



# Sanctioning Disciplined Grabs (SDGs): From SDGs as Green Anti-Politics Machine to Radical Alternatives?

Peter Bille Larsen<sup>a,\*</sup>, Tobias Haller<sup>b</sup>, Ashish Kothari<sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup> University of Geneva, Environmental Governance and Territorial Development Institute, Boulevard Carl Vogt 66, 1205 Geneva, Switzerland

<sup>b</sup> University of Bern, Institut für Sozialanthropologie, Lerchenweg 36, 3012 Bern, Switzerland

<sup>c</sup> Kalpavriksh, Apt 5 Shree Datta Krupa, 908 Deccan Gymkhana, Pune 411004, India

## 1. Introduction

The universalist ambition of the 17 Sustainable Development Goal (SDGs) and 169 targets as a global plan of action for people, planet, prosperity and peacebuilding deserves analytical scrutiny from multiple angles. While the SDGs are largely heralded as a paradigm shift compared to their predecessor Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), we argue that four fundamental dynamics undermine or severely hamper SDGs as a game changer to address the deep-running sustainability challenges facing the planet.

First, consider the omnipresent so-called implementation dilemma or gap. The United Nations 2020 report on SDGs is not only revelatory about the dire state of achieving the stated goals, but telling about how fundamental contradictions and gaps are continuously recycled in calls for ‘more of the same’. As UN Secretary General Guterres noted in the foreword to the report, “Far from undermining the case for the SDGs, the root causes and uneven impacts of COVID-19 demonstrate precisely why we need the 2030 Agenda, the Paris Agreement on climate change and the Addis Ababa Action Agenda and underscore the urgency of their implementation” (United Nations, 2020: 2). Yet, on the other hand, the COVID-19 pandemic has also precisely demonstrated *both* deep-running inequalities and the inadequacy of global development frameworks.

Our purpose with this critique is not to throw the baby of global development cooperation and global agenda-setting out with the bathwater. In fact, it is quite the contrary. Global development agendas, we argue, *are* relevant. Yet, despite decades of critical development theory and thinking, we have found a remarkable level of UNcritical buy-in to the SDGs as the language, idea and vehicle of cooperation. We define UNcritical discourse as an anti-political (defined further below) assemblage constituted by UN discourse and careful (UNish) criticism. The dominant narrative is one of making the goals happen in response to a depoliticized critique signalling inaction. The problem with jumping on

this implementation narrative bandwagon is not the call for action *per se*. Rather, it concerns the UNcritical approach of win-win language and the hidden away questioning of structural challenges.

Asking such critical questions and calling out the anti-politics at stake into question might be perceived as academic posturing. After all, isn't the compromised nature of global development agendas self-evident – as is the importance of the need for further collective action on issues such as fighting poverty and climate change? Our critique here is not one against the goals to end hunger or promote well-being, to mention just two, but rather one of questioning the constant pursuit of win-win scenarios of SDGs without adequate attention to deep-running contradictions. There is a need to reflect on the fact that the SDGs do not address the root causes leading to what they are supposed to be responses to, nor do they base themselves on a clear and explicitly stated bedrock of progressive values and ethics. Both historical (including colonial) and contemporary processes of extractivism and inequalities are far too easily left unaddressed – and, as we argue, even risk being deepened.

There is a need to take both in-built conservatism and the ensuing transformative dynamics seriously. In a discursive landscape characterized by the relative paucity of critique, our ambition is that of retrieving spaces for critical questions, and making those questions heard, including those left out in the process of SDG implementation.

Second, we argue that the consensual design of goals and the (in/cap)ability of existing conservation and development institutions and practice for disruptive change instead favours ‘development as usual’. This notably concerns omissions, slippage and gaps in formulating the SDGs and targets (Fukuda-Parr, 2019), even if there is some improvement compared to the MDGs (Fukuda-Parr and McNeill, 2019; Fukuda-Parr, 2016). Whereas SDGs may be argued to harbour some potential for change in relation to, for example, human rights and environmental challenges, the likelihood of capture by mainstream actors through

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [Peter.larsen@unige.ch](mailto:Peter.larsen@unige.ch) (P.B. Larsen), [tobias.haller@anthro.unibe.ch](mailto:tobias.haller@anthro.unibe.ch) (T. Haller), [chikikothari@gmail.com](mailto:chikikothari@gmail.com) (A. Kothari).