

## A1 | SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS IN THE AGE OF NEOLIBERALISM

### Introduction

In the previous edition of *Global Health Watch* (GHW<sub>4</sub>), the opening chapter A1 was on “The Health Crises of Neoliberal Globalization”. Neoliberalism 3.0 (the austerity agenda) was in full force. Massive US-led regional trade and investment deals were in negotiation or near finalization (the Trans-Pacific Partnership and the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership). There was little movement on climate change, wealth inequalities were worsening and the UN world was still trying to come up with a set of new global plans to replace the waning Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Much has changed in just three years.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were adopted by more than 150 nations at a special UN General Summit in September 2015. A new climate change agenda was signed by 197 nations in December 2015 in Paris, and reached ratification and ‘entry into force’ in October 2016. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) in May 2016 featured a cover story in its flagship *Finance & Development*, “Neoliberalism: Oversold?” (Ostry, Loungani, Furceri, 2016), a belated response to (but no apology for) the extent to which the neoliberal policies they had helped to diffuse globally had exacerbated inequalities while failing to stimulate much growth. Globalization itself, at least as it was generally considered by the popular media, appeared to be tottering on



**Image A1.1** The austerity agenda was in full force (Indranil Mukhopadhyay)

its last legs. Was the world taking a slow U-turn towards a more just, locally grounded and environmentally sustainable future?

Not so much. The world continues to grow hotter, each of the last three years being the warmest on record. Wealth inequalities persist in getting worse. Oxfam in its “Even it Up” campaign calculated in 2010 that it took the wealth of 388 billionaires to equal that of the world’s poorest 3.6 billion people (the bottom half of humanity). In 2014 the number had dropped to just 85, and then to 67, and then further to 62. By the end of 2016 it was a mere 8. The top 1 per cent of the ‘uber-elites’ (the ones who gather annually at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland) now control more wealth, and the privilege and power that brings, than the 99 per cent rest-of-us. (Oxfam, 2017).

2016 also saw the UK choose to ‘Brexit’ by the slimmest of voting margins, after a campaign filled with false statements that marked the start of the ‘post-truth’ era and the possible break-up of the European Union (EU). This surprise outcome has since become fodder for the rise of the ‘alt-right’ (alternative right) in much of Europe, a previously slumbering movement built on xenophobic, nationalistic and racist motives with unhealthy doses of misogyny. But the year’s biggest shock came with the November election of Donald Trump as US President, after a vitriol-laced campaign in which the elite billionaire presented himself as the anti-elite champion of the disenfranchised blue-collar worker. Trump subsequently stocked his new administration with even more billionaires, mostly white, mostly men. This kleptocratic group will somehow re-create the mythical America of the 1950s when the USA was the world’s industrial juggernaut, Mexicans stayed on their side of the border, a woman’s place was in the home and the uber-rich were growing increasingly ill-content with their declining share of national wealth. As the recently passed and ever insightful sociologist, Zygmunt Bauman, characterized Trump (and Russia’s Putin, China’s Xi, India’s Modi, Turkey’s Erdogan, the Philippines’ Duterte, the resurrecting Latin American oligarchs and the suite of European alt-right wannabes): They are ‘decisionists’, autocratic individuals who fill a void of citizens’ existential uncertainty as economies falter, environments grow more fragile, migrations strain nations and borders, the rich world’s middle-class hollows out, and the hegemonic assuredness of neoliberalism’s old order begins to fray (Bauman, 2016).

Trump’s election has thrown a large political spanner into globalization’s economic machinery. His threatened protectionism and prompt withdrawal from the mega-trade and investment treaties could begin to unravel the world’s economy as we have come to know it these past forty years. Whether this means that the USA will abandon neoliberalism’s underlying tenets remains to be seen, although there are reasons to doubt. Powerful swathes of American transnational corporations have built their wealth upon neoliberalism’s market openness, including Trump’s own global businesses. It is more probable that the global trade tilt will be less away from neoliberalism (or from globaliza-

tion, for that matter) than towards new rules, agreements or simply unilateral actions that give even greater favour to American (“America first!”) interests. More immediately troubling is the Trump administration’s climate-change denialism, Islamophobia, militaristic intentions, antagonism to Mexico, and abandonment of women’s reproductive rights.

Not all who voted for Trump, or who support the world’s other ‘decisionists’, necessarily agree with all of their economic or social policies. One also wonders what might have transpired in the US election had Bernie Sanders and his centre-left populism become the Democrat candidate unlike Hillary Clinton who, setting aside the sexist hatred levelled at her by the Trump campaign, was widely perceived as continuing policies that had been disappointing many working class Americans for decades. Like Trump, Sanders spoke to this same disaffection but did so from a more inclusive, non-divisive and self-described ‘socialist’ platform (more accurately a somewhat social democratic politics, hardly radical).

We can only guess at what such a different US electoral outcome might have signalled to the rest of the world. The huge protests that met Trump’s inauguration in January 2017 and that continue with each new outrageous Presidential executive order are necessary and encouraging. But what is needed now is a left-populism to counter that violence of the ascending right-populism, a new global economic and social policy platform that speaks both rationally and emotively to the human need for caring and sharing, and to the ecological urgency of sustainability.

Can the new Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) offer help in creating such a platform?

### **The SDGs: Plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose?<sup>1</sup>**

Many development activists were quick to embrace the hopefulness of the SDGs, with one lauding them as “a gigantic global version of Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal, a plunge into public investment in order to stave off not just recession but also climate change, famine, and a few other horse-men of the apocalypse” (Van der Zee B, 2016). The breadth of the SDGs, the extent of public consultations that went into their finalization, and their normative binding on *all* of the world’s countries decidedly set them apart from their predecessor MDGs. As one of the lead negotiators that led to their eventual creation described them, they “signalled the need to redesign the global and national development landscape.” (Farrukah Khan, 2016). This redesign, originally meant to set targets for a green economy and to address the most pressing environmental problems, merged with developing countries’ deep concerns with poverty reduction and inequalities in global power and decision-making. As such the twin crises of our era were given political voice “in an international process going right.” (Farrukah Khan, 2016)

Other views, from both the right and the left, were not so generous. *The Economist*, standard bearer for the status quo, described them as “stupid”

**Image A1.2** The more it changes, the more it stays the same (IndranilMukhopadhyay)



development goals, “so sprawling and misconceived...that the entire enterprise is set up to fail.” (The Economist, 2015). This was a common refrain from mainstream economists who preferred the narrow, precise and non-threatening style of the MDGs, non-threatening because these did not question the underlying logic of either neoliberal globalization or global capitalism. The new set of 17 goals with 169 targets (and 230 indicators) unquestionably comprises a sprawling agenda for change (see Table A1.1), but such an agenda is “misconceived” only if one holds to a simplifying market fundamentalism that views human development as a matter of a few inexpensive interventions

TABLE A1.1: Sustainable Development Goals

- 1 NO POVERTY
- 2 ZERO HUNGER
- 3 GOOD HEALTH AND WELL-BEING
- 4 QUALITY EDUCATION
- 5 GENDER EQUALITY
- 6 CLEAN WATER AND SANITATION
- 7 AFFORDABLE AND CLEAN ENERGY
- 8 DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH
- 9 INDUSTRY, INNOVATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE
- 10 REDUCED INEQUALITIES
- 11 SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES
- 12 RESPONSIBLE CONSUMPTION AND PRODUCTION
- 13 CLIMATE ACTION
- 14 LIFE BELOW WATER
- 15 LIFE ON LAND
- 16 PEACE, JUSTICE AND STRONG INSTITUTIONS
- 17 PARTNERSHIPS FOR THE GOALS

Source: <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdgs>

here and there. Patrick Bond, an incisive critic on the left, expressed similar skepticism, calling them “Seriously Distracting Gimmicks” that risked diverting social movement and political activist attention away from the depredations of a twenty-first century capitalism on disequalizing environment-destroying steroids. (Patrick Bond, 2015). There is good reason to be cautious of an uncritical acceptance of the SDGs, which in their present form remain abstracted from an understanding of why the world now faces the entwined crises of ecological collapse and gross economic inequities.

### The myth of poverty reduction

Consider, first, the new poverty SDG, *End poverty in all its forms everywhere*. Significantly, and likely at the insistence of the G77 + China (the negotiating voice for developing countries), this sits prominently as the first in the list of 17. Superficially, it is a much more ambitious poverty goal than the MDG’s

#### Box A1.1: The SDGs: universally binding or selectively cherry-picked?

In most international resolutions, declarations or agreements, there are ‘preamble’ paragraphs that set the interpretative context for what countries have agreed to. Paragraph 55 of *The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (United Nations, 2015), which finalized the SDGs and their targets, is revealing for how it illustrates the governance dilemma between universal obligation (even if only a non-enforceable one) and national or sovereign choice.

The SDGs and targets are integrated and indivisible, global in nature and universally applicable, taking into account different national realities, capacities and levels of development and respecting national policies and priorities. Targets are defined as aspirational and global, with each government setting its own national targets guided by the global level of ambition but taking into account national circumstances. Each government will also decide how these aspirational and global targets should be incorporated in national planning processes, policies and strategies. (¶ 55)

While the goals themselves are seen as universal and indivisible, the targets give nations considerable latitude in defining their own “level of ambition”. On the one hand this can be interpreted as recognizing differences in the resource capacities and circumstances of differing countries. On the other, it can be a ‘get out of jail free’ card (a reference to the board game, *Monopoly*), allowing countries at whatever level of development or wealth to choose their own particular targets.

call for a halving in the proportion of people living below the ‘absolute’ poverty line between 1990 and 2015, set initially at \$1/day but later adjusted by the World Bank to \$1.25/day to reflect higher price levels in developing countries (Millennium Development Goals and Beyond, 2013). With great fanfare this MDG poverty goal was announced as “mission accomplished” five years ahead of schedule (The World Bank, 2016). Much of this success is attributed to China and a handful of other developing countries which benefited from the outsourcing by American and European transnational firms of industrial production (think manufactured goods and electronics) and services provision (think call-centres). Globalization’s opening of borders to the freer flow of capital, goods and services has created new pockets of the not-absolutely-poor, although huge increases in income inequalities within those countries benefiting from this (now declining) growth has been the socially disrupting price paid for it. Remove China from the global headcount, however, and the number of those living in absolute poverty today is about the same as the number back in 1981, trickle-down neoliberal globalization not keeping pace with population growth. (Hickel, 2016). A sixth of the world’s population still struggles below the absolute poverty level, which has since been re-adjusted to \$1.90/day.

The SDG now commits governments to eliminate absolute poverty by 2030. *The Economist* likes this target, because it is simple and just possibly achievable (although since 2015 there’s been backsliding rather than forward progressing). There is another poverty target that calls on countries to reduce by “at least half” the proportion of people living in poverty “in all its dimensions according to national definitions.” Less ambitious than “eliminate” this target partially addresses the need to improve income growth for the 2 billion people who now live at the not-quite-absolutely-poor level averaging globally at around \$2.90/day (Shaohua Chen and Martin Ravallion, 2012), a level characterized by insecure or informal employment that is highly vulnerable to small economic or environmental shocks. Targets in the SDGs, it is important to note, are “aspirational”, with each country able to set its own level of ambition (see Box A1.1). Given the ubiquity of the World Bank’s absolute poverty measure it is likely that, without powerful and persistent civil society prodding, this will become the default metric for SDG 1, with little attention given to the income distributional needs of those who have been ‘lifted’ a dollar-a-day higher. The absolute poverty target is also not well-liked by most development activists, for the simple reason that it is so low that achieving it would still leave people with insufficient resources for a reasonable life expectancy, generally pegged at around 70 years. Estimates of the income required for this still modest outcome (since many in high-income countries can expect to live well past 80 years) range between \$5/day and \$7.40/day (Hickel, 2016). Using the \$5/day level (the minimum the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development considers to qualify as a poverty line, and below which over

4.3 billion people presently live) (Hickel, 2016) and based on current poverty reduction trends, when 2030 dawns:

- 15% in Latin America and the Caribbean would still be poor, rising to
- 30% in East Asia and the Pacific, and
- 50% in Middle East and North Africa, but an astounding
- 90% in South Asia and sub-Saharan (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, 2013)

At the current rate by which the global economy has been reducing poverty, it would take 200 years to eliminate poverty at the \$5/day level, and over 300 years at the \$7.40/day (Woodward, 2015). Even if these more appropriate poverty targets were eventually achieved, what would be the cost to all of the environmental SDGs if our prevailing economic growth model continues? This question cuts to the contradiction at the heart of the SDGs: The belief that the same global economic rules and power relations that have created an increasingly unequal and unsustainable world can somehow engineer the reverse.

### **The contradictory hearts of the SDGs**

The strongest expression of this contradiction is found in SDG 8, that calls on all the world's countries to *Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all*. Its first target emphasizes “sustained per capita economic growth” exceeding “at least 7 per cent...in the least developed countries.” This is the clarion call of conventional economists, which has grown louder since the financial crisis of 2008. Although countries going through prolonged recessions or depressions generally do not do well health-wise (Karanikolos et al., n.d.; Arne Ruckert & Labonte, 2017), and economic growth itself is not necessarily or at least not always a bad thing, the problem once again is with the metric, and secondarily with where the emphasis is placed. Regarding the metric, the GDP has long been critiqued for measuring only economic transactions regardless of whether they are good for poverty reduction, the environment or human health, with the oft-cited cliché that wars, pollution and disasters increase GDP hence, at least in theory, also reduce poverty. (Wars do have a way of reducing competition for well-paying jobs by killing workers-as-soldiers.) With respect to the misplaced emphasis, assuming that “sustainable economic growth” means growth that is environmentally sustainable (a questionable assumption given it could equally mean growth that goes on and on and on), the noun in the phrase (economic growth) dominates the modifying adjective (sustainable). This phrasing is reminiscent of the 1980s when “sustainable development” was the policy rage. Some countries established multi-stakeholder Roundtables (government, business, civil society) to debate the way forward, much the way multi-stakeholder governance for the SDGs is still imagined (on which

**Box A1.2: Decent work**

The tripartite ILO (with representatives from government, industry and labour) defines decent work with the same idealistic flair found in the best of the SDGs:

Decent work sums up the aspirations of people in their working lives. It involves opportunities for work that is productive and delivers a fair income, security in the workplace and social protection for families, better prospects for personal development and social integration, freedom for people to express their concerns, organize and participate in the decisions that affect their lives and equality of opportunity and treatment for all women and men. (International Labor Organization, 2017)

Few reading this passage (at least few workers) would disagree with these aspirations, which are buttressed by the ILO's responsibility to oversee ratification of and compliance with core labour rights. These rights are also referenced in SDG 8 (target 8.8). Leaders in the G20 and G7 country groups, the European Union and the African Union have signed on to this agenda although, as with all normative commitments, the agenda flounders on a lack of enforcement measures. Nonetheless, labour rights and the Decent Work agenda can be useful rhetorical tools for health activists who approach the SDGs through the lens of employment rights or alongside movements advocating for a living wage (there are several operating in different countries).

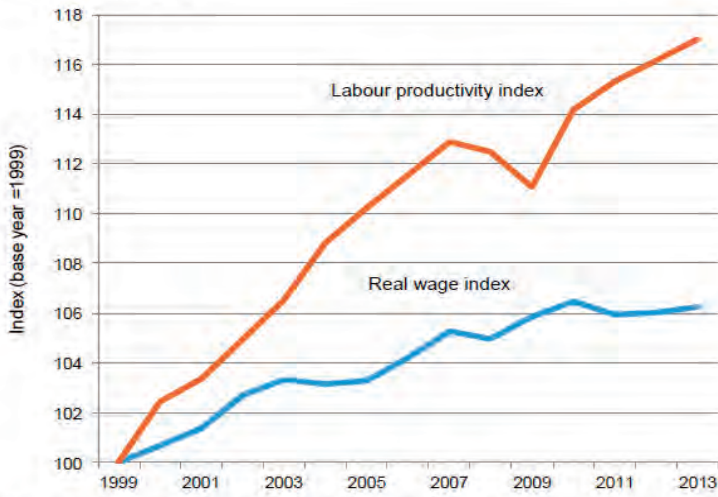
more later). When one environmentalist emerged from yet another fruitless meeting, frustrated by the lack of any ecosystem understanding on the part of the business representatives, a friend explained, "It's simple. You see. They (business) got the noun (development) while you (environmentalists) got the adjective (sustainable)." Nouns as subjects of the sentence control the action. Adjectives only modify from their secondary status.

The way in which the employment targets are stated deepens the contradictions. The reference to *decent work for all* is useful, as it gives traction for the Decent Work agenda of the International Labour Organization (ILO) (see Box A1.2). The call for full employment (elaborated under target 8.5) is also nice to see, albeit one that is frequently promised by governments but rarely delivered. Yet it is almost immediately contradicted by another of SDG 8's targets (8.2), which calls for "higher levels of economic productivity", the indicator for which is "annual growth rate of real GDP per employed person." Increased productivity is another axiom of conventional economics, since as the amount of output per labour input rises, so does the time-value of labour,



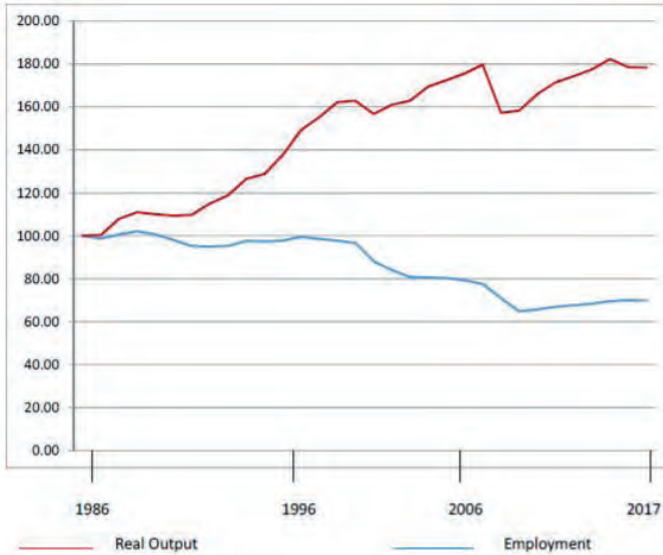
with productivity gains leading to lower prices for what is produced. Or so the theory goes, often with historic narratives such as how, 250 years ago, over 90 per cent of Americans worked in agriculture. Today it is less than 2 per cent who, with technology, now produce far more per farmer than in the eighteenth century. (Ross, 2015). This theory, however, assumes that the labour displaced by increased productivity will simply be re-employed in new forms of better-paying work. Figure A1.1 begins to question this theory, at least for developed economies, by illustrating a widening gap between workers' productivity and workers' wages. This gap is shown even more starkly in Figure A1.2, which shows changes in manufacturing output and employment since 1980 in the USA. It is this particular gap that came to dominate the Trump campaign and arguably led to his electoral victory. Blame was placed on China, and outsourcing to China (and elsewhere) is estimated to have destroyed between 700 thousand and 2.4 million US manufacturing jobs. But other studies suggest that over 5 million jobs were lost due to automation, with a recent US business school study attributing as many as 87 per cent of American manufacturing jobs since 1987 lost due to technology-enabled increased productivity. (Hicks and Devaraj, 2015).

Globalization's inclusion of hundreds of millions of new workers in global production and service supply chains (allowing transnational companies to take advantage of 'labour market arbitrage') has led to a world of too many workers competing for too few jobs to produce too many goods or services for too few consumers with too little income to afford them without increasing their already high levels of personal debt.<sup>2</sup> (Debt in the form of risky mortgages, real estate bubbles and corrupt banking practices, as the last GHW<sub>4</sub> pointed out, is what precipitated the 2008 financial crisis.) This statement may seem an oversimplification, but consider that since the 2008 financial crisis and recession global unemployment is at its highest-ever recorded level and is expected to rise again in 2017. (International Labour Organization, 2017). Much of this burden will be borne by low and middle income countries, with unemployment falling slightly in developed economies. Most of the employment gains in high income countries, however, are a result of increases in part-time, insecure and low wage jobs, creating what the labour economist, Guy Standing, has called the 'precariat'. (Caldbeck, Labonte, Mohindra, & Ruckert, 2014). Even Germany (the economic 'powerhouse' of Europe) is affected, reporting the highest instance across Europe of workers earning below 60 per cent of the median wage, indicative of the loss of mid-level occupations (Mezger, 2017).<sup>3</sup> Similarly insecure and often hazardous informal employment continues to dominate the labour markets in many low income countries, with half of the employed in South Asia and two-thirds of those in sub-Saharan Africa stuck in 'working poverty', earning less than \$3.10/day (well below UNCTAD's \$5/day poverty minimum). (International Labour Organization, 2017).



**Figure A1.1:** Trends in growth in labour productivity and average wage in developed economies (index) 1999–2013

Source: International Labour Organization (2015) Global Wage Report 2014/15: Wages and income inequality, International Labour Office – Geneva: ILO, 2015. P. 8



**Figure A1.2:** US manufacturing output and employment – 1986–2017

Rebased (1986 = 100)

Source: Calculated from primary data sources. Employment data from United States Department of Labour, Bureau of Labour Statistics, available at: <https://data.bls.gov/timeseries/CES3000000001>; Manufacturing Output data from [https://www.federalreserve.gov/releases/g17/ipdisk/ip\\_nsa.txt](https://www.federalreserve.gov/releases/g17/ipdisk/ip_nsa.txt)

Contradictions also pepper SDG 17: *Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development*, which addresses how to finance all of the previous ones. There is the perennial plea for donor countries to reach their 0.7 per cent of GNI commitment to development assistance (which, after 47 years, remains mostly unmet) and various promises of various forms of “cooperation”. It also calls for strengthening countries’ abilities to collect “tax and other forms of revenue” (presumably a reference to royalties), but makes no mention of the progressivity of such taxation. Nor do the SDGs anywhere address the ongoing avoidance or evasion of taxes by transnational companies and wealthy individuals through transfer pricing and tax havens, which costs governments hundreds of billions of dollars in revenue each year. (Cobham, 2015). The one mention of global taxation (a financial transaction tax) that had been the indicator for improved regulation of volatile global financial markets (SDG target 10.5) disappeared in the final version, likely at the behest of the USA, the UK and other countries with vested interests in footloose capital. (See Box A1.3.)

**Box A1.3: Global development goals demand systems of global taxation/tax-regulation**

As the previous GHW<sub>4</sub> pointed out, a financial transaction tax (FTT) on all forms of currency exchange (now technically feasible even for speculation in derivatives), if levied at a rate of just 5 cents on every 100 dollars, could raise over US\$ 8.6 trillion a year (McCulloch & Pacillo, 2011) – more than the outside estimates of what is needed to fund achievement of all 17 SDGs and their 169 targets (Ronald Labonte, 2016). Moreover, there are several existing global health, development, environmental and social protection funding bodies already established under international agreements that could be vehicles for a globally equitable and needs-based disbursement of such funds, rather than these funding bodies’ (such as the Global Fund’s) reliance upon irregular voluntary donations from governments or philanthropies. Ten EU countries are slated to adopt legislation for such a tax (France already levies one) which could raise between US\$ 40–47 billion annually. The eventual EU agreement on a FTT offers leverage for campaigns in other countries, creating a potential norm cascade with tremendously healthful potential – even if the USA and the UK are unlikely to join in (at least certainly in the short-term). Another hopeful global initiative is a recent commitment by OECD and G20 countries to create an accounting system whereby transnational corporations pay taxes in the jurisdictions in which they earn their revenue, which should reduce their use of transfer-pricing practices and tax havens (amongst other measures) to avoid taxation.

Echoing the MDG8, SDG 17 also calls for a “universal, rules-based, open, non-discriminatory and equitable multilateral trading system under the World Trade Organization”, through “conclusion of negotiations under its Doha Development Round.” It is certainly preferable for global trade to have rules than to function anarchically or by a ‘beggar thy neighbour’ set of rules where might is right (the sort of mercantilist trade rules that some envision Trump as wanting to negotiate or re-negotiate). But there is little evidence to suggest that our current sets of rules have been equitable or that completion of the Doha Round will disproportionately benefit least developed or most low income countries; indeed, the evidence suggests quite the opposite. (Polaski, 2006). ‘Equitable’ and ‘non-discriminatory’ make sense only when the universe of economic players are fairly equal, which they are not. This fact is well recognized within the WTO as the ‘special and differential treatment’ (SDT) that should be accorded to developing countries, and is repeated under SDG target 10.a as one of the means to reduce inequality. But after 20 years of WTO negotiations it is still not legally binding on member countries, and many trade observers doubt that the Doha Round will ever be completed. Even if it were, there remains the conflict between targets 17.14 (“enhance policy coherence for sustainable development”) and 17.15 (“respect each country’s policy space”), since many analyses of trade agreements (and especially the



**Image A1.3** Trade treaties are major barriers to development: Protests against TPPA in the Philippines (PHM Philippines)

new generation of regional trade and investment treaties) point out how such treaties are the major barriers to countries achieving policy coherence (Blouin, 2007; Koivusalo, Labonte, Wibulpolprasert, & Kanchanachitra, 2013; Labonté, Schram, & Ruckert, 2016), with several agreements likely to be in direct conflict with several SDG health and food-related targets (Ruckert et al., 2017).

### **The indivisibility of the SDGs**

Do these systemic flaws affirm the SDG critics? The answer is both ‘yes’ and ‘no’, and pertains to how one approaches the indivisibility of the SDGs, the presumption that all must be acted upon in concert with each other. Stated positively, this presents health activists and civil society groups with potential leverage for what we now call a ‘Health in All Policies’ (HiAP) approach to government decision-making, or what public health activists labelled ‘healthy public policy’ during the era of the *Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion*, and ‘intersectoral actions for health’ when the WHO launched its Commission on the Social Determinants of Health (Nunes, Lee, & O’Riordan, 2016). That such thinking appears to now permeate the highest levels of UN agencies and (nominally at least) their member states gives such an approach a stamp of approval that it lacked in earlier periods. Although health does not hold the same centrality in the SDGs as it did in the MDGs, most of the 17 SDGs deal with societal and ecological determinants of health. The indivisibility of the SDGs, while admonishing states and agencies not to cherry pick from their own personal favourites, poses two significant problems for supportive governments or health activists advocating the SDGs’ policy importance. The first, already discussed, is the embedded contradiction between equitable and sustainable development and the insatiable economic growth model of global capitalism, the SDG complaint from the left. The second is that if the SDGs address everything, they risk becoming nothing, the SDG complaint from the right, but one also voiced by some development activists who argue that the SDGs were better suited to the international cooperative decade of the 1990s than the current illiberal era epitomized by Trump (Doane, 2017). In a similar vein, the general lack of explicit accountability measures within the SDGs risks them “becoming everyone’s business but no-one’s major responsibility... if everyone is accountable in theory, no one is accountable in practice.” (Engebretsen, Heggen, & Ottersen, 2017).

Although states’ accountabilities under international conventions remain weak, it is still states that are, in human rights parlance, the ‘duty-bearers’ for the agreements they reach. We may have embraced a new politics of governance (in which state and non-state actors seek common ground on issues) but it remains the state that has the policing power of enforcement, even as the ‘market’ (private economic actors) retains the financial means to

exert undue influence over the state's decisions. It falls upon the amorphous groupings of citizens (civil society) to hold both state and market to account for actions that embody the environmental sustainability and health equity targets of the SDGs. At the same time, it will be hard for many of the world's governments under current global political clouds to focus upon 17 goals and 169 targets. Like the accountability problem, the indivisibility of the SDGs may be sound in theory but wanting in practice. The challenge for health activists is to organize the goals into a shorter priority list as a basis for their accountability advocacy.<sup>4</sup>

### **The long list of SDG priorities**

The SDGs are an effort to combine the health and social development targets of the MDGs alongside those of the post-Rio sustainable development agenda. The relationship between the two is apparent in the vastly more enormous ecological footprint of the world's 1 per cent (and even the top 20 or 30 per cent) compared to the bottom half of humanity (Oxfam, 2015). Almost a decade ago, the UK Commission on Sustainable Development (Jackson, 2009) noted the impossibility of raising the consumption levels of the rest of the world to that of the presently affluent – we do not have enough environmental resources to do so, requiring by some estimates the equivalent of four Earth planets to come even close (McDonald, 2015). We now live in an 'Age of the Anthropocene' in which human actions are determining the trajectories of all the world's ecosystems. Climate change ranks as the immediately most serious, but there are few of our ecosystems that are not under major stress (loss of forest cover, desertification, soil erosion, water depletion, wetland loss and damage, biodiversity loss, species extinctions, fisheries depletions) (Whitmee et al., 2015). There are some signs of positive change, such as increases in the amount of energy being generated from renewable sources.<sup>5</sup> But it is difficult not to lapse into catastrophic terms when viewing the enormity of the environmental damages we humans, our societies and our economies have created, and continue doing so.

Urgent activist priority should thus go to the environmental SDGs, notably SDG 6 on water, 7 on energy, 12 on consumption/production, 13 on climate change, 14 on marine conservation, and 15 on 'terrestrial ecosystems' and biodiversity loss (although it should be noted that many of the other SDGs have environmental targets within them). While important, the environmental SDGs have limitations. The energy goal is primarily concerned with increasing access to "reliable and modern energy services" that would include increasing "the share of renewable energy in the global energy mix" (but with no numerical target).<sup>6</sup> The consumption/production goal includes a target to "rationalize inefficient fossil-fuel subsidies that encourage wasteful consumption...by restructuring taxation and phasing out...harmful subsidies" – although the G20 countries (never mind the rest

### Box 1.4: Policy by numbers?

If the policy cliché that what you can't measure doesn't get noticed is true, then health activists need to pay as much attention to the indicators agreed upon for the SDG targets. Although not formally binding, the indicators constitute a form of policy by numbers, or in some instances policy by neglect. Despite the headline importance given to reducing inequalities, for example, there is no mention of the use of Gini coefficients or disaggregated income distribution measures. Instead, the target and indicator for reducing inequality is simply a higher-than-average rate of income growth for the bottom 40 per cent. The MDG lesson-learned of the importance of disaggregated measures appears to be lesson-forgotten in the SDGs. There is no measure for reducing between-country inequalities, and a proposed Inclusive Wealth Index as a complement to GDP was replaced by countries being able to achieve a census "achieving 100% birth and 80% death registration." The indicator for SDG target 8.8 (labour rights) was diluted from the number of ILO conventions ratified to emphasize only "freedom of association and collective bargaining". A proposed indicator for policy coherence (SDG 17.5.1) which referred to constraints on government's policy space within trade and investment agreements or development assistance and loans (usefully specific) was dropped in favour of the "extent of use of country owned results framework," rather obscure and only as applied to development assistance. Many of the other SDG targets had mentioned reductions in inequality as one of their measures; most of these disappeared in the final set. And it was only a concerted advocacy campaign by over 300 health activist groups to overturn a last minute change to one of the indicators for universal health coverage (SDG 3.8) – "number of people covered by health insurance or a public health system per 1,000 population" – which says nothing about affordability of health insurance, back to its original: "Fraction of the population protected against catastrophic/impoverishing out-of-pocket health expenditure" (Lei Ravelo, 2016).

If numbers matter, it is important to ensure that the best ones for health equity and ecological sustainability are the ones used, regardless of the final 'official' and discretionary list.

of the world) have still to agree to a deadline to phase out such subsidies (Denyer, 2016). The climate change goal is the most disappointing, deferring to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change "for negotiating the global response," with the weakly phrased commitments of the Paris Agreement on Climate Change (with much of its language couched

in conditional ‘woulds’ and ‘shoulds’ rather than forceful ‘will’ and ‘shall’) the best on present offer. The climate change SDG, instead, is primarily concerned with building adaptive “resilience” amongst communities, cities and the poor to what seems to be accepted as the inevitable. This does not make health activism on climate change less urgent; only that there is a need for more teeth in its SDG targets and indicators.

The same applies to most of the SDGs, which lose some of their force as their headline intents are translated into measurable targets and suggested indicators (see Box A1.4). Health activists, as with their governments, need to consider each sectoral policy or action implied by one goal or target in terms of how it will support achievement of all the other goals or targets, albeit with an awareness of the fundamental economic flaws within the full set. That being said, where should health activism around the SDGs begin? Suggested below is an initial set (with brief commentary) of the SDGs that are likely to hold the most immediate promise for a healthier, ecologically sustainable life.<sup>7</sup>

*Goal 1: End poverty in all its forms* Its importance to UN member states is signalled by its position as the first goal, and poverty is certainly the greatest single ‘risk condition’ for poor health. As earlier noted, Goal 1 requires a meaningful metric and not the World Bank’s ‘absolute’ measure. One of its targets usefully calls for “social protection systems...for all” with an emphasis on the poor and vulnerable, which necessarily demands improved tax measures and, for LMICs, better domestic resource mobilization. It further requires an end to the revenue eroding practices of transfer pricing – a transnational corporate practice to avoid taxes – and tax havens, the persistent of both on which the SDGs are silent.

*Goal 2: End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture* Undernourished people cannot be healthy or economically and politically well-functioning citizens. Apart from malnutrition targets, Goal 2 calls for “sustainable food production systems...that increase productivity and production [and] that help maintain ecosystems,” emphasizing assistance for small-scale producers. What remains problematic is the emphasis on increasing production (including for “fishers”, which challenges one of the targets for Goal 14 on marine resources that cautions the need to “restore fish stocks”) without any indication of how this might actually be done.<sup>8</sup> While calling for an end to trade-distorting food export subsidies (something HICs have finally agreed to under WTO rules) there is no mention of trade-distorting domestic production support (which now dominates the practices of countries such as the USA, China, Japan and the EU) and on which the LDCs (least developed countries) are calling for caps and reductions in line with Goal 2’s broader intent (ICTSD, 2017).





**Image A1.4** Trade rules undermine food security: Activists demonstrate at the World Social Forum in Tunis in 2015 (Amit Sengupta)

*Goal 3: Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages* “Achieve universal health coverage,” including “affordable essential medicines and vaccines for all,” is important, if weakened by ongoing disagreements over how it be financed (public or private or both), with the private healthcare and financial service sectors of the EU and USA happy to see an enlarged global role for themselves. Also problematic is the continued usage of the term ‘coverage’ – essentially insurance terminology that allows the possibility of public healthcare services to be outsourced (while continuing to be public financed) to private providers (see Chapter B1). “Universal access to sexual and reproductive health-care services” is equally important for its positive health impacts on women’s and children’s health, and its ability to keep population growth within ecological limits (see Box A1.5). But most of Goal 3’s targets concern reductions in mortality and morbidity rates with little discussion of how these might be achieved, and the risk that Goal 3 becomes ‘the’ health goal to the neglect of the other SDGs associated with the determinants of health. As former WHO Director-General Margaret Chan expressed, “Universal health coverage...underpins all SDGs and is key to their achievement” (The Graduate Institute Geneva, 2015), a worrying health sector solipsism only slightly expanded by MSF and VENRO (an umbrella group of German NGOs) in their urging of the G20 to give special attention to the health targets of the SDGs (Doctors Without Borders, 2017).

*Goal 4: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all* The link between education and good health are

### **Box1. 5: The population Ponzi scheme**

For decades the issue of population planning has been contentious, with both reactionary and progressive arguments calling for efforts to control the size of the human species, which now is the most numerous mammal on the planet and by some numerical distance. Population control has frequently been used by colonizers and elite classes to curb the family size of those they considered inferior, even as feminist and development theorists have argued the importance of guaranteeing the reproductive rights of women often (but not always) emphasizing small family size. Concern over the potential misuse of family planning initiatives exists and is often warranted, but there is broad agreement that the human population cannot continue to expand indefinitely. Yet there is a standard economic argument for continuous population increases that essentially mimics otherwise discredited Ponzi schemes. A Ponzi scheme, named after a fraudulent investor who first dreamt it up, pays investors from capital provided by new investors and not from any real profits. The scheme only succeeds by continually recruiting ever-more new investors, thus expanding the pool of capital to pay the earlier investors, until it eventually collapses (or is found out) with almost all but the scheme's operator(s) losing everything. A dominant demographic argument today mimics the same Ponzi logic. Its argument is that, with population aging, immigration and/or incentives for larger families should be encouraged to re-swell a comparatively shrinking working age cohort (those between 15 and 64 years). The economic rationale is that the taxes collected from the productivity of the working age population is needed to pay for the services and pensions of a proportionately greater and increasing number of elderly. That makes sense, perhaps, for the short-term. But fast forward 40 or 50 years, and the re-swelled working age cohort has itself become elderly (and far more numerous), requiring an ever larger expansion in the base of the working age population. And so on, and on, and on. Like new investors feeding the 'returns' of the earlier and older ones, an ever increasing working age population is assumed necessary to feed the health and social needs of the elderly retired, and to keep the business-as-usual economy growing exponentially. At some point (and we may already have reached it) a continuously expanding pyramidal population base becomes unsustainable on every axis conceivable: economic, ecologic and social.

well-established, particularly for women and girls in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) (PRB, 2011). The emphasis here needs to be placed on the "quality" of education, and not simply on access. Whether such education leads to greater employment in "decent jobs", another of Goal 4's targets, will

depend on how the global over-supply of workers is managed through radically different labour market policies than those erected by the last forty years of neoliberal economics. But it is still better to have a literate and numerate civil society than not, even if un- or under- employed, as that holds some hope for a skilled political change movement. Indeed, without these educational targets Goal 5's aim, *Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls*, is unlikely to be achieved.<sup>9</sup> An important related educational target emphasizes development of knowledge and skills related to “sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equity...and global citizenship” which could help to build a stronger activist base essential to moving governments forward on the SDGs; although the absence of representative global government renders the concept of global citizenship more rhetorical than real.

*Goal 6: Ensure availability and sustainable manage of water and sanitation for all* No water, no health; poor sanitation, much disease. Goal 6 is the historic mainstay of public health, but its activist prioritization needs to be tempered with some critique. The first target references “affordable drinking water,” which could be code for engaging private markets in water supply or user fees for public provision. Recent history in both approaches has not been sanguine for equitable access (Kishimoto, Lobina, & Petitjean, 2015). With diminishing supply and increasing population and agricultural/industrial demand, especially in light of the target to increase agricultural productivity, water access is becoming a source of conflict and a driver of refugee populations. The target “to substantially increase water use efficiency...and ensure sustainable withdrawals and supply of freshwater” is thus central to Goal 6.

*Goal 10: Reduce inequality within and among countries* Given the impossibility of meaningful poverty reduction through economic growth alone, Goal 10 assumes paramount importance. It targets sustained income growth for the bottom 40 per cent at a rate greater than the national average (which is good as far as it goes), but says nothing about the distortion of accumulating wealth at the top without which inequalities could continue to rise. Importantly it does add ‘equality of outcome’ to the usual emphasis on ‘equal opportunity,’ thereby affirming the more difficult of social justice’s two main articulations (Labonte, Baum, & Sanders, 2015). The measure for “fiscal, wage and social protection policies” that “progressively achieve greater equality” is the labour share of GDP – of fundamental importance given the gross erosion in this share over the past 40 years of neoliberal economic policies.

*Goal 12: Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns* The implication of Goal 12 is more profound than its targets, which recycle most of the tropes of ‘sustainable development’ that first made their global rounds with

the 1987 publication of the Bruntland Report, *Our Common Future* (WCED, 1987). Weak on reducing fossil-fuel subsidies (another sovereign escape clause, “in accordance with national circumstances”), the goal itself needs a syntax inversion: not ‘sustainable consumption’ (another instance of the consumption noun dominating the sustainable adjective) but ‘consume sustainably’ (which can only be achieved by reducing current global levels of our material gorging). This recasting of the goal requires a reduction in demand, especially in HICs<sup>10</sup>, at a time when conventional economics is calling for an increase in demand to get the growth economy back on track, underpinning again the foundational importance of an appropriately calibrated inequality goal. Consuming and producing sustainably is also inconsistent with Goal 9’s different targets and indicators calling for increases in industrialization and industrial employment (making still more stuff for more consumers). Such industrialization increases may be meaningful for LICs (in terms of ‘value-adding’ for their exported products, think fine chocolate products rather than raw cocoa beans), but would be sustainable only to the extent that there are parallel dramatic decreases in the same in HICs.

This long list of priority SDGs, although forming a base for campaigning and accountability, nonetheless further reveals the permeating ‘business-as-usual’ model that cripples the utility of the SDGs for meaningful social transformation. But if activists take this near-but-not-quite-fatal flaw into constant consideration in their work, the SDGs still provide us with an imperfect roadmap of a world that just might be liveable into the next century.

### **The (very) short list of priority SDGs**

But even this long list of priority goals could create a cluttered message for health advocates, in which a slew of special interests could drown out the essential transformations needed. This is what happened with the Occupy movement, which became unmoored from its original complaint against the predatory practices of the financialized economy as every social grievance attached itself to the demonstrations and tent cities. If we were to reduce the SDGs to the primary goals, without which none of the others would be likely to succeed even in the short-term, we might consider these three:

1. Ensure quality education for women and girls (which is not to ignore men and boys, but emphasizing women and girls can rapidly advance gender empowerment, one of the best known means to improve health equity).
2. Reduce inequality (which in itself would and should eliminate poverty).
3. Consume and produce sustainably (which requires more equitable global patterns in both, alongside aggregate global reductions, which underpins all of the environmental SDGs).

How, then, do we move forward with this agenda, transforming wondrous words into meaningful actions?

### **Governance for the SDGs**

We are at a crossroads. One road points to the inexorable rise of authoritarianism, while another opens up a more hopeful cosmopolitan future (Held, 2017).

There are no non-radical options left before us. (Winship, 2016).

David Held, a scholarly activist, holds out the possibility that we may yet create a global politic in which the lives of each individual, regardless of nationality, are equally valued and accorded equal rights and privileges. That is also the message of the SDGs, and their catch-phrase: “Leave no one behind.” Naomi Klein, an activist scholar, is more intensely and immediately critical of the ecological predations of global capitalism, attesting to the incongruity of the SDGs in their assumption that by slight tweaks of the same economic model we can continue to grow and consume our way out of a tragedy of unequal growth and skewed consumption. Both in different ways point to a crisis in contemporary global governance, for it is one thing to campaign for the priority SDGs, but quite another to envision the type of political system or organization that might see to their fruition.

In ethical terms, cosmopolitanism challenges the authoritarianism of today’s ‘decisionists’, who rely upon ‘othering’ to capture the disenfranchisement of disgruntled citizens. Trump blames the Mexicans, Chinese, journalists and judges, and foments an internationalizing Islamophobia. Modi aims for a Hindu nationalism with similar anti-Muslim undertones. Putin re-creates an imperialist Russia against the rest of the West. Brexit voters see the source of their economic weakening in the EU’s bureaucracy. Erdogan plays the separatist terrorist card. For Duterte, drug lords and drug addicts have become the legitimating ‘other’ for extrajudicial murder. In none of these instances is the inequality intrinsic to a capitalist economy on globalized steroids questioned as a causal agent. That is where Klein’s economic critique of neoliberal capitalism comprises the political edge to Held’s ethical idealism. This is not to reduce xenophobia (the violent extreme of ‘othering’) to economic determinism so much as to recognize that economic inequalities have been driving much of the illiberal rejection of the past forty years of a ‘hyper-globalization’. The participation of an estimated 4 million worldwide in the women’s protest march the day after Trump’s ill-attended inauguration was invigorating, with the persistence of such citizen demonstrations of solidarity vital in the days and years to come. But it is perilous for such social activism, in response to the discrimination of right-wing ‘othering’, to valorize impugned identities

(important to do) without also critiquing the economics that underpin their derogation in the first instance.

We do not have a global government and its closest equivalent, the UN system has been under neoliberal assault for decades and is facing its own test of contemporary relevance (O'Grady, 2016). Instead we have 'global governance' – a melange of multi-stakeholder forums with varying degrees of influence and decision-making authority, although with little enforcement powers. Such governance systems can help to set normative agendas, as they have with the headline declarations of the SDGs and the Paris Agreement on Climate Change. Such agenda-setting is not unimportant since, in the struggle for a humanistic (cosmopolitan) political populism to challenge the exclusionary autocratic form on present ascent, it is the visionary claims that constitute the basis of engagement.

The struggle for governance in support of these claims will need to work across government (decision-making) levels, from local to global, if it is to succeed. Such efforts are likely to be easier at local levels, where the indignities of disequalizing neoliberal economics and the exclusionary politics it foments are more apparent, and the 'lived experiences' of environmental fragilities more immediate, can catalyze the often more-responsive and participatory democracies of cities and regions. It is not accidental that municipalities and states have become the loci of opposition to the policies of Trump and the Republican Party in the USA. But, while vital for the opportunity localism allows citizens and civil society organizations to articulate, and to agitate for, a different style of politics and economics embodying the progressive targets of the SDGs, it needs to confront power at the national and global scales. It is at these scales that activism encounters its greatest challenge, in the form of a too-often decision-making capitulation to the interests of elite and powerful individuals and corporations in the guise of multi-stakeholder governance. As governments, public institutions and multilateral UN or affiliated agencies fall under fiscal restraint (the result of years of declines in the share of global economic product going to taxes and the financing of public goods) they rationalize greater engagement with powerful and influential private sector actors. From the WHO's formalization of the participation of 'non-state actors' in its functioning (including the private corporate sector) to the UN's Global Compact with private industry (Adams & Martens, 2015), it is hard to see how such governance will resolve the fundamental contradictions inherent to capitalism that remain implicit (and sometimes explicit, if not in name) in the SDGs.

Thus the larger governance struggle surrounding the SDGs is an older one of constraining the predatory nature of capitalism (neoliberal or otherwise), or seeking its transformation into some different system that respects human rights and that moves rapidly to implement the SDGs (sanitised of their economic contradictions). Simply stated: the headline intent of the SDGs, the

most exhaustive and global summary of ‘the world we want’ yet developed (The World We Want, n.d.), poses an inherent opposition to the premises of global capitalism. As activists mobilize around the SDGs, it is imperative that they continuously bring this contradiction to their populist platforms.

## Notes

1 An epigram by the French novelist and critic, Jean-Baptiste Alphonse Karr, published in 1849. Literally: ‘the more it changes, the more it stays the same.’

2 This structural conundrum may also explain why creating more consumer ‘demand’ (through more consumer loans and government stimulus spending) to re-ignite a moribund global economy has become a major concern of the international financial institutions, central banks and many government finance ministries.

3 Similarly, Canada’s labour market reported 200,000 new jobs created in 2016, reported as a sign of a fully recovered and rapidly growing economy. Only in passing was it noted that just over 2/3rds of these were part-time, low-paid, insecure and mostly in the service sector (<http://www.cbc.ca/news/business/jobs-statistics-canada-january-1.3975643>).

4 Similar arguments have been made about the need to prioritize certain ‘indivisible’ human rights over others, based on ethical reasoning (notably the ‘capabilities approach’ developed by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum) and an analysis of contradictions within them similar to those within the SDGs.

5 Perhaps because it is less beholden to the oil industry, ‘decisionist’ China since the 2008 financial crisis has provided proportionately larger sums than most European or North American countries into ‘green energy’ as part of its economic stimulus program (REF: <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2017/jan/05/china-invest-renewable-fuel-2020-energy>). One result of this was the relocation to China of a number of US and EU firms producing solar panels or wind turbines, followed by trade disputes over China’s (and also India’s) ‘trade-distorting’ subsidies. Despite at least six such trade disputes being initiated against subsidies or local sourcing requirements for renewable energy, there have been no disputes against the estimated \$2.9 trillion in government production and consumption subsidies directed towards more health and environmentally destructive fossil fuels.

6 This is not to say that alternative energy sources are free of negative environmental externalities (REF: <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/the-darker-side-of-solar-power/article24649804/>; see also: <http://svtc.org/our-work/solar/>), which only underscores the importance of reducing energy demand, and not merely altering its source. One of the energy targets does call for a doubling in “the global rate of improvement in energy efficiency”, although without reference to either an absolute cap on energy supply or a measure of its equitable global distribution.

7 The following section is adapted from Labonté, 2017: Labonté, R., “Health Promotion in an Age of Normative Equity and Rampant Inequality,” *International Journal of Health Policy and Management* (2016), 5(12), 675-82; [http://www.ijhpm.com/article\\_32443\\_9cfe55f382f6c9876bd955b41b2c9007.pdf](http://www.ijhpm.com/article_32443_9cfe55f382f6c9876bd955b41b2c9007.pdf)

8 Increased production requires technological development (another of SDG 2’s targets), begging the question: Where will the huge numbers of people presently earning their livelihoods in agriculture find employment once the low-income world experiences the same productivity miracle as American farmers did over the past two centuries?

9 Goal 5 in its re-statement of “universal access to sexual and reproductive health” importantly references the Beijing Platform for Action, which does recognize the hazards of unsafe abortion and the importance of access to safe abortion in countries where it is legal, a topic on which Goal 3 is curiously silent.

10 Or, as a commentary on the universality of the SDGs, argues, countries must attend not only to progressing through the goals and targets within their own borders, but must ensure that their own actions do not imperil other countries’ abilities to meet the targets. This implies taking action commensurate to the degree to which they contribute to the problem globally; and a high level of ambition for HICs in reducing their consumption/production in order for LICs and LMICs to increase theirs

(REF: <https://www.iisd.org/blog/reporting-sustainable-development-goals-challenges-oecd-countries-part-2-universality>).

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