

Disarmament, the Sustainable Development Goals, and Power

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I was asked to talk about the relationship between the Sustainable Development Goals and disarmament.

Unfortunately, on the face of it, there is far less connection between the two than there should be. The SDG's don't include any disarmament goals—or even any goals for reduction in military spending. The closest the Sustainable Development Goals come to addressing militarism, military spending, and disarmament is in Goal 16, which calls for a halt to “illicit” arms flows—but the SDG's make no mention of that the member states of the United Nations spend over one and three quarter trillion dollars annually on their militaries.¹ This is so despite the declaration in their Preamble that “There can be no sustainable development without peace and no peace without sustainable development.”

This connection, it should be noted, also is explicitly stated in treaties that are fundamental to both the United Nations and disarmament contexts. The UN Charter and the preamble of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty contain nearly identical formulations to this effect. Article 26 of the Charter calls for “the establishment of a system for the regulation of armaments” in order to “promote the establishment and maintenance of international peace and security with the least diversion for armaments of the world's human and economic resources...” The Preamble of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty reiterates this theme, stating “that the establishment and maintenance of international peace and security are to be promoted with the least diversion for armaments of the world's human and economic resources...” Nonetheless, the connections between military spending, disarmament, and development seldom are systematically addressed in UN forums and processes—or, for that matter, in government and intergovernmental forums of any kind.

One could argue, perhaps, that the omission of any discussion of disarmament or military spending—and the absence of other important things, such as any concrete targets for reductions in carbon emissions—can be attributed to the institutional structure of the United Nations. The UN divides its work among General Assembly committees and UN organizations. The First Committee of the General Assembly, the Security Council, and the Office of Disarmament Affairs, for example, are the bodies mainly concerned with disarmament. Development and environmental matters, on the other hand, are mainly the province of the Economic and Social Council and the General Assembly Committees concerned with economic, social, and humanitarian issues. Efforts to address climate change have an entire international negotiating framework of their own, to which it could be argued the SDG's must refer—or defer—for setting substantive targets.

But the way these institutions and their practices have developed over time reflect a way of addressing the pressing and intractable challenges now facing our entire species in ways that

tend to break problems up into their component parts. They also tend to focus on effects rather than causes. The approaches that have won out make it difficult to talk about the ways that problems like poverty and inequality, ecological collapse, and seven decades of high tech arms racing have been generated by a form of civilization dependent on endless material growth, in which endless competition among large, authoritarian organizations is the main motor for development.

The solutions to these problems addressed by the SDG's first and foremost are about power—who has it, and who doesn't. It has become virtually impossible in mainstream discourse, and particularly in government and intergovernmental forums, to talk about power. This is what is delicately referred to in disarmament discourse at places like the United Nations as the problem of the absence of “political will.” This is treated like an epidemic affecting all relevant bodies politic; an affliction whose possible cure remains outside the bounds of rational analysis and discussion.

The same avoidance of fundamental questions affects the development field, delimiting what initiatives like the Sustainable Development goals can address. Limits are placed on the kind of research that can be done, and even the language used shows the effects of power—and also the ways that those who hold power make their agency, their power, invisible. In preparing for this talk, I was looking, for example, for information about global income distribution. I came across a recent UNICEF working paper on the topic that had the following passage: “Viewed as an ‘unwelcomed’ and ‘politically sensitive’ topic, world income inequality received little attention in international fora for decades.”² We are never told who exactly it is who viewed this topic, absolutely central to understanding anything meaningful about poverty and development, as “unwelcomed” or “politically sensitive.”

The Sustainable Development Goals treat poverty and its elimination, a central concern of the process, in a similar fashion. It is cast as an affliction rooted outside the economic system, to be “cured” if at all by yet more of what the current economy offers: more profit-driven growth. So the Preamble to the SDG's says, “We are resolved to free the human race from the tyranny of poverty and want and to heal and secure our planet.”

Poverty isn't a tyrant. Poverty is caused by people and organizations that behave like tyrants. Our main task is to free ourselves from the tyranny of those who cause poverty. And the first step is to identify and name them, to admit that poverty is not some natural condition, but a consequence of social choices.

The economist Joseph Stiglitz underscored this point in a recent address, stating that “Inequality is a choice — not the result of inevitable economic laws.”³ Putting aside for the moment whether the Sustainable Development Goals constitute the right set of development priorities—and particularly whether their goals would in fact be sustainable—there is little question that a program of this order of magnitude would be affordable, if those who hold most of the world's wealth and power chose to make it so.

Over eighty years ago, a leading disarmament diplomat, Salvador de Madariaga, observed that “Technical difficulties are political objections in uniform.”⁴ Where the issue is economic development, cost difficulties often are political objections in a Savile Row suit.

The *Economist* magazine, for example, denounced the SDG’s as “unfeasibly expensive.”⁵ A program of action to achieve the goals is estimated to cost between 2 and four and a half trillion dollars a year.⁶ If those who hold power in the world system were open to different kinds of political choices, that would not be seen as a big number. Once again, the world’s governments spend over one and one and three quarters trillion dollars every year on militaries. And they spend hundreds of billions more every year on policing their own populations—much of which would be unnecessary in societies not starkly divided by disparities in wealth. It is estimated that a modest financial transactions tax could raise as much as a trillion dollars a year. World-wide, 3% of the population receives 20% of the world’s annual household income in a 78 trillion dollar global economy—as much as the bottom 54%.⁷ And inequality in wealth is even more pronounced. “The top 1% of wealth holders now own half of the world’s total household wealth” – That means that the 1% holds roughly \$125 trillion in assets.⁸ Against this background, it should be clear that the only obstacles to funding a global development program that costs a few trillion dollars a year are political ones.

The more fundamental problem, however, is that getting the world on to a *sustainable* development path is a more difficult task than accomplishing the kinds of remedial measures envisioned by the Sustainable Development Goals. For the most part, the SDG’s still are premised on the assumption that we can “grow our way” out of our problems, with mild redistributive measures palatable to those at the top because they can retain and sustain their privileged place. But the kind of growth rates envisioned—for which there are concrete targets, such as 7% annual GDP growth in the least developed countries—is incompatible with ecological sustainability goals—at least in the absence of redistributive goals far beyond the modest aid targets set out in the SDG’s.

Many of the goals seem merely hortatory, running as they do directly counter to strong trends in the actually existing development path of the global economy. Take, for example, goal 11.3: “By 2030, enhance inclusive and sustainable urbanization and capacity for participatory, integrated and sustainable human settlement planning and management in all countries.” Even in a wealthy region like the Bay Area where the population is relatively well off, this seems completely at odds with reality. Here and everywhere, urban development patterns are driven by vast global capital flows that transform cityscapes and populations at a breakneck pace. “Participatory, integrated, and sustainable human settlement planning” sounds like a fantasy to the vast majority of people who are shut out of the top-tier economy, and who are being expelled in growing numbers from cities their families have inhabited for generations.⁹

Our built world has been constructed as an efficient means of concentrating wealth and power in a fraction of the world’s population, most of them living in increasingly insular and defended enclaves in a handful of cities. This development process occurred, for the most part, in a few centuries, a time in which fossil fuel energy was cheap, and in which the carrying capacity of the planet placed few limits on the ambitions of those who built modern states and empires. The ability to seize, extract and deploy vast energies was the route to power, with energy-

profligate economic development and the development of organized, industrialized state violence reinforcing one another. As the historian Charles Tilly wrote,

“Power holders' pursuit of war involved them willy-nilly in the extraction of resources for war making from the populations over which they had control and in the promotion of capital accumulation by those who could help them borrow and buy. War making, extraction, and capital accumulation interacted to shape European state making.”¹⁰

This way of life now dominates the entire planet—but also is approaching its limits. The quest for advantage within economies has generated immense disparities of wealth, and with it endless conflict. The project of control of the many by the few—an inescapable characteristic of a society that generates stark inequality both within and among states—has brought with it the endless perfection of state violence. The quest for advantage among states has created weapons that can destroy all states. Heedless extraction of natural resources in the service of endless wealth, and the endless state power that sustains it, threatens to destroy the ecosystems all else depends on. For all of these reasons, the connection between disarmament and sustainable development runs far deeper than the choice between guns and butter, weapons and welfare.

So: are the Sustainable Development Goals useful? An initiative like the Sustainable Development Goals may have some value for those who work in the UN and in government who are looking for additional rationales to conduct and publicize research on matters that some powerful people find “unwelcomed” and “politically sensitive,” income inequality and the ecological effects of development. This kind of information can be useful for mobilizing political support for change-- “creating political will.” But the “political will” to actually move towards a development path that is significantly more fair, peaceful and ecologically sustainable can only be created by very large, mobilized social movements—particularly in the countries where those with the most economic, political, and military power reside. For most of us, our attention for the time being should be on building those movements.

I will close with some words from Lewis Mumford, who half a century ago saw what was ahead better than most:

“Our problem in every department is to slow down or bring to a halt the forces that now threaten us: to break into the cycle of expansion and disintegration by establishing new premises, closer to the demands of life, which will enable us to change our direction and in many areas, to make a fresh start.”

¹ Sam Perlo-Freeman, Aude Fleurant, Pieter D. Wezeman and Siemon T. Wezeman, “Trends in World Military Expenditure, 2014,” Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, Fact Sheet, April 2015, p.2.

² Isabel Ortiz and Matthew Cummins, *Global Inequality: Beyond the Bottom Billion: A Rapid Review of Income Distribution in 141 Countries*, UNICEF Social and Economic Policy Working Paper, (New York: United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), 2011), p.10.

³ quoted in Michael S. Wilson, “Thousands reject the extractivist logic at the World Bank-IMF meeting in Peru, Waging Nonviolence, October 17, 2015, <http://wagingnonviolence.org/feature/thousands-reject-extractivist-logic-world-bank-imf-meeting-peru/>

⁴ Salvador de Madariaga, Spanish diplomat, delegate to the League of Nations, and Chief of the League's disarmament section, quoted in the Nobel Lecture of Philip Noel-Baker, 1959 Nobel Peace Prize laureate, Nobel Institute, Oslo, Norway, December 11, 1959

⁵ "The 169 commandments: The proposed sustainable development goals would be worse than useless," *The Economist*, Mar 28th 2015.

⁶ "The 169 commandments: The proposed sustainable development goals would be worse than useless," *The Economist*, Mar 28th 2015; Michelle Nichols, "U.N. states agree post-2015 sustainable development agenda," Reuters, August 3, 2015.

⁷ Glenn Phelps and Steve Crabtree, "Worldwide, Richest 3% Hold One-Fifth of Collective Income," Gallup, January 3, 2014 <http://www.gallup.com/poll/166721/worldwide-richest-hold-one-fifth-collective-income.aspx>

⁸ Credit Suisse research Institute, *Global Wealth Report 2015*, p.4.

⁹ See generally Saskia Sassen, *Expulsions: Brutality and Complexity in the Global Economy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014).

¹⁰ Charles Tilly, "War Making and State Making as Organized Crime," in *Bringing the State Back In*, edited by Peter Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer, and Theda Skocpol (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 172.