

Agenda 2030 Between the Ideology of Progress and the Reality of Poverty and Exploitation

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Adopted in 2015, the [2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#) promises to eliminate poverty and promote sustainable development, peace, and prosperity for all by 2030. The Agenda introduced 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), establishing a framework of targets and indicators for their measurement, monitoring and implementation. By repeatedly stressing the idea of ‘tracking progress’ towards each goal, the Agenda reinforced the language of progress in international law. This intervention questions the usefulness of progress as a concept and the progressive nature of the 2030 Agenda, arguing that its strategy of [governance through goals](#) for poverty eradication fails to account for contextual, historical and systemic aspects of global poverty and therefore conceals a reality of exploitation, oppression and inequality that ultimately compromises the achievement of the SDGs.

International Law, Agenda 2030 and Progress

Thomas Skouteris identified two ways in which Progress features in International Law: 1) in the uppercase, ‘as the belief in the possibility of the improvement of the human condition as a whole ... by means of international law’; and 2) in the lowercase, ‘as a prosaic mode of declaring measurable advance with doctrines, institutions, or policies’ ([Skouteris](#), pp. 939). In the first sense, progress can be explained as the triumphalist idea that ‘international law has an inherent progressive value for humankind, along the Kantian mantra that internationalism signifies a desirable move towards a superior state of social development’ (ibid., p. 944). In the second sense, it may be understood as meaning that ‘international law has achieved and should continue to achieve progressive internal development’ as a professional system (ibid., p. 944). In the following sections, I argue that Agenda 2030 provides an excellent empirical object to demonstrate this dual notion of progress at work in contemporary international law.

Progress in the Uppercase

Agenda 2030 does not propose a real break with the traditional capitalist development model. In fact, it only proposes a simulative renewal of such a model according to soft [green economy parameters](#) that do not really challenge capitalism’s inherent logic of accumulation and exploitation. Even if, rhetorically, sustainable development proposes a new form of development, its ‘dominant ideas ... remain trapped within the ... confines of economic growth, GDP, and developmentalism’ ([Kotzé and Adelman](#)).

By relying on the 'growth' paradigm (SDG 8), in the market as an optimal resource allocator, and in technology as a neutral force, the Agenda's discourse reinforces traditional ideas of development and modernisation, perpetuating the belief that the world is inevitably progressing and that economies can grow without increasing environmental pressures. This is apparent even in the underlying principle of '[Leaving no one behind](#)', which takes on a teleological narrative of progress that is belied by the reality of poverty and inequality and by the general failure of the agenda to deliver on its promises. Additionally, the erasure of the differentiation between developed and developing countries in the Agenda's discourse — often regarded as a progress in relation to the Millennium Development Goals — [has the effect](#) of masking the North-South divide and the contrast between environmental and socio-economic concerns that characterises it.

In sum, Agenda 2030 might claim to be progressive, but, ultimately, it sustains the status quo of capitalist-driven development. Despite its 'green' colouring, the reiteration of this paradigm reinforces an ideology of progress that is historically typical of [Eurocentric international law](#).

Progress in the Lowercase

Agenda 2030 seems to assume that progress towards sustainable development can be achieved just by establishing absolute, quantitative, 'hereafter' goals, measuring and monitoring them without, however, critically engaging with the political, economic, and historical factors that inform measurement and create world's problems in the first place. There seems to be a greater concern to empirically demonstrate the forward movement of implementation — as a way to prove perhaps the legitimacy of the SDG framework — rather than really addressing the problems; a focus on *appearing* to be treating the symptoms rather than actually tackling disease *at its root*. The profusion of bland, data-saturated reports about insufficient progress towards the implementation of goals evidences the illusory character of this supposed Progress and of the simulative transformative potential of the agenda as a whole.

There are certainly benefits to portraying goals and targets in numerical, absolute forms. However, by ignoring different contexts, systemic issues, and unjust historical patterns of wealth, power and resource distribution, this strategy deprives the SDGs of history and materiality, making them lifeless abstractions in an eternal quest for implementation. Quantifiable goals and targets that are only 'hereafter' considered end up erasing historically constituted social relations of production and exploitation that, in their complexity, reveal systemic aspects of global challenges, leaving no room for reflecting on their '[root causes](#)', for example. Especially in the global South, the gaps between the ideals of SDGs and the obstacles of actual policy are evident as structural issues remain unaddressed. In this sense, [reforming](#) the global debt and financial architecture and [tackling](#) climate debt are good examples of retroactive approaches that would best enable SDGs implementation.

A Neoliberal Framework of Governance Anyway...

The Agenda's intensive use of data and the narrative of progress in its implementation ends up revealing a normative mode of speaking the world. Specifically, the normative frame provided by Agenda 2030 leaves out of the picture key historical and systemic dimensions of global production and distribution which are nonetheless crucial to the achievement of the goals. By reproducing such ideological notions of progress, the Agenda naturalises constitutive elements of neoliberal capitalism, such as privatisation, financialisation, individualism, competition and minimal government intervention, therefore encasing them from *real* transformation.

The Illusion of Progress Regarding Poverty Eradication

Phillip Alston demonstrated that the international community has mistakenly gauged progress in eliminating poverty by making reference to 'a standard of miserable subsistence rather than an even minimally adequate standard of living' ([Alston](#), p. 1). This has in turn enabled exaggerated assertions about the state of the eradication of extreme poverty while minimising the dire conditions in which billions of people live despite moving out of extreme poverty. According to Alston, the SDGs measure of extreme poverty — the International Poverty Line (IPL) — is '... well below the national poverty lines of most countries, and accordingly generates dramatically lower numbers in poverty' (*ibid.*, p. 5). Thus, it '... should not be treated as the pre-eminent basis on which to determine whether or not the world community is eradicating extreme poverty, let alone as the benchmark for SDG 1' (*ibid.*).

The World Bank's IPL '... is set so low and arbitrarily as to guarantee a positive result and to enable the United Nations, the World Bank, and many commentators to proclaim a Pyrrhic victory' (*ibid.*). This point is crucial: the mere definition, monitoring and achievement of a target does not necessarily mean 'progress' if its underlying assumptions are not problematised. Misplaced reliance on a flawed indicator, for example, may mislead about the success of a global effort towards a specific goal. In other words, depending on the parameters of a given indicator, as well as on the ideological frame over it, reported progress may be illusory, leaving complex questions out of the picture, and thus serving superficial self-congratulatory narratives that do not match reality.

Unveiling the Systemic Character of Poverty

Misplaced reliance on the IPL reinforces a distorted depiction of progress in poverty alleviation and demonstrates the Agenda's overall blindness in relation to historical, systemic causes of poverty. Indeed, mechanisms of the 2030 Agenda are unable to perceive historical patterns, international spillovers, and social costs of a globalised political economy that are nonetheless structurally related to poverty.

Drawing attention to systemic aspects of poverty, [Susan Marks](#) has pointed out 'the role of international law in establishing the very conditions within which poverty can occur' (Marks, p. 38). Thomas Pogge also [regards](#) international law as crucial in establishing conditions that permit and foster impoverishment. The work of geographer Mike Davis [shows](#) that 'the processes which impoverish the bottom billion are not just dysfunctions, mishaps or signs of local problems or weaknesses.

Rather, they belong with the logics of a world that is structured around multiple and shifting forms of exploitation' (Marks, p. 47). So, rather than looking at poverty as one-dimensional, isolated and measurable along absolute, monetary global lines, a systemic approach calls for a historical understanding of the phenomenon in a multidimensional context of reproduction of capitalist social relations that necessarily engender the exploitation and impoverishment of a large section of the global population condemned to be 'left behind'. From this point of view, the existence of poverty no longer becomes a simple lack of capitalist development or rule of (international) law, but the very result of and condition for the system's reproduction.

Conclusion

Facing the enduring legacy of colonialism and imperialism, as well as the all-pervasive reality of commodification and exploitation under neoliberal, neo extractivist forms of capitalism is essential to overcome humanity's main challenges and finally implement the SDGs. This might mean confronting the history of poverty, inequality and exploitation behind the ideas of progress, development and modernisation, as well as the unequal patterns of wealth and power accumulation that helped to shape today's world. It may involve investigating the historical roots and causes of unsustainable development and poverty and not only thinking of goals 'hereafter', as numbers to be checked in a colourful dashboard. In the case of poverty this might mean deconstructing and expanding the one-dimensional and econometric form that dominates SDG 1's approach to poverty, unveiling the reality of exploitation that remains hidden under ideological discourses, as well as tackling — via redistributive efforts — historical legacies and systemic issues (such as climate debt and global inequality) that link deprivation to privileges through capitalist relations of production and exploitation. Above all, it may imply completely rethinking 'progress talk' and the automatic association of international law with the idea of progress.

