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Interpreting the Sustainable Development Goals through the Perspectives of Utopia and Governance

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ABSTRACT The article analyses the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) from the perspective of their self-understanding of political sense expressed in key SDG documents, including both UN documents and reports produced by individual countries. Utopia and governance are presented as ideal-typical approaches and analytical tools for qualitative content analysis. This approach is argued to be particularly illuminating in the case of politics of international development, as international development is simultaneously highly utopian and deeply embedded in rationalities of governance. As this analytical framework is applied to the SDGs, it is shown that their utopian pronouncements are related to the idea of humanity as a single subject, as well as inclusive prosperity. On the other hand, the SDGs are curtailed by adherence to the ideas of contemporary governance, the international order and given ideas of development economics. The findings and the methodology are then further discussed in the broader context of international development.

Keywords: Sustainable development goals; Utopia; governance; United Nations; international development; document analysis

The politics of international development is informed by landmark agreements and global goals. These agreements and goals and their implementation involve ideas not only about desired policies but also about the very sense and purpose of development. This article suggests a conceptual framework for analysing such ideas, based on the distinction between utopia and governance. Development is analysed as involving a continuous tension between these two political modes: on the one hand, it is characterized by a bold utopian vision of a different kind of world, and on the other by governance without real transformative political power. The article then applies this framework to the current Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and sets to answer the research question: how do utopian ideas manifest in the SDGs, and how are these ideas curtailed by the implementative logic of the SDGs?

The article proceeds as follows. The following section presents the starting points and elaborates the research question. Subsequently, the notions of utopia and governance are presented theoretically and as a methodological approach. Then the data and

the method of analysis will be presented. This is followed by a discussion of the analysis results, divided into two subsections: the utopian ideas of the SDGs and the implementative order of the SDGs. Finally, the findings are synthesized and discussed in the Conclusions section.

Rationale and background

All development goals and policies, like any political agendas, can be analysed by uncovering ideas about their sense (or perception of purpose). The sense of politics involves not only ideas about the constitution of society, but also about the logic of social change. There is a broad variety of possible ways of categorizing such ideas, but the approach suggested here is to analyse their normative emphasis. The ideas are then seen as placed on a continuum between ideas focused on what-could-be and those focused on organizing-what-is. These (ideal-typical) approaches will be called in this article ‘utopia’ and ‘governance’. The analysis of such political modes in the context of global development goals then means asking, what kinds of modes can be discerned in key documents describing their content and current level of attainment.

It is necessary first to define how ‘utopia’ and ‘governance’ can be understood. In its typical interpretation, utopia refers to an imaginary place that is more desirable than the one we currently inhabit (Suvin, 1997, pp.126–128). In this article, the concept of utopia is used in a more specific *methodological* sense. This means understanding utopian mentality as a general orientation towards a better society¹, rather than a comprehensive imaginary reconstitution of society (Levitas, 2013; 2010). In an alternative formulation, utopia means an expression of hope (Bloch, 1986): anything that expresses an orientation or a desire towards a qualitatively better mode of being, can be perceived as utopian in this sense. This strand of thought then sees utopias as providing a sense and direction for societal change, ‘a compass’ (Wright, 2010).

In contrast to utopian thought, governance is an enterprise of organizing human activities to produce given results. In the broadest definition, governance can be used to refer to any set of patterns of rule, yet typically it is used to refer to patterns of rule characterized by the dependence of the state is upon other agents (Bevir, 2009). Indeed governance emerged as a serious object of analysis in research with the (real or perceived) failures of traditionally understood state sovereignty (Jessop, 2011) and the tendency of political power to disperse (Miller and Rose 2008). So while governance can be understood as any processes of governing, the concept is used below in the more specific sense of organizing activities in a reality where political power traditionally associated with sovereignty is absent. Governance, as opposed to government (traditional state sovereignty effectively materializing a

¹ According to some authors on utopias, seeking utopias should be seen as inherent human ‘propensity’ (Manuel and Manuel, 1979, p.5).

political will through a top-down implementation apparatus), then means manoeuvring in a multi-actor reality without a single locus of power. It typically utilizes approaches such as networks, co-ordination, communication, and partnerships. As a political mode, governance means recognising locations and relations of power as they are currently understood, and trying to solve societal problems by attempts to align the interests of the recognised agents.

This idea of governance is also reflected in the interpretations of successful implementation, which have generally shifted from putting policy into effect, into ‘getting something done’ by a variety of possible means (Barrett and Fudge, 1981, p.258; Hill and Hupe, 2002, p.56). Depending on perspective, these approaches to governance can be seen as pragmatic (‘performance overrides conformance’) or simply a depoliticizing tendency (‘taking politics out of policy’).² These are reflected in the typical policy justification narrative in contemporary governance, which highlights apoliticised data, evaluation and monitoring, rather than legitimization of political power, or abstract and visionary ideas of better society.

Utopia and governance can then be seen as opposite political modes. Utopia expresses the desire to change the immediately existing social reality into something qualitatively better, while governance means taking existing entities and relations as given and trying to co-ordinate them, informed by apolitical data, to organise society. As such, the categories are ideal-typical³: hardly anything is purely utopian or mere governance. But as ideal types, they offer a conceptual basis for an analysis of political modes.

Particularities of the notion of development

While any political practice involves the perspectives of both utopia and governance, international development stands out as a particularly illuminating case. This is because for the duration of its existence, international development has both involved very high ambitions and bold ideas regarding the future of humanity, and has been forced to operate through a dispersed system of implementation, with limited powers for putting these ambitious ideas into practice.

International development has the tendency to see its political subject (and object) to be no smaller than the whole humanity, as a subject with a common destiny. Many of the expressions of its purpose have emphasised shared responsibility and called for remaking the world as it exists. Indeed the enterprise can be seen as motivated by the very idea of human progress, very deeply embedded in enlightenment and modernity (on the idea of progress, see Nisbet, 1994).

Perhaps the most iconic starting point of international development was the ‘Point Four speech’ in 1949 by US president of the time, Harry Truman. In this renown

² For a criticism of ostensibly non-political tendencies, see Edwards and Klees, 2014.

³ On the concept of ideal-types and their methodological uses, see Burger, 1987.

speech, Truman called for ‘a bold new program for making the benefits of [...] scientific advances and industrial progress available for the improvement and growth of underdeveloped areas’ (Sachs, 1992), practically initiating international development. Another famous pronouncement with an explicit utopian orientation was the initial UN charter, an ‘international machinery for the promotion of the economic and social advancement of all peoples’ (Jolly et al., 2004, pp.5–6). The goals articulated in the UN charter, based on the categories of standards of living, solutions to international economic and social problems, and universal respect for human rights (UN, 1945, chap 1, art 1(4)), have indeed been seen as ‘at the time breathtaking in their boldness’ (Jolly et al., 2004, p.6).

This approach of ‘thinking big’ has been part of development discourse ever since, and especially the discourse of the UN, which has repeatedly been able to produce ambitious ideas (Weiss, 2010). The ‘development decade’ of the 1960s involved broad aspirations on the global improvement of conditions of human life (Jolly et al., 2004, p.88). A later pronouncement from 1986, the declaration on ‘the right to development’ (Jolly et al., 2004, p.3; UN 1986), restated development not only as a shared goal, but also as a right of both nations and individuals. More recently, the Millennium Development Goals (MDG), effective 2000–2015, sought to ‘liberate humanity from poverty’, seeking to accomplish this through a ‘Big Push’ strategy. In the context of the MDGs, economist and UN advisor Jeffrey Sachs declared in 2006, that the end of poverty was ‘an economic possibility for our time’ (Sachs, 2006). While some critics have seen these ambitious ideas about ‘development’ as concealing the deepening of market relations (Rist, 1997) and market subjectivities (Illich, 1997) or essentially excuses for interventions based on a specific western worldview (Escobar, 1995), the utopian sentiment is in any case very real.

But despite these ambitious ideas, international development is a bureaucratic and pragmatic enterprise, assuming whatever priorities and approaches governance might have at the given time. The development apparatus is typically not transformative in the sense of remodelling governance structures or the political space, but rather diffusing into the existing ones. Indeed the agenda can only materialise through an existing system of governance. This is more than an ‘implementation problem’, as it orients the self-understanding of the enterprise into the sphere of guidelines, co-ordination, indicators, and evaluations, together with a general cost–benefit approach to societal change. While development aid has often been criticized for failures in implementation (e.g. Dichter, 2003; Easterly, 2006), a more accurate point of criticism is that international development understands implementation through whatever hegemonic ideas for implementation exist.

The contrasting political modes of utopia and governance are then not simply alternatives or extremes within a continuum. Curiously, they tend to coexist within development policy, even to the point of mutual dependency. One could argue, for example, that the Millennium Goals declaration in 2000 was the brightest single moment of global development. It synthesized the outcomes of a decade of top

summits, expressed an unprecedented degree of consensus, and firmly defined extreme poverty as an evil that can and will be overcome. If anything, it expressed humanity uniting under a vision of its future. Yet the MDG declaration was preconditioned – indeed in its very existence – on a standardized and technical, and deeply non-transformative, idea of problems and their remedies, chiefly because of the statistical and atomizing approach related to the basic needs thought, which was assumed as the basis for the MDGs.

Currently, global development policy is informed by the SDGs (UN 2019). Effective in 2015 and consisting of 17 specific sub-goals, they continue and expand the politics of MDGs.⁴ Similarly to the MDGs, they articulate a set of global goals with a set of indicators, to which all UN members have committed themselves. The goals include specific targets especially on poverty reduction, basic services and environmental protection, expanding the scope of the largely poverty-focused MDGs.⁵ The clearest difference to the MDGs is the increased attention to environmental matters, although the very notion of sustainable development has always been criticised over its emphasis on economic rather than ecological rationality (Banerjee, 2003), suspected to lead to ecological overshoot rather than ecological balance (Lautensach and Lautensach, 2013). Some authors have also highlighted the SDG emphasis on ‘governance through goals’, meaning that the goals as such play a major role in comparison to the actual institutional arrangements or investments, and that the goal-setting process as such is given much emphasis (Biermann et al., 2017).

Below, the SDGs are explored from the perspective explicated above: the question is, how do utopianism and governance rationality manifest in the SDG documents and how could the SDGs be interpreted as a tension and interplay between these political modes.

Data and analysis method

The data used in this study consists of a set of SDG-related documents. They form three sets of subdata. First, the SDG declaration itself. Second, information documents on the content and meaning of the SDGs produced by the UN and the UNDP (United Nations Development Programme). These documents were chosen amongst a limited body of data, based on judgement of relevance. The third subset of data consists of voluntary national reports (VNRs) on progress on SDGs, from the United Kingdom, South Africa and Tanzania. The rationale of choosing the documents produced by these particular countries followed a logic of availability and representativeness. The voluntary reviews are currently not numerous compared to the number of

4 For a more detailed analysis on the shift from the MDGs to SDGs, see Fukuda-Parr (2016). For a critical account, see Carant (2017).

5 On policy-making through global goals, see Kanie and Biermann (2017); Fukuda-Parr (2014).

signatories of the SDGs. Amongst the existing ones, one report was chosen to represent each traditional ‘development level category’: one ‘developing country’ (Tanzania), one ‘middle-income country’ (South Africa) and one ‘developed’ or traditional donor country (United Kingdom). Combined, the documents contained about 1,000 pages, which means that the third dataset was by far the largest.

As for a critical note on the data, it is an open question, how accurately reports of the kind used in this study display the reality of the self-perception of a field of politics. While answering this question is not within the scope of this study, it should be noted that documents of these kinds are key tools of expression for contemporary institutions. Indeed ‘it is exactly the written document which represents the most ubiquitous form of knowledge production within modern institutions, such as hospitals, schools, nursing homes, policy and military departments, courts and social welfare agencies’ (Patton, 2002). This means that the policy document is not only an *epistemological* object, but is to be understood as a natural reference point on how the modern institution relates to the world: they express, legitimate and relate through the policy document. Sometimes institutional texts are even seen as the basis of contemporary sense making, as they help us construct, sustain, contest and change the sense of social reality (Miller, 1997). On this basis it can be assumed, that such documents, as tools of expression, legitimation and relation, provide a relevant source of information for analysing the political mode(s). Particularly the VNRs have also been widely utilized in earlier research, for example on how they address gender equality (Oda, 2019), health issues (Bickler et al., 2020), interlinkages and integration of the SDG targets (Allen et al., 2018) or the relative importance of individual targets (Sebestyén et al., 2020).

The data was analysed employing a content analysis / close reading approach. Content analysis generally is a broad category, mostly referring to the careful and systematic analysis of data and its organisation into patterns and themes (Berg, 2009, p.338; Leedy and Ormrod, 2005). Here, this organisation followed the aforementioned research problem of discerning the political mode in the documents, which necessitated an analysis on how given problems, issues and solutions are framed and represented. In other words, a close reading analysis on the political mode in documents seeks to decipher ways of expression that illuminate the underlying ideas of the sense of the practice.

These typical approaches of content analysis were informed by an approach arising from the notion of ‘utopia as method’: applying the so called ‘archeological mode’ of utopian studies (Levitas, 2013) in the analysis. This means identifying utopian elements in different kinds of texts, including texts typically seen as merely technical. Such analysis pieces together utopian elements embedded for example in political programmes and social and economic policies (Levitas, 2013, p.153), coming close to so called ‘utopian hermeneutics’, that aims to find utopian elements in all areas of human culture (Bloch, 1986; Kellner, 1997; Jameson, 1979). Seen this way, utopian analysis is a form of close reading: rather than locating patterns and clusters generally, such

Figure 1: Keywords related to the utopian mode.

analyses pays particular attention to locating elements looking (and dreaming) beyond the currently existing, in any kind of texts. A similar approach was used in the case of governance, although close reading to discern governance mentality has not so explicitly been systematized as a method.

The analysis process involved several phases. The first phase consisted of general familiarization with the documents. This was followed by the second phase, in which frequency of keywords typical to a given political mode was analysed. The keywords are visualized in Figures 1 and 2. The third and final phase consisted of the identification of general categories and themes (Berg, 2009, pp.350–352). The second and third phase were not simply successive: keywords as they are ‘clustered’ (Krippendorff, 1980, pp.116–117)⁶ informed themes, but the discerned themes fed back into understanding the relevant keywords, which again clarified the themes – and so forth. The analysis required assuming such reflexivity.

While it is clear that the SDG declaration shows more examples of the utopian mode than the VNRs, the aim of the analysis was not to compare the declaration and the implementation documents. Rather, all documents were analysed with the same tools, and all categorisations extend over all subsets of data. These categorisations were made on the basis of political mode rather than on the basis of substance, in other words thematic categories were identified only to the extent that they were relevant for the analysis of the modes. As a further point, the analysis of the themes in the text partially required discerning the ‘latent content’ (as opposed to manifest

⁶ Clustering seeks to group or lump together objects or variables that share some observed qualities, organised into categories (Berg 2009, pp.350–352).

Figure 2: Keywords related to governance mode.

content) of the text (Berg, 2009, pp.343–344), going beyond the immediate recognition of keywords. For example, ideas about implementation are not necessarily articulated, but the existing order can be implicitly assumed.

The results of the analysis are presented below, beginning from the utopian mode. Both utopian mode and governance mode are discussed through recognised key categories through which the modes are manifested. Quotations from the documents to illustrate the categories are given in the text, rather than as separate quotes.

The utopian world of the SDGs

I will begin the presentation of the analysis results by categorizing utopian elements discernible in the SDG documents. Below, I have ‘pieced together the utopian elements’ (Levitas, 2013) by organising them in broad categories. These categories are based on relevance and prevalence. I suggest that the utopian world of the SDGs consists of three major categories. First, the expression of the *political we-subject*. Second, *transformative values*. Third, the notion of *inclusive and fair prosperity*.

The first identified category is the political we-subject, referring to humanity as a single global political subject, with collective responsibilities. This category might raise questions about whether it concerns utopias at all, as it concerns the political subject rather than anything ‘substantial’. Yet drawing a sharp distinction between subject and substance can lead to downplaying the utopian qualities of participation and unity. The talk about political subjectivity on a world-scale implies an attempt on significant reconstruction of social relations. Indeed the form of the political

agent as envisioned in the SDG documents is highly inclusive. The political subject is vaster and more abstract than current politics could ever handle. The unity of humanity is emphasised throughout, despite sometimes sliding into a *realpolitik* language in ‘we the leaders’.

Looking at the documents in a more detailed manner, several characteristics of the functioning of this we-subject can be discerned. On a country-level, the virtues of participation and consultation are repeatedly articulated. Yet this is restricted to the process of designing the SDG policies, which indeed has been noted to allow much participatory space to civil society (Fukuda-Parr and McNeill, 2019), but hardly extending to be seen as a virtue of the world to be generated by the SDGs. Also part of the transformative ideas embedded in the very form of the SDG process is the (at least partial) reorientation of the North/South dichotomy. In terms of the constellation of global politics, it is not unimportant that the Northern countries make their intra-country reporting in the VNRs on the very same terms and formats as do the Southern countries.⁷ The traditional donor/recipient relations are thereby partially remodelled by setting goals for the ‘first world’ that are not limited to funding. While the old donor discourse sometimes does surface in the documents, a key part of the vision of the SDGs is to understand problems and solutions in a geographically cross-cutting manner, rather than focusing the attention to the ‘developing’ countries.

A very real element in the documents is a given ideal of social harmony, or *lack of conflict*. This is an utopian element that can be discerned amongst a quite implementative discourse. Of course the idea of humanity as a political subject focuses on shared goals, or shared visions for the future, rather than conflicts or disagreements. It thereby assumes and expands the idea of development as maturing of a nation as an internally harmonious unit of development (e.g. Rist, 1997).

The utopianism at play needs to be understood in the context of UN tradition, in which unity and coming-together are seen as the high virtues (Peters, 2015). But the idea of non-conflict can be seen in national VNRs as a broad ideal, for instance when emphasising good labour relations and working with industry and trade unions ‘to promote good work in the economy’. Unity then surely can be suspect as it can downplay even legitimate conflict. Yet the utopian tone is clear. Further, technology is praised as offering ‘unprecedented opportunities to rethink the way in which the Goals are tackled’, hinting at the possibility of progress entailing new means to surpass societal conflicts.

Second, the documents can be seen as leaning on *transformative values* as a general mentality. Values or principles repeatedly embraced in the documents include human dignity, equality and equity (at the global level), freedom, solidarity and tolerance. They either reaffirm human values, or support the idea of the we-subject. Further, they form the language in which many more concrete goals are

⁷ On how reporting practices influence the approach to SDGs, see for instance Bexell and Jönsson (2019).

expressed, thereby framing given policy goals in a transformative utopian tone. For instance, eradication of extreme poverty is expressed as ‘liberation’ or ‘freedom’ from the global evils of ‘the abject and dehumanizing conditions of extreme poverty’. Similarly, despite the all-embracing political subject of humanity, the tasks ahead are at places described in terms of ‘combatting’ evils such as violence against women. In other words, not only humanity is seen as one, but it also struggles for social transformation as one.

Moving from values to a more concrete level, the third and most explicit category I suggest is the utopia of *inclusive and fair prosperity*. This means that despite all the recent ecological alarm and criticisms of measurements of growth (e.g. Ulvila and Pasanen, 2009; Munda, 2012), economic growth remains to be not only a self-evidently assumed goal but a clearly utopian element, involving an aspiration for a better quality of life: ‘prosperous economies bring people out of poverty’. Typically, ‘the economy’ is seen as a subject (rather than a contested space) with a *function* to eradicate poverty. Furthermore, the economy is seen as a domain of empowerment: for instance job creation is repeatedly framed as ‘economic empowerment’, and the availability of banking is discussed in terms of ‘empowering people to access capital’.

The wish of a growing economy is accompanied – rather than replaced – with hopes of seeing the economy become more equal and inclusive. Sustainability is talked about in the same tone, for example when dreaming of ‘a prosperous Africa based on inclusive growth and sustainable development’. Sometimes equality assumes the guise of individual merit: ‘everyone should be able to go as far as their hard work and talent can take them, which means removing the barriers and inequalities that exist’. But the turn to addressing inequality is broader than this, and this turn is quite real since the MDGs, from which inequality was strikingly absent. The SDG documents explicitly address ‘imbalances of wealth, opportunity and power’, ‘privilege’, and unequal wage incomes, for instance.

In addition to poverty reduction and general ‘economic empowerment’, practical manifestations of the utopia of equality relate typically to education. Especially free and universal access to schooling is repeatedly asserted as something of a dream. This is emphasised by the repeated focus on vulnerable and disadvantaged groups, active use of the slogan ‘leaving no-one behind’, and addressing the persisting inequalities in the education system, including gender parity issues. Interestingly, also the domestic institutional basis is continuously presented in a utopian tone. Functioning legal institutions are seen as a key element in the realisation of full and universal human functioning, good society and justice. Efforts to strengthen legal institutions are continuously reported in the context of human rights, justice, gender parity and democracy. Human rights are presented as an issue of ‘broad reforms of the institutional functioning’, ‘strong commitment to improved governance’, and ‘confidence in the legal system’. The utopian state, is therefore respectful and inclusive by being institutionally and judicially fair.

Governance mode in the SDGs

Yet the documents are not devoid of implementative language, on the contrary it is the dominant tone of talk. The implementative order, in the sense of systems of governance assumed and affirmed in the documents, can be analysed through four categories. These are, first, *reaffirming the international order*; second, *alignment with existing national points of emphasis*; third, *assuming the approach of networked governance*; and fourth, *assuming the rationale of the hegemonic development economics thought*. This forms the implementative framework of the SDG agenda. I will next look at these categories in detail.

Reaffirming the international order

First, all SDG documents from the declaration onwards make it clear, that while the geopolitical balance might be changing and countries might assume new identities, the underlying international order remains untouched. The SDG declaration very explicitly makes the point of reassuring that ‘sovereign equality of all States’ will be upheld, ‘territorial integrity and political independence’ respected, and the principle of non-interference to internal affairs honoured. However strong the ethics of humanity-as-one might be and however transformative values might inform the political enterprise, the realm of *realpolitik* involves no alternatives to nation-states as the domain of politics and a Westphalian world order. As interconnected and unified the world of the SDGs is, it is comprised of contained nation-states.⁸ Beyond the declaration, the goals are set so to necessarily require governance arrangements to diffuse them and integrate them into institutions, policies, and practices (e.g. Kanie and Biermann, 2017).

This reaffirmation is not visible only in the repeated talk on honouring sovereignty, but in the constant reference in the VNRs to rankings as countries describe their aims and achievements. Countries see themselves as units taking part in a competition in the international field, in the realm of rankings organised around various individual indicators. This is in line with the notion made in literature on global governance about the emergence of a ‘reflexive indicator culture’ (Bhuta et al., 2018; Davis et al., 2012), and the use of ‘performance indicators’ to attract attention to the relative performance of countries in a given policy area’ (Kelley and Simmons, 2014, 4). The abundance of indicators gives a possibility for virtually any country to see itself as successful in this perceived competition.⁹

When it comes to latent content (Berg, 2009, pp.343–344), the most strikingly absent points in the analysed documents relate to global institutions and politics.

8 For an analysis of the state-centric nature of SDG implementation, see Bexell and Jönsson (2017).

9 For example, Tanzania is said to rank number 11 out of 184 countries on projected tourism growth; the UK remains at the top of the global league tables for philanthropy and volunteering.

The transformation of global politics to any extent is clearly not part of the SDG agenda. Global politics hardly extends beyond the ‘reaffirmation’ of the UN organisational structure, ‘the central position of the General Assembly’. The political advancements then take place within this stable framework: it includes developing strong partnerships and co-operation between nations, and strengthening the UN and its agencies, including the Bretton Woods Institutions.

Alignment with national politics

Second, to move on to *alignment*, a central effort in the analysed VNR documents seems to be to show that almost any SDG goal is aligned with already existing policies of the government in question. Alignment is, importantly, opposite to policy change or institutional reorganisation. It often means assuring that the SDGs do not need to change anything essential in the national agenda, or that the government has already been acting towards the SDG goals even before these goals were agreed on. This extends even to mentioning in the reviews laws that have come to force in the 1990s. Sometimes alignment is expressed by the concept of ‘convergence’, as in ‘convergence between NDP [the National Development Plan] and the SDGs’. Also, a very broad range of elements in existing legislation seem to be counted as ‘supporting policy’. As an example of this, ‘supporting policies such as National Investment Promotion Policy 1997 are well aligned with the SDGs’. This tendency is further exacerbated by the multi-actor approach visible throughout the documents, practically meaning that any positive cases within the country are presented as national progress towards the SDGs. Such cases range in the analysed VNR documents from the activities of global foundations to breakfast programmes sponsored by the soft drinks industry, from youth apprenticeship programmes to activities of various NGOs.

Despite the global nature of the goals, in all country documents the SDGs are discussed clearly in the tone of the country’s tradition of development talk, rather than creating new ways of formulating the problems. Tanzania’s documents focus on development plans together with donors, economic growth and poverty reduction. South Africa frames close to everything in the context of post-apartheid (social welfare system, the criminal justice institutions, environmental protection, ...). The UK emphasises its global development leadership and carefully documents monetary inputs in exact sums to various international programmes. This observation is in line with earlier studies based on the VNRs which also suggest that the domestic approach to politics determines the interpretation of the SDGs (e.g. Tosun and Leininger, 2017).

Assuming the approach of networked governance

The analysed documents are also thick on language referring to the contemporary self-understanding of governance, seeing governments as co-ordinators rather than as

sovereign locations of power (Bevir, 2011; Miller and Rose, 2008), and seeing the process of governance as a field of data-based expert action rather than being about pushing a given political line (partisan ideology or transformative utopia). In governance focused on co-ordination, a number of different agents are recognised, and the government sees its task to be co-ordination and streamlining the activities of these multiple agents to align, to the extent possible, with broad government-initiated ‘visions’ and ‘strategic programmes’. This can be seen as a symptom of governments encountering the limits of governing, being forced to work on legitimation (Hajer and Wagenaar, 2003).

Further, ‘stakeholders’ are constantly involved and invited to dialogues, ‘encouraged to make a difference’, rather than regulated. The documents emphasise ‘engagement beyond government, particularly by civil society and the private sector’. The government agenda is then to incentivise such stakeholders to be involved with dialogues for common strategies. This can be seen as confirming to the idea of network governance as ‘organisation of self-organisation’ and ‘regulation of self-regulation’ (Jessop, 2011). Indeed governments increasingly share the activity of governing with societal actors, including private firms, non-governmental organisations and non-profit service providers (Bevir, 2011).

The relation with the private sector is a particularly illuminating case. Curiously, a key part of the attainment of the SDGs seems to be the expectation that the interests of governments and firms could ultimately merge, as business becomes ‘committed’. A key idea in SDG politics is that a major part of investments needed for meeting the SDGs should come from the private sector, and this will take place with a mindset that causes firms to see the SDGs as a business opportunity and themselves as ‘implementing partners’ who essentially support government efforts. Indeed the SDGs are often described in very business-friendly terms, such as a ‘window of investment opportunities’. In this spirit, enterprises are called to ‘participate’.

All in all, the VNR documents display a general depoliticising tendency. This does not only mean that setting the indicators often dilute the underlying goals (Fukuda-Parr and McNeill, 2019). There is a general focus on ‘knowledge-based’ governance and handling societal matters as technical optimization issues. This kind of idea of governance sees the government’s power being based on rationality, standardisation and systematisation (Shanhav, 2000), rather than the formal state and its capacity to regulate. The key instruments used for this purpose are monitoring and data. Measurement becomes a key element in implementation. This is as such in line with long-term criticism of development practice turning politics into technical matters and handling them as cost–benefit problems (Ferguson, 1994).

Indeed the SDG documents place strong emphasis on issues such as data gap, assessment, indicators, metadata for indicators, data production and data management. Data becomes an area of development in its own right: the reports express concern over how to develop indicators and build data required for monitoring the SDGs. Data is not only seen as required for evaluation, but also being involved in ‘all of

the core activities of government’, as well as in decisions on the need for new policies. Sometimes talk on data assumes an emancipatory discourse, as comprehensive data is seen as ‘necessary to achieve leaving no one behind and to make the invisible visible’.

Assuming the development economics paradigm

In addition to a given idea of governance, the documents entail a given idea of economic rationality, expressed either explicitly or implicitly. The economic logic of naming problems and framing expertise (Miller and Rose, 2008) gains prominence in the framework of governance discussed above: indeed contemporary governance has sometimes been called ‘a form of democratic government, which guarantees the dominance of the rules of economics over those of politics’ (Frischtak, 1994). In the analysis of the SDG documents, the interesting aspect is exactly what the ‘rules’ of economics are seen to consist of, in other words what is seen as self-evidently good policy rather than contested ideas.

The economic ideas entailed in the documents could perhaps be best described as ‘neoliberal economism with good social policy’. By ‘neoliberal economism’ I refer to both an approach and a policy programme. Approach-wise, the focus is very pointedly in a traditional conception of growth: industrialization and infrastructure, including communication technology, dominate the imagery of ‘developing’.¹⁰ Sometimes this is expressed by noting that economic growth is essential for overcoming global poverty and for allowing human potential to flourish, but in any case ‘growth’ is the dominant starting point for the content of ‘to develop’.

The political programme aspect can be described as neoliberalism. This means an abundance of talk about competitive sectors, a ‘vibrant’ private sector, breaking cartels and promoting competition through limiting the size and influence of state-owned enterprises (seen as ‘growth accelerator’). Further, the economic programme for development is seen to involve promoting labour market reforms to increase flexibility, taking a stark export orientation and enforcing fiscal discipline. All in all, the desired economic order is seen to put emphasis on market virtues of flexibility and competition, along with explicit and inflexible rules both nationally and internationally. Seen in terms of competition-generated equilibrium, it is difficult to see how an utopian element could be accommodated into a policy framework pointed so strongly towards liberalization as the final stage of perfect competition.¹¹

Curiously, the private sector is seen as both a priority in development *and* a subject bringing about desired social change. Business climate/environment is discussed repeatedly, sometimes by emphasising policy certainty and engagement with the

¹⁰ On the traditional conception of development and its criticism, see Sachs (1992) and Rist (1997).

¹¹ For earlier accounts on the neoliberal underpinnings of the SDGs, see Weber (2017) and Carant (2017)

private sector. The role of business also extends to a strong emphasis on public-private financing of infrastructure and thereby giving 'greater opportunities to the private sector'. Generally, private sector actors are 'encouraged', rather than regulated.

Naturally, 'neoliberal economism with good social policy' involves the social policy side as well. This means poverty reduction in a quite traditional sense, accompanied with a visible interest in cash transfers. The documents generally recognise the need for 'government investments allocated to pro-poor sectors' in the form of conditional grants. These transfers are typically justified by reference to people living in extreme poverty, thus basically being means of lifting people from the most humiliating and life-threatening forms of poverty, yet not necessarily more.

So the idea of economic good practice communicated in the documents can be shortly described as follows. People should be lifted above the lowest poverty lines, but the economy by large (labour market included) should be liberalized to allow for free-market competition. Further, 'the economy' is regularly presented as having primacy over the actual development goals, despite being seen as functional in poverty reduction. For example, education when discussed in the context of the economy, is presented as 'supplying sophisticated skills', important because 'low skill levels constrain productivity and growth'. This tone is a clear opposite to seeing education as such to be good for human life.

Conclusion and discussion

The discussion above aimed to shed light on the political mode(s) visible in the SDGs documents and thereby the self-understanding of the SDGs. Employing an empirical (document) analysis, the analysis above used utopia as an analytical tool, uncovering and displaying utopian elements in political texts. This approach follows the 'archeological mode' of utopian analysis. As an opposite to the utopian mode, the concept of governance was employed in a similar fashion both as a name for an ideal-type and as an analytical concept. Both elements are present in policy documents, and a qualitative close reading needs to be employed to discern and categorize them.

It was shown that the politics of the SDGs involve a noteworthy tension. The SDGs include highly utopian elements, as they promote the idea of humanity as a single subject with a common destiny, lean on highly transformative values and seek a future characterized by inclusive prosperity, or a future free from the evil of poverty. But simultaneously they are cast in a highly contrasting logic of implementation. This logic of implementation includes the reaffirmation of the existing political order and political space, exacerbated by an 'indicator culture', and generally assumes a given idea of networked governance and economic rationality, which can limit potential societal change significantly. This approach is based on taking as given the existing political agents, power relations, and systems of organisation (the nation state), and seeking the societal change pronounced by the SDGs by co-ordinating and aligning these existing powers.

Beyond their noteworthy utopian spirit, the SDGs could be seen as global politics without global means. They are cast politically into a reality in which they are not attached to any entity with political power traditionally understood. Rather, their attainment is expected to take place within a framework of implementation largely based on attempts to align the activities of multiple agents by means of co-ordination such as strategies and visions. Quite like the MDGs, this attainment is also grounded on a data-driven idea of governance which conceals the underlying politics (Fukuda-Parr and McNeill, 2019): monitoring, evaluation and impact assessment rather than transformation. While development politics have for long been criticized for the excessive power of the key institutions (Bretton Woods Project, 2020; Donlagic and Kozaric, 2010), such as the World Bank, the challenge of the SDGs can turn out to be the opposite: the lack of power for implementation.

Furthermore, the documents analysed above are strikingly devoid of many aspects of political talk. There is shortage of references to matters such as liberties, democracy, media, political conflict, societal transformation, power relations; empowerment, freedom, reflexive / critical skills, transition, conflicting ideas of development, political disagreements, classes and so forth. Also the discourse on participation is weak beyond participation to the SDG process itself: the focus is clearly in provision instead of claims.

It was further argued that the conceptual tools used, while applicable to any qualitative policy document analysis, are particularly suitable for scrutinising the politics of development. Indeed the very enterprise of development can be seen as an ongoing interplay and tension between utopia and governance, as was noted in the above discussion on the history of development and particularly the MDGs. The SDGs continue this tradition of being very thick in both political modes: envisioning grand futures for humanity but immediately restricting their realisation by their attachment to governance based on co-ordination of existing activities.

The analysis above should not be interpreted as signalling that the relation between the utopian mode and the governance mode is fixed. On the contrary, development politics can involve instances in which a window for redefining this balance into a more utopian direction opens. For instance, the MDGs, as noted, were a highly utopian enterprise. While it simultaneously introduced a technical conception of poverty and data-driven politics, quite different kinds of approaches were on the table in the process of the build-up towards the MDGs.¹² Even the basic needs framework seemed to be more open to non-technical approaches in its initial phases, involving for instance the idea that basic needs oriented policy implies participation (Jolly et al., 2004, p.25; ILO, 1976, p.32). Perhaps today, the ‘implementing partners’ could

¹² For instance the Copenhagen World Summit on Social Development in 1995 sought to ground development policy on the idea of the globalization of the welfare state (to put a long story short) (Wiman et al., 2007), and was only later sidetracked by the quantitative and clearly less transformative basic needs approach.

form constellations that begin to form new political spaces, or perhaps ‘the economy’ could assume new meanings. In the era of the SDGs, quite like before, utopias and governance continue to be in a dynamic relation. Understanding his dynamism, which both can open and close political spaces, assists our understanding of ‘development’ in general.

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