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Sustainable Development in the Anthropocene

The Story of the SDGs

In the year 2015, leaders from 193 countries of the world came together to face the future. And what they saw was daunting. Famines. Drought. Wars. Plagues. Poverty. Not just in some faraway place but in their own cities and towns and villages. They knew things didn't have to be this way. They knew we had enough food to feed the world, but that it wasn't getting shared. They knew there were medicines for HIV and other diseases, but they cost a lot. They knew that earthquakes and floods were inevitable, but that the high death tolls were not. They also knew that billions of people worldwide shared their hope for a better future. So leaders from these countries created a plan called the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This set of 17 goals imagines a future just 15 years off that would be rid of poverty and hunger, and safe from the worst effects of climate change. It's an ambitious plan.[1]

The story of the SDG agenda is a story about development, which is to say it is a story about the relationship between the past, present and the future. Not only does the SDG agenda aim to shift existing development trajectories, but the way it is itself narrated by groups such as the UNDP above (the United Nations Development Program) casts it as a positive

development in and of itself, as a kind of awakening and new age. What the agenda does in practice, however, is far from certain or predetermined. Shaping its actual outcomes are legacies from the past, competing worldviews and different readings of the sustainable development challenge.

This is not the first time that the world has had a set of global goals. Immediately preceding the SDGs were the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), established at the turn of the Millennium to much fanfare. As a final report on the MDGs describes: 'At the beginning of the new millennium, world leaders gathered at the United Nations to shape a broad vision to fight poverty in its many dimensions. That vision, which was translated into eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), has remained the overarching development framework for the world for the past 15 years.'[2]

As the epitaph above demonstrates, the strongly normative discourse about *shared* problems and heroic action that shaped the MDGs is continued with the SDGs. Thematically the SDGs also build on the MDGs, incorporating the issues highlighted by the MDGs within the new framework in recognition of the enormous amount of work still needed to properly address the problems they name (see Table 2.1).

Despite the similarities and overlaps, the SDG agenda differs in three main ways.

First, the SDGs substantially broaden the range of issues included, expanding the number of goals from eight to seventeen. While three health-related MDGs are rolled into SDG 3 Good Health and Wellbeing, some are disaggregated, such as MDG 1 Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger, which is broken into the first two SDGs, and MDG 7 Ensure environmental sustainability, which is distributed across multiple SDGs, including SDG 6 on Clean Water and Sanitation and SDG 13 on Climate Action. In addition, numerous other goals and ambitions are added to make explicit the need to tackle critical 'background issues' such as access to energy and post-primary education, unjust work conditions, and violence and conflict. For instance, SDG 9 Reducing Inequalities, plus broader attention to inequalities across the SDGs, explicitly recognises the fact that inequality in income, wealth and access to environmental goods and services between and within countries is persistent, even

Table 2.1 The 17 SDGs and the 8 MDGs

Sustainable Development Goal (2015–2030)	Description	Related Millennium Development Goal (2000–2015)
1. No poverty	End extreme poverty in all forms by 2030	MDG 1. Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger
2. Zero hunger	End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture	MDG 1. Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger
3. Good health and wellbeing	Ensure healthy lives and promote wellbeing for all at all ages	MDG 4. Reduce child mortality MDG 5. Improve maternal health MDG 6. Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases
4. Quality education	Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all	MDG 2. Achieve universal primary education
5. Gender equality	Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls	MDG 3. Promote gender equality and empower women
6. Clean water and sanitation	Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all	MDG 7. Ensure environmental sustainability
7. Affordable and clean energy	Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all	
8. Decent work and economic growth	Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all	
9. Industry, innovation and infrastructure	Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialisation and foster innovation	
10. Reduced inequalities	Reduce inequalities within and among countries	
11. Sustainable cities and communities	Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable	MDG 7. Ensure environmental sustainability

(*continued*)

Table 2.1 (continued)

Sustainable Development Goal (2015–2030)	Description	Related Millennium Development Goal (2000–2015)
12. Responsible consumption and production	Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns	MDG 7. Ensure environmental sustainability
13. Climate action	Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts	MDG 7. Ensure environmental sustainability
1. Life below water	Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development	MDG 7. Ensure environmental sustainability
2. Life on land	Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation, and halt biodiversity loss	MDG 7. Ensure environmental sustainability
3. Peace, justice and strong institutions	Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels	
4. Partnerships for the goals	Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalise the global partnership for sustainable development	MDG 8. Develop a global partnership for development

worsening, and is a major inhibitor of good development outcomes.[3] Overall, the SDGs offer a far more comprehensive set of goals than the MDGs. As discussed below, this move to cover more (if not all) bases resonates with both the contemporary rise of systems thinking and an older development ideal.

Second, more radically, the SDGs do not just slice, dice and extend the list of issues covered, they reframe the development challenge more holistically, reflecting the paradigm of sustainable development that tries to integrate environment, society and economy. In so doing, they add not just a more systematic but a systemic approach, bringing into view the interconnections between processes in different areas, populations and

sectors. Unusually, the SDG agenda attempts to tackle at least some causal drivers of contemporary problems (e.g. unsustainable consumption and production, unsustainable food systems, dirty energy sources) not just 'symptoms' such as environmental degradation, climate change and hunger. Its openness to facing some of the hard facts about contemporary society is one reason we see the SDGs as an opportunity for transformational change, especially if those in higher education and others can help push conversation and action further towards deeper root causes such as capitalism and colonialism.

Partly as a result of being presented as indivisible, the SDGs are also less spatially contained to certain regions. The SDG agenda is promoted as applicable to *all* groups everywhere, both in terms of where action is needed and who needs to be involved. As described below, no longer is the underlying model of development simply that of *international development* (the rich helping the poor 'catch up'), although strong elements of this approach do remain. It is also *global sustainable development*, where problems are seen everywhere, including problems generated by the rich, such as resource consumption and production practices that contribute significantly to serious negative social, economic and environmental 'externalities' in low-income areas.[4] Although, as critics have pointed out, opportunities to really mark wealthy populations and Western lifestyles as problematic were side-stepped in the agenda (e.g. malnutrition targets only include under-nutrition, not over-nutrition), the agenda is unusually overt in problematising elements of the conventional progress ideal, which is one reason the SDGs hold such far-reaching implications for universities.

Third, the SDGs reverberate with the urgent tone and planetary focus of recent intellectual and policy developments, notably discussion of the Anthropocene, planetary boundaries and resilience, and other major international agreements such as the Paris Climate Accord. Rather than the SDGs 2030 deadline simply being an automatic administrative reset of the 15-year period of the MDGs, 2030 is given real meaning in the SDG agenda due to growing awareness that the world is running out of time to avert runaway climate change and Earth System collapse. Like the Paris Climate Agreement, which it explicitly cross-references, the SDG agenda also began in 2015 and is similarly monitored in terms of

likely outcomes in 2030. Failure to substantially reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 2030 will lock in dangerous levels of climate change, pushing the world beyond the target of 1.5 °C of average global warming and undermining the entire SDG agenda.

The 2020 UNEP Emissions Gap report on countries' voluntary commitments to mitigate greenhouse gas emissions points out that compared to what is needed to limit temperature rise to 1.5 °C, as of mid-2020 policy commitments across the world:

> remain seriously inadequate to achieve the climate goals of the Paris Agreement and would lead to a temperature increase of at least 3 °C by the end of the century.[5]

The report concludes that while more and more countries are committing to reducing emissions from their own activities to net zero, this leaves many emissions untroubled or unaccounted for and 'a dramatic strengthening of ambition is needed'. Specifically, countries collectively need to commit to five times the existing level of mitigation effort if we are to keep global warming to 1.5 °C.[6] Furthermore, distant policy commitments need to be translated into action now.

Despite a small dip in emissions due to COVID-19, actual emissions are still far in excess of even existing inadequate policy commitments, rising in 2019 to unprecedented levels, partly because of emissions from the growing number of forest fires that climate change feedbacks are exacerbating.[7] Global average temperature is already more than 1.15 °C above the pre-industrial average (1800–2019)[8] and reached a record high (equal with 2016) in 2020.[9] Combined with the way that far-reaching climatic changes and their cascading impacts are already eroding societal wellbeing, ecosystem health and institutional capacity, the situation is increasingly urgent. Many scientists are arguing more and more forcefully that every year—even every month—needs to achieve substantial greenhouse gas mitigation.[10]

Failure to achieve the SDGs will severely undermine society's capacity to mitigate future climate change rapidly and effectively enough. It will also undermine our capacity to cope with and adapt to the attendant climatic changes and pervasive flow-on effects.[11] How we and our

communities, workplaces, institutions, landscapes and other living things are impacted by climate change is as much a matter of the 'conditions on the ground' that we are facing at a given moment in time as it is by climatic factors.[12] Such conditions are, in turn, an expression of not only prior specific climate adaptation actions (e.g. urban greening to reduce heat and flood risk, improved emergency communication systems) but the degree to which the myriad dimensions of sustainable development have been achieved in a given context, or not. Sustainable development is vital to successfully managing as well as avoiding climate change, and climate change action is an enabler and beneficiary of all of the SDGs, not just the focus of a single SDG (SDG 13).

Action on other SDGs is no less urgent than that on SDG 13, and not only because many of them—such as SDG 11 on sustainable cities, SDG 7 on clean energy, SDG 9 on responsible consumption and production and SDG 2 on sustainable food systems—are vital to lowering atmospheric greenhouse gas concentrations and/or vulnerability to climate change impacts. For example, biodiversity loss, which is explicitly covered in SDG 14 Life on Land and SDG 15 Life Under Water, is now so dire that it constitutes what some have declared a Sixth Mass Extinction in Earth's history. The 2019 Global Assessment Report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services—the first of its kind in nearly 15 years—concludes that despite overwhelming evidence that non-human nature is foundational to human wellbeing, 'the great majority of indicators of ecosystems and biodiversity' show 'rapid decline' since 1970.[13]

Underlying this reduction in the quantity and quality of biodiversity is the fact that pollution and invasive alien species are increasing, species assemblages are becoming more homogenised, and 'human actions threaten more species with global extinction now than ever before'.[14] The consequences are not limited to the non-humans involved in SDG 14. Rather, because 'Nature is essential for human existence and good quality of life', it 'is essential for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals'. The loss of ecological services such as clean air and water, temperature control, pollination, food and pharmaceuticals profoundly undermine the SDGs' progress. Conversely, progress on the SDGs is essential to

conservation of nature and ecological services, demonstrating once again their reciprocal character.[15]

COVID-19 and its far-reaching flow-on effects are further highlighting the urgency and challenges of the SDG agenda. Among other things, the pandemic catastrophe is shining a harsh light on current human-animal interactions, global supply chains and spatial and social inequalities in health, health care, employment, social services, governance systems and green space. Lack of progress on the SDGs has exacerbated and co-generated the effects of the pandemic, while 'COVID-19 will likely negatively impact progress towards most SDGs in the short and medium-term, including in high-income countries'.[16] Despite or partly because of the disruption of the pandemic, the 'turn to the future' that the SDG agenda encourages is only strengthening. As we discuss below, this includes experimentation with different modes of imagining and governing the future.

Reactions and approaches to the SDG agenda vary widely, reflecting underlying worldviews, concerns and interpretations of component ideas. To help explain some of the key arguments, we now turn to the past to revisit the agenda's underpinning ideas. We begin with the very notion of development itself which has been interpreted and approached in radically different ways. The role of interpretation and implementation means that, like universities, the SDG agenda is not fully determined. Thus, its potential cannot be dismissed or bounded from the outset and is up to us to realise. At the same time, it is important to be aware of the baggage that development and related concepts carry. This means reflecting on questions of progress and sustainability, and their roots in big ideas and drivers such as modernity and colonialism.[17] In this chapter we look at international development, post-development and sustainable development in the Age of the Anthropocene, before sketching out some of the implications for universities.

The Concept of Development

At the heart of both the Sustainable *Development* Goals and the higher education sector is the idea of development. For the last few decades, the ambition and practices of development have been contested and regularly declared outdated, reflecting its long history. Despite claims by some that it is 'dead', development remains a highly resilient concept, in part because of its reincarnation as sustainable development and, more recently, its ongoing reworking in contemporary international discourse, such as the idea of 'climate-resilient development'.[18] Appreciating how development arose and functions as a concept is a crucial first step in critically engaging with the SDGs and understanding the current juncture.

Since at least the colonial period, the concept of development has become a basic pillar of Western thought and global governance, one with the 'power to frame our thinking of what is desirable and doable, and how'.[19] Being Western in origin, the concept of development and its associated measures and metrics have been used repeatedly to arrange the world's regions into an imagined temporal sequence in which Western, usually wealthy nations are designed as 'developed' (advanced) and others are more or less relatively 'less developed'.[20] It is this imagined temporal unevenness between (and to a lesser extent within) nations that has classically animated development initiatives and informs one of the cornerstones of the SDG agenda: 'leave no one behind'.

Although development has multiple historical roots and context-specific interpretations and uses, Finnish development studies scholar Juhani Koponen argues that the concept is characterised by three overarching and mutually reinforcing meanings: (1) 'a desired goal, an ideal state of affairs to strive for'; (2) 'a transformative process or, rather, a set of processes towards that goal'; and (3) 'intentional human action based on the belief that a well-meant intervention will trigger processes leading to what we ideally regard as development'.[21] Underpinning this composite meaning are two beliefs. One (informed by religious and scientific thought) is in the existence of some kind of 'embryonic' or latent potential that is primed to develop/unfold into a 'full future form'. The second

is in the capacity of humans 'to act intentionally to change existing conditions', including intervening to make something 'unfold' if it does not seem to be doing so adequately on its own.[22]

As discussed further in the next section, the tension between these two beliefs—what Cowen and Shenton call 'immanent development' and 'intentional development'—continues to stimulate debates about development today.[23] Core to this tension is whether intervention is necessary and, if so, how it relates to 'background' development or 'progress'. During the height of the colonial period, when development crystallised as an overarching policy framework, it was used not only as a tool for dispossession, extraction and settlement of new lands but also as the goal to justify these invasions. As Koponen explains, the general rationale was that: 'If indigenous people had left the resources of their countries undeveloped, their development was not only a right but also a duty of the colonialists'.[24] Animated by what Tania Murray Li refers to as 'the will to improve', the colonial project was justified by the assertion that it was of mutual benefit for the colonised as well as the colonisers.[25]

Yet, accumulating evidence of the lack of benefits enjoyed by the colonised, and by the working class 'back home', quickly strained the idea that colonisers were simply 'coaxing out' a natural potential in the world and that elite, capitalist development of natural resources was enough to generate benefits for local communities. Rather it became clear that extractive and industrialising processes were imposing an extreme cost on many local populations at home and abroad, including dispossessing them of their lands, undermining their livelihoods and eroding their health and survival.

As colonial governments struggled to develop some of their seized territories into proper countries, unemployment and inequities drove civil unrest in France and Britain, and critics such as Karl Marx and Frederick Engels deplored the inhumanities of industrialisation. In the midst of these struggles, social or 'human' development gradually emerged as something of a counterpoint or complement to 'economic development', although the latter remained the overall goal. In this way, the *practice* of development (the third leg of its composite meaning, mentioned above) was adjusted to better deliver on the *ideal* of development as being a kind of 'peaceful evolutionary change guided by conscious human action'.[26]

There are three important things to note about this history. The first is the link to universities. Education is deeply entwined with the notion of development and is similarly characterised by the tension between a belief in people's inherent latent potential (e.g. in a child) and the need for expert guidance and intervention (formal education, training) to ensure that potential is fully realised and directed towards what educators recognise as desirable ends. Unsurprisingly, formal education has long been a core human development intervention, motivated by a desire to both morally improve individuals and fulfil the labour needs of the economy. Clemente Abrokwaa argues that in colonial Sub-Saharan Africa, for example,

> Western education became the most sought after, important agent of social change within the different colonies. … Western education became the index of development as well as the tool for measuring national and human growth.[27]

Also relevant to universities is the fact that research has had a central role in colonisation and associated conceptions of development, human civilisation and progress. As with education, science has functioned in colonialism as both means and end, tool and proof.[28] In the colonies, research institutes and associated networks and conferences became a major feature of imperial practices and circuits, helping fuel not only practical outcomes in local contexts such as large-scale irrigation but research in European-based universities.[29]

Beyond science's practical and symbolic role, social science also emerged as a key component of development. Indeed, according to some commentators, social science emerged as a field largely because it could purportedly understand and help shape society—that is, foster social development—as reliably as science could nature, making social science the complement to science and economic development.[30] In sum, the point is that modern universities and their contemporary challenges are, at least in settler colonial nations, partially a product of the ideal of development, which they are now being called upon afresh to support through the SDG agenda.

The second important point to note is that it is out of this development-centred context that the institution of the United Nations emerged. Contrary to what some people assume, the United Nations did not invent the idea of development—it is instead a product of it. That said, as we discuss below, the United Nations emerged in the post-World War period hand in hand with a new variant of development—what we now know as 'international development'. The implication is that the UN and development, including the SDGs, are closely linked, though not in a simple, linear fashion.

Third, the role of unemployment and the rumblings of civil unrest and 'violent revolution' in driving and challenging development in the past[31] begs the question of how development will feature in responses to the contemporary challenge of COVID-19 and its economic and social consequences. Although it has already been pointed out that the current crisis threatens to slow progress on achieving the SDGs, the historical pattern suggests it may also invigorate a rebooting and reworking of development, with implications for the SDG agenda.

International Development and Its Discontents

As indicated above, one of the thematic threads running through the SDGs is the notion of international development and its particular expression through the MDGs. Now a large and well-developed industry, international development emerged as a variant and continuation of colonial development in the post-World War period when the Bretton Woods agreement helped spark a new global imaginary—a new awareness of nations' integrated fates and fortunes. In a landmark speech in 1949, US President Truman called for a 'fair global development programme', not for charity's sake but because it would be mutually beneficial for all nations involved. As Truman put it, the poverty of under-developed nations 'is a handicap and a threat both to them and to more prosperous areas' (such as the US).[32]

The subsequent establishment of the International Bank of Reconstruction and Development and the United Nations (picking up where the inter-war League of Nations left off) helped to solidify this

united view and put into practice international development flows of financial support from rich to poor through mutually obligated aid arrangements. In this way, development was rhetorically distanced from colonialism and 'reborn' as a modern global objective for all. Promoting the 'economic and social progress and development' of all people was written into the United Nations charter.[33]

Despite broad agreement on the need for international development, its implementation has been characterised by fierce debates over its actual direction or goal. As Koponen notes:

> Even if we speak, as the discourse of international development does, 'only' of economic and social development, its meanings cover a huge range: from modernisation to poverty reduction, from economic growth through increased productivity and the production of more-or-less-necessary gadgets to the fundamental values of a good life and the enlargement of human freedom.[34]

There has also been a long history of contestation over how development should be pursued and the degree and source of intervention, relative to leaving local contexts to 'develop' in a more immanent, bottom-up way. Adding to contestation and diversity in approaches is a pluralism of the groups involved. Some high-income countries such as Australia and the United States have backed away from the idea that there is a shared moral imperative to assist low-income countries, leading to an overall decline in the financial and political influence of nation states in international development. Other countries, namely China, have moved from being recipients to significant deliverers of foreign assistance.

Besides nation states, a diversity of increasingly professionalised and politicised actors now characterise international development. Philanthropic organisations/businesses such as the Gates Foundation, development professionals and companies (including those devoted to *assessing* development interventions in keeping with good governance standards), non-governmental organisations of all sorts, and large consortia such as CGIAR (formerly the Consultative Group for International Agricultural Research) now vie for influence in international development settings. This includes universities.

Further complicating the situation are three overlapping paradigms that have emerged over the last five decades as alternatives to conventional international development. These general alternatives and their arguments point to some important lessons from the past and a range of intellectual resources we can draw on to shape the future. As we argue in relation to the topics of sustainable development and resilient development below, appreciating the history of, and contestation around, international development helps us understand some of the criticisms levelled at the SDG agenda and thus tackle it in a more sophisticated and effective manner.

Neopopulist International Development

The first line of critique levelled at international development, advocates for an alternative 'participatory' or 'neopopulist' development approach. This approach maintains international development's commitment to deliberately transferring wealth from rich to poor, but argues against the classic top-down way in which associated development efforts are conducted, given the negative ways a significant proportion of international development efforts have affected local populations.[35]

Neopopulist international development advocates for development efforts to be largely led by local people, local knowledge and local human development priorities.[36] For example, rather than Western technologies being 'rolled out' in local agricultural contexts to try to increase others' food security or profits (as many colonial initiatives largely tried to do), the focus is on context-appropriate interventions and technologies—and indeed context-appropriate research and innovation, as we discuss in Chaps. 4 and 5. In terms of the SDG agenda, the neopopulist perspective on development is evident in the agenda's emphasis on localisation and participation, reflecting the long consultation process involved in formulating the SDG agenda. Nevertheless, numerous neopopulist critics voice legitimate reservations about the SDGs. As Belda-Miquel et al. (2019) note:

A key question is whether they can address structural problems in development aid policies and practices, such as the lack of accountability and coherence, unequal power relations, or depoliticisation.[37]

The authors conclude that: 'It seems that this will depend on how the agenda is adopted in the various territories as well as on the different interests at play'.[38] Their analysis of how the SDGs are being localised and implemented in the port city of Valencia on the Spanish coastline illustrates this point, highlighting the competing interpretations of the SDGs at work in the local context and the conflicting discourses involved in implementing them. As we return to below, this emphasis on the fact that the SDG agenda is not monolithic but is co-produced by actors as they interpret, debate and implement it within particular dynamic contexts is vital to appreciating the malleable nature of the SDG agenda, and key to why we believe the SDGs have positive and subversive potential.

It is useful here to consider the neopopulist criticism of the SDG agenda as itself a product of clashing worldviews. Being associated with the UN, the SDG agenda is interpreted by many people as a classic product of what Mary Douglas and colleagues would call a Hierarchical worldview.[39] This is a typically Western stance on the world that assumes and values the existence of a strong (hierarchical) social order, combined with a strong moral commitment to others. In their Cultural Theory worldview framework, which is based on empirical analysis of groups around the world, Douglas and colleagues refer to this as a 'strong grid' and 'strong group' orientation (see Fig. 2.1).

One of the three alternative worldviews in the resultant matrix shares the strong moral commitment to others but eschews the orientation to a strong grid. In contrast to the Hierarchical worldview's belief in the importance of formal leaders, professionals and experts, this Egalitarian worldview emphasises the role of the public, local communities and Traditional Owners. It also resonates strongly with the relational understanding of the world that characterises many Indigenous worldviews.

To some degree, the neopopulist critiques of international development and reservations about the UN-led SDG agenda expresses an Egalitarian worldview, and a related interpretation (arguably misinterpretation) of mainstream approaches (notably the UN) as too Hierarchical
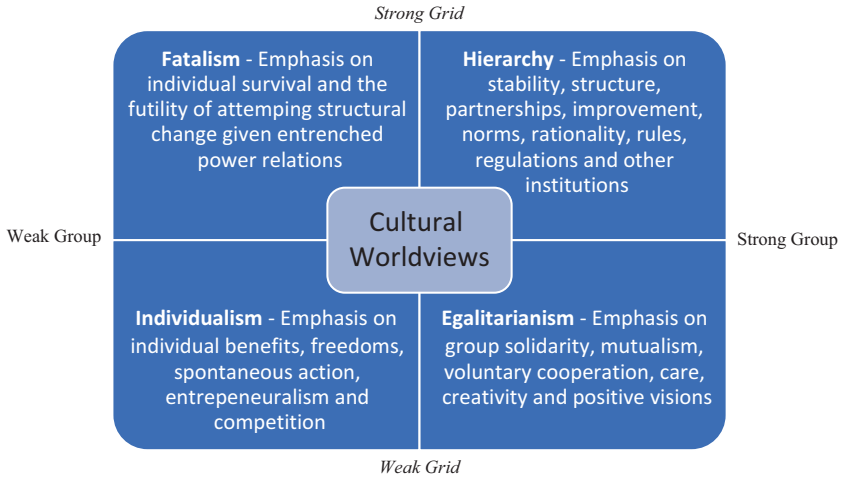
Fig. 2.1 The four worldviews of Cultural Theory. (Adapted from the work of Mary Douglas and colleagues. Figure from https://www.dustinstoltz.com/blog/2014/06/04/diagram-of-theory-douglas-and-wildavskys-gridgroup-typology-of-worldviews)

in nature. It is a concern that we return to below, along with a further discussion of worldviews and how they help us appreciate characteristics of the SDG agenda.

Neoliberal Development

International development has been more strongly critiqued from a second alternative approach—neoliberal development—which dismisses the whole notion of international development and even rejects intentional development by states at all. As the name suggests, neoliberal development is a product of the pro-Capitalist market, neoliberal governance approach that rose to international prominence in the 1970s.[40] At the time, the end of the Cold War meant that international development was losing its status as a tool of soft power within larger geo-political struggles. The combined rise of neoliberal economic policies and the reduced importance of international development for national

geo-political agendas meant that the whole premise of intentional development—and especially intentional development via state aid or 'welfare' programmes—was called into question. Although the first two arms of the composite meaning of development described above remained relatively intact (i.e. the belief in development as a general goal and process), the third meaning (intentional human intervention to engender the process and achieve the goal) was largely rejected.

The result was acknowledgement that many countries of the world remain 'under-developed' (e.g. with levels of child mortality or hunger far above the global average), but strong resistance to addressing this using government welfare and the so-called developmental state.[41] Instead the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, US Treasury and others established a set of free market policies (the Washington Consensus) to guide development. These include Structural Adjustment Programs that replaced development aid with the 'carrot' of financial loans to push recipient national governments to liberalise their governance structures and cultures.

Ongoing today, the goals of these programmes include bringing countries more fully into the global economy and reducing barriers to foreign trade, reforming their governance structures and processes to better meet modern standards and reduce corruption, and implementing specific development projects such as large infrastructure projects or microfinance to stimulate entrepreneurial behaviour. Over time the neoliberal perspective has widely popularised the idea that simply giving humanitarian aid to people in need distorts markets and disincentivises individuals and nations from helping themselves.[42]

Combined with the Global Financial Crisis, an upshot of the neoliberal turn is that since the 1960s total Official Development Assistance payments from wealthy nations for international development have fallen as a proportion of donor country's income, with only Sweden, Denmark and Norway consistently meeting the agreed UN target of 0.7% of Global Net Income.[43] This drop in financial assistance is despite a partial retreat from the harsh neoliberal policies of the 1980s triggered by unavoidable evidence of the regressive social and environmental consequences of one-dimensional Structural Adjustment Programs. Some commentators even declared neoliberalism 'dead' after the 2000–2015

Millennium Development Goals helped 'revive' intentional, international development.[44] As others have pointed out, however, if neoliberalism has faded at all, it is far from dead and remains in a zombie state.[45]

Although the SDG agenda initially helped further bolster foreign aid by encouraging many wealthy nations to restate their commitment to intentional international development, and the overall amount donated in 2016 reached a record high, more recently this commitment has started to waver, thanks in part to the rise of more nationalistic and neoliberal policies in countries once prominent in international development assistance such as the UK, US and Australia. Emma Mawdsley and colleagues characterise the current regime as 'retroliberalism'—one in which there is a stated commitment to 'shared prosperity' but also 'a return to explicit self-interest designed to bolster private sector trade and investment' and 'aid programmes … increasingly functioning as "exported stimulus" packages'.[46]

Meanwhile, the amount of funding needed for international development continues to rise as humanitarian crises increase in number and length, due in part to the cascading effects of climate change. In 2019 it was reported that half-way through the year 'humanitarian organisations had still received less than a third of money—27%—they needed to provide relief to people affected by crises worldwide'.[47] Since then, COVID-19 and its flow-on effects have compounded the problem. The situation is so serious that New Zealand development scholars John Overton and Warwick Murray assert that 'despite a global commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals, we are at a point where the very notion of aid is being questioned and its future is uncertain'.[48]

Over the last four decades the roll back of social welfare programmes run by recipient countries and international development assistance from wealthy countries has created a vacuum that civil society and a plethora of development non-governmental organisations have had to step into.[49] To some extent this has generated a window of opportunity for more participatory, local-based initiatives to thrive in keeping with the neo-populist critique of top-down international development mentioned above. It has also precipitated a turn to the private sector and philanthropies to try to fill the financial gap. This has deepened the influence of capitalism on international development by not only involving a new

range of global corporations in international development work but by stimulating the financialisation of the development sector, adding in a level of complicated financial instruments that businesses far removed from development can participate in and profit from.[50]

From a neoliberal perspective, the UN is often critiqued as hopelessly old-fashioned, bureaucratic and naïve. That is, it is once again criticised as too Hierarchical—this time from the Individualistic worldview (not Egalitarian worldview) that characterises capitalism and the neoliberal ideal. Free of a moral commitment to help, Individualists critically appraise international development in terms of opportunity and self-benefit. In this light, international development is potentially another arm of business, offering new markets, financial assets, labour and opportunities to demonstrate Corporate Social Responsibility in order to legitimate other business activities.

The role of the SDG agenda is ambiguous here. On the one hand, its overlap with the MDGs means it is often interpreted as a nation state and altruistic issue, a continuation of UN moralising of a sort that many have tuned out to or regard dismissively, reflecting to some degree the normalisation of an Individualist outlook on the world. On the other hand, the business community is far more explicitly involved in the SDGs than the MDGs. The private sector had a powerful influence on the design of the agenda and businesses are specifically charged with helping to implement it—both in terms of helping cover the trillions (1.5–2.5% of global GDP) estimated to be needed per year to cover implementation costs[51] and in terms of driving specific initiatives.[52]

Post-Development

We come then to the third and strongest line of criticism directed at international development. The 'post-development' paradigm calls into question the entire modernist premise of development—not just international development but earlier colonial development as well as the sustainable development approach discussed below. As Wolfgang Sachs famously wrote in the introduction to *The Development Dictionary* in

1992: 'The last 40 years can be called the age of development. This epoch is coming to an end. The time is ripe to write its obituary.'[53]

Later in the Dictionary, Gustavo Esteva similarly describes 'development' as an 'unburied corpse',[54] while more recently, Eduardo Gudynas argues that development is 'a zombie concept, dead and alive at the same time'.[55] All the talk of death and zombies indicates that, unlike the neopopulist international development approach described above, postdevelopment does not 'intend to improve the attempts to bring about "development" but questions "this very objective"'.[56] As Aram Ziai outlines, from a post-development perspective, development is:

1. an ideology of the West, promising material affluence to decolonising countries in Africa and Asia in order to prevent them from joining the communist camp and maintaining a colonial division of labour ….
2. a failed project of universalising the way of life of the 'developed' countries on a global scale which has for the overwhelming majority of affected people led to the 'progressive modernization of poverty' ….
3. a Eurocentric and hierarchic construct defining non-Western, non-modern, non-industrialised ways of life as inferior and in need of 'development' ….
4. an economic rationality centred around accumulation, a capitalist logic of privileging activities earning money through the market (and disvaluing all other forms of social existence), and the idea of the *Homo economicus* (whose needs for consumption are infinite).
5. a concept that legitimises interventions into the lives of people defined as 'less developed' as justified in the name of a higher, evolutionary goal or simply the common good defined by people claiming expert knowledge.[57]

So how does the SDG agenda look from this perspective? Ziai raises this question explicitly, asking whether the new agenda has 'provided a rejuvenating cure' or whether it is 'only the last in a long line of cosmetic surgeries designed to let its object appear fresh and vigorous, but unable to mask the signs of decay?[58] As his tone suggests, Ziai is unimpressed by the SDG agenda, as are critical scholars such as Heloise Weber who point to specific limitations such as its promotion of capitalism and free trade.[59]

From this perspective the SDG agenda is read as not just Hierarchical but also Individualist, a kind of Jekyll and Hyde monster that reflects the fact that neoliberalism is equally the progeny of government as business. As seen in Ziai's list above, the SDGs are interpreted as yet another elitist, bureaucratic, imperial endeavour, if not a calculated and dangerous bid at neo-colonialism.

Significantly, however, there are at least two variants of the post-development paradigm which understand the problem from different worldviews and thus differ in their preferred response. First, there are those characterised by deep cynicism about not only development's specific ambition of improving the human condition but grand ambitions of any sort. At work here, we suggest, is a Fatalist worldview (Fig. 2.1) which understands the world as deeply unjust and everyone as only out for themselves. From this perspective the SDG agenda is a ludicrous initiative and/or a poorly described grab by entrenched interests for yet more power. Given their deep despair and apathy about the world, this cynical camp does not offer any suggestions as to what could replace development. Rather, as discussed below in terms of the Anthropocene, the focus is just on coming to terms with the end of the human story.

The second variant of post-developmentalism is more action-oriented. Here there is no question that the whole paradigm of development needs overhauling, but there *is* a belief in the capacity for such transformative change. In particular, there is a burgeoning of scholarship and practice around identifying, celebrating and experimenting with specific, tangible alternative models. In keeping with an Egalitarian worldview, these alternatives often highlight the value of marginalised philosophies and perspectives, such as the *Buen vivir* ('living well') framework of Indigenous groups in Ecuador or the degrowth paradigm in economics.[60]

At the same time, there is some reflexivity in this variant of post-developmentalism about the irony that some of the most strident advocates *for* conventional development—for example, development projects that improve sanitation, incomes, health care, good governance—are from those living in the 'developing world' contexts that post-development advocates claim to be representing or at least protecting from development.[61] Critics of post-development call out post-development scholars for declaring development 'over' when they largely do so from positions

of privilege that have been enabled by that very development, yet deny such benefits, meaning that they are effectively 'pulling up the ladder' after them.

Amplifying this scrambling of positions is an emerging shift towards less binary 'for/against' thinking. Even Wolfgang Sachs, the so-called father of post-development, recognises that the SDG agenda is an assemblage of many worldviews, ideologies and agendas and cannot be easily boxed as bad or good.[62] Although he points out that the SDG agenda is less progressive than Pope Francis's remarkable 2015 Encyclical letter *Laudato Si* (which resonates strongly with *Buen vivir*), he does see real potential in the SDGs—as do we. Overall, the point is that post-development, as with international development, is characterised by a tense combination of, on the one hand, mounting evidence of the vital importance of its underpinning concern with development and equality and, on the other hand, keen awareness of and growing frustration with the limitations of dominant development approaches.

Sustainability and the Anthropocene

If development is an unfolding of human potential and ongoing improvement of human society, *sustainable* development is an effort to guide it in such a way that it fosters, not erodes, our long-term environmental enabling conditions and so can be sustained over time. As a concept, sustainable development was institutionalised and popularised with the 1987 report *Our Common Future* (the Brundtland report) by the World Commission on Environment and Development, an international working group set up by the UN General Assembly in 1983 to propose strategies 'for achieving sustainable development to the year 2000 and beyond'.[63]

Our Common Future defined sustainable development as that which 'meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs'. In doing so, it helped crystallise a new global sensibility, future-orientation and moral ideal. More specifically, it addressed a number of emerging concerns about development,

beginning with the need for a more integrated approach. Discussing *Our Common Future*, John Dryzek asserts that:

> Its main accomplishment was to combine systematically a number of issues that have often been treated in isolation, or at least as competitors: development, global environmental issues, population, peace and security, and social justice both within and across generations.[64]

The concept of sustainable development has also helped illuminate numerous other realities: the need to understand development as a continuous process involving all countries and all parts of the Earth, not just colonies or places of international development intervention; the need to reshape development to better fit the limits of the planet; and the need to attend more carefully to reproductive as well as productive processes, including those that care for, maintain and repair the world.

Approaching development in more global terms and establishing a 'new international order' had already been flagged thanks to the debates about international development discussed above. For example, the Independent Commission on International Development released an influential report, *North-South: A Programme for Survival* (the Brandt report), in 1980 that argued strongly for the rights of those in the Global South to greater redistribution of wealth from the Global North (given the dependency relations the latter had established) and to a greater say in 'international political and economic affairs'. *Our Common Future* built on and diverged from this language of rights and responsibilities by taking it as a given that all countries were equal and focusing instead on the question of mutual interests.[65] Relative to other approaches, sustainable development emphasises the need for coordinated action by actors across the world at all levels, 'motivated by the public good'.[66]

In the approximately three decades between *Our Common Future* and the SDG *Transforming Our World* agenda, a lot has happened, but the outcomes envisaged by the authors of the Brandt and Brundtland have not been realised. Deep socioeconomic and political inequalities persist, and while many alternative approaches to sustainable development have been tried and hotly debated, the planet itself has also heated up and

many other environmental indicators have continued to decline. It has become clearer than ever that we are transforming the Earth itself, not just because the list of individual environmental problems is lengthening but because their complex interactions are altering how the Earth System itself functions, pushing us into what is now known as the Anthropocene.[67]

It has also become clearer that the interpretations of 'sustainable development' that have come to prominence since *Our Common Future* have failed to grasp or address the challenge. Some definitions of sustainable development are a lot more radical than others. Systems thinkers Donella Meadows and colleagues, for example, endorse *Our Common Future* for what they see as its implicit questioning of the paradigm of economic growth, in keeping with their own global systems analyses (e.g. the *Limits to Growth* report) which point to highly disruptive physical feedbacks (e.g. climate change, resource depletion and degradation) increasingly undermining economies and societies unless consumption and production processes are contained.[68]

In contrast, the dominant ways in which sustainable development has been defined and enacted (at least until recently) have presumed that economic growth is not only compatible with sustainable development but a requirement of it. These mainstream approaches to sustainable development are generally based on 'weak sustainability'—the idea, originally advanced by economist Robert Solow,[69] that economic development is sustainable, and nature can be squeezed hard as long as capital is reinvested in productive capabilities such as technological replacements for natural resources or processes.

Today, there is a dawning realisation that what is needed is not only a sufficient supply of resources, nor even the preservation of irreplaceable, non-commensurable natural resources (known as 'strong sustainability'), or even of patches of nature for its own sake.[70] Instead, thanks to advances in ecological, resilience and Earth System science, it is increasingly apparent that to protect 'our common future' we need to maintain the *functional integrity* of the Earth System itself.[71] This is an exceedingly more complex endeavour—one that extends far beyond the purview of the 'environment sector' to implicate all sectors, all organisations, all disciplines.

It is also one deeply complicated by the emergence of escalating feedbacks of the sort that *Limits to Growth* warned of fifty years ago. In systems

terms, climate change, deforestation and related Anthropocene issues are starting to erode the planet's negative feedback loops (i.e. self-correcting mechanisms such as increased uptake of carbon dioxide by vegetation in conditions of high atmospheric carbon dioxide) and generate new positive feedback loops (self-amplifying mechanisms, such as wildfire begetting more wildfire as vegetation evolves to become more flammable and smoke produces greenhouse gases and worsens climate change).[72]

As a result, the planet is becoming less stable and predictable in its function. Combined with more localised pressures such as urbanisation, as well as the long supply chains, transnational circulations and interdependencies of knotted global systems, global risks are escalating in number and magnitude. A 2014 comparison of contemporary data with the dozen scenarios the *Limit to Growth* report modelled suggest that the world is tracking what was aptly named the Business-as-Usual scenario. Concerningly, it projects feedbacks and resource scarcities that increasingly disrupt economies and severely impact human populations.[73]

Planetary sustainability and resilience, like the concept of development, encompass all nations, sectors, individuals and actions. Which is one reason that universities are inescapably part of it and are crucial to addressing it. To understand the reciprocal role of universities within the contemporary sustainable development challenges presented by the Anthropocene and its uneven expression in the SDG agenda, we outline three key aspects in subsequent chapters: the need to face unsustainability; the need for resilience, adaptation and experimentation; and the need for maintenance, repair and regeneration. Each helps address the inevitable question of 'what should we do?'. In addressing this question, we aim to provide further insight into our motivations for writing this book and why we believe that the SDGs are a flawed but valuable tool for progressing the positive transformational change needed, including through universities as the next chapter elaborates on.

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