

# SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS: THE MISSING DIMENSION

A Relational Thinking Dialogue



# Three Relational Concerns about the Sustainable Development Goals<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were published in 2015, taking over from the Millennium Development Goals first published in 2000, which expired in 2015. There are many positive features to the SDGs. They display an awareness of the injustice connected with financial poverty amongst so many of the world's population and the determination to do something about it within a defined timeframe. There is great benefit in their international coverage in terms of applying some uniform standards across countries in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Middle East. The breadth of concerns demonstrates growing awareness in the international community that education and health are as important for individual self-determination and fulfilment as levels of income and there is awareness, too, of discrimination against women in particular which is both prevalent and widespread. So there is much to say in praise of the SDGs. So why should anyone quarrel with their content?

One of the major concerns expressed from a number of quarters about the SDGs regards the underlying worldview which focuses so much on individual rights. This view grows out of Western legal decisions and practice rather than reflecting the balance of responsibilities and obligations recognized in much of the so-called "third world". Equally, there is concern about the language of "developing countries" and "developed countries" which carries an implicit message that the determinant of a society's level of progress is measured primarily by its level of wealth and income rather than by the characteristics of its broader culture. So the SDGs, as currently articulated, fit uneasily with the traditions and values characteristic of many of those in Africa, Asia and Latin America.<sup>2</sup>

The relational analysis below notes especially the consequences of the SDGs for patterns of relationships within families, communities, between organisations, and in wider society. It notes situations where these relationships will be advanced, and where harmed by implementation of the goals and targets set out in the United Nations document. A relational perspective needs to consider not just the impact of a policy or proposal on levels and distribution of income, but on availability and use of time, because time is the currency of relationships.

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<sup>1</sup> The author is grateful for the comments he received when presenting an earlier version of this paper at a roundtable discussion in Geneva on April 20<sup>th</sup>. The views expressed here are those of the author alone.

<sup>2</sup> See Michael Schluter, "What Charter for Humanity? Defining the Destination of Development", in *After Capitalism: Rethinking Economic Relationships*, Jubilee Centre: Cambridge, 2012, p 62-73.

# 1. The Focus on Individuals

The SDGs at many points focus on individual rights and freedoms, apparently taking little account of the consequences of the pursuit of those rights on relationships with family, community and other third parties. Yet evidence suggests that quality of family and community relationships are key to a person's identity, wellbeing, and even survival under harsh environmental conditions. Recent evidence from studies of the population of the Sahel countries emphasises that strength of relationships is key to those people's resilience in the face of drought and other hardships.<sup>3</sup>

An example of this individualistic focus is the SDGs emphasis on the importance of every individual having equal access to land and other forms of property (target 2.3). But a relational perspective insists that land is not primarily an economic asset: place is to do with roots, security and belonging, and is the foundation of strong extended families and communities. The social, psychological, and religious value of land needs to be recognised, rather than only its productive capacity measured in terms of food and other agricultural output, so that land is not treated merely as an object to be bought and sold, used and discarded. It is important that all families and communities have access to land, but with the emphasis on household or family access rather than on individual ownership because individual use and ownership often harms agricultural productivity.<sup>4</sup>

A relational emphasis is also concerned more with equity than equality. Equality in ownership of land, of course, is impossible to measure or to achieve; every piece of land is unique in some respect in terms of, for example, soils, water availability, access to transport, vulnerability to flooding, or proximity to urban centres. The primary issue is not equality therefore, as we all understand these differences in land value, but whether land distribution creates relational dysfunction due to a sense of injustice, unfairness, or wide disparities of wealth and income. The relational issue is not so much equality as equity.

A relational focus would also result in a different emphasis in considering children's education. The SDGs current focus is on the individual - the rights of the individual child to receive an education. They rightly seek to ensure fairness in access to education for girls and boys, brothers and sisters, but do not consider the relational consequences of educating children without giving their parents the opportunity of becoming literate. Why do the rights of older people to receive education, especially the opportunity at least to become literate, receive no mention? And what impact does this have on relationships within the family and the home?

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<sup>3</sup> Brendan Bromwich, *Relationships and Resources*, UNEP, Geneva, 2014.

<sup>4</sup> This issue is explored in Michael Schluter and John Ashcroft, *Jubilee Manifesto*, Intervarsity Press, 2015, p 163.

## 2. Definition of Poverty

Financial poverty is distinct from relational poverty. There can be no dispute that financial poverty leads to human suffering in the form of hunger, malnutrition, disease, premature death. It also makes it impossible in its extreme form for people to participate in family and community life, contribute to the needs of others and live in a dignified way in relationship with other members of their communities.

There is clearly overlap between those in the category of financial poverty and those in the category of relational poverty. Some people are financially rich and relationally poor (e.g. some old people in USA and EU), and some financially poor people are relationally rich, at least in some respects. An example of people in the latter category are those pulling handcarts in Calcutta; generally they are financially poor, but relationally rich in their family commitment and interdependence. In terms of the Dickens novels, would you rather be Scrooge (rich and isolated) or Bob Cratchet (financially poor but relationally rich)?

However, arguably the SDGs largely ignore relational poverty. This is manifest through conditions such as exclusion of foreigners from involvement and participation in the community, loneliness of old people, isolation of prisoners, abuse or simply neglect of children and exclusion of those with certain diseases and of those with mental illness.

Another major omission in the SDGs from a relational perspective is any consideration of the factors putting pressure on relationships within extended families, households and married couples as these are often the factors driving growth of relational poverty, especially as it affects children. Examples would include factors increasing household debt and those which drive families off the land and into urban slums. It might also include the SDGs themselves; thus, for example, the emphasis on women's rights which, helping to create greater gender parity, does not consider quality of relationships between men and women, nor consider how changes in women's rights can be introduced in a manner which takes into account the legitimate rights and interests of other members of the household. Nor do the SDGs consider whether centuries of relational patterns in households should be changed within the 15 year time period of the SDGs.

## 3. Definition of the Term 'Development'

The first goal of the SDGs distinguishes between developed countries, developing countries and least developed countries. These distinctions seem to be based primarily on financial criteria. Implicit is the assumption, it seems, that underdeveloped and developing countries (most of which are in Asia, Africa and Latin America) ought to strive to become 'developed' countries (i.e. like the West). This is different from saying that low-income countries should seek to become high income countries; rather it suggests that countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America should follow a pattern of economic growth and social change set by the West. But is this really the intention? Will the people living in these

‘developing countries’ really be better off in the future if they live in societies with the broken families, vulnerable, abused and neglected children, and weak community commitment that is now characteristic of Western societies? In England in 2013/14, for example, there were nearly 571,000 children at risk of abuse referred to government social services.<sup>5</sup>

A first step toward providing an appropriate context to the SDGs would be to make it clear that the goal is not just on increasing incomes, or protecting individual rights, but the indicators summarized in the ‘Human Development Index’ which has a broader definition of development. These focus on three measurable aspects of quality of life: living a long and healthy life, being educated, and having a decent standard of living. As Amartya Sen puts it, ‘Human development is first and foremost about allowing people to live the kind of life they choose - and providing them with the tools and opportunities to make those choices’.<sup>6</sup> However, even this broader definition of human development focuses only on the individual and the choices they have, and says little about the quality of relationships within which a person lives out their lives, even though we know that quality of relationships is a, or perhaps the, primary determinant of wellbeing.<sup>7</sup>

An alternative way to define ‘development’ would be in terms of quality of relationship within and between families, communities, ethnic groups and generations. It would also look at quality of relationships in the work place. Indicators might include marriage and divorce rates, levels of isolation of older people, number of incidents of domestic or ethnic violence, and levels of absenteeism in the work place.<sup>8</sup> On these criteria, arguably many ‘developed countries’ would now be rated as underdeveloped, and many so-called developing countries would be rated as ‘developed’.

Robert Kennedy summarized the point well in a speech in 1967 when he said  
“Yet the gross national product does not allow for the health of our children, the quality of their education or the joy of their play. It does not include the beauty of our poetry or the strength of our marriages, the intelligence of our public debate or the integrity of our public officials. It measures neither our wit nor our courage, neither our wisdom nor our learning, neither our compassion nor our devotion to our country. It measures everything in short, except that which makes life worthwhile.”

Perhaps the greatest problem with the SDGs lies here. There is no clear vision for the destination of “development”, which is necessary to define the main factors which need to be put in place to create the kind of society people want, or which they will feel is compatible with their belief system. This is a major problem given the interconnection of sectors and institutions in what is usually termed to as the

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.nspcc.org.uk/fighting-for-childhood/news-opinion/number-of-children-at-risk-of-abuse-soars-80-per-cent/>

<sup>6</sup> Human Development Report 2004: Cultural liberty in today’s diverse world, New York: UNDP, 2004, p128.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, the Australian Unity Wellbeing Index, which can be seen in, ‘What makes us happy?’ (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.), Australian Unity: Australia, 2015.

<sup>8</sup> Mills and Schluter, *After Capitalism*, pp. 62-73.

“social paradigm”. Without such an agreed and holistic social vision, the SDGs are bound to appear arbitrary in terms of what is addressed and what is left unaddressed.

## **Conclusion**

There is much in the SDGs which can be wholeheartedly endorsed by an individual or group starting with a relational view of society. However, it is also true that the SDGs raise many relational concerns; those listed above are not exhaustive. The argument of this paper is that if the SDGs are to receive wholehearted buy-in from low-income societies in the so-called ‘third world’, as well as from many middle-income societies, there is a significant problem. At this late stage, it is probably impossible to amend the goals, targets and KPIs. However even within the straight jacket which is created through the SDG framework, perhaps there is room for flexibility at the national level to consider how the SDG goals, targets and KPIs can be amended to address local-cultural priorities and thus to influence their implementation. The issue then will be whether donor agencies, the international community, and other Western funding sources are prepared to accept such flexibility in their implementation.

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