

An(Other) geographical critique of development and SDGs

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Dialogues in Human Geography
2018, Vol. 8(2) 186–190
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sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav
DOI: 10.1177/2043820618780788
journals.sagepub.com/home/dhg



Abstract

Geographers should engage with development and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by utilizing not only the theoretical and methodological tools from our various subfields but also through advocacy, expanding the role of public intellectuals and holding institutions and people to account. If we want emancipatory politics and transformations in development, we need to challenge and improve what is done in the name of SDGs, keeping central the issues of social justice and ethical engagement. This is perhaps the most critical thing geographers can undertake going forward in order to dismantle the master's current house.

Keywords

critical geography, development, politics, postcolonial, SDG

Development is a tricky business. It has been presented for several decades as an inherently good thing by international institutions, non-government organizations (NGOs), governments, and many citizens, who promote purported luxuries and privileges that development is supposed to bestow. Despite abundant criticism of the meaning, mechanisms, policies, projects, and impacts of development on Other bodies, spaces, and ecologies, the trenchant discourses and practices of development continue, with the word 'development' essentially remaining without 'any positive opposing or distinguishing term' (Williams, 1976: 76). Development strategies and projects have been tweaked over time and development is regularly reinvented discursively while remaining intractably more of the same methodologically and epistemologically.¹ The latest reincarnation of development took place in 2015 with the introduction of the Sustainable

Development Goals (SDGs), which replaced the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) that had guided development the prior 15 years. Diana Liverman's article 'Geographic Perspectives on Development Goals: Constructive Engagements and Critical Perspectives on the MDGs and the SDGs' offers an important critique and intervention and invites geographers to engage more forcefully with development. My comments here are offered in a general spirit of solidarity with Liverman, as I further analyze development and the SDGs and discuss how geographers have and could engage with development. I draw insights from my experience of being a critical

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geographer who has worked inside a large international development institution, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and dealt with the promises, pitfalls, and contradictions of development indicators and goals (see Sultana, 2014). I also write as a geographer from the postcolonial world who has been a subject of development.

Liverman makes a call to arms for geographers to engage with international development institutions, practices and policies, and then outlines some of the ways that geographic perspectives can add to ongoing debates. Critiquing the shortcoming of the MDGs (between 2000 and 2015) and potential failures of the new SDGs (between 2015 and 2030), Liverman encourages critical geographers to ‘contribute to the discussion’ from both within (by recommending tools, methods, strategies, indicators) and from outside (through critique, dialogue, and activism). Liverman thus encourages geographers, in whatever ways possible (that we each configure individually and collectively), to pursue mechanisms that enable geographers to showcase our unique interdisciplinary skills in theory and method by engaging more directly with public policy. Some geographers have already done so (including Liverman herself) through their work with international organizations in a variety of ways, such as being program staff, consultants, researchers, collaborators, and evaluators (see Simon and Carr, 2014).² Liverman argues that we need to engage more with the SDGs and global development institutions, especially drawing upon long-standing critiques by development geographers, political ecologies, as well as critical geographical insights from all the subfields of geography. Geographers can thus better inform what is being done in the name of development.

But how geographers more broadly can work on development remains the challenge. The impact we can have, despite our engagement, is generally relatively small in the grand scheme of things, often gradual and frustrated, or even ignored (Carr and Simon, 2014). While many geographers may want to engage, critique, and be heard, these are not necessarily the outcomes of our engagement. This is due to a variety of reasons in my opinion, such as development institutions being largely unresponsive

to critique, slow to change, generally resistant to reflexivity, require sustained engagement (which many scholars are unable to do given other academic obligations), and development has historically been dominated by economists and the quantification of life. Perhaps all this actually makes the case for more critical geographical insights to be internalized and taken on board, but the neoliberal governmentality at the heart of much of development is possibly antithetical to critical geographical epistemologies, methodologies, and insights. Moreover, academic responsibilities make it increasingly difficult for any critical mass of scholars to have sustained engagement with development institutions to have significant impact from within.

While extensive transformation of development by geographers is unlikely and an improbable goal, there are other ways to contribute. Geographers are already constructively engaging with international policies and projects through attention to a variety of topics, such as analysis of scale, political economy, critical social theoretical insights, complexities of places and peoples, linking the impacts of colonialism and imperialism to development, deconstructing reductionist discourses of vulnerability and resilience, advancing understandings of climate change and climate justice, and providing nuanced qualitative data and critical observations. Liverman identifies some of these aspects of geographical contributions, as well as the importance of demonstrating the fallacy of relying heavily on quantifiable indicators, measurements, and aggregation, which the SDG suffers from, albeit less than the MDGs. Indeed, one of the aspects of the SDGs (in comparison with the MDGs), from the perspective of its proponents, is that the SDGs avoid the oversimplification, quantitative-driven, and simplistic goals of the MDGs. However, the 17 goals and dozens of targets are fuzzy, ambitious, often unimplementable and contradictory, and perhaps even hubristic. While the SDGs are supposed to be aspirational, they’re open to interpretation, capture, and subject to abuse by those with power. Also, the SDGs are supposed to be transformative, but exactly how that may be is still unknown. Indeed, the SDGs can be considered to be post-political, that is, a polite consensus and celebration

without any real change. While supporters can point to the progressive possibilities in the vision of the SDGs, we will not know until they are implemented and the outcomes, both intended and unintended, are evident. This is particularly so for the complexities of impacts that are experienced along intersectional social categories such as class, race, gender, as well as ecological impacts. Furthermore, given that SDGs are supposed to apply to both the global North and global South (whereas the MDGs applied only to the global South), it is difficult to imagine how policies, institutions, and processes can be influenced at the very heart of empire.

Liverman's paper showcases how indicators and goals remain controversial with respect to not just definition but also measurability and outcome. One example I can give of the problematic ways indicators and metrics are used in development is from the mismatch between national indicators and local indicators for water and sanitation targets that are supposed to have 'equitable access to safe and affordable drinking water'. First, local data are often not collected, or are not collected properly, are frequently inaccurate, and also expensive to collect. Second, the 'what' that needs to be known is also conflictual, since current indicators generally rely on quantifiable data of whether someone has a water source nearby. This does not account for issues of reliability, availability, accessibility (rights, restrictions, social challenges), the costs involved, multiplicity of water sources used, distance to each source (physical, social, and emotional), as well as the gendered nature of water collection around the world (O'Reilly et al., 2009). The hassles, stress, suffering, and sometimes violence that women and girls face every day in procuring clean safe water for their households are difficult to measure in a metric that looks at specific quantifiers to measure coverage (Sultana, 2011). Thus, while the MDGs early on claimed that great accomplishments had been made on improving sources of drinking water, the claims were not fully true—it did not measure what it wasn't aware of or looking for, that is, illegible to its gaze. But building off of this purported success on drinking water in the MDGs, the SDGs initially risked paying less attention to water or the human right to water (which the UN ratified in 2010), and only through enormous

concerted pushback by academics, civil society, and communities around the globe did the reaffirmation of the human right to water and sanitation find coverage in the SDGs at all (becoming Goal 6 of 17). However, what this all means in implementation remains to be seen, especially given the increasing privatization of water and lobbying by corporations for commodifying water, and the alliances forming between development organizations and private water corporations. These will likely result in increasing dispossession of water for the poor and issues of affordability, accessibility, quality, and reliability become more fraught globally (Sultana and Loftus, 2012).

Another critique of the SDGs, one that is not elaborated upon in Liverman's paper, is the choice of terminology of 'sustainable development' (SD henceforth) at the heart of this new international framework of titled SDGs. 'Sustainable development' has been very contested, conflictual, and contradictory in definition and reality since its uptake in the 1980s (Redclift, 2005). Why this very term was chosen to define this 15-year initiative made me wary from the time they were announced. Given that critiques of SD have been extensive, many from geographers, and should be known by now to power brokers and higher-ups, it is indeed strange that such a term was chosen at all. SD can mean anything to anybody. Ergo, are we to take it that the SDGs are also something that will mean simultaneously anything and nothing, a warm fuzzy term that holds no real critical content, a greenwashing of yet another international set of agendas? Is choosing SDGs a wink to expect a lot more of the same vagueness and buzzwords as was generated from SD itself? While the stated goals and targets are meant to be the parameters of SDGs, they may suffer the same fate as SD. At some level, as Liverman points out, highlighting the importance of the environment and climate change is an important addition in the new framework and thus they fall under the vague purview of SD and its cousin sustainability (another contested term). However, given that the rhetorical and discursive shift does not take into account the existing critiques of SD, it is worthwhile tracing these critiques from geographers and other scholars

critically so that better alternative visions of development may be envisioned.

Another point I want to raise is about power. International development, aid monies, and all development goals are effectively about power. Thus, deconstructing and demonstrating the ways power relations operate, the kinds of powers that exist, and asking questions of what, who, why, and where, become critical in assessing these large international interventions that impact peoples and places. Development monies, policies, and projects will be modified in the pursuit of these goals, whether they are preset or to be determined, and thus these discourses and prescriptions play important roles in the ways societies will be impacted for quite some time. As a scholar of and from the developing world, these are important to me both professionally and personally, as development is enacted on Othered peoples like mine around the world. Structural power and neoliberal ideologies are glossed over in the SDGs and are being promoted in controversial ways already in developing countries. There is thus conflict between ‘business as usual’ or status quo and the discursively idealistic anticipated goals in the SDGs. This is particularly poignant, given the existing trends of structural adjustment programs, rapacious capitalism, enforcement of neoliberal free trade treaties in unequal relationships, increased push for commercialization and privatization, and concomitant socioecological destruction wreaking havoc around the world. Desiring better social and environmental outcomes without addressing structural problems, power imbalances, and ideological biases is very problematic about the SDGs. The growing inequalities and inequities around the world should be more central in any critique of the SDGs. As the famous Black feminist scholar Audre Lorde once said, ‘the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house’ (Lorde, 1984: 112). In other words, we can’t advance social justice and ethical change without challenging systemic oppression, power relations, and exploitation. Thus, if we want emancipatory politics and transformation, we need to do something differently and develop new tools beyond the SDGs. This is perhaps the most critical thing geographers can undertake going forward.

In conclusion, Liverman encourages geographers to engage with development by utilizing the insights and tools from our various subfields, such as political ecology, feminist geography, and development geography. Beyond identifiable theoretical and methodological contributions by geographers, I also think there is importance in engaged scholarship and advocacy, of expanding the role of public intellectuals, and of holding institutions and people to account. This is not easy work, rather it is challenging and exhausting. Furthermore, these activities are neither valued in academia nor generally rewarded, thus making it more difficult for academics to engage in long-term meaningful and impactful work (as restrictions come from promotion and tenure rules, value rubrics, metricized mania, and general neoliberalization of academia). Thus, we need to reassess what it means for us to be ‘engaged’ scholars, and what kind of impact we hope for (whether achievable or not). We must also question what ‘meaningful’ engagements look like, as we can publish scholarship that might never get read or have traction, or engage with stakeholders and institutions without precipitating any real change. Nonetheless, I agree that we need to engage critically and constructively, however we can. Too much is at stake to not do so. If the SDGs are truly to be useful and have transformative potential, then we must be part of that conversation too, and develop new tools to dismantle the master’s house.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes

1. There is considerable scholarship debating the complexities and problématique of development from both proponents and critics so I will refrain from reproducing those here.

2. These issues are discussed in greater depth by various scholars who have worked in and with development institutions in a special issue edited by development geographers David Simon and Ed Carr (2014).

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