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Engaging with the Janus face of sustainable development: A critical pedagogy on and beyond the Sustainable Development Goals

By Dr Jack Taggart, School of History, Anthropology, Philosophy and Politics

Later this year I will, as part of a longstanding engagement, attend the 2022 Summit of Global Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation (GPEDC) in Geneva. This meeting takes place at the halfway point of the Agenda 2030 and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This meeting offers national, civic, and private representatives of the global community an opportunity to review the progress to date. The mood is not optimistic.

The UN’s 2022 SDG report revealed that COVID has wiped out more than four years of progress on the eradication of poverty, while pushing nearly 100 million more people into extreme poverty (UN, 2022). Negligible progress towards cutting greenhouse gas emissions suggests that a sustainable transition is highly unlikely. In the immediate and short term, ever more extreme weather events become the norm. Yet our trajectory of inaction poses - in the words of UN Secretary-General António Guterres - a catastrophic and ‘existential threat’ to humanity and our ecology (UN News, 2018). Our continued pursuit of consumption and ever greater economic growth is increasingly energy intensive, while the gains of such growth are concentrated in the hands of a tiny elite. In 2020, the poorest 50% of the world’s population owned just 2% of total private property, and there are few signs of these trends abating (Chancel et al., 2021).

Given these challenges, the embrace of the SDGs by Queen’s University is laudable. It reflects the University’s global orientation, burgeoning expertise, and commitment to resolving the pressing challenges of our age. The SDGs are themselves a remarkable achievement; they are the product of extensive and inclusive global consultations, and they exhibit a considerable degree of reflexivity having incorporated lessons learned from prior agenda. The SDGs may well constitute the best international agenda we currently have for addressing economic and ecological issues in tandem. Yet even under the most optimistic scenarios, the SDGs will not be enough to save us from disaster. At best, the SDGs may provide much needed relief to those suffering from extreme poverty, improving education, and gender equality, while mopping up the worst excesses of decades of consumption. However, in the worst case, the SDGs may well forestall the radical transformation of our habits, relationships, and political economies that is required to meet the scale of the crisis.

Post-graduate students in my new Global Development module will receive a thorough grounding in the contemporary state of international development cooperation, including the implementation challenges for key global agendas, along with the various public and now private agendas that comprise the field. Yet from the beginning, they will be under no illusions as to the promise of good intentions within mainstream global development agendas. We begin our exploration with the origins of international development. Here, colonial administrations such as Britain used Poor and Welfare acts to placate more radical agitations on behalf of their indigenous subjects (Cowen & Shenton, 1996). The palliative function of international development was likewise crucial in the US’ - and its allies - battle with the USSR for the hearts and minds of the so-called ‘Third World’, while foreign aid was subsequently laden with conditionalities towards the coercive transformation of Southern countries in ways that would be conducive to Northern corporate interests.

Today, the UN’s SDGs inherit these lineages, and they are ultimately based on a paradigm of economic growth; they offer perpetual and ever-greater consumption as a catch-all solution to a variety of social, economic, and ecological challenges. That is, the SDG Agenda prescribes perpetual and ever greater consumption as a remedy to the crisis, or, more of the same poison as the cure.

The challenge of critical pedagogy in the context of Sustainable Development is to equip students with this reflexive understanding as to the nature of the sector, while affording them with the critical skills that are necessary for work within reactive and fast-paced international development organisations. One of the challenges of teaching such subjects is managing the sense of despair and despondency towards the lacklustre prospects for the realisation of development agendas. Yet hope lies alongside the interests of students. While engaging with the history, evolution, and dynamics of contemporary international development organisations is an essential component of understanding the sector, the most enthusiastic engagement comes from discussions on alternative development paradigms. Foremost is the paradigm of ‘degrowth’ that implores a need to abandon economic growth as the driving rationale of our societies (Schmelzer et al., 2022). It instead proposes that we shrink sectors of the economy associated with unnecessary consumption while augmenting those committed to conviviality and community. In short, it offers the promise of ‘private sufficiency, yet public luxury’. Just five years ago this paradigm was the fancy of the fringe and heterodox, dismissed as a utopian and hopeless fantasy. Yet as the crisis unfolds, it is enjoying a surge in popularity and serious consideration: the continued pursuit of business-as-usual is now, it seems, the fairy-tale.

But such radical alternatives will not be on the agenda in Geneva. Instead, we will discuss the very real and immediate challenges of cooperation towards the implementation of the SDGs. QUB students will be well positioned to contribute to such processes as future practitioners, but they will also be afforded the space to think beyond the confines of old and discredited paradigms. Our sustainable future may well depend on it.

References


