, therefore, not part of this discursive formation of sustainable development.

The first part of the paper gives an overview of how the SDGs address inequalities. The focus here is on the theoretical concepts of development and universality, which entail initial difficulties regarding inequality reductions. Using Critical Discourse Analysis on the UN Development Programme (UNDP), the second part addresses the discourses surrounding SDG #10 in reproducing a specific approach. It will be shown how specific power configurations are perpetuated and continued in “development” discourses by the arrangement of media contents and the essentializing and obscuring portrayal of “development” subjects.

Development Programme and Sustainable Development Goals

This section introduces the object of research and then elaborates on the concept of “development,” inequalities between states, and marginalization in the context of development goals. The three units are essential to understanding the current UN development work.

The UNDP has been the authoritative institution for “development” at the United Nations since 1965. It coordinates the UN Development Group, which brings together 41 different UN actors working in this field. Within the framework of the SDGs, UNDP participated in the development of the goal setting and is actively involved in the implementation. Moreover, UNDP is responsible for conducting relations between and among societies within the framework of the SDGs. One limitation is that an analysis of the organization is only possible to a limited extent due to its size and diversity. For example, Browne (2012) stresses the difficulty of measuring UNDP's actions. Unlike other UN organizations, it lacks clear definitions and measurable goals. This is our starting point, as we see particular strength in using an interdisciplinary approach to examine the content created by the organization to work out the underlying patterns of interpretation. Murphy (2006) shows that within UNDP, there is an ongoing conflict between the so-called “industrialized” and “developing” countries. The former group of countries has historically repeatedly positioned itself against measures of the organization. This reveals another starting point for inequality research. The self-isolation of actors from the geopolitical Global North already indicates unequal socioeconomic power relations, which will be explained further

in this contribution.

This study examines a dominant area of UNDP's work. We explore the aspect of inequality reduction in the frame of the SDGs by analyzing historically-developed subject positions. Hence, the focus is on differences and how these relationships are represented. The content published on the UNDP websites about the SDGs gives a representative impression of the UNDP's approach to reducing inequalities. We choose this web content as the starting point for our inquiry because they allow a multi-level analysis in a mixture of image and text and reflect the specific interpretation of norms. In the following, the concept of "development" as the underlying norm will be presented and critically assessed as the first subunit.

An influential interpretation of "development" in international politics can be traced to Harry S. Truman's inaugural address in 1949. Truman constructed a "developed" as well as an "underdeveloped" world in his speech. He defined "developing" countries as "primitive" and their condition as a "threat" to the existing world order (Truman 1949). Through this reductive and essentializing interpretation, he created a subordinated image of the majority of the world's population while describing the United States of America as the ideal of "development" and a standard by which all other countries should be judged (Escobar 1995). This understanding of Truman can be interpreted as an influential constant in the development discourse up to the SDGs (Ziai 2015, 199-200). The U.S. is particularly influential in terms of founding and financing the United Nations. As a single state, they finance about one-fifth of the total budget (Hong et al. 2021). Although they originally opposed the establishment of UNDP and wanted to outsource development tasks to the World Bank, it is now the third largest program donor country after Germany and Japan (UNDP 2021, 14). From a position of economic power, a regional understanding of "development" was universalized. In the SDGs, the United Nations describes these efforts as a "universal agenda" for a "collective journey" in which "no one will be left behind" (United Nations 2015, 1). The principle of common-but-differentiated-responsibilities (CBDR) was taken over from the Rio '92 conference. While the emphasis is placed on national adaptation opportunities, a fundamental orientation for the SDGs defines what it means to live a worthwhile life. For example, SDG #8 calls for a sustained increase in economic growth. From the perspective that considers economic growth positive, all other orientations towards living are deemed "backward" and incompatible with sustainability. Kothari, Demaria, and Acosta criticize the concept of "development" as a Western hegemony, an "overarching concept of how humans should progress or be or do or live [...] all in the framework of modernity [...] to convert people from 'primitive to modern,' never mind that in the process entire cosmologies, knowledge systems, ways of living in harmony with nature, and identities are erased" (Kothari et al. 2015).

Development discourses prescribe precisely how this framework is supposed to be imposed, winning consent from all who participate in it on a global scale. These interpretations of "development" show the underlying trend toward universalization. This trend opens up, in particular, the urge to investigate textual and visual forms of representation, since a comparison with the annual reports, for example, would reveal little about the discursive structures of inequalities. UNDP's presentation of Internet content is also particularly different in that it does not merely reproduce the Sustainable Development Goals. Instead, concrete content is created, interpretations are implemented in regional contexts, and specific groups are identified.

With this approach, it is possible to investigate how universal evaluation standards for all people might erase the complexities of life. This homogenization of the world population could lead to the exclusion and devaluation of marginalized people. During the negotiations establishing the

SDGs, world leaders decided that humankind should live in a world where more infrastructure, economic growth, and labor are considered positive. At the same time, a life in the status quo is considered negative. Despite the agreement upon universal standards by all participating member states, this proves that subtle and informal yet effective power structures govern social realities and dictate how to conceptualize inequality. Proposing a monolithic vision of “development” necessarily affords the erasure of groups at the social periphery and could potentially lead to further exploitation of the most vulnerable (Saiz and Donald 2017). The concept of “development” also serves as a measure for classifying societies, which UNDP adopts as a criterion. In the following, this will be described with a view to inequalities between states as the second subunit.

The UN Charter describes states that were under colonial foreign rule or trusteeship as underdeveloped. Categorizing countries according to “development” classifications has been extremely problematic since it was introduced in the post-World War II period. From this critique, we are interested in how people with “developmental needs” are represented today. The process of essentializing countries into blocks continues in contemporary discourse. However, these blocks consist of extremely diverse countries which are not comparable in size, infrastructure, population, or history. For example, Greece belongs to the OECD group, the so-called “developed” countries, while Singapore is assigned to the block of “developing” countries. Classification according to economic indicators would justify a reverse picture. However, the SDGs claim to illustrate a paradigm shift in global developments by focusing on all countries. The homogenization of nation-states as independent, though “anti-imperial” (Chasse 2016, 233), fails to take into account the neo-colonial origins of the nation-state as a concept and further reduces the agency of “developing” nations and their citizens (Kothari 1997). The criticism goes as far as to demand that the concept of development be fundamentally abandoned (Ziai 2015), thus also calling into question the work of UNDP. The current paper examines the extent to which this criticism holds in the domain of representations by UNDP.

Moreover, this raises issues of self-determination: How can “development” be understood as a global project if introduced as a devaluation mechanism by a few privileged states? How much can a self-appropriation of the “development discourse” by so-called “developing countries” have an empowering effect if historically shaped inequalities continue today? Which forms of representation can accurately reflect inequalities in the Western-shaped institutional and knowledge-based spaces? It should be noted that processes of appropriation have also taken place in addition to the imposition of the “development” discourse (Chasse 2016; Ziai 2015). For example, politicians in the geopolitical Global South have used “development” to further their own political agendas. In this sense, development discourses are also “a discourse of claims and rights for those who were designated as deficient and inadequate” (Ziai 2015, 15). As such, regional, national, and global development discourses all serve to establish social, economic, and political hierarchies.

The third subunit discussed here is the marginalization of alternative actors. The negotiations on the SDGs involved various actors like member-states, UN staff, external “experts” (in these negotiations, an expert on poverty is unlikely to have lived experience with their subject area of expertise), and civil society organizations represented by so-called major groups. However, the main negotiations between 70 countries took place during the Open Working Group. While many different actors articulated their concerns in different formats, these nation-states ultimately decided upon implementation. In this setting, the traditional blocks of “developing countries” (G77 + China) and the “developed” countries (OECD countries) were again visible (Kamau, Chasek, and O’Connor 2018). The underlying logics of a have/have-not binary pervade extant discourses from non-state actors and state governments within the framework of sustainable development

(Bexell and Jönsson 2017). Although the UN Development Agenda explicitly addresses marginalized groups, the universal approaches still appear paternalistic towards non-capitalist lifestyles. Universalism in social policy has often been operationalized in ambivalent ways (Budowski and Künzler 2020). Here, it reproduces the hegemonic position of “developed” countries through complex reproductions of discourses that neglect diverse realities on the ground. Various forms of inequalities persist, which is visible in the reproduction of images of “disadvantaged” and “helping people” based on a capitalistic logic of reducing people to essentialist identities. In particular, the visualization of gender, racial, and ethnic inequalities, which, as we analyze in our case study, can serve to reify inequalities by visually representing individuals as geographically distant and racially othered.

SDG #10 - Inequality Reduction

After a negotiation process lasting several years, all 193 member-states adopted the SDGs as the successors to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) during the General Assembly in September 2015. The political agenda covers the three realms of economic development, social inclusion, and environmental sustainability. More precisely, the United Nations committed itself to “eradicating poverty in all its forms and dimensions, combating inequality within and among countries, creating sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth and fostering social inclusion” (United Nations 2015, 5). This statement already centers on inequality, which also resulted in its own development goal.

SDG #10 outlines the imperative to reduce inequality within and among countries. The goal includes the following ten targets:

Table 1

- By 2030, progressively achieve and sustain income growth of the bottom 40 per cent of the population at a rate higher than the national average
- By 2030, empower and promote the social, economic and political inclusion of all, irrespective of age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion or economic or other status
- Ensure equal opportunity and reduce inequalities of outcome, including by eliminating discriminatory laws, policies and practices and promoting appropriate legislation, policies and action in this regard
- Adopt policies, especially fiscal, wage and social protection policies, and progressively achieve greater equality
- Improve the regulation and monitoring of global financial markets and institutions and strengthen the implementation of such regulations
- Ensure enhanced representation and voice for developing countries in decision-making in global international economic and financial institutions in order to deliver more effective, credible, accountable and legitimate institutions
- Facilitate orderly, safe, regular and responsible migration and mobility of people, including through the implementation of planned and well-managed migration policies
- Implement the principle of special and differential treatment for developing countries, in particular least developed countries, in accordance with World Trade Organization agreements
- Encourage official development assistance and financial flows, including foreign direct investment, to States where the need is greatest, in particular least developed countries, African countries, small island developing States and landlocked developing countries, in accordance with their national plans and programmes
- By 2030, reduce to less than 3 per cent the transaction costs of migrant remittances and eliminate remittance corridors with costs higher than 5 per cent

(ibid. 21)

SDG #10 covers fundamental issues of a highly unequal global order. This global order is the direct result of colonialism, the traces of which are present even in countries that did not directly colonize other countries (Purtschert, Falk, and Lüthi 2016; Stoler 2008). “Development” is also used as a metric with which to determine this global order. As Sarah White notes, development “comprises a process of racial formation, made up of a vast range of diverse and contradictory racial projects which link the meaning of ethnic, racial and national identities to material entitlements” (Omi and Winant 1994; White 2002). The logics of “development” are then infused with racial understandings, which the current SDGs fail to consider. Since inequalities are not unjust per se, the goal initially appears irrelevant. The development goal only takes on significance in a qualitative assessment of what counts as unjust (in)equalities. Therefore, an important question must be asked: Which forms of inequality and which groups are represented, and how?

Ethnicity, Gender, and Race within the SDGs

The categories of ethnicity, gender and race lie in the focus of this analysis. Achieving gender equality is one of the core concerns of the SDGs. The international community has formulated a specific goal for gender inequality (SDG #5) as a special concern and highlights gender within

other goals (SDGs #1, #4, and #17). Some critiques address the unrealistic nature of SDG #5. Briant Carant reports that “targets 1 and 2 aim to end all forms of discrimination and violence against women and girls [...] targets within SDG #5 are void of time-sensitive and measurable indicators, suggesting the UN does not believe they will be achieved in the near future” (Briant Carant 2017, 31). However, Sakiko Fukuda-Parr sees this as a major strength of the SDGs over the MDGs. Due to their complexity, the SDGs can adequately address nuanced problems (Fukuda-Parr 2016). Scholars have noted that the interrelation of the goals might prove overly complex yet could overall be an asset if considered carefully (Nilsson et al., 2018).

Still, despite this nuance and their apparent improvement upon the Millennium Development Goals, the SDGs continue to perpetuate a potentially constraining view of the subjects of inequality discourse, particularly ethnicized, gendered, and racialized subjects. For example, the SDGs clearly purport a binary understanding of sex and gender, resulting in an almost complete erasure of transgender and gender non-binary people (Divan, Cortez, Smelyanskaya, and Keatley 2016). The core slogan of the agenda, “leaving no one behind,” seems hardly appropriate, specifically when those who face oppression due to their gender experience further racialized and sexualized stigmatization (Elias and Holliday 2019).

The specific issue of woman’s inequality is prominently featured in the agenda of the SDGs as well as discussed in development literature (Esquivel and Sweetman 2016). Scholars note an improvement in recognizing diverse women’s experiences, yet the current conceptualization of women’s empowerment necessarily shapes a monolithic understanding of women and women’s needs (Dhar 2018; Esquivel 2016). As our analysis will show, gender within the SDGs serves as a marker to indicate a specific kind of woman: Cisgender, from the Global South, often racialized as non-White, stricken by poverty, and in need of aid. This masculinist focus characterized the negotiation and adoption of the SDGs, thus creating the problem of who speaks for whom in the construction of various forms of need.

Representation is necessary to encompass the complexity of varied global experiences more accurately. This is not to diminish the importance of efforts to reduce gender inequality but rather to broaden the scope and acknowledge the constraints of extant discourses. Gender is integral in considering intersections with other dynamics of difference (Stuart and Woodroffe 2016). The focus on gender as a binary construct and, specifically, as solely an issue of racialized women of the Global South undermines the importance of thinking intersectionally as well as interdisciplinarily around issues of inequality.

Furthermore, though the SDGs have improved in recognizing income or ability status issues, they still lack racial and ethnic analysis. Race and ethnicity present a myriad of issues in terms of analysis. A global perspective on these highly contested terms risks losing analytical purchase on practical, material problems. In addition, race and racism are born out of a specific colonial history (Hall 1980). Asserting a universal approach to race is firmly rooted in a neoliberal model that presupposes the nature of racialized categories and fails to address contextual specificities (Goldberg 2009). It is necessary to develop analytical tools to critique structures that hold rigid conceptualizations of the premises of inequality. Thinking through race in each context necessarily requires exposing underlying racial premises and deconstructing how racial and ethnic minorities are marginalized (El-Tayeb 2011).

We understand race and ethnicity as intertwined concepts that are theoretically distinct from one another. Given this article’s focus on analyzing and interpreting visual data, we primarily

use the concept of race that “connotes an unchosen arbitrary designation of identity based on heritable physical and visible characteristics” (Martín-Alcoff 2009, 118). While we do not ignore ethnicity as a construct that shapes cultural groups (Ortiz 2017), our main focus is the predominant utilization of race as a tool of political ideology to structure dominant hierarchies (Omi and Winant 1994). Facilitated by the shrinking distances of (post) modernity, image distribution has become a powerful tool for establishing a widespread understanding of racialized structures (Parameswaran 2002). These understandings legitimize international understandings of inequality, further shaping initiatives to address such inequality, including those of the SDGs.

The SDGs use race and ethnicity in different ways. The basic statement “Transforming Our Planet – The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development” references these concepts sparingly. First, The United Nations claims “to free the human race from tyranny of poverty” (United Nations 2015, 1). According to this logic, the only race that matters is the “human race.” Yet, mentions of race and ethnicity feature in the texts of the SDGs, always in the formulaically inclusive “catalog” of identity categories (Pellegrini 1997). The statement calls for “respect for race, ethnicity and cultural diversity” (United Nations 2015, 4). The following demand has a similar emphasis:

By 2020, enhance capacity-building support to developing countries, including for least developed countries and small island developing States, to increase significantly the availability of high-quality, timely and reliable data disaggregated by income, gender, age, race, ethnicity, migratory status, disability, geographic location and other characteristics relevant in national contexts. (ibid. 27)

Both mentions highlight the importance of distinguishing between various races and ethnicities. However, the exact opposite is meant in demanding “human rights and fundamental freedoms for all, without distinction of any kind as to race [...]” (ibid. 6). Similarly, the following phrase illustrates notions of abolishing characteristics of distinction:

All people, irrespective of sex, age, race or ethnicity, and persons with disabilities, migrants, indigenous peoples, children and youth, especially those in vulnerable situations, should have access to life-long learning opportunities. (ibid. 7)

However, this necessarily restricts the SDGs from addressing racial and ethnic inequality in any meaningful way. Merely gesturing towards race and ethnicity without accounting for how these different categories matter only limits critical discussion on inequality. Moreover, the member states of the United Nations do not elaborate on what they mean by these terms.

How can we critically assess the dimensions of inequality related to race and ethnicity without critically addressing the concepts themselves? While the subject of gender is widely accepted (with the exception that it typically follows a binary logic), the United Nations maintains an ambiguous position on the concepts of race and ethnicity, which reflects a generalized understanding of the causes of inequality they are attempting to combat and further reifies discourses that reinforce those categories. A perspective on race and ethnicity that acknowledges both somatic and symbolic representations of difference is sorely needed. The following section applies these theoretical considerations to our methodology in analyzing representation in sustainable development discourse.

Methodology

This paper uses a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach to address the representation of ethnic, gender, and racial inequality in sustainable development discourses. The focus of CDA is “the role of discourse in the (re)production and challenge of dominance,” where dominance is defined as “the exercise of social power by elites, institutions, or groups, that results in social inequality, including political, cultural, class, ethnic, racial and gender inequality” (van Dijk 1993, 249). A focus on the social power of institutions is critical in addressing structures of inequality representation within initiatives enacted following the SDGs.

Websites are a complex amalgamation of written and visual discourse. For the present paper, we have chosen not to enter the debate on the role and position of visuals in relation to written text (see, for example, Müller 2007). We follow Hodge and Kress, who point out that “visual texts, no less than verbal texts, facilitate certain modality judgments and resist others” (Hodge and Kress 1988, 198).

Consequently, the interpretation of visual texts is an integral part of meaning-making. We understand web pages as holistic, integrated texts that contribute significantly to our understanding of communicative phenomena (Schneider and Foot 2004). Our interest is precisely in how the discursive constructions of SDG discourses are formed using text and images in relation to the broader contexts of Western-centric development.

Our intent is neither to exaggerate nor diminish visuals’ importance in the analysis. Adopting a critical discourse approach allows us to establish how gendered and racialized images play an important function in racial meaning-making. Visuality sets the parameters for a mediated form of what Christian Metz calls a “visual scopic regime” (Metz 1975), which has the potential to “invent and sustain new racial hierarchies” (Amin 2010, 8). Representations of sustainable development, where racialized Others are the image focus, invent and sustain these hierarchies (Shome 2011, 165). Furthermore, the distribution of images through digital channels reproduces and renews widely held views about the social position of racial subjects (Goldberg 1993). Images reify the position of racialized discourses in the construction of social power.

We analyzed web-based articles from the UNDP website. The United Nations Development Programme is the primary coordinator of global UN initiatives (Browne 2012), as well as a predominant actor in constructing discourses on sustainable development (Akçali and Antonsich 2009; McDonald 2013; Telleria 2017). We selected the website for the rich amount of representational data, clearly defined by the website’s purpose of providing examples of SDG integration. This set of representations of SDG integration provided us with an easily accessible and fairly generalizable selection of texts and images spanning a broad range of countries, contexts, and peoples. The data is organized based on a tagging system that the user can access by clicking on relevant categories. Of course, tagging systems produce certain subjectivities, displaying and organizing content that does not necessarily reflect our research interests. However, this genre of discourse is made to be consumed with the organizational principle of the SDGs in mind; the point of this categorization is to easily find the UN’s representation of inequality reduction for researchers and laypeople alike. By targeting those forty-one articles specifically indexed with the category “reduced inequalities,” we could effectively select, access, and organize the data relevant to our research question.

The website consists of two groups of articles. The first group consists of articles one can access after selecting SDG #10, “Reduced Inequalities,” on the main page describing the SDGs. They are lengthier, contain many high-quality images, and span a somewhat diverse range of locations and topics. Africa is notably absent, despite being the subject of the page’s main photograph. Ease of access plays an integral role in delineating this group. Research on interactivity highlights that certain patterns of website travel are easier than others, creating certain routes for users to follow, marked by “clickable areas” (Adami 2015). The first group represents a superficial overview of the various geographical regions and gives the viewer an impression of “diversity.” The second group is viewable after selecting the archive of reports by clicking “Our perspectives.” These articles are on topics spanning the entirety of foci for the SDGs, hence the need to specify the search for topics related to inequality by selecting only those referenced with the tag “poverty reduction and inequality.”

The first group of articles is roughly ten to twelve pages when converted to PDF format for analysis. They consist of multiple, high-quality images and shorter, descriptive texts. Their tone implies a public relations approach and gives the distinct impression of intending to represent the UNDP and its associated values. The genres of the first and second groups differ slightly. The second group, while still belonging to the genre of the web-based report, comprises thirty-five articles that are typically more journalistic, are usually much shorter, and (with one exception) feature only one image. It is worth noting that this group differs from the first in terms of formatting, tone, and attribution to authors. This difference between the “public relations” angle of the first group and the more journalistic focus here constitutes a difference in the discourse sub-genre (Fairclough 1995).

Each article was converted into PDF format and printed for ease of analysis. The first author analyzed the first group of data to examine the written and visual texts for meanings, themes, and patterns. The first author then determined these individual items as codes, conceptually grouped them into categories, and cross-referenced them with the coding by the second author. The first author then analyzed and noted layers of connotative meanings in both the visual and written texts. In the second round of coding of the same data, the first author engaged in the same process of open coding, conceptual clustering, and cross-referencing with the second author to address salient themes that will be discussed in the findings.

Findings

The analysis reveals several shortcomings in UNDP’s representation of inequality. A dominant narrative of the structural causes of inequality does little to attribute agency to the subjects of the discourses of sustainable development. Both written and visual texts pay little attention to the causes of inequality, particularly regarding race and ethnicity. The journalistic report sub-genre of the articles is represented as factual and neutral. However, herein lies the subtle nuances of the representation of inequality. The discourse here invites the audience to make their own meaning of the texts by not presenting race as a notable factor in systems of inequality and, in doing so, speaking a language of racelessness (Bonilla-Silva 2015). Neither images nor written discourses are devoid of valuation. We argue that the texts invite meanings of ethnicized, gendered, and racialized subjects that are constitutive and constitute the structures of inequality in a discursive feedback loop. The analysis highlights four categories that serve as dominant themes in the data: Arrangement, essentialization, absence, and obscuration.

Arrangement

A strong tendency in the visual aspects of the data was that photo subjects are either covered, hidden from view, or facing away from the camera (for example, Shamerina 2015; Bahous 2015; Neto 2016; Faieta 2016). With this, the picture arrangement is now examined in more detail. A common occurrence within the visual language of this discourse is the depiction of (mostly) women in various ethnic or religious headcoverings. Out of the 122 images of people in the data set, 50 depicted someone in a type of head-covering, often with their face partially or mostly obscured. While the images predominantly represent presumably Islamic head coverings, there are also various other styles of dress. The representation in these images marks the subjects of the photograph ethnically and racially. In the process, the representation constructs homogeneous groups based on supposedly traditional images. This mode of representation has a derogating effect due to its iterative use and is placed in connection with images depicting a lack of “development.”⁴



Figure 1

The person in figure one is seen crouching in an agricultural area holding a garden hoe. Their entire body is covered in a black garment, a red over-layer, a black hat, and gloves. They also wear a lanyard with a hanging, laminated card draped across their knee. They are bent toward a hole in the ground that they seem to be digging using the gardening utensil. No part of their body, not even their face, is visible in the picture.

This paper’s intent is not to critique the individual practices of various authors or photographers (who could possibly be the same person, operating under very limiting conditions). However, the issue remains that the discourse tends to represent subjects of inequality in this way, framing the debate in terms of the binary construction of superiority and inferiority. This points to a fundamental problem of visual representation, since there is always an imbalance between the person observing and the person being observed. Photography is always an arrangement since picture details, exposure, and the persons and objects are staged. The observers remain anonymous, while the observed person is objectified in a specific space and time. The images of the veiled, looking away, and bent persons stage a certain authenticity. In the process, it is neglected that the observed persons are quite aware of the process of being photographed and behave accordingly. Therefore, the depiction of a “natural,” uninfluenced state does not occur. This calls into question the extent to which a visual image can be participatory, empowering, or emancipatory, especially when these images are made by strangers to the observed, who are in this position due to their

profession and thus entangled in their own dependencies and expectations. Visual arrangements are subjective and represent a starkly unequal relationship. Arrangements, in particular, can be misleading and thus are questionable as a means of participation.

Essentialization

The theme of essentialization can be recognized at several points in our analysis. For example, the articles often describe African countries as caught up in a “cycle of poverty and violence” (Wang 2015) or offering the “ideal conditions for mayhem” (Yahya 2017). Five of the six articles that explicitly reference Africa do so in a way that fails to take the specificities of fifty-four distinct countries into account. Specific instances of this generalizing tendency include essentialization based on geographic origin, including Africa portrayed as the home continent to large groups of nameless young men undertaking a perilous journey to make a new start in Europe (Yahya 2015). This representation does not portray the countries facing unique problems, global interdependencies, or the young men as individuals. This essentialization perpetuates the seemingly constant depiction of Africa as a place needing the kind of homogenizing assistance the UN is accustomed to giving without differentiating between recipients. When these texts refer to Africa, individual names of countries, regions, ethnic groups or people only occasionally follow. In any case, presenting “Africa” at the beginning of the article primes the reader to generalize, rendering this specification ineffective. One solution that reoccurs in the data is undergirded by the neoliberal notion that employment solves all inequality. The quick fix is simply “jobs and more jobs” (Wang 2015). As one article says, “while money doesn’t solve everything, it certainly helps.” (Clark 2016). Articles highlighting monetary means of combating inequality, such as financing (Orliange 2016) or cash management (Hildebrandt 2016), expose a larger tendency to equate all forms of inequality with income inequality. This, despite the previously mentioned attempt to characterize high-wage countries as also needing development. The implications for this strand of discourse are quite clear. The continued representation of the “Global South” as needing homogenous (and at times contradictory) aid logics despite intentions to the contrary further perpetuates the dichotomy between privileged and underprivileged.

Furthermore, the written language of racelessness underscores global racial inequality, evidenced by the overwhelming depiction of people of color in vulnerable positions. It is certainly true that poverty is a form of oppression that greatly affects racial (Gradín 2012), ethnic (Kazemipur and Halli 2000), gender (Chant 2008), and sexual minorities (Kabeer 2015). Still, the written part of these articles completely essentializes those affected by such oppression. The juxtaposition of texts that attempt to problematize a vague notion of inequality with images of Black and brown women speaks volumes. A stark example is the article entitled “How are all countries, rich and poor, to define poverty?”



Figure 2

The article accompanies the above image of a smiling Rwandan seamstress (as an exception, this photograph is well-lit and beautifully composed). It features a Black woman with short hair in a sky-blue patterned garment lit by the sun from the same angle as the camera. She and her workstation, featuring a sewing machine processing a piece of textile, are in focus within the foreground. The background, slightly out of focus, features many colorful patterned textiles. The article with this image discusses poverty lines in various countries and how they should be defined. It asks the question: Why this image? Is the woman living in poverty? Is she representative of poverty in her country? If so, how? The article does not answer these questions. The reader is left to draw the connection based upon pre-existing mental schemas that associate Blackness and femaleness with Otherhood and poverty. This example represents a recurring phenomenon within the visual data: Articles that discuss issues that affect huge populations across the globe feature photos presenting people of color, often Black women (for example, Hildebrandt 2016; Gonzalo Pizarro 2015; Khoday 2015).

Absence

Written texts explicitly naming race or ethnicity are almost completely absent from the UNDP website, despite explicit mentions in the second point of the SDG #10 targets (see table 1) of the progress indicators as a dimension of inequality. The erasure of race within the text highlights an invisibility. In this sense, the absence of certain discursive structures can be as effective as their presence (Rose 2016). The gap left by race colors the argument for addressing racial inequality. In other words, the absence of any mentions of race precludes any attempts to critique how racialized subjects are represented.

In all cases, the represented subjects have very little input into their representation. For example, an article entitled “Giving a voice to women survivors in Guatemala” features only two singularly quoted women who are marginalized due to the intersection of their gender, socioeconomic class, race, and ethnicity (Morales and Truttman 2016).

Differences in power between subjects and those who represent them are responsible for selecting what receives emphasis and what does not. The resulting emphasis is, in many cases, an oversimplification of the phenomenon at hand. For example, inequalities due to ethnic differences are often glossed over to present a coherent narrative. The ethnic struggles of the Yazidi women,

the Pemón, and the people of Bosnia and Herzegovina are either not mentioned or drastically simplified to fit the UNDP's narrative. There are only two explicit mentions of either race or ethnicity throughout the articles, again in the form of the typical "catalog of identity markers" (Pellegrini 1997).

There is a notable point of synergy between the images and the text. The images that represent the inequality issue do not problematize the forces that affect the subjects of inequality. For example, images where societal problems such as the transphobia Monica Shahi faces (Okwenje and Shrestha 2015) or the misogyny present in the Egyptian legal system (Lowthian 2015) focus on surviving these problems rather than critically exposing them. For example, the court issues represented in the aforementioned Egyptian example repeatedly center on women without explicitly why it is predominantly women who need legal help. Furthermore, a historical embedding regarding gender inequalities is completely missing. The reader is left to speculate why the presented domestic violence and marital dispute cases are relevant problems for providing legal aid, resulting in constructing the visual subjects as "lesser" and needing benevolent intervention from outside parties.

Similarly, the prejudices against transgender people in Nepal are shortly mentioned at the beginning of an article describing the plight of a transgender woman, but the difficulties that the transgender and further LGB community face are implicit throughout the entire article. Monica and other transgender people face structural inequalities, which the article does little to address, instead highlighting her personal victories over the system intended to erase her gender identity. There is also a certain contradiction to the fact that transgender identities are not part of the SDGs and are not recognized in the majority of UN member states.

An exception to the tendency of absence is the article in which the force that threatens livelihood is environmental, namely flooding (Egan, Cupac, and Bundalo 2015). Here, inequality is explained as perpetuated by a lack of infrastructure in response to a cause largely outside of human control. In this case, the images depict the floodwaters as well as the responses of their victims. However, the visual emphasis in all cases frames situations in which the causes of inequality are rarely explicated. Thus, the representation of inequalities remains in large parts unclear.

Obscuration through exposure – Dark/light binary

The differences between depictions of darker- and light-skinned subjects throughout the data are also noteworthy. Every depiction of lighter-skinned subjects (fifteen images across seven articles) features well-lit and positioned photography, with the subjects usually using a form of technology to combat inequality. The contrasts here are striking: In the cases of representation of dark-skinned people, the images tend to mark them as racially Other. Light-skinned subjects, however, are adopted as a representation of modernity. This dichotomous depiction furthers a representation of dark-skinned people as backward, non-traditional, and therefore lesser than their lighter-skinned counterparts.



Compare the picture above in which the lighter-skinned subjects are all facing the camera, smiling in a setting that seems clean and “modern” with the picture to the right in which the faces of the majority of the subjects are not visible, as they engage in physical labor in a rural setting



Figure 3

There is one instance in which a subject is named in the text (Yahya 2015). Still, the accompanying picture is not of him at all but rather of men who are presented to be “like him,” despite a picture of the named subject being available in a newspaper. Well-lit images of the subjects of inequality discourses are rare, raising the question of why it is so difficult to portray them with adequate lighting. A common theme within these photographs is obscuring its main focus through lighting, physical obstacles, or juxtaposition with many other subjects, potentially confusing the visual narrative.

Discussion

By first addressing the visual representation of subjects within the UN discourse on the SDGs, we exposed the intersections of ethnicity, gender, and race as structuring forces of representation. We discussed how all three aspects, while seldom explicitly mentioned, were an unmarked, underlying factor within the representation of inequality. We utilized the critical opportunity to analyze representations of social practices where race is represented implicitly to varying degrees (van Leeuwen 1993). In this sense, race is a present absence, thematically embedding it within this online discourse (Bell 2011). The same applies to the other two intersections of ethnicity and gender in our analysis.

Absences that nevertheless structure the discourse were a recurring theme. Another absence in many of the narratives within this discourse related to the SDGs is the absent voice of those represented. The SDGs are envisioned as a means to provide voices to the voiceless, yet these voices are markedly absent from the content of each article. This is in direct conflict with what Reisigl and Wodak, following Habermas, call a “deliberative democracy” in which “all concerned with the specific social problem in question can participate” (Reisigl and Wodak 2005, p. 34). Participation in this context can take various forms, but ultimately this discourse positions those that “are concerned with the problem” (ibid.) over those whom the problem affects. The improved alternative here would be what has been described as a “political (studies) approach” to partici-

pation, which promotes an “equalization of power relations between privileged and non-privileged actors in formal or informal decision-making processes” (Carpentier 2017, 88). In this context, the non-privileged visual subjects are not presented as having similar positions in relation to their privileged counterparts. One possibility would be to let those people in the addressed contexts decide if and how they want to represent this context visually. For this purpose, emancipatory photography workshops could serve, in which the participants are provided with the technology. Similarly, it is crucial that no censorship occurs either before, during, or after the workshop. At the same time, such a measure must always be contextualized, especially regarding the SDGs and the limitations already resulting from such institutionalized norms.

Those in power must always pay attention to who gets to speak and for whom. The articles themselves are presented by the UNDP, with the author’s credits in italics at the end of the article. This subtle placement reinforces the uniformity of each article’s message from a united voice. While expressing one’s issues and concerns has been theorized as a ‘fundamental human right’ (Phillips 2003; Chouliaraki and Zaborowski 2017), it is unclear if any of the articles do so. The often nameless and, at times, even faceless photographic subjects are generalized to the point of removing any modicum of agency they might have had. Furthermore, in generalizing these social actors through the use of plural nouns like “victims” and “communities,” the articles render them a specific class beyond the capacity for individual agency (van Leeuwen 2006).

The depiction of racialized subjects, predominantly women in ethnicizing clothing, compellingly codes these subjects as hidden, objectified, and othered. Arguments about the veil marking women as Other can be found elsewhere (Chapman 2016; Hoodfar 2001). The analysis of visual discourse on this website provides visual examples of the UNDP participating in this Othering discourse. The representations in these photographs align with discourses of non-Western women as lesser, unequal, and needing development aid. The analysis results resonate with notions of the SDGs as institutionalized norms. Here, “development” is attributed to groups of people in an essentializing manner without reference to structural causes.

Despite the risks of positioning visuality as a positivist epistemology, there is a certain value in seeing visual subjects. As Kress and van Leeuwen point out, “[s]eeing in our society has become synonymous with understanding” (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006, 163). This means that, in the images in which the subjects are obscured, there is no way to understand them properly. The recognizability of a subject as a human individual is tantamount to perceiving it as such. Depictions of others remain problematic and attempts to involve those depicted in the production of this content are not evident. This may also be due to the hegemonic use of English, which further disadvantages people in the problematized regions of the world.

This paper provides a visual analysis to specify claims that the initiatives of the UN considering the SDGs have (neo)colonial influences (Freistein and Koch 2012; Freistein and Mahlert 2016). The origins of interventions from donor states to recipient states are structured along colonial relations and influenced by colonial histories (Ziai 2015). For example, while the underlying logics of “development” may have overtly divested from colonial discourses, at the same time, the same logics position the Global North as inherently superior to the Global South and imposes an adaptation of the “civilizing missions” so commonplace in the justification of the colonial project (Ziai 2015; Freistein and Koch 2012). The data of this study also confirm how inequalities are represented, especially through the visualization and textualization of certain world regions such as the African continent, certain groups of people such as non-White women, and certain ethnicizing situations. Despite the SDGs’ potential improvement over previously established goals

(Freistein and Mahlert 2016, 13), our study shows how inequalities in representation persist.

An important note: class differences do not feature prominently in development discourses. Given the visual thrust of this paper, such analysis was outside of the scope of our analysis. In future studies, we see a need for further research to uncover colonial continuities and develop adequate responses in the different fields of UNDP action.

Finally, racism ideologically structures media that essentializes specific communities, justifying uneven “development.” In their concise description of sociologist Robert Miles’ view of racism’s role in global capitalism, Wodak and Reisigl point out his “explanation for racism in the ‘disorganisation of capitalism’” (Wodak and Reisigl 2005, 18), strictly speaking, in a field of several contradictions “between, on the one hand, universalism and humanism, and, on the other, the reproduction of social inequality and exploitation” (ibid.). Intersections of inequality (race, ethnicity, gender, class, income, etc.) justify intervention based on the essentialized traits of recipient world regions, nation-states, and specific group constructions. Further research is necessary concerning the intersection of development policy and social structures, especially regarding the nation-state and capitalist accumulation and those forces’ effects on the intersection between ethnicity, gender, and race. This study asserts a critical stance toward the framework the UNDP enacts, promotes, and represents within its initiatives. Inequality reduction, as envisaged in SDG #10, cannot be achieved with the maintenance of incoherent content and the essentialization and obfuscation of marginalized peoples.

Conclusion

Almost two decades ago, Sara White (2002) critically examined the relationship between race and development. The findings of this paper extend the line of work, critical of the (neo-)colonial origins of “development,” adding perspectives on ethnicity as well as gender and showing the critical role of representation within development discourses. The SDGs reflect and encourage a problematic to contradictory approach to sustainable development, especially regarding inequality reduction. We have shown that the representation of sustainable development discourses on behalf of the UNDP subtly centers issues couched in language that fails to account for issues of gender, ethnicity, and race, despite this being a dimension of SDG #10, “reducing inequality.” The analysis has uncovered the textual tendency to reify hegemonic power structures, neglect structural causes, and essentialize aspects and actors. Consumption of this discourse allows its audience to ignore the contradictions between “development” and inequality, as well as differences between and amongst subjects of inequality to cement the status quo.

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Notes

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