Who Framed Global Development?

Language Analysis of the
Sustainable Development Goals

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The linguistic analysis contained in these pages shows that **the SDG process is fundamentally compromised and carries within it the seeds of its own failure**. The remedy is to bring clarity to our unstated assumptions and get the core ideas right from the start.

That is the hope I bring in writing this report.

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— Executive Summary —

We conducted a detailed linguistic analysis of key documents for the SDG process (download full report here) and came to this conclusion:

> **The SDG process carries within it the seeds of its own failure.**

Four fundamental weaknesses popped out of our research:

Insight #1: The entire effort rests on a mis-framing of poverty. The SDG documents consistently frame poverty as a disease, which, in contrast to their own promise to *eradicate* it by 2030, evokes the logic that it should be expected and managed, but cannot go away. When they conceptualize poverty this way, they misunderstand what it is and overlook the essential list of structural causes that must be addressed for any transition to a sustainable world. They fail to say how poverty *is created*.

Insight #2: The language obscures "development as usual". It ignores this topic entirely and fails to articulate that it is based on a particular, specifically neoliberal and corporatist conception of how the world economy does and should work. Also noteworthy, there is no reference to corporations—the most powerful institutions on the planet, whose influence in development spaces has been growing considerably in recent years, including via this process—an omission that prompts suspicion that an unpopular agenda may sneak through under the radar. This has the effect of neutralizing analysis on the core elements of the development model, and any consideration for the role of power politics or financial influence in development outcomes.

Insight #3: The poison pill is growth; specifically undifferentiated, perpetual growth as represented by GDP as a measure of progress. An awareness is acknowledged of the deep problems and contradictions when relying on GDP growth to tackle poverty. It is then deliberately kicked into the long grass and left as the prime operative of economic development. Indeed, the only thing the SDG framework has to offer on this is that it has nothing meaningful to offer; instead it passes this challenge to future generations.

Insight #4: The language is self-contradictory and conflicted on the relationship between nature and the economy. There is a clear and laudable intent to connect development and the environment—indeed, calling themselves the Sustainable Development Goals they could not make a bigger signal about needing development to be sustainable—but then the logic repeatedly demonstrates a confused and

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contradictory understanding of whether the economy is something linked with or separate from nature; there to dominate or work within. No credible use of the word *sustainable* would perform this way.

These insights lead to a simple antidote that can heal the SDG process and move us closer to real sustainability—tell the story of poverty creation that reveals systemic and structural causes of "development as usual."

You can contribute to this healing process by asking yourself (and those within your sphere of influence) these three fundamental questions:

How is poverty created?

Where do poverty and inequality come from? What is the detailed history of past actions and policies that contributed to their rapid ascent in the modern era? When were these patterns accelerated and by whom?

Who's developing whom?

The story of development is often assumed or unstated. What is the role of colonialism in the early stages of Western development? How did the geographic distribution of wealth inequality come into being? What are the functional roles of foreign aid, trade agreements, debt service, and tax evasion in the process of development? And most importantly, who gains and who loses along the way?

Why is growth the only answer?

The mantra that "growth is good" has been repeated so often that it has the feel of common sense. Yet we know that GDP rises every time a bomb drops or disaster strikes. Growth, as defined up till now, is more nuanced and complex than this mantra would have us believe. Why must the sole measure of progress be growth? Who benefits from this story? What alternative stories might be told?

We hope these insights and recommendations are helpful. Frame analysis is a powerful tool for uncovering narrative elements and unstated assumptions. The next step is to question them through open dialogue and debate.

- The Rules Team

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Purpose of This Report

As you read these words there is a group of people shaping how global humanity will think about the economy for the next few decades. No, there's not a conspiracy theory unfolding here. What I am referring to is the United Nations process for the *Sustainable Development Goals (SDG)*—where a course is being set for the next fifteen years of intergovernmental coordination for our economic system. This process has been quietly unfolding in the background for several years and will come to completion this fall in New York City.

I am a language researcher who cares about the future of humanity. And I share concern about the risks associated with globalization that currently threaten our collective future— climate disruption, soil depletion, widespread inequality and poverty, regional conflict, rigged financial systems, and more—the very same risks that concern many of the people involved in the SDG process. My primary responsibility at TheRules.org is to study cultural patterns of understanding and unpack their significance. This includes the use of *frame analysis[1]* where I closely scrutinize the words used to think and talk about important issues.

Frame analysis is the study of mental models for human understanding. The concepts we have in our minds are structured in ways that can be systematically explored to reveal implicit assumptions, logical inferences, value judgments, and moral sentiments. An example relevant to the SDG process is the diversity of mental representations for poverty.

Poverty can be conceptualized as a disease that spreads like an epidemic, a prison to be liberated from, the condition of being incomplete or broken, a magical number measured in some predefined way, and more.[2] We might talk about poverty *eradication* (treat it like a disease) or as a *war* (battle with and defeat it). Each meaning brings its own basic assumptions, constraining what poverty is understood to be about and how to deal with it.

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[1] A collection of web resources can be found at http://www.cognitivepolicyworks.com/resource-center/frame-analysis-framing-tutorials/

[2] Here is an analysis I did on Twitter data exploring the many ways that poverty is talked about: http://www.s-lideshare.net/joebrewer31/the-many-faces-of-poverty

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Importantly, these meanings can be incorrect, inadequate, and problematic yet still be widely used. Poverty can be treated as merely a part of the natural world, for instance, which conceals the history of **poverty creation** throughout the last few hundred years where it came into being as a core feature of economic development.[3]

When I looked at the language used to talk about the SDGs I was struck by how much hidden meaning can be found there. The analysis that follows is based on written text for the proposed sustainable development goals. It reveals a great deal about the faulty assumptions that remain uncritically accepted in the process. These assumptions jeopardize the entire effort by leaving out many of the structural factors that create poverty and directly contribute to ecological devastation.

No credible use of the word *sustainable* would perform in this way. In the following pages I make the case that the SDG process is fundamentally compromised and carries within it the seeds of its own failure. While it may be too late to course correct for the UN-led effort that is so near to completion, my hope is that this research is useful for the difficult work ahead of us. There will continue to be a serious need for alternate frameworks of economic change if humanity is to achieve planetary thriving later in this century. It is in the spirit of this larger effort that I write these words to the page.
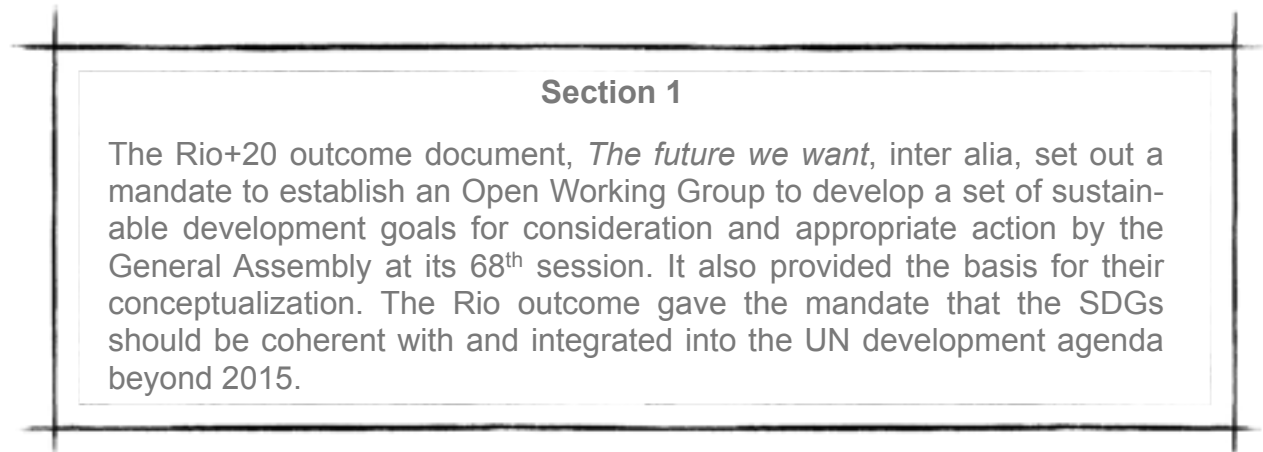
In service of humanity,

Joe Brewer

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[3] http://www.fastcoexist.com/3043284/3-ways-humans-create-poverty

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Insights Revealed by the Analysis

The SDG proposal is divided into eighteen brief sections, each describing a key element of the framework that has been formulated to guide the global economy for the next 15 years.

Let's look at each section to see what the frames reveal.[4]

> ### Section 1
>
> The Rio+20 outcome document, *The future we want*, inter alia, set out a mandate to establish an Open Working Group to develop a set of sustainable development goals for consideration and appropriate action by the General Assembly at its 68th session. It also provided the basis for their conceptualization. The Rio outcome gave the mandate that the SDGs should be coherent with and integrated into the UN development agenda beyond 2015.

Commentary

The opening text presumes a unified perspective in the phrase "The future we want…". But who is *we*? It is presumed to be the international community, which therefore represents the people of the world. But is this process capable of figuring out what the people of the world want? Is there a future that the majority of people agree with?

This frames the discourse as *populist, inclusive, participatory and democratic*. The question we need to ask ourselves is whether these frames convey (or conceal) important truths about the gritty real politics of the world. In the **One Party Planet**[5] pamphlet my colleagues argue that a deliberate course of action has been undertaken to advance one ideology over all others—that this way of thinking is used to justify the corporate control of governments around the world that serve private interests of a tiny elite. A great deal of evidence supports this claim. The SDG proposal dismisses all of this evidence by asserting the unified perspective for all of humanity as representing the peoples of the world. It presumes a unity that does not exist and thereby conceals the structures of

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[4] The analysis that follows is from text on this website: https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdgsproposal

[5] http://therules.org/campaign/do-we-live-on-a-one-party-planet/

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power that have shaped the global economy for decades and continue to shape them today.

Also noteworthy in this text is how the sustainable development goals must be coherent with the UN development agenda beyond 2015. This introduces a frame of *sameness* whereby the SDGs and the UN development agenda are blended into the same category. Both are, and must be, the same. This begs the question: What is the REAL development agenda? And its corollary: Is this "beyond 2015" agenda radically different from the Neoliberal development agenda that has dominated global institutions for the last 40 years? By asserting the framework and the development agenda to be the same, we bypass this issue entirely. It simply does not come up in the mind of the reader.

Section 2

Poverty eradication is the greatest global challenge facing the world today and an indispensable requirement for sustainable development. The Rio +20 outcome reiterated the commitment to freeing humanity from poverty and hunger as a matter of urgency.

Commentary

Poverty Eradication frames poverty as a disease. It is part of nature. It just happens. There are germs and viruses in the world. They should be expected and managed, but cannot go away. No one created germs or viruses, and therefore no one creates poverty.

This is a huge problem because—as noted above (and in other research[6])—*poverty is created*. The rules of the system are set up to extract wealth from the economy and hoard it in the hands of the few who control the money supply. This is done through unfair trade agreements, regressive tax structures and tax evasion, structural debt relations, land grabs, privatization of public utilities, and other widely used business practices. When the SDG framework conceptualizes poverty as a disease, it misunderstands what it is and overlooks this essential list of structural causes that must be addressed for any transition to a sustainable world.

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[6] http://www.slideshare.net/joebrewer31/the-rules-report-final

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Also noted in the text is the claim that *managing the poverty disease* is a "requirement" for sustainable development. This implies both (1) development MUST continue (unquestioned in its fundamentals, as we noted above); and (2) it must continue in a manner that treats poverty like a natural disease.

Then there is the language of poverty as the *greatest global challenge,* which introduces a moral hierarchy where poverty is placed in the top position. This is a reductionist perspective that frames away the importance of systemic causation, pushing system-level interdependences out of awareness so they don't come up in the discourse. The way this happens is by conceptualizing a vertically stacked structure with poverty placed on the top. All other issues (violence against women, global warming, wealth inequality, etc.) are treated as distinct from and lower in the hierarchy than poverty.

In reality these challenges are deeply interwoven and interdependent. Many of the practitioners involved in the SDG process will surely know this. And yet here is an articulation built on "issue silos" that compartmentalize the topics into different bins—each existing on its own to be addressed separately. Mischaracterizing the systemic nature of the challenge will make it much more difficult, if not impossible, to address.

The *matter of urgency* language in the text frames poverty as a crisis. Thus a mode of crisis management is deemed appropriate, according to this logic, which opens up the route to extreme interventionist measures. Perhaps this is not intended by the SDG community, but there it is all the same as a warning flag to discuss further.

> **Section 3**
>
> Poverty eradication, changing unsustainable and promoting sustainable patterns of consumption and production and protecting and managing the natural resource base of economic and social development are the over-arching objectives of and essential requirements for sustainable develop-ment.

Commentary

We already noted the *poverty eradication* frame. It gets reiterated here, showing that it is the most prominent way of thinking for those involved with the SDG process. None of the other concepts for poverty that were mentioned above appear anywhere in the text. This

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tells us that the various frames for poverty were not actively considered in the design of the SDG framework.

The framing of *sustainable patterns of consumption and production* is important. This is a real and substantive claim, a sign of deeper commitment to radical change. Our task with this frame is to hold them to it and make them take it seriously. For reasons having to do with the "unquestioned Neoliberal development agenda" that I mentioned in the commentary for Section 1 we should be suspicious about this one. It may not be the case that these stated intentions are based on lies—it is much more likely that SDG participants really do want to tackle the hard problem of mass consumption—rather that there is no political power for real follow through in the way this process has been structured.

Note the framing of *natural resources* that treats nature as a commodity, reducing it to a material input for industrial processes. This is similar to the *human resources* frame that conceptualizes workers as replaceable commodities to be managed in whatever way minimizes costs and maximizes profits for a company. Thus the *profit and loss* frame is implicit (by association) when nature is framed in this way.

The terms *economic and social development* are nebulous in this passage. What do they mean? Are they referring to the problematic development agenda we've critiqued in other writings?[7] Or are they suggesting something different here? The absence of clarification (via alternative framing) leaves the discourse as it was before. The old frames for development remain the unquestioned, and uncritically analyzed, default mode of thinking.

It is this pattern of continuing "development as usual" without unpacking what it means that is so troubling. The frame analysis shows that deeper meanings are not debated or clarified—leaving the global network of institutional structures (and their business practices) intact. How will the SDGs alter the course of global economic change if they don't question the basic operating assumptions of the current economic paradigm?

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[7] A thorough exploration of the problematic frames of development, poverty and aid can be found in *Finding Frames: New Ways to Engage the UK Public in Global Poverty*, which can be downloaded here: http://www.findingframes.org.

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Commentary

"People are at the centre of sustainable development" employs the framing of people before profit. It introduces a radial grid with people placed at the center. This evokes a *shoot the target* frame of body-based logic where a weapon aimed at a target is metaphorically used to describe how to define and reach an objective. What this frame does is imply that people, not corporations, are what the economy should be about.

Yet it is noteworthy that corporations are not mentioned anywhere in the text (in this section or any of the others). It has become a well known fact that multinational corporations are the most powerful institutions in the world. They supersede the sovereignty of individual citizens, nations, and nongovernmental entities. As a framing omission, this is a glaring void in the development discourse for the SDGs.

The terms *sustained and inclusive economic growth* are very revealing. The goal is economic growth, which goes unquestioned as the prime operative of the global economy. The terms "sustained and inclusive" are used as grammatical modifiers, augmenting but not challenging the tenet of growth. This positioning may well be the biggest problem with the SDGs—namely that all social justice and environmental issues are secondary to the growth imperative that Neoliberalism mandates as the unstated development agenda.

Countering this are the terms *environmental protection, children of the world, youth, and future generations*. These are expressions of empathy and nurturance that convey pro-social values encouraging cooperation and altruism. They also introduce a category of

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victimhood. These are the powerless who would be threatened if, according to development logic, economic growth were to falter or be done in a non-inclusive way. This framing brings forth moral sentiments of empathy and uses them to serve the Neoliberal agenda (because it has gone unquestioned in the previous goals as the default mode of thought).

Section 5

Rio+20 also reaffirmed all the principles of the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, including, inter alia, the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities, as set out in principle 7 thereof.

Commentary

The label *Rio Declaration of Environment and Development* places environment and development on equal footing. Either they work together or they remain in balanced opposition, depending on other frames. This failure to place development WITHIN the environment suggests that ecological thinking may not be central enough. Based on this wording alone, we cannot draw any conclusions about this. But a frame of equivalence is implied in the phrase construction.

Also, the two are treated as *separate and distinct* which artificially divides humans from nature—an untenable position that ignores the foundational knowledge of physics and biology for living systems.

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Section 6

It also reaffirmed the commitment to fully implement the Rio Declaration, Agenda 21, the Programme for the Further Implementation of Agenda 21, the Plan of Implementation of the World Summit on Sustainable Development (Johannesburg Plan of Implementation) and the Johannesburg Declaration on Sustainable Development, the Programme of Action for the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States (Barbados Programme of Action) and the Mauritius Strategy for the Further Implementation of the Programme of Action for the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States. It also reaffirmed the commitment to the full implementation of the Programme of Action for the Least Developed Countries for the Decade 2011–2020 (Istanbul Programme of Action), the Almaty Programme of Action: Addressing the Special Needs of Landlocked Developing Countries within a New Global Framework for Transit Transport Cooperation for Landlocked and Transit Developing Countries, the political declaration on Africa's development needs and the New Partnership for Africa's Development. It reaffirmed the commitments in the outcomes of all the major United Nations conferences and summits in the economic, social and environmental fields, including the United Nations Millennium Declaration, the 2005 World Summit Outcome, the Monterrey Consensus of the International Conference on Financing for Development, the Doha Declaration on Financing for Development, the outcome document of the High-level Plenary Meeting of the General Assembly on the Millennium Development Goals, the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development, the key actions for the further implementation of the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development and the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, and the outcome documents of their review conferences. The Outcome document of the September 2013 special event to follow up efforts made towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals reaffirmed, inter alia, the determination to craft a strong post-2015 development agenda. The commitment to migration and development was reaffirmed in the Declaration of the High-Level Dialogue on International Migration and Development.

Commentary

This long list of commitments can be simplified to the statement *Continue doing development as we've agreed in the past*. This has two entailments: (1) Where Neoliberal policies are in place, don't challenge them; and (2) where Neoliberal policies are challenged, remove politics from the discussion and defuse any capacity for altering them.

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Said another way, all of these meetings are nothing more than rhetoric—not because those involved believe or intend them to be, but rather because no direct opposition to "business as usual" is advanced with real political, military, or monetary power. Without a political base from which to challenge existing power structures, the SDG process will arrive stillborn without resources to bring it to life.

Section 7

Rio+20 outcome reaffirmed the need to be guided by the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations, with full respect for international law and its principles. It reaffirmed the importance of freedom, peace and security, respect for all human rights, including the right to development and the right to an adequate standard of living, including the right to food and water, the rule of law, good governance, gender equality, women's empowerment and the overall commitment to just and democratic societies for development. It also reaffirmed the importance of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, as well as other international instruments relating to human rights and international law.

Commentary

This *universalist* language of freedom, peace and security, human rights and so forth is an expression of humanism—where life and liberty for people is paramount. The ideals of the United Nations are expressed powerfully here, and I resonate deeply with them.

Yet all of these purposes and principles are opposed to the global system of wealth extraction and corporatism that dominates development today. The Neoliberal agenda is couched in the language of universalism that has kept the United Nations politically neutered from its inception. We would love to see these purposes and principles realized, yet history reveals that this system of intergovernmental bodies has been largely captured (or marginalized) by global corporate anarchy in the form of the de facto *One Party Planet* referenced in an earlier comment.

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Section 8

The OWG underscored that the global nature of climate change calls for the widest possible cooperation by all countries and their participation in an effective and appropriate international response, with a view to accelerating the reduction of global greenhouse gas emissions. It recalled that the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change provides that parties should protect the climate system for the benefit of present and future generations of humankind on the basis of equity and in accordance with their common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities. It noted with grave concern the significant gap between the aggregate effect of mitigation pledges by parties in terms of global annual emissions of greenhouse gases by 2020 and aggregate emission pathways consistent with having a likely chance of holding the increase in global average temperature below 2° C, or 1.5° C above pre-industrial levels and it reaffirmed that the ultimate objective under the UNFCCC is to stabilize greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere at a level that would prevent dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system.

Commentary

The framing of everything *in* this paragraph is good. Emphasis is given to cooperation, intergenerational equity, a strong commitment to a global response to climate disruption.

Problematic is *what's missing*—namely the absence of comment on corporations, which are now irrefutably the most powerful instruments of government on Earth. Calling on *all countries* to participate without acknowledging where real power resides is one way that the political neutering of global governance is achieved. The frame of *national sovereignty* conceals the much more nuanced picture of networked financial assets that are coordinated through a nested shell system of corporate structures—enabling things like the tax haven system and cross-cultural propaganda efforts that shape social norms at scales of regional markets.

That said, it is real progress that climate change appears here. We need to acknowledge that this has been a hard-won battle and continue building momentum in this direction.

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> **Section 9**
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> Planet Earth and its ecosystems are our home and that "Mother Earth" is a common expression in a number of countries and regions, and Rio+20 noted that some countries recognize the rights of nature in the context of the promotion of sustainable development. Rio+20 affirmed the conviction that in order to achieve a just balance among the economic, social and environmental needs of present and future generations, it is necessary to promote harmony with nature. It acknowledged the natural and cultural diversity of the world, and recognized that all cultures and civilizations can contribute to sustainable development.

Commentary

The *planetary thinking* and language of Earth as our home are very helpful frames. As is the recognition that nature has inherent rights. This contradicts the *natural resource* frame mentioned above, showing that these goals have inherent tensions where some of the thinking has progressed beyond Neoliberal thinking.

In these areas, we should elevate and commend the thinking that is in the right place. One of the powerful ways that frame analysis can help is by making clear how these contradictory frames work. In this case, it is the contrast (or choice point) between (1) treating nature as external to the economy that can be commodified to generate monetary value; and (2) treating nature as inherently valuable and something from which the economy arises as part of larger ecological webs of energy exchange.

The frame of *balance* between economic, social, and environmental needs is one of holism and systemic thinking. It is a welcome frame in the SDG discussion. Growing the prominence of this *ecological, complex systems understanding* should be a major objective for improving upon the current SDG framework. As should emphasis on replacing the wealth extraction system in place today that creates poverty, inequality, and environmental damage as core features of the way it has been designed to function.

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Section 10

Rio+20 recognized that each country faces specific challenges to achieve sustainable development. It underscored the special challenges facing the most vulnerable countries and, in particular, African countries, least developed countries, landlocked developing countries and small island developing States, as well as the specific challenges facing the middle-income countries. Countries in situations of conflict also need special attention.

Commentary

The pernicious and problematic frame here is the *Nation as Developing Person* metaphor that places all countries on a continuum from less developed to more developed—with the moral exemplar being those countries with the most "advanced" economies based on measures of monetary wealth and economic growth (GDP).

Unquestioned in this framing is the topic we have revealed in the question **Who's developing who here?**[8] Those countries that are "less developed" could be reframed as "more pillaged" and those that are "more developed" are countries that have "reaped the benefits of pillage." This story of wealth extraction—through colonialism in early history and more recently in structural adjustment programs, land grabs, privatization schemes associated with austerity, etc.—is glaringly absent in this frame construction.

This is especially bothersome considering that these wealth extraction activities are *what causes poverty!* No framework that takes seriously the goal of reaching planetary-scale sustainability would leave out the root causes of the problem. The absence of deep structural considerations of economic power is why the SDGs are doomed to fail, as can be seen clearly here where the exemplars of good behavior are those countries where the rules-of-play are extractive, selfish, wealth hoarding behaviors. A sustainable world would not be built on these social norms. Indeed, it cannot be built that way.

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[8] http://therules.org/campaign/inequality-video/

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Rio+20 reaffirmed the commitment to strengthen international cooperation to address the persistent challenges related to sustainable development for all, in particular in developing countries. In this regard, it reaffirmed the need to achieve economic stability, sustained economic growth, the promotion of social equity and the protection of the environment, while enhancing gender equality, women's empowerment and equal employment for all, and the protection, survival and development of children to their full potential, including through education.

Commentary

The key frames in this passage are *sustained economic growth* that goes unquestioned throughout and *promotion of social equity* that challenges the wealth hoarding tendency of "development as usual." This tension is unresolved because there is no deep structural critique of the development agenda in the SDG framework.

The *human development* framework comes up as the way of conceptualizing how a society increases well-being and human security—through mechanisms that promote gender equality, women's empowerment, employment opportunities, and protection of children. What does not come up here is the way that speculative finance creates debt bubbles that transfer massive amounts of wealth into private hands in the form of national debt servitude. This is what austerity policies do to the social programs that depend on government funding and progressive taxation.

Again it is the mechanisms of wealth extraction (which create the conditions of desperation where human security is forfeit) that does not arise in the framing of the issues.

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Commentary

This passage begins with the frame of *national sovereignty* that has been used as both a tool of hegemony (e.g. The United States on the UN Security Council and exclusive veto power in World Bank governance.) and as a divide-and-conquer strategy (e.g. pit nations against each other in a race to the bottom through "free trade" agreements). As such, it retains a fatal design element that keeps the world from truly moving toward sustainability.

Note the absence of commentary on *debt relations*—how the developed and developing countries are mired in webs of private and national debt, orchestrated to serve corporate interests that deliver money to those who invest in them at large scales. These layers of corporate structure and investment networks of people (using trade agreements and other economic mechanisms) are removed from discussion by not being mentioned.

This is another example of self-inflicted political neutering. It is as if the explosion of protest movements and new political parties never happened. The critiques of the global financial system brought forth by Occupy Wall Street, protesters in Tahrir Square, the Indignados of Spain, the Syriza Party in Greece, and a long list of other social justice groups are nowhere to be seen in the SDG framework. Recall from Section 1 that the language of *the world we want* was used to set the stage, yet nowhere are the frustrations and proposed solutions

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from grassroots movements reflected in a coherent development agenda that moves beyond Neoliberalism.

Section 13

Rio+20 reaffirmed that there are different approaches, visions, models and tools available to each country, in accordance with its national circumstances and priorities, to achieve sustainable development in its three dimensions which is our overarching goal.

Commentary

This is a framing of *agility, diversity and experimentation*. As such it supports innovation and solution-making at local and regional scales. It opens up the possibility for bioregionalism, relocalization, and other kinds of decentralized solutions that operate at the ecological scale.

This demonstrates an element of robust ecological thinking that is nice to see in the SDG framework. It must contend with the conceptual dissonance of how these local to regional efforts push against the use of national sovereignty to divide and conquer in a world of globalized trade. Still, it is very nice to see here.

Section 14

The implementation of sustainable development goals will depend on a global partnership for sustainable development with the active engagement of governments, as well as civil society, the private sector, and the United Nations system. A robust mechanism of implementation review will be essential for the success of the SDGs. The General Assembly, the ECOSOC system and the High Level Political Forum will play a key role in this regard.

Commentary

This framing of *global partnership* is either the key to our salvation or the road to serfdom, depending on the underlying rules of politics and power. If the various sectors of the world

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came together to address sustainability issues, it would be the road to salvation. If it continued the development agenda of Neoliberalism, it would be the road to serfdom.[9]

I will reiterate, because it is so important, that the absence of any commentary about the root causes of poverty or wealth hoarding makes this whole process nothing more than rhetoric. By remaining in the default mode of development-as-Neoliberalism (without questioning it at all), we will not see the SDGs contribute meaningfully to a transition away from over-consumption, financial destabilization, chronic inequality, or a host of other massive problems it presumes to address.

Section 15

Rio+20 reiterated the commitment to take further effective measures and actions, in conformity with international law, to remove the obstacles to the full realization of the right of self-determination of peoples living under colonial and foreign occupation, which continue to adversely affect their economic and social development as well as their environment, are in-compatible with the dignity and worth of the human person and must be combated and eliminated.

Commentary

On a positive note, the elevation of the *worth of the human person* is a sign that people are more important than corporations. Yet at the same time, this prioritization of individualism is a core tenet of Neoliberalism and as such should be recognized as the Trojan Horse that it is.

The same can be said for the phrase *self-determination* that is a Western construction of rugged individualism applied at various conceptual levels to individual people, societies, countries and economies. Applying this concept to the world at large is a continuation of post-colonial thinking that—while not necessarily being a bad thing in the long run—is certainly something that should be debated more vigorously to unpack its many nuances.

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[9] Readers of economic history will see the rich irony of this statement—for it was Friedrich Hayek, author of *The Road to Serfdom*, who coined the term "neoliberalism" in fear of exactly this kind of totalitarian state that his followers brought into being throughout the late 20th Century.

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Also the phrase *conformity with international law* does not challenge those existing legal structures that support development-as-usual. Structural debt relations, trade agreements, a system of tax evasion, etc. are all part of the existing web of international laws that both undermine global governance and interact as a complex adaptive system in shaping how national, regional, and global economies function.

Section 16

Rio+20 reaffirmed that, in accordance with the Charter, this shall not be construed as authorizing or encouraging any action against the territorial integrity or political independence of any State. It resolved to take further effective measures and actions, in conformity with international law, to remove obstacles and constraints, strengthen support and meet the special needs of people living in areas affected by complex humanitarian emergencies and in areas affected by terrorism.

Commentary

The frame of *national sovereignty* joins the frame of *self-determination* here in mutual support of Neoliberal concepts. Conjoined with the challenges of humanitarian aid during times of crisis, this makes for a very complicated situation. How will these issues be untangled? What are the protocols for giving priority to sovereign actors at different levels of policy implementation and rapid-response action?

Our concern here—from a frame analysis point-of-view—is that the only clearly articulated concepts are part of the moral philosophy for Neoliberalism, which is also the default mode of thinking for development-as-usual. As such, we cannot see any evidence of a substantial shift from the past trajectory for global change that the SDGs are meant to address.

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> **Section 17**
>
> In order to monitor the implementation of the SDGs, it will be important to improve the availability of and access to data and statistics disaggregated by income, gender, age, race, ethnicity, migratory status, disability, geographic location and other characteristics relevant in national contexts to support the support the monitoring of the implementation of the SDGs. There is a need to take urgent steps to improve the quality, coverage and availability of disaggregated data to ensure that no one is left behind.

Commentary

Gathering and utilizing data seems like a slam dunk. And from a scientific point of view, I believe it is. It fits into the frames of *remote sensing* and *data-supported decisions* which are about empirical integrity and quality intelligence that guides decision making.

What is left ambiguous is the topic of *data sovereignty* or *data commons*—who owns the data? Is it principally created and gathered to support profit-generating activities of private companies? Or is it open source and owned collectively by the people of the world? Questions like these are increasingly important in our technologically advanced civilization.

I bring this up because so much of the framing throughout the SDGs implicitly accept (or actively promote) the Neoliberal ideologies of privatization, self-interest, and profit-maximization. Left unconsidered and uncritically accepted, we again default into a climate where companies like Monsanto can introduce terminator seeds and sue farmers when the wind carries them onto their land. Property rights are a fundamental component of economic development that are not framed pro-actively in the SDG framework.

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Section 18

Sustainable Development Goals are accompanied by targets and will be further elaborated through indicators focused on measurable outcomes. They are action oriented, global in nature and universally applicable. They take into account different national realities, capacities and levels of development and respect national policies and priorities. They build on the foundation laid by the MDGs, seek to complete the unfinished business of the MDGs, and respond to new challenges. These goals constitute an integrated, indivisible set of global priorities for sustainable development. Targets are defined as aspirational global targets, with each government setting its own national targets guided by the global level of ambition but taking into account national circumstances. The goals and targets integrate economic, social and environmental aspects and recognize their interlinkages in achieving sustainable development in all its dimensions.

Commentary

The discussion of metrics is a very important one. Is GDP finally going to be laid to rest? With the goals implicitly (and overtly) promoting *unfettered growth*, GDP remains one of the top-priority metrics. This goes against much critical analysis of the last 70 years and ignores the huge and growing body of research in ecological economics, public health research, and related fields that all point out how GDP is both inadequate and harmful as a metric for progress.

The phrase *levels of development* appears again in this passage—applying a uniform set of normative standards for what is "good development" that all countries must conform to. This is a subtle way that the Neoliberal agenda sneaks through by implying that the moral exemplars (e.g. Western industrialized nations) are what all countries should aspire to be.

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Drawing Conclusions

At this point it should be clear why I am not confident in the SDG framework as a viable tool for addressing chronic problems in the global economy. It lacks the deep structural critique of prior development patterns that would be necessary for crafting system-level solutions to mass poverty, wealth inequality, ecological decline, and the myriad other related challenges humanity must confront in the 21st Century.

Looking at this in a positive light, we can also see that structural critiques already exist and a great deal is known about poverty creation, the behavior of complex social systems, and where gaps reside in current thinking—all of which point toward an alternative approach that could be viable. What this analysis shows is that *an essential missing piece has been an assessment of the patterns of human thought that give rise to the way we conceptualize the issues*. Had a frame analysis been done on the SDG process itself, these limitations would have popped up very quickly where they could be dealt with early on.

Herein lies the hope for our collective future. When we know—in detail and with clear insight—what the key misconceptions are, it becomes possible to design a process that is built on solid theoretical ground. In other words, the SDG process could be done differently with insights that:

- ✦ **Focus on the mechanisms of wealth extraction** that create poverty and inequality around the world;

- ✦ **Clarify the role of ideology in setting development agendas** so an honest, open conversation can take place across the international community about what we want the development agenda to be;

- ✦ **Resolve conflicts about the way nature is treated** to remove confusion about whether the economy is part of the environment (which it is) and how we should value its inherent worth;

- ✦ **Deeply critique the concept of progress, in particular the myopic focus on economic growth**, to ensure that sustainability thinking truly is reflected in the vision put forth for creating a better world;

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- ✦ **Bring politics to the center of the discussion** to identify where power resides and how it should be managed. Otherwise the process will be nothing more than an exercise in futility;
- ✦ **Actively deliberate about what "good development" looks like** instead of defaulting into the standard reference point of debt-laden, chronically unequal societies built on mass consumption economies. This is probably not the best we can do—and is obviously at odds with the mission to achieve sustainability worldwide.

In other words, we need to "radicalize" the conversation by going to the roots of these wicked problems and rethinking how we understand them. Structural problems require structural solutions—or as we say at **TheRules.org**, if you want to create a better world you'll have to change the rules for how we work and play together.

Right now the rules are set up to extract wealth and hoard it in the hands of a tiny elite. This is why 93 cents of every dollar in economic growth has gone to the top 1% since the financial collapse of 2009.[10] It is why 85 individuals have the same aggregate wealth as 3.5 billion.[11] It is why our ecological footprint exceeds the carrying capacity for the Earth.[12] It is why we have crossed (or will soon cross) several planetary boundaries essential for our survival.[13] It is why mass poverty exists and the world is so unequal. Only when we recognize that these are logical outcomes of a system designed for wealth hoarding will we be capable of redesigning the system to achieve a state of shared prosperity and planetary thriving.

I frame this as a design challenge because the criteria for a *designed solution* are readily articulated. All we have to do is look at economic history to see what has worked and what hasn't. The key design criteria are (1) take a whole system approach to the problem (and use tools from complexity science to study it); (2) note the importance of functioning

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[10] http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2012-10-02/top-1-got-93-of-income-growth-as-rich-poor-gap-widened

[11] http://www.forbes.com/sites/laurashin/2014/01/23/the-85-richest-people-in-the-world-have-as-much-wealth-as-the-3-5-billion-poorest/

[12] http://www.footprintnetwork.org/en/index.php/GFN/page/world_footprint/

[13] http://www.washingtonpost.com/national/health-science/scientists-human-activity-has-pushed-earth-beyond-four-of-nine-planetary-boundaries/2015/01/15/f52b61b6-9b5e-11e4-a7ee-526210d665b4_story.html

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democracies for countering the efforts of elites to shape policies for their own gain that harm society writ large; (3) recognize that a circulatory approach is needed to redistribute wealth through dynamic feedbacks of progressive taxation and investments in physical and social infrastructure; and (4) transcend false or incomplete dichotomies like nature vs economy, private vs public, and rich vs poor to better see how the integrated system operates politically and economically.

While this list is not exhaustive, I hope it will be illustrative. There are leaders who have shaped public policies in the past that led to a strong middle class and functioning social democracies. A great deal is now known about ecological function and planetary dynamics that can inform how we redesign our urban landscapes, support regenerative agriculture, safeguard the world ocean, and preserve the life-giving relationships we depend upon with our nonhuman kin. And—as this report clearly shows—the tools of cognitive science are "shovel ready" for use in the design process to help us think about our internal perceptions and beliefs. We will need these insights about ourselves if we are to move our newly globalized civilization into a configuration of planetary sustainability and shared prosperity.

Where Might We Go From Here?

This report began with the hope that it might give rise to a viable alternative to the SDG framework as it currently stands. It is probably too late to influence what the SDG declaration becomes—considering that it is already several years along in formation and will soon come to a close. That was never the intention anyway. The elite institutions of the world have their agenda and it is constrained to produce what it is capable of. We really can't expect it to do anything more.

What we *can* do is expect more from ourselves moving forward from here. The SDG process is a brief moment on a long journey toward sustainability. I critique it not because I dislike what they've done but rather because I know we can do so much better. Indeed, I have received insider accounts from colleagues working on the SDGs that they too believe it could be more than it currently is. These people are friends and allies that we hope to support with our unique position in the landscape. Our organization is not beholden to elite funders and can speak truth to power. Thus we have a responsibility to do so with a combination of humility and veracity.

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I may have failed on both counts, though I have earnestly tried to speak from a place of service to things larger than myself. It is in this spirit that I offer what I believe to be the appropriate next step, which is that we engage our peers in this conversation and get to the root issues together.

From here we can see that some of the frames used by the SDGs are very good. They should be promoted and celebrated as the progress they represent. Other frames are problematic or simply unclear. They warrant discussion and debate. You can participate by sharing this report with your colleagues. Invite them to talk openly about it wherever they are able—if not in their professional roles at the organizations they serve, then informally among their friends and confidants.

Let us know if this kind of analysis is helpful. As one of the few active practitioners of frame analysis, I know how uncommon this approach currently is. What other topics should we apply this research tool kit to and reveal important assumptions for open debate? How can we extend what we have done here to assist you in your work to help bring about a more socially just and sustainable world?

There are literally millions of us working on these problems now. We are legion and our numbers grow with each passing year. I merely hope that, in my small way, I have contributed something useful to the ongoing efforts you all work within as we go about this important work together.

In service,

Joe Brewer
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TheRules.org

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