

Hot Air or Comprehensive Progress? A Critical Assessment of the SDGs

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ABSTRACT

Since the SDGs have been adopted, the focus of the policy, civil society and academic debate is on how to implement ‘the SDGs’. However, if there are inherent contradictions, it will be impossible to implement all goals, and a choice has to be made. This paper analyses the SDGs regarding their coherence and its impacts on their implementation. It does so by using the DPSIR heuristic looking at driving forces, pressures, states, impacts and responses of sustainability challenges. The opportunities for success are assessed by a closer look at the agency mentioned in the SDG–Agenda 2030 text. The SDGs are found to be weak on agency, with limited obligations to governments and none to business or consumers. They focus on state and impact, neglecting the pressures and supporting counterproductive drivers. In conclusion, either the positive targets will not be realized, or the means of implementation must be upgraded significantly. Copyright © 2016 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd and ERP Environment

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Introduction: Purpose and Procedure

AT FIRST GLANCE, 2015 APPEARS TO HAVE BEEN THE YEAR OF REVITALIZED GLOBAL GOVERNANCE, WITH HABITAT III, THE Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, the Paris Climate Agreement and not least the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and Agenda 2030 adopted. All of these reflect the global consensus that business as usual is no option any longer, that changing the development trajectory is necessary. This paper focusses on the SDGs–Agenda 2030 to analyse if the agreement can be an effective means to this end, addressing the causes of problems, not only trying to cure symptoms.

In September 2015 the United Nations adopted Agenda 2030, with the SDGs as its centre piece United Nations (UN), 2015). Although criticism on earlier draft versions was largely ignored (e.g. Sachs, 2012, asking for more incentives for business; Hajer *et al.*, 2015, demanding inclusion of Safe Operating Space, Planetary Boundaries and the activation of societies; Lu *et al.*, 2015, suggesting priorities), the international reaction was overwhelmingly positive. Positive assessments refer to individual targets and to the overall content, although some authors highlight

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that the expected thematic benefits arise only if the SDGs as a whole are taken into account (e.g. Orme *et al.*, 2015; Waage *et al.*, 2015).

Agenda 2030 and the SDGs have been frequently praised for their broad approach and the participatory process of developing them, and their global reach has been emphasized as a major achievement (Pogge and Sengupta, 2015). Despite the frequent references to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (UN General Assembly, 2000) in Agenda 2030 this is a misunderstanding, resulting from perceiving the SDGs as a revision, extension and successor of the MDGs (Le Blanc, 2015; Sachs, 2012), which they are basically not. Instead, the decision to develop SDGs was part of *The Future We Want*, the final declaration of the UNCSD conference in Rio de Janeiro 2012 (United Nations (UN), 2012) – the merger of the processes of developing SDGs as decided by UNCSD and the follow-up of the MDGs was a plausible, but later, decision. Thus the point of reference for evaluating the SDGs must not be the development discourses, but the sustainable development ones at UN level. The SDGs' ancestorship includes documents and processes such as *Our Common Future*, the final document of the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED; better known as the Brundtland Commission), *Agenda 21* from Rio de Janeiro 1992 (United Nations (UN), 1993) or the Plan of Implementation (PoI) from Johannesburg 2002 (United Nations (UN), 2002). They are all broad, global and integrated (but have been at best partly implemented; see, e.g., UN General Assembly, 1997) and have been developed in the open participatory manner that is no recent achievement but characteristic of the UN sustainable development processes for the last 25 years. Nonetheless, it is to be welcomed that the (partly misguided) perception of the SDGs as successor to the MDGs finally seems to be making the development community take sustainable development on board in earnest (Le Blanc, 2015).

This paper analyses the SDGs, not regarding their process of development or in comparison with the MDGs, but concerning their coherence and their potential to drive progress towards sustainable development. As most discussions in the political and scientific sphere now focus on implementing the SDGs as a whole, it is important to identify potential contradictions and incoherencies and assess if they might be obstacles to the implementation process if not addressed. With this aim, the second section briefly describes the methodology, the third and fourth present the analysis, first following the DPSIR scheme, then having a closer look at the agency mentioned in and active behind Agenda 2030. The fifth section offers a discussion and some conclusions. The online appendix provides an annotated compilation of relevant targets quoted from the SDGs.

Method

The basis for this analysis is the whole of Agenda 2030. Its ambition regarding implementing the two pillars of sustainable development as defined by the Brundtland Commission (World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), 1987, p. 43), i.e. fulfilling human needs, in particular those of the poorest, and accepting limitations in creating environmental pressures, was assessed focussing on selected key targets. These were mostly linked to the goals relevant for climate change, energy transition, poverty alleviation and reducing inequalities, and sustainable production and consumption patterns.

We do not address the inherent weaknesses of target formulation – the International Council for Science (ICSU) and the International Social Science Council (ISSC) found only 29% of the 169 targets to be well defined and based on the latest scientific evidence, while 54% were classified as needing more work and 17% as weak or non-essential (ICSU and ISSC, 2015). Many of the links among goals that have been documented in biophysical, economic and social dimensions are not explicitly reflected in the SDGs (Le Blanc, 2015). Nor do we judge the credibility of the SDGs from later political events such as the budget foreseen (7.55 m US\$, about 0.14% of the UN budget of 4500 m US\$, UN General Assembly, 23 December 2015) or the suggestion of the industrialized countries to formally end the Doha Round of trade negotiations, eight weeks after having named it as a major element for progress in Agenda 2030 – both not supporting trust in its implementation. Instead we take the targets at face value (for a critical assessment see the appendix) and ask if by addressing the causes and allocating tasks to the responsible actors they provide a chance of changing the global development trajectory.

The opportunities for success are evaluated in a twofold way. First the SDGs are analysed by using the DPSIR heuristic used in particular by the European Environment Agency (EEA) and the EU Statistical Services (Eurostat),

classifying the SDG targets as referring to driving forces, pressures, states, impacts and responses of sustainability challenges. This classification helps recognize if targets are formulated for the prevention and mitigation of sustainability problems, or if they focus on restoration and adaptation. Second an actor analysis, based on excerpts from Agenda 2030, is undertaken to see if the agency named in the text is adequate to address the challenges mentioned and implement the targets and goals.

In the appendix, the relevant targets are assessed regarding their suitability for sustainable development based on the full initial definition by the Brundtland Commission (World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), 1987).

A Brief DPSIR Analysis

In a recommendation to the EEA on how they should proceed with the development of a strategy for Integrated Environmental Assessment, the Dutch National Institute of Public Health and the Environment (RIVM) and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) proposed the use of a framework that distinguished driving forces, pressures, states, impacts and responses (UNEP–RIVM, 1994). This became known as the DPSIR framework and has since been more widely adopted by the EEA. It is derived from the DSR scheme used by the UN Commission on Sustainable Development to structure indicators and reporting on the implementation of Agenda 21 (United Nations Division for Sustainable Development, Department of Policy Co-ordination and Sustainable Development (UNDPCSD), 1996). Initially conceptualized as a causal description, it is in its current form a descriptive rather than an analytical tool, not identifying causalities, but an appealing heuristic to illustrate them in environmental and sustainability policies (Stanners *et al.*, 2007).

State in this terminology refers to the socio-ecological situation, be it the current one or a desired future one. Impacts are the changes of the state caused by pressures, which are in turn caused and directed by driving forces (Binimelis *et al.*, 2009). Responses are policy actions, which can address each of the other stages, but with different intentions and effects (see Figure 1).

As a heuristic tool, DPSIR can be adapted to different situations; in particular, depending on the research question, what is considered a pressure or a driver, a state or an impact can change. Thus to apply the heuristic it is necessary to clarify the way it is applied in the respective analysis. Here it is used to classify not elements of a situation but targets, depending on if the objective they formulate is a different state, a change of impacts, or the future state

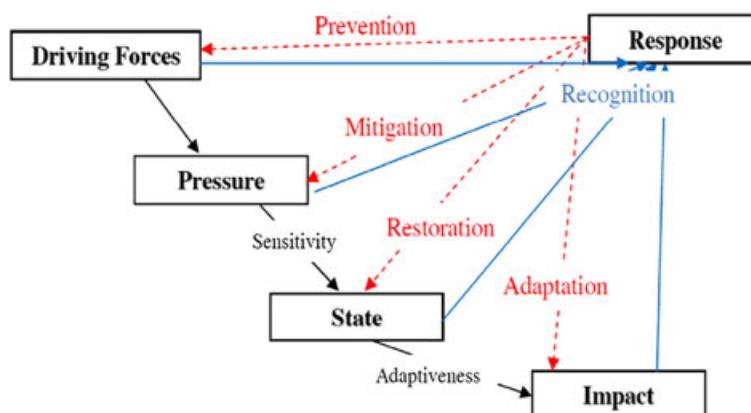


Figure 1. An extended DPSIR model. Responses only take place if a problem has been recognised, and the epistemology shaping the kind of societal recognition (co-)determines the kind of response. The sensitivity of the system determines how the state is affected by a certain pressure (sensitivity is pressure-specific), and the adaptiveness co-determines the resulting impacts. Prevention and mitigation require addressing Drivers and Pressures – a focus on State and Impact can at best lead to re-establishing the status quo ante (restoration), with the pressures going on unabated. This may imply that the restoration is improbable to last for long. Source: Spangenberg *et al.* 2015. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

of pressures and drivers (Stanners *et al.*, 2007). Using this approach and the definition of DPSIR components described, the Agenda 2030–SDG targets¹ can be classified according to the DPSIR scheme; to the best of my knowledge, the DPSIR approach has not been applied in this specific way before. Doing so provides the following results (for a list of relevant targets and their characteristics see the online appendix):

- targets addressing the *state* are plentiful (e.g. the state of poverty, the quality of water),
- targets addressing *impacts* are multiple (state changes such as climate change),
- targets for *pressures* are missing (for instance, accidents are covered, but not the number of cars, water pollution is addressed, but not the kind of agriculture causing it),
- targets referring to *driving forces* are mentioned (sustained growth, unconditioned free markets, free trade and globalization), but for the driving forces not a reversal of the past direction is advocated, but more of the same, and
- *responses* are policy actions to turn targets into reality; in the approach used here there are no targets referring to responses.

Whereas the targets for state and impact changes are rather radical in the social and somewhat ambitious (despite certain weaknesses) in the environmental domain (Scott and Lucci, 2015), the pressures that have caused the situation to be problematic are not addressed at all. For instance, while overcoming unequal distribution is a prominent social target, redistribution is not mentioned as a target or political task throughout the text, although today 1% of humankind owns more than half the Earth's wealth, while the lower 50% own just 0.6% (Pogge, 2015). Climate and biodiversity challenges are dealt with by a reference to the respective conventions, but terms such as decarbonization and planetary boundaries are missing from the text, although the concepts are discussed globally and have even been endorsed by the G7. Failing to address such pressures reduces policy options (which are not specified in Agenda 2030 but mostly left to national governments) to restoration and adaptation instead of reducing and eliminating the problems in a causal manner (see Figure 1). As long as this gap is not filled and targets for reducing pressures are not formulated, efforts to realize the SDGs will remain curative, addressing symptoms but not causes.

The hesitation to address the organizations, decision making mechanisms (policies, governance and economic processes) and orientations (ideologies, imaginations of what progress could mean for a sustainable society, which habits and routines are in the need of change) is most obvious in the way in which the driving forces are dealt with. Figure 2 provides a schematic view of different levels of drivers. Unlike pressures, they are not ignored, but mentioned and endorsed without analysing their past role in causing the unsustainable situation the SDGs are set to overcome.

Problems cannot be solved with the same mind-set that created them
Albert Einstein

This brief analysis falsifies the claim of § 61 of the Declaration that 'The Agenda's Goals and Targets deal with the means required to realize our collective ambitions'; the DPSIR classification shows that this is a fundamental misperception. While SDG targets should address unsustainable trends, at a closer look they are found to focus on changing unsustainable *states* and *impacts*, neglecting the need to change *pressures* and supporting counterproductive *drivers* such as sustained GDP growth, modernization-led development concepts, free trade and deregulation.

As far as these drivers have caused the pressures and shaped the state that the SDGs call to change, the targets regarding the drivers are counterproductive for achieving the targets referring to state or impacts. In particular, endorsing free trade without any caveats (for instance, there is no reference to a fair world trade system), free markets without mentioning their ecological and social effects and economic growth without limitations (only a minimum is proclaimed) ignores both of the two basic principles of sustainable development. As Piketty (2014) has shown, only strong social policy interventions can avoid ongoing income polarization in market economies, which in turn leads to eroding social cohesion (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009). Unlimited growth is no option either, given the constraints of the planetary boundaries (Rockström *et al.*, 2009; Steffen *et al.*, 2015).

¹The resolution *Transforming Our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, adopted by the UN General Assembly on 25 September 2015, consists of a preamble and 70 paragraphs (here §). No 59 includes the 17 SDGs and their targets. The target analysis focusses on § 59, the agency analysis on the whole resolution.

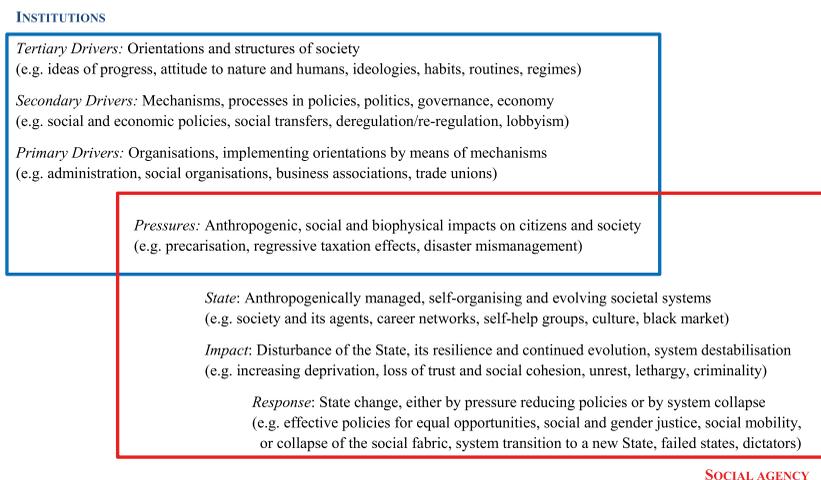


Figure 2. Exemplified by impacts on social systems and the cohesion of society, the figure shows what is missing in the SDGs: addressing the pressures, and a focus on the Driving Forces. This would require a more differentiated analysis of the Driving Forces in need of being reverted, on different levels of institutions. Inertia of primary drivers is one explanation for this failure, ideological fixation and taboos on the level of tertiary drivers is another one. Source: Author. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

Having said this, we hold that markets, trade and growth are not bad per se, but, as for every medicine, Paracelsus was right in claiming that the dose makes the poison. When suffering from an overdose, increasing the application is no cure but testifies a conceptual lock-in, potentially undermining the economic, social and environmental health of a society.

Agency Analysis

The SDG targets are multiple, well informed and ambitious (Scott and Lucci, 2015). A necessary question is who will do what to implement them: the existence of agency is a condition of action to be taken, and identifying the right agents is necessary for it to be effective and efficient (Bulkeley and Newell, 2015). The declaration, in § 40 and 60 ff, when highlighting the need for ‘concrete policies’, mainly refers to the much disputed Addis Ababa Action Agenda, i.e. an agreement on financial transfers for the benefit of sustainable development, but no other policies. About the ‘[c]ohesive nationally owned sustainable development strategies, supported by integrated national financing frameworks’, which according to the declaration (§ 63) ‘will be at the heart of our efforts’, little is to be found in Agenda 2030, a familiar benign neglect, since establishing such strategies was decided in 1992 in Agenda 21 (United Nations (UN), 1993) and many were formally adopted in the run-up to the 2002 World Summit in Johannesburg.

Consumers and Citizens

While Agenda 21 has an own chapter on sustainable consumption, frequently refers to citizens and defines nine major groups to be equally involved in pre-decision sustainable development discourses (alphabetically, business and industry, children and youth, farmers, indigenous peoples and their communities, local authorities, non-governmental organizations, the scientific and technological community, women, and workers and trade unions), Agenda 2030 like the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation before it (WSSD, 2002) in no way elaborates on these issues. Unlike business, citizens and consumers are not ascribed an active role; just two demands to consumers can be identified:

- enhance awareness of sustainable development and green life styles (SDG 12)
- education, training and data collection, sustainable life styles (10 YFP-SCP).

What consumers can do and have done (from voluntary simplicity, downscaling, deceleration, and sufficiency oriented life styles, via vegetarian and vegan food consumption, buying durable goods and having them repaired, to self-supply by city gardening, and do-it-yourself) is rather completely ignored. In particular, any discussion of the political conditions for sustainable consumption is missing. While people's role as consumers is only weakly addressed, people as citizens, as active political agents, do not occur in Agenda 2030.

Business (Only Firms; Trade Unions, Although One of the 'Major Groups', are Not Mentioned)

Agenda 2030 signifies a culmination point in the longer term efforts to change of the role attributed to business in sustainable development, from providing means to politically determined objectives to being an agent playing a prominent role in defining objectives and strategies (Scheyvens *et al.*, in press). Instead of legally binding obligations, 'partnerships' are promoted by business and the UN Secretary-General, but without any systematic evaluation of the partnership agreements signed under UN auspices as the 'second pillar' of sustainable development strategies, agreed in 2002 in Johannesburg.

However, this enhanced influence is not associated with enhanced responsibilities. While the Johannesburg Declaration stated that 'the private sector has a duty to contribute to the evolution of equitable and sustainable communities' (United Nations (UN), 2002, § 27), Agenda 2030 does not mention duties or obligations but invites business to voluntary engagement; not even ending tax dodging as foreseen in an earlier version of the declaration (Scheyvens *et al.*, in press) is mentioned in the final declaration. In this Agenda 2030 follows business lobbying for voluntary initiatives rather than regulation (Pingeot, 2014). The key demands of the SDG regarding business can be summarized in two points.

- Achieve higher levels of economic productivity through diversification, technological upgrading and innovation, including through a focus on high-value added and labour-intensive sectors (SDG 8.2). Private business activity, investment and innovation are considered 'major drivers of productivity, inclusive economic growth and job creation' (declaration § 67). Therefore business is *invited* to cooperation, and networks and partnerships including PPP, are encouraged (10 YFP-SCP).
- Retrofit industries to make them sustainable (SDG 9.4), upgrade the technological capabilities of industrial sectors in all countries (SDG 9.5), decouple economic growth from environmental degradation (SDG 8.4) and improve global resource productivity/efficiency in SCP (SDG 8.4). Businesses are *called upon* to apply their creativity and innovations to solving sustainability challenges (declaration § 67) and *encouraged* to adopt sustainable practices and to integrate sustainability information into their reporting cycle, especially large and transnational companies (SDG 12.6).

Business is treated as a per se benevolent actor for the public good, instead of a market based, profit seeking undertaking; the objectives and targets include no criteria to distinguish between a positive and a negative role of business for sustainable development (the fact that many sustainability problems have been caused by business activities is not mentioned at all). The target to establish an 'enabling international economic environment' (§ 63) literally echoes business suggestions; the role it ascribes to governments is paving the way for business to deliver sustainable development. Themes such as 'illicit financial flows, debt, unfair trade rules and corporate power' are missing (McClosky, 2015, p. 186). No criteria are given for when and how PPP and other business partnerships support the public good (in times of zero interest rates any profit generating partnership will cause extra expenses for the public budget). Unlike it was the case at the WSSD, no Corporate Accountability Convention was on the agenda (2002 discussed but not adopted), no corporate transparency regulation, no rules for liability; not even the OECD standards are formally endorsed. Calling upon businesses to apply their creativity falls short of naming the relevant agents: investments happen under public pressure (legally forced – the most effective driver for environmental innovation, see Ghisetti and Pontoni, 2015, or pressurized by consumers' opinions), or if promising sufficient returns; neither condition is mentioned. This means that the most effective mechanisms to stimulate business investment and socio-environmental innovations are not demanded by Agenda 2030.

The role ascribed to business also suffers from a number of inconsistencies. Sectors are not simultaneously high value added and labour intensive; regarding diversification, productivity, innovation and job creation, the means do

not fit the ends, and agency remains unclear. Making industries sustainable would require limiting resource consumption – decoupling and improving resource productivity point in this direction. However, combined with the imperative of sustained growth (accelerated by upgrading the technological capabilities), they would only slow down and not end increasing environmental pressures and degradation. Sustainability reporting will not help: some of the most impressive reports were those of the Volkswagen Company. Overcoming poverty by offering fair salaries, reverting the explosion of income inequality within firms (which is definitely not ‘inclusive’) is not mentioned as a business task.

Politics

According to Agenda 2030, governance is to be improved by governments taking action to secure *effective, accountable and efficient institutions at all levels* (SDG 16.6) and *improved domestic capacity for tax and other revenue collection* (SDG 17.1). Accountable and effective institutions require good governance and action against corruption and organized crime, which remain unspecified (Edwards and Romero, 2014). Improved tax collection is important, but falls short of broadening the tax base and stopping capital flight. It is also not considered the main route to national revenue generation: besides the frequently reiterated claim for international financial transfers, the heads of states and governments ‘recognize that domestic resources are first and foremost generated by economic growth’ (declaration § 66); this does not resonate well with the WCED sustainability criterion of acknowledging limitations. The effectiveness of institutions is mentioned, but not what they should be effective in doing – concluding from the SDG imperatives, overcoming poverty might be an objective as the social targets indicate, but accepting limits seems to be none of their purposes.

To *integrate ecosystem and biodiversity values into national and local planning, development processes, poverty reduction strategies and accounts by 2020* (SDG 15.9) is a double edged sword for conservation and can have adverse environmental and social impacts (Spangenberg and Settele, 2016).

In fiscal policy, governments pledge they will *rationalize inefficient fossil fuel subsidies and restructure taxes* (SDG 12c), *phase out other harmful subsidies, including all agricultural export subsidies* (SDG 2b) and *fisheries subsidies leading to overcapacity and overfishing* (SDG 14.6), and *remove market distortions* (SDG 12c). Getting rid of harmful subsidies and having eco-taxes is an intention welcome from a climate perspective and necessary after the Paris Agreement, but requires social compensation (or a free basic supply) for the poor amongst the beneficiaries such as the Social Protection Floor, endorsed by UNCSD 2012 (Spangenberg, 2013), but not mentioned in Agenda 2030. Cutting subsidies to unsustainable fishing fleets and agricultural exports is a demand primarily relevant to the EU, the USA and regarding fisheries to Japan; it is in its explicit form an innovation to the sustainability documents that would oblige export surplus nations to either produce at or below world market prices, or reduce the production of farming to a level not significantly surpassing regional demand. The call for removing market distortions, welcome as it is for subsidies mentioned, can however be counterproductive if social, environmental and development policies are considered market distortions.

Regarding investments, governments commit themselves to ‘devote resources to developing rural areas and sustainable agriculture and fisheries, supporting smallholder farmers, especially women farmers, herders and fishers’ (declaration § 24) and provide ‘inclusive and equitable quality education at all levels – early childhood, primary, secondary, tertiary, technical and vocational training’ (declaration § 25), but not to industrial policy restructuring the production system. Supporting education at all levels has been recognized as a condition for sustainable development since the WCED, and similar claims were made in Rio 1992 (United Nations (UN), 1993, ch. 36). Supporting smallholders while dismantling subsidies, and devoting resources to developing sustainable agriculture and fisheries while removing market distortions, is a balancing act at best, if not an open contradiction.

New, and something to remind several European and US politicians of, is the promise regarding migration: ‘We will cooperate internationally to ensure safe, orderly and regular migration involving full respect for human rights and the humane treatment of migrants regardless of migration status, of refugees and of displaced persons’ (declaration § 28).

In a nutshell, regarding the objectives and targets obliging governments to action, what is envisaged falls short of the grand promises and great visions of the declaration; some claims might even be contradictory.

Discussion and Conclusion

Discussion

The Copenhagen lesson, learnt after the spectacular failure of climate negotiations in 2009, is that attempts to internationally agree on binding targets for national action are bound to fail, but ambitious declarations of good will plus voluntary contributions are possible. Consequently, the SDG targets 'are defined as aspirational and global, with each Government setting its own national targets guided by the global level of ambition but taking into account national circumstances. Each Government will also decide how these aspirational and global targets should be incorporated into national planning' (declaration § 55). A similar approach is the basis of the Paris climate agreement. Means of implementation are rarely defined, instead 'We [i.e. the heads of governments] encourage all Member States [i.e. their governments, alas themselves] to develop as soon as practicable ambitious national responses to the overall implementation of this Agenda' (declaration § 78). This is not a new twist; in significant parts of the 2012 UNCSO final declaration *The Future We Want* governments of world called upon, encouraged and urged the governments of the world to finally undertake efforts to implement agreements long adopted by the governments of world (United Nations (UN), 2012). This need not be bad, if only the voluntary national commitments were finally irreversibly committed and sufficient to reach the commonly agreed objectives, goals and targets. Unfortunately this tends not to be the case, either with agreements on restructuring the global financial markets or on environmental issues such as climate change (Cléménçon, 2016). Instead a strange but stable pattern seems to emerge, a new normal in the field of international, in particular environmental, diplomacy: to radicalize promises once earlier promises failed (welcome as it appears to make up for the time lost), but without radicalizing the measures.

The results are agreements on ambitious goals (such as changed distribution of wealth in the SDGs or the 1.5 °C target in the Paris Agreement), but without realistic plans for how to get there. The insight that business as usual is no option any more is widespread, but so is the incapability to design a fundamentally new policy. The result is a permanent cognitive dissonance, an indication of an unstable political situation.

Searching for the reasons for this lock-in, the SDG targets reveal the two opposing and mutually exclusive world views (Spangenberg, 2016). One is based on social and biosciences advocating what has been called 'strong sustainability', justice or fairness and limiting physical resource use (Daly, 1991), the other is based on economic thinking following a 'weak sustainability' approach (assuming full substitutability, i.e. a forest or civil rights foregone can be compensated by higher income; see, e.g., Pearce and Barbier, 2000). The former, known as ecological economics, is dominating the social and to some degree the environmental targets, while the latter, environmental economics, reflecting a neoliberal view widely spread in politics and supported by the power of business, holds sway over the definition of agency and the driving force targets (Pingeot, 2014; Spangenberg, 2016). The incommensurability of objectives results in defining goals and targets that correctly address pressing needs of societies worldwide, while at the same time making it impossible to jointly recognize the need for a more fundamental change of course if these targets are to be achieved. For instance, the social demands imply an elaborate welfare state with redistribution of income and wealth, and strong wage, social protection and regressive tax policies, but redistribution does not appear as an objective in the political targets: social and political targets do not match.

By comparison to what it could have been, it's a miracle. But by comparison to what it should have been, it's a disaster.

George Monbiot, *The Guardian*

The camps of environmental and ecological economists also have different senses of urgency. For the 'strong' approach representatives, uncertainty and tipping points (financially, socially, regarding climate and biodiversity) play a crucial role and have to be dealt with based on precaution; they see the world entering a time of end games where postponing decision is no longer possible. Based on neoclassical economic thinking, in the 'weak' camp processes are considered reversible (physics tends to disagree) and the future is discounted; agents holding this world view tend to argue for delaying decisive environmental action, and for incremental rather than radical change (e.g. Lomborg, 2009). Business tends to endorse this view: in the run-up to the SDGs it became obvious that business

interest groups had interpreted sustainable development principles in a rather narrow fashion, seeking win–win opportunities and showing little interest in social sustainability (Barkemeyer *et al.*, 2014). Their key messages in the preparation process were that growth and technology, together with corporate sustainability, are the key means to achieve sustainability (no trade-offs suggested), and that the role of governments should be to create an ‘enabling environment’ for business, including a business-friendly trade system, pricing incentives, support for responsible business, and the possibility to participate in defining policy strategies and priorities (Pingeot, 2014). Many of these demands were taken on board by the UN Secretary General and found their way into Agenda 2030. This view is not limited to Northern agents; often Third World elites have adopted modernization theory as the background for formulating their demands and expectations, regardless of the more than disputed status of that theory in science.

As without agency the SDG targets cannot be implemented (even if better formulated, see ICSU and ISSC, 2015), the agency section as it stands has to be complemented with additional mandatory targets for business and politics, objectives, tools, mechanisms, conventions and binding agreements, sanctions etc. as compliance supporting mechanisms, agreed in whatever way, in the political implementation process. There is a need not only for new global goals but also a new global development paradigm (Gore, 2015); a turn to sustainable development will not happen on its own, nor will it be brought about by the markets alone: it needs decisive political action (United Nations (UN), 2011). In the SDGs–Agenda 2030, there is so far no indication of changing the rules governing business, trade and free markets; conditionalities to make them work for sustainable development by addressing both pillars, needs and limitations, are missing and constitute a veritable policy gap.

Without new goals based on a new paradigm, pressures will not be addressed, and drivers will continue pushing the global system in an unsustainable direction. Politics will be restricted to curing symptoms, and the targets will remain empty shells with no means to accomplish them.

Conclusion

Whoever wants substantial sustainable development cannot but opt for setting legally binding rules and standards for all relevant agents (including business), for intervention in market processes, for reregulation instead of deregulation (United Nations (UN), 2011) and for a strong role of citizens and *all* major groups. What is needed to make the social and some environmental targets operational, even realistic, is hard targets and the corresponding tools to enforce limits

- to resource consumption (based on environmental space/planetary boundaries),
- to income disparities (e.g. a call for minimum and maximum incomes defined on a national basis) and
- to wealth concentration (e.g. by inheritance capping; to illustrate this, 10 m US\$ inheritance means a lifelong, work-free income of 10 000 US\$/month for the beneficiaries, from the first month of life to beyond the age of 80).

Implementing such targets is impossible unless the institutional setting is changed in favour of sustainable development; i.e., the institutions themselves must undergo a sustainability check (which was part of the post-1992 sustainability indicator set, but was abolished early this millennium; see United Nations Division for Sustainable Development, Department of Policy Co-ordination and Sustainable Development (UNDPCSD), 1996). Generally speaking, the aim should be to make the kind of business performance that would contribute to sustainable development the only profitable one (taxation, fees, bans, legislation and incentives must be combined to this end). Elements of such an institutional innovation could be refinements of existing SDG targets such as mandatory social minimum standards, including a minimum income and guaranteed minimum supply of goods such as shelter, energy, water and mobility, verifiable corporate CSR reports (not a la Volkswagen) or strong industrial policy for structural change towards a fossil-free, physically slimmed ‘light’ industrial sector. Such measures would moderate the tensions between profit-driven and socially motivated agents contributing to sustainable development, but without eliminating this fundamental difference (Luke, 2013), as business would keep its *raison d’être* centred upon profit making. Europe and the USA could learn a lot from countries such as the Republic of Korea or the People’s Republic of China, despite their different governance systems.

Other elements would be rather new, such as a global Corporate Accountability Convention (CAC), defining corporate and individual liabilities, regulation of international trade according to sustainability criteria (TTIP, TiSA and other currently negotiated agreements do not pass this test) and of the financial sector at the UN level, steering it

back from the role as organizer of speculation to a servant of the real economy, ending tax evasion, and sufficiency policy favouring better but less consumption for the global consumer class; unfortunately, such ideas seem to be far away from the negotiation tables so far. However, for the SDGs, as for the other global governance agreements reached in 2015, the positive targets will either not be realized, or the means of implementation must be upgraded significantly.

This is the result of endorsing two mutually exclusive world views: an ambivalent situation (which explains the diverging assessments of the agreements). The parties involved may recognize, sooner or later, that the measures foreseen are insufficient to meet the targets and sharpen their bite against all foreseeable political resistance: addressing the root causes will require more 'radical' steps ('radix', in Latin, means 'root'). Alternatively, they may refrain from doing so, due to cost concerns or higher priority given to other issues, and let the ambitious goals and targets slip away, at the expense of the essence of the SDGs. For the hopes placed on and the efforts invested in the SDGs, the former is the desirable, although not necessarily the politically more probable, option; a conflict with much of the business world would probably be inevitable.

To succeed with the SDGs, we need to be radical in our analysis, visionary in finding solutions that are just, benign and environmentally sound, and pragmatic in their implementation, instead of being radical in the denial of problems, visionary in defending the status quo and pragmatic in undermining all policies of change if private or national interests seem to be at risk. While the latter has been the normal procedure in the past, justifying scepticism, the former is the current best hope for minimizing damage and to have some progress towards sustainable development. The world has to make a choice, soon.

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