

Green Politics and International Development

In 2015 the UN Sustainable Development Goals were agreed, addressing a range of global development issues and sustainability challenges. Covering everything from access to water and energy to health, education and security, they chart a course for the international community over the coming decades in its elusive quest for development for all. But whose vision of development do they represent and what are the chances that it will do more to address inequality and unsustainability than previous efforts?

The main problem is that they are largely silent about the true causes of poverty and unsustainability. Without critical attention to the ways in which today's global economic model is implicated in exacerbating these issues, there is little prospect that the SDGs will be any more successful than the MDG Millennium Developmental Goals that preceded them agreed in 2000.

Critical questions have not been posed, let alone addressed: for example, about why, in a world of unprecedented wealth, technological advancement and so-called progress, levels of poverty and inequality remain so high. This represents an important opportunity for critical thinking and political action to address this neglect and redefine the debate about what forms of development can be considered sustainable.

This 'gap' asks what Green Politics can offer the understanding and practice of international development. Greens have traditionally had a lot to say about peace and security, poverty and social exclusion, gender and of course sustainability. So on the face of it Green politics should be playing a central role in debates about international development. But critical Green insights about the causes of poverty and destitution and the organisation of the global economy, the role of aid, trade and multinational corporations, as well as around what inclusive, just and green solutions to these problems might look like, have often been overlooked. There is an urgent need to redress this oversight by building on existing knowledge, experience, struggles and advocacy around the world on these issues and efforts to bring Green politics into key arenas of power.

The shifting landscape of development

The idea of (overseas) development (and the industry to which it gave rise) is a largely post-second war phenomenon. It emerged in a world transitioning from open warfare to a cold war in which competing ideologies sought to prove that their way of organising the economy - either market liberal or state socialist - could best deliver growth and prosperity. It is a journey that developed through the 1950s with the pursuit of a vision of development as 'growth first'. It was articulated by President Truman in 1949 when in his inauguration speech, he described the Southern hemisphere as an 'underdeveloped area', implying a global hierarchy in which the West was ranked first.

Since then development thinking has moved from an emphasis on the state to the role of private and transnational actors, particularly from the 1980s onwards with the onset of globalisation in driving economic growth. But while the recipe for development is constantly adjusted - more or less state, integration of gender and environment, growing emphasis on good governance, conflict and the role of business - the idea that growth is a pre-requisite for development has held firm. This idea of development appeals to and serves the needs of elites in the global North and South and provides a justification for invoking growth as the

answer to any societal ill. As Wolfgang Sachs puts it in *The Development Dictionary*, 'development can mean just about everything, from putting up skyscrapers to putting in latrines, from drilling for oil to drilling for water, from setting up software industries to setting up tree nurseries. It is a concept of monumental emptiness, carrying a vaguely positive connotation'.

In an increasingly financialised global economy, investors need outlets for their wealth when domestic markets are saturated, driving demand for profitable infrastructures that guarantee them a return, investing in land and resources (often controversially in the form of land and green grabs - acquiring land in poorer countries to serve the food and energy needs of wealthier ones), as well as seeking to 'financialise' new areas of the economy and the environment, as we see in the creation of financial instruments such as carbon and biodiversity offsets. Manufacturing new needs and desires through advertising guarantees future demand, embedding western levels of consumerism and affluence as the global norm and generating huge environmental devastation as a result wherever this model takes hold.

Despite this, it offers a powerful narrative of hope and progress for those kept in poverty by the current economic system. Yet this model of development is clearly running up against ecological and social limits and its own inability to reproduce itself and sustain such high levels of production and consumption in a world of declining fertile land, loss of fresh water, and where the majority of fossil fuels now need to be left in the ground to avoid catastrophic climate change. Many of the certainties that underpinned the post second world war model of development – resource abundance, technological optimism, rationalism and modernity - look shaky at best in the face of resource conflicts and scarcity, nationalism, and critical awareness of the limits of technological solutions to society's problems. Whereas once it was thought growth could substitute for justice through the trickle-down of benefits to excluded groups, and inequality was no problem as long as the have-nots were able to improve their position along the way, these demands have not gone away as growth itself has deepened inequalities.

Why is there no Green view of development?

There is clearly then a need for a critical Green view of development and a programme of political action to match it. Why has one not taken hold to date? It is worth reflecting on the reasons for the deliberate neglect of Green perspectives in development debates.

First, Greens often ask the awkward questions about growth and globalisation, global militarism and the effect of donors' policies on the world's poorest people. In other words, they have an account of international development and its failings that powerful state and corporate elites and international economic institutions do not want to hear. This is because of the implication of these actors in the very problems they claim to be addressing and because of their prior ideological commitment to growth at any cost. The development industry is notorious for faddism and looking at new ingredients to add to the development mix (add gender, governance, sustainability) without asking if the recipe is the right one.

Think of recent attempts to 'green' growth or promote 'climate compatible development', in which more growth is always presented as the answer, whatever the problem. Having failed with 'sustainable development', which was the watchword from the late 1980s in the wake of the Brundtland report, green growth is the latest attempt promoted by the World Bank and OECD to obscure the contradictions between infinite economic growth and the fact we inhabit a finite planet. It is not popular to state that how we in the richer part of the world produce and consume energy, food and water and how we meet our transport, heating and

dietary needs all need to radically change. It is more comfortable to focus on market pricing, technology or incremental policy reform that can be accommodated within a business-as-usual trajectory. So the Greens have an important message, but it doesn't present easy or politically-convenient answers.

This is not to be overly critical of Greens and environmentalists working within current political structures to challenge the hegemony of orthodox economics, promoting environmental or ecological economics, proposing alternative ways of valuing nature that make benefits as well as costs more visible, or making the 'business case' that environmental action can be profitable. But we also need a clearly articulated alternative vision of Green development.

A second reason for the neglect is that the issue of international development throws up many challenges and dilemmas for Greens. Often, backing calls for financial transaction (Tobin, or 'Robin Hood') taxes, or supporting demands to significantly increase funds to tackle problems such as climate change, implies, at least in the short term, generating funds within a fossil-fuelled economy – in other words expecting 'green growth' to address the problems caused by normal growth. Greens need to be careful what they wish for, when often an excess of finance is the problem- albeit directed into destructive areas of the economy rather than more sustainable ones. For example, re-directing large swathes of the USD\$600 billion a year that are spent subsidising climate-changing fossil fuels towards renewable energy would be a good thing. But increasing investments in 'cleaner' technologies and energy sources without simultaneously reducing finance for business-as-usual development pathways will not bring about more sustainable development.

Then there are the dilemmas about de-linking from the global economy, shortening the circuits between production and consumption, which many Greens advocate, but which Development economists argue would have a hugely detrimental impact on the livelihoods of the world's poorest people, many of whom are locked into export-oriented production of commodities. Longer-term, it is certainly possible to argue that making peoples' livelihoods dependent on the fickle consumption patterns of wealthy consumers and fluctuating prices for commodities (whose production is also increasingly effected by environmental problems such as climate change) does nothing to improve a precarious existence. But there are real short-term dilemmas and trade-offs about how to transition to a greener economy that Greens need to address. The growing popularity of the idea of 'just transitions' captures this by describing the social compacts that will be required within and between societies as they move from environmentally destructive models of development to more benign ones while ensuring poorer groups that might lose out receive adequate compensation, retraining and the like and that efforts to 'internalise' environmental costs do not fall hardest on the poor. Greens need to engage actively in these discussions.

Third, Greens are often also ambiguous or even suspicious about the role of the state and international institutions, making strong arguments in favour of de-centralisation and subsidiarity to avoid concentrations of wealth and political power in few hands. Yet Green New Deals, Green Keynesianism and just transitions that are critical to a global transition to a lower carbon global economy all require a strong, well-resourced and interventionist Green state. This presents difficult dilemmas for Green thinkers and activists that need to be addressed.

And what about the potentially significant role for international institutions in regulating the arms trade, tackling trans-border environmental issues and promoting human rights? All things

Greens strongly believe in. Foreign policy is often thought to be a neglected area in Green politics. This is in part traceable to an antipathy towards many of the global institutions currently charged with managing the global economy such as the World Bank, IMF and WTO that play such a powerful role in organising international development along unsustainable lines.

Where Green politics can make a contribution here is in re-balancing global governance from a system which preserves the power of the wealthiest in global society to one which seeks to uphold shared and universal values around peace, human rights and sustainability. In practice this would mean re-defining the role of key institutions of economic governance to deliver welfare and prosperity rather than growth at any cost. The goals of global governance would become peace, welfare enhancement, rights protection and sustainability, and all other agencies and activities would have to ensure that their activities are the means to achieve these ends and not the other way around. In other words, economic rules and principles should not trump legitimate attempts to improve welfare or protect vulnerable citizens or the environment, as so often happens at present, but rather support and not override national and regional attempts to promote sustainability. This might be linked to current calls for a social Europe by Green parties - working with European institutions and within Europe to re-balance the goals of the EU towards social and environmental goals rather than purely economic ones.

Growth and Development

'God forbid that India should ever take to industrialisation after the manner of the West. The economic imperialism of a single tiny island kingdom (England) is today keeping the world in chains. If an entire nation of 300 million took to similar economic exploitation, it would strip the world bare like locusts' (Gandhi).

Getting to the roots of under-development is where Green politics can make a real contribution to development policy and debates: probing and addressing the causes of the world's development problems so as to advance meaningful and effective solutions to them. I am reminded of the quote by the Brazilian Catholic archbishop and liberation theologian Hélder Câmara, who famously said 'When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why they are poor, they call me a communist'.

It is a critical time to ask why, in a world of such wealth and opulence, do we still need sustainable development goals in 2015?

If the growth-based market-led model of development that has been accelerating over the last 50 years has been so successful, why do one in eight people go to sleep hungry every day, (842 million hungry people worldwide) and why does a child die every minute of a water-related disease, and 1 in 9 people in the world lack access to safe water? Why do 1.6 billion of the world's inhabitants lack access to electricity? The shameful roll-call of failed development could go on. Something is not working.

We need to revisit the purpose and meaning of development and reclaim it from a development industry that for too long has defined the indicators of development and provided the explanations for under-development as lying in lack of income, finance, technology, and growth, and in the failure to emulate the political and economic models of the global North. This is not to cast doubt on the fact that carefully targeted aid associated with international development has improved the livelihoods of many of the world's poorest people - providing greater access to water and sanitation, to energy and basic health services

than would otherwise have been the case, despite the continued appalling gaps in provision of each of these. These are important achievements. But the export- and growth-obsessed and neo-liberal doctrines which have underpinned development policy since the era of structural adjustment in the 1980s have also brought great social dislocation and environmental devastation in their wake.

The blurring of the security and economic interests of the world's most powerful countries with their 'development' interventions is an increasing source of concern as the causes of poverty come to be identified as opposition to western foreign policy (hostile religious or state socialist 'ideologies') or barriers to private investment (by interventionist or 'populist' states). There are obvious contradictions between acknowledging that war is 'development in reverse' as the World Bank puts it and that conflict and insecurity are key drivers of increasing poverty, and the way in which the global North continues to support the export of arms to some of the poorest countries in the world, financing repressive regimes and strengthening their ability to repress internal dissent. Only the Greens address this issue directly by calling for tougher regulation of the arms trade.

From the point of view of global sustainability, the export of a resource-intensive and wasteful model of development to the majority world through pressure to intensify exports to western markets, to privatise state assets and to target the 'bottom of the pyramid' poorest consumers through business, go against the desire of most marginalised groups to have greater control over the land and to acquire the means to secure their own water, food and energy rather than be subject to the vagaries of the global market. This is increasingly expressed in the language of food, water and energy sovereignty expressed by social movements and some governments - an agenda that many Greens do and should support.

Of course the needs of the poor are frequently invoked precisely to justify development as usual. Governmental and non-governmental representatives call for accelerated growth in the name of helping the poor. Even oil multinationals such as Exxon proclaim their concern for the world's energy poor, one which unsurprisingly leads them to the conclusion that we need to extract and burn even more fossil fuels to meet the needs of the poor. Given the low levels of purchasing power of the poor, the fact that many live off-grid or that if they can access a grid they cannot pay for the connection charges or bills that follow, this is clearly nonsense: invoking the needs of the poor to justify business as usual.

Articulating a post-growth politics which is able to deal honestly and openly with the trade-offs that come from efforts to put welfare over profits and actively encourage a slow-down in conventional economic activity in some parts of the world without further immiserating the poor will be a huge challenge. The Cambridge economist Joan Robinson once famously said that 'there is only one thing worse than being exploited and that's not being exploited'. The quote captures the catch 22 dilemma that many poor and marginalised groups find themselves in, especially in the global South.

Globally, a Green politics of development will require striking deals on resource use which recognise the rights and needs of poorer groups to use a greater share of remaining ecological space to service their pressing development needs while ensuring that richer countries accept the greatest burden to drastically reduce their own demands upon global resources, given the historical responsibility they bear for our collective predicament to date. Ideas around contraction and convergence in the climate context are helpful here. Domestically, it will require a major re-balancing of the economy away from financialisation, militarisation and globalisation and towards productive, worthwhile, welfare-enhancing, employment-creating

forms of work and exchange that serve the common good. It will mean forming coalitions with new allies and like-minded groups that are sympathetic to this vision and its politics - grassroots movements and trade unions, civil society organisations and selected progressive governments in the global South and North.

This is a critical time for international development. The SDGs provide the basis of the vision for development that will bind the world for the rest of this century. They commit the international community to reducing poverty and inequality; addressing gender inequalities; promoting food security; and improving access to energy. As it does so, we need to bring some critical Green politics to bear on this vision. Without it, a set of hackneyed solutions revolving around trickle-down growth, the primacy of private solutions to public problems and calls for further waves of neo-liberal reforms will triumph.

Peter Newell

Peter Newell is Professor of International Relations at the University of Sussex. For more than 23 years he has conducted research, consultancy and advisory work on issues of climate change, agricultural biotechnology, corporate accountability and trade policy working in a number of countries including Argentina, Brazil, China, Ethiopia, India, Kenya, Mexico and South Africa.. Besides working for academic institutions including the universities of Sussex, Oxford, Warwick and East Anglia, he has undertaken commissioned research and policy work for the governments of the UK, Sweden and Finland and for international organisations such as UNDP, GEF and the Inter-American Development Bank. He has worked for NGOs such as Friends of the Earth and Climate Network Europe and together with groups such as CDM Watch, Practical Action, Transparency International, Care, Centre for Trade and Sustainable Development, International Council on Human Rights Policy and is a board member of the NGO One World Trust and Nature Code.