

THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS, NEOLIBERALISM AND NGOS: IT'S TIME TO PURSUE A TRANSFORMATIVE PATH TO SOCIAL JUSTICE

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Abstract: This article argues that two recent reports on food security and education call into question the technical and managerial development process set in motion by the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It suggests that the goals can't succeed as long as they are fatally hitched to the broken neoliberal paradigm of development which is resulting in wealth concentration in fewer hands and growing social polarisation. The article encourages non-governmental organisations to broaden their policy ambit toward a more political and transformative agenda that directly addresses the fundamental causes of inequality and injustice. Clinging to the aid agenda and the SDGs is unlikely to alter the neoliberal trajectory on which we are set toward more social fragmentation and political authoritarianism.

Key words: Sustainable Development Goals; Neoliberalism; Non-Governmental Organisations; Aid; Development Policy; Social Transformation.

Introduction

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (UNDP, 2019) were adopted in 2015 by the United Nations and its member states as an ambitious programme 'to promote shared prosperity and well-being for all over the next 15 years' (UN, 2015). Four years into their delivery, two reports in as many weeks have cast serious doubt on the efficacy and intended outcomes of the SDGs. These reports not only indicate that two key goals – food security (WHO, 2019) and inclusive education (UNESCO, 2019) - are significantly off-track and unlikely to be achieved by 2030, but more fundamentally question the development process that the Global Goals represent. This debate around the goals goes to the heart of contemporary international development delivery. Does it remain a largely technical, managerial and depoliticised discourse on aid or does it widen its ambit for debate into the need for systemic change and political influence addressing the root causes of economic inequality? It is difficult to anticipate a scenario where

the managerial path alone, which the SDGs appear to represent, will provide the transformative change needed to achieve poverty eradication. The damaging reports on food security and education appear to underline this view.

Food security and education

The first report on food security from a UN multi-agency taskforce has found that 820 million people worldwide are still going hungry and argues that reaching the target of zero hunger by 2030 is ‘an immense challenge’ (WHO, 2019). SDG 2 (2015) aims to ‘End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture’ but the report finds that ‘The pace of progress in halving the number of children who are stunted and in reducing the number of babies born with low birth weight is too slow’ (WHO, 2019). Moreover, the number of children overweight and obese – indicators of malnourishment – continues ‘to increase in all regions, particularly among school-age children and adults’ (Ibid). And in suggesting difficulties in achieving SDG 5 (2015) on gender equality, the report states that ‘The chances of being food insecure are higher for women than men in every continent, with the largest gap in Latin America’ (WHO, 2019).

The second recent report showing the SDGs to be off-track, was published by UNESCO on the key area of education. It finds that ‘one in six 6 to 17-year-olds will still be excluded [from school] in 2030’ (UNESCO, 2019). It goes on to suggest that ‘40% of children worldwide will fail to complete secondary education, a figure that is forecast to reach 50% in sub-Saharan Africa where the proportion of trained teachers has been declining since 2000’ (Ibid). SDG 4 (2015) aims to ‘Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all’. However, a 2017-18 UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report found that the education share of total aid fell for six consecutive years, from 10% in 2009 to 6.9% in 2015 (UNESCO, 2017: xvii). Helen Clarke, the former prime minister of New Zealand and chair of the Global Education Monitoring Report advisory board said that world leaders ‘had a lot to answer for’ in letting education slip ‘down the aid agenda’ (Lamble, 2019). In voicing her concern about ‘complacency’ among countries regarding the education target, Clarke added that lack of progress toward SDG 4 had ‘worrying implications for the whole 2030 agenda on sustainable development’ (Ibid).

Aid is not enough

While Helen Clarke bemoans the lack of aid and collective commitment of nation states as the chief impediments to SDG delivery, it is doubtful that increasing development assistance to countries in the global South alone will eradicate stubborn levels of poverty. For example, Hickle reported in 2017 that ‘for every \$1 of aid that developing countries receive, they lose \$24 in net outflows’. Most of the outflows represent the illicit flow of capital from the global South to the North as a result of the use of tax havens or the reporting of false prices on trade invoices. The World Bank (2017) has defined illicit flows as ‘Money illegally earned, transferred, or used that crosses borders’ and argues that they ‘reduce domestic resources and tax revenue needed to fund poverty-reducing programs and infrastructure in developing countries’. Aid also pales alongside the remittances sent by migrants working abroad back home to countries in the global South. The World Bank (2019) reported that remittances reached a record high of \$689 billion in 2018 which is nearly four times the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)-estimated total of official donor assistance in 2018 of \$153 billion, a drop of 2.7 percent on 2017 (OECD, 2019).

But the full scale of global inequality and the limitations of development aid were starkly revealed in an Oxfam report (2019) showing the wealth of the world’s billionaires to have increased by \$900 billion in 2018 alone while the wealth of the poorest half of humanity fell by 11 percent (Oxfam, 2019: 11). The report also showed that wealth is becoming more concentrated with 26 billionaires controlling the same wealth as the bottom half of humanity (Ibid). But what is ignored by the standard economic measurement of development, Gross National Product (GNP), is the unpaid work of millions of women across the world which Oxfam estimates annually at \$10 trillion, a sum 43 times greater than the annual turnover of the transnational giant, Apple (Ibid).

Oxfam’s report indicates that the main driver of gender inequality, social injustice and wealth concentration is neoliberalism:

“Our economic rules have been written by rich and powerful men in their own interests. The neo-liberal economic model of today has made

this worse – cuts to public services, cuts to taxes for the richest individuals and corporations, and a race to the bottom on wages have all hurt women more than men” (Oxfam, 2019: 14).

SDGs and Neoliberalism

There appears to be a lack of critical engagement in the international development sector with the SDGs and their capacity to impose meaningful change on a dangerously deregulated neoliberal economic system. However, an academic study carried out in the Valencian autonomous region in Spain considered whether the SDGs can address structural problems in development aid policies and practices, ‘such as the lack of accountability and coherence, unequal power relations, or depoliticisation’ (Belda-Miguel et al, 2019: 1). The study found that:

“the SDGs do not overcome the depoliticisation of aid discourses and policies as they still frame development problems as technical, managerial and measurable problems. For example, issues of power and key political issues such as redistribution are totally absent from the Agenda” (Belda-Miguel et al, 2019: 2).

The international development sector appears reluctant to leave the policy comfort zone of overseas development assistance and become more politically engaged with the structural causes of poverty. As John Hilary, former director of War on Want, said: ‘Over the past two decades, a highly professionalised NGO sector has increasingly moved to identify international development with overseas aid, despite the numerous critiques of such an elision from the majority world itself’ (Hilary, 2013: 11). The SDGs appear to be locked in a similar managerialist and technical approach to development with the Valencian study suggesting that:

“Despite the references to structural issues, the new global agenda has been criticised for reproducing the status quo and for not addressing the causes of impoverishment created by the existing dominant capitalist and developmentalist model” (Belda-Miguel et al, 2019: 2).

While the Goals recognise the importance of climate action with SDG 13 (2015) calling for ‘urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts’, SDG 8 (2015) calls for ‘sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth’. How do the goals square the circle of combating climate change while enabling poor and middle-income countries to higher levels of growth with the enhanced global consumption of carbon which that implies? The goals seem to be fatally hitched to the same tried and failed economic system that created climate change, global inequality and social polarisation in the first place. It seems certain that until this nettle is grasped by international development NGOs and they start working with unity and purpose toward a more heavily regulated economic system that supports progressive taxation, properly funded public services and decent wages, then the social fragmentation suggested by Brexit and the election of Donald Trump will continue (McCloskey, 2017).

In Ireland, a study by Kleibl and Munck (2018) argued that ‘there is a shared discourse across the government, NGO and academic sectors which does not really encourage critical enquiry’ (2018: 2). However, in light of the safeguarding crisis which has enveloped Oxfam (Charity Commission, 2019) and has since impacted on other NGOs in the development sector, they argue now is the time for ‘honest self-reflection’ and propose ‘a carefully crafted and openly debated research project’ to consider the role of NGOs as agents of development (Kleibl and Munck, 2018: 22). This debate appears to be overdue, particularly as the development process to which so many NGOs have imbued with their social capital and policy formation – the Sustainable Development Goals – is already sending out signals of distress.

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