

Inclusive Narrative of Development: The SDGs as a Post-Foundational Framework for Global Governance*

*Sürdürülebilir Kalkınma Amaçları (SKA'lar) ve Kapsayıcı Kalkınma:
Temelcilik Sonrası Küresel Yönetişim Perspektifi*

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Abstract

This study critically examines the role of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in global development, focusing on their introduction of a post-foundational framework that rethinks traditional development paradigms. The SDGs represent a transformative shift from the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which were largely shaped by neoliberal economic principles and felt short in addressing structural inequalities and environmental degradation. The 2008 global financial crisis exposed the limitations of rigid, economic growth-centered frameworks, amplifying calls for inclusive, flexible, and sustainable approaches. Developed through an extensive participatory process, the SDGs prioritize the integration of environmental, social, and economic dimensions of sustainability while simultaneously allowing for adaptation to diverse national contexts. At their core, the SDGs reject fixed ideological foundations, instead they embrace a governance model based on negotiation, dialogue, and inclusivity. This post-foundationalist approach positions development as a dynamic and context-sensitive process, enabling responses tailored to the unique values and conditions of individual countries. By emphasizing equitable collaboration across global and local levels, the SDGs promote shared responsibility while addressing the root causes of inequality and exclusion. Ultimately, the SDGs redefine development as a multidimensional, participatory endeavor that prioritizes human dignity, social justice, and ecological balance over standardized and universalizing solutions, which marks a significant evolution in global governance.

Keywords: *Sustainable Development Goals, Neoliberalism, Post-foundationalist approach*

Özet

Bu çalışma; Sürdürülebilir Kalkınma Hedefleri'nin (SKH'ler) küresel kalkınmadaki rolünü, geleneksel kalkınma paradigmlarını yeniden şekillendiren post-temelci bir çerçeve bağlamında ele almaktadır. Neoliberal ekonomik ilkelere şekillenen Binyıl Kalkınma Hedefleri (BKH'ler), yapısal eşitsizlikleri ve çevresel bozulmayı ele almakta yetersiz kalmış, 2008 küresel mali krizi ise bu katı, büyüme odaklı yaklaşımların sınırlamalarını açığa çıkarmıştır. Katılımcı bir süreçle geliştirilen SKH'ler, sosyal ve ekonomik sürdürülebilirliği bir araya getirerek farklı ulusal

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baęlamlara uyarlanabilir esnek bir model sunmaktadır. SKH'lerin temelinde, sabit ideolojik temellere dayanmayan, mzakereye, diyaloga ve kapsayıcılıęa dayalı bir ynetiřim modeli bulunmaktadır. Bu post-temelci yaklařım, kalkınmayı dinamik ve baęlama duyarlı bir sreç olarak yeniden tanımlamakta ve farklı lkelerin kendine zg deęerlerine ve kořullarına uygun yanıtlar geliřtirilmesine olanak tanımaktadır. Kresel ve yerel dzeylerde eřitlikçi iř birlięini teřvik eden SKH'ler, eřitsizliklerin ve dıřlanmanın kkenlerini ele alırken, paylařılan sorumluluk ilkesiyle hareket etmektedir. Sonuç olarak, SKH'ler, kalkınmayı insan onurunu, sosyal adaleti ve ekolojik dengeyi nceliklendiren çok boyutlu ve katılımcı bir giriřim olarak yeniden tanımlayarak kresel ynetiřimde nemli bir dnřm temsil etmektedir.

***Anahtar kelimeler:** Srdrlebilir Kalkınma Hedefleri, Neoliberalizm, Post-temelci yaklařım*

Introduction

Economic development has long been a central concern in global discourses, with countries and organizations striving to address complex social and environmental challenges. In the course of time, various theoretical approaches and policy paradigms have emerged to demonstrate the changing priorities within political, economic, and social spheres. There have been contested concepts of development that have been prominent in the international system, directly impacting interstate relations as well as domestic policy. In particular, the United Nations (UN), as the key global institution, has played a central role in shaping and advancing these paradigms through coordinating efforts across its specialized agencies and member states (Fomerand, 2020). Kenneth Dadzie's four-phase development framework demonstrates the historical trajectory of UN development procedures by providing a historical lens through which to analyze the shifting priorities and approaches. According to Weiss et al. (2018), these phases can be categorized as follows: "national state capitalism" (1945–1962), "international affirmative action" (1962–1981), "return to neoliberalism" (1981–1989), and finally, "sustainable development" (1989–present).

One of the most crucial changes in the development approach of the UN has been the shift towards sustainability, which essentially revisited the global discourse on development. The re-evaluation of development considered environmental sustainability and social justice as indispensable components beyond mere economic growth. Adopted by the UN in 2015, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) represented a transformation from earlier development models often based on rigid, ideologically driven frameworks. While previous approaches focused primarily on economic growth and market-driven solutions, the SDGs have reflected a more flexible, pluralistic approach that emphasizes inclusivity, participation, and collaboration across diverse actors. Under the SDGs, governments, civil society, the private sector, and local communities are brought together around shared values like social justice, human dignity, and ecological sustainability.

This paper investigates the role of the SDGs in transforming development practices through a post-foundationalist lens. More specifically, it traces the evolution of development thinking from traditional linear models to a more inclusive, context-specific approach embodied by the SDGs. This study argues that the SDGs have represented an inclusive framework for sustainable development, which has promoted a dynamic and adaptable approach in responding to local contexts and evolving global challenges. Lastly, it examines the SDGs' commitment to fostering a more democratic global community by balancing universal objectives with contextual adaptability. By enabling diverse interpretations and applications across cultural and economic contexts, the SDGs demonstrates a departure from top-down, one-size-fits-all models, in favor of advancing a more participatory, bottom-up approach to global development.

The Emergence of the Idea of Sustainability

The development concept has long been essential to debates on national economic policies and the global economy, with the UN playing a key role. In its early years, the UN's development program was heavily influenced by Keynesian economic doctrines, which advocated for state intervention in the economy, the promotion of national economic self-reliance, and the establishment of state-owned enterprises in key sectors of the economy (Weiss et al., 2018). This approach prioritized national economic growth as the primary objective of development through state-led economic models. The Keynesian paradigm assumes that government intervention plays a fundamental role in managing economic cycles, which is expected to ensure full employment and promote social welfare. This vision of development aligned with the UN's early goals of rebuilding war-torn economies and establishing economic stability in the post-World War II era (Harrod, 1972).

This focus on national self-reliance was part of a broader global consensus, as evidenced by the establishment of the Bretton Woods institutions (e.g., the World Bank and the IMF) and regional development bodies aimed at fostering reconstruction and economic stability in post-conflict nations (Weiss et al., 2018). The UN's initiatives during this period were largely centered around state-driven efforts to build infrastructure, promote industrialization, and reduce dependency on foreign aid. To mitigate reliance on the global capitalist system, this phase also emphasized the need for self-sufficiency and national sovereignty in economic affairs (Helleiner, 2023). These efforts mirrored the broader post-World War II belief in the importance of governmental intervention to regulate the economy and lay the foundation for long-term development.

In the post-colonial period, the UN membership witnessed a steep acceleration that led to the second phase of the UN's development approach. This period marked the Global South's seeking to assert control over their economic futures, leaving behind colonial exploitation, and reshaping the development agenda in order to effectively address their unique challenges and aspirations. This sphere witnessed an increasing awareness of

national self-reliance by addressing the structural imbalances within the global political economy. Newly independent states in the Global South sought to rectify historical injustices and income inequalities, in return advocating for a New International Economic Order (NIEO). In response, the UN expanded its technical assistance to these countries with a strong emphasis on poverty reduction, women’s empowerment, education, and small-scale business development. These efforts aimed to balance the economic pre-eminence of the Global North and mitigate the systemic imbalances that left many post-colonial nations reliant on foreign aid and international markets (Weiss et al., 2018). Simultaneously, the Bretton Woods institutions, particularly the World Bank and IMF, revised their development programs to better identify the specific needs of the Global South. They adopted policies focused on improving living standards, reducing inequality, and promoting socio-economic empowerment. The second period resulted in the 1974 adoption of the Declaration and Program of Action on the Establishment of a New International Economic Order, which centered on principles such as economic sovereignty, fair trade, aid reform, and greater participation of postcolonial states (Getachew, 2019).

During the 1980s, the third sphere of the UN’s development discourse was characterized by Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) to promote neoliberal economic policies under the direction of the Washington Consensus. As influenced by theorists such as Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman and political leaders such as Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, the UN’s development program moved away from state-led economic models to market-driven solutions based on free-market capitalism (*laissez-faire*), minimal regulation, and maximum private entrepreneurship (Weiss et al., 2018). SAPs, promoted by the UN and Bretton Woods institutions, became significant to development strategies in the Global South. These programs emphasized economic liberalization through privatizing state-owned enterprises, deregulation, and free trade. In this context, a free-market economy is envisioned to encompass “common goods” (those that transcend the technical and/or economic realm) which are conceptualized on the grounds of “immaterial values carrying ethical and humane significance” to exemplify freedom and the protection of human rights (Andersen and Lindsnaes, 2007: xiii).

However, the outcomes of the third phase have turned out to be highly controversial. Global South countries experienced increased poverty, widened inequality, and social unrest because of harsh economic adjustments. This period earned the moniker “lost decade” for development, with stagnant growth, mounting debt crises, and deteriorating social conditions plaguing many developing nations (Coate, 2014: 622). By the late 1980s, critiques of neoliberal policies were uncontrollable. The debt crises, exacerbated by rising interest rates and economic instability, have sparked calls for debt relief and a reevaluation of the neoliberal development model. This evolution culminated in a greater focus on sustainability, which emerged as a central theme by the end of the decade (Weiss et al., 2018).

By the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War in 1989, the UN's development approach adopted sustainable development, which was popularized by the Brundtland Commission's 1987 report, *Our Common Future*. This concept defined as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987: 54). Sustainable development, as the current prominent approach of development, has brought about a new synthesis between free-market advocates and public regulations and socio-economic assistance. This phase marked a key change driven by increasing concerns about environmental limits and social inequality. The Brundtland Report particularly emphasized two main principles: (i) prioritizing the needs of the world's impoverished environmental challenges imposed by existing technologies and social structures, and (ii) emphasizing the simultaneous consideration of environmental preservation, social equity, and economic growth. This vision represented a departure from earlier development models, which often relegated environmental and social concerns to secondary importance. The Brundtland Commission laid the foundation for subsequent initiatives, including the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and later the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), providing a global roadmap for tackling the interconnected challenges of poverty, inequality, and environmental sustainability (Morgan, 2010).

The evolution of the UN's development frameworks from Keynesianism and state-led models to neoliberal market reforms and finally to embrace sustainable development in fact reflected a broader shift in global development thinking. This trajectory highlighted the new understanding of development as integrating economic, social, and environmental dimensions rather than singular, linear process. The adoption of sustainable development for a more inclusive, equitable, and environmentally responsible approach marked a shift from growth-centric frameworks to prioritizing global justice.

Charting a New Course: Lessons from the MDGs' Achievements and Shortcomings

The 2008 global financial crisis marked a milestone in the reassessment of prevalent development paradigms, with far-reaching results for economic stability and global development. As McCloskey (2015) highlighted, the crisis revealed the structural vulnerabilities of the global economic system and the inadequacies of neoliberal policies. These policies failed to address fundamental challenges such as economic and social inequality. Klein (2015: 15) describes the 2008 economic crisis and ongoing climate change crisis as an "existential crisis" that obliges to transform "our failed [neoliberal] economic system." Eventually, this crisis revealed the vulnerability of economic systems in the Global North, which forcefully highlights the urgent need for a fundamental shift in approach.

The MDGs became the cornerstone of the UN's sustainable development agenda, introduced at the 2000 Millennium Summit to inspire more unified and effective programs, goals, and policies for a more sustainable future. Adopted with a set target date of 2015, these goals aim to adopt measures to promote sustainable human development to improve and maintain their basic needs as well as their social, economic, and psychological security (Weiss et al., 2018). UN member states agreed to eight time-bound goals to solve critical global challenges such as poverty, gender inequality, education, health, and environmental sustainability. A new political-economic relationship between the North and the South has emerged with the MDGs. At the same time, the environment became integrated into the global agenda and subsequently amalgamated economic development with social development (Biermann, Kanie, & Kim, 2017). As such, the MDGs demonstrated a new, inclusive, and dialogical approach to the North-South debate that culminated in a convergence towards more sustainable growth models.

Even though the MDGs' strived to address underdevelopment, they confronted significant criticism because of their certain deficiency in identifying the structural roots of global poverty and inequality. Critics like Klein (2015) and Hickel (2017) maintained that the MDGs perpetuated a growth-driven paradigm that exacerbated inequality and environmental harm and thus failed to address the interconnected nature of economic and environmental crises. The MDGs were increasingly perceived to largely neglect the environmental impacts of neoliberal development, particularly resource extraction and ecological degradation (Pogge and Sengupta, 2016). Despite setting ambitious targets like halving extreme poverty, the MDGs often addressed the symptoms of poverty rather than its root causes. These root causes include inequitable trade policies, illegitimate debt, power imbalances within global financial institutions, and the climate change crisis, which have been "meticulously linked to neoliberalism's rampant and unsustainable consumption of natural resources" (McCloskey, 2015: 192).

Fukuda-Parr (2016) critiques the MDGs from a human rights perspective, arguing that their neoliberal underpinnings inadvertently exacerbated inequality and poverty. The MDGs' market-driven focus prioritized corporate profits over human welfare in return reinforced power imbalances within and between nations. This reliance on market forces, Fukuda-Parr (2009) contends that the MDGs neglected the political economy of development and limited efforts to challenge the global order that perpetuates inequality. Similarly, Bello (2013) argues that the framework failed to address the structural roots of global poverty, inequality, and marginalization. While Bello views the MDGs as a tool promoted by Global Social Democracy (GSD), an offshoot of European social democratic ideas that advocate for globalization and global market integration, the MDGs' primary shortcoming was their technocratic nature. They were "a project where experts conceived and imposed reforms from above, rather than a participatory project

where initiatives emerged from the ground up” (Bello, 2013: 216). Another central critique of the MDGs, particularly from scholars such as Harcourt (2005), is that the MDGs are overly focused on development assistance to the Global South while failing to address the intricate challenges brought up by globalization, trade, and debt. The MDGs were shaped by the geopolitical and economic priorities of the Global North, thereby they overlook critical areas such as global trade rules, migration, and financial flows. Harcourt (2005: 1) argues that these issues significantly impact development in poorer nations and that they were not addressed by the “minimum development” approach of the MDGs.

To tackle the multi-dimensional development challenges, the UN has maintained its sustainable development efforts. Therefore, at the United Nations Rio+20 summit in Brazil, committed governments created Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) or ‘Global Goals’ that aimed to broaden the capacity of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) after their 2015 deadline (Griggs et al. 2013). As the successor of the MDGs, the SDGs have aimed to address symptoms and root causes of poverty and inequality with their 17 interconnected goals prioritized long-term solutions (Fukuda-Parr, 2016). Unlike the MDGs, which frequently focused on short-term remedies and ignored fundamental challenges, the SDGs aimed to create a more inclusive, balanced, and equitable approach to global development. This evolution indicated a comprehensive strategy of shared responsibility to ensure development efforts across social, economic, and environmental dimensions (Griggs et al., 2013).

A fundamental distinction between the MDGs and SDGs lies in the latter’s holistic vision, targeting systemic changes in global economic systems, governance structures, and societal values (Fukuda-Parr, 2016). The SDGs underlined the shared responsibility of all nations to address global challenges through an inclusive and collaborative approach.¹ Unlike the MDGs’ top-down, technocratic process, the SDGs were developed through extensive consultations with governments, civil society, businesses, and academics (Biermann, Kanie, and Kim, 2017). This systemic angle acknowledged that challenges such as poverty, inequality, and climate change are interconnected both at national and international levels and require coordinated solutions within and outside organizations (Le Blanc, 2015). For instance, health-related targets (SDG 3) are closely tied to clean water and sanitation (SDG 6), sustainable cities (SDG 11), and responsible consumption and production (SDG 12). As Le Blanc (2015) highlights, the SDG framework was designed to foster partnership and minimize trade-offs, particularly by aligning sectoral policies toward shared objectives. Moreover, the SDGs’ universality demanded action from both developed and developing nations, with each country attending sustainability within its specific context (Kroll, Warchold, and

¹ The SDGs are about “a global agenda for sustainable development. They are universal goals that set targets for all – not just poor – countries and are as relevant for the USA as for Liberia” (Fukuda-Parr, 2016: 213).

Pradhan, 2019). Fukuda-Parr (2016) underscores that this comprehensive and inclusive framework redefines global development as a collective responsibility rather than a unilateral agenda imposed on the Global South. This inclusive methodology fostered international cooperation and reflected a consensus on the importance of focusing the needs of marginalized and vulnerable groups, including women, indigenous peoples, and persons with disabilities.

An Inclusive Framework for All: A Post-Foundational Approach to Sustainable Development

The SDGs developed through a remarkable participatory process shaped by a participatory and consultative process by involving feedback from over a million people, making it “the largest consultative effort ever by the UN” (Monkelbaan, 2019: 12). By incorporating diverse perspectives, the SDGs have adopted the interconnected challenges of poverty, inequality, and climate change in a comprehensive and integrated aspect. Their emphasis on inclusivity, adaptability, and shared responsibility represents a transformative step toward redefining development to align global aspirations with local realities (Monkelbaan, 2019).² As Biermann, Kanie and Kim (2017: 27) notes, the SDGs are not simply a set of technical goals but rather a form of “governance through goals” that incorporates diverse voices and interests. This model of goal setting is non-legally binding yet carries significant normative weight and promotes collective action at multiple levels of governance.³ The SDGs have surpassed previous attempts at global governance by integrating bottom-up, non-confrontational, and stakeholder-oriented approaches. As such, the SDGs offer a flexible, adaptable, and inclusive governance concept that includes both global actors (governments and civil society) and local and global private sector (Biermann, Kanie, and Kim, 2017).

Building on this idea of inclusivity and emerging from a participatory, deliberative democratic process, the SDGs have represented a post-foundational model of global governance. Post-foundationalism rejects the imposition of rigid, paternalistic, and universalizing moral systems, which have historically been used to justify development agendas. Unlike previous development models, which often relied on fixed moral order or monolithic ideology, the SDGs embrace a more flexible, dialogical approach that allows for ongoing negotiation and contestation. Here, the SDGs do not assert

2 It is important to note that “like other normative concepts – democracy and justice, for example – the concept of sustainable development will mean different things in different places because it is the concrete context that will determine the weight given to the social, economic and ecological dimensions of the concept. As a context-dependent concept, sustainable development needs to be understood as a spatial concept because it is grounded in the material circumstances of people and place, which is why local and regional context is so important to the politics of sustainability” (Morgan, 2010: 88).

3 The SDGs have introduced a new governance model that relies on non-binding global goals set by the UN member states. The SDGs operate through a relatively weak institutional framework at the intergovernmental level, which emphasizes a bottom-up, collaborative, and inclusive approach, involving countries and various stakeholders. This decentralized and participatory approach is seen as a key factor in achieving global inclusivity and comprehensiveness in the global goal-setting process (Biermann, Kanie, and Kim, 2017).

a singular, hegemonic vision of human progress but instead create a platform for a diversity of voices to come together, negotiate, and agree on common goals. This process acknowledged that development cannot be prescribed from a foundationalist perspective but must instead be negotiated and adapted to specific political, economic, and cultural contexts and thus reflect the diversity of global needs and values.

Actors with diverse political agendas and constituencies shaped the SDGs' political instruments. These actors and groups have influenced the content and scope of the SDGs through deliberative processes, determining which issues to prioritize and address. As Pettit (2012: 9) argued, democracy, both on a national and global scale, requires both "contestatory" and "participatory" processes that reflect shared interests and foster inclusive agreements. Pettit's concept of "freedom as non-domination" emphasized the necessity of impartial institutions shaped by deliberation and contestation, principles mirrored in the SDG negotiation process (2012: 23). Within Pettit's terminology, the SDGs can be seen as a product of "contestatory" and "participatory" democratic politics to define the common goods and goals by enabling broad-based participation and iterative revisions through their inclusive framework. They have served as an evolving model of participatory democracy, engaging stakeholders across governments, civil society, and the private sector to collaboratively shape the global development agenda while navigating regional and ideological complexities (Biermann, Kanie, and Kim, 2017; Dryzek and Pickering, 2019). As such, the SDGs represented a shift toward a more pluralistic, non-hegemonic framework that seeks consensus on human dignity, equality, and shared needs, rather than any particular moral or ideological foundation. This democratic process fosters an inclusive language in the SDGs, allowing for global participation and reflecting a consensus on key development goals and targets. In return, the encompassing language can better appeal to a global audience.

The SDGs emphasize adaptability by enabling countries to tailor their strategies to address unique national contexts and challenges. This flexibility has fostered local ownership and contextual relevance, ensuring that development efforts resonate with specific societal needs and capacities (Kanie and Biermann, 2017: 100). This vision integrated principles of social justice, sustainability, and human dignity into global governance, reflecting a shift toward participatory and inclusive policymaking (United Nations, 2015; Fukuda-Parr, 2016). In essence, by challenging entrenched structures of power and privilege, the SDGs redefined development as a shared moral responsibility based on participatory governance and ethical accountability (Dryzek and Pickering, 2019).

Moreover, the goal-setting approach also has a moral aspect. The SDGs stress the moral dimensions of development, offering a normative framework rooted in principles of sustainability, equity, and human dignity. Unlike the MDGs, which lacked a cohesive ethical foundation, the SDGs established a shared moral vision that transcended

ideological divides and prioritized systemic transformation over instrumentalism and fragmentism (Kanie and Biermann, 2017). The moral discourse of the SDGs transcended national and cultural boundaries without endorsing any specific foundationalist ethical system or comprehensive moral doctrine. Grounded in universally shared political principles such as equality and justice, the SDGs have provided a framework for global cooperation while respecting the pluralism of local values and norms. This approach is designed to reconcile local economic, social, and environmental objectives with universal political values (Le Blanc, 2015:). As Clarke (2008) notes, the SDGs have offered a flexible and non-dogmatic moral framework, responsive to the evolving needs of the global community. This inclusivity demonstrated a significant departure from earlier, often Western-centric development models, offering a more global and adaptable moral discourse that aligns with diverse perspectives, needs, and contexts.

This approach embodied a post-foundationalist ethos, rejecting the idea of a paternalistic, predetermined or universally applicable hegemonic formula for development. Instead, it embraced a democratic principle that development must be negotiated through contingent, context-sensitive, and collaborative processes. In other words, rather than being a static set of objectives, the SDGs have functioned as a dynamic framework for governance which evolves through ongoing negotiation, redefinition, and reaffirmation as new challenges and circumstances arise. The SDGs also prioritized inclusive governance, where power is not concentrated in a few institutions but shared among diverse stakeholders. In this sense, the SDGs are inherently dialogical: their meaning and implementation emerge through continuous engagement and contestation among various actors, whose interests and values transform and acclimate in response to changing global circumstances.

The SDGs, while designed to be a dynamic and inclusive framework for development, can also face unprecedented challenges in the current global landscape. The latest UN report (2024) outlined these challenges, identifying the COVID-19 pandemic,⁴ global conflicts, environmental crises,⁵ economic instability, and civilian casualties⁶ as significant setbacks in front of achieving the SDGs. Nevertheless, the report also acknowledged “encouraging advancements” in several areas, including improved

4 The Covid-19 pandemic, for instances, has “reversed nearly 10 years of progress in life expectancy” (UN, The Sustainable Development Goals Report, 2024).

5 The UN highlights the cumulative impacts of climate change, stating: “In 2023, the world experienced the warmest year on record. For the first time, global temperatures were dangerously close to the 1.5°C lower limit of the Paris Agreement” (UN, The Sustainable Development Goals Report, 2024).

6 The UN reported a 72% increase in civilian casualties in armed conflicts between 2022 and 2023. This resulted in record-high numbers of refugees (37.4 million) and forcibly displaced people (nearly 120 million), the highest spike since the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in 2015. In 2023, 40% of civilians killed in conflicts were women and 30% were children (UN, The Sustainable Development Goals Report, 2024). It is crucial to emphasize that the losses from the recent war in Israel and Palestine are not included in this report.

access to medical treatment,⁷ progress in female education, and the utilization of technologies such as artificial intelligence to enhance employment opportunities (UN, The Sustainable Development Goals Report, 2024).

Recognizing the need for a more effective approach, the report emphasizes the importance of a “wide-ranging approach” to achieving the SDGs, highlighting it as an “actor-driven process in which agency, context, purpose, and dynamics co-evolve, ultimately shaping the outcomes of the process” (Ningrum et al., 2024). Local governments are identified as key actors in advancing international cooperation, as they are “the only local entities with responsibilities and interests across all sectors” (Bush et al., 2017: 145). In this context, local authorities from Europe, Asia, Latin America, and Africa have contributed to the development of Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs) (Ciambra, 2020). Given the voluntary nature of the SDGs, several countries, including India, Indonesia, Japan, and Australia, have engaged in collaborative efforts with local communities to implement strategies and monitor progress (Guha and Chakrabarti, 2019; Masuda et al., 2022; Ningrum et al., 2023). Notably, the Japanese government set a target for all local authorities to achieve 60% of the SDGs by 2024, as part of a broader quantitative policy initiative (Masuda et al., 2022).

While the SDGs face unprecedented challenges, the report underscores the importance of a dynamic and localized approach for successful implementation. By fostering collaboration among international actors, national governments, and local communities, and by simultaneously addressing the root causes of conflict, inequality, and environmental degradation, the world can strive to achieve the ambitious goals set forth in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Importantly, while the SDGs are designed to be universally applicable, their effective implementation demands contextual adaptation and active local engagement. This allows nations to interpret and implement goals according to their unique sociopolitical and economic contexts. Thus, achieving these goals requires not only top-down governance but, more importantly, grassroots participation. Civil society is expected to play a critical role in advancing the SDGs, particularly by fostering accountability and ensuring that marginalized voices are included and given the space to shape the development agenda (United Nations, 2015: 3/35; Biermann, Kanie, and Kim, 2017). Overall, as highlighted in the Global Sustainable Development Report (United Nations, 2023), this adaptability must be balanced between local autonomy and global accountability to ensure that nations collectively uphold the shared vision of a sustainable and equitable future.

The universality of the SDGs underscored a global consensus on critical challenges like poverty, inequality, and climate change. This consensus embraces diverse paths to achieve shared goals, recognizing development as a dynamic process involving

7 For instance, AIDS-related deaths have decreased by approximately 20.8 million over the past three decades, and gender parity in education has improved across most countries (UN, The Sustainable Development Goals Report, 2024).

governments, civil society, and the private sector. Building on an inclusive and dialogical framework, the SDGs extended their impact by integrating moral pluralism and democratic engagement. The SDGs provide a platform for dialogue and negotiation, enabling distinct values to shape sustainable development pathways in a non-hegemonic and context-sensitive manner. Rather than imposing a singular or ideological vision of development, the SDGs reimagined the notion of development as an inclusive, democratic endeavor. This emphasis on participation and local adaptation, departing from universalizing, one-size-fits-all solutions, fosters a relational and dynamic model of governance that accommodates diverse cultural and political contexts, making the SDGs a flexible framework for global challenges.

The adaptability of the SDGs presents a unique set of opportunities and challenges. While this flexibility allows for context-specific implementation, it can also complicate progress measurement and accountability. Effective implementation demands robust governance, transparent monitoring, and strong cross-sectoral collaboration to bridge the gap between aspiration and action (Biermann et al., 2017). Critiques of the SDGs highlight their potential alignment with neoliberal paradigms, prioritizing market competition and business interests over values such as solidarity and the imperative to “act responsibly” (McKeon, 2017). The voluntary nature of the SDG framework can enable stakeholders to implement these goals in ways that primarily serve their own interests (Ibid.). While collaboration between developed and developing nations is essential, the latter face unique challenges, including financial constraints, entrenched inequalities, and competing priorities, particularly in areas like climate action and social equity (Kanie & Biermann, 2017). Balancing flexibility with accountability is crucial to ensure equitable progress and achieve the ambitious objectives of the SDGs. Despite the need for further research on the SDGs’ capacity to foster transformational change and the persistent operational hurdles they face; the SDGs remain a vital roadmap for sustainable and equitable development in an interconnected world.

As we navigate emerging challenges and opportunities, such as the rise of Artificial Intelligence (AI), the true test of the SDGs will lie in their ability to facilitate the benefits of technological advancements for all nations. Recognizing sustainable development as both a universal aspiration and a context-sensitive practice, the SDGs provide a framework for shaping a future where technology becomes a force for good. By fostering innovation, promoting ethical AI development, and ensuring equitable access to technology, the SDGs’ post-foundationalist approach can drive sustainable development, social progress, and global justice. As such, by addressing the root causes of conflict, inequality, and environmental degradation, while fostering inclusive governance and localized engagement, the SDGs have the potential to serve as a transformative framework for realizing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Conclusion

This paper argued that the SDGs have represented a transformative shift in global development discourse, moving beyond traditional, top-down models towards a more inclusive, context-sensitive, and participatory approach. Challenging conventional neoliberal approaches, the SDGs have transcended traditional economic metrics-based development notions. They have prioritized equity, sustainability, and democracy and hence were designed to foster a dialogical, contingent, and pluralistic framework for global governance. Building upon the foundations laid by the MDGs, the SDGs adopted a holistic approach that addresses root causes and emphasizes systemic reforms to create a more just, sustainable, and human-centric global governance.

The SDGs that foster dialogue and collaboration among diverse global stakeholders are characterized by their democratic and inclusive nature. This participatory approach promotes the legitimacy of the development agenda by incorporating multiple perspectives into its formulation and implementation. Recognizing the interconnectedness of global challenges, the SDGs offered an integrated framework that addresses poverty, inequality, and climate change in unison. By balancing universal principles with contextual adaptation, the SDGs are crafted to empower nations and communities to tailor strategies in tandem with their unique needs and aspirations. This flexible approach, grounded in social and ecological justice, departed from traditional top-down models. The SDGs advocated for a bottom-up approach, empowering local actors and communities to play a central role in shaping the development agenda. This approach not only enhances their legitimacy but also strengthens their capacity to address pressing global challenges, offering a unique platform for nations and stakeholders to work together toward a sustainable and equitable future. Far from being a static set of rules, the SDGs have represented a living process—one that demands ongoing engagement, critical reflection, and a collective commitment to fostering a more inclusive, democratic, and sustainable global governance.

In conclusion, the SDGs' success hinges on their post-foundationalist nature, embracing inclusivity, dialogue, and adaptability while challenging fixed, hegemonic, and Eurocentric development approaches. The SDGs offer a dynamic, participatory, and collaborative framework for global governance through a non-hegemonic vision. Rooted in universal principles, this vision accommodates the diversity of global perspectives to reshape global development practices toward a more just, equitable, and sustainable future for all. To realize this ambitious and comprehensive agenda, concerted efforts from governments, civil society organizations, businesses, and individuals are essential to translate the SDGs' principles into tangible actions and achieve effective outcomes, particularly in light of emerging social, political, and technological developments.

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