

Quid Sustainability – the SDG’s from a critical perspective

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We were asked to give a critical perspective on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG’s). We started off very enthusiastically because, who does not like giving critique? However, criticizing such an important theme as Sustainable Development (SD) proved not that evident. Moreover, critiquing is easy, proposing an alternative is far more difficult. In that sense, we will be asking questions rather than giving answers. And we would like to start with these:

- “Who is pro sustainable development?”
- “Who thinks climate change is a problem?”

The evident follow-up questions would be “For whom is this a problem?” The question itself might be very straightforward, the answer might very well not be. In this sense we would like to refer to the Dutch comedian Theo Maassen who claims climate change is primarily a problem for us, humankind. The world, he claims, was here long before us and will be here long after us. Even more, he describes climate change as a fever. Human kind is the virus the world wants to get rid of. For sure these are the hyperbolic words of a comedian. There might however be some truth to it. It all depends on perspective.

Let’s tell a story: the story of man and deer. To manage the deer population man organizes hunting campaigns. Although this might seem like nothing more than the perfect weekend past-time for some people, there lies an important and necessary argument within this kind of environmental management. In order to guarantee the existence and survival of deer, man, as the most dominant species resorts to killing of the excess of a species for the sake of sustainability. Now, the evident question to ask here is not: “what is the perfect weekend past-time of Bambi?” but rather “how does the deer feel about sustainability”? Let’s try for a moment to switch stances here and consider Bambi not from her loveliness and cuteness, but rather as some sort of “killer-Bambi”, haunting and hunting humankind.

The reason to refer to the story of Bambi, or rather: killer-Bambi, takes us back to the basics of sustainable development. And as such, let’s raise rephrase our first question: not “who is

pro sustainable development?" but rather "who is in favor of SD?", or even more: "who favors SD?". And again, once more: "does SD favors someone?" To answer this question, we have to start with the Brundtland definition. The Brundtland commission defined SD as "development that meets the needs of the future without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs". The rationale behind the SDG's engages with the conditions that should be met for such development. It refers to the by now infamous triple bottom line: a search for a balance between the social, the environmental and the economical. But, before exploring this question of balance, let's take a moment to look at the Brundtland definition more closely. SD is "development that meets the needs of the future without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs". Immediately two complexities emerge: "needs" and "generations".

Foremost, it remains unclear in what sense we should understand these "needs". The Brundtland report clearly assumes an intergenerational variation of needs. However, for some reason, it omits an intercultural or intergenerational difference in needs. And that is not unproblematic: sustainable development may well be considered differently by various cultures within a same generation: "if in one society it is agreed that fresh air and open spaces are necessary before development can be sustainable, it will be increasingly difficult to marry this definition of 'needs' with those of other societies seeking more material wealth, even at the cost of increased pollution" (Redclift 2005, 213-214). The question remains who's needs should be met: who is the needy-one? Or, rephrased from a third world perspective: who is the greedy-one? One of the biggest issues with the Brundtland definition is indeed its lack of a differential understanding of needs. Or in other words, its presumption of a universal set of needs: the universality of the one who is in need is not at all unproblematic. This is the true difficulty of the Brundtland definition: whose needs should be addressed, and in what sense is this needy-one considered as a differential being?

Secondly this also brings forth the question of the who of these "generations". Or, rather: "what" are these generations? Are these human generations, or are these the generations of currently existing and future species? To come back to our story, is it man or Bambi? Recently, the newspapers reported that more and more species are disappearing and that the threat of biodiversity loss is increasing at a rate 100 to a 1000 times faster than normal. We are heading

towards a sixth mass extinction event. One biologist, nuancing this alarming news, claimed that this does not pose a problem since mankind breeds more species than that are disappearing. Said biologist claimed that new species evolve every day, some of which might hold more advantages for mankind. Without questioning the truth of this statement, we would like to focus on the last part: “for the advantage of mankind”. SDG’s and SD are both guilty of a similar, although less apparent, reasoning. Both are strongly anthropocentric. The environment, whether you call it nature, ecosystems or biospheres are more often than not viewed as natural resources. Resources for the production of goods, for clean air, for clean water, for recreational purposes. Such an anthropocentric reasoning is mainly informed by an economic rationale. Only rarely is it discussed merely for the purpose of its existence. If a more ecocentric view is applied to the SDG’s then these SDG’s would look very different. The definition by Brundtland might stay the same, but if one would ask Bambi what her greatest threat is, the human species would most likely a great concern. Of course, this is a rather black and white representation. The human species is not the source of all evil on earth. Our anthropocentric focus however, is a great threat to all other species. Moving beyond such anthropocentric focus would certainly broaden and deepen the answer to the question “who favours SD?”.

The questioning of needs and generations inevitably brings us to the already mentioned Triple bottom line. When we look at this triple bottom line, we see that SDG’s or SD efforts are often applied via the use of trade-offs between the social, the environmental and the economical. Notwithstanding the seminal consequences of the acknowledgement of three important dimensions, the fundamental question for this trade-off remains what constitutes a so called good or adequate balance. Indeed, the question of balance basically translates as a question of measuring, and in our society, this all too often results in economic measuring. Whereas ample attempts to produce an internationally comparative index of indicators in order to measure sustainability have been made, and still are made, most of them still start from a perspective that is inevitably confronted with its own assumptions of economic growth and development. The fundamental question of this anthropocentric and developmental view, than, is not whether we are willing to retrace and retreat our relation with the environment, but rather whether we can harmonize the three dimensions of SD. And as things are today, the environment itself is all too easily left out of the equation or is merely considered as a

resource for development to meet our needs or those of future generations. The environment as such is purely there and necessary to satisfy human needs (Dobson 1998). Such a view reveals that it is human well being, and not the environment, that needs to be sustained. It means nature is subordinated to man and implies technological developments to guarantee the hierarchy of this relation. Technocratic innovations are considered to be the answer – or rather: the solution – to what just as well could be a fundamental questioning of our relation with the environment. Manes aptly summarizes this as follows: “as the discourse of sustainability is used today, it swamps issues of how we can learn to dwell harmoniously in nature with an endless liturgy of technocratic solutions to environmental “problems.” It brazenly champions developmentalism as the highest form of environmentalism” (Manes 2002). Here again, it should be no surprise that developmentalism, as an increase and further innovation of technology, mainly refers to the frameworks of more industrialized and economically developed countries. Or in other words, “becoming a new client of the development apparatus [...] brings with it more than is bargained for: it affirms and contributes to the spread of the dominant economic worldview” (Escobar 1995, 196).

So far, our comments on SD have been rather straightforward, so let’s nuance things a bit. Let’s assume for an instance that we succeed in rephrasing SD from a less economic viewpoint, shifting perspectives and making trade-offs does not necessarily become easier. When using the example of the panda, the choice is clearly made to protect this species even if its purpose for mankind is limited, its economic value is negligible compared to, say for example, bees. The panda is an adorable species, it’s cute, we should save it. But then, what about the sea cucumber, or the cockroach? Do they not have the same claim on existence as any other species? So, even if we are not protecting species for its economic value, are we not still protecting them for anthropocentric reasons, rather than for the species themselves?

Let’s use another example of a small island community of the coast of Vietnam and we ask them to make a trade-off, not from an economic perspective. Still, very few would choose the sea cucumber, they would all chose the whale as it is worshipped and serves cultural and religious value as well as protection for fishermen. The question remains whether this is the most sustainable trade-off, as we still do not know what the sustainable trade-off for the sea-cucumber and the whale would be. Or in other words, and to take it one step further, how

would nature itself define sustainable development? But that brings us to a whole new discussion: what is nature? It would take us too far to delve in to this question however.

So, let's recapitulate. The question we want to ask, is whether SD implies a selfish approach that ensures the survival of the human race and those that have value for us, or should SD entail an altruistic approach that ensures the survival of all species and radically questions the value of the human race? The truth to the matter is simple: think off Theo Maassen's aforementioned account of climate change and the fact that this is not a problem for nature in itself: sustainable development might be an anthropocentric concept, and it is difficult to conceive it differently: it is indeed humankind who has everything to win or to lose by it.

Unfortunately, the urgency of the current global challenges requires us to take action immediately. So far, the SDG's are the generally accepted way forward. So, if we can't exclude an anthropocentric perspective out of the SD equation, what should than be the challenges to take into account, considering all of the aforementioned pitfalls for these SDG's?

A crucial challenge for the SDG's lies in the inclusive nature of the anthropocentric perspective. In other words, who is the dominant *Anthropos*? As such, socio-economic and politico-cultural assumptions and hegemonies need to be taken into account. Western governments and scientists have long had and sometimes still have a tendency to speak for the entire earth. If we frame this in the discussion on needs: the needs that need to be met are primordially associated with the needy West. Already 20 years old, Escobar polemically wrote the still valid argument that "it is still assumed that the benevolent (white) hand of the West will save the Earth; it is up to the fathers of the World Bank, mediated by Gro Harlem Brundtland, the matriarch scientist, and a few cosmopolitan Third Worlders who made it to the World Commission, to reconcile 'humankind' with 'nature'" (Escobar 1995, 193). As such, the discourse on sustainability and sustainable development simply seems to redistribute and reshuffle the challenges of neoliberal development models (Hove 2004). Indeed, as some have suggested, "by advancing an environmental agenda the North has once more concentrated on its own interests" (Middleton et al. 1993, 5).

When we take this small Vietnamese island community again that was asked to make trade-offs, this trade-off is not merely made by this community, but also by Western culture. For example, making trade-offs requires decision making; decision making that is often based on Western democratic values. Democratic values that are not necessarily shared on this island. In the end, the question is whether the Western regime proves to be the most sustainable development program. In this sense, the big question remains: what kind of world do we want? In what kind of world do we want to live? We strive for a just, equitable and democratic world, but what is this? Let's assume for an instance that overpopulation is not an issue for the environment, that there is no climate change and no biodiversity loss, that the air is clean and that water is plenty full. The question of what kind of world we want still remains. Are we striving for the Western ideal and give everyone their house in the countryside, their two cars, and their 1.2 children? Unfortunately, this is not possible, the earth is too small. Even maintaining the Western ideal only for people in the West is no longer possible. As such, the sustainability question urges us to reformulate a new idea of the world.

When we are saying these things and making provocative (and perhaps even unethical) questions, we are aware that we are being hypocritical (we have a house in the countryside ourselves). We are being cynical and judgmental, but foremost we are unsure. We do not know what the sustainability answer is, we do not know how to fix these issues. But what we do know, is that these fundamental questions need to be asked. Sustainable development is not simply about cleaner technology and more sustainable innovations: it is about questioning the foundations of our society.

As higher education institutions we have the luxury of asking these questions. We are not the ones making the difficult decisions, making the trade-offs, We are however shaping those that will. And this is what the role of higher education should be. In other words, our luxury is a duty. A duty to educate the sustainable human being, and to stimulate a sustainability reflection. But how do we do this? The answer is at least twofold: on the one hand higher education institutes are no different from other organizations and corporations. We should adapt the sustainability mantra by decreasing our negative impact and increasing our positive. By lowering our carbon footprint, by applying gender equality, by providing quality education. On the other hand, higher education institutes are different from other organizations and

corporations: it is our duty to ask these difficult and fundamental questions in education and in research. By creating interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary communities. By placing disciplinary studies and research in the broader frame of SD. By giving researchers and students the tools to see the bigger picture. Whether you are studying criminal law or researching cross-breeding, all of us are placed within this sustainability question. Each one of us contributes to it, each one of us has the potential to work against it. We need to orient future generations that hold the intellectual, scientific and cultural legacy of a society towards and from sustainable development and the SDG's. We hold the responsibility to research and investigate the conditions for transformation and as such transform the world, one research project at a time, one student at a time.

The good thing is, that we are doing this already. A lot of research that is conducted at higher education institutes, is putting these SDG's in practice even if it is not explicitly named as such. Internationalization and student exchange are the SDG's. It is as complex as creating innovative clean energy models, and it is as simple as using more non-western examples in lectures. Furthermore, we need to realize that SD entails more than the simple application or refinement of technologies. It is also hearing and acknowledging the biologist that warns for the extinction of the human species in a few centuries. It is asking these fundamental questions about human nature, about population, about dominant hegemonies, about cultural practices etc.

In order to create a reflex of sustainability, we first and foremost need to retrace sustainability, to re-find/refine the SDG's, improve where needed and build upon opportunities. Where society needs to "glocalize", higher education institutes need to do the same, localize SD in every discipline, in every class, in every professor, in every student. But we also need to see the institutes as a globe, as a unified entity. We have the duty to think, the luxury to think free. The luxury to work beyond traditional boundaries, the duty to tackle the global challenges from a holistic perspective, from a transdisciplinary and an interdisciplinary perspective. One of the greatest challenges in this is not the unwillingness of institutes to do this, or a lack of capacity to do this. What we are missing is a sustainability language, an interdisciplinary language, a transdisciplinary language. Because, how do we work within the frame of the SDG's, within the frame of SD, how do we make the triple bottom line trade-offs

if we do not understand each other? If we want to move beyond ad hoc ticking of boxes, if we really want to achieve what the SDG's want to achieve, we should make them history, we should make them something future generations will read upon in books and find hard to understand that a sustainable world was once the greatest challenge we faced.

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