

The Ethical Core of the Sustainable Development Goals: Planetary Health and Human Well-Being

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The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are an attempt to clarify how best to organize human collectives in a socially and ecologically responsible way. As such, they relate to a broader project that has been ongoing at least since the publication, in 1972, of the Club of Rome's landmark *Limits to Growth* report, a searing early depiction of a civilization in ecological overshoot. Since then we have seen many attempts to quantify the total impact of humans on the planet's many interlocking systems: Ecological Footprint Analysis; Life-Cycle Analysis; the UN Millennium Development Goals; the Index of Social Health; the Genuine Progress Indicator; the Happy Planet Index; the Triple Bottom Line; the Sustainability Tracking, Assessment and Rating System; Leadership in Energy and Design; and many more.¹

The SDGs provide the most comprehensive set of analytic tools yet developed. But although the metrics are indispensable, the toolkit also needs something it is so far largely lacking: an analysis of the values underpinning the project. It is missing a clear and compelling presentation of the ethical core of the sustainability project. This is a problem because if we are not explicit about this aspect of our efforts, we risk failing to see opportunities for building consensus around them. Too often, the natural and social scientists who generate the otherwise impressive metrics simply assume that the values and principles grounding those metrics are obvious and incontestable. For example, a recent application of the SDGs to one nation's policies notes that because they are "neutral outcome benchmarks," the goals "offer a remarkably useful shorthand for what matters."² This is doubly problematic. First, the reference to 'neutrality' obscures the fact that the benchmarks express or summarize broadly liberal or humanitarian moral principles of ecological, social and intergenerational respect or equality. Invoking scientific neutrality in this case is therefore highly misleading. Second, and relatedly, although the metrics might point to "what matters," they are entirely silent about *why* those things matter. And, if we don't have a compelling answer to the 'why' question, we don't really have a satisfying answer to the 'what' question either.

We can begin to fill these theoretical gaps by analysing the SDGs in terms of the relation between two other concepts: planetary health and human well-being. COVID-19 has pushed the issue of global public health to stark prominence. The suffering and death caused by the pandemic are a wake-up call for our species because with respect to the potential for negative impacts on human health, the climate crisis is set to dwarf COVID-19 in the coming decades. The most urgent task at hand is therefore to develop a jurisdiction-by-jurisdiction account of which policies were effective at curbing the spread of the disease, and which ones were not. Nearly everyone understands the urgency of this task and that is because there is broad

¹ Caradonna, J.L. 2014. *Sustainability: A History*. Oxford; Oxford University Press, 180-188.

² Biggs, M. and McArthur, J. 2018. "A Canadian North Star: Crafting an Advanced Economy Approach to the Sustainable Development Goals." In R.M. Desai *et. al.*, *From Summits to Solutions: Innovations in Implementing the Sustainable Development Goals*. Washington: Brookings Institution, 265-301 (294).

agreement that health *matters*. Moreover, the pandemic has forced all of us to think about health in a more comprehensive way than we did before. We now talk, not just about saving life and limb, but also about the mental health of those subject to long periods of relative confinement, the conditions for a healthy economy (including questions about what sort of work is ‘essential’), about the health of the social body whose members must think more pointedly about the importance of and conditions for social trust, and so on. All of this questioning has the potential to be quite fruitful as preparation for coming crises, precisely because most of us care more or less *automatically* about health, and we understand the broad application of the concept just mentioned.

This is why it is so important to extend our vision one step further, to encompass the notion of planetary health. According to a succinct recent definition of it, “planetary health is the health of human civilization and the state of the natural systems on which it depends.”³ The significant gains we have made in advancing human prosperity since the Enlightenment have all come at the expense of natural systems and have also been inequitably distributed. Now the bills have come due. The IPCC is clear that vulnerability to the negative health effects of climate change is and will increasingly become globally skewed according to geography, current health status, age and gender, socioeconomic status and the quality of public health and other infrastructure.⁴ It follows that adaptation efforts are intrinsically a matter of justice. We must therefore conceptualize planetary health in a way that also attends to local and global dimensions of justice.

However, health is not only about diet or even the body more generally. It is also connected to a deeper idea of well-being. This is a multi-faceted concept, with deep philosophical roots. Well-being includes both traditional metrics of mental and physical health as well as what philosopher John Rawls calls the “social bases of self-respect,” among many other factors.⁵ It is psychological, social, ethical, ecological, existential and political *all at once*. From the standpoint of grounding the SDGs ethically, the most important theoretical task here is to show that the best approach to well-being is provided by objectivist, rather than subjectivist, accounts of it. Arguably, a large part of what Charles Taylor calls the “malaise of modernity” consists in our having allowed the concept of well-being to be defined along subjectivist lines.⁶ This, for example, is the central assumption of neoclassical economics, the enterprise responsible for both the past 200 years of planetary destruction and the most unequal division of wealth ever seen in the history of civilization.

³ Rockefeller Foundation-Lancet Commission on Planetary Health. 2015. *Safeguarding Human Health in the Anthropocene Epoch: Report of the Rockefeller Foundation-Lancet Commission on Planetary Health*. Lancet 386, 1973-2028 (1978). [https://www.thelancet.com/pdfs/journals/lancet/PIIS0140-6736\(15\)60901-1.pdf](https://www.thelancet.com/pdfs/journals/lancet/PIIS0140-6736(15)60901-1.pdf)

⁴ Smith, K.R., A. Woodward, D. Campbell-Lendrum, D.D. Chadee, Y. Honda, Q. Liu, J.M. Olwoch, B. Revich, and R. Sauerborn. 2014. Human health: impacts, adaptation, and co-benefits. In: *Climate Change 2014: Impacts, Adaptation, and Vulnerability. Part A: Global and Sectoral Aspects. Contribution of Working Group II to the Fifth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change* [Field, C.B., V.R. Barros, D.J. Dokken, K.J. Mach, M.D. Mastrandrea, T.E. Bilir, M. Chatterjee, K.L. Ebi, Y.O. Estrada, R.C. Genova, B. Girma, E.S. Kissel, A.N. Levy, S. MacCracken, P.R. Mastrandrea, and L.L. White (eds.)]. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 709-754.

⁵ Rawls, J. 1971. *A Theory of Justice*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 178-182.

⁶ Taylor, C. 1991. *The Malaise of Modernity*. Toronto: House of Anansi Press.

The bottom line is (a) that we must connect planetary health to an objectivist model of human well-being; and (b) that we won't understand the moral point of the SDGs without a detailed account of this connection. So, the idea that the SDGs reveal what really matters is true after all, although much more philosophical work along the lines sketched here is required to say why this is the case.