A critical engagement

Sustainable development goals and the problem of 'race'

special feature

Living Rights Festival

Solidarity for Change

– By **Crain Soudien**

This article looks critically at the UN's Sustainable Development Goals and how they deal with their fundamental objective – the inclusion of all people. CRAIN SOUDIEN argues that dominant development discourses have struggled to deal with the realities and effects of exclusion and marginalisation as they are manifested in ongoing processes of racialisation, gender discrimination and class formation.

Introduction

How do we conceptualise and develop a global development agenda that is attentive to the needs, requirements and entitlements of all the world's people? In this contribution I problematise dominant approaches to development and the ways in which these approaches, firstly, conceptualise ideas about the 'universal' and, secondly, erase, silence and marginalise particular groups of people. With this backdrop, I focus on the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and particularly their conceptualisation. Of particular interest is how the design of the SDGs deal with the fundamental objective underpinning this global intervention – that of inclusion. The argument I will make is that dominant development discourses, including the SDG project, have struggled to deal with the realities and effects of exclusion and marginalisation as they take expression and are manifested in processes of racialisation, gender discrimination and class formation.

This article unfolds in five movements. First it considers ideas of development and how these ideas deal with the questions of inclusion, 'progress' and equality, and well-being. It then works with the SDGs in terms of their substance and their objectives. Thirdly, a brief examination is undertaken of the broad architecture of the SDGs in relation to issues of racial inequality. A fourth section examines how racial inequality takes expression in SDGs 3 and 4, Health and Education. A final section considers the question of alternative development pathways.

The argument I will make is that dominant development discourses, including the SDG project, essentially conceptualise ideas such as progress in narrow European ways. They struggle to accommodate and make space for other sensibilities or other ways of making a life. They tell us that there is no alternative.

Ideologies of development

It is important to begin this discussion by insisting that there are alternatives. We can challenge dominant ideas of 'development'. We can, firstly and simply, because we have no option. As the world hurtles towards unprecedented levels of global warming, imperilling the very fabric of life, we have to be consciously, resolutely and practically doing everything we can, in the first instance, to mitigate the worst effects of what is to befall us, and, secondly, to begin the radical process of looking anew at our fundamental presumptions of what the 'good life' is (see Ripple, *et al*., 2024; and Alenda-Demoutiez, 2022). Facilitating, fortunately, our path towards rethinking what wellbeing means, we have, in the last 30 years or so, moved on from strait-jacketed economism, the conceit that economic questions constitute the essence of life, and ideas of economic growth. We now, into the 21st century, influenced by scholars such as Amartya Sen (1999) and, more recently, by the decolonial movement, have a broader, wider and deeper understanding of development (see Kumi, Maes & Fomunjong, 2022). Development is not simply an economic manifestation. It is also cultural, psychological and social. It involves the full amplitude of the complex relations that exist between humans, between humans and *all* the forms of life which make up our planetary ecology.

While the UN uses the concept of the Human Development Index, which includes questions of life expectancy, levels of education, it is essentially the standard of living indicator which has come to determine whether a country is developed or not (see United Nations, 2024). This standard of living indicator indicates what a country's annual per capita income is. 'Developed' countries are countries where the annual income per capita or gross domestic product (GDP) exceeds US$12,000 (Aggarwal, 2023).[1] A low-income country is where the income per capita or GDP is US$1,145 or less. In 1999 the World Bank defined poverty as the situation where people were earning less than $2 per day and extreme poverty as an income of $1 a day (see Haughton & Khandker, 2009). In terms of this definition about half of the world's population then was poor – three billion people – and another quarter extremely poor, underdeveloped. Progress is based on the pace of income growth per head of the population. The belief was that economic growth provided the basis to solve all challenges. We believed this. We believed that if we did not place ourselves on a path towards economic growth we would not be able to deal with the challenges of health, education, environment and the improvement of people's living standards.

It is important, before we move on, to be clear-eyed about how systematically economic growth thinking has seized control of not only financial policymaking but has come to determine development thinking almost everywhere. The dominant version of this thinking is evident in neo-classical economics - the idea of freeing up the market to give individuals the freedom to compete with each other. It takes form now in neoliberalism (see Harvey, 2003). But the idea of economic growth as the central objective of development is also there in what we think of as socialist planning (see, *inter alia*, Fernandes, 2022). The objective of socialist planning is to secure control of production processes to avoid the irrationality of the free market. It requires, however, planned growth.

To emphasise how much this 'growth' sensibility dominates our discourse, it is important to understand how the development discussion was managed in the circles in which we found ourselves, not least of all in the academy (see Fioramonti, 2017). The discussion has effectively come to pivot on the question of how parts of the world came to be 'developed' and others 'under-developed'. Out of this emerged a new field of enquiry, that of 'Development Studies'.

We learnt a lot out of this theory-making. We came to a better understanding of the nature of global capitalism and of globalisation and imperialism. We came to see, in the late 20th century, how globalisation took shape in extreme forms of financialisation and how a few corporate oligopolies were effectively determining the direction of economies everywhere (see Gallagher, 2005).

Now, of course, one should not in a reverse fundamentalism throw out economic ideas of development. In complex societies, now mass-based societies, one has to be thinking about production and how one produces for the fulfilment of the needs of everybody. But we are faced with quite important issues here. They are issues about whose idea of needs and wants are to be taken into consideration and how they are to be fulfilled; issues about how we settle and resolve disputes about whose interests and needs are to be taken into consideration, about how we define wellbeing, and, critically, how we think of development in relation to the capacity of the planet.

With respect to the question of whose needs and how we deal with the needs of different people, the work of Amartya Sen is critical. Sen, it must be said, is not beyond our criticism, but he kicks off his famous book, *Development as Freedom,* with an explanation which quite categorically upends the entire 'Development Studies' legacy we have inherited. "Development can be seen", he says in the very first line of his book, "as a process of expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy" (Sen, 1999: 3). He continues: "Focusing on human freedoms contrasts with narrower views of development, such as identifying development with the growth of gross national product, or with the rise in personal incomes, or with industrialisation, or with technological advance, or with social modernization" (Sen, 1999: 3). He also makes clear that standard economic factors can substantially contribute to expanding human freedom, but that the lack of substantive freedoms "robs people of the freedom to satisfy hunger ... or for the maintenance of local peace and order ... the freedom to participate in the social, political and economic life of the community" (Sen, 1999: 4).

Dominant approaches to development, focusing on production and consumption, lead to the dangers of over-production and over-consumption with extreme negative effects for the ecology. They promote personal cultures of excess and superficiality, and structural effects such as extreme inequality and unmanageable debt. They have driven the planet to the point of unsustainable collapse. In the wake of this, exclusion and marginalisation have been exacerbated. Poor people everywhere are being pushed to the edges of the survival cycle.

What we are dealing with, it is important to understand, is the larger and long-term project of modernity. The literature around this, especially as it pertains to ideas of progress, is large (see, for example, Portes, 1973; Jackson, 2009; Heinberg, 2011; Dietz & O'Neill, 2013; Rifkin, 2014). Critical about modernity, now a 500-year-old project, is that it brought to the world ideas of human progress and development. We are now, well into the 21st century, wholly under its supervision. The benefits it has brought to the world are abundant. We are living longer. Our states of health have somewhat improved (Broom, 2022). More people can read and write than at any other time in our history. The technological capacity we have at our disposal is extraordinary. But we wish to stand in clear resistance to its presumption that it does *all* that we would wish our knowledge repertoires to make possible for us. It is a European idea. It is filled with European conceit - the idea that we can bend all of nature, all that we deem to be of inferior status to the rationality of European logic. The idea took full flight with the renaissance and the industrial revolution and came to its climax with the confluence of the industrial revolution and colonialism. Based on extractivism, taking from the planet whatever we like, oppression of working-classes everywhere and the marginalisation and discrimination of people not deemed to be white, it constructed and constituted the idea of humanness, and its perfectability, in narrow European middle-classedness. Everything else was suspect, backward.

The problem now is that the world, geopolitically, is fighting over how to consummate this 500-year project. The sum total of what we have before us is complete paradox. While the wellbeing of large proportions of humanity has improved, we are now, amongst ourselves, riven with unacceptable disparity, inequality and discrimination. The gap between the rich and the poor in our contemporary times has grown year on year. In 2020 the world's 2,153 billionaires, based, largely, in what we call the 'developed North', had acquired more wealth than 4.6 billion of the world's population put together (Oxfam, 2020).

The Sustainable Development Goals

The SDGs are at the heart of the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (United Nations, 2015). This agenda, which was adopted by all member states in 2015, aims to provide a "shared blueprint for peace and prosperity for people and the planet, now and into the future" (United Nations, 2020). It is, ostensibly, the world's response to its development contradictions. It will guide development investment in the coming decade (Griggs *et al*., 2013; Hák *et al*., 2016).

The agenda consists of 17 goals. These are subdivided into 169 targets and 232 indicators. Across their 17 goals is the objective of fulfilling human rights, achieving equality and non-discrimination - of "leaving no one behind." While the ambition and well-meaning intent of the SDGs are acknowledged there are substantial criticisms. Defenders claim that the goals reflect the complexity of development, detractors argue that the breadth is at odds with the need to prioritise (*The Economist,* 2015). The

mainstream journal, *The Economist,* describes the SDGs as so broad and sprawling as to, "… amount to a betrayal of the world's poorest people."

A more radical view argues that the SDGs' universalist claims are overstated and that they effectively reproduce the dominant discourse of 'development' and thus continue to legitimise the capitalist world order. They fail to work with the criticism that neo-liberalism is central to global poverty. Critics (see *inter alia,* Swain, 2017; Action Education, 2015) question whether they will protect and fulfil human rights for all and end racial, gender and other forms of discrimination prohibited by international law. Specifically, as an outline for a Society, Politics and Law course at the Open University (n.d) emphasises, the following issues arise:

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- Power: The SDGs do not go far enough in challenging the status quo. They protect existing political and economic interests that contribute to the very global issues, such as environmental degradation, racism, sexism and inequality, the goals are supposed to address.
- Agency: Many people are excluded by uneven processes of development that are directed by and benefit the most powerful.
- Scale: Even though the SDGs are global in scale, implementation is dependent on national governments and governments can select which SDGs they wish to pursue.
- History: The SDGs are premised on the continuing pursuit of economic growth, which has produced stark social inequalities and damaged the environment.
- They devalue local knowledge and schemes of thought. This is where decolonisation is really important.

In what follows, we focus on the question of racism raised in this Open University course.

Racial inequality

Global racism is a particular point of issue with respect to the politics of the SDGs. E. Tendayi Achiume, United Nations Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance makes the following observation:

> *Despite the 2030 Agenda's promising rhetoric, it largely fails to fulfil its pledge to 'leave no one behind' when it comes to the principles of racial equality and non-discrimination .... Racial justice commitments are largely absent from the operationalisation of the SDGs ... The persistent lack of resources, failure to collect disaggregated data and dearth of political willpower still limit progress toward racial justice in virtually all national and international contexts. (United Nations, 2022)*

In her report, the Special Rapporteur attributed the entrenched challenges of promoting racial justice and racial equality through development initiatives to the racialised origins of the modern international development framework. She said that "the (2030 Agenda) is incapable of fundamentally disrupting the dynamic of racially discriminatory underdevelopment embedded in the international economic order" (Achiume, 2022: 1). Achiume said a vast body of research had demonstrated that the international economic, development and financial order perpetuated human rights harms and economic inequality, dismantling social safety nets in the global South and increasing dependency of formerly colonised peoples: "If anything, the development framework has contributed significantly to entrenching and advancing racialized underdevelopment" (Achiume, 2022: 9). Her report emphasised the urgent need for decolonising global economic, legal and political systems – a goal which could only be achieved by disrupting international hierarchies and moving beyond Euro-centric visions, models and means of economic development.

Winkler and Satterthwaite (2017) also argue that inequalities based on race, ethnicity and similar factors do not receive the same attention as gender equality in the SDGs and in the targets and the global indicators developed by the Inter-Agency and Expert Group (IAEG-SDGS) approved by the UN General Assembly to monitor progress on implementing the SDGs. While

Winkler and Satterthwaite (2017) support the explicit gender focus in the SDGs, they find the exclusion of many marginalised categories of people deeply troubling.

In many respects and despite global initiatives, talking about race in development, it could be argued, is a taboo subject (White, 2002). Reading the global literature critically, race acts as an absent presence in development discourses. It is often absent, for example, as a category of analysis in the institutional lives of development organisations and programmes. White (2002: 408) describes the silence surrounding race as a "determining silence that both masks and marks its centrality to the development project" (Walker *et al.*, 2023: 2). Through seeing itself as being outside of the politics of race and adopting a 'colourblind' stance (e.g., see Gillborn, 2019, for a discussion of colourblind ideologies), a conclusion which is hard to avoid is that international development functions as a continuation of the European colonial project, propagating a Western imaginary of the world order and of the accumulation of capital.

In the next section I work with two critical goals, those of health and education, SDGs 3 and 4, to see how inclusion is managed.

SDG 3 - Health and inequality

The short description of SDG 3 is "Good health and well-being. Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages" (United Nations, 2015: 14). It consists of 13 targets.

The final decisions on SDG 3, the "Health SDG", occurred after intense, multi-cornered contestation among UN member states, the for-profit sector, civil society and private foundations. The groupings did not represent a single interest. There were many differences and schisms among them. In the end the differences of ideology and interest were, some say, massaged, and the multiple Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) on health were brought together under the single umbrella of SDG 3. But the schisms were deep and essentially papered over.

The most important challenge in realising the aims of SDG 3 is that of funding. The funding for health, national and global, has been restricted ever since the 1980s - the early years of the neoliberal policy regime, with its cuts in national health budgets, its push towards privatisation and liberalisation of regulatory structures.[2] Within this racism is a particularly acute problem. Paradies *et al*. (2015) make the comment that racism influences health across the life span beginning in childhood. A large meta-analysis of people identifying as minoritised racial groups around the world demonstrated a negative relationship between racism and health in countries such as the Netherlands, Finland, Israel, Norway, the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, Spain, Portugal, New Zealand and Barbados. Racism erodes health through a myriad of pathways, including a heightened stress-response, with adverse consequences for the cardiovascular, inflammatory and immune systems (Harrell *et al.*, 2011).

In the United States and Latin America, minoritised and racialised groups (people classified as Black, Native American and Indigenous) are more likely to get ill earlier in life, have faster disease progression and lower survival rates (Williams *et al.*, 2019). These disparities are particularly evident for stress-related illnesses such as heart disease and stroke (American Psychological Association Working Group on Stress and Health Disparities, 2017).

Research on the short- and long-term psychological effects of experiencing racial discrimination in childhood in the United States and South Africa has found that children who experience racial discrimination develop perceptions of threat, fear, victimisation, low self-efficacy and self-esteem, and hopelessness.

... there is the need to think again about the relevance, foundations and the implementation of the SDGs ... questioning their claims to be speaking for the world.

Target 3.8 seeks to achieve universal health care but pays no attention to processes such as racism and racialisation (United Nations, 2015: 16). It says relatively little about the pathways by which and through which Universal Health Care (UHC) will be provided to people. Yet, there is growing concern that those pathways may be critical to determining whether those responsible for implementing the UHC approach, nationally and globally, limit themselves in the foreseeable future to picking low-hanging fruit, or tackles the more difficult challenges that confront the health of those at the very bottom of social and economic hierarchies (see Sen, 2015). The UHC approach has traditionally been concerned with economic inequality and whether or not the health system protects and promotes the health of the poor. But, at the bottom of most socio-economic ladders,

inequality is not only economic but is reinforced by such factors as gender, caste, race, ethnicity, disability, gender identity or sexual orientation to name some. This kind of intersectional inequality is often impervious to universalising approaches and requires specific targeted approaches.

SDG 4 – Education

SDG 4 reads as follows: "Quality Education: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" (United Nations, 2015: 17). It has 10 targets.

In advocating for inclusive, high-quality education for all, it could be argued that SDG 4 was written with a consciousness of the questions of race and racism. Strikingly, while there is specific mention of inequalities relating to gender, disability and indigeneity, the terms 'race' and 'racism' do not appear in any of the official text describing the goal and its 10 targets. None of the targets, and particularly Target 5 on 'Discrimination', makes any reference to racism (United Nations, 2015: 17). Evident, I argue, is a failure to engage with ideologies of race, processes of racialisation and the material effects of racism. This failure has the effect of reinforcing racial disparities and perpetuates epistemic violence through global education policy.

Education, it must be emphasised, was central to the colonial project both in terms of providing the human capital required by segregated, colonial labour markets but also in producing racialised subjects who knew their place within the colonial social and political order. At an epistemological level, education also played a key role in the spread of the Western episteme in the form of Western languages, knowledge systems and religions at the expense of the knowledge systems, values, cosmologies and languages of the colonised.

In developing our arguments here, it is important to clarify that we are not seeking to assert that racial disparities are more or less important compared to other forms of oppression and disadvantage in education. Rather it is to argue that by eliding issues of race and racism, the international education development community is failing to recognise and address a burning form of disadvantage. Further, it is often the intersection between racism and other forms of disadvantage that is crucial to grasp when seeking to address disparities of different kinds, a point we will return to below.

This omission is compounded when we work with the continuing legacy of colonial epistemic violence. Target 4.7 explicitly refers to the need to inculcate respect for cultural diversity as a basis for global citizenship (United Nations, 2015: 17). Whilst this is undoubtedly a positive aspiration, from a racial justice perspective it is impossible to implement until such a time as the full extent of epistemic violence perpetuated through education is addressed. As noted, education has been a major vehicle for the global hegemony of the Western episteme (Western knowledge systems, values and languages) as the basis for curricula around the world. Of course, this episteme is not singular or, put differently, without contradiction. In its worst conceits, however, it undermined or in some cases, in the process, completely erased indigenous languages, knowledge systems, religions and cosmologies.

Closely linked to the predominance of a Western episteme is the hegemony of Western languages as languages of teaching and learning around the world. As has been clearly evidenced, the use of a subtractive, bilingual approach in many formerly colonised countries that promote English and other Western languages at the expense of local and indigenous languages can be seen as a form of linguistic imperialism in that it further reinforces Western interests within the Western-led development project (Phillipson, 2012).

Conclusion: towards alternative pathways to development

In light of the critique developed in this contribution, it is clear that there is the need to think again about the relevance, foundations and the implementation of the SDGs. Most critical is questioning their claims to universality – to be speaking for the world.

There is an emerging debate in the academic and political spheres about considering the possibility of scrapping the existing framework and the 17 goals and starting over, adjusting the SDGs and creating new SDGs, as there are important areas that are not yet addressed or are insufficiently emphasised in the current framework of the 2030 Agenda. For example, some countries have presented in their Voluntary National Reports proposals for different SDGs according to their domestic political priorities. India has proposed an SDG on local empowerment and rural development, and Costa Rica has proposed SDG 18 on people's happiness and wellbeing. Most pertinently, Brazil has suggested the adoption of a new goal to combat systemic racism. President Lula da Silva announced, at the High-Level Political Forum, that his country favoured the voluntary adoption of an 18th goal regarding ethnic-racial equality (see Forum of the Countries of Latin America and the Caribbean on Sustainable Development, 2024). The suggestion emanated from a need to confront the country's main development problem, that is, structural racism.

The suggestion of an 18th goal is significant because the year 2024 marked the 76th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the final year of the International Decade for People of African Descent. The global analysis is

that there has not been enough progress with structural changes in the issue of racial equality. Despite the enormous challenges, the Brazilian suggestion can be seen as part of a shared effort of the international community against racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance, as well as to contribute to inclusive sustainable development for persons however they have been racialised. This would fundamentally reshape the 2030 Agenda and would have ramifications for the future of international politics.

What such a development would set in motion is the possibility of developing new, alternatives theories to fill in the gaps left by the SDGs and, critically, to foster resistance in fields such as agriculture, economics, education or health (Isgren & Ness, 2017; Kopnina, 2020; Padayachee *et al*., 2018).). It would provide the conditions for the legitimation of marginalised epistemologies and cultures and open possibilities for new and plural ways of thinking about development. It would make possible a critical engagement about some of the notions on which the SDGs lie, be it the notion of development or wellbeing (Jimenez & Glover, 2023; Van Norren, 2020). Those routes call for a robust dialogue between several worldviews, positionings and modes of action that can enrich one another to make it possible to enter the provocative zones of imaginations deemed to be off-limits.

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ENDNOTES

[1] See Farias (2023) for an extremely useful discussion about the typologies that have developed around the meaning of 'developed' and 'under-developed'.

[2] Contemporary developments with the withdrawal of federal government funding by the United States government to financially challenged economies around the world have brought this whole system to unmanageable levels of crisis.

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