

# Hidden Politics in the UN Sustainable Development Goals

ADAM SNEYD

foreword by James Schneider

**critical development studies**



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# Critical Development Studies Series

Three decades of uneven capitalist development and neoliberal globalization have devastated the economies, societies, livelihoods and lives of people around the world, especially those in societies of the Global South. Now more than ever, there is a need for a more critical, proactive approach to the study of global and development studies. The challenge of advancing and disseminating such an approach — to provide global and development studies with a critical edge — is on the agenda of scholars and activists from across Canada and the world and those who share the concern and interest in effecting progressive change for a better world.

This series provides a forum for the publication of small books in the interdisciplinary field of critical development studies — to generate knowledge and ideas about transformative change and alternative development. The editors of the series welcome the submission of original manuscripts that focus on issues of concern to the growing worldwide community of activist scholars in this field. Critical development studies (CDS) encompasses a broad array of issues ranging from the sustainability of the environment and livelihoods, the political economy and sociology of social inequality, alternative models of local and community-based development, the land and resource-grabbing dynamics of extractive capital, the sub-national and global dynamics of political and economic power, and the forces of social change and resistance, as well as the contours of contemporary struggles against the destructive operations and ravages of capitalism and imperialism in the twenty-first century.

The books in the series are designed to be accessible to an activist readership as well as the academic community. The intent is to publish a series of small books (54,000 words, including bibliography, endnotes, index and front matter) on some of the biggest issues in the interdisciplinary field of critical development studies. To this end, activist scholars from across the world in the field of development studies and related academic disciplines are invited to submit a proposal or the draft of a book that conforms to the stated aim of the series. The editors will consider the submission of complete manuscripts within the 54,000-word limit. Potential authors are encouraged to submit a proposal that includes a rationale and short synopsis of the book, an outline of proposed chapters, one or two sample chapters, and a brief biography of the author(s).

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# Foreword

Crises abound. Global living standards are falling. One in ten people on Earth goes to bed hungry. More humans are displaced than at any time in history. Life expectancy is falling in nine out of ten countries. The past twelve months have seen temperatures more than 1.5°C above preindustrial levels. Today, as I write, temperatures are more than 2° above those levels. Major, irreversible changes to our environment will turbocharge existing crises that are almost certainly baked in already.

Human history is speeding up. Seismic events that mark a before and an after in the world system occur with unprecedented regularity — the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, and the genocide of Gaza, all in the past few years. In much of the world, politics has become more volatile and, at times, more violent. We know we live in a time of historical flux.

But geologic time, our planet's deep history, is also speeding up — and alarmingly so. For about the past twelve thousand years — pretty much all of known human history — humanity has lived in the Holocene geological era. It provided an unusually stable climate in which human society expanded dramatically. It gave us our assumptions about nature: the pattern of the seasons, the migration of animals, and the temperature. But that era is over, and we are moving to something else rapidly.

We've known this for sixteen years now. In 2008, the august Stratigraphy Commission of the Geological Society of London published a report presenting evidence that the Holocene was over and we were now in an era "without close parallel" in the previous many millions of years. A key factor in bringing on these tremendous, literally epochal, shifts is the concentration of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, leading to warmer air and water temperatures. For almost all of the Holocene, the concentration was around 260–280 parts per million. That's the preindustrial level. In 2008, human activity had already pushed it to 385. The forecast for 2024 is 424. Up and up it goes.

Geological history is moving at an unprecedented pace. Human history sits on top of that underlying planetary history. Humanity, we might say, makes its own history, but not in circumstances of its own choosing.

It wasn't supposed to be this way. Just nine short years ago, to great fanfare, world leaders announced the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). They claimed to chart a course to resolve many of the crises that haunt hundreds of millions if not billions of humans: poverty, hunger, ill health, violence, inequality, and so on. The SDGs set seventeen targets to be hit by 2030. At present rates, two, maybe three, will be. Eight are going in the wrong direction entirely. In short, the SDGs have already failed, badly.

How are we to understand this overabundance of crises and our collective failure to address them? What can be done to improve the conditions of life on Earth for humanity? To engage with these huge questions, let us analytically triage the crises into three categories, which interact with each other: those *within*, *of*, and *beneath* the world system. From there we can see why the SDGs have failed and an outline of how we could change course.

Crises *within* the world system are those crises produced by the system operating perfectly normally. Many things that are devastating for millions are either irrelevant or integral to the smooth reproduction of the global system. Hunger, poverty, conflict, deprivation, and even genocide create sorrow for large portions of humanity but the accumulation of capital and the maintenance of systems of power is generally unaffected.

However, these crises *within* the system still threaten to undermine it. They generate responses, resistance, and organizing from people and communities that, from time to time, cohere into a broader crisis *of* the system. If sufficient counterpower builds up, or some great failure from rulers strips away consent to their governance, then the system's social settlement struggles to reproduce itself. This process is what Italian revolutionary theorist Antonio Gramsci called an "organic crisis," which can be thought of as a crisis of the social settlement or a crisis *of* the system. We saw such a crisis *of* the system in the 1970s as the workers, women, and the excluded of the Global North and the nations and peoples of the Global South made claims on a fairer share of global power and resources, a new social settlement.

We are also living in such a crisis *of* the system today where the system of rule struggles to reproduce itself. But in our case, the social settlement is not so much being challenged from below as much as it is falling apart from above. The effects are clear in many countries around the world: political volatility, low levels of trust in institutions, and declining living standards for the majority.

Our world system, with its methods of rule, its social settlements, and its challenges for people, sits atop a physical world. Should our physical world be radically transformed — by an asteroid collision, nuclear war, or climate breakdown — our social systems would also be radically transformed. Here we meet crises *beneath* the world system. Our changing climate, caused by our existing world system and its distribution of power, is creating a crisis *beneath* that system that will bring disruption like nothing we've ever known.

The latest science suggests that at 1.5° of warming, major tipping points — thresholds that trigger large, accelerating, and likely irreversible changes, like the melting of the Greenland ice sheet — become likely. Our climate, nature, the environment, or whatever we call it, is set to change significantly, disrupting harvests, supply chains, political systems, and our assumptions about the world.

The SDGs were announced the same year that world leaders agreed in Paris that they would limit global warming to below 1.5°, under the mantra “1.5 to stay alive.” Aiming only at crises *within* the system, the SDGs, in essence, do not engage with or even head off crises *of* the system while ignoring crises *beneath* the system. They are an elite project to maintain the system, not transform it, as this book you are holding shows in meticulous detail, goal by goal. That's their hidden politics.

But, as it turns out, crises *of* and *beneath* the system are too great for the crises *within* the system to even be substantially ameliorated, let alone resolved. Both the crisis *beneath* the system and the distribution of power *of* the system must be addressed.

Fifty years ago, in another moment of multiplying crises, the peoples of the Global South sought to resolve crises *within* the system by creating and winning a crisis *of* the system. They strove for a new, more favourable, more equal distribution of power. In 1974, through the United Nations General Assembly, the global majority declared a New International Economic Order (NIEO) to form a new base “of economic relations between all peoples and all nations.” They sought to improve the system by fundamentally changing the system. The NIEO included concrete measures to do so, such as technology transfer to the South, institutions to coordinate research, nationalization of natural resources, condition-free finance for development, cancellation of debts, access to fertilizers, and much more besides.

The architects of the NIEO had the ideas to change the world — and they had enough power to get it firmly on the global agenda. But ultimately, they did not have enough power to see it through. The global ruling class — predominantly in the banks, boardrooms, and government ministries



of the Global North — fought back hard and won. Today, we live among the ashes of the dream of the NIEO.

The SDGs are a project from above to keep things fundamentally the same, whereas the NIEO was a project from below to change things fundamentally. Both failed, and we have to learn the lessons. That means we build a project of counterpower that unites those struggling against the crises *within* the system. Then we direct that unity onto the struggle to transform the social settlement, creating and then winning a crisis *of* the system. From there, we use that victory to act against and adapt to the rapidly developing crises *beneath* the system that are set to turbocharge the crises *within* the system.

If we are serious, we need a strategy to engage all three levels of crisis. After all, they interact and metastasize each other. That requires exposing attempts by our rulers to hide their real politics as they pretend to change the system while buttressing it. The Tancredis of this world are not our leaders but our enemies.

The end isn't nigh; it has already happened. We have left one epoch and a new one is being established. Dramatic change is coming, and people, agriculture, and cities will move. But one important truth will ring out: the system of rule that puts the wealth and power of a tiny few ahead of the material comfort and dignity of the vast majority and the very planetary systems on which we all rely cannot continue. It must be overthrown and replaced.

Humanity is on a bumpy road, and it will get bumpier still. But however dangerous and frightening that road becomes, we can navigate it — and even enjoy the ride — if popular, democratic forces forcibly take the driving seat. That project for counterpower is inherently conflictual. If it is successful, some corporations, states, and institutions will have far less wealth and power and the people will have more. The rich and powerful will fight, and fight hard, to stop that happening.

Our task is huge, larger than any humanity has collectively faced before. But we have no choice other than to give it a shot by exposing the hidden politics of our current failing system and building the collective will and capacity to construct another.

— James Schneider, St. Vincent  
March 2024

# Introduction

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), also known as the Global Goals, were adopted by the United Nations (UN) in 2015 and heralded as a universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet, and ensure that by 2030 all people would enjoy peace and prosperity (UN 2015). This book is about the politics of the SDGs. It shows how each of the seventeen SDGs endorsed by the UN is fundamentally political. Taken together, the SDGs constitute a political project that necessitates careful political analysis. While states are not legally bound to implement their commitments to the goals, the UN expects governments to take ownership of this project and to establish national implementation frameworks (UN 2016). The UN's nonbinding call to action has nevertheless stimulated a massive and highly political global outpouring of interest in sustainable development and the Global Goals. Yet behind all the SDG cheerleading and feelgoodery lies a much darker reality. To put it bluntly, the package of ambitions contained in *Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (UN 2015) is anything but transformative. In fact, the 2030 Agenda advances a set of minimalist reforms, which, if implemented, would bolster the legitimacy of the current liberal international economic order and entrench global capitalism. The chapters that follow show how this political orientation infuses the targets and indicators that accompany each of the SDGs. They also document, goal by goal, the political inadequacies of the metrics being used to measure progress.

More broadly, in this book I focus on the emergence of perspectives that challenge the liberal orientation of the SDGs and advance alternative viewpoints on global ordering. The ideas proposed to countervail the 2030 Agenda or to correct its deficiencies are growing in influence. As even the UN itself now admits, many of the goals will not be achieved (UN 2022). During these increasingly turbulent times, information about the problems and faltering progress of the SDGs can be used to further political agendas of

various types. By putting politics at the centre of the analysis, this contribution directly engages with the profusion of new and conflicting notions on what needs to be done to build a better world.

The claim that the Global Goals serve to reinforce the legitimacy of the liberal international economic order requires some initial elaboration. The goals aim to align international cooperation and global capitalism with a business-friendly vision for development that can be considered more inclusive and sustainable than the status quo. The subsequent chapters of this book demonstrate how this approach buttresses the present mix of international organizations and governance frameworks. They document the ways that the 2030 Agenda is congruent with the globalization of possessive individualism and designed to strengthen the world trading system and fortify the global financial and investment architecture. At best, this agenda advances exceedingly minor and dated ambitions to reform the institutions of global economic governance. Put another way, the SDGs were ostensibly designed to build a more democratic, effective, moral, and inclusive order (Scholte 2002). As such, they can be considered an attempt to salvage or sustain the legitimacy of the contemporary international order. Many well-intentioned governments, businesses, civil society organizations, and global citizens have made considerable investments in the success of this system maintenance project.

Unfortunately, those responsible for drafting the 2030 Agenda were not forthright about the politics of their ambitions. They portrayed their aspirations as universal, and simply failed to anticipate or articulate the possibility that the SDGs could generate sustained political pushback. This lack of foresight is curious, as efforts to govern the world are always political and tend to be subject to political contestation (Mazower 2013). We do not even have to go that far back in history to find a serious example of this global politics. In the 1970s, political contests over the failings of the interstate, international order and the global capitalist system were fraught. As Robert W. Cox (1979) painstakingly detailed, many views on what needed to be done to the world order came into conflict at that time. Some voices sought to maintain the liberal international economic order at all costs. Others pushed for reforms that would advance the interests of developing countries or were committed to transforming the system entirely. These debates crystallized around the calls made by developing countries for a New International Economic Order (NIEO) within and beyond the UN system. Over the course of forty-six pages, Cox detailed the perspectives that mercantilists, liberals, social democrats, Third World liberationists, and Marxists articulated on the matter. He showed that the push for a NIEO did

not start or stop with the UN Declaration and Programme of Action on the topic. The many conflicting ideological viewpoints on the NIEO animated a prolonged political contest over the institutions of global economic governance. This disorder over how to order the world economy persisted until the early 1980s. At that time, in the context of the Third World debt crisis, Western views in favour of maintaining the liberal international economic order won the day. The transformative demands that developing countries had articulated were relegated to the dustbin for decades.

Today, perspectives on global ordering have reached a similar inflection point. Since 2015, the liberal consensus on the international order and global financialized capitalism has broken down. A range of nationalist voices now fight back against any global guidance related to national policies, legislation, economic activities, and perceived ways of life (Drache and Froese 2022). Around the world, populist politicians stoke fear about nebulous “globalist” agendas and portray the SDGs as an elitist or “socialist” project contrary to “freedom” and the interests of “the people.” At the other end of the political spectrum, progressives have endeavoured to resuscitate the NIEO (Progressive International 2024). Under the guidance of the Progressive International, a transnational nongovernmental organization, political activists and socially concerned researchers have mobilized proposals to radically transform the world political and economic order. These change-oriented viewpoints contrast sharply with the 2030 Agenda’s efforts to reinforce a kinder and cleaner version of business as usual. Over the past several years, another cluster of opinion has emerged that forcefully challenges the idea of infinite economic growth. Many political ecologists and green supporters of environmental and climate justice have embraced calls to radically reduce global consumption and production. They seek to relocalize economies, bolster communities, enshrine the commons, and build a world order that unhooks the global economic system from planetary despoliation (Kallis et al. 2020).

Collectively, these emerging perspectives on the global order are at odds with the assertion that the 2030 Agenda reflects universal ambitions. The limitations of the SDGs cannot be understood in isolation from this resurgent global politics. However, many scholarly analyses of the SDGs have set this broader politics to the side and have focused solely on functional challenges related to implementing the goals. Numerous contributions to the literature have also understated or overlooked the politics that underpins and animates the SDG project. For instance, a recent edited volume on the interlinkages between the seventeen goals focused exclusively on the governance mechanisms and policy instruments necessary to implement the goals

in diverse contexts (Breuer et al. 2023). This contribution simply assumed the beneficence and necessity of the SDGs and glossed over the emerging political challenges. Numerous other works published in dedicated book series or as one-off contributions to the literature, including those that are cited in the following chapters, reflect these shortcomings. By and large, many experts have failed to substantively engage with both the politics of the SDGs and the rise of political conflict over how the world should be ordered. Even the analyses of staunch critics of the 2030 Agenda, such as the Japanese philosopher Kohei Saito, have not been rigorously attentive to politics. Saito's (2024) characterization of the SDGs as the new "opiate of the masses" drew popular attention to the fact that the goals bolster status quo interests and practices. His depiction nonetheless obscured the rise of right-wing politicians across the world who now prominently, routinely, and inaccurately portray the goals to be against "the people."

Of the more enlightening academic analyses of SDG politics, Lars Niklasson's (2019) keen political insights largely predate the global emergence of reactionary populist movements. Magdalena Bexell and Kristina Jönsson (2021) have also authored a rigorous and authoritative book on SDG-related political challenges. While Bexell and Jönsson apply their discourse analysis primarily to SDG implementation issues, their approach sheds needed light on the politics of the goals. It can also serve as a useful aid for those who seek to develop more comprehensive accounts of the politics of ordering the world at a time of heightened global political conflict. Similarly, a comprehensive edited volume that assesses the impact of the SDGs on major institutions and political processes also comes very close to engaging with the new political reality (Biermann et al. 2022). There, too, however, the contributors focus mostly on the political impact of the SDGs, and not on the ramifications of an increasingly divisive politics for people and the planet. In sum, despite the vast global outpouring of analytical literature on the Global Goals, little has been written about the overall politics of the 2030 Agenda.

This book takes this gap as its point of departure. It focuses directly on the political assumptions and orientations that have been built into each goal. The analysis presented in the ensuing chapters primarily foregrounds the hidden politics of the targets and indicators associated with the SDGs. In pursuing this emphasis, I identify many troubling disconnections between goals that sound great (e.g., "No Poverty") and the indicators that allegedly measure progress towards these noble-sounding ends. Moreover, to contribute to correcting the gap identified above, the book also speaks briefly to the new political discord over the content of each goal. Conflicting

perspectives are increasingly consequential, and future researchers must embrace the challenge of comprehensively mapping the ideologies that contend to shape the twenty-first-century global “disorder.”

## How the Book Proceeds

Each chapter focuses on one of the seventeen SDGs. I draw upon an organizational strategy and style of argumentation first employed by Ha-Joon Chang and Ilene Grabel (2004). At the outset of each chapter, I uncritically summarize the UN goals and their mission statements in a section entitled “What They Tell Us.” These brief sections refer to recent UN progress assessments and introduce and restate UN calls for action on each goal. They also include a two-column textbox that presents the relevant SDG targets and indicators in full. These sections draw upon and reproduce UN language to serve as a point of reference for readers. They are not intended to be analytical and do not include any of my original language or thinking beyond the occasional paraphrase or coherence connection.

Subsequently, the overviews of what the UN tells us about the 2030 Agenda are juxtaposed with a deeper critical analysis of the hidden politics. In these longer analytical sections, I articulate how the SDG targets and indicators are inattentive to highly consequential political factors, ideas, conflicts, and power relations. Thus, I highlight the limits of the goals in relation to the issues that they seek to address and underscore the paths that have not been taken. These sections typically showcase a sharp disjuncture between SDG ambitions and the means employed to move forward the 2030 Agenda. They also raise difficult questions about the ways that progress is measured in relation to the goals. To close each chapter, a brief final paragraph reiterates the gloomy findings of the UN secretary-general’s 2023 SDG midpoint review and points to some of the broader political challenges that are teased out more fully in the book’s concluding chapter.

In the conclusion, I reiterate the book’s conceptual framework and findings. I also speak to some of the political headwinds constraining the realization of progressive social change and a greener future. Progressives and ecologists who seek to build a better world now confront goals that are heavily skewed towards the maintenance of the liberal international economic order. They also face a surge of right-wing populist and nationalist sentiment that often conflates the UN goals with the machinations or agenda of a so-called global elite. The book’s concluding summary cuts through the ideological cacophony to reinforce the point that the goals are political and ultimately subject to political interpretation, engagement, and implementation. In other words, I debunk the notion that SDG ambitions

are universal. This aspect of the book's conclusion aims to give students, scholars, practitioners, and global citizens entry points to think more deeply about the relevant ideological perspectives at a critical juncture on the road to 2030 (UN 2023). Put another way, it helps readers identify key aspects of the political debates that now set the limits of the possible for the realization of transformative change. This short provocation can also be considered a point of departure for future analyses of sustainable development politics. The concluding chapter then articulates how the analytical approach of the book contributes to development studies scholarship on the goals. Ultimately, I call for a global effort to fundamentally rethink and redesign the goals.

This book can be read in several ways. For those seeking to immerse themselves in the politics of the Global Goals and the book's argument, a cover-to-cover reading could be instructive. On the other hand, some development practitioners may find it useful to treat this work as a reference text and focus primarily on the chapters that intersect with their areas of interest. The fact that there are seventeen SDGs also poses a challenge for course instructors intending to assign this book. If students will read this book over a twelve-week course of study, focusing on a subset of the goals that intersects with economic, social, and environmental themes could make sense. For instance, asking students to read about Goals 1, 2, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 12, 13, 14, 16, and 17 would cover a lot of ground. Instructors could also squeeze this content into a twelve-week format by presenting options to students — for example, asking students to decide between reading about Goal 1 or 10, Goal 3 or 4, Goal 6 or 11, and Goal 14 or 15. For readers who can design their own strategies of engagement with what follows, it is also possible for the seventeen body chapters to be read as stand-alone pieces and in any order whatsoever.

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