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Politics of ‘Leaving No One Behind’: Contesting the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals Agenda

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ABSTRACT *In this article, I develop a critical analysis of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) agenda and its commitment to ‘leave no one behind’. The Preamble to the Resolution on the SDGs adopted by the United Nations General Assembly stated the following: ‘We are resolved to free the human race from the tyranny of poverty and want and to heal and secure our planet. (...) As we embark on this collective journey, we pledge that no one will be left behind’. Through a close examination of the SDG initiative—and aligned concrete policy proposals—I demonstrate that the project to ‘leave no one behind’ rests on specific ideological premises: it is designed to promote and consolidate a highly contested neo-liberal variant of capitalist development. The SDGs are framed as a universal project, with quite substantial institutional monitoring mechanisms aimed at ensuring the successful implementation of aligned policies. Indeed, as I demonstrate, the implementation of highly contested neoliberal policies are themselves explicit goals of the SDG agenda. In this respect, the SDGs differ significantly from the Millennium Development Goal initiative. The argument I develop demonstrates that the SDG agenda may be aimed in part at undermining political struggles that aspire for more socially just and ecologically sustainable approaches to development. Overall, I argue that the explicit commitment to ‘leave no one behind’ is a discourse that is strategically deployed to justify the implementation of a highly problematic political project as the framework of global development. This is a framework that privileges commercial interests over commitments to provide universal entitlements to address fundamental life-sustaining needs. Political struggles over development will continue against the ideology of the SDG project and for transformative shifts for actually sustainable development.*

Keywords: Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), development, poverty, inequality, political struggle, World Trade Organisation (WTO)

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Introduction

The Preamble to the Resolution on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted by the United Nations' (UN) General Assembly states the following: '*We are resolved to free the human race from the tyranny of poverty and want and to heal and secure our planet. (...) As we embark on this collective journey, we pledge that no one will be left behind*' (United Nations, 2015, 1, my emphasis). This commitment to 'leave no one behind' was one of five big transformative shifts identified by the UN High Level Panel that was charged with conceptualising the SDGs (United Nations, 2013; see especially 7–8).¹ The critical evaluation I develop of the SDG framework centres on this normative commitment to 'leave no one behind'. Through a close analysis of the SDGs, I draw the conclusion that there are substantial provisions (in this framework) which privilege the up-holding of commercial interests over commitments to universally ensure entitlements to address fundamental life-sustaining needs. It is on the basis of this insight that I argue that the commitment to 'leave no one behind' should be seen as ideologically motivated. In demonstrating how the SDG framework is deeply aligned with the rules and regulations of key international development institutions, such as the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and its highly contentious policies, I argue that this commitment ('to leave no one behind') serves to justify the further consolidation of the conditions through which deprivations of fundamental entitlements have been sustained and reproduced. What is profoundly concerning, therefore, is that SDG framework presents a highly contested approach to development as '*the*' agenda for *global development sine qua non*.

The framing of the SDGs as a *universal* project, together with the anticipated quite substantial institutional monitoring mechanisms that are aimed at ensuring the successful implementation of aligned policies, has significant social and political implications. Indeed, as I demonstrate through my critical discussion below, *the implementation of highly contested neoliberal policies is itself part of the explicit goals of the SDG framework*. In this respect in particular, the SDGs differ significantly from the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) initiative, not least because the latter did not circumscribe matters of implementation either as explicitly or in as much detail as the SDGs do. As I show, implementing core elements of the SDG agenda will result in the entrenchment of laws, rules, and regulations that will effectively and directly prioritise commercial interests over commitments to universally ensure entitlements to address fundamental life-sustaining needs.

In this context, it is important to note that advocates of the SDG framework disregard—in so far as they fail to engage with—the extensive body of scholarship that has provided detailed critical analyses of the politics of global development over the past decades (cf. indicatively, Elias, 2013; Enloe, 2011; McMichael, 1990, 2005, 2010a, 2016; Mitchell, 2002; Pasha, 2013; Saurin, 1996, 1997; Soederberg, 2014; Thomas, 1987, 2000; Thomas & Weber, 2004). Neither have they engaged with, or sought to learn lessons from well-sustained critical analyses of the MDGs and the zero-draft of the SDGs (cf. indicatively Amin, 2006; Saith, 2006; Satterthwaite, 2003; Sexsmith & McMichael, 2015; Weber, 2014b, 2015). They also fail to engage with the wealth of analyses of social and political struggles in and over development (for an excellent account, see McMichael, 2005, 2010a, 2010b; Scott, 1990), which have been shown to be precisely over relations of domination and deprivations associated with the expansion and entrenchment of the 'market episteme' (McMichael, 2010a, p. 3).² However, more than merely ignoring such analyses, as I show below, the SDG agenda also contains language that suggests it may have significant, substantive implications for social and political struggles for more (actually) sustainable alternatives: for instance, Goal 16 (SDG 16) anticipates

the consolidation of order and security operations in ways that could easily be used against *prima facie* legitimate and even necessary protests or other forms of contestation over development initiatives.³ In what follows, I develop my critical analysis through a close examination of the SDG framework and by drawing on specific targets and goals. My analysis of the SDGs is embedded in critical analyses (more generally) of the making of a development agenda that fundamentally privileges commercial interests by more comprehensively (*re*)framing development in terms of the 'market episteme'.

In this article, I refer to the 'market episteme' (similar to McMichael, 2010a, p. 3) in order to capture the normative underpinnings of the dominant global development agenda. This agenda places the entrenchment of commercial relations and 'market-based' policy solutions at the heart of development, and initiatives associated with it. As I show below, the making of this agenda is the outcome of a political project crafted predominantly by actors who stand to benefit substantially from the continuity of neo-liberal rule.

At this point a small caveat is in order: for anyone who subscribes to a neo-liberal development episteme and its premises there will be little in terms of disagreement with the underlying assumptions and framework of the SDGs. The premise that underpins my critical analysis is that the contemporary dominance of the neo-liberal development episteme is deeply problematic because of its impoverishing effects and implications, socially and politically. For yet others, who may not subscribe to a neo-liberal development episteme, but may only be familiar with the broad public discourse around the SDGs, the new initiative can indeed seem like an inclusive global development framework, and perhaps even one oriented towards an egalitarian ethic which one could potentially read off the commitment 'to leave no one behind'. However, as I have already noted, closer scrutiny of the goals themselves, and additionally in particular the preconceptions of *how* the goals are to be realised—which are most explicitly articulated in Goal 17 which defines the *process* through which many of the other goals will be realised—suggests that this is indeed a comprehensive *global* framework that would engender quite significant social and political implications. To this end, the advocates of the SDG framework are surely right to present it as engendering a transformative agenda in significant ways. However, it is decidedly not the kind of transformative process that critical scholars and social movement activists might anticipate for a project that would seek to overcome deprivations of fundamental life-sustaining needs, and going beyond that, to ensure the necessary conditions to live dignified lives while substantively committing to ecological sustainability. Thus, the argument I develop is that the SDG framework is highly problematic because of the adverse social and political implications one can reasonably expect, should it be implemented in the ways suggested.

For anyone working from more egalitarian sensibilities, we can only hope for the successful challenge of alternatives as aspired to by global social movements for more sustainable approaches to development. It is in this sense, that those who foreground the 'data revolution' (the latter, as it is aligned with the SDG framework focuses on gathering data on progress in terms of implementation), deflect attention away from both any engagement with the struggles for social and political alternatives and a close engagement with the substantive implications of the SDGs. As I show below, the SDG project (if implemented as anticipated) looks set to reinforce the conditions which sustain deprivation of fundamental entitlements to life-sustaining needs for many, such as for example, to water, food, shelter, decent work, and lived lives of dignity.

I develop my argument through the following steps. Firstly, I analyse the conceptual underpinnings of the SDGs by examining the core framework as well as specific goals. My objective

here is to engage with specific goals that are closely aligned with determining the *implementation* of policies. Secondly, I consider how international development policy has been evolving in ways that align with commercial law at least since the WTO's 2000 Ministerial Meeting, which has been presented as the 'Doha Development Agenda'. In this context, I turn to examining the 2011 Busan Declaration on 'Development Effectiveness' which is regarded as a significant milestone in the reframing of global development by shifting the focus from aid effectiveness towards 'development effectiveness'. The Busan Declaration has been argued to reflect a 'paradigm shift' in international development (Mawdsley, Savage, & Kim, 2014) not least because of (a) the role attributed to pursuing development in terms of the 'market episteme' (foregrounding the commercialisation principle as development policy) together with a highly significant role attributed to private business in development; and (b) it heralding a shift away from prescribing and defining international development (aid) policy *towards comprehensively framing an agenda for global development*. This agenda is congruent with the 'market episteme' which frames the SDGs. My objective here is to draw attention to the congruencies and effects of this alignment, including its implications for struggles over development. Finally, I draw some broad critical conclusions from my examination of the SDGs and the politics of global development through inequalities.

The SDGs: A Neo-Liberal Development Project

That the SDGs are constitutively embedded in a neo-liberal politics of development can be discerned especially and indicatively but certainly not exclusively, from a closer examination of Goal 17 (SDG 17). *Goal 17 focuses on the implementation of policies to realise the SDGs—which also means that the implementation of goal 17 is itself one of the goals*. Goal 17 includes the implementation of free trade law and has an explicit focus on the WTO. SDG 17.10 states the following:

Promote a universal, rules-based, open, non-discriminatory and equitable multilateral trading system under the World Trade Organization, including through the conclusion of negotiations under the Doha Development Agenda.

This commitment to free trade through the framework of the WTO is emphasised elsewhere in the UN Resolution on the SDGs. For example, under the sub-header of 'Means of implementation' the following is noted (see point 40, p. 10):

The means of implementation targets under goal 17 and under each Sustainable Development Goal are key to revitalizing our Agenda and are of equal importance with the other goals and targets.

The framework of the WTO includes the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS). The GATS relates to the commercialisation of, for instance, water, health, education, basically what have been conceived as public goods and services. It also includes provisions for the liberalisation of the financial services sector as well as the expansion of financial services trade. The WTO framework also comprises the rules and regulations around Trade Related Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS). What has been referred to as the Doha Development Agenda, is therefore for critics immensely problematic, not least because of the highly contentious implications of the GATS and TRIPS agreements. These agreements have accordingly been subject to much critical scrutiny.⁴ For example, Jane Kelsey through her close and critical examination of the GATS has explicated its underlying ideological biases. In particular, she has argued that a narrow focus on its legal provisions only serves to detract from any serious engagement with its wider social and

political implications (and ideological premises). Her analysis makes an important and politically astute observation which,

locates the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) within the broader ideological transformation of 'services' from fundamentally social relations that are embedded within communities to commercialised commodities traded within an international market place. (Kelsey, 2003, p. 267)

Based on this critical understanding of the GATS, Kelsey makes a strong argument for appreciating its ideological biases. As she states:

Seeing the GATS as ideology, and not simply as a technical legal text, is therefore pivotal to understanding how the interests of international capital are effectively privileged and how competing understandings that insist that GATS embodies and perpetuates the inequality of social relations are excluded. (Kelsey, 2003, p. 267)

It is notable that—with the exception of Goal 4 (target 1) which commits to 'free primary and secondary education for all'—the SDGs and associated targets do not comprise any commitments to ensuring universal guarantees of entitlements to address fundamental life-sustaining needs, such as water, health care, shelter, and food. To get a sense of the problematic implications of this neo-liberal bias, we can draw briefly on the example of water. While water is not yet scheduled as part of member states' WTO/GATS commitments to trade liberalisation, the inclusion of water into the commercialising approach would be the logical outcome of successfully completing the Doha Development Agenda (SDG 17.10), and certainly not inconsistent with it. A consequence would, of course, be the commitment to treat a life-sustaining need—such as water—just as any other commodity at the level of trade law. This is not to suggest that because there have not been any scheduling commitments (as yet) under the WTO/GATS in relation to the water sector, there have not been ample examples of water privatisation forging ahead nevertheless. Indeed, the 1992 Dublin Statement on Water already effectively committed to treating water as a commodity: 'Water has an economic value in all its competing uses and should be recognized as an economic good' (quoted in Conca, 2005, p. 219). The efforts by international development banks, including the World Bank, to create and facilitate water markets have been significant. As Conca notes, in 2002, '12 IMF lending agreements included conditions for water privatization and/or "cost recovery"'. Those subjected to these conditions included countries with already high levels of poverty, such as Honduras, Rwanda, Angola, or Yemen (Conca, 2005, p. 221). In the same year, 12% of the World Bank's total lending portfolio was directed at water privatisation (Conca, 2005, p. 222). Furthermore, one of the precursors to the WTO, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) which came into force in 1994, already included water as a tradeable commodity (Conca, 2005, p. 224). Therefore, the issue of more comprehensive water privatisation looms large behind any commitment to advance SDG objectives by means of concluding the Doha Round of trade negotiations.⁵

The neo-liberal variant of capitalist development which integrally informs the development model of the SDG framework, has already given rise to a legacy of contestation and social struggle. In the context of what came to be known as the 'water wars' in Latin America, the Cochabamba episode stands out. In the late 1990s under pressure from international development agencies to generally make the Bolivian economy 'more efficient' and ensure market-oriented regulation, water was privatised in Cochabamba (as well as in other locales, such as El Alto). As a result of the pricing of water out of the reach of many, it is estimated that more than 70,000 people took to the streets in protest (the government responded to the protests with the force of the military); in the end, the private corporation was forced to leave

Cochabamba, and the management of water was returned to the community (cf. Morgan, 2011). This example of struggles over a fundamental life-sustaining need such as water, is not unique to Bolivia or to countries of the global south.⁶ It is noteworthy that in the context of struggles over 'rights' to water globally (sometimes using the language of 'water is a human right'), representatives of private water companies have come to align with the discourse of 'water is a human right' but while qualifying this with the proviso that they (the companies) are best placed to provide water as a service most efficiently through the market. This, in turn, has inspired some activists and critical scholars to shift from the language of rights to the language of the commons in efforts to decommodify water (cf. Bakker, 2012).

Similar to the GATS and its actual and possible implications, the TRIPS agreement has also been the subject of critical political analysis as well as the target of social movements, not least because of the potential to exclude usage by means of commercialising what has historically been part of the commons (cf. Shiva, 2004). There are several examples of social struggles to decommodify what used to be part of the commons prior to the 'arrival' of exclusionary commercial interests, but one case that stands out as a telling example is that of the neem tree. The neem tree has been used by communities in parts of India for centuries. It is not only considered to be sacred, but is also a plant used for a wide range of purposes, from medicinal to daily use (whether in cooking or for cleaning teeth). A pesticide based on the neem tree (Neemix) was patented on the basis that the communities' knowledge of its use was not documented in written form (Marsden, 1999, p. 284). After several challenges, this patent was finally revoked (Marsden, 1999). The initial patent rested on the notion 'that no prior knowledge' of the practice was documented in written form by the community (who shared the 'value' of the neem tree as part of the commons); this case should be evaluated in the light of Kelsey's critique (as discussed above) that we must zoom outside of the (legal) texts to derive our critical political analysis of ideology, power, and deprivation in development.

As noted Goal 17 of the SDGs is focused on implementing the policies through which many of the others goals are to be realised. Important here is the fact that concluding the schedule of commitments to the WTO is itself a crucial goal of the SDGs and it is one that is argued to be foundational for the realisation of other goals. We should also note in this context that SDG 10, which is conceived to 'Reduce inequality, within and among countries' aligns closely with the assumptions of SDG 17. For instance, the first two targets of SDG 10 *are revealing about the centrality accorded to economic growth—rather than a commitment to redistribution—as the means to reducing inequality.* I explicate this through a brief examination of SDG10:

SDG 10.1 By 2030, *progressively achieve and sustain income growth of the bottom 40 per cent of the population* at a rate higher than the national average. (my emphasis)

SDG 10.2 By 2030, *empower and promote the social, economic and political inclusion of all*, irrespective of age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion or economic or other status. (my emphasis)

In addition to the foregrounding of economic growth as the means to reducing inequality, we can again apprehend the commitment to 'leave no one behind' in SDG 10.2. With regard to the latter, one could be forgiven for reading into it an element of compulsion, implied as part of this project of a neo-liberal variant of (hyper) capitalist approach to global development. This reliance on the market to reduce inequality is corroborated by indicators associated with SDG 10 (although it should be noted that the indicators vary for different countries). For example, while a generic indicator for SDG 10.1 is 'Growth rates of household expenditure or income per capita among the bottom 40 per cent of the population' (this indicator is simply focussed on *measuring* expenditure

or income), others such as the one for Goal 10.6 (SDG 10.6) include measuring the proportion of developing countries in membership of international development Banks (including the World Bank Group and regional development banks), UN agencies as well as the WTO.⁷ Membership of these institutions *means* committing to their development policies and frameworks.⁸

The more macro-political framework of the SDG agenda as discussed above (which includes a comprehensive focus on the liberalisation and commercialisation of 'sectors') is complemented by its more micro-level goals and targets. For example, SDG 1 to 'End poverty in all its forms everywhere' includes specific targets and associated indicators. It is useful to examine three of the targets and indicators of SDG 1 more closely in order to demonstrate exactly how the approach is aligned problematically with the market episteme. Indicators associated with the goals and targets vary for different countries even though there is a 'general' list of proposed indicators.⁹

As an illustrative example, I focus on three targets and aligned indicators of SDG1 for Bangladesh, not least because of the significant proportion of the population living in poverty even though it is currently categorised by the World Bank as low middle income country.¹⁰

SDG 1.1. By 2030, eradicate extreme poverty for all people everywhere, currently measured as people living on less than \$1.25 a day

- 1.1.1: Indicator: Proportion of population living below the international poverty line (\$1.90) by sex, age, employment status and geographical location (urban/rural)

SDG 1.3. *Implement nationally appropriate social protection systems* and measures for all, including floors, and by 2030 achieve substantial coverage of the poor and the vulnerable (my emphasis)

- For example, indicators for Bangladesh include:¹¹
 - 1.3.1 Proportion of the population covered by *labour market programs* (my emphasis)
 - 1.3.1 Proportion of the *poorest quintile population covered by labour market programs* (my emphasis)
 - 1.3.1 Proportion of the population covered by social assistance programs
 - 1.3.1 Proportion of the poorest quintile population covered by social assistance programs
 - 1.3.1 Proportion of the population covered by social insurance programs
 - 1.3.1 Proportion of the poorest quintile population covered by social insurance programs

SDG 1.4: By 2030, ensure that all men and women, in particular the poor and vulnerable, have equal rights to economic resources, as well as access to basic services, ownership and control over land and other forms of property, inheritance, natural resources, appropriate technology and financial services, *including microfinance* (my emphasis).

There are currently no specific indicators identified for Bangladesh for target 1.4. However, the following is a provisional (general) indicator for SDG 1.4:

- 1.4.1 (provisional indicator/under review) Proportion of the population living in households with access to basic services. (UNSTATS, 2016)

It is instructive to analyse these targets and goals: it is important to note in this context that the indicator for SDG 1.1 is the statistics gathered on the number of people who live below the stated poverty line. What it does *not* do is prescribe concrete proposals for redistribution to ensure that no one (e.g. outside the safety net of subsistence communities) falls below this line.¹² The indicators for SDG 1.3 similarly focuses on *gathering data* on the number of persons covered by social assistance programmes, social insurance programmes, and also the number of persons covered by labour market programmes (including of the poorest).

However, SDG 1.3 also includes the gathering of data in relation to *labour market programmes* generally, including for the 'poorest quintile population'. This means that labour

market programmes generally, and especially for the poorest, ought to be seen as part of the planned policy goals of realising SDG 1.3, the objective of which is to ‘implement nationally appropriate social protection systems’. It is important to note here how *labour market programmes* for the poorest have become an *indicator* of ‘nationally appropriate social protection systems’, and especially for the poorest. Implementing labour market programmes does, of course, not have to be problematic per se; rather the crucial question that must be asked is: what kind of labour market programmes are envisaged for the poorest and most vulnerable?¹³

SDG 1.4 (see above) gives us a sense of what kinds of labour and associated programme responses are envisaged in this context: for example, in this context microfinance schemes are advocated as a means for poverty reduction. Briefly, microfinance refers to the provision of financial services on a commercial basis for poverty reduction. A key component of micro-financial services are microcredit schemes for poverty reduction. The approach is premised on the provision of small amounts of credit (on interest) as a poverty reduction strategy. Micro-finance has also been advocated in contexts of the establishment of user-fees for health care services, as well as a means of securing micro-insurance schemes. However, microfinance (and microcredit) schemes are a highly contested approach to poverty reduction (cf. for early critical analyses see Elyachar, 2002; Fernando, 1997; Rahman, 1999; Rankin, 2001; Weber, 2002, 2004, 2014a). Political anthropologists and critical development scholars among others have for over 15 years demonstrated the adverse social impact and implications of microcredit programmes that target poverty. These critical studies have demonstrated the policies’ adverse social and political implications at the community level. While such work has by now led to recognition and acknowledgement of these findings at the level of international development institution, this has not effected any actual revision of the strategy; instead, it has become ‘normal’ in policy lingo and an accepted practice to concede and indeed support the idea that microcredit is used for ‘consumption smoothing purposes’ (i.e. to meet basic needs), rather than ‘poverty reduction’, self-employment, empowerment, or ‘development’. There is also an acknowledgement that repayments are very often made through pyramid loans or by means of cross-borrowing from one NGO or microfinance institution to pay off the other, practices neither of which could be reasonably construed as ‘assisting development’, ‘empowering people’, or ‘alleviating poverty’. It is clear, therefore, that the critical insights about microcredit have not in any way resulted in a rethinking of microcredit and microfinance schemes as a targeted approach to poverty.

Among the critical perspectives on microcredit and poverty, one argument has been that microcredit schemes have been strategically aligned with structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) because they can be used to facilitate SAPs—and especially financial sector liberalisation—while simultaneously undermining resistance to neo-liberal development (cf. Weber, 2002, 2004). (In this context, we can recall the discussion above with regard to social protests associated with the privatisation of water). If we accept—in line also with the recent shifts at the level of policy-makers already indicated above—that microcredit schemes perpetuate debt-dependent social relations, it would be incumbent on us to recognise that such debt-dependent social relations also imply significant disciplining effects, and that such effects form a marked contrast from the discourses of empowerment that have been associated with microcredit in much public discourse. It is noteworthy in this context, that more recently the Consultative Group to Assist the Poorest (CGAP), a part of the World Bank Group, made the case that if a poor borrower foregoes two meals to repay her (micro)debt, then he or she is still deemed better off than without the credit which might have meant having to forego much more. Therefore, the CGAP concluded, it would not want to deny (very) poor people access to microcredit,

or presumably renege on the importance of maintaining repayment rates as the measure of 'success' in poverty reduction (see CGAP, 2011, p. 4).

Let us return to the SDG 1.3: to implement *nationally appropriate social protection systems* through *labour market programmes* and connect this with SDG 1.4 which has explicit references to microfinance schemes. When located in the broader (historical) context of the politics of development and poverty, this suggests that there is more than an indicative relation between the two: it is also a highly problematic approach to poverty, especially if one takes seriously the critical insights on the social impact and implications of microcredit schemes. This is so especially if these insights are in congruence with the argument that the incorporation of microcredit schemes into SAPs has been strategically motivated. As already suggested, the advance of microcredit schemes as a targeted response to poverty was also based on the potential to rely on the dynamics of debt-dependent social relations as a means of disciplining or undermining social resistance to neo-liberal development. Indeed, we can turn to two specific examples where this was an explicit objective of the World Bank behind its funding of large-scale microcredit programmes in the context of SAPs: Bangladesh in the 1990s and Bolivia in the 1980s (Weber, 2002, 2004, 2014a).

Summary: Critical Examination of the 2030 SDGs

In my discussion above, I have focussed on critically examining what I think are some of the most significant political implications of the SDGs. These pertain to goals (and targets) that focus on the *implementation* of a broader set of policies, in particular SDG 17 and also SDG 10. In so doing, I have demonstrated that they aim to implement a highly contested (and contentious) macro-political framework that ultimately privileges upholding *commercial law as the ordering principle of development*. The justification of this approach is the assumption that it is the most efficient means to realise (and secure) economic growth, which is configured as conditional for achieving any of the goals in the list. As I have shown, this more macro-political framework is neatly complemented by specific goals and targets aimed at the more micro-political level (cf. the discussion of SDG1 above). Both share a conception of development based on modernisation theory (and the associated framing of development in terms of the 'ladder metaphor'), with a conception of poverty that is both reductionist and also conceptually delinked from processes and relations of development themselves.¹⁴

This problematic conception of poverty and development is also evidenced in SDG 2 (see especially 2.3) which aims to end hunger and promote sustainable agriculture. SDG 2.3 aims to double agricultural productivity as part of this objective. Leaving aside whether or not doubling agricultural production per se is a desirable goal, this nevertheless raises the question of the problematic assumption that the cause of hunger is the lack of availability of food (in physical terms), rather than a lack of what Sen (1981) has referred to as 'entitlement failure' (i.e. the lack of money needed to buy food in a market economy and in the absence of sufficient welfare). The conception of hunger that underpins SDG2 is therefore highly ideological, in that it analytically severs the link between development and poverty in ways that align with Malthusian premises (i.e. a focus on food availability rather than on entitlement failure due to poverty as the causal explanation of hunger).¹⁵

The SDG agenda, as I have shown through a close examination of specific goals is ultimately premised on a conception of poverty and inequality that is completely congruent with the premises of modernisation theory (for more on this see Weber, 2014b). Poverty and inequality are conceived as stages on the rung of the (metaphoric) ladder rather than in *relational* terms.

Framed in terms of the ladder metaphor, poverty, and inequality are analytically disconnected from the process of development itself. The SDGs, I argue reflect a highly problematic approach to development. SDGs 1 and 17 circumscribe what is at stake and why we should be concerned about efforts to realise these goals as universal ones for development.

Power Behind the SDGs: Whose Interests/Who Benefits

One could be forgiven for posing the question of how might it have been possible to script the 2030 SDG framework against the backdrop of rising social movements for more just and sustainable development alternatives? We can trace the gradual making of a neo-liberal development project to the SAPs of the 1980s and subsequent international development policies, including the poverty reduction strategy paper (PRSP) initiative of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, as well as the WTO's Doha Development Agenda.¹⁶ These initiatives have foregrounded commercialisation as the core organising principle of development. It is this logic that the SDG framework aims to consolidate in comprehensive terms. As Scheyvens, Banks, and Hughes (2016) have shown, influential actors of the (commercial) profit-oriented private sector have played a key role in shaping the SDGs. Similarly, it has been shown how the pro-market episteme approach to development also came to be consolidated at the 2011 4th High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness in Busan, South Korea. As already noted, the Busan Declaration has been referred to by Mawdsley et al. (2014) as a 'paradigm shift'. The Busan declaration makes an important discursive shift from focussing on 'Aid Effectiveness' to 'Effective Development Co-Operation' (see article 28). In other words, similar to the SDG agenda, the Busan Declaration makes a comprehensive move towards framing and defining what the parameters of *global development ought to be*. It is worthwhile to draw out some of its core implications for development, not least because it resonates with the SDG agenda.

Firstly, it called for a shift away from aid *'to enable countries to make full use of the opportunities presented by international investment and trade, and to expand their domestic capital markets'* (see article 9, my emphasis), while making the case for 'aid for trade' (article 10).¹⁷ The Busan Declaration also calls for 'development co-operation to support implementation at the political level' (article 13). I want to contrast two key premises of risk which underpins the Declaration. One makes the case that risk in development should be managed rather than avoided, while the other makes a strong case for the private sector in development while explicitly stating that the risks its investors could face should be proactively minimised. For example, according to,

Article 18 a) *'Developing countries' efforts and plans to strengthen core institutions and policies will be supported through approaches that aim to manage—rather than avoid—risk, including through the development of joint risk-management frameworks with providers of development co-operation.* (my emphasis)

In contrast, article 32 (which focuses on the 'Private sector and development'), is explicit on the need to implement the conditions for the private sector to flourish.

Article 32 b) *'Enable the participation of the private sector in the design and implementation of development policies and strategies to foster sustainable growth and poverty reduction'*

Article 32 d) *Promote 'aid for trade' as an engine of sustainable development, focussing on outcomes and impact, to build productive capacities, help address market failures, strengthen access to capital markets and to promote approaches that mitigate risk faced by private sector actors.* (my emphasis)

The Busan declaration does indeed reflect a paradigm shift in so far as it has shifted the discourse of international development assistance (i.e. international aid policy) to one of *global development* in a comprehensive way (which actually reflects the 'transformative shift' as envisaged by the crafters of the SDGs). The Busan Declaration explicitly calls for the enabling '*of the participation of the private sector in the design and implementation of development policies and strategies to foster sustainable growth and poverty reduction*' (Article 32; b). Furthermore, and importantly, it carefully differentiates between risk that communities (or 'developing countries') should be subject to as a consequence of accepting the premises and policies of 'providers of development cooperation' (cf. article 18). For those among the 'provider's of development cooperation' who belong to the *private sector* the Busan Declaration holds out the promise of mitigating risks. This is akin to investment guarantee mechanisms often associated with free trade agreements, for example.

Similar to the SDGs the Busan Declaration called for an 'action plan to enhance capacity for statistics to monitor progress' (cf. articles 18c and 19b). To be sure, while monitoring progress on goals should not be problematic per se, it is important to be clear about exactly what is being monitored and what is not. As I have noted above, monitoring progress in the SDG framework is very much about gathering data (aimed to sustain the statistical monitoring of performance) on conditions of deprivation or on those goals that focus on the 'means of implementation'.

Conclusion: Contesting the SDGs

Taking stock of the above discussion, we can conclude that the SDG agenda has come a long way, *away* from the embedded liberal compromise of the post-1945 era. There is deafening silence on redistribution or ecological implications of the continued emphasis that is placed on realising an unqualified conception of economic growth. The SDGs, it would seem, may well make the Poor Laws that accompanied the enclosures look progressive; or perhaps the agenda as such is the logical extension of the enclosures. The SDGs as a framework for global development integrates (comprehensively), what has been evolving as a neo-liberal development project at least since the 1980s. Unlike the MDGs it is explicit on the fact that a highly contested neo-liberal political approach to development should be the framework of global development. This comes at a time when there have been rising social movements both challenging this project and defending more just and sustainable alternatives. To leave no one behind implies that *no will be/ ought to be* outside /excluded from this agenda. That is to say, one could be forgiven for discerning an element of compulsion, suggesting that everyone *ought* to be part of this project. This project includes a strong commitment to implement contentious policies which critics have shown to be highly exclusionary and therefore unjust, and therefore also not sustainable. Let me close by rendering an important caveat in the UN Resolution on the SDGs which alludes to the fact that the goals may not be realised:

The Sustainable Development Goals and targets are integrated and indivisible, global in nature and universally applicable, taking into account different national realities, capacities and levels of development and respecting national policies and priorities. *Targets are defined as aspirational and global*, with each government setting its own national targets guided by the global level of ambition but taking into account national circumstances. Each Government will decide how these aspirational and global targets should be incorporated into national planning processes, policies and strategies. It is important to recognise the link between sustainable development and other relevant ongoing processes in the economic, social and environmental fields. (United Nations, 2015, point 55, p. 13; my emphasis)

While we can say that any (future) commitments will always be contingent on unanticipated events and dynamics, to this end the SDGs can plausibly be conceived as aspirational. But let us be clear that the core of the SDG framework and targets are not about guaranteeing universal entitlements to live dignified lives (except with regard to education).¹⁸ Rather, they are closely aligned to the sentiments writ large in SDG 17 (and also SDG 10) and SDG 1 and SDG2 (as discussed above). There are global efforts already underway to ensure that these goals are implemented, together with Goal 16 which focuses on peaceful and conflict free societies.¹⁹ At its core, the 2030 SDG agenda is premised on the consolidation of the conditions of the 'market episteme' while attempting to mitigate against any challenges to this political project. Indeed, the latter is evident in the Busan Declaration and the commitment to mitigate risks to investors (framed as 'providers of development') while making the case that others should accept the 'risks of development'.

The crafters of the 2030 SDG agenda must surely know that social and political struggles against domination and deprivation have been integral to the history of development. They must be acutely aware that social and political institutions that justify unequal relations and unsustainable practices have never been stable. This is what Scott has demonstrated through his critical analysis of *domination and the arts of resistance*. Infrapolitics, as Scott reminds us, is always everpresent and it comprises 'millennial dreams that threaten to become revolutionary politics' (1990, p. 201).²⁰

There are alternatives to the 2030 SDG agenda articulated through struggles for development otherwise; as the latest (2016) World Social Forum (WSF) noted it is not only that another world is possible but 'another world is needed: together, it is possible' (WSF, 2016). The sensibilities of the WSF are not the ones aligned with the SDG commitment to 'leave no one behind'—they are for *development otherwise*. Social political struggles will continue *against* the ideology and impoverishing effects of the SDG agenda for actually sustainable social and ecological relations.

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Notes

- 1 This commitment to 'leave no one behind' has been presented in relation to the framing of the SDGs in terms of a paradigm shift: 'We believe there is a need for a paradigm shift, a profound structural transformation that will overcome the obstacles to sustained prosperity. The transformations described below apply to all countries. They are universally relevant and actionable (United Nations, 2013, p. 7).
- 2 It is important to note here (a point recognised by McMichael, 2010a) that struggles over domination and deprivation in development are also over race and racism, and include anti-colonial movements, especially as expressed in indigenous politics (cf. Shilliam, 2014, 2015; Strakosch, 2014).
- 3 See for example the case of Ecuador which has incorporated the concept of 'Good Living' (GL) in its 2008 Constitution. GL includes a recognition of the 'rights of nature' as well as collective rights. GL evolved through indigenous struggles against marginalisation, but it has been a project that has been able to inspire and mobilise

as a counter movement (more broadly) to neo-liberal development. Bolivia has also incorporated a similar conception in its constitution. By no means is this project wholly successful (or complete) but it is a concrete example of struggles for alter-development. For discussions of the social and political significance of GL (or commitments to similar sensibilities) as well as constraints faced, see Casas (2014), Gallegos-Anda (*in press*), and Bebbington and Humphreys Bebbington (2011). See also *La Via Campesina* (the 'food sovereignty movement') and their efforts aimed at achieving (actual) sustainable development (indicatively, see Desmarais, 2002; McMichael, 2008). Interestingly, the UN Resolution on the SDGs acknowledges that there are other approaches to sustainability such a GL, but it misleadingly concludes that the sensibilities of GL and the ideological basis of the SDGs are commensurate on the basis of the following: 'that planet Earth and its ecosystems are our common home and that 'Mother Earth' is a common expression in a number of countries and regions' (United Nations, 2015, point 59, p. 13).

- 4 On the politics of the WTO Doha development Round and poverty, see for example, Higgott and Weber (2005); on the GATS see Kelsey (2003); on the GATS, the environment and development see Weber (2005); on the GATS and Water services see Lang (2004); on the politics of neo-liberalism, the WTO, and social discipline, see for example, Gill (2002).
- 5 For a good discussion of the GATS and its implications for water services, see Lang (2004).
- 6 See the documentary 'A World Without Water' (produced by True Vision) for examples of poor families in the United States of America having their water cut off due to their inability to pay for the charges. Consequently, there has been a rise of 'robin head' style tactics to reconnect to water services.
- 7 See for example the indicators for SDG 10.6 in relation to Bangladesh: unstats.un.org/sdgs/indicators/database/?area=BGD (accessed 7 November 2016).
- 8 It should come as no surprise that the WTO's (2015) Ministerial Declaration and Decisions recognised the role of the WTO in contributing to the realisation of the SDGs (e.g. see points 8 and 15 of the 'Preamble').
- 9 See UNSTATS for the different indicators used for different countries: available at: <http://unstats.un.org/sdgs/indicators/database/> (accessed 19th December 2016); For the general list of proposed indicators see UNSTATS (2016), available at: <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/statcom/47th-session/documents/2016-2-IAEG-SDGs-E.pdf> (accessed 19 December 2016).
- 10 See the World Bank on Bangladesh: <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/190391468190764030/Bangladesh-Country-snapshot> (accessed 19th December 2016).
- 11 See unstats.un.org/sdgs/indicators/database/?area=BGD.
- 12 At the same time, however, accepting this monetary measure as a base-line of poverty could potentially conflate destitution with subsistence communities, and thereby also target the latter 'for development'. For an important critical discussion in relation to the conflation of destitution with subsistence communities see Nandy (2002).
- 13 For example, the prison-industrial complex is also a kind of labour market programme. For a critical discussion of relationship between the NAFTA, poverty and migration and the rise in private prisons see Suliman (2014).
- 14 For an expanded discussion of the MDGs and SDGs in the relation to theory and method of analysis, see Weber (2014b, 2015).
- 15 In a recent insightful paper, entitled from *Poverty to perversity*, Somers and Block (2005) argued that welfare debates in the USA continue to rely on such Malthusian conceptions of poverty.
- 16 For critical discussions of the PRSPs see Weber (2006) and the Doha Development Agenda see Higgott and Weber (2005).
- 17 In this context the 2015 Impact Report of the Enhanced Integrated Framework (EIF): Trade for LDCs states that it will 'tie its work to the SDGs' noting the relevance of (free)trade for several SDGs (e.g. see p. 17). The EIF is a new initiative that was established in 2015.
- 18 We should note here that the commitment to free education in the SDG framework sits alongside education being subject to privatisation under the GATS of the WTO.
- 19 For a critical discussion of the potential implications of SDG 16 to undermine legitimate social struggles for entitlements to address fundamental live sustaining needs, see Weber (2014b).
- 20 On a similar point about resistance to domination and subjugation, see Grovogui (2009).

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