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The masters of greenwashing

The UN's SDGs are not the answer to the global crises. In fact, with their techno-optimistic, finance-focused approach, they make things worse

Disillusionment pervaded the UN summit in New York. On 18 and 19 September, member states met to discuss progress towards the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Half way towards the 2030 deadline, just 15 per cent of them are on track to be met, and up to 30 per cent have even seen a regression.

This elicited broadly similar reactions across the board, namely that it was vital to ensure the goals are still achieved after all. To that end, the international community is pinning its hopes on the twin pillars of digitalisation and finance. Via a large dose of techno-optimism plus injections of new funds (Germany, for instance, is giving the World Bank around €300 million from the budget of the Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development), it is thus aiming to achieve a very different outcome over the remaining seven years, while in fact pursuing an essentially unchanged approach. It's hardly surprising then that the summit's speakers seemed to be stuck in the rhetorical no-man's land of hopes, dreams and wishes. That they were forced to resort to such vague exhortations to keep the faith is down to the fact that participants face enormous practical constraints, and are also hamstrung by the contradictions of the 2030 Agenda itself.

Right at the start of the summit, UN Secretary-General António Guterres called on the member states not to focus on the reasons for this failure and on mutual finger-pointing, but to instead redouble efforts to achieve the SDGs. It's an approach that calls to mind Kurt Tucholsky's maxim that those who point out muck are much more dangerous than those who create it. The question of whether the international community should admit that the SDGs themselves are a problem was thus rendered taboo by those at the very top. There is, it would seem, no exit strategy from the current plan.

The UN's grand delusions

Sustainable development is the best business plan of all, Guterres stated earlier at the SDG Action Weekend. What he chose to ignore was that, in the current global economic order, value chains based on exploiting other people and their natural resources only remain the best 'business plan' if your aim is to generate profit. Sustainability and economic growth are almost always contradictory, despite the masterclasses in cognitive dissonance and greenwashing offered by summit participants.

SDG 8's goal of sustained economic growth is emblematic of a grand delusion perpetuated by the UN. The constant quest for more is at best partly responsible for and at worst instrumental in many of today's global problems. After all, some of the very biggest international corporations are those behind the exploitative fossil fuel use that has caused a global climate crisis and led to structural inequality between different regions of the world.

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At this mid-way point, summit participants expressed disappointment that, despite the agreed goals, not enough has been done to tackle global warming. Six out of nine planetary boundaries have already been breached. These sentiments, however, stand in contrast to the dropping of fossil fuel reduction as a goal, which happened before negotiations on the SDGs even began. Any discussion of such a goal would have resulted in oil-producing countries refusing to come to the negotiating table at all.

The SDG summit saw the adoption of another new declaration, after facilitation by Ireland and Qatar. There is, however, still no mention of reducing fossil fuel use in this 10-page document, something both countries, given their current situations, benefit from. According to ecological footprint assessments, the average per capita CO_2 emissions are currently more than three times too high in Ireland, and more than nine times too high in Qatar. For the declaration to talk of countries' vulnerability to climate change while remaining silent on fossil fuel use is frankly absurd.

Another grand delusion within the UN is that member states intend to meet the development goals despite crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic. In fact, the SDGs foster a way of life that positively facilitates global crises. SDG 9, for instance, talks about building infrastructure, the consequences of which include an increase in impervious surfaces,

deforestation and the destruction of wildlife habitats. One result of this is an ever-increasing animal-to-human transmission of pathogens, as people around the globe experienced in the recent pandemic. Likewise, famine, an issue repeatedly emphasised during the summit, is connected not to the quantity of infrastructure, but to a massively unequal distribution and blockades on supplies. Mostly, the end result of a constant quest for more is more problems — improvements for the worse, as it were.

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A third grand delusion becomes apparent if we look at the issue of global social inequalities. SDG 10 includes, among other things, a division into sustainable and non-sustainable countries in relation to their migration policies, where countries with high refugee populations are classified as non-sustainable. This seeks to create border regimes aimed at controlling and separating people. The declaration adopted at the SDG summit goes even further, with its emphasis on 'taking into account national circumstances' representing an extreme watering down of commitments. Here, sustainable development, in effect, means that people's movement should be restricted or entirely curtailed. True social justice would mean the exact opposite, given that those who migrate are the people most likely to experience upward social mobility. At present, we are seeing crises of control at Europe's external borders and those of the United States, places that have become mass graves for tens of thousands of people. In terms of social justice, sustainability would mean open migration routes, i.e. fewer individual state borders. By focusing on the consolidation of border regimes and thus preventing global mobility for individuals, the SDGs, on the other hand, promote a deepening of social inequalities. Indeed, there could hardly be a more potent symbol of the failure of the United Nations in general than its underlying principle of discrete states that seek to keep people apart.

At this mid-point in the 2030 Agenda, one thing should by now be apparent: the elephant in the room is that, if participants are serious about meeting the challenges of today's polycrises, then the SDGs are not

the answer. Ultimately, the UN development goals seek to preserve an unsustainable way of life. It seems baffling to wish to uphold prevailing notions of prosperity while completely ignoring the frequent crises they cause. Sustainability means ensuring the world is, at the very least, no less liveable for future generations than it is today. As we saw from the SDG summit, member states are set to allow even this most basic goal to be missed, while their techno-optimistic, finance-focused approach risks making global crises worse.



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