

The First Roundtable Dialogue on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by the Relational Thinking Network in Geneva

"The implementation of the SDGs will only be possible by challenging the existing economic paradigm," said Ms Beris Gwynne, the Head of Programmes of the Relational Thinking Network (RTN), as she introduced the subject in Geneva on 20 April 2016. "There is a need for a quantum shift in the way we do business if we are serious about achieving the SDGs and all that they entail."

In preparation the main presenter, Dr Michael Schluter, the founder of RTN, wrote a relational critique of the SDGs and this roundtable was meant to enliven the conversation around the subject.

Dr Michael Schluter's presentation

Why is there little attention to relationships when we know it's so crucial for outcomes? The main reason is that it is very difficult to measure. Measurement becomes important in making the argument for thinking (and acting) relationally, according to Dr Schluter.

In praise of the SDGs he said that the 17 goals were put together in recognition of an unfair world and that they were of great purpose "but that it is even more important that we can get it right." Before he dived into his 'critique', which can be found at <http://relationalthinking.net> and is called The Missing Dimension, he acknowledged that any broad change to the agenda involves an underlying world view and three concerns: "It's like the foundation of the house: You can't see it – it is out of sight. But I will try to lay bare some aspects of that in what I say today."

Concern 1: An individualistic underpinning of the SDGs

The Western worldview characterised by materialism runs deeply throughout the SDGs. A few examples:

- **Rights versus justice.** Human rights have become deeply individualistic because of the courts deciding on the legitimacy of advancing a right. He illustrated this by a story where a UK university was offered money for improving accessibility to a counselling facility for disabled people. Seeing the relative low number of students who make use of the counselling facility on an annual basis, the question can be asked if that was the best way to invest that money. These and other issues need to be re thought by the social and political forums where we spend the money.

Another example could be found in the issue of migration where the needs and rights of unemployed young people in southern Europe need to be weighed against the needs of

migrants. We need to look for “proportionate” balance but there is no formal process for discussion on rights outside of the courtroom.

- **Land as 'asset' rather than 'roots'**. The social, psychological, and religious value of land needs to be recognised, rather than its productive and economic capacity measured in terms of food and other agricultural outputs, so that land is not treated merely as an object to be bought and sold, used and discarded.
- **Education**. The SDGs speak of equal access to education for boys and girls. But what about parents? What does it do to parents if they are not literate but their children are and they need to ask them for help reading text on packaging or a road sign? How can you maintain respect in the household when focus is on individual rights and needs instead of that of the household?

Concern 2: Definition of 'poverty'

- **Is poverty only financial?** Is it defined by access to public sector sources? Or should we be thinking of it as a relational rather than a financial condition?
- **Exclusion**. The SDGs do not address this kind of 'relational poverty'.
- **Omission of relational pressure**. The SDGs do not address issues like debt that can cause enormous suffering and can increase pressure on family relationships

The SDGs are concerned about poverty but not 'emotional poverty'.

Concern 3: Language of development needs to be reconsidered

What does 'development' mean? Is it about institutions or something deeper? In the UK over half a million children are abused each year¹. Three point seven million children are in the court system and there is about a 50 per cent divorce rate. Is that the aspiration of the Kenyans or Indians when they think about developing their nation? Is that what we want? If not, then what is our vision of a 'developed' country? Can you describe it? If not, what does the term "SDG" mean with the word 'development' in the middle? What are we striving for? ²

¹ <https://www.nspcc.org.uk/preventing-abuse/child-abuse-and-neglect/>

² The World Bank recently announced to eliminate the word “development” from its vocabulary:
<http://qz.com/685626/the-world-bank-is-eliminating-the-term-developing-country-from-its-data-vocabulary/>

Measuring the outcome

If we talk about relationships and measuring the quality of relationships, what are we talking about? Schluter defined five areas that have an impact on our communication with each other:

Story - How much time do we invest in relationships and how much continuity is there?

Information – Do we know the other only in one context (for example as a colleague at work) or do we also know them in other situations (playing sports together, know their family etc). What do we share?

Power - Participation, sharing of risk and reward – is there 'fairness' in the relationship?

Purpose - Do we share values and goals?

Communication - How do we communicate, do we meet face-to-face?

Key to measuring the quality of one or more relationships (between partners and organisations in commercial and non-commercial spaces) then is the process of filling out a questionnaire. This is done by both parties which consequently opens up the possibility of a dialogue.

The bottom line in all of this is that we do need some kind of review of targets and indicators to bring SDGs more into focus so they will find real traction in countries. They will need to connect more closely with underlying values of the communities in which they will be introduced.

Mark Halle, of the International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD), was the first respondent to give feedback on what he had heard and read. He agreed that there is a danger of undervaluing relationships. Countries very often are subject to economic measurement approaches that they don't like. However, the fact that the SDGs at many points focus on individual rights and freedoms, he perceived as "in line with the vast bulk of international law, and very prominently the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. There is no other body of international law on which these suggestions might repose. Sound as they are, there is no place to start from but here and no time but now."

He agreed that the SDGs have gaps and holes but considering the long process of negotiations, the outcome is a real achievement. "The process leading to this text was the most open and participatory in the history of international cooperation. And although the result might be a compromise, it is preferable over no agreement. Now they are adopted, let's put the critique aside. We have to get on with it," he said. "The basis for Agenda 2030 is national implementation – bottom up. Countries have a lot of freedom how to go about it, and how they value the relational aspects of the development process. They can build on strong community engagement."

He also commented that the 2030 Agenda cannot be implemented within the existing scheme.

"The initiators had no idea of the far reaching consequences when they put it together. Implementation is only possible through challenging the existing overriding economic paradigm. A social paradigm includes employment favourable policies and allows for a great diversity of path and addressing equity." According to him, international progress on any agenda, for instance climate change, will be difficult "because they ducked the challenge of equity. We have to change that paradigm and start looking at things like redistribution."

Professor Lichia Yiu-Saner, President of the Centre for Socio-Eco-Nomic Development (CSEND) noted that the SDGs do not present one straight line. There is room for feedback. She also emphasised that transformation is about changing our behaviour and that is really hard. "How long does it take for us to take on board that smoking is a bad thing?" she asked. "It's a meandering process and 15 years might not be enough."

"Looking for technical solutions we might overlook the qualitative solutions. Relational Thinking allows us additional space for analysis and solution development which is good," she said.

As for the SDGs she questioned how we prove that a goal like "access to water" contributes to the well-being of everyone?

"In order to prove that, we have to go back to the fundamentals. Cognitively we need to be able to switch from technical to relational, from high context to low context, from quantitative to qualitative and to not leave one of those out of the equation. That is what Relational Thinking can bring to the table in as a practice."

She also briefly mentioned the issue of equity.

"What does it mean – access to reasonable housing or schooling? There is more to it. What if we could propose a relational impact assessment to a community? This will create opportunities to (re)create relationships." She noted that the World Bank only started to talk about behavioural science last year.

Finally, knowing the situation in Geneva, she also addressed the challenge of coordinating efforts in attaining some of the SDGs.

"We've been struggling with silos and fragmentation and haven't really started to talk about inter-organisational partnerships. There are new competencies and roles needed in the context and realisation of the SDGs. And I endorse the idea of implementing Relational Thinking in the process

of achieving the SDGs – in the instruments, the building of bridges and mechanisms, and to not be wasting resources.”

Dr Samuel Gayi stated that the SDGs were a compromise coming from competing interests from different constituencies. However, they are an improvement on the MDGs and in that sense progress has been made.

He was of the opinion that the paper as presented by Schluter brought fresh perspectives on development that one does not hear much of in the current climate.

After some reflective comments he spoke on the issue of land: “We see it as an asset but that’s not right. We need to incorporate the idea of rights whether it is with regards to the individual, community, social, but we can’t treat it just as a ‘bundle of rights’. Where I come from land is where your ‘umbilical cord’ is buried. This goes beyond economic value.” Also, he said that we see it as an asset with individual ownership versus community ownership, which should not be the case. He cited the example of an indigenous communities land title approach (the Customary Right of Occupancy) pioneered by a Masai leader, Edward Loure, in Tanzania, who recently was awarded the “Environment Prize”. This approach ensures the co-existence of traditional land organisational techniques of the Masai and Hadzabe with nature, preserving wild life, herding cattle and goes beyond individual land ownership.

On the issue of poverty, Dr Gayi supported Schluter’s notion that poverty has more than a ‘financial face’ and has a Relational component. “Social capital is an invaluable mechanism for economic growth. It hinges on ideas of trust and reciprocity. In addressing poverty we therefore must go beyond financial aspect,” he said.

On the question of what is development, he said that development was a multifaceted concept that is about more than increasing income. The political, institutional, cultural aspects are as important as the economic ones.

However, he admitted, it has become an economic term where it is measured by what we accumulate and GDP. Does this mean that if it is not increasing, a society is not developing? There are other aspects one should look for such as the hours of volunteering that are being done, etc.

Gayi, at the end of his response, stressed the need for implementation and monitoring of the SDGs at the country and community level.



“We’re are still sitting with the issue of measurement. If something cannot be measured people think it’s not worthwhile. We should get traction if we can measure some of the ideas or proposals we discuss,” according to Gayi.

If you would like to stay informed, please let us know by sending an email to b.gwynne@relationalresearch.org or by signing up for the newsletter at <http://relationalthinking.net>

The Relational Thinking Network is always looking for interested members. For more information about joining us visit <http://relationalthinking.net/get-involved/> or contact Marjon Busstra through the website.

(*) “The Relational Lens: Understanding, managing and measuring stakeholder relationships”, expected to come out in October 2016, published by Cambridge University Press.

(**) The five areas are part of the Relational Proximity Framework®, a tool that can measure the strength and health of relationships. Relational Analytics, a Member of the Relational Thinking Network, is hoping to organize a special training session around this in June. If you like to know more about this, please write to Ms Beris Gwynne: b.gwynne@relationalresearch.org. Or go to their website: www.relational-analytics.com