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SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

Addressing the Contradictions of Sustainable Value Chains

IS SUSTAINABILITY SUSTAINABLE?

Agri-Chains and Sustainable Development, Montpellier, France 2016

IN THIS PAPER...

- ✖ I take as given
  - ✓ The reality of climate change
  - ✓ The decision to pursue the SDGs
- ✖ However, I argue that we need to ask what we mean by
  - ❓ Sustainable
  - ❓ Development
  - ❓ Value Chains
- ✖ These words too often hollowed out, glosses

SUSTAINABILITY

- Now claimed by …
  - International organizations
  - Nations
  - Corporations
  - Non-governmental organizations (NGOs)
- Definitions used often contradictory
- Slavery in ancient Egypt sustainable, but hardly worth trying to reinstate

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SUSTAINABILITY

- Sustainability cannot be defined as merely protecting the environment without considering negative impacts on persons/groups
- Sustainability must include some concept of social justice
- Put differently, sustainability cannot be separated from human values and endeavors
- It must include sustaining human life in a manner that everyone values

SUSTAINABILITY

- Various organizations studiously avoid social justice

- Including social justice would undermine their organizational goals, challenge class structure, involve re-enacting aspects of our *socionatural* world

- Similarly, scholars often work hard to maintain divide between social and natural even as they claim sustainability

SUSTAINABILITY

- Markets are often used as best means for promoting sustainability
- But as Piketty has shown us, our faith in markets has led to great inequalities
- We live in a world filled with externalities, market failures, rigged markets, playing fields that are far from level
- In short, sustainability is contested.

DEVELOPMENT

Total world production of coarse grain, 1961–2004

Legend:
- Yield
- Production
- Area harvested
- Seed

Source: FAO
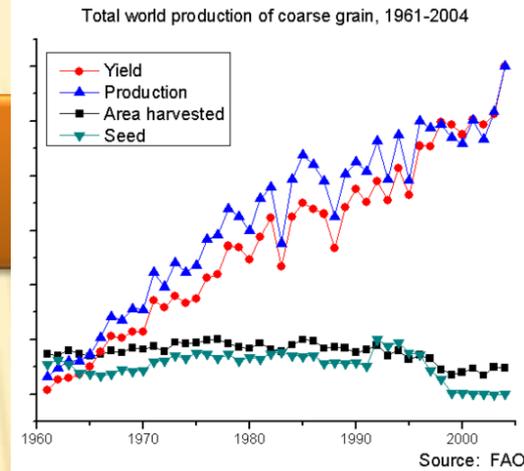
- Difficult to be against development
- Yet, until Truman used the term 'underdeveloped countries' it was largely applied to film
- Rostow's 'airplane theory' assumed a **linear path** from underdeveloped to developed
- This tended to privilege elites in the poor world

DEVELOPMENT

✖ Agricultural science embraced a model in which all useful knowledge originated in science and was diffused to farmers via extension services

| Scientist | → | Extension Agent | → | Farmer |

✖ Far too many agricultural development projects are still built on this model

DEVELOPMENT

- What might be considered development in one place might be called 'un-development' in another
- Single definition may lead us astray
- World is littered with failed projects based on 'one size fits all' model
- Development nearly always linked to economic growth

DEVELOPMENT

- Yet, if we take sustainability seriously, then continuous economic growth must be questioned
- Club of Rome warned us in 1972 that environment is not an infinitely large sink
- To date, development has been taken to mean more **things**
- For this reason, Sachs has argued that **sustainable development** is an oxymoron

DEVELOPMENT

- Of course, development need not follow this path

- It could be understood in local terms rather than as a neat linear transition from underdeveloped to developed

✳ ✳ ✳

- So what does that say about the Sustainable Development Goals?

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

- Clearly a step in the right direction, but considerable debate about how to achieve the goals
- SDGs hardly without their own contradictions
- Too much emphasis on achieving one goal may push others out of reach
- Consider some examples…

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

Goal 1 = commitment to end poverty

* Highly desirable but it could come at cost of more polluted air, water, desertification and deforestation

* Thus, Goals 6 & 15, water and land, would be that much more difficult to achieve

* And, were entire world to reach income levels of rich world using current technologies, results would be dire

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SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

* Current crop yields depend on massive use of non-renewable energy, use of pesticides and chemical fertilizers

* Reducing manufactured inputs will require shifting from monocrop agriculture to agroecological methods

* That in turn could push farming to more marginal soils (Goal 15), reduce economic growth (Goal 8) and even have undesirable effects on gender equity (Goal 5)

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

- 17 SDGs, while desirable individually, do not *add up* to some single thing
- No algorithm can be written to provide guidance
- They are a wicked problem that can only be pursued in an iterative and reflexive manner
- So how might value chains help or hinder in pursuing these goals?

VALUE CHAINS

- Notion of VC is linear much like its forerunners, e.g., subsectors, *filières*, supply chains and commodity chains

- VC is a useful fiction: VCs <u>**do not exist**</u> in the same way as physical objects

- Everyone involved in a VC is also involved in other activities

- These other activities promote a wide range of values, only a few are tied to commodities

VALUE CHAINS

- But VCs are also performative, i.e., they tell us what to do

- They cause us to create a world consisting of linear chains, each surrounding a particular commodity

- Ensuring that the various things in the chain are linked takes precedence

- The chains are amplified; all else is reduced

VALUE CHAINS

- In short, the world is partially reorganized so as to make the VC into something tangible

- But this is often done at the expense of other actions and with undesirable consequences that are unnoticed

- This suggests that VCs need to be rethought

- If VCs are performative, then challenge is to make the SDGs equally performative

VALUE CHAINS

- To date, one VC has done this with some success: agroforestry
- At its best, agroforestry incorporates both production of forest products and a variety of other commodities we humans find desirable
- Whether other VCs can do the same remains to be seen

SDGs AND INFRASTRUCTURE
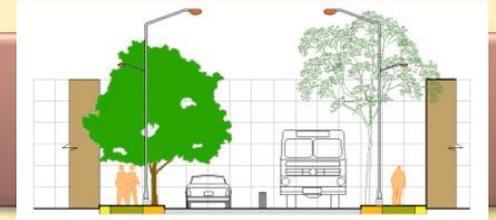
- We are beginning to understand how we shape the socionatural world and it shapes us

- Central to this is recognition that all societies depend on infrastructures

- Infrastructures are at once physical and social

- They consist of **norms, laws, standards** and **technologies** by which we structure our everyday lives

SDGs AND INFRASTRUCTURE
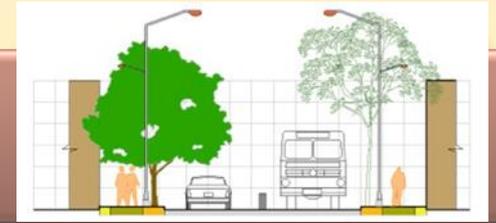
- The development project and globalization have been built on premise that **one** set of norms, laws, standards and technologies can and should become **universal**

- This uniformity promoted by neoliberal belief that all institutions should follow the market logic

- What we are witnessing today is a revolt against this idea

SDGs AND INFRASTRUCTURE
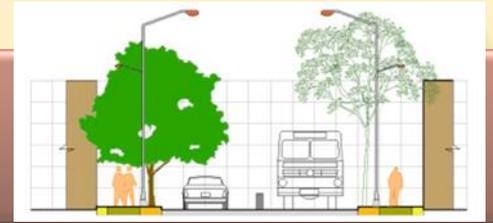
* Growing recognition that physical infrastructure is necessary for material improvements

* But little recognition of importance of social infrastructure

* Moving toward the SDGs will require re-imagining and re-enacting social infrastructures

SDGs AND INFRASTRUCTURE
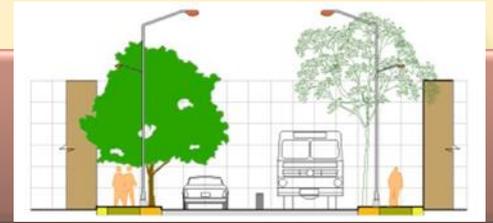
An apparent *double* paradox:

- *First*, we need standards to define what sustainability means, measures to determine improvements

- But once created, there will be pressure to focus on the measure, thereby undermining those aspects of sustainability not subject to measurement

SDGs AND INFRASTRUCTURE
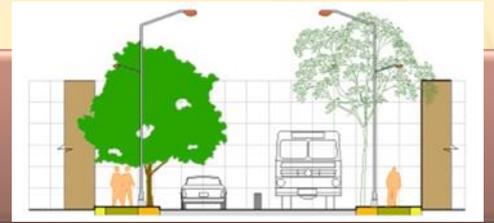
An apparent *double* paradox:

- ❌ *Second*, we need to build and rebuild social and physical infrastructures everywhere

- ❌ Yet, doing so would seem to require that we impose on the world **one** particular form of globalization, something hardly likely to work

SDGs AND INFRASTRUCTURE
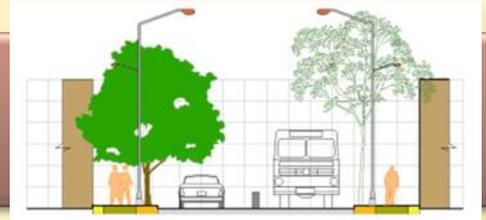
- However, these are only paradoxes if we see the SDGs as fixed and immutable
- If we see them as first attempts to define desired futures, then the paradoxes dissolve
- Since the goals will change, so must the measures; no single measure can or will be developed
- Similarly, SDGs must take different paths in different places; actions to produce a more sustainable world must be local, not universal

CONCLUSIONS

- Justice comes in multiple forms; imposing same goals on everyone unjust
- Living in a globalized world need not involve making every place the same
- Instead, we need to ensure that all human communities and each human being within those communities have a secure place to live
- True globalization only achievable by protecting local diversity in nature, technology and society

CONCLUSIONS

In sum, let us remember the questions we must ask as we travel down the paths we have selected. They are Tolstoy's questions:

- × Who are we?
- × How shall we live?