

# Flaws of Sustainable Development

Subjects: Environmental Studies

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In 2015, the United Nations (UN) introduced 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 169 associated targets, addressing poverty, hunger, climate change, environmental degradation, peace, justice, and other global issues, as a “blueprint to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all people and the world by 2030”. Thirty years after the Rio Earth Summit, the report from the United Nations on progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) may justifiably trigger some anger. Greater numbers of people are suffering, environments are being further degraded, and the life support systems for both current and future generations are being seriously compromised. About halfway through the time period for the SDGs, in March 2022, UN Secretary-General António Guterres warned that humanity is “moving backwards in relation to the majority of the Sustainable Development Goals”. Although some of the setbacks could be attributed to the pandemic and associated policies, the SDGs were already off-track before COVID-19 emerged.

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## 1. The Primacy of Narrow Economic Interests

In the early years of the elaboration of the concept of Sustainable Development, one of the main criticisms was that it implied an equivalence between economic, social, and environmental value, so that key natural phenomena, such as a pristine oldgrowth forest, could be replaced by a cattle ranch and be regarded as part of Sustainable Development <sup>[1]</sup>. This concern led to debate about ‘strong’ and ‘weak’ commitments to environmental protection within the framework <sup>[2]</sup>. Decades later, this issue has not been resolved, with substitutability being central to the latest ideas on biodiversity offsets. Therefore, the framework does not disallow destruction of key—even essential—ecosystems <sup>[3]</sup>.

Another criticism is that the concept ignores evidence that, globally, human settlement is already overshooting the planet’s ‘carrying capacity’, which is the total use of natural resources and the amount of pollution from people that the global environment can take without being degraded <sup>[4]</sup>. Sometimes described as humanity’s ecological footprint, this overshoot, or ‘overtrampling’, of the Earth is occurring with current population levels and current levels of consumption by billions of people living energy- and resource-intensive consumer lifestyles. The problem of exceeding the Earth’s carrying capacity is even worse than it may first seem, because of the many amplifying feedbacks which can lead to cascading effects on ecosystems and societies. This led to scientists explaining that there are “planetary boundaries,” where breaching them would mean destabilising Earth systems at the planetary scale, in ways that would threaten most of life on Earth <sup>[5]</sup>. With this devastating possibility in mind, any plan for improving both the environment and people’s lives that does not deliberately seek to reduce overshoot and that instead requires expanding economic systems, is simply adding to the existing problem <sup>[6]</sup>.

This brings people to a widely discussed problem of Sustainable Development in general and of the SDGs in particular: the reliance upon and the promotion of economic growth <sup>[7]</sup>. Sustained economic expansion is not only assumed in SDGs, but the pursuit of growth is also enshrined in the framework as a separate goal in SDG 8 on ‘decent work and economic growth’. The SDGs therefore reflect the habits of centuries of economic models and political institutions that have promoted a version of human flourishing synonymous with the growth of material wealth. Although SDGs offer no clear explanation of how global economic expansion will reduce poverty and environmental destruction, the implicit assumption is that such economic growth is essential for achieving the human development objectives on poverty, hunger, and health. That is the assumption, despite this notion being dispelled by empirical studies; instead, inequalities in ownership, income, status, and rights shape how people experience poverty <sup>[7]</sup>.

The fixation on economic growth is also flawed in its reliance on the belief that technological change and resource substitution allows people to decouple economic growth from resource exhaustion, biodiversity loss, and carbon emissions <sup>[8]</sup>. Instead, empirical data show that the growth goal of the SDGs is incompatible with the framework’s sustainability objectives to reduce the use of global resources and carbon emissions rapidly enough to stay within even the conservatively derived carbon budget for dangerous 2 °C ambient global warming <sup>[9]</sup>. Even if economic growth could

be decoupled from emissions by replacing fossil fuels with renewable energy, this cannot be done quickly enough if the economy continues to grow at the usual rates <sup>[7][10]</sup>.

Further recent analyses of the processes required for powering *all* societies with renewable energy, including battery storage implications, has unfortunately revealed that this vision is both implausible and destructive <sup>[3]</sup>. In 2021, the UN's International Energy Agency (IEA) calculated that a global energy transition off fossil fuels would increase demand for key minerals such as lithium, graphite, nickel, and rare earth metals by 4200%, 2500%, 1900%, and 700%, respectively, by 2040. The IEA noted that there is no capacity to reach such a demand <sup>[11]</sup>, there are no plans to build enough mines and refineries, and such expansion is unprecedented and would take decades. The report also noted that the environmental impacts of delivering that level of supply would be massive, including not only the devastation from earth removal, but also the toxic and radioactive wastes produced from the mining and refining processes. An analysis of where those critical minerals are located finds that they are typically in locations occupied by people living outside of the urban societies that want the metals from under them. One study concluded that massive investment in renewables for total decarbonisation “could put severe pressure on lands held by Indigenous and marginalized communities and reshape their ecologies into “green sacrifice zones.” Such cost shifting risks reproducing a form of climate colonialism in the name of just transition” <sup>[12]</sup> (p. 543).

This concern with how the myth of Sustainable Development could encourage further environmental damage is also found in relation to the increasing vulnerability of communities as their environments become more unstable. For instance, one study from the Caribbean on the impacts of Hurricanes Irma and Maria in 2017 and Dorian in 2019 found that the logic, practices, and debts of colonial-capitalist development and neoliberal exploitation had increased the vulnerability of the affected populations <sup>[13]</sup>. Such findings have significant implications for the way international cooperation addresses the task of Disaster Risk Reduction, which I return to below.

If Sustainable Development proponents are ignoring the limits of technology and commerce to solve environmental dilemmas, they are ideologically aligned with an approach that is now known as ecomodernism. By focusing on technology as the answer, ecomodernists typically argue for an intensification of human activities and more artificial means of production. Whereas such technological projects could be pursued by economic orders other than capitalism, they are typically imagined as enabling the current economic system to continue, thereby making them attractive to incumbent power <sup>[14]</sup>.

## **2. Deeper Critiques of Sustainable Development**

Contrary to an ecomodernist outlook, it is becoming widely recognised that economic growth cannot endlessly continue on an already over-exploited planet. In light of poor performance and contradictions within SDGs and the potential for further injustices in the name of green energy, calls have multiplied for abandoning growth in favour of ‘degrowth’, which would involve a “planned reduction of energy and resource use designed to bring the economy back into balance with the living world in a way that reduces inequality and improves human well-being” <sup>[10]</sup> (p. 1105). Changing economic direction in this manner is a massive challenge, given that current monetary systems both rely upon and encourage economic expansion <sup>[15]</sup>. It also involves major cultural changes, such as far less consumerism. Therefore, many researchers conclude that people must try to shift societal paradigms, abandoning narrow and outmoded concepts and ideas, to allow a more fundamental rethinking of responses to environmental and social dilemmas <sup>[16][17]</sup>.

These deeper criticisms of Sustainable Development echo some prior critiques of the paradigm of international development, which are collectively described with the term ‘post-development’. Scholars and activists in that field criticised the concept of development as a Eurocentric and hierarchical ideology which denigrates non-Western, non-modern, and non-industrialised ways of life as inferior and in need of changing to make them more like the ‘developed’ nations. They argued that such an approach forced the capitalist logic of privileging activities that earn money through the market, thereby marginalising all other forms of social existence including traditionally sustainable lifestyles and forms of production. They argued that the attitudes, policies, and activities that result from this ideology help to maintain colonialist, imperialist, and racist power relations in the global economy <sup>[18][19][20]</sup>. Consequently, these power relations, which include various functions of banking, investment, marketing, advertising, and media, as well as international economic rules (or the absence of them), have helped to spread and maintain the imperial ideology of development in non-Western countries around the world <sup>[20]</sup>. It is not surprising, therefore, that one of the key theorists of post-development thinking, Wolfgang Sachs, described the SDGs as self-delusional and showing an inability to imagine prosperity without economic growth <sup>[20]</sup>.

These post-development theories mirror the critiques of the ideologies of progress and modernity in general, which have existed for some time in the more radical strands of environmental thought <sup>[21]</sup>. Such critiques identify a range of

underlying cultural assumptions as necessary for societies to organise the destruction of the living world so effectively. One is anthropocentrism, where humans are considered the centre and purpose of all life. The second is androcentrism, where patriarchal ways of being and organising are privileged; therefore, aspects of being and knowing that are regarded as feminine are systematically marginalised. The third is the desacralisation of nature, where all life is seen as merely material phenomena with no intrinsic worth and without mystery or sanctity, so it can be utilised or substituted whenever those with the power choose to do so <sup>[22][23]</sup>.

Perhaps the deepest flaw with Sustainable Development is the power of it as a positive myth to distract from irreconcilable priorities. That means that “existing theories of exploitation of poorer countries by imperial powers could be side-lined, along with critiques of capitalism at a time of hope after the Cold War” <sup>[24]</sup> (p. 432). That side-lining of radical critiques was convenient to capitalist institutions and to the people and organisations that they funded. Therefore, Sustainable Development became a systemic greenwash, undermining challenges to structural power that were posed by people and organisations that people might loosely describe as anti-imperialist. Therefore, the apparently apolitical quality of Sustainable Development was actually highly political in its consequences. By framing the generic planetary need as one of more and better management and technology, rather than more freedom from manipulative and oppressive systems, it justified the further extension of managerial power, both corporate and bureaucratic. This process parallels the contemporaneous societal extension of a belief in the benefits of more and better management and hierarchies across society, known as ‘managerialism’ <sup>[24]</sup>. With these deeper critiques in mind, it is possible to see that the initial enthusiasm for the SDGs or Global Goals was an own goal for both humanity and nature.

### **3. Learning from the COVID-19 Setbacks**

The societal impacts of policy responses to the COVID-19 pandemic have further reduced progress towards the SDGs <sup>[25]</sup>. That has led some experts to argue that it is time for proponents of the SDGs to admit failure and learn some hard lessons. For instance, when writing as the UN’s special rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, Philip Alston noted in an official communication that “doubling down on an inadequate and increasingly out-of-date approach is especially problematic” <sup>[26]</sup> (p. 331). The lessons could be particularly damning for the ideology of Sustainable Development.

First, the damage to the SDGs from the COVID-19 policy responses demonstrates that there is little resilience in a model of human progress which relies on increasing formal economic activity and global trade. This particular disease did not have a high infection fatality rate <sup>[27]</sup>, and yet the impacts on commerce and trade were significant enough to disrupt progress towards the goals. That is leading even mainstream experts to support the arguments that there must be a separation of both environmental and social objectives from economic growth <sup>[25]</sup>.

The second lesson is more controversial, due to the polarisation that has been produced about the origins of the pandemic. That lesson is from realising that, in the thirty years that Sustainable Development has helped to uphold a vision of the complementarity of economic development and environmental sustainability, massive economic changes have increased the likelihood of pandemics. That is for a number of reasons. Importantly, the further destruction of habitats and destabilisation of weather patterns has vastly increased the likelihood of zoonotic diseases spilling over into human populations <sup>[28]</sup>. Awareness of that situation likely leading to more frequent pandemics in the future has meant that some scientific institutions justify themselves in funding more risky virology research <sup>[29]</sup> in a sector where leaks from laboratory-acquired infections are worryingly regular <sup>[30]</sup>. For instance, in one of the few systematic analyses of rarely published official data, it was found that, in the US alone every week, there were two possible release or loss events of pathogens that posed a threat to public health and safety, from the most secure ‘Biosecurity Level 3’ laboratories <sup>[31]</sup>. The rapid increase in fast long-distance travel has also meant that any such natural or unnatural infections are more likely to spread before dying out in their locations of origin.

The third lesson is even more controversial, due to the unhelpful demonisation that often occurs in discussions about pandemic policy responses. This is because the responses to the pandemic in many countries were overly shaped by a managerialist ideology, which tends towards the control of people and nature while being unquestioning towards new technologies. It was not ill health that significantly interfered with the schooling, commerce, incomes, non-COVID-19 medical procedures, mental health, and government budgets that have been summarised in various sobering papers <sup>[32]</sup>. Rather, it was the policy choices of some governments to close schools, businesses, and borders and then to discriminate within their populations on biomedical status, that influenced a range of negative societal outcomes <sup>[25]</sup>. It would require more study to explore whether Sustainable Development ideology and institutions played a role in shaping the overly managerialist responses to the pandemic in some countries.

With some members of the public suspicious of the claims from authorities that medical experts are unbiased and objective, establishment institutions have responded by “doubling down on the guise of disinterested objectivity,” and most independent media commentators have not used a critique of capitalism and instead offer “paranoid modes of interpretation [that] depoliticize politics, rendering collective democratic action difficult or even impossible to conceive or enact” <sup>[33]</sup> (p. 143). One example is the attention of pandemic critics on the World Economic Forum’s call for a ‘Great Reset’ in how societies are organised, rather than focusing on the broad system of corporate power and the managerialist ideology involved in shaping responses to the pandemic and other challenges <sup>[34]</sup>. (Far from being a break with current power, the Great Reset proposals are for a further extension of ecomodernist and managerialist approaches to societal challenges. A managerialist attitude from people in positions of power means that they regard other people as needing or benefiting from more management of their lives. Therefore, it is not surprising that a backlash has grown against the ideas of a Great Reset, even if some criticisms are embellished with exaggerations and falsehoods. The political ramifications of both this agenda and the backlash to it are still to be seen, but neither bode well for generating widespread public support for changes to reduce poverty and environmental destruction. By providing fertile ground for polarising policy agendas, the original benefit of Sustainable Development in avoiding political dispute may finally collapse from the ‘original sin’ of avoiding the problem of unequal power relations.)

Even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, some scholars concluded that, not only is the concept of Sustainable Development unhelpful, but a non-capitalist concept of ‘sustainability’ is also now unhelpful for informing policy, due to the disruptive era people have entered, widely referred to as the Anthropocene. The argument is that this new era of unprecedented rates of biodiversity loss and climate mayhem, with rising impacts on human societies, means that the future is characterised by inevitably increasing loss and damage, of uncertain amounts and frequencies, depending on factors both within and beyond human influence <sup>[35]</sup>. Although such a view has been marginal in the professional fields of environment and development, it has been growing in recent years, as the reality of environmental mayhem becomes more apparent <sup>[36]</sup>. It typically involves an emotionally difficult realisation of the extent of loss and damage that are already underway and certain to occur in the coming years <sup>[16]</sup>.

The flaws of Sustainable Development and suggestion of the unlikelihood of any form of sustainability could seem rather negative, if not offering any alternatives. Fortunately, there are a myriad of frameworks, each with different relevance for different audiences and purposes.

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