

# Geographic perspectives on development goals: Constructive engagements and critical perspectives on the MDGs and the SDGs

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## Abstract

The successes and failures of the UN Millennium Development Goals and the establishment of a new set of Sustainable Development Goals provide many opportunities for geographic engagement and critical attention. Development goals, in their focus at the national level and on measurable indicators, redirect investment and frame views of the world. They are often difficult to measure and implement and sometimes contradictory. In reviewing the history, progress, and critiques of the UN goals, this article asks what a geographic perspective shares and adds to the debates about development, its measurement, and impact.

## Keywords

critical geography, development, Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

## Introduction

Why a dialogue on development goals in geography? Comparisons between countries and places are characteristic of geographic inquiry and policy analysis, often expressed in socioeconomic and environmental indicators that purport to measure progress, well-being, sustainability, and the condition of ‘development’. With roots in the colonial enterprise to exploit natural resources and ‘civilize’ non-Western cultures, the idea of development has been associated with a modernizing project that measures progress primarily in terms of economic growth, and secondly as improvements in literacy, health, and living conditions (Kothari, 2006).

In its first World Development Report in 1978, the World Bank highlighted absolute poverty as a continuing problem despite progress in incomes, education, nutrition, and health, and reported a set of national development indicators that included production and trade, demography, health, and education (World Bank, 1978). The World Bank and many other international organizations now regularly report the state of development—mostly at the country level based on information provided by

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member nations. These development data pervade publications and teaching and are used by the media and politicians to claim comparative success or progress, failure or decline. Geography has been a partner and a critic of the idea and measurement of development—collecting and analyzing data, challenging assumptions and measures of progress, and curating texts and maps that show different aspects of development and environment around the world (Blaikie, 2000; Dorling et al., 2008; Hart, 2001; Seager, 2009; Slater, 1974; Watts, 1984). Yet some observe that geography and geographers are rarely seen as major contributors to the general theories and practices of development, despite their concern and distinctive skills (Bebbington, 2002; Peck and Sheppard, 2010).

A renewed and expanded vision of development emerged when, in 2000, the United Nations Millennium Declaration called for the elimination of poverty and hunger as well as improvements in health, education, and gender equity (United Nations General Assembly, 2000). Progress toward the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) would be measured using national-level development indicators from 1990 to 2015 and against targets that included halving the proportions of people in poverty or who are undernourished. Assessing the MDGs in 2015, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon claimed

The global mobilization behind the Millennium Development Goals has produced the most successful anti-poverty movement in history. The landmark commitment entered into by world leaders in the year 2000—to spare no effort to free our fellow men, women and children from the abject and dehumanizing conditions of extreme poverty—was translated into an inspiring framework of eight goals and, then, into wide-ranging practical steps that have enabled people across the world to improve their lives and their future prospects. The MDGs helped to lift more than one billion people out of extreme poverty, to make inroads against hunger, to enable more girls to attend school than ever before and to protect our planet. They generated new and innovative partnerships, galvanized public opinion and showed the immense value of setting ambitious goals. By putting people and their immediate needs

at the forefront, the MDGs reshaped decision-making in developed and developing countries alike. (United Nations, 2015b: 3)

This article seeks to open up a conversation about goal-driven development among geographers and to consider what we might add to the debates and practices about the purpose, nature, and impacts of development goals. I argue that while it is certainly true that the MDGs reshaped development decision-making, the effects are more perverse, and their success is more contested and uneven than their champions suggest. While the goals are associated with some improvements in incomes, health, and access to food and water, they are also flawed in the selection of targets, the accuracy of measurement, and the aggregation of data and classification of countries. The MDGs significantly reoriented the activities and discourses of donors, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and developing countries. They produced new forms of governmentality and biopolitics aligned with processes of neoliberalism, such as a focus on public–private partnerships, quantitative outcome measures, solutions through markets, and individual rather than collective strategies (Death and Gabay, 2015; Harvey, 2007; Liverman and Vilas, 2006). In the second part of this article, I address the question of potential geographic contributions to debates over development goals. As the United Nations declares partial success in achieving the MDGs and moves forward with a new set of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), what might geography have to say about the potential and pitfalls of setting such development goals? Can we constructively engage with the post-2015 development agenda and the SDGs in ways that are progressive and meaningful? And what does constructive engagement imply for our everyday scholarship, service, and outreach?

## The MDGs

The MDGs were proposed in association with the United Nations Millennium Declaration and Summit in 2000. They were adopted by 189 member states and more than 20 international organizations, including the World Bank and World Health and

Food and Agriculture Organizations. Eight goals were established, focused on human capital (measured in terms of nutrition, health, and education), infrastructure (access to water, energy, and IT), and human rights (empowering women, increasing voice and access). Each goal had specific targets for improving conditions in the developing world, from a baseline of 1990 by 2015, for a total of 21 targets measured by 60 official indicators. The goals set out to

1. eradicate extreme poverty and hunger—targets include halving the proportion of people living in poverty and suffering from hunger;
2. achieve universal primary education;
3. promote gender equality and empower women—targets include eliminating gender disparity in education, employment, and political representation;
4. reduce child mortality—target of reducing child mortality rate by two-thirds;
5. improve maternal health—targets to reduce maternal mortality ratio by 75%, universal access to contraception;
6. combat HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases—halt and reverse spread of HIV/AIDS and incidence of malaria;
7. ensure environmental sustainability—reduce biodiversity loss and carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) emissions, halve proportion of people with access to improved water and sanitation; and
8. develop a global partnership for development—debt relief for least developed countries, increase development assistance, and access to information technology.

The MDGs were developed by UN agencies in the context of the financial crisis, the end of the Cold War, and growing opposition to globalization and international economic institutions (McArthur, 2014). UN Secretary Kofi Annan saw an opportunity to reinvigorate the development agenda, producing the March 2000 ‘We the Peoples’ report that argued for ‘eliminating poverty everywhere’. A series of UN conferences during the 1990s on specific topics (education, environment, children, women, food) had generated a series of

recommendations and targets. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) synthesized these into a set of international development goals that could motivate donors, but the initial goals were criticized by global civil society, were contested among various international agencies, and lacked buy in from developing countries. A slightly more consultative process was used to draft text for the September 2000 UN Millennium Summit (the Millennium Declaration) and the subsequent road map report that formalized the set of goals and targets at the global and national scales.

A pivotal decision was the selection of a 1990 baseline, and 2015 end point, for the targets. McArthur suggests that the choice of 1990 mirrored the baselines used in the topical conferences in the 1990s, addressed the lack of up-to-date 2000 data available at the time of the Millennium Summit, and was a better fit to historical trends making it easier for countries to achieve at least some of the targets (McArthur, 2014). Critics suggest that the 1990 baseline was a way to weaken the goals and to cynically ensure rapid progress in reaching the goals—especially because 1990 preceded rapid growth in incomes in China and the improvements in access to water, health care, and education in many regions (Fukuda-Parr et al., 2013; Vandemoortele, 2011b). Thus, the commitment to the MDG targets was made after much progress had already been made.

The value of a concise set of goals, with a modest set of targets, is that they can be easily communicated to the public and policy makers (Vandemoortele, 2011b). Supporters and critics alike recognized this, even as they suggested that key issues had been omitted or that an even smaller list would have provided greater focus (Fukuda-Parr et al., 2014). Apparently, a decision was made to only include targets with agreed upon indicators and robust data—one of the reasons that human rights, or issues such as participation and equality, do not appear clearly in the MDGs (Vandemoortele, 2011b).

### **Progress and successes in achieving the MDGs**

The date for achieving most of the MDG targets was the end of 2015. Although data are not fully

**Table 1.** Progress on selected Millennium Development Goals (United Nations, 2015b).

Goal	Target	1990	2015
Extreme poverty (>US\$1.25 per day)	Halve— Reduce to 23.5%	47%	14%
Undernourished people	Halve— Reduce to 11.65%	23.3%	12.9%
Achieve universal primary education	100%	80%	91%
Under-5 child mortality	Reduce by two-thirds to 30/1000	90	43
Maternal mortality	Reduce by 75% to 107.5	430	230
Access to improved drinking water	Halve those without in developing countries (85%)	70%	89%
Access to improved sanitation	Halve those without in developing countries (71.5%)	43%	62%
External debt as percentage export revenue	Zero	12% (2000)	3% (2013)

available for some targets and countries, victory has been declared on many of the goals and considerable progress on others (Table 1). Of the targets, the greatest successes were the halving of poverty and increasing access to improved drinking water. Improvements are reported as especially striking in Asia and Latin America—poverty fell by 84% in SE Asia and by 66% in Latin America and the Caribbean. Hunger dropped from 31% to 10% in SE Asia and from 14% to less than 5% in Latin America. Sub-Saharan Africa started from a more challenging base and did not reach many of the goals: poverty declined from 57% to 41% and hunger from

33% to 23%. For this region, the most significant changes were a decline in under-5 mortality from 179/1000 to 86/1000, an increase in access to improved drinking water from 48% to 68%, and a 50% reduction in HIV/AIDS numbers of new infections.

These statistics that show significant progress in eliminating poverty and hunger, and in the status of women and living conditions, are often a surprise to those who perceive a growing toll from disaster and disease, increased degradation of the environment, and serious damage to livelihoods from neoliberalism.

### Critical perspectives on the MDGs

There is a large critical literature on the MDGs ranging from technical criticism of data sources, variable choices, and scale of analysis, to overarching objections to the ways in which the MDGs were used to reorient development thinking and funding, create and govern neoliberal subjects, and undermine local priorities. There have been several large collaborative efforts that take critical perspectives on the MDGs, including the ‘Power of Numbers’ project based at the New School (Fukuda-Parr et al., 2014) and a collective study on the MDGs and human rights (Langford et al., 2013).

Many of the critical arguments connect to geographic approaches and concerns, yet geographers are rarely authors of, or cited in, the critical literature on development goals. Exceptions include Jones and Chant (2009) who question the dominance of the MDGs and global solutions in the poverty reduction strategy papers for Gambia and Ghana and Bond (2006) who provides a powerful, but brief, critique of the MDGs as nontransparent, neoliberal, and a distraction from social struggles for basic needs and democracy. Mawdsley’s sustained attention to development paradigms includes several discussions of the MDGs (Mawdsley, 2007, 2015), including a recent call for critical development geographers to be at the ‘forefront of theorizing the ‘post-2015’ era (Mawdsley, 2017).

In the next section of the article, I summarize some of the prevalent criticisms of the MDGs.

### *The MDG-reoriented development*

The MDGs, some suggest, have biased development investments toward the measurable targets. This has led to changes in policy and behavior, and changes in ideas, that produce lower priorities for programs that do not relate to the MDGs and to fragmentation of policies that should be interconnected and multi-sectoral (Fukuda-Parr, 2014). This reorientation has occurred in multinational development agencies, national government donors and recipients, and many NGOs (Davis, 2011). Among the goals or targets, those focused on water and sanitation, child mortality, maternal health, and HIV/AIDS have become a major focus of attention and investment, although this may be also a result of factors—including activism, donor preferences, and government policies—other than the MDGs. For example, the target of reducing the debt of the poorest countries (Goal 8) was well underway by 2000 as a result of movements such as Make Poverty History, the Jubilee movement, private sector decisions, and G8 summits (Hulme, 2010).

### *The MDGs legitimized neoliberal processes and governmentalities*

Many critical geographers have engaged with the debate over neoliberalism and the new ways of governing environmental issues and subjects. Political ecologists, for example, have identified privatization, the undoing of environmental regulation, the dispossession of land and resources, and the commodification and marketing of nature as processes of neoliberalism (Castree, 2008; McAfee and Shapiro, 2010; Springer, 2012). While some conform to the more deterministic approach of Harvey's critiques (Harvey, 2007), others focus more on neoliberal environmental governmentalities inspired by Foucault (Barnett, 2005; Watts, 2003). Others see value in combining insights from Marx, Gramsci, and Foucault to understand the ways in which political economy and discourse can explain the practices, attitudes, and policies that produce approaches to environment and development that emphasize markets, surveillance, public-private partnerships,

and the responsibility of individual citizens (Barnett, 2010; Bulkeley, 2009; Springer, 2012).

Informed by critical theories associated with Foucault and Marx, scholars have assessed the MDGs in terms of governmentality, biopolitics, and political economy. Fukuda-Parr et al. (2014) argue that in linking social objectives to concrete outcomes, the MDGs involve a 'transformation that reifies intangible phenomena, simplifies complex concepts, and abstracts social change from local contexts'. They conclude that 'goal setting is a poor methodology for elaborating an international agenda' (2014: 11). The focus on goals, targets, and outcomes is seen as emerging from the shift to development that is top down, competitive, results based, and narrowly focused on what can be counted (Davis, 2011). Following Foucault, the goals are seen as techniques and rationalities of governmentality that measure lives, bodies, and spaces by creating categories of persons and managing them through social engineering of money and policies to meet the targets. Death and Gabay identify the MDGs as 'an ambitious and hegemonic attempt to rearticulate the development project and produce entrepreneurial subjects' (2015: 598). This biopolitics defines people as poor, women, slum dwellers, students, or workers—where progress is defined through higher incomes, urban services, education level, or equity—and not through the multiple identities of individuals, their collective actions, or the many other aspects of well-being and rights.

Ilcan and Phillips (2010) call the development discourses associated with the MDGs 'developmentalities', which rely on information profiling, responsabilization, and knowledge networks supported by calculative practices. Because, they argue, the MDGs assign human beings as statistical referents to their national territories or social group, and place them into arbitrary classifications, the MDGs create new imaginaries of regions and groups and divert resources from practical actions to the collection of statistics (Ilcan and Phillips (2010)). The MDG governmentalities also construct certain individuals and groups as those best prepared (or most responsible) for advancing development goals, including women farmers, urban managers, millennium villagers, and private sector partners.

Other contributions from critical development theory take a political economy perspective (e.g. Amin, 2006; Bond, 2006; Pogge and Sengupta, 2015; Saith, 2006) arguing that the goals could not be met within a capitalist global economy where people are being systematically dispossessed of their land, entitlements, and jobs in the interests of capital, specifically through neoliberal policies of free trade, less government, and privatization. To quote, ‘The MDGs are part of a series of discourses that are intended to legitimize the policies and practices implemented by the dominant capital and those who support it’ (Amin, 2006: 6). Rather than address the structural basis of poverty, hunger, and inequality with roots in colonialism, the MDGs made developing countries responsible for addressing these problems, with a nod to the role of debt relief and aid in helping to meet the goals. Gore (2010) and Hulme (2010) see the MDGs as the consequence of the neoliberal accountability of ‘results-based management’ that has come to dominate development with an emphasis on goals, targets, and indicators that are specific, measurable, agreed, realistic, and time-limited.

And the MDGs can be seen as a strategy of survival, legitimacy, and accumulation by the UN agencies and their NGO clients. The MDGs were designed to give new urgency to development investments (Hulme, 2010), which include funds for the UN agencies, NGOs, and other organizations (including universities). To the extent these organizations are associated with the success of the MDGs, they gain legitimacy and support from national governments and provide sense of achievement for those who work in international development.

### *The targets for poverty and hunger were arbitrary*

Target 1a, which had a target of halving poverty, has been singled out by critics who note that the choice of measure—the percentage of the population living on less than US\$1 a day—created a number of problems and a false success. For example, by choosing to half the proportion, rather than the absolute numbers, of people in severe poverty, the goal was made

easier to reach (Pogge, 2004). A proportional target was also easier to achieve in countries with a smaller proportion of poor people or with a large population. It is a lot easier to cut poverty from 6% to 3% in Costa Rica than from 80% to 40% in Nigeria, in terms of the needed investment and policy results. MDG 1 also set a less ambitious target than even the UN agencies had proposed at conferences prior to the setting of the MDG targets.

Critics challenged the selection of less than US\$1.25 a day—US\$1 prior to 1999—as the criteria for extreme poverty, arguing that widespread deprivation occurs at higher income levels such as US\$5–US\$15 a day (Gore, 2010) and that the MDG criteria undercounts the experience of those who are extremely poor. Pogge (2004) showed that using US\$2.50 a day as the break point could easily erase signs of progress. He shows that at US\$1 a day, poverty fell from 1481 million to 1092 million from 1981 to 2001, whereas at US\$2 a day it increased by 285 m. In Sub-Saharan Africa, poverty at US\$1.25 fell from 25% to 16% but at US\$2.50 a day, poverty increased from 386 million to 610 million. He also notes that millions of people live just above the poverty line with little qualitative difference in their experience of deprivation compared to those below it and that the World Bank changed the methods for measuring poverty using a different base for purchasing power parity in the later MDG period.

Changes in the proportion of people living on less than US\$1.25 a day are also a very limited measure of what it means to be poor. More relevant, critics suggest, would be a multidimensional measure of poverty that includes poor health, lack of education, and disempowerment or as defined by the poor themselves in particular places (Alkire, 2007; Bahadur et al., 2015; Lemanski, 2016). One of the main criticisms of the MDGs is that they should also have considered material and relative inequality, which increased in many countries over the time period (Saith, 2006).

The hunger target (Goal 1c) suffers many of the same problems as the poverty target in terms of the choice of measure and its biases. Both the number and the proportion of undernourished people (i.e. people eating less than 1200 calories per day needed for sedentary work) declined over the MDG

time period. The proportional measure for hunger showed a drop from 23.3% to 12.9%—a halving of hunger by this measure—and almost met the target of 11.65%. However, the number of hungry only fell by 21% to 780 million (rather than a 50% drop to 495.5 million). Pogge (2004) shows how increasing food prices in recent years made it even less likely that the poor could obtain adequate food and that those living active lifestyles would be hungry even at 1200 calories per day. And even more shockingly, he demonstrates that the hunger indicators were aligned with the World Bank adjustment in measuring poverty, such that the proportion of the hungry suddenly increased by 19% in 1990 and decreased by 6% in 2010, making success in reaching the target even more likely. In selecting targets only for minimal calorie consumption and child weight for age ratios, the MDGs neglected many other important (and regularly reported by FAO) dimensions of food security including prices, access, and key aspects of nutrition (Fukuda-Parr and Orr, 2014).

### *Lack of attention to human rights*

Although the United Nations was paying increasing attention to human rights at the time the MDGs were elaborated, the goals paid less attention to rights than many had hoped for (Langford et al., 2013). Although rights had been articulated for food, work, education, gender, and health at UN conferences, these were not included in the MDGs. Darrow (2012) identifies a series of problems with the lack of human rights goals and targets in the MDGs. He notes that authoritarian and oppressive regimes could report progress while continuing to ignore human rights. One of the greatest violations of rights under the MDGs may be of those occupants of informal settlements who were removed in efforts to meet MDG 7d: ‘By 2020 to have achieved a significant improvement in the lives of at least of 100 m people slum dwellers’. The indicator selected was the proportion of urban populations living in slums and only set out to reduce the proportion by 9%—a lesser ambition than most other goals. The apparent success of reducing the proportion of slum dwellers from 39% to 30% from 2000 to 2014 is partly a result of government efforts to eliminate slums

through forcible displacement of their residents and violation of their rights (Huchzermeyer, 2013). A goal focused on slums, rather than on the political economy and biopolitics that create and define them, ignored the political economies of land tenure, prices, land grabs, and discrimination that has forced millions into precarious urban homes and livelihoods (Di Muzio, 2008). Human rights are also seen to underpin the goals for hunger and water—because access to food and clean water can be seen as a human right. Critics felt that affordability and quality should have been included in the drinking water goal (Darrow, 2012).

### *Inadequate representation of gender*

While initially seen as a victory for women’s rights, MDG 3 (to promote gender equality and empower women) has a very limited view of gender equality and empowerment, with targets that include eliminating gender disparity in education (measured by enrollment ratios), providing access to paid employment (share of women in wage employment), and women’s political representation (proportion of seats held in parliaments) (Kabeer, 2005). Nothing is said about the quality of education, equity in earnings, or legal rights for women (Yamin and Boulanger, 2014). As Kabeer argues, the indicators can show progress but also have downsides:

Women’s access to paid work may give them a greater sense of self-reliance and greater purchasing power, but if it is undertaken in conditions that erode their health and exploit their labour, its costs may outweigh its benefits. Women’s presence in the governance structures of society clearly carries the potential to change unjust practices, but if the women in question are drawn from a narrow elite, if they have been invited rather than elected, and if they have no grassroots constituency to represent and answer to, their presence will be only a token. (Kabeer, 2013: 24)

Only one of the 13 recommendations of the 1995 Beijing conference on women is addressed in the targets and indicators (Sen and Mukherjee, 2014), causing Antrobus (2005) to call them the ‘Major Distracting Gimmicks’. While MDG 5 focused on improving maternal health, this is only measured in

terms of maternal mortality (5a) and access to reproductive health care during pregnancy. Some suggest that the influence of the Vatican, US evangelical Christians, and conservative Islamic states removed broader sexual and reproductive rights from the MDGs (Berer, 2012; Hulme, 2010).

### *Insufficient attention to environment*

The MDG 7—ensuring environmental sustainability—included only four targets to cover the enormous breadth of environmental challenges to development. Target 7a—integrate principles of sustainable development into country policies and reverse loss of environmental resources—was very vague and is measured in terms of forest loss, CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, and ozone depleting substances. MDG 7 includes one of the most spectacular failures of all MDGs. The target of reversing climate change instead saw a global increase of greenhouse gas emissions of 50% from 21 million metric tons in 1990 to 33 million metric tons in 2012, with emissions in developing regions more than tripling in magnitude (Fukuda-Parr et al., 2013; Janetos et al., 2012). Target 7b—a significant reduction in biodiversity loss—is also poorly defined with the quantitative measure in terms of only the percentage of terrestrial protected areas. While the area of land protected in the developing world increased from 8.4% in 1990 to 15.7% in 2014, this did not stem the loss of biodiversity (Butchart et al., 2010; Chape et al., 2005).

Target 7c—halve the proportion of the population without sustainable access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation—is more precise, although the measure that is reported is limited to access to ‘improved’ water or sanitation, where improved is defined as water that is contained from outside contamination, available within 1 km of the household. Among the criticisms of the drinking water and sanitation targets are that they do not focus on key components of access such as affordability and reliability (Langford and Winkler, 2014). Although piped water extended to 1.9 billion people, with less fecal pollution, other aspects of water quality (such as arsenic or other chemical contamination) were not addressed. Water is often only

available for a few hours each day, required considerable time to collect, and, as a result of water privatization or full cost charging, many people could not afford to pay for their improved water (Dar and Khan, 2011).

### *Problems of attribution*

While the United Nations and others proposed causal links between the establishment of the MDGs and progress on key development indicators (e.g. McArthur, 2013), it is very difficult to attribute global or national improvements to the internationally agreed goals (Cimadamore et al., 2016; Kanie and Biermann, 2017). Although some development institutions did use the MDGs in targeting and evaluating projects (Davis, 2011), there is little evidence that setting a goal was linked to outcomes on the ground (Fukuda-Parr et al., 2013). Many other factors have been identified as reasons for success including reductions in conflict in key regions such as Africa and SE Asia, philanthropic investments in health by institutions such as the Gates Foundation, the rise of democratic governments under pressure to reduce poverty in regions such as Latin America, and the globalization of trade and communications to the benefit of the developing world (McArthur and Rasmussen, 2017).

## **A geographical perspective on the MDGs**

Geographical perspectives are consistent with many of these criticisms, despite the lack of focused attention on the MDGs. Political economy, biopolitics, and governmentality have been used by geographers to critique the neoliberal development project—unpacking not only the structures and discourses of development but also how development and neoliberalism produce nature and patterns across space. For example, critical geographers have shown how biopolitics constructs people as poor or hungry and sheds light on the everyday experiences of precarity and deprivation as embodied in individuals’ relationships to space, place, and nature (Elwood et al., 2016; Loftus, 2015; Nally, 2015; Rose-Redwood, 2006; Waite, 2009). The critical geography journal,



*Antipode*, published a powerful analysis of the politics of the MDGs (Ilcan and Phillips, 2010), showing how the UN employs the rationalities of neoliberal governance—information profiling, responsabilization, and knowledge networks—to shape subjectivities and create ‘developmentalities’ using calculative practices. For example, the Millennium Villages Project suggests populations can escape poverty through identifying their problems and choosing from available options, lists of stakeholders from NGOs and businesses are enrolled in achieving the goals, and decentralization is seen as the key to success (Ilcan and Phillips, 2010).

But geography may have missed a simpler opportunity for constructive critique of the MDGs. Geography has useful perspectives on the arbitrariness of thresholds in the use of indicators, including those that demonstrate the ways in which the selection of map classes can control interpretation or how the way a forest is defined can influence its management (Crampton, 2011; Robbins, 2001). We also understand the problems of aggregated data and the false imaginaries created by dividing countries into developed and developing.

Most reports of progress on the MDGs focused on progress at the global or regional scale. At the global level, aggregation produced a greater sense of progress as millions of people emerged out of poverty and hunger in China and India and gained access to improved water, changing overall global averages. A ‘tyranny of averages’ overlooks equity and variation within nations for reasons of data availability (Vandemoortele, 2011a).

It is important to note that the MDGs only focused on the so-called developing world—defined as Northern and Sub-Saharan Africa; Latin America and the Caribbean; the Caucasus and Central Asia; Eastern, Southern, Southeast, and Western Asia; and the Pacific Islands. The developed world was excluded (Australia and New Zealand, the United States and Canada, Japan, Eastern and Western Europe, and Russia). Even at the beginning of the MDG period, this classification was breaking down as Mexico and South Korea joined the OECD club of higher income countries. By 2015, new groupings and terms had emerged including

the ‘advanced’ or ‘emerging’ economies and middle-income or newly industrializing countries, often including Brazil, Korea, and Mexico. The decision to set the MDGs only for the developing countries let the developed countries off the hook for the deep pockets of poverty and deprivation within their own countries and entrenched a division between the north as the benevolent provider of assistance and the south as the disciplined subject (Mawdsley, 2015).

The regional aggregations also created a narrative of rapid progress in Asia and Latin America and of failure in Sub-Saharan Africa. Within each of these regions, there are countries like Vietnam or Brazil or Ghana that showed great progress on poverty, hunger, or water goals, and other countries like Central African Republic and Madagascar that made little progress or regressed on key goals. The regional aggregation probably does the most damage to Africa (Easterly, 2009)—where the region and its countries is narrated as failing on most of the goals—reflecting what Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie calls the ‘danger of a single story’ about Africa (Adichie, 2009).

The most pervasive distortion associated with aggregation is the lack of attention to variation within countries. In Ghana, for example, overall poverty decreased (measured in the percentage of people living on less than US\$1.25 a day) dramatically from 49.4% in 1993 to 22% in 2012, over the MDG challenge period. But local level poverty (measured as the percentage living under 1413 GHC based on the Ghana Living Standards Survey) varied from 5.6% in Accra to more than 70% in the Upper West region of Ghana, with even greater variation at the district level (Ghana Statistical Service, 2014). And, of course, these indicators vary between households and within households and between urban and rural areas.

The MDGs conform to the UN convention of reporting by, and on, recognized member nations at the level of the nation. This obscures and erases some of the most impoverished and oppressed peoples on the planet—indigenous nations who have no official representation within the states that bound them or within the UN except as observers with NGO status—and for whom development indicators do not exist or are resisted (Watene and Yap, 2015).

For example, in the United States, American Indian poverty and hunger rates are far higher than those of other groups in society.

Geographers are very familiar with these problems of data aggregation and the hidden geographies of suffering. We recognize pitfalls of the ‘ecological fallacy’—where group data are used to make inferences about individuals—in which average poor performance data for Africa or a country construct a place or individual as conforming to that average. We also understand the way in which the choice of arbitrary, modifiable, and socially constructed spatial boundaries—such as census districts—influences the results of statistical analyses that aggregate point or local data into larger regions. When goals, and progress to reaching them, are based on aggregated geographic data, there are considerable risks of bias and misinterpretation (Openshaw, 1984). Critical GIS scholars understand that the choice of variables, scales, indices, and visuals has significant implications for what is prioritized, invisible, and biased, but also the power of spatial analysis to inform debates about social and environmental justice (Elwood, 2008; Sheppard, 2005). Having missed some of the opportunities to inform the debates on the MDGs, geographers could engage more actively with the newly established SDGs.

## The SDGs

On September 12, 2015, at the UN General Assembly, countries adopted a new set of goals to ‘end poverty, protect the planet, and ensure prosperity for all’ (United Nations, 2015a). The 17 ‘SDGs’ are much broader and more ambitious than the MDGs, with 169 targets, most to be reached within 15 years by 2030. They are also supposed to apply to all countries, not just those in the developing world. There is continuity with the MDGs with goals of poverty reduction, health, and education. But there are many more goals with an environmental focus. Seen as an integration of the people-centered MDGs with the planet-centered Rio+20 declaration, the SDGs are a core of the ‘Post 2015 Development Agenda’ centered on people, planet, prosperity, and partnership.

The 17 goals are to

1. end poverty in all its forms everywhere;
2. end hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture;
3. ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages;
4. ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all;
5. achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls;
6. ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all;
7. ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable, and modern energy for all;
8. promote sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all;
9. build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization, and foster innovation;
10. reduce inequality within and among countries;
11. make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable;
12. ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns;
13. take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts (taking note of agreements made by the UNFCCC forum);
14. conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas, and marine resources for sustainable development;
15. protect, restore, and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification and halt and reverse land degradation, and halt biodiversity loss;
16. promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all, and build effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions at all levels; and
17. strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development.

The process was apparently more inclusive than for the MDGs, with a large consultation process of thematic and national conversations, as well as door-to-door surveys and an open working group with representatives from 70 countries (Death and Gabay, 2015). Critical discussion on the SDGs is only just starting to emerge among scholars and development practitioners—with most indicators for the 169 targets not yet defined. The preliminary set of indicators totaled a mind-blowing 300 measures (Hák et al., 2016).

## Criticism of the SDGs

### Complexity

Criticisms of the SDGs so far focus, in particular, on the large number of goals and targets, which are viewed as too complex to communicate to the public or drive policy, and too ambitious, universal, and absolute to be successful (Langford, 2016). For example, the Economist termed them the ‘Stupid Development Goals’ and the ‘169 commandments’—so sprawling and misconceived that they are doomed to failure (Economist, 2015). Perhaps, the Economist speculates, NGOs and national governments think that the more goals and targets the more money for development. Others suggest the goals and targets are too narrow and directed to allow for local variation and creativity, and are a distraction from a core goal of eliminating poverty.

The expansion in the number of goals and targets, especially as the indicators are developed for measuring progress toward targets, will add even more calculation, monitoring, and quantification to the process of evaluating development and its biopolitical processes (McMichael, 2017). This is evident in the many calls to take advantage of new technologies—remote sensing, social media, big data analysis—for creating social and environmental indicators (Jerven, 2017; Kharrazi et al., 2016; Ryerson and Haack, 2016). This can result in overly narrow assessments that again redirect policy toward quantifiable outcomes rather than broader but harder to measure social needs.

### Contradictions

Other critics focus on the contradictory nature of many of the goals, suggesting that the growth goals cannot be met without sacrificing many of the environmental ones or that sustainability cannot be achieved under the current economic model of capitalism (Hickel, 2015a). As Sexsmith and McMichael argue, SDG efforts to reconcile economic development and environmental protection may produce a ‘Faustian bargain’ where environment is subordinated to the ‘economism of development thinking’ (2015: 16). The SDGs, argue Fletcher and Rammelt, assume a ‘fantasy’ of decoupling resource consumption from human well-being, in which simultaneously achieving growth, protecting the environment, and reducing inequality face overwhelming challenges (Fletcher and Rammelt, 2016). For example, SDG 8—seeking decent work for all and sustained economic growth—includes a target of 7% growth in gross domestic product per year in least developed countries, partly driven by export expansion. Decoupling this growth from increasing environmental impacts will be difficult. As Hickel argues, the SDGs seek to reduce inequality through income growth for the bottom 40%, but without touching or redistributing the incomes of the top 1% and without degrading the environment (Hickel, 2015b). But this postcolonial perspective is hard to reconcile with goals that focus on the individual, trade, and green growth.

Another contradiction is that the SDGs take for granted the need for the World Bank and IMF structural adjustment programs and the spread of free trade—policies that many argue deepened poverty for millions and degraded the environment. Goal 17—revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development—actually includes a target (17.10) that promotes universal open trading systems under World Trade Organization, thereby increasing exports from developing countries.

The SDG targets are rife with poorly defined but widely used terms such as sustainable, resilience, and modern. The goal of being ‘sustainable’ is mentioned in 10 of the 17 goals without clear definition, and resilient is a goal in 2 of them. We have been debating the definition of sustainability for decades,

it has become widely used, and yet there is still no consensus on how to measure it (Camacho, 2015; Hugé et al., 2013; Liverman et al., 1988). Geographers have engaged critically with the rush to resilience as concept and catchphrase, arguing that it lacks attention to power, agency, differing values, and inequality and justifies neoliberal ideologies of community self-reliance (Cannon and Müller-Mahn, 2010; Cote and Nightingale, 2012; Cretney, 2014).

### Positive reactions to the SDGs

More positive views include those who see more progressive, and even radical, opportunities possible within the SDGs. Hajer and colleagues (2015) are enthusiastic about the transformative potential of the SDGs, if they involve the full range of societal actors. Death and Gabay (2015) see value in the way the SDGs remove the division between developed and developing countries, thus recognizing the universality of poverty and the processes that create it. They appreciate the global call for reductions in inequality and the push for strong sustainability based on some alternative development paths. Death and Gabay (2015) also see positive parallels with the radical Latin American discourse of ‘*buen vivir*’ (living well) that draws on indigenous worldviews to highlight harmony, community, environment, and culture.

Some NGOs have endorsed the SDGs. Rosche (2016) explains why Oxfam decided to participate constructively in consultations on the SDG goals on gender and to try and influence the goals, targets, and indicators. Oxfam developed a strategy to bring women’s rights into the SDGs, including the elimination of violence against women and addressing the unpaid burden of care. They joined with other NGOs to push for a stand-alone goal, meeting with UN agencies and governments as well as the UN High-Level Panel and the Open Working Group charged with developing the SDGs. She sees great progress in the acceptance of a stand-alone gender goal—Goal 5 to ‘achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls’—that includes commitments to end discrimination, eliminate violence, value unpaid care and domestic work, promote

women’s participation and leadership, and ensure access to reproductive health and rights. She also argues that the SDG’s overarching principle of ‘Leave No-one Behind’ is a win for women and that it implies an intersectional approach that requires that disaggregated social data—including sex, age—will be assessed for all goals and targets. Others celebrate the sensitivity to gender and equity in the SDGs but question the overall lack of attention to the structural causes of gender poverty and discrimination such as macroeconomic policies focused on growth and free trade rather than social support and fair employment (Bidegain Ponte and Enriquez, 2016; Esquivel, 2016; Fukuda-Parr, 2016; Razavi, 2016).

### Environment in the SDGs

Many of the SDGs focus directly on the environment, including biodiversity and ecosystems, climate change, and oceans, and others focus on the main forces driving environmental degradation including energy and water use, food production, consumption, and urbanization. Climate change has been identified as the one stress that could undermine the other environmental goals, as well as those on poverty or health (Ansuategi et al., 2015; Campagnolo and Davide, 2017; Reckien et al., 2017; Wright et al., 2015). How well do the SDGs address the climate challenge?

Goal 13 is to take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts and has five targets that include strengthening resilience and adaptive capacity to climate-related hazards and natural disasters, integrating climate change measures into national policies, strategies and planning, improving education, awareness raising and human and institutional capacity, implementing climate finance for the developing countries of US\$100 billion annually by 2020, and promoting mechanisms for raising capacity for effective climate change-related planning and management in least developed countries and Small Island Developing States, including focusing on women, youth, and local and marginalized communities. Goal 13 was heavily influenced by the prospects of a climate agreement under the UNFCCC and by the anticipated findings of the

2013 IPCC reports. The targets include recognition of several concerns of critical scholars and activists working on climate—such as additional financing for climate adaptation and capacity building for least developed countries, small islands, women, youth, and marginalized communities.

But they also include targets that are going to be very difficult to measure in a meaningful way. For example, we continue to disagree about how to measure resilience and adaptive capacity, what the actual costs of responding to climate change may be, and whether ‘raising capacity’ can be converted into the recognition of the rights, loss and damage, and vulnerability of countries, women, children, and other groups.

The US\$100 billion funding for developing country mitigation and adaptation was a back of the envelope calculation that did not take account of the problems of costing nonmarket impacts, the reports that requested up to US\$300 billion a year for adaptation alone or the relabeling of development assistance to appear to contribute without additional funding (Liverman and Billett, 2010).

Commitments to ‘building capacity’ can be seen as a very vague statement that distracts from the real material needs and rights of the most vulnerable (Archer and Dodman, 2015). The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) lists capacity building as including ‘strengthening relevant institutions, including focal points and national coordinating bodies and organizations, and strengthening climate change communication, education, training and public awareness’. Capacity building often involves highly paid consultants and training, rather than understanding of local needs and supporting serious responses to them. And assessments of capacity building often only focus on the number of people trained or attending workshops rather than substantial measures of progress.

## **Conclusion**

I have suggested that geographers have, for the most part, ignored or evaded discussion of development goals in their full technical, material, discursive and political dimensions. Our engagement with

development debates is longstanding and critical, but few development geographers (with important exceptions) engage directly with either the international institutions or NGOs. This may be partly a result of our focus on the case study and complex identities of places and people that leads us away from analysis at the scale of the United Nations and large regions (Bebbington, 2002). Many geographers have a healthy skepticism about statistics and aggregations that provide inadequate representations of lives and landscapes, or are unwilling to engage with the debates over facts and knowledge in a post-truth society.

Geographers are well positioned to contribute to the discussion of the post-2015 development agenda and some have begun to engage. For example, Herrick (2014) calls for health geographers to engage with SDG 4 which seeks to ensure healthy lives through reducing the burden of HIV/AIDS, TB, malaria, tropical diseases, and the noncommunicable diseases of cancer, cardiac disease, diabetes, and respiratory disease. She sees opportunities for geographers to connect health goals to urban political ecology, to examine the links between global health funding and local suffering, to map the industrial epidemics associated with tobacco, alcohol, and diet, and to disaggregate by place and sector. Barnett and Parnell (Barnett and Parnell, 2016) discuss how SDG 11 on sustainable cities will require careful theoretical research, monitoring, and evaluation that recognize the diversity of city experiences and needs and the dynamic relationships and contingencies between places, global processes, and dispersed outcomes. Kaika warns that the new urban agenda reflected in the SDGs relies on techno-managerial solutions and ecological modernist thinking that did not work for urban citizens and environments (Kaika, 2017).

What are some of the possibilities for geographic scholarship and active engagement? We can work within the system by recommending indicators, methods, and strategies for assessing and supporting progress toward the SDGs. We can sustain and expand the criticisms of the problems with nation-based, quantitative, contradictory, development indicators. We can offer our nuanced understanding of scale, statistics, and spatial analysis and our

ability to connect social and environmental conditions. We can bring our training in critical theory and political ecology to more progressive visions of development that pay more attention to nature, labor, gender, multiple identities, and bodies. We can become politically active in resistance and protest against damaging development or run for political office to change the system from within. We can propose alternative development visions that take account of local, subaltern and indigenous voices and agency, reassert the significance of social protections, and admit the inevitable trade-offs and contradictions between growth and environment.

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# An(Other) geographical critique of development and SDGs

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## Abstract

Geographers should engage with development and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by utilizing not only the theoretical and methodological tools from our various subfields but also through advocacy, expanding the role of public intellectuals and holding institutions and people to account. If we want emancipatory politics and transformations in development, we need to challenge and improve what is done in the name of SDGs, keeping central the issues of social justice and ethical engagement. This is perhaps the most critical thing geographers can undertake going forward in order to dismantle the master's current house.

## Keywords

critical geography, development, politics, postcolonial, SDG

Development is a tricky business. It has been presented for several decades as an inherently good thing by international institutions, non-government organizations (NGOs), governments, and many citizens, who promote purported luxuries and privileges that development is supposed to bestow. Despite abundant criticism of the meaning, mechanisms, policies, projects, and impacts of development on Other bodies, spaces, and ecologies, the trenchant discourses and practices of development continue, with the word 'development' essentially remaining without 'any positive opposing or distinguishing term' (Williams, 1976: 76). Development strategies and projects have been tweaked over time and development is regularly reinvented discursively while remaining intractably more of the same methodologically and epistemologically.<sup>1</sup> The latest reincarnation of development took place in 2015 with the introduction of the Sustainable

Development Goals (SDGs), which replaced the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) that had guided development the prior 15 years. Diana Liverman's article 'Geographic Perspectives on Development Goals: Constructive Engagements and Critical Perspectives on the MDGs and the SDGs' offers an important critique and intervention and invites geographers to engage more forcefully with development. My comments here are offered in a general spirit of solidarity with Liverman, as I further analyze development and the SDGs and discuss how geographers have and could engage with development. I draw insights from my experience of being a critical

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geographer who has worked inside a large international development institution, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and dealt with the promises, pitfalls, and contradictions of development indicators and goals (see Sultana, 2014). I also write as a geographer from the postcolonial world who has been a subject of development.

Liverman makes a call to arms for geographers to engage with international development institutions, practices and policies, and then outlines some of the ways that geographic perspectives can add to ongoing debates. Critiquing the shortcoming of the MDGs (between 2000 and 2015) and potential failures of the new SDGs (between 2015 and 2030), Liverman encourages critical geographers to ‘contribute to the discussion’ from both within (by recommending tools, methods, strategies, indicators) and from outside (through critique, dialogue, and activism). Liverman thus encourages geographers, in whatever ways possible (that we each configure individually and collectively), to pursue mechanisms that enable geographers to showcase our unique interdisciplinary skills in theory and method by engaging more directly with public policy. Some geographers have already done so (including Liverman herself) through their work with international organizations in a variety of ways, such as being program staff, consultants, researchers, collaborators, and evaluators (see Simon and Carr, 2014).<sup>2</sup> Liverman argues that we need to engage more with the SDGs and global development institutions, especially drawing upon long-standing critiques by development geographers, political ecologies, as well as critical geographical insights from all the subfields of geography. Geographers can thus better inform what is being done in the name of development.

But how geographers more broadly can work on development remains the challenge. The impact we can have, despite our engagement, is generally relatively small in the grand scheme of things, often gradual and frustrated, or even ignored (Carr and Simon, 2014). While many geographers may want to engage, critique, and be heard, these are not necessarily the outcomes of our engagement. This is due to a variety of reasons in my opinion, such as development institutions being largely unresponsive

to critique, slow to change, generally resistant to reflexivity, require sustained engagement (which many scholars are unable to do given other academic obligations), and development has historically been dominated by economists and the quantification of life. Perhaps all this actually makes the case for more critical geographical insights to be internalized and taken on board, but the neoliberal governmentality at the heart of much of development is possibly antithetical to critical geographical epistemologies, methodologies, and insights. Moreover, academic responsibilities make it increasingly difficult for any critical mass of scholars to have sustained engagement with development institutions to have significant impact from within.

While extensive transformation of development by geographers is unlikely and an improbable goal, there are other ways to contribute. Geographers are already constructively engaging with international policies and projects through attention to a variety of topics, such as analysis of scale, political economy, critical social theoretical insights, complexities of places and peoples, linking the impacts of colonialism and imperialism to development, deconstructing reductionist discourses of vulnerability and resilience, advancing understandings of climate change and climate justice, and providing nuanced qualitative data and critical observations. Liverman identifies some of these aspects of geographical contributions, as well as the importance of demonstrating the fallacy of relying heavily on quantifiable indicators, measurements, and aggregation, which the SDG suffers from, albeit less than the MDGs. Indeed, one of the aspects of the SDGs (in comparison with the MDGs), from the perspective of its proponents, is that the SDGs avoid the oversimplification, quantitative-driven, and simplistic goals of the MDGs. However, the 17 goals and dozens of targets are fuzzy, ambitious, often unimplementable and contradictory, and perhaps even hubristic. While the SDGs are supposed to be aspirational, they’re open to interpretation, capture, and subject to abuse by those with power. Also, the SDGs are supposed to be transformative, but exactly how that may be is still unknown. Indeed, the SDGs can be considered to be post-political, that is, a polite consensus and celebration

without any real change. While supporters can point to the progressive possibilities in the vision of the SDGs, we will not know until they are implemented and the outcomes, both intended and unintended, are evident. This is particularly so for the complexities of impacts that are experienced along intersectional social categories such as class, race, gender, as well as ecological impacts. Furthermore, given that SDGs are supposed to apply to both the global North and global South (whereas the MDGs applied only to the global South), it is difficult to imagine how policies, institutions, and processes can be influenced at the very heart of empire.

Liverman's paper showcases how indicators and goals remain controversial with respect to not just definition but also measurability and outcome. One example I can give of the problematic ways indicators and metrics are used in development is from the mismatch between national indicators and local indicators for water and sanitation targets that are supposed to have 'equitable access to safe and affordable drinking water'. First, local data are often not collected, or are not collected properly, are frequently inaccurate, and also expensive to collect. Second, the 'what' that needs to be known is also conflictual, since current indicators generally rely on quantifiable data of whether someone has a water source nearby. This does not account for issues of reliability, availability, accessibility (rights, restrictions, social challenges), the costs involved, multiplicity of water sources used, distance to each source (physical, social, and emotional), as well as the gendered nature of water collection around the world (O'Reilly et al., 2009). The hassles, stress, suffering, and sometimes violence that women and girls face every day in procuring clean safe water for their households are difficult to measure in a metric that looks at specific quantifiers to measure coverage (Sultana, 2011). Thus, while the MDGs early on claimed that great accomplishments had been made on improving sources of drinking water, the claims were not fully true—it did not measure what it wasn't aware of or looking for, that is, illegible to its gaze. But building off of this purported success on drinking water in the MDGs, the SDGs initially risked paying less attention to water or the human right to water (which the UN ratified in 2010), and only through enormous

concerted pushback by academics, civil society, and communities around the globe did the reaffirmation of the human right to water and sanitation find coverage in the SDGs at all (becoming Goal 6 of 17). However, what this all means in implementation remains to be seen, especially given the increasing privatization of water and lobbying by corporations for commodifying water, and the alliances forming between development organizations and private water corporations. These will likely result in increasing dispossession of water for the poor and issues of affordability, accessibility, quality, and reliability become more fraught globally (Sultana and Loftus, 2012).

Another critique of the SDGs, one that is not elaborated upon in Liverman's paper, is the choice of terminology of 'sustainable development' (SD henceforth) at the heart of this new international framework of titled SDGs. 'Sustainable development' has been very contested, conflictual, and contradictory in definition and reality since its uptake in the 1980s (Redclift, 2005). Why this very term was chosen to define this 15-year initiative made me wary from the time they were announced. Given that critiques of SD have been extensive, many from geographers, and should be known by now to power brokers and higher-ups, it is indeed strange that such a term was chosen at all. SD can mean anything to anybody. Ergo, are we to take it that the SDGs are also something that will mean simultaneously anything and nothing, a warm fuzzy term that holds no real critical content, a greenwashing of yet another international set of agendas? Is choosing SDGs a wink to expect a lot more of the same vagueness and buzzwords as was generated from SD itself? While the stated goals and targets are meant to be the parameters of SDGs, they may suffer the same fate as SD. At some level, as Liverman points out, highlighting the importance of the environment and climate change is an important addition in the new framework and thus they fall under the vague purview of SD and its cousin sustainability (another contested term). However, given that the rhetorical and discursive shift does not take into account the existing critiques of SD, it is worthwhile tracing these critiques from geographers and other scholars

critically so that better alternative visions of development may be envisioned.

Another point I want to raise is about power. International development, aid monies, and all development goals are effectively about power. Thus, deconstructing and demonstrating the ways power relations operate, the kinds of powers that exist, and asking questions of what, who, why, and where, become critical in assessing these large international interventions that impact peoples and places. Development monies, policies, and projects will be modified in the pursuit of these goals, whether they are preset or to be determined, and thus these discourses and prescriptions play important roles in the ways societies will be impacted for quite some time. As a scholar of and from the developing world, these are important to me both professionally and personally, as development is enacted on Othered peoples like mine around the world. Structural power and neoliberal ideologies are glossed over in the SDGs and are being promoted in controversial ways already in developing countries. There is thus conflict between ‘business as usual’ or status quo and the discursively idealistic anticipated goals in the SDGs. This is particularly poignant, given the existing trends of structural adjustment programs, rapacious capitalism, enforcement of neoliberal free trade treaties in unequal relationships, increased push for commercialization and privatization, and concomitant socioecological destruction wreaking havoc around the world. Desiring better social and environmental outcomes without addressing structural problems, power imbalances, and ideological biases is very problematic about the SDGs. The growing inequalities and inequities around the world should be more central in any critique of the SDGs. As the famous Black feminist scholar Audre Lorde once said, ‘the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house’ (Lorde, 1984: 112). In other words, we can’t advance social justice and ethical change without challenging systemic oppression, power relations, and exploitation. Thus, if we want emancipatory politics and transformation, we need to do something differently and develop new tools beyond the SDGs. This is perhaps the most critical thing geographers can undertake going forward.

In conclusion, Liverman encourages geographers to engage with development by utilizing the insights and tools from our various subfields, such as political ecology, feminist geography, and development geography. Beyond identifiable theoretical and methodological contributions by geographers, I also think there is importance in engaged scholarship and advocacy, of expanding the role of public intellectuals, and of holding institutions and people to account. This is not easy work, rather it is challenging and exhausting. Furthermore, these activities are neither valued in academia nor generally rewarded, thus making it more difficult for academics to engage in long-term meaningful and impactful work (as restrictions come from promotion and tenure rules, value rubrics, metricized mania, and general neoliberalization of academia). Thus, we need to reassess what it means for us to be ‘engaged’ scholars, and what kind of impact we hope for (whether achievable or not). We must also question what ‘meaningful’ engagements look like, as we can publish scholarship that might never get read or have traction, or engage with stakeholders and institutions without precipitating any real change. Nonetheless, I agree that we need to engage critically and constructively, however we can. Too much is at stake to not do so. If the SDGs are truly to be useful and have transformative potential, then we must be part of that conversation too, and develop new tools to dismantle the master’s house.

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### **Notes**


1. There is considerable scholarship debating the complexities and problématique of development from both proponents and critics so I will refrain from reproducing those here.

2. These issues are discussed in greater depth by various scholars who have worked in and with development institutions in a special issue edited by development geographers David Simon and Ed Carr (2014).

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# ‘From billions to trillions’: Financing the SDGs in a world ‘beyond aid’

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## Abstract

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) require and are helping normalize a radical shift in development finance. The previous focus on raising donor contributions in the form of Official Development Assistance (ODA, or ‘foreign aid’) is being surpassed by the call for private finance to fund the SDGs. A growing role for ODA in this vision of moving from ‘billions to trillions’ is to leverage investment from business, venture capital, sovereign wealth funds and other non-state sources. In this commentary, I argue that any analysis of the SDGs must be attentive to the possibilities and risks of the emerging development finance regime that they are helping legitimate.

## Keywords

blended finance, foreign aid, private sector, Sustainable Development Goals

In August 2017, Achim Steiner, the recently appointed Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) addressed a conference I attended in Bergen, Norway (the European Association of Development Institutions). As the United Nations’ leading development institution, the UNDP will play a particularly important role in pursuing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Steiner was candid about some of the shortcomings of the SDGs and all the more persuasive for that. His request to the large audience of international development academics and practitioners was that we critically, actively engage with the SDGs – whatever their faults, he argued, nothing better is going to come along. Steiner would welcome Diana Liverman’s article, which while certainly critical, nonetheless makes a strong case for more attention and constructive engagement with the SDGs.

Liverman’s article is extremely wide-ranging and touches on a very broad spectrum of issues and concerns about the MDGs and SDGs. In this commentary, I will pick up on one area that marks a key change between the MDGs and SDGs, but which only gets a mention in this otherwise capacious paper, namely financing. Accompanying the SDG process – their formulation, launch and current operationalization – has been a parallel set of multi-stakeholder meetings and debates over how to finance these hugely ambitious global goals, particularly in poorer countries. The slogan making the

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rounds is ‘from billions to trillions’. Various forms of public and private finance were rallied for the Millennium Development Goals (2000–2015), notably at the 2002 Monterrey Financing for Development conference. But the pre-eminent form of financing for the MDGs, and thus attendant pressures and politics, was of and around Official Development Assistance (ODA) or ‘foreign aid’ (including debt relief). A variety of MDG-related donor meetings sought to encourage the (so-called) ‘traditional’ donors to reach their long-standing commitments to provide 0.7% of gross national income in ODA. Few donors have ever met this target, and it seems most unlikely that the majority ever will under current definitions. As the SDGs coalesced, on the other hand, their ambition and scale evidently rendered this 0.7% target grossly inadequate. ODA continues to be recognized as an important resource, especially for the poorest and/or most conflict-affected countries, but even if every donor met the 0.7% target it would barely touch the trillions that have been variously estimated to be required to achieve the SDGs. In her article, Liverman notes that for Goal 13 alone (urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts), an estimated US\$100 billion is needed annually by 2020; while Schmidt-Traub (2015) calculates that an extra US\$1.4 trillion a year is necessary to pursue all 17 goals in the low- and lower middle-income countries alone.

Various sources of SDG finance are under discussion, such as raising levels of domestic resource mobilization. Combatting tax evasion and limiting capital flight, for example, were discussed at the 2015 UN Summit on Financing for Development at Addis Ababa, but this failed to produce an international tax body, or indeed, to bring any new money to the table. Rather, the energy lies with the private sector, and here the debates and initiatives around financing the SDGs are stimulating, deepening and consolidating existing trends that are centring the private sector within international development. Private sector representatives are being invited to drive and shape global development governance and policy by the United Nations and other multilaterals (e.g. Mader, 2016), and national development agencies (e.g. Mawdsley, 2015).

Despite referencing small and medium enterprises, and crumbs here and there, private sector voices are dominantly those from transnational corporations and the finance sector. Development institutions are increasingly seeking partnerships with venture capital, hedge funds, investment banks, sovereign wealth funds, credit rating agencies, global accountancy firms and corporations which are themselves increasingly governed by financial logics (Krippner, 2011), to open up new circuits of financial investment, speculation and extraction. The background against which this is happening is a shift away from the MDG’s focus on direct *poverty reduction*, however problematic that was, towards the central analytic of *economic growth*.

The logic runs that given the staggering amounts required to meet the investment gap, particularly but not only in poorer countries, the role of ODA and other forms of public finance should be to ‘unlock’, ‘catalyse’ and ‘leverage’ much larger flows of private finance for ‘development’. Donors are increasingly deploying the concept of ‘blended finance’ and expanding their use of financial instruments like debt and equity finance for public–private partnerships (PPPs). Donors now actively promote one role as ‘de-risking investment’ through various guarantees and finance deals. Carroll and Jarvis (2014) argue that public money is being used to ‘escort international capital into frontier and emerging markets’ in the name of development. The United Nations, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), Bretton Woods Institutions and their private sector partners all talk the language of sustainable growth ultimately serving poverty reduction – for example, of aligning the global financial system with ‘long-term’ perspectives (when examined, ‘long term’ can be as short as 1 year for many major investors); of building green economies and infrastructure; with labour (supposedly) protected by renewed commitments to corporate social responsibility.

Liverman observes that

[r]ather than address the structural basis of poverty, hunger and inequality with roots in colonialism, the MDGs made developing countries responsible for

addressing these problems, with a nod to the role of debt relief and aid in helping to meet the goals (p. 173).

Her observations on the SDG's 'business model' give a sense of the much more deeply integrated, post-political alignment, being projected between business, finance, development and sustainability. As she says:

Sexsmith and McMichael argue, SDG efforts to reconcile economic development and environmental protection may produce a 'Faustian bargain' where environment is subordinated to the 'economism of development thinking (2015, p16). The SDGs, argue Fletcher Rammelt, assume a 'fantasy' of decoupling resource consumption from human wellbeing, in which simultaneously achieving growth, protecting the environment, and reducing inequality face overwhelming challenges (Fletcher and Rammelt, 2016). . . . As Hickel argues, the SDGs seek to reduce inequality through income growth for the bottom 40%, but without touching or redistributing the incomes of the top 1%, and without degrading the environment. But this postcolonial perspective is hard to reconcile with goals that focus on the individual, trade, and green growth. . . . Another contradiction is that the SDGs take for granted the need for the World Bank and IMF structural adjustment programs and the spread of free trade – policies that many argue deepened poverty for millions and degraded the environment. Goal 17 – revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development – actually includes a target (17.10) that promotes universal open trading systems under WTO and increasing exports from development countries.

The trend from the narrow construct of 'ODA' to broader category of 'development finance' is not solely about the SDGs, but the SDG framework provides a normalizing narrative and, through the United Nations and other development organizations, the institutional interfaces for deepening state-private capital hybrid formations.

This latest iteration of neo-liberal development – in which the imperatives of finance play a more prominent role than in earlier Washington and post-Washington Consensus ideologies and interventions – is expected to provide resources to scale, innovation, efficiency and energy. The focus on

infrastructure, land and digital financial technologies (Gabor and Brooks, 2017) is presented as an essential driver of growth, which will trickle down into poverty reduction. The growing turn to state-supported development financing is not new, but it is certainly entering a different scale and phase. Donors and the mainstream international development community (now arguably including Brazil, China and India) are reorienting their narratives and practices to continue to serve capital, now in a qualitatively different conjuncture. The 'work' of the 1980s and 1990s (privatization, land titling, deregulation, dismantling capital controls and otherwise enhancing the free movement of capital) in the global North and the global South (the latter being donor assisted/driven) has led to vast over-accumulation of international capital, supercharged by booms and busts (the 1997 Asian financial crisis, the 2001 dot-com bubble and the 2007/2008 global financial crisis, to name the larger ones). The 'financing for development' agenda provides a legitimating veneer to the development industry's current 'work' to create investment opportunities in 'frontier' economies. In their analysis of the latest wave of donor-supported PPPs, for example, Van Waeyenberge and Bayliss (2017: 578) suggest

While earlier drives for privatisation in donor advocacy formally highlighted the potential efficiency gains deriving from increased private sector involvement in public service provision, the more recent wave of PPP advocacy is anchored almost entirely in arguments seeking to match a glut in global savings with the need to upscale public service provision in developing countries. This has created an increasingly financialised approach to infrastructure, as policy is framed in terms of investment opportunities for financial investors and institutional arrangements bearing on infrastructure provision are reconfigured to facilitate their entry into the sector.

For its many mainstream advocates – the United Nations, bilateral development agencies, philanthropic foundations and private sector partners – this is entirely desirable. Greater 'financial inclusion' for individuals and communities and financial sector deepening for low- and middle-income countries are all framed as unalloyed

improvements. A Kenyan woman can now transfer money to a distant relative or trading partner in the blink of an eye through M-Pesa; while at the other end of the spectrum, blended finance from northern and southern partners is leading to a surge of infrastructure building around the world. New instruments, like development impact bonds and weather index-based insurance, are deepening financial logics in development narratives, institutional functioning, programmatic interventions and stakeholder subjectivities. Not all of these claims can or should be lightly dismissed. But critical scholars are raising a host of concerns (e.g. Brooks, 2016). Out of what is an increasingly rich and detailed literature, two are very briefly mentioned here.

The first concerns complexity, accountability and transparency. Efforts to monitor these flows of public money into private sector and financial partnerships, by academics and civil society watchdogs, are increasingly hampered by commercial privacy barriers. For example, an increasingly large share of bilateral ODA is being routed through national development finance institutions, which are tasked with supplying investment to the private sector to support development in poor- and middle-income countries. This can be in the form of loans, equity investments, risk guarantee instruments and so on. Unlike more 'traditional' uses of ODA, these flows now 'leveraging' or 'catalysing' private sector investment can be hidden behind the layers of commercial privacy, or in some cases, routed through highly secretive tax havens.<sup>1</sup> Even ODA is going to become more difficult to record and follow. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development -Development Assistance Committee (OECD-DAC) has been leading dialogue among its members around 'modernizing ODA'. While some desirable reforms appear to be emerging, it is evident that ODA will also become considerably more complex to understand and track. These trends have considerable implications for the transparency and accountability of public money and also for scrutinizing the claims that various public-private development partnerships are leading to the inclusive and sustainable growth claimed by the SDGs.

A second concern is that of risk. Over-indebted farmers committing suicide in India, housing bubbles

in Argentina and the enduring (and inherent) volatility of the global financial market are all forms and scales of risk that are largely unacknowledged in the ebullient language of 'fintech' and financial sector deepening. Akyuz (2017), for example, provides a searing critique of the growing risks of (over-)financializing the 'periphery'. At present, however, the international development community and its private sector/financial partners appear to be complacent at best, and in denial at worst, about extending and deepening insufficiently regulated financial tools and markets. To take just one example, in 2017 the Business and Sustainable Development Commission (which is an extremely high-ranking and influential platform launched in 2016, explicitly framed around the SDGs) produced a report on 'Ideas for Action for a Long-Term and Sustainable Financial System'.<sup>2</sup> Space precludes a fuller analysis of the report's assumptions and recommendations, but what is strikingly relevant here is the complacency about financialization and risk. Even as it seeks to better align the existing financial system with the aspirations of the SDGs, the report starts from the position that 'global finance is highly regulated' (p. 7). The only reference to systemic risk is a reassuring statement on the 'progress' made since the GFC. All remaining references to risk are couched in terms of risks to *investors* (e.g. because of climate change, or the higher risks of investing in poorer countries). The risks to *borrowers* in the context of deepening financialization – whether individuals, municipal authorities or countries – are almost entirely absent from the report.

Liverman makes a powerful case for geographers to engage with the vast and complex canvass of the SDGs. This commentary concurs and has sought to further emphasize the parallel and intertwined debates and shifts around financing that have accompanied the emergence of the SDGs.

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### Notes

1. <http://www.eurodad.org/privatef>
2. [http://s3.amazonaws.com/aws-bsdc/BSDC\\_SustainableFinanceSystem.pdf](http://s3.amazonaws.com/aws-bsdc/BSDC_SustainableFinanceSystem.pdf)

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# Geography's contribution to the Sustainable Development Goals: Ambivalence and performance

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## Abstract

Building on Liverman's critique of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), I argue SDGs must be conceptualized as *situated* by (i) unpacking the black box of social, political and intellectual consensus behind indicators and (ii) reimagining development goals as dynamic performances that are uneven over time and space for both populations and individuals. Poverty, justice and other targets of SDGs are not a state of being but rather a punctuated experience for the individuals and populations in question. For the SDGs to be effective, they need to go beyond simple statistics to account for how situated, performative aspects of lives *evolve*, rather than as they *are*.

## Keywords

consensus science, development pathways, indicators, ontological politics, poverty, situated performances

When asked to participate in this dialogue, my first thought was, 'Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are slippery things, how can one disagree with justice, equality and environmental sustainability?' Given the history of critiquing development (McDowell, 1993; Rocheleau et al., 1996; Watts, 1983; Yapa, 1996), myself along with many critical geographers find engaging with indicators and entrenched development technologies to invoke a sense of unease, or at least ambivalence.

As Diana's essay points out, adopting these laudable goals is not straightforward. SDGs and MDGs simplify and render legible complex processes of social and political reproduction. They serve to privilege statistics and measurement as the ultimate evaluation of whether the world is moving towards sustainability (Robert et al., 2005). Diana reviews

how we can understand this as a proliferation of biopolitics or attempts by various authorities to govern and control through making populations legible (Escobar, 2011; Gabay, 2012; Li, 2007). What is interesting about the SDGs is the incredibly sweeping domains they map out as necessary of evaluation. Millions of dollars will be spent and thousands of projects will be implemented in the name of fulfilling them. Similar to the MDGs before them, SDGs reshape how development practice is done and more nefariously, how we imagine the world

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ought to be, distilled into numeric form (Ilcan and Phillips, 2010; Saith, 2006).

I want to pick up from Diana's essay and argue that in addition to deconstructing the indicators and statistics employed, we also need to tackle the problem of consensus science. The SDGs in particular were built upon a desire to bring together different dimensions of development into an encompassing framework. The scientists and practitioners who worked on articulating the goals were given the task of *agreeing*. As a result, this consensus reflects a process of homogenization, at least intellectually (Klenk and Meehan, 2015). It required people to listen and take on board other ways of framing a problem and by necessity, shifting their own intellectual stance. Fiercely contested ontological politics and social relations have been transformed into colourful Lego blocks with compelling logos. Remnants of those contestations persist in the bewildering array of subtexts that attempt to nuance and capture different interests and ontologies within each goal. And while these efforts at representing diversity should be applauded, standardized goals, agreed upon by consensus, can never reflect the diversity of visions for how to live well that exists across the world (Beck et al., 2014; Jasanoff, 2013). Furthermore, they may be *distracting* us from moving towards more a more just, sustainable world.

Deconstructing consensus science requires prising open the black box of their formulation to understand more clearly what kind of consensus they represent (Goldman et al., 2011; Hulme and Mahony, 2010; Latour, 1987). An ethnography of this form of authority/knowledge-in-the-making will help illuminate how and where geographers might more effectively intervene. It would be revealing to examine who was involved in articulating which goals, at what point in the process they were brought in (or edged out) and what kind of debates led to consensus. This is never an innocent process of dialogue. Rather, social differentiation such as gender, class, nationality, age, academic achievement and a variety of other intangible social differences are at play within these dialogues to shape whose voices are loudest. Here the project is not to name and shame our colleagues who engaged in formulating the SDGs

but rather to understand the disciplines, institutions, ontologies and geographies of the people who came together to articulate the goals (see Beck et al., 2014; Mahony, 2015, for example in relation to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC); Hulme and Mahony, 2010). Many of us who have worked with large research teams know that confrontational or clear intellectual positions are counterproductive to the functioning of a team. Intellectual disagreements can be difficult to keep emotionally separate from personal attacks, and insisting on a particular position can thwart short- and long-term collective research goals. In my experience, this usually results in controversial members being quietly deleted from email circulation lists, their contributions being edited out, or people voluntarily stepping away to allow the rest of the group to continue. A qualitative investigation into how particular goals came into being would help to situate the Lego blocks within the politics of their articulation.

Second, consensus science cannot provide an intellectually reliable foundation for analysis. Exposing how and why this is the case is important when unpacking development goals. While the definitions and domains that emerge from consensus science are useful as an overview, to map the terrain of a debate or to broadly frame a problem, like climate change adaptation or development, they cannot easily be used as analytical tools (Mahony, 2015). Translating broad frames into indicators at best masks the diversity of analytical stances within a descriptor and, at worst, privileges the analytical stances most conducive to quantitative measurement. Indicators require distilling complex processes down to a couple of measurable instances that can somehow capture the essence of those processes – or at least how they are changing over time.

Diana captures part of this critique in her elaboration on the problem of getting the targets right. There is politics to the science and practice of which targets are chosen and how they are represented. But I want to push this a bit by conceptualizing targets as performances rather than objects. It's not so much criticizing whether the right targets have been identified, as it is to tackle the problem of how we imagine what targets (i.e. poverty, gender equality, etc.)

are. As the SDGs are presently formulated, they demand that countries improve their indicators by specified percentages within a fixed time frame. For example, they frame poverty as a state of being measurable by annual income. Yapa (1992), over 25 years ago, argued that maps of gross domestic product (GDP) present a skewed view of well-being that suggests increasing GDP is good in itself. Diana similarly draws out some of the problems with these indicators and how aggregate measures mask deprivation within countries, communities and households. However, her critique continues to operate within the frame of a measurable state of being. In some respects, she is arguing that we need to get the measurements right rather than challenging their measure-ability.

I want to begin my critique by insisting that poverty (or justice, gender equality, etc.) is not a state of being and, as such, is not conducive to static measurement. Poverty is a series of performances and interlocked processes that serve to render one 'poor' (discriminated against, lacking resources, etc.) (Escobar, 2011; Yapa, 1996) *at particular moments in time*. It is not a state of being, but rather a punctuated experience for the individuals and populations in question. I have arrived at this understanding based on the earlier critiques referenced and my own experiences of living in communities that are classified as poor. I absolutely agree with the critique Diana invokes that homogenizing communities or households as all equally poor serves to reinforce hierarchies based on age, kinship, gender, race, disability and other dimensions of social inequality. But I also see that 'poverty' is not even across time and space for individuals and populations (see also Yapa, 1996). There is often a seasonality to poverty linked either to agricultural or work availability cycles. People are 'poor' at some times during the year and at other times have excess income and resources that can be invested. Yet those investments cannot buffer them against the deprivation they know they will face later in the annual cycle.

In addition, poverty is situated. When at home, within communities, many people experience poverty very differently than when they attempt to move beyond the geographical territory of their place. Well-off families in particular places—

defined by access to land, resources, food security and income—find themselves unable to access education, medical care, technology or other services when they move outside of their immediate locality; this is of course most profound when moving internationally from low-income to high-income countries. Another form of situated poverty occurs when new technologies arrive in communities. Peoples' incomes, which had previously been more than adequate for livelihood needs, are not sufficient to access these new technologies. It is in this sense that I argue poverty is situated and performed. Measuring poverty through indicators fails to capture the essence of poverty, no matter how disaggregated and careful the measurements are. They are too static to account for the situated, shifting experience of being in poverty. If counting does not reflect the reality of being in poverty, it is not an adequate guide for understanding how to alleviate poverty.

My critique insists on the dynamic, performed nature of the processes identified by the SDGs that shift over time and geography. If we conceptualize targets as dynamic, then the SDGs have distracted us from understanding how we might capture a desire for justice and peace (SDG 16), for example, that can be accountable as it *evolves*, rather than as it *is*. Justice and peace, similar to my critique of poverty, are enacted, performed, not a state of being or an institutional end point. As such, they are not easily quantifiable, certainly not within simple statistics. While complex mathematics is well outside of my expertise, there are mathematical equations that can take account of processes that change over time and space, that lack fixed outcomes and nevertheless can provide some 'measure' of change. Perhaps there is some potential to use these as forms of measurement to avoid static ontologies. I can see good justification for wanting to measure and compare. But these measures make worlds and shape practice as Diana argues (see also Barad, 2007). It is vital that we situate measurement(s), demand that they are always placed in context.

Situating SDGs requires far more than incorporating more aspects of gender inequality, one of the domains where the interventions of critical scholars have been celebrated as particularly important.

Rather, it requires unpacking the black box of social, political and intellectual consensus behind individual indicators. Can we imagine partnerships whereby one of us acts as the external critic who can keep alive controversies, which out of necessity are smoothed over by colleagues involved in the consensus politics of the formal processes? And more ambitiously, it requires reimagining development goals as dynamic performances that are uneven over time and space for both populations and individuals. This kind of conceptualization brings the project of development goals closer to lived realities. We need to promote these imaginaries within academic and practitioner circles and take on the challenge of linking this way of understanding development to the practice of development. It is through this kind of contribution that I try to avoid my critical insights being 'rendered technical' (Li, 2007) and rather keep open political possibilities for imagining different pathways to a better world.

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# Geography and engagement with UN development goals: Rethinking development or perpetuating the status quo?

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## Abstract

It is sensible to assert that geographers ought to participate in an ongoing discussion about the UN development goals because development will be better for it. I largely agree with this sentiment but also wonder whether this means walking into an intellectual cul-de-sac of sorts, a debate where the parameters are too restrictively defined. This essay is written in response to a paper by Diana Liverman and is divided into three parts: questioning the value of engaging with development metrics, the geographic perspective and development goals, and thoughts for moving forward.

## Keywords

agriculture, development goals, food security, New Green Revolution for Africa

## Introduction

I am grateful for, and honored by, this opportunity to comment on Professor Diana Liverman's reflection on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). One of the aspects of Dr Liverman's scholarship and service that I have long admired is her willingness to engage in policy debates and to work with international institutions (AAG, 2014). In many ways, she has been a role model who walks a path of international policy engagement established by other geographers such as Gilbert White, Robert Kates, and Anthony Bebbington. In her article in this issue, Liverman outlines some of the problems with development goals and then sketches out the potential contributions of a geographic perspective to debates over such goals. In the end, Liverman acknowledges

the many problems with development goals and measures, but then argues that geographers need to participate in a discussion about this topic because development will be better for it. I largely agree with this sentiment, but also wonder whether this means walking into an intellectual cul-de-sac of sorts, that is, a debate where the parameters are too restrictively defined. The rest of this essay is divided into three parts: questioning the value of engaging with development metrics, the geographic perspective and development goals, and thoughts for moving forward.

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## **Should we dance with development metrics?**

I begin with a personal story which is relevant to a discussion of development goals and metrics. I spent a year of my life in 1997 working for the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) in Washington, DC, where one of my major responsibilities was to help write the environmental section of that agency's annual performance report (USAID, 1998). This report, and associated data collection effort, was part of Al Gore's 'Reinventing Government' initiative when he was vice president for then President Bill Clinton (Kamensky, 1996). The guiding philosophy of this initiative was that one could use metrics to improve government performance. As such, for every USAID project around the world with an environmental component, there were goals, and progress against those goals was tracked via indicators. The results of this exercise were published in the agency's annual performance report. While this exercise may have been about improving government performance, it was also about justifying the agency's existence and showing that USAID was making a difference. Unfortunately, in my view, it was also the worst possible social science as there were huge attribution problems. USAID was claiming, for example, that small scattered projects were leading to significant changes in national statistics for deforestation, biodiversity conservation, and water use, when the actual causal connections were extremely tenuous at best. It was this exercise that led me to end a 10-year international development career.

I had spent the previous 9 years working for the Peace Corps, the World Bank, and the British non-governmental organization (NGO) Save the Children. It was at Save the Children where I started working with a bunch of British geographers on a hunger mapping project. Here I was exposed for the first time to geographic scholarship on environment and development, including books by Michael Watts (1983), Paul Richards (1985), and Piers Blaikie (1985). Their scholarship helped me understand development anew in the African context, including recognizing the insights of local farmers as well as the influence of colonialism, national policy,

regional trading relationship, and international financial institutions. In contrast, USAID's bean counting, *cum* assessment, exercise was frustratingly blind to political economy and often deeply misleading. So I packed up my bags and left. It was development goals and measurement that drove me out of the development business and into academic geography.

Given the above, it is somewhat ironic to now be reflecting on Dr Liverman's paper on development goals. One of her central questions is: What do geographers have to contribute to a discussion about global development goals? Before reflecting further on this question, and Dr Liverman's response, I should note that—while tempting—I have not given up on development as an intellectual project. For me, deprivation and inequality are real, and these are social problems that need to be addressed for moral reasons as well as benevolent self-interest. While conventional development is deeply problematic, and inflected with neocolonialism and neo-imperialism, we need to reimagine development so that it is more just and collaborative. As such, a key question for me is whether geography's engagement with the UN development goals is helping to rethink development or perpetuating the status quo.

Also germane to this question is an ongoing discussion about public scholarship in geography. Kevin Ward has coined the term 'public geographies', which he sees as distinct from scholarship for public policy formation (2006; see also Fuller, 2008). Ward draws heavily on the work of the sociologist Michael Burawoy (2004, 2005a, 2005b) and describes policy-oriented writing as scholarship that aims to provide solutions to predefined problems. In contrast, 'public scholarship is less about intervention and more about bringing a disciplinary perspective into a broader conversation with the public' (Moseley, 2010: 109). Keeping this distinction in mind, could geography help reorient the conversation about development by engaging with the UN development goals or is the discipline at risk of simply invigorating a narrow discussion circumscribed by predefined questions?

I lastly point out that it is difficult to ignore politics when discussing development goals and metrics in the current era. In a time when right-

wing populist movements have affected electoral results in the United States and Europe, we increasingly live in a world where politicians disregard facts and evidence that contravene their world views (Feldmann, 2017). While I am more of a post-structuralist than a positivist, I have grown nostalgic for evidence-based decision-making in the postfact world of contemporary political discussions in the United States. As problematic as goal setting and monitoring may be for the often intangible aspects of development, I recognize that some of this is needed. This leaves me as conflicted and tormented as I suspect Dr Liverman may be on the need for geography to engage with the UN development goals. On the one hand, these goals represent what is wrong with development, both in their conception and in what they measure and do not measure. On the other hand, there is a recognition that these goals may have some sway in orienting development investments and that geography has a valuable perspective to offer in ongoing debates about these goals and measures.

### **The geographic perspective and development goals**

Dr Liverman provides an excellent summary and discussion of geography's concerns about conventional development and development goals. She also accurately notes that geography has been strangely silent as a scholarly community on this topic (although, at the time of writing, some more recent geographic scholarship has given attention to the topic, see, e.g. D'Alessandro and Zulu, 2017).<sup>1</sup>

As Liverman and others have noted, there have been some positive shifts in the conception of development goals in the transition from MDGs to SDGs. The SDGs nicely update the poverty alleviation focus of the MDGs and combine this with ever-growing concerns about the environment as seen in rounds of global climate change negotiations. These goals also are (significantly in my view) intended for all countries, not just lower income ones.

However, critiques of the UN's new SDGs abound. Mainstream publications (such as *The Economist*) have referred to them as 'sprawling and misconceived', 'unfeasibly expensive', and 'worse than

useless'. Others, such as the Gates Foundation, clearly prefer the preceding MDGs which were more focused on absolute poverty and had measurable targets. More radical critiques tend to revolve around the idea these goals are aimed at saving the world without transforming it. My concerns more closely align with the second perspective. When I look, for example, at SDG#2 on food security and agriculture, there are a myriad of objectives that represent multiple constituencies and likely conflict with each other. On the one hand, we have goals dealing with food access, ending malnutrition, resilient agriculture, and genetic diversity. On the other hand, we have goals about doubling agriculture production, boosting agricultural investment, and increasing free trade. While everyone may see themselves in these goals, there is no strategic prioritization. Furthermore, if we look where development investments are being made, then one could argue that SDG#2 is providing cover for a doubling down on the green revolution, or productionist, approach to addressing challenges related to food security and agriculture.

Strengths of Dr Liverman's essay are the sections where she considers the potential contributions of the geographic perspective to debates on MDGs and SDGs. This included her useful discussion of the ecological fallacy, where broad averages are inappropriately downscaled to smaller areas or populations, and the modifiable areal unit problem, where analysis fails to account for the impact of the shape and scale of areal units on findings.

I am also worried about what we chose to measure in the MDGs and SDGs and what is missed or occluded in the process. Two African countries illustrate this point. Ethiopia has become a darling of the international development community, an Africa lion with phenomenal growth rates and significant foreign investment. It is also a site of major land grabs and dispossession of small farmers and abuse of human rights (Moseley, 2012). As Liverman correctly points out, economic growth is calculated and recorded, whereas dispossession and abuse of human rights often are not. This leads us to celebrate a process that is deeply problematic.

Burkina Faso represents another interesting case. This country formerly had an charismatic, socialist leader, Thomas Sankara, who came to power in

early 1980s and reigned for a few years before he was assassinated in a coup d'état. By emphasizing self-sufficiency, he helped foster, on the heels of major droughts, a noncapitalist agricultural revolution that emphasized soil conservation, agroforestry, intercropping, and affordable or no cost improvements to agriculture production that facilitated access or secured food entitlements for rural people (Sen, 1981). This erstwhile agroecological revolution was aided and abetted by progressive nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and social movements like Six-S (*Se Servir de la Saison Sèche en Savane et au Sahel*) and GRAAP (*Groupe de Recherche et d'Action pour l'Autopromotion Paysanne*) (Dembele, 2013). This noncapitalist agricultural revolution lasted about 20 years but is now being undone by a capitalist agricultural revolution in the form of the New Green Revolution for Africa with its emphasis on improved seeds, chemical inputs, value chains, and scaling (Gengenbach et al., 2017). We record this latest development as progress, whereas the previous agroecological revolution went virtually unnoticed.

## Moving forward

I understand the need for geographers to be involved in the post-2015 development agenda. Not because it makes geography and geographers relevant, but because I think the agenda will look different and better if geographic perspectives are in the mix. That said, I really wonder whether the SDGs are driving the agenda and whether this should be the focus of our energy. To put it in political ecology terms, we need to be cognizant of ultimate not proximate drivers (Moseley et al., 2013), to focus on the agendas of big players and donors, like the Gates Foundation, that are shaping a development agenda reflected in the SDGs.

Furthermore, the SDGs appear to legitimize multiple development agendas already in progress rather than prioritizing transformative approaches over others. As Liverman notes, these goals are also about legitimizing the existence of an institution, the United Nations, that is floundering to find meaning and mission in the contemporary world. Lastly, I am wary of the UN goals to the extent that they seem to be building a case for a certain form of progress and not others.

A different approach might be to use these goals in a process of institutional learning (rather than as measures of certain forms of progress). We are currently running a myriad of development experiments (or natural experiments) to try to improve the human experience. We really don't know what works and what doesn't in particular places and with particular populations. Some common metrics might allow us to compare different approaches to see what works where and under what conditions. Such learning could then lead to a level of prioritization for scarce resources. In other words, we could use these goals to learn rather legitimize certain approaches to development.

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1. This is the introductory article to a two-volume special issue on the MDGs and SDGs in the African context.

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# Development goals and geography: An update and response

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## Abstract

In response to the four excellent commentaries on my article, I address several points including the significance of development finance, the problems of development data, and questions about how development goals are created and for whom. I also provide assessment of some more recent literature on the Sustainable Development Goals and consider the rise of neoliberal metrics and the changes in US international policy that affect development.

## Keywords

critical geography, development, Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)

The new year—2018—brings us ever closer to the ambitious UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to be achieved by 2030. They include ending poverty and hunger; ensuring health, education, and water for all; making cities, infrastructure, consumption, and economies more sustainable; protecting climate and ecosystems; and increasing equality, peace, and partnerships. The SDGs and their precursors—the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)—were the focus of my intervention that argued for more and critical attention from geographers to the nature and implications of setting international goals for development.

I am very grateful to the busy colleagues—Emma Mawdsley, Bill Moseley, Andrea Nightingale, and Farhana Sultana—each with deep knowledge of development issues—who have taken the time to comment on my paper, and to others who heard or read the article and made constructive suggestions. Their responses provide important extensions,

and criticisms of my original paper and further build a case for geographers to pay critical attention to development goals.

For example, Emma Mawdsley (2018) focuses her commentary on the crucial question, overlooked in my article, of how efforts to achieve development goals will be financed, given that overseas development aid from higher income countries is far removed from the recommended 0.7% of gross national product and is often not addressed to countries or sectors in greatest need. She identifies an important shift to an emphasis on private sector investment and on domestic taxation as the way to fund development, normalizing the role of business, and neoliberal processes such as trade, in

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development. Prompted by her commentary, I read some of her work that shows how development donors are now helping to reduce the risks of private investment and encouraging the commodification of land, infrastructure, and health in the global south (Mawdsley, 2015, 2016; Mcewan and Mawdsley, 2012). I realized how closely this is reflected in debates about climate finance where patterns of investment, including the relabeling and redirection of development funds and the role of private investments, deserve greater critical attention (e.g. Roberts and Weikmans, 2017)

Bill Moseley (2018) comments that a focus on development goals may lead us into an intellectual dead end, thus challenging the main argument of my paper. He raises concerns about the value of working on development goals given that many data collections by development agencies are just exercises in self-justification. He worries about what the SDGs do not measure and the huge attribution problems in linking development interventions to real improvements. While I did ask whether the successes in reducing poverty and hunger or improving water access can really be linked to the MDGs, the question of whether goals have any real relation to development on the ground, and whether good data are actually available to assess this, is best raised by those geographers, such as Bill, who have inside experience within development agencies and who commit to long-term field study where development can be contextualized in local contexts.

Literature on the challenges and implementation of the SDGs has flourished over the last year, but geographic work is still mostly absent. One exception, identified by Bill, is a double issue of the *African Geographical Review* 'From the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): Africa in the Post-2015 Development Agenda. A Geographical Perspective' with an overview paper which argues for the value of geographical perspectives in understanding the SDG agenda in Africa, especially the internal variations in problems and solutions, multi-scalar perspectives, and human-environment relations as viewed from political ecology (D'Alessandro and Zulu, 2017). The 13 papers include authorship by

geographers and other social scientists based or trained in Africa.

Andrea Nightingale (2018) raises important questions about the process and politics of creating development goals, including the ways in which consensus can silence a diversity of views. She wants to know who was involved in developing the SDGs and who was not, and what were the debates behind the scenes. There is little literature on this as it relates to development goals, and I agree that we often read too much into published texts or final products. We should do more interviews and triangulations with those involved in the policy process and the creation of goals. Her approach to triangulation, as I understand it, is to use multiple methods that can be used to identify different, rather than converging, perspectives in efforts to show the situated knowledges that underpin development (Nightingale, 2016).

Another criticism of my essay is that I argue for getting the measurements right, rather than challenging the principle and validity of quantitative measurement especially of concepts, such as poverty, which are not only multidimensional but embodied and performative. She wants geographic critiques to provide us with new imaginaries of development that reflect lived realities.

The need for more work on understanding the process of creating the goals and on the embodied experience of poverty and other deprivations is also reflected in the commentary by Farhana Sultana (2018). She wants us (me) to think more deeply as to why some goals were chosen and others were not, and who had the authority to influence them. Surely, she asks, geographers should focus beyond the MDGs and SDGs to study more profound and challenging issues of oppression, justice, and exploitation—human experiences that are not captured or solved by the current set of goals. Her views are supported by papers in a recent issue of *Globalizations*, where Gabay and Ilcan call for more research on the affective politics of the SDGs (Gabay and Ilcan, 2017). They criticize the universalism of the SDGs and the way in which individuals have been made into objects in need of help and then constructed as active subjects, responsible for their own development and then managed through



partnerships, capacity building and big data that remake and relabel bodies and communities. Other recent papers make similar points—Weber argues that the 2030 agenda may undermine political struggles for social and environmental justice because the SDGs privilege a universal and neoliberal market approach, as expressed in Goal 17 which promotes the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and Goal 1 which promotes microfinance (Weber, 2017). Weber suggests the SDGs overlook guarantees of free entitlements (e.g. a right to water or food rather than ‘access’) except in the case of education. She also explores the power and interests behind the SDGs.

Where I disagree with Farhana is with her scepticism about whether geographers can influence development agencies in debates about policies such as development goals. In the case of climate, I would argue that geographers have played significant roles in the elaboration of climate goals and policies, especially in highlighting the importance of vulnerability and adaptation and in introducing critical perspectives on gender, race, and scale (Ford et al., 2007; Liverman, 2015; Smit and Wandel, 2006; Tschakert, 2012).

Since I wrote the original paper, there have been some attempts to assess progress toward the SDGs. Recent reports from the United Nations and the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDKN) are based on limited and proxy data for many targets, illustrating the point that I and others have made about the complexity of measuring the SDGs. The United Nations highlights slow and inequitable progress, notes a real decline in bilateral aid to the least developed countries, and notes an uptick in debt service to 6.1% in 2015 from 3.6% in 2011 (United Nations, 2017). The report notes that income inequality dropped in 49 of 83 countries between 2011 and 2015 but does not provide other measures of inequality. The environmental indicators, such as those for Goal 14—conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas, and marine resources—are also limited to measures of protection and fishery exploitation showing that in 2017 only 5.3% of global oceans were under protection and, in 2013, 31% of marine fish stocks were overfished. The report admits that ‘The lack of sound

disaggregated data for many...vulnerable groups—including children, youth, persons with disabilities, people living with HIV, older persons, indigenous peoples, migrants, refugees and those internally displaced—exacerbates vulnerabilities by masking the extent of deprivation and disparities. What’s more, a lack of rigorous evidence and comprehensive data has long compromised the ability of governments and the international community to accurately document the discrimination faced by various groups’ (p. 13). The SDG Indicators and Dashboards report (Sachs et al., 2017), by the SDKN, finds that of the 230 indicators for the SDGs, only 150 have established definitions, and that in the voluntary national reviews countries are struggling to implement the full range of indicators, doing better on socioeconomic than environmental reporting.

The SDKN report does raise the important issue of international spillovers that I should have discussed in my paper, given my focus on geography. The SDGs rely on countries to monitor and implement their own goals, but for many their ability to achieve them is limited because their own environment, economy, and even social conditions are heavily influenced by processes and policies outside of their borders. Clear examples include the way in which increasing prices as a result of drought or trade policy in a country can increase poverty in many others through global economic links, or where international investments transform land use at local levels. This is something that Liu and others have written on as ‘telecoupling’, where, for example, changes in land use in one place are driven by changes elsewhere through price, investment or trade (Lenschow et al., 2016; Liu et al., 2013, 2015).

Since I wrote the original paper, there has been considerable growth in literature on development goals, although little of it by geographers. My colleagues in the Earth System Governance Project have compiled a volume ‘Governing through Goals’, which critically examines goals as a strategy for global governance and the challenges of implementation (Kanie and Biermann, 2017). They identify the limits of the SDGs because of their detachment from the international legal system and binding obligations and their weak institutional status and lack of oversight. They call for more formal

commitments and benchmarks, the mobilization of resources to achieve and govern the SDGs, and the need for integration with other international agreements. They identify research needs that include relating SDGs to genuine progress on the ground and for critical examination of trade-offs. Journal special issues on the SDGs include *Current Opinion in Sustainability*, *Forum for Development Studies*, *Globalizations*, *International Journal of Human Rights*, and *Sustainability Science* (Bexell and Jönsson, 2017; Brondizio, 2017; Saito et al., 2017; Stafford-Smith et al., 2017; Weber, 2017; Winkler and Williams, 2017).

My own interest in the SDGs has been renewed through my role as a lead author for the forthcoming IPCC special report on 1.5C (<http://www.ipcc.ch/report/sr15/>). In this report—where geographers are well represented among the authors—we have been asked to examine the impacts of a global warming of 1.5°C in the context of sustainable development and the pathways that could allow us to keep warming below 1.5°C. Work on the report has made me realize the enormity of the challenge in achieving the SDGs, especially reducing inequality, while also responding rapidly to the risks of climate change. Furthermore, the year 2017 has been difficult for those of us in the United States who care about social and environmental justice at home and in other countries. The new US administration is taking us out of the Paris Agreement on climate, is undoing environmental protections, has insulted other countries and migrants, appears to be against science and diverse voices, and has cut budgets for development, social, and environmental programs. How the ‘America First’ policy affects the achievement of development goals, or social and environmental rights and conditions more broadly, is under discussion by geographers and other scholars (Association of American Geographers, 2017; Clarke, 2017; Ferrarello, 2017; Harris et al., 2017; Konyndyk, 2017). Of course, the world of development goes on without the United States, and the new policies have prompted many forms of resistance.

Thinking about the problems with measuring development through goals has brought me to a greater awareness of the prevalence of goals and metrics in the everyday life of education and science

under neoliberalism (Berg et al., 2016; Dowling, 2008; Mountz et al., 2015). Every month, we are asked to produce more and more quantitative data on teaching outcomes, research productivity, attendance and response to outreach events, and citations and journal rankings. This data-driven valuation of work in the university has many parallels to development goals. When will we be given a list of 17 Academic Development Goals that will redirect our everyday practice to meeting the goals rather than more complex and profound markers of success and commitment?

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