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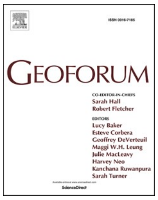

Sanctioning Disciplined Grabs (SDGs): From SDGs as Green Anti-Politics Machine to Radical Alternatives?

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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 Millennial 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 *UN*critical 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

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repackaging existing practices and business as usual in the attire of SDGs is ever present.

Critiques have pointed to the absence of *systemic* changes along economic and political axes in the SDG framework as undermining its transformative potential (Kothari et al., 2019): xxxvi). Global 'surrogate' SDGs and wider technocratic policy agendas tend to reproduce mainstream notions of development rather than transform structural conditions. Far from a coincidence, this resulted from critical voices raising root causes and power asymmetries being pushed aside by government representatives in negotiation processes (see Fukuda-Parr, 2016). As compromise(d) Sustainable Development Goals are set up to work within existing institutions, practices continue to be shaped by Northern development agendas far from the paradigm change necessary to change current neoliberal practice. Antrobus questioned the MDGs as a "Most Distracting Gimmick" (Antrobus 2009); are SDGs a similar distraction from real change? Sachs (2017) suggested renaming the goals as SSGs – sustainable survival goals – because of their lack of transformative ambition, while Easterly described them as "Senseless, Dreamy and Garbled" (Easterly, 2015). The emphasis on the lack of actual transformation and 'teeth' to enforce change reflects our argument that SDGs are falling behind the actual transformations needed.

It is not that structural challenges are totally unaddressed. Sustainable Development Goal 12 on sustainable production and consumption, for example, addresses very real structural contradictions. The recent 2020 reporting even acknowledges how: "Consumption and production drive the global economy, but also wreak havoc on planetary health through the unsustainable use of natural resources" (United Nations, 2020: 48). However, such reckoning is easily contradicted by the continued emphasis on economic growth as a driver of development, indicating a failure to recognize (or rather, refusal to accept) the fundamental unsustainability of continuous growth. In this sense, the SDG framework has been criticized as providing renewed legitimacy to growth, while undermining attempts to question it (Gomez-Baggethun, 2019).

Third, we contend that the *actual* "transformation of the financial, economic and political systems" (United Nations, 2020: 2) differs substantially from what is promised. In effect, what SDGs do is to introduce or provide a new vocabulary of legitimacy that may easily further deepen development dispossession and inequalities. This is facilitated by the re-ordering of development and public policies to new mechanisms for accumulation and commons grabbing (Haller et al., 2020; Gerber and Haller, 2021) and new forms of sustainable development finance as illustrated by so-called green economy projects (see Haller, 2019). SDGs are, in this sense, not only a "semantic deception" (Sachs, 2017: xiii), they constitute a bundle of practices obscuring power politics of deepening and enabling resource grabs under the guise of sustainability (Hope, 2021). As such, there needs to be far more recognition about how SDGs – notably in the field of the green economy – may enable new repertoires of domination, elite capture and dispossession (Cavanagh, 2018; Ashukem, 2020).

Whereas the first argument is about the lack of transformation, the argument here concerns the workings of the narrative of SDGs as a positive force and institutional transformation enabled by a sustainability framework. We seek to go further here in qualifying the deepening and unquestioned sustainability 'transformation' that is taking place (Wanner, 2015). Not only are neoliberal trends and partnerships maintained, they are potentially reinforced, enabling new forms of private partnerships, sustainable finance and investment schemes to be legitimated in a growing and highly profitable green anti-politics development machinery (Haller et al., 2020). As global green finance and impact investments schemes grow, much of this is channelled through new forms of both existing development channels and public private partnerships.

Fourth, this favours continuous reproduction of top-down decision-making despite participatory objectives. Although SDG Goal 16 is about peaceful and inclusive societies and target 16.7 aims to "ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels", multiple studies stress the dominance of governments and selective SDG implementation (Horn and Grugel, 2018) shaped by experts from the Global North, powerful NGOs and corporations (Mediavilla and Garcia-Arias, 2019). In contrast, the roles of local actors in formulating and transforming core development agendas, such as the governance of the commons and associated land rights, appear lost in translation. This is highly problematic as common-pool resources are not just a means for rural survival in the margins, but are also important for food and cash generation in urban settings through the circulation of meat, milk, game, fish, water and timber-related products between urban centres and hinterlands (see Haller, 2020 for an example from the African Wetlands). Genuine 'participation' would mean that rural and urban communities on the ground are recognized as rights-holders with primary decision-making powers, and governments are (made) accountable to them (Kothari and Das, 2016). In the absence of this, SDG implementation remains shaped by nation-state governments where failures of political will, intent and capacity are inherently invisibilized in mainstream development narratives.

2. SDGs: direction, distraction or discipline?

Word games have flourished around the SDG acronym. Yet, the real *directional* challenge of the SDGs hinges not only upon questions about how goals and targets were formulated initially, but also about the practices and omissions as well as permissions enabled by officialized language. We argue here that SDGs, through their design and operation, create a distinct form of permis*ability*, in part, enabling what it was supposed to leave behind.

A closer look at both the process of formulating goals and the results point to the limitations of participatory ambitions. This becomes evident in the terms used, how they are framed and filled with content and meaning of development as an anti-politics machine, hiding power relations but at the same time disciplining and providing powerful ideological and legitimizing 'docking stations' for state and private sector actor capture (Campbell, 2019; Horn and Grugel, 2018). One case in point is the use of the term participation – a hallmark of sustainability thinking since Rio. The last goal – SDG 17 – with its sub-targets suggests a wide participatory process in the implementation of the SDGs. Despite the SDGs' presentation as a new language and vehicles of transformation, they have largely been adopted, appropriated even, by mainstream actors of the development bureaucracy apparatus. This happens in several ways: first, in contrast to the rhetoric of 'leaving no one behind', the root causes and drivers of social inequalities and marginalization are not addressed head-on. Participatory negotiations of the SDGs ultimately excluded, or led to reduced meaning of, inequalities, land and human rights (Fukuda-Parr, 2019).

Second, SDGs and implementation mechanisms tend to hide or disguise underlying power asymmetries. Consider how normalized green development rarely discloses who the polluters are, nor its underlying drivers, but rather states the language of goals and responsibilities in shared terms, as if all humans are equally culpable for the crises. In such a normalized, and undifferentiated, discourse the large-scale agro-industrial company is held equally responsible for CO2 emissions as a smallholder in Africa or Asia – without displaying the power constellations and highly uneven pollution impacts, spaces for participation and differential responsibilities. Despite the fact that the former causes much more pollution than the latter, such a company has much more power to influence governments to act and is even more likely take part in SDG implementation (and gain easy legitimacy in the process, without a fundamental challenge to its exploitative practices) as a part of a stated drive to enhance private sector participation (Scheyvens et al., 2016; Witte and Dilyard, 2017).

The formulation of SDG 10, related to inequalities, illustrates the fine line between participation and top-down process including limited civil society voices from the Global South, while resulting in language reducing the reach of inequality targets (Fukuda-Parr, 2019). Fukuda-Parr uses the SDG 10, *Reduce Inequalities,* as an illustration of this that was finally accepted – mainly because of pressure by countries from the Global South who were critical of 'poverty reduction' wording and the discourse of 'leaving no one behind'. The reduction of inequality as a goal was retained, yet made empty by setting targets and measurable indicators focusing on social inclusion instead of addressing the root causes of extreme inequality. Both how extreme inequality came into being in the first place and the structural changes needed to reduce it – such as the redistribution of wealth via taxes (Piketty, 2018), or reworking unequal trade relations – were completely side-lined. Fukuda-Parr (2019) argues that powerful actors within the commissions were able to reduce SDG 10 to a matter of technical measurements, measurements which only focused on social exclusion rather than addressing its root causes such as actor groups striving for unequal land distribution and grabbing processes, dispossession and exploitative working relations.

These would include elites using the state for their accumulative purposes and external market actors profiting from neoliberal policies and low tax payments, while the states in the Global South are forced or induced to privatize their assets in the context of structural adjustment programmes (Ferguson, 2006; Fletcher, 2010; Haller, 2019).

This was, of course, not a question of a technically flawed process, but rather a political consequence resulting in what James Ferguson (1994) described as the "anti-politics machine", where technical measures hide power relations and politics are replaced by technical solutions. The process was pushed by countries from the Global North and donor organizations dominating the debate. While form and terminology shifted from previous global formulations, they were nonetheless severely hampered from the start, being framed by repertoires of domination (Ribot and Peluso, 2003), resources and networks. Whereas powerful NGOs and large transnational companies were able to maintain access to such processes, representatives of civil societies or local grassroot movements *de facto* remained marginal voices.

Not only was a large proportion of the world's population excluded from participation in goal formulation and its implementation, so was their local ecological knowledge that had been accumulated for centuries on how to manage the environment.

What then about our second argument, that of SDGs legitimizing new forms of appropriation? To put it provocatively, should the SDG acronym be considered as ***Supporting Dispossession*** and ***Grabs?*** The SDGs have been framed and cleverly recycled in ways to include the private sectors in areas such as green energy businesses, conservation and technology transfer as well as mega-infrastructure projects, which clearly support – and sanction – the most powerful private actors (such as large transnational companies) in this domain. Areas that are not yet fully covered by the expansion of capitalism – such as many parts of Africa and other new 'frontiers' – can now be reached, and potentially financed, with the tool and name of SDGization (see Evans and Musvipwa, 2017). As Fletcher (2010) has argued, neoliberalism is not only about reducing control by the state to get better access to resources, it is also trying to use state agendas to access gain governance influence and access to fiscal revenue through another twist of accumulation by dispossession (Harvey, 2004). Capitalizing on tax income for stakeholder value interests may even be further legitimated by references to the SDGs. This may happen through facilitating access for foreign direct investment in the name of SDGs or through dedicated global funds for private sector involvement in the name of sustainable green economies. This is in line with neoliberal tendencies opening up opportunities to shape governance via the private sector. The green economy has been continuously criticized for encouraging broad land and resource-grabbing processes by hiding capitalist interests without challenging inequalities (Fairhead et al., 2012). Not only are growth models not questioned within the green economy shadings of the SDGs, existing structural inequalities and practices of dispossession and grabbing may be further sanctioned through bureaucratized development and private sector involvement highlighted as good practice (see Gerber and Haller, 2021). Such structural dynamics of bureaucratic development machines and private sector capture, in contrast, are underplayed.

As the United Nations, 2020 report notes, "pursuit of these universal Goals will keep governments focused on growth, but also on inclusion, equity and sustainability" (United Nations, 2020). Rather than favouring shifts to alternative approaches to well-being, SDGs can be – and are – used to reproduce mainstream notions of development and perpetuating extractivism (see Niederberger et al., 2016; Larsen, 2015; Haller et al., 2018a) while hiding these grabbing processes by referring to green and social corporate responsibility (see Gerber and Haller, 2020; Haller et al., 2020; Larsen, 2017). Similarly, corporate ability to cater to and report progress on SDGs tends to disguise (lack of) results coupled with flexible target delivery and vague indicators. Target 12.6 of the SDGs, for example, encourages companies to adopt sustainable practices and reporting. While harbouring a hope or potential for change, the risk of greenwashing the negative social and environmental effects on local livelihoods is high (see Lashitew et al., 2021; Haller et al., 2020).

Although improved monitoring, reporting and communication from one standpoint indicates progress, from another it also signals technorational intensification prone to new forms of post-frontier capture (Larsen, 2015) or simply empty bureaucratic action. Much reporting on progress is simply 'name-dropping', demonstrating nominal relevance of a given policy initiative, yet with limited structural attention to actual change required. Consider the United Nations, 2020 report which notes how the European Union reported "at least one national policy instrument that contributed to the implementation of the 10-Year Framework of Programmes on Sustainable Consumption and Production" (United Nations, 2020).

On any slightly more than cursory look, SDG 8 on economic growth, SDG 9 on industries and SDG 12 on sustainable production reveal massive contradictions with SDGs 13 (climate), 14 (life in water) and 15 (life on land) as the former are still based on mining, infrastructure development and large-scale energy consumption, overuse, pollution and relations of exploitation. As Salleh notes in a post-developmentalist critique: "the cradle-to-grave impacts of mining, smelting, manufacture, transport, and ongoing energy drawdowns by high tech imply a distinctly unsustainable toll of soil erosion and toxicity, water wastage, and atmospheric greenhouse emissions" (Salleh, 2016: 3). A far more nuanced take on goal setting and progress is needed to address such blatant contradictions.

3. Enlarging options for accumulation by dispossession

Not only do SDGs not address several of the underlying drivers of degradation and inequalities, including the drive for resource extractivism (Haller et al., 2018b), they paradoxically may even provide new options for continuing such processes. As the most powerful actors in these sectors are not explicitly identified as causing environmental problems, they can even use the SDGs as a basis of legitimacy to expand their operations (Niederberger et al., 2016; Gerber and Haller, 2021; Bersaglio et al., 2021).

Consider how SDG 7′s emphasis on clean energy has led to a new market for lithium and other minerals needed for batteries, encouraging newer extractive industries, just as investing in further biofuel production and/or direct energy production (solar and wind) is being driven by the rise of so-called sustainable smart cars and cities. Similarly, under SDG 12 (production and consumption, green production) commons-grabbing processes can be legitimated through the production of soy or green conservation agriculture which, in some cases, is much more pesticide consuming (see Bergius et al., 2018; Bergius et al., 2018). Neither mining nor green soy nor solar nor wind energy are as sustainable as they seem. However, they *are* easily couched as SDG progress – while relying on deepening processes of grabbing of local community lands and related common-pool resources, limiting community access to pastures in drylands and leading to massive changes in local land use patterns and biodiversity (see, for example, Achiba, 2019; Ryser, 2019). Although SDGs, in theory, would enable inclusive community-led conservation approaches, they may also facilitate the perpetuation of fortress approaches in conservation in relation to SDG 15 (life on earth). This can be seen in the ways in which conservancies in Kenya are promoted (see Weissman, 2019) with a strengthened colonial discourse of 'pure nature' displacing existing cultural landscape ecosystems.

Denying or giving a green veneer to all this not only surrenders to green-grabbing processes but also exacerbates the misreading of landscapes, thus undermining the creative and reproductive activities local communities undertake to maintain local livelihoods (see the older work of Ellen, 1982; Fairhead and Leach, 1996; Larsen, 2015; Haller, 2020). Such SDG dynamics may even intensify with the 'half-earth' and '30X30′ proposals (see Büscher et al., 2017; Büscher and Fletcher, 2019 for a similar debate).

Last, but not least, is the issue of mega-infrastructure projects and the landgrab involved in these, which may be enabled, rather than prevented, by SDG language. Examples of such 'sustainable commons grabbing' include how fisheries were undermined by the construction of ports or pastoral common pastures grabbed as they became incorporated in Belt and Road development initiatives in Asia. Similar dynamics are found in the LAPSSET corridor (connecting Kenya, Uganda, Ethiopia, see Enns, 2019) and the agro-infrastructure corridor in Tanzania (SAGCOT) (see Bergius et al., 2018). All these cases demonstrate how extractivist and neoliberal economies rely on state or private property regimes, which are easily re-aligned in a state-driven SDG framework. Commons are being grabbed through undermined communal ownership and tenure security which previously served to counter livelihood and food scarcity. 'Leaving no one behind' in such cases of grabbed commons should focus on local people's claims to get back communal property and enable them to craft their own rules.

While global commons are being framed as a matter of policy concern (atmosphere, oceans, forests, biodiversity, etc.) (Messerli et al., 2019), there is limited recognition within the SDGs of the large numbers of communities who have managed their common property for centuries and created institutions for their management. SDGs 6, 7, 14 and 15, in particular, often portray resources as pure nature without acknowledging that they are linked to local common property and its institutions and thus cultural landscape ecosystems – as results from both old and new research shows (see Haller et al., 2018a for an overview of literature and the missing reference to the commons). In the same vein, local knowledge, ontologies and use systems by Indigenous Peoples and local communities are not taken seriously and rarely fully recognized in natural resource management systems (see Berkes, 1999).

Despite the 2020 SDG report calling for sound data and science, it is striking how documentation of the dynamics of commons grabbing (Dell'Angelo et al., 2017; Giger et al., 2019; Haller et al., 2020; Gerber and Haller, 2021), extractivism (Niederberger et al., 2016) and processes of dispossession as well as the dynamics of violence against environmental defenders (Larsen et al., 2020) – are systematically underplayed and left out of the equation. Even when the inequalities and environmental contradictions are recognized, they are recycled back into calls for more of the same rather than the clear-cut analysis of inequalities and structural changes needed.

More explicit recognition of resource-grabbing dynamics, property transformations and analysis of their structural drivers and violence would, in fact, open up a more solid debate about alternative solution spaces, including the strengthening of local resource property rights regimes. In response to commons grabbing (Dell'Angelo et al., 2017; Gerber and Haller, 2021), for example, this would involve strengthening a global agenda aimed at restoring collective local ownership, and creating platforms to devise new institutions from the bottom up: comparative studies all over the planet have shown that such processes can be successful (see Haller et al., 2016; ICCA Consortium, 2021). Real participation could go into this direction, yet, as we have argued here, the existing SDG assemblage of discourse constraints and vehicles of implementation are far too easily mobilized to maintain the status quo and even deepen dispossession.

4. Closing spaces of appropriation and exploring alternative scenarios

What kinds of ideas and approaches can help inform a rethink of the SDGs as a universalizing development agenda, retaining their essential progressive features while replacing the regressive and contradictory ones? Can a different agenda for well-being lead to alternative options better in line with the realities and challenges experienced by many communities? If we consider that SDGs may produce or maintain exclusion(s) and even be reduced to a neoliberal development agenda of some sorts, the articulation of alternatives becomes urgent. How can the playing field of the Sustainable Development Game be levelled or even transformed?

For one, it needs to explicitly address power inequalities, not least in terms of recognizing how past legacies should be approached and alternative futures negotiated, whose voices are heard and the governance implications. Reclaiming universalist development agendas as a locus of progressive politics is not a lost cause despite a mixed track record.

The language of recognition, rights and even redistribution is far too easily reduced to hollow echoes of inclusivity, where ongoing struggles of land, labour and power are replaced by hegemonic 'Sustainable Development Golden' pathways. Where sanitized statistics gaps are used to justify more of the same, repoliticized debates are critical to visibilize development struggles of redistribution, recognition and remedy in a variety of fields.

Specific approaches will differ across different SDGs. We here highlight the case of commons governance and management. Development policy would need to leave behind the global aspiration for growth *ad eternum* as well reversing neoliberal conditions of SDG-driven expropriation and dispossession. It is simply not good enough, indeed outright problematic, that supposedly consensual development goals continue to undermine the communal resource ownership and governance essential to human well-being and environmental sustainability. In breaking with the constraints of mainstream approaches, national and global development agendas need to recognize struggles of control and ownership with a more courageous focus on empowering local community governance, whether that of the urban poor, commons management or land rights. To reverse ongoing trends of SDG-led commons displacement, a strategic push is needed to recognize and work with local commoners' organizations, reverse nvisibilization and protect their resources against external grabs. There are multiple examples of local actors challenging the top-down powers and crafting new governance approaches (see also Eid and Haller, 2018; Faye et al., 2018; Kothari and Das, 2016). While examples of such effective local institutions abound across the world, in many parts, states remain reluctant to accept high levels of decentralization, collective land rights or tenure security (see, e.g., Larsen, 2020). Decentralization schemes and participatory discourse in the Global South have placed heavy responsibilities on local communities, while at the same time often depriving them of real governance influence (see Poteete and Ribot, 2011). As Black Lives Matter and other movements have demonstrated, social inequalities grounded in racialized, gendered and caste-driven cleavages continue to hinder more deliberative politics of inclusion and recognition.

There is no miracle cure for such structural inequalities; however, enlarging spaces for inclusive exploration and experimentation is critical. Local groups organizing themselves around specific common-pool resources in rural and urban areas can, with the right mix of enabling conditions, redress colonial legacies, top-down planning, and power asymmetries.

Without romanticizing the 'local', empirical studies, radical political ecologies and critical analysis of bottom-up institution building (what we call 'constitutionality', see Haller et al., 2018a) point to the significance of power heterogeneity in diverse local contexts, yet also highlight the potential of building more inclusive governance and management through the recognition of existing common property institutions and knowledge systems as well as local innovations in managing fisheries, forests, pasture area and wider ecosystem management grounded in bioregions (see Haller et al., 2016; Kothari, 2017). This may lead to a more problem- and solution-oriented focus fostered around local bio-cultural regional realities rather than one based on nation state boundaries, neoliberal foundations of economic growth and GDP as the proxy for economic development.

For these we need a system that provides security of the commons (see Haller et al., 2021) and holds large capital actors accountable, enhances transparency and, as a transitionary process, requires businesses to pay the true costs of production systems (Kolinjivadi and Kothari, 2020). As movements for due diligence and accountability grow in Europe (and elsewhere), a window of opportunity is emerging in countries such as Germany and Switzerland with new opportunities to make multi-nationals more accountable. While current diligence measures remain flawed on several accounts, the underlying political debate points to potential for change in the regulatory apparatus. Yet, as argued in this paper, safeguards are vulnerable to capture and business as usual with green add-ons, prompting the need for more courageous agenda-setting. The risk of social-ecological costs being externalized to local communities and their lands is omnipresent, as demonstrated by the continuous evictions based on large solar and wind energy schemes which still profit from a green-energy reputation (see Achiba, 2019; Ryser, 2019; Kolinjivadi and Kothari, 2020; Larsen et al., 2020).

Strategically, the big question is whether there is a possibility to use the SDGs in order to push back ‘development’ as the world has known it, and empower communities while bringing economies within ecological limits. We highlight five elements or pathways to consider in rethinking an alternative sustainability agenda (Kothari, 2019).

First, there is a need to recognize local stewardship in building ecological integrity and resilience, where Indigenous Peoples and local communities are able to care for the diversity and maintenance of their cultural landscape ecosystems, whether in traditional or new ways. There are thousands of ‘Territories of Life’, for instance, where Indigenous Peoples or other local communities are governing and conserving ecosystems and biodiversity (ICCA Consortium, 2021) ranging from a few hectares to thousands of square kilometres. A really inclusive strategy would involve these local groups in finding participatory bottom-up ways to craft new institutions for the sustainable governance of resources and cultural landscape ecosystems; finding equitable ways of recognizing and strengthening such governance diversity is emerging as a critical sphere of policy innovation (Reyes-García et al., 2021). Coupled with this are the newly emerging movements to recognize, in formal law and policy, ‘the rights of nature’ and, through these, attempt to bring back ways of being and living that recognize humans as part of nature, living in mutual respect with other species.

The second would involve building and investing in forms of direct and delegated democracy, empowering decision-making from the lowest to the highest levels based on the principles of subsidiarity. Several initiatives of ‘radical’ governance, including large ones such as the Zapatista and Kurdish autonomous regions and Indigenous territories of self-determination, but also urban neighbourhood assemblies and ecofeminist municipalism in various European cities, demonstrate the feasibility and potential of such political transformation (Kothari and Das, 2016; Roth, 2021). Additionally, there are many initiatives of direct or radical democracy units seeking to make representative institutions accountable through, for example, rotations of delegates or representatives, experiments such as sortition, referendums, and so on (Kothari, 2017; Haller et al., 2021).

Third, economic democracy would involve bringing communal rights and custodianship back to land and land-related common-pool resources, consumer-producer-prosumer collectives and alliances, and open localization with self-reliance for basic needs. Hundreds of farmer-led initiatives across the world, many of them part of the global *La Via Campesina* movement have moved towards food sovereignty, while many other communities have moved to take control of and become self-reliant in terms of energy, water, housing and other basic needs in what are variously known as ‘social and solidarity’ or ‘community’ economies (Kothari, 2021). Replacing ‘sustainable gentrification’ with social housing involves a different kind of urban politics with room for experimentation. Anarchist urban initiatives such as *Christiania* in Copenhagen or multi-cultural ones like *Auroville* in India, are experimenting with economic resources, including housing, being in the commons rather than privately owned, and elements of the Transition movement are even re-commoning what were once privatized spaces such as parking lots (Bajpai and Kothari, 2018; https://auroville.org; https://transitionnetwork.org/about-the-movement/).

Fourth, social well-being and justice initiatives need to address racial, gender and class inequalities more directly via locally developed processes. Critical elements repeatedly invisibilized in mainstream development thinking include local care and stewardship, well-being and justice initiatives challenging social, racialized and gender-driven socio-economic, land and resource inequalities, and recognizing the need for diverse knowledges, including modern science and locally and culturally embedded knowledge based on centuries of experience (see Kothari, 2019). Movements for gender and sexuality justice are generations old, anti-racism movements have resurfaced in North America, and people with disabilities have successfully fought for equal opportunity rights in many countries.

Fifth, development practice would require building upon cultural diversity and knowledge democracy, recognizing the need for diverse knowledges, including the bridging of modern science and locally and culturally embedded knowledge based on centuries of experience. Some truly cutting-edge climate solutions and biodiversity research is taking place as collaborations between Indigenous Peoples and formal sector scientific institutions, such as the Arctic Biodiversity Assessment (https://arcticbiodiversity.is/aba). Various movements are attempting to undo the colonial nature of maps and how territories are visualized (see, e.g., Rose-Redwood et al., 2020). Myriad worldviews and concepts, some resurrected from Indigenous ways of life and concepts (e.g. *buen vivir, sumac kawsay, swaraj, ubuntu, kyosei*, country), others arising from within the belly of the industrial beast (e.g., degrowth, ecofeminism, ecosocialism, transition, commons), explore these dimensions of transformation in what may be termed pluriversal ways (Kothari et al., 2019).

Without rethinking such elements head-on, and without learning from these alternative worldviews and practices, even the best conceived Green New Deal (GND) or rehashed SDG agenda would probably continue – even accelerate – the process of dispossessing people and nature. Contemporary seductive win-win narratives are more successful at enabling the rich to overuse, while keeping the poor beguiled by their visions and hopes for a new green future. Sustainability cannot be allowed to be co-opted or dispossessed by the new, and shallowly green, neoliberal development. Can power asymmetries and systemic challenge be overcome to enable more space for alternatives?

Getting rid of simplistic win-win scenarios and quick techno-fixes while protecting peoples and the planet will require far more nuance (Kolinjivadi and Kothari, 2020: 2) and readiness to think out of the box. A revised SDG agenda, or rather a sustainable *well-being* agenda, needs to address the root causes of the social-ecological crisis as well as alternatives to development evolved by Indigenous Peoples, local communities, civil society groups, and others (Kothari et al., 2019).

Therefore, we must strive not only for alternative development, but also for alternatives to development. Radical thinking is needed – not only to unveil the root causes of land and resource grabbing, but also to facilitate new pathways of recognition and empowerment. In what the UN has called the “decade of action” in addressing planetary challenges, much will depend on whether socio-ecological alternative movements can raise their bargaining power against the capital investment driven agenda of the 1% who own or control most of the planet. In the long run, a radically alternative well-being agenda has to replace the SDG framework if we are to fully repair our broken relationships with each other and with the rest of the earth.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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