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Sustainable Development Goals: A New One-Size-Fits-All Universal Standard?

Abstract

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were adopted by the United Nations in 2015. Unlike the earlier Millennium Development Goals, its framers claim that they are universally applicable, regardless of history, culture, or geography.

Lawyers -- especially human rights lawyers -- are used to speaking in terms of supposedly "universal" truths. Universalisms inevitably tend to be controversial, especially when they are perceived to be "outside" standards meant to control resources and power in reticent recipient societies. Over the years, the field of human rights has developed a range of answers to such critiques, some more convincing than others. The primary promoters of the SDG discourse, on the other hand, are still more committed to a straightforward universalist narrative: any critique is equated to anti-modernity and anti-liberalism.

The SDGs apply to international development collaborations, and they are already channeling the availability of global development funding available in the Global South. It makes sense, therefore, for those who promote the SDGs to be sensitive to the possibility that the SDGs—and especially the way in which they are promoted—might fit uncomfortably into the mold of previous colonial or post-colonial impositions of "foreign" (i.e., Western) standards on to recipient societies in the Global South. This matters also to lawyers, since the SDGs -- quite in contrast to earlier development frameworks -- focus also on the way in which development practitioners engage with justice institutions. Efforts to promote the rule of law and human rights are now all governed by the overarching logic and governance technology of the SDGs.

In this presentation I attempt to apply some of the lessons of the critical realist discourse (Mutua, Dembour, Illich, etc.) to the efforts by international development practitioners to promote "justice" through the SDG framework.