Five reasons to think twice about the UN's Sustainable Development Goals

*As part of the **Africa at LSE** and **South Asia at LSE** cross-blog series on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, LSE's Jason Hickel critiques the new Sustainable Development Goals. He argues that the goals due to be signed at the UN Summit this week are not only a missed opportunity, but actively dangerous because they lock the global development agenda around a failing economic model.*

This week the world's heads of state will gather in New York to sign the new Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It is set to be a major international event, and comes on the heels of what has been billed as "the world's largest advertising campaign" – a slick social media operation that has Beyoncé, One Direction, Malala, Mafikizolo, and countless other major personalities on the roster, with the likes of Gary Lineker and Gareth Bale entertaining audiences with their #dizzygoals.

But despite this enormous effort, the campaign has not managed to inspire more than a few thousand clicks. For some reason no one seems to be excited about the SDGs.

First session of the UN Open Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals, 2013. Credit: flickr/Adam Adamus CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

The *Economist* and the Gates Foundation have slated the goals for being too wide-ranging, too cumbersome to be packaged into sound-bites. But thoroughness can hardly be the problem here; after all, the Pope's recent encyclical – which addresses the same issues – inspired an excited global conversation despite being hundreds of pages long. It seems more likely that the SDGs are being ignored because, unlike with the encyclical, there is nothing in them that's really *new*. At base, the Zero Draft reflects old thinking, and calls for little more than business as usual.

People are not getting excited about the SDGs because they know that business as usual isn't going to deliver the new economy we so desperately need. In this sense, the goals are not only a missed opportunity, they are actively dangerous: they lock in the global development agenda for the next 15 years around a failing economic model that requires urgent and deep structural changes, and they kick the hard challenge of real transformation down the road for the next generation to deal with – by which time it may be too late.

Here are five good reasons to think twice about the SDGs.

1. The contradiction of growth

The Zero Draft affirms the necessity of achieving "harmony with nature," establishes a commitment to hold global warming below the 2° Celsius threshold, and calls for "sustainable patterns of production and consumption." This language signals awareness that something about our economic system has gone terribly awry – that the pursuit of endless industrial growth is chewing through our living planet and threatening our existence.

And yet the core of the SDG programme for development and poverty reduction relies precisely on the old model of industrial growth — ever-increasing levels of extraction, production, and consumption. Goal 8 calls for 7% annual GDP growth in the least developed countries and higher levels of economic productivity across the board.

In other words, the SDGs call for both less and more at the same time. How can they expect to succeed with such a profound contradiction at their root?

Right now global production and consumption levels are overshooting our planet's capacity by about 50% each year. This is a monumental crisis, and one that proceeds from the deep logic of capitalism. Yet the SDGs offer nothing but superficial responses: reduce food waste, make resource use more efficient, and "encourage companies to adopt sustainable practices." These proposals explicitly sidestep the only real solution, which is to reduce over-consumption by the world's wealthy.

2. Growth does not reduce poverty

The Zero Draft promotes growth as the main solution to poverty, but this relationship is highly tenuous. While global GDP has grown by 271% since 1990, the number of people living on less than $5/day has *increased* by more than 370 million. Clearly growth is not working. Under best-case scenarios the picture looks a bit more promising, but even so the poorest 60% of humanity receive only 5% of all new income generated by global growth.

Why do the SDGs rely on growth as a poverty-reduction strategy? Because the prospect of growth allows our leaders to sidestep the challenge of having to distribute existing resources more fairly.

The only problem is that, even given the best-case scenario mentioned above, it will take 207 years to eliminate poverty with this strategy. And to get there, we will have to grow the global economy by 175 times its present size. This is obviously a terrible strategy: even if such immense growth were possible, it would drive climate change to catastrophic levels and, in the process, rapidly reverse any gains against poverty.

What we really need is to abandon GDP in favor of a saner measure of human progress – one that does not rely on endlessly increasing extraction and consumption. This has been on the table for a long time, but repeatedly blocked by powerful interests in the SDG process. Instead, the SDGs quite literally pass this urgent challenge down to the next generation: buried at the very bottom of Goal 17 is a flimsy commitment to, "by 2030 build on existing initiatives to develop measurements of progress on sustainable development that complement GDP."

In other words, the SDGs are committed to shelving the problem until 2029.

3. Inequality gets ignored

If growth doesn't provide a solution to poverty, then the only real alternative is to reduce the enormous inequality that marks our global society, where the richest 1% own half of the world's total private wealth. Confronting inequality is the only way to end poverty in a climate-constrained world, and we need to face up to this fact.

Inequality has become perhaps the most pressing issue of our time, and yet the SDGs remain silent on it. All we get is Target 10.1, which states that by 2030 they will "progressively achieve and sustain income growth of the bottom 40% of the population at a rate higher than the national average." In other words, we can allow inequality to grow until 2029 before gradually beginning to reduce it. But of course by then it will no longer be a binding commitment.

The SDGs initially included two other targets on equitable sharing of global resources, but US negotiators eviscerated them last month in a last-minute backroom decision.

Thus yet another monumental global challenge has been handed down to the next generation. This betrayal is the subject of an open letter to the UN that has been signed by Noam Chomsky, Naomi Klein, Thomas Pogge, Chris Hedges, Eve Ensler and other powerful voices.

4. Big drivers of poverty are left unaddressed

Surprisingly, the SDGs offer little by way of solutions to many of the biggest known drivers of global poverty. They say nothing about the unfair trade regime of the World Trade Organisation, or the many bilateral trade and investment agreements that liberalise global markets at the expense of the poor. In fact, instead of tackling this crucial issue, Goal 17.10 calls for *more* trade liberalisation and *more* power for the WTO.

And instead of demanding an end to the financial speculation that has caused food prices to spike since 2007, pushing 150 million into hunger, the SDGs ask that we "ensure the proper functioning of food commodity markets." It's not clear what this means, but it can easily be interpreted as yet more liberalisation, which is what caused the food crisis in the first place.

The SDGs are also eerily silent on the need for greater regulation of financial markets and big banks. Goal 17.13 speaks vaguely of the need to "enhance global macroeconomic stability" through "policy coordination," with no specific targets. Tax evasion and tax avoidance, which drain developing countries of $1.7 trillion each year, are politely sidestepped.

Finally, the SDGs evade the issue of debt. They refuse to call for debt cancellation even though debt service drains developing countries of more than $700 billion per year – money that could be directed instead toward poverty reduction. On the contrary, clauses inserted by the EU in yet another backroom deal ensure that borrowers shoulder full responsibility for over-indebtedness.

5. The mis-measurement of poverty

Nowhere is the compromised nature of the SDGs more evident than in their proposal to eradicate extreme poverty, which they measure at only $1.25/day. It's high time we got around to eradicating poverty, but a growing number of scholars are pointing out that $1.25 is actually not adequate for human subsistence.

A number of recent studies suggest that if people are to achieve normal life expectancy and meet their basic needs as outlined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, they need closer to $5 per day.

So why do the SDGs stick with the discredited $1.25 measure? Because it's the only one that will allow them to get anywhere near their goal of eradicating poverty by 2030. If we measure poverty by the more accurate $5/day line, the total poverty headcount rises to 4.3 billion people, more than 60% of humanity.

Eradicating poverty of this magnitude would require more than just weeding around the edges of the problem. It would require changing the rules of the global economy to make it fairer for the world's majority. The SDGs fail us on this. They offer to tinker with the global economic system in a well-meaning bid to make it all seem a bit less violent. But, as Arundhati Roy has put it, "we are not fighting to tinker with reforming a system that needs to be replaced."

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This post forms part of a cross-blog series on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development run by the **Africa at LSE** and **South Asia at LSE** blogs. View more posts in this series.

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