Assessments of Sustainable Development Goals

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Brown, S. *Sustainable Development Goals and UN Goal-Setting*. London and New York: Routledge, 2017.

Dodds, F., Donoghue, D., & Roesch, J. *Negotiating the Sustainable Development Goals: A Transformational Agenda for an Insecure World*. London and New York: Routledge, 2017.

Following the end of 2015's Millennium Development Goals, conversations among academics, policy analysts, and other parties involved in global development have shifted to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and a 2030 Agenda. Contributing to this dialogue are Stephen Browne's *Sustainable Development Goals and UN Goal-Setting*, in which Browne analyzes the considerations of the UN's role in global development today, and Dodds et al.'s *Negotiating the Sustainable Development Goals: A Transformational Agenda for an Insecure World*, in which the authors present the specifics of the formulation and details of SDGs. Both books provide important information on recent developments in global development and the role of the SDGs in furthering quality of life across the globe. While Browne offers a larger picture of the role played by the United Nations Development System (UNDS) in both historical and contemporary global development agendas, programs, and initiatives, Dodds et al. provide a more detailed consideration of the SDGs, including their creation, relationship with past development agendas, and an outlook on their role in global development looking toward 2030. Browne's work takes a more critical approach to discussing the UN's role in global development, whereas Dodds et al. provide a largely descriptive account of the intricate processes through which the SDGs came into being and are considered the focus of global development for the future.

Browne's work provides background on the historical role of the United Nations (UN) in global development work, leading up to and including current planning and implementation of SDGs. The book begins by explaining the establishment of the UN Development system and its historical foundations, tracing from the League of Nations through the organizational structuring of the UN in relation to other global development actors. Historical funding mechanisms for global development are considered, including a discussion of the ideological and organizational tensions between the UN and various funding partnerships and sources. While the UN is described as a fundamental organizing structure for global development as a whole, Browne points to differences in objectives held by various UN member organizations in areas of planning, goals, and funding. Many organizations within the umbrella of the UN secretariat are discussed in relation to the historical progression of development agendas and areas of focus, one example being the UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, 2010. Current technical structure of the UNDS is described as encompassing "technical standards and norms, data and research, global policy and conventions, and operations and technical assistance" (pp. 22-23). Overall, Browne critiques the historical presence and leadership of the UNDS in global development as somewhat uneven and largely without a singular cohesive organizational structure.

Moving into a discussion of foundational ideas and perspectives that have shaped trends in global development, Browne explains how the UN has historically approached development in

relation to or in tension with other actors such as the World Bank (WB) and International Monetary Fund (IMF)—the policies of which form the Washington Consensus, a set of prescriptions that focus on encouraging emerging economies to participate in the market economy and global trade. Global policies, programs, and agreements such as the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) are explained and presented along with a description of their roles in shaping the progression of development thinking within the UN. The role of international trade and structural adjustment requirements of the Washington Consensus are considered and critiqued as drawing development thinking away from human needs and toward a "neoliberal agenda" (p. 38). As a result of the Washington Consensus, Browne argues, a focus specifically on economic forms of development (*i.e.*, wealth creation and the participation in the free market) became of primary concern. An emphasis was placed on global trade, and economists played a significant role in development research; a market approach to aid for developing countries built an economic model for global development initiatives. "Social development thinking," including issues impacting women, children, health/nutrition, population, education, and culture all fell within the reach of structural adjustment and initiatives to prioritize economic development agendas under the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

Browne argues human development took perhaps its most important approach to development with a more people-centric focus in the 90s, in which "people were not the means to development ends [but] were themselves the ends" (p. 57). The Millennium Development Goals and, currently, the Sustainable Development Goals, according to Browne, do not take up the person-centered approach of 1990s' development ideology and instead are demonstrative of what the author describes as a "disconnect between ideas and operations" (p. 61). Browne argues that a fundamental issue with the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) today in directing global development initiatives is an emphasis on economically driven research and apolitical ideas without subsequent and equitable focus on taking direct action to be a "human development organization" (pp. 61-62).

Browne outlines the history of goal setting by the UN, including supplementing the text with lists and descriptions of the Millennium Development Goals and a full outline of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals for a 2030 Agenda. This material is provided in addition to describing the processes of goal setting by the UN and other global partners at the UN Sustainable Development Summit in 2015. While the author highlights an emphasis on "action-oriented…measurable…limited" (p. 92) development goals coming out of the 2012 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, he is highly critical of the actual Sustainable Development Goals as they stand today. Browne argues, "The most fundamental problem with the SDGs…is that they are incomplete as an agenda for development, even while they are unnecessarily complex" (p. 93). Browne also emphasizes the success of the Montreal Protocol and Paris Climate Agreement in gathering global partnerships to address issues of managing the climate. Given the Paris Climate Agreement has become a topic of international conversation with the announced withdrawal of support by the United States, Browne's research on the importance of this global initiative will provide a helpful resource for continuing research and conversations on this pressing issue.

Critiquing the UN as lacking historical and current outlines for operating as a "development 'system,'" Browne argues that the UNDS heads into the SDGs as increasingly disjointed, with many "structural weaknesses" in an ever-growing field of global development (p. 108). To address issues limiting the effectiveness of the UN as a development system,

Browne believes a review of Robert Jackson's 1968 *Study of the Capacity of the United Nations Development System* is advisable. As Jackson argued, the UN operates as a "jungle of proliferating agendas," (p. 113) Browne argues the UN's ineffectiveness can be explained by a "main concern … to see organizational expansion" (p. 127). Instead says Browne, "coordination…consolidation…[and]…coherence" must drive the changes needed to create a more effective UN as a system "fit" (p. 129) to take on the SDGs and avoid repeating the organizational disjunction that contributed to unresolved issues in the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals. However, Browne argues the need for cohesion is inconsistent with the nature of the SDGs, as they are inherently fragmented goals resulting from the fact that they were produced by an inherently fragmented system.

Given that the success of the SDGs depends on the integrative work and cooperation of nation states and global development partners, Browne argues that the role of the UNDS should be to adopt the priorities of the SDGs as its own. This approach can only be accomplished through a redesign of the SDGs to provide a more cohesive structure to shape more directly applied UNDS engagement. Browne considers moving "beyond aid" (p. 138) and economic factors as the primary focus in global development to avoid issues of corruption and hierarchies of assistance that can perpetuate rather than eliminate global inequalities. In prescribing changes for a future of the SDGs and global development initiatives as a whole, Browne argues that while aid is at times necessary, aid should be utilized while limiting its duration and reducing input of aid from operational activities for development (OAD) and from the UN aid system overall and applied in a more cautious way.

In addition to the historical roles played by the UNDS, Browne also highlights future roles for the UN described as "'ideational' regarding global policy and conventions; technical standards and norms; and research, data, and information" (p. 147). Concluding the text, Browne provides a number of suggestions for future roles for the UNDS, including raising awareness of global inequalities, alerting non-state parties of their roles in the SDGs, and, particularly, serving as a monitor for the adoption and implementation of the many goals and targets of the SDGs. Some major contributions of the text include not only a comprehensive yet critical historical and contemporary analysis of the UNDS's role in global development but also a number of practical tools such as lists of the *Principal UN Goals and Targets 1960-2015* and *Principal UN Development Conferences and Summits*.

Dodds et al. provide a comprehensive analysis of the SDGs ranging from the goals' conception to planning to considerations of various challenges that will be faced in the pursuit of global development going forward in a 2030 Agenda. Beginning with the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), Dodds et al. provide a detailed analysis of the MDGs as the "first time that international cooperation would focus around a set of goals to put poverty eradication at the center of a global development agenda" (p. 6). The authors indicate the MDGs suffered from lack of cohesion and interest by stakeholders and heads of state. The MDGs represent both a new direction for global development partnerships and a somewhat failed agenda, suffering from not only global economic crisis that resulted in an increase rather than decrease in poverty around the globe but also a disorganized focus by parties tasked with its development and implementation.

In a post-9/11 world, global conversations shifted away from "poverty and sustainable development" and toward "peace and security" as the global ramifications of 9/11 brought "terrorism" to the forefront of international concerns (p. 13). Dodds et al. describe this and similar movements away from a focus on poverty as the "death" of sustainable development.

They subsequently point to the ideas of the Rio+20 Conference in June 2012 as the "rebirth" of sustainable development with a renewed global focus on poverty-elimination policies and sustainable development agendas including climate change as a new area of concern. The authors importantly note that the ideas of Rio+20 derived from a call to action by Colombia's Ms. Paula Caballero, the Director of Economic Social and Environmental Affairs at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in response to a 2010 survey on expectations for Rio+20. With the conceptualization of the SDGs coming out of Rio+20 in 2012, a new focus on the cohesion of "economic, social, and environmental dimensions" of development would be posed as "the future we want" by the UNDS, UN partners, and member states (p. 19).

Dodds et al. provide a comprehensive explanation of the "complexity" of the conceptualization of the SDGs and the many parties who took part in the planning of the direction of global development in a post-2015 context. A strong focus on intergovernmental collaborations and negotiations was a necessary aspect of setting a development agenda truly different from that of the MDGs and posed to address a post-2015 world, according to the authors. The text includes lists of those chosen as members of panels in planning the post-2015 Agenda and a detailed report of those panel meetings. An Open Working Group (OWG) focused on bringing together global regions, including Africa, Asia Pacific, Latin America and the Caribbean, Western European States & Others, and Eastern European States provided a format to position global partnerships in the agenda for post-2015 development. Dodds et al. emphasize that the OWG comprised many folks who were present at and contributors to Rio+20 in conceptualizing the SDGs as explicitly concerned with "economic, social, and environment[al]" issues rather than emphasizing "peace and security," as was desired by the High-Level Panel (pp. 35-36).[1]

Dodds et al. explain that a compromise between the OWG and the High-Level Panel resulted in an agreement that the SDGs would focus on (1) eradication of poverty, (2) empowerment of women and girls, (3) combatting climate change, (4) promoting peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, and (5) strengthening implementation and global partnership (pp. 37-43). Some of the other parties involved in the conceptualization and planning of the SDGs included (but were certainly not limited to) UN networks such as the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) and UNDG, providing thematic, national, and global compact consultations. The authors provide a detailed flowchart to explain the SDGs and the post-2015 Agenda planning process, including all relevant parties, a useful tool for understanding this highly complex system. Accountability, according to Dodds et al., was the primary concern of the issues left to be determined by member states as the planning stages of the SDGs moved toward a 2015 climax with the end of the MDGs near.

The authors describe the progression of the conceptualization and planning for the SDGs in what they term "the big year," 2015, as both the end of the MDGs and the beginning of a fresh start in global development agendas and initiatives. The authors provide a detailed summary of the movement from the OWG to the Third International Conference on Financing for Development and the UN Sustainable Development Summit. This overview includes information on the role of intergovernmental compromise, financing commitments made by governments and nongovernmental organizations alike, and a global political perspective highlighting a need to address poverty and waste as global social and moral crises. The role of the 2015 UN Statistical Commission to develop indicators for monitoring the SDGs is also highlighted as a core component of the SDGs as a post-2015 development agenda and distinct from the MDGs.

The SDGs as a 2030 Agenda is comprehensive both in scale and in applicability, and the authors indicate the Agenda is heralded as an overwhelming achievement of the UN and efforts of UN member states to work cooperatively toward diplomatic development initiatives. Dodds et al. offer a list of outcomes from 2015 resulting from the MDGs as a way of considering how the SDGs and other aspects of global development agendas going forward can address where the 2015 objectives left off. Many of the concerns addressed in this chapter overlap with the information presented in Browne (2017), including an assessment of the "fit" of the UN to carry out the SDGs and the role of climate change in global development priorities. Specifically, the authors comment on the UNDS as lacking "integration and … focus on implementation," and suggest reform to reduce fragmentation in organizational structure to address issues of the "fitness" of the UN to carry out the SDGs (p. 138).

Dodds et al. also discuss climate change posed as a potential area of concern for developing consensus toward a 2030 Agenda, yet the seeming widespread success of the Paris Agreement and similar panels and global agreements on climate change are considered evidence of a successful cohesion of intergovernmental agreement. The role of parliaments, local and subnational levels of engagement, global partnerships, and the private sector fill out a comprehensive survey by the authors of considerations gained from the MDGs and addressed in planning for the SDGs and the post-2015 Agenda.

Concluding a comprehensive description of the process of conceptualizing and planning of the SDGs, Dodds et al. explain some of the particular challenges that a 2015–2030 development agenda will face. Some of the new challenges of the 2030 Agenda discussed by the authors include global migration and forced displacement; climate change, including water, energy, and food; increasing global health challenges; disruptive industries such as high unemployment caused by new technologies; synthetic biology; bioinformation; 3D printing; and artificial intelligence. Leaving the reader with both a sense of the immense challenges and promises of the 2030 Agenda, the authors offer a suggestion for emphasizing intergovernmental processes, accountability, and assessment of the impact of new technologies of the SDGs as they are implemented.

The "2030 Agenda Adoption Poem" is offered at the end of this text as an inspiring parting gesture emphasizing the incredible potential of the SDGs to create a world "full of peace and fairness" (p. 164). The text provides the full document of *The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* as a highly useful resource for those interested in the details of the SDGs for continued study. Detailed flowcharts and listings of various processes in planning the SDGs included throughout the text are a major contribution by the authors to the reader's understanding of this complex process.

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[1] High-Level Panels propose agenda items for the SDG on particular issues of interest, deriving from the 2006 High Level Political Forum in which establishment of a "Global Leaders Forum within the Economic and Social Council" was determined a priority (p. 12).