

“Business as Part of the Solution”: SDG 8 Challenges Popular Views in the Global Sustainability Discourse

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1. Introduction

The UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were adopted by all UN Member States in 2015 with a time horizon of fifteen years to achieve them. The 17 Goals and 169 targets, which form the core of Agenda 2030, aim to effectively address the social, economic and environmental challenges of the 21st century by embarking on a global partnership designed to tackle the environmental, social and economic dimensions of sustainability simultaneously. Unlike prior global initiatives to save the environment (Rio Convention) or to eliminate poverty (Millennium Development Goals), the SDGs are the product of a joint effort that included high- and low-income countries as well as stakeholders from civil society, academia, government and business. The outcome is therefore based on a more inclusive process and, with it, enjoys more global legitimacy (Sachs 2015).

However, criticism about the alleged inconsistencies and contradictions of the goals, and its targets and indicators abound. There are indeed several overlaps and trade-offs between the different goals and their respective targets (Barbier and Burgess 2019).

Moreover, the indicators designed to measure progress on the different targets are perceived by some stakeholders to be rather crude or even misleading (MacFeely 2019). Moreover, the lack of data availability and lack of means to implement the ambitious goals, especially in low-income countries, will be a major challenge to measure and promote real progress (Barbier and Burgess 2019).

Yet, the SDGs represent a very useful global framework of orientation, and, more important, they stand for a paradigm shift in the sense that the private sector should cease to be merely seen as part of the problem, but envisioned as part of the solution (Scheyvens et al. 2016).

The UN Sustainable Development Goal 8 (SDG 8) on inclusive growth and decent work is at the heart of this paradigm shift. It is built on the insight that improving the material well-being of the most vulnerable people will require more investment in entrepreneurship and innovation on the local as well as the global level

to enable inclusive and sustainable economic change. For that purpose, governments need to design facilitating policies that encourage businesses to invest in scalable innovations that address urgent sustainability challenges and generate inclusive prosperity (Juma 2016). This sort of people-centered prosperity requires a global partnership and a bigger appreciation of responsible and innovation-driven firms that understand that they do not operate in a vacuum but are part of society (Aerni 2018).¹

Neither the Rio Principles on Environment and Development, nor the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) have put such a great emphasis on the promotion of inclusive prosperity. In this context, SDG 8 is clearly a goal prioritized by the majority of the world, the countries where population growth, poverty, youth un- and underemployment and internal migration are still the main challenges in efforts to embark on a transition toward sustainability. It is in these low- and middle-income countries where most of the world's population still lives in precarious conditions and where most workers lack any kind of formal employment contract, which would protect them from substandard working conditions that sometimes are equivalent to modern slavery (Aerni 2015a; Stoll 2019). Moreover, it is in these countries, where hundreds of millions of new jobs will have to be created by 2030, just to keep pace with the growth of the working age population.

Yet, SDG 8 has also been denounced by advocates and scholars of the so-called “degrowth” movement for being a sort of Trojan horse carrying “neoliberal” ideology in the global sustainability debate (Carant 2017; Rai et al. 2019). The idea of “degrowth” envisions an alternative economic system that is not built on the paradigm of economic growth. As such, its advocates may praise the targets of SDG 8 that deal with equal opportunity in employment (Target 8.5), the reduction of youth currently not in employment, education or training (Target 8.6), the abolishment modern slavery and child labor (8.6) and the protection of labor rights (Target 8.7). However, they take issue with the targets 8.1, 8.2 and 8.3 on promoting Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth as well as entrepreneurship and innovation to create a more diversified and productive economy, especially in least developed countries (Frey 2017). They also question the idea of “Green Growth” as it is embodied in Target 8.4 with its aim to decouple economic growth from environmental degradation (Rai et al. 2019; Hickel and Kallis 2019; EEB 2019).

¹ See also comment by Paloma Duran, Director of the UN SDG Fund: <https://www.sdgfund.org/businesses-heart-sustainable-development-goals> (accessed on 13 October 2020).

If one believes that it is affluence rather than poverty that has to be stopped in order to save the planet, then the opposition to targets 1, 2 and 3 of SDG 8 make sense. Economic development, as measured, among other indicators, by GDP growth rates, is incompatible with the vision and goals of the degrowth community for which GDP represents the harmful productivist logic that humankind must overcome (Rai et al. 2019). The growth-oriented targets of SDG 8 also run counter to the intention of the de-growth community to stop the alleged efforts to impose Western capitalist thinking on the rest of the world, to acknowledge and appreciate the value of unpaid work, especially done by women, and to debunk the view that innovation would be able prevent environmental collapse (Kallis et al. 2018).

This book chapter addresses these concerns but also highlights the elitist and paternalizing character of the degrowth mode of thinking. It reflects the viewpoint of a generation that has grown up affluent and is tired of it, which makes sense because affluence as such does not provide any meaning, orientation or identity (Eysenck 1990; Aerni and Bernauer 2006).

Yet, the UN SDGs were not launched to provide post-material societies with more psychological and spiritual well-being, as the degrowth community suggests (Kioupi and Voulvoulis 2019). Instead, they aim to address global challenges related to social exclusion, climate change and environmental degradation that have clear material consequences for the less affluent on this planet. These challenges must be addressed through effective public–private partnerships with the private sector as the main driver of economic change and job creation. This is also why the UN Secretary-General António Guterres called on all sectors of society to mobilize for a decade of action,² and not activism, as many contemporary environmental organizations who also provide school material for education for sustainable development (ESD) seem to imply (Kioupi and Voulvoulis 2019).

SDG 8 is very much at the heart of this action-oriented agenda called Agenda 2030. It is based on the insight that business is essentially what people do to make a living and how they generate the means to care for their respective families and to address the challenges that emerge within their respective communities. For ordinary people, economic growth is not about ideology but opportunity. Once they benefit from business opportunities, they are more likely to meet their essential material needs and be able to care more about the future of the next generation (Aerni 2015a).

² See UN Website on the Sustainable Development Agenda: <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/development-agenda/> (accessed on 13 October 2020).

Harnessing economic growth for inclusive and sustainable change, however, requires well-designed institutional framework conditions that encourage investments in scalable solutions that ensure an inclusive transition toward sustainability (Aerni 2018). How this works will be illustrated by means of concrete examples on how the global environmental challenges related to the ozone hole, acid rain and industrial agriculture have been addressed in an effective and inclusive way.

2. The Importance of SDG 8 for UNCTAD

The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) was established in 1964 in response to the demand from developing countries to address unfairness in the global trading system and to promote development.

Raul Prebisch, the first secretary general of UNCTAD, pointed at the problem with the terms of trade that largely favor high-income countries in international trade and drive low-income countries into debt. After all, the Global South primarily exports raw commodities, which face decreasing returns due to their low-income elasticity as inferior goods. As such, they are unable to cover for the costs of expensive capital goods imported from high-income countries to build up their domestic economies (Love 1980).

The current Secretary-General of UNCTAD, Mukhisa Kituyi, a Kenyan, believes that the solution to these structural challenges in international trade is not less trade—as advocated by many left-wing civil society institutions and right-wing populists in affluent countries—but better trade, fashioned by the principles of inclusivity and equity.³

How did it happen that UNCTAD, an institution mainly concerned with reducing global economic inequality and poverty, became a promoter of trade and foreign direct investment (FDI) in low-income countries? This is probably because the empirical evidence gathered over the past five decades clearly suggests that low-income countries can benefit from international business if they create adequate institutional framework conditions. These include smart domestic industrial policies that attract FDI while also enabling technological and knowledge transfer (Juma 2011; Juma and Yee-Cheong 2005). Evidence also shows that it is not market integration, but actually a lack of market integration that accounts for most of the extreme poverty in low-income countries (Hidalgo 2015; Bird 2019).

³ See blog written by Mukhisa Kituyi, Secretary-General of UNCTAD, on “Trade: a more nuanced approach” published on 23 March 2018: <https://unctad.org/en/pages/newsdetails.aspx?OriginalVersionID=1699> (accessed on 13 October 2020).

Since economic empowerment is a core concern of UNCTAD, it has an obvious interest in SDG 8 on inclusive growth and decent work (UNCTAD 2014a; UNCTAD 2014b). It also explains why UNCTAD believes that promoting entrepreneurship training (SDG 4.3 and 4.4⁴), protecting the rights of women entrepreneurs (SDG 5.5, A, B, C), investing in resilient infrastructure (SDG 9.1–5) to support growth-oriented domestic business and improving access to technology, capacity development (SDG 17.6–8) and trade (SDG 17.10–12) will greatly contribute to inclusive development in low-income countries while also enabling them to address their environmental challenges more effectively (UNCTAD 2018).

The importance of economic empowerment was already marginally present in the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDG 8 on promoting a global partnership for development) (Juma and Yee-Cheong 2005). Thanks to the more inclusive approach in the design of the UN SDGs, the issue has, however, gained importance. Despite the popular view among donors in high-income countries that economic growth is primarily a threat to sustainable development, they will have to respect the fact that recipient countries tend to see it more as an opportunity (Aerni et al. 2015). As signatories of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness⁵ in 2005, donor countries pledged to respect the principle of ownership in development cooperation, which is all about taking local priorities in recipient countries more seriously. The principle was also reiterated by the OECD donor countries in the Busan Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation⁶ and is best described in the first of the four Busan partnership principles, which defines ownership of development priorities by developing countries as follows: “Countries should define the development model that they want to implement”. So far, there are very few indications that development organizations who obtain their funding in high income countries would regard the supposed beneficiaries in low income countries as their clients and therefore respect their priorities (Aerni 2018; McCourt 2018).⁷

⁴ The Sustainable Development Goals consists of 17 Goals and 169 Targets. SDG 4.3. for example refers to Sustainable Development Goal 8, Target 4. Sometimes there are also letters (A, B, C) in addition to number that stand for particular targets to achieve a particular Goal.

⁵ See main principles of the OECD Paris Declaration: <https://www.oecd.org/dac/effectiveness/parisdeclarationandaccraagendaforaction.htm> (accessed on 13 October 2020).

⁶ See website on the Busan Partnership: <https://www.oecd.org/development/effectiveness/busanpartnership.htm> (accessed on 13 October 2020).

⁷ See also the author’s comment on the rhetoric of the German Minister of Development Cooperation: <https://punkt4.info/social-news/news/demokratie-braucht-eine-wirtschaftlich-emanzipierte-mittelklasse.html> (accessed on 13 October 2020).

3. No Mention of a Paradigm Shift in the Global Sustainable Development Report (GSDR)

The disregard of the ownership principle manifests itself also in the fact that leading academic and civil society institutions, mostly located in affluent OECD countries, are ignoring the demand for a paradigm shift in the SDGs.

The difficulties of integrating private-sector-driven entrepreneurship and innovation into a more comprehensive view of sustainable change is most visible in the recently published Global Sustainable Development Report (GSDR 2019) entitled “The Future is Now: Science for Achieving Sustainable Development”. The GSDR was one of the outcomes of the Rio + 20 Conference in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, on the “Future We Want”. Its purpose was to create a high-level political forum on sustainable development (HLPF) that would also strengthen the science–policy interface, building on existing assessments on the state of sustainable development. After the UN SDGs were approved by the UN General Assembly on 25 September 2015, member states eventually decided that the report should be produced by an independent group of scientists, appointed by the UN Secretary-General, once every four years, to inform the UN General Assembly on the state of the SDGs.

Even though GSDR does a good job of describing the current state of global sustainable development from a scientific perspective, it does not refer to any paradigm shift associated with the insight that business must become part of the solution. SDG 8 is only discussed in the context of targets related to labor rights standards and the problem of child labor. Its call to generate inclusive economic growth and to upgrade and diversify formal growth-oriented business is largely ignored. In this context, the report fails to connect sustainability science to the role of entrepreneurship and innovation as drivers of sustainable change, which explains why there is no reference to the UN resolution 69/210 on entrepreneurship for sustainable development.⁸ It also explains why the GSDR would not mention anywhere that in many regions of this world, poverty, combined with population growth, rather than affluence may still pose the greatest threat to the environment and social well-being (Aerni 2015b; Hollander 2003).

⁸ The UN Resolution 69/210 on Entrepreneurship for Development was adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations on 19 December 2014: <https://undocs.org/en/A/RES/69/210> (visited on 13 October 2020). It recognizes the important contribution that entrepreneurship makes to sustainable development by creating jobs and driving economic growth and innovation, improving social conditions and addressing environmental challenges.

For most low-income countries, the expansion of the informal economy is not just a manifestation of alternative “livelihoods” (a term used in the GSDR about 50 times) as some scholars suggest (Ruzek 2015). According to the International Labor Organisation of the United Nations (ILO 2014), the informal economy is rather a poverty trap, if not an outright indicator for stunted development. For most young people who grow up in the informal sector, the likelihood that their improved access to education will translate into better economic opportunities is tiny. Instead they end up in most cases as self-employed daily laborers or in precarious informal employment. As such, they lack a formal employment contract that would legally protect their labor rights (Aerni 2018).

Moreover, they do not have any formally registered property that would enable them to attract investment; and they lack access to social security and access to other essential public goods (Aryeetey 2015). That is why SDG 8 addresses the protection of the rights of migrant workers, particularly women migrants and those in precarious employment (SDG 8.8). Improving the situation of these marginalized members of society is of crucial importance to inclusive sustainable change. The focus on the improvement of the economic situation of the vulnerable is also reflected in other targets of SDG 8, such as 8.9 on promoting sustainable tourism, 8.10 on financial inclusion and 8a on trade facilitation. They represent additional means to this end.

Despite taking stock of the global state of sustainable development, the GSDR report rarely addresses these existential concerns of people in the majority world that still struggle to meet their essential material needs because of lack of economic prospects. As a consequence, the report tends to disregard the human-centered approach of UN SDGs with its focus on the need of every human being to eventually become integrated in business and society (Arts 2017). Instead, the GSDR focuses on the description of sustainability challenges that are almost exclusively portrayed as negative by-products of economic and technological change. This is odd, because, after all, the SDGs are about People, Planet and Prosperity and not People, Planet minus Prosperity.

4. Human Ingenuity Challenging the Malthusian Narrative of Environmental Collapse

By framing material prosperity primarily as a threat to people and the planet, the GSDR is well-aligned with the account on planetary boundaries in “Sustainability Science” (Foley 2017; Folke et al. 2016). This account is based on the neo-Malthusian narrative of the environmental movement of the 1970s predicting the limits to growth

and the looming environmental collapse caused by population growth and the human pursuit of material wealth (Meadows et al. 1972).

This narrative, however, has been challenged by the empirical work of pioneers in sustainability research in developing countries such as Ester Boserup (Boserup 1981), Alfred O. Hirschman (Hirschman 1992) and Jack Hollander (Hollander 2003), as well as interdisciplinary scholars such as Jane Jacobs (1969, 1984), who explore the sustainability potential of innovation ecosystems. Especially the ideas of Janes Jacobs have been recently validated in research on life-cycle solutions (McDonough and Braungart 2013; Rockström and Kulm 2015).

The baseline assumptions of Thomas Malthus were also challenged on theoretical grounds by Paul Romer (Romer 1990), the Winner of the Nobel Prize in Economics in 2018, and César Hidalgo (Hidalgo 2015), one of the leading scholars in the new field of economic complexity. They argue that population growth would indeed ruin the environment, if you ignore the impressive track record of humankind in responding to scarcity through technological and institutional change.⁹

In order to understand why population growth and increasing affluence have not led to environmental collapse so far, one needs to take into account the role of knowledge as the only non-scarce and, therefore, non-rival resource available to manage the scarce resources on this planet. According to Romer, knowledge creates social value only when entrepreneurial teams with the appropriate skills and know-how are able to convert it into new goods and services that address particular needs or problems in society (Romer 2010). As such, innovative entrepreneurial teams may create new markets with large and often unintended positive external effects for society and the environment (Aerni 2018; Naam 2013). In other words, they may enable humankind to embark on a journey of sustainable intensification that renders the concept of the so-called carrying capacity in ecology meaningless when applied to the human species (Haberl and Erb 2017). This is, in essence, also the argument of Ester Boserup (Boserup 1981), who pointed out that population growth does not just create more pressure on scarce natural resources, but also leads to a larger work force and more human brainpower to find innovative solutions to scarcity problems and help restore prior environmental damage.

⁹ Cesar Hidalgo refers in this context to the law of entropy that would predict all things alive move towards disorder and eventual disappearance. This also applies to the human being as an individual, but not to the species of humankind in general that makes use of information (knowledge and know-how) passed on over generations, to create order, in the sense of converting natural space into cultural space (Hidalgo 2015).

This is not to deny that innovations, which result in new markets with increasing returns, do not generate negative externalities or cause re-bounce effects that cancel out the efficiency gains in production through the stimulation of more consumption (EEB 2019). However, the net-impact of scalable innovation may nevertheless be positive, especially when the innovation results in an affordable substitute for an existing problematic product that causes large negative externalities (Naam 2013; Kaiser et al. 2012).

Often, however, there is reluctance in business to invest in such disruptive innovations that could potentially generate large positive external benefits for society, especially because these benefits cannot be captured by the investing company itself; they go to society at large. A second reason is organized resistance against innovation that may threaten the social acceptance of a disruptive new technology. Organized resistance is supported by incumbents in business that benefit from the status quo (Juma 2016). In view of the high degree of risk and uncertainty related to private sector investments in disruptive innovation, governments need to come up with a long-term plan designed to lower institutional uncertainty and, with it, increase the likelihood of business to generate a return on investment. In this context, it must be ensured that a long-term government strategy cannot easily be derailed with the next election (Mazzucato 2013).

5. Understanding the Popularity of “Degrowth” from a Historical Perspective

The community of scholar-activists who propose the normative concept of “degrowth” as a sustainable alternative to the current growth-oriented global capitalist system challenge the view that business can be part of the solution (Kallis et al. 2018; Kallis et al. 2012). They tend to portray advocacy for technological change as a reductionist approach (technological fix) that would not take into account “systemic” thinking and thus produce irreversible unintended negative side effects in ecosystems that may also have long-term economic consequences (Jackson 2009). The German sociologist Arnold Gehlen (1988) argues, however, that there is no alternative to trial and error in the history of humankind when facing existential scarcity problems. As unspecialized deficient animals, human beings have to innovate in order to survive in a particular ecosystem. These innovations may have negative unintended consequences, which, once again, have to be addressed by further converting natural space into cultural space through human intervention, but that is part of the never-ending learning process (Gehlen 1988).

By disregarding this essential insight from philosophical anthropology, the degrowth community may run the risk of embracing a reductionist approach.

After all, it interprets this process of human development merely from an ideological perspective, namely as an interplay of the expansion of capitalism and its opponents who have historically preferred alternative economic systems (Kallis et al. 2018; Latouche 2007). In consequence, their criticism of the UN SDGs mainly focuses on the first three targets of SDG 8 because they suggest more rather than less innovation-induced economic growth in efforts to create a more sustainable and inclusive society (Carant 2017; Rai et al. 2019; Frey 2017; Gerold 2019).

The argument of degrowth advocates resonates well with a public discourse on sustainable development in postmaterialist societies that is shaped by bipolar baseline assumptions reflected in slogans such as “defending people’s interest against profit”, “punishing big business for offending basic human rights” or “ending climate change by ending capitalism” (Aerni 2018).¹⁰

The general view that global companies pose a major threat to human rights by doing business at the expense of local cultural and economic rights is firmly entrenched in the sustainability debate of affluent societies and remains largely unchallenged in academia (Sikkink 2019).

The current defensive and polarized global discourse on sustainability may also be understood as a response to the recent global crises. The financial crisis and the subsequent food crises that took place at the end of the first decade of the 21st century resulted in a general disillusion with the global economy and triggered a longing for alternative economic systems that would be more sustainable, fair and inclusive. In this context, the subsequent movements in civil society and academia ranging from Occupy Wall Street (Sikkink 2019) to Food Sovereignty (Hardt and Negri 2011) up to the latest Global Climate Strikes (Holt-Giménez and Altieri 2013) are comparable to the emergence of the powerful social movements of the 1970s (Aerni 2018; Wright and Nyberg 2019). Back then it was the oil crisis that triggered an economic crisis combined with a confidence crisis in industrialized countries (Bosse 2019), in addition to a food crisis in developing countries (Lipset and Schneider 1983). Advocacy groups protested against a Cold War elite mainly concerned with industrial progress and military rearmament, but tended to ignore its environmental and social consequences (Devereux 2000). There was already a lot of talk about the limits to growth (Meadows et al. 1972), the risks of modern technologies, as well as the lack of openness and transparency in business and government (Gottlieb 1993).

¹⁰ See article in the Guardian that illustrates the bipolar framing: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/mar/18/ending-climate-change-end-capitalism> (accessed on 13 October 2020).

Moreover, there were discussions on alternative economic systems that would focus less on economic growth and more on equality and social well-being—a sort of third way between market economy and classical socialism (Šik 1976; Kalb 2002). In this context, the Gross Domestic Product (GDP)¹¹ as an indicator of a country's level of human development was already a target of criticism. The arguments were very similar to the ones voiced again recently (Boarini et al. 2006): GDP ignores the distribution of income, does not take into account other quality-of-life factors, such as literacy, life expectancy or treatment of minorities, ignores the value of unpaid work and fails to factor in the environment costs associated with GDP growth.

The activists of the 1970s have successfully completed the march through the institutions of democracy and the market economy and transformed them accordingly. As a consequence, environmental issues and transparency in business and politics have gradually climbed in importance on government agendas (Masood 2016; Fiorini 1998). Moreover, the United Nations Human Development Program (UNDP) has responded to the criticism regarding GDP rankings by adopting a human development index in 1990, while Clifford Cobb and Hermann Daly launched the Genuine Progress Indicator (GPI) and Robert Putnam the Indicator of Social Health (ISH). They all depart from merely measuring a society's total income and its total expenditure on newly produced goods and services and focus instead on the improvement of non-material aspects. Similarly, some eco-minded economists have tried to add to the GDP an imputed dollar value of the benefits derived from a healthy environment (Zürn 1998).

Yet, academia and civil society advocates of degrowth¹² do not believe that some amendments to the GDP will do because they find the general idea behind the indicator to be flawed: the so-called growth imperative implying that economic growth would be a panacea for all social and economic problems (Rai et al. 2019; Costanza et al. 1997). This imperative would ignore the planetary boundaries that humankind may eventually have to learn to cope with by stopping global economic expansion and instead returning to a more local and autonomous caring-type of economy (Jackson 2009; Raworth 2012).

¹¹ According to the Bureau of Economic Analysis of the United States, the Gross domestic product (GDP) is the value of the goods and services produced by the nation's economy less the value of the goods and services used up in production. GDP is also equal to the sum of personal consumption expenditures, gross private domestic investment, net exports of goods and services, and government consumption expenditures and gross investment.

¹² Degrowth is defined by ecological economists as an equitable downscaling of throughput, with a concomitant securing of wellbeing (Kallis et al. 2018).

In this context, advocates of degrowth argue that there is a need to break the productivist logic in modern capitalist society in order to restore a “decolonized” vision of well-being as it is believed to have existed in all human cultures and knowledge traditions prior to capitalism (Kallis et al. 2018). Such a return to the roots would also stop unchecked environmental depletion as a result of an unfettered materialist consumption culture (Rai et al. 2019). The idea of degrowth is also present in many recent manifestos for alternative economic systems (Latouche 2007; Paech 2012; Rifkin 2014; Jackson 2019). Some call for reforms of the existing capitalist system, while others call for a revolution to topple it entirely. Most authors advocate a radical change in lifestyle, becoming virtuous out of necessity by embracing low-impact livelihoods that promote well-being and equality while stopping environmental degradation (Kallis et al. 2018; Latouche 2010).

Degrowth demands are also related to feminist concerns related to gendered forms of unpaid labor on which capitalism would rely, but not respect (Rai et al. 2019), as well as food sovereignty concerns. The food sovereignty movement has identified industrial agriculture as the main source of harm for biodiversity, food culture, decent employment, food security and environmental degradation (Aerni 2011). It advocates instead for a return to local food systems based on agro-ecological principles (Holt-Giménez and Altieri 2013; Vivero-Pol et al. 2018).

Degrowth activists are also convinced that a reduction in economic output can go hand in hand with more engagement in distributive justice and the promotion of social equality (Kallis et al. 2018). It would simply require a set of integrated policy reforms that compensate wage losses due to a reduction in working hours by increasing hourly wages with a living wage policy. Moreover, a universal basic income (UBI) could be introduced to mitigate the impact on small businesses that would struggle paying higher hourly wages combined with dividends funded by taxation on carbon, wealth, land value, resource extraction, and corporate profits (Hickel and Kallis 2019; Victor 2008).

6. Déjà vu: The Affinity of the Youth Climate Movement to the Old Ideas of Degrowth

In her dramatic speech to the UN General Assembly on 23 September 2019, climate change activist and founder of the Fridays for Future Movement, Greta Thunberg, very much endorsed the world view of the degrowth community when she argued that “People are suffering. People are dying. Entire ecosystems are collapsing.

We are at the beginning of a mass extinction and all you can talk about is money and fairytales of eternal economic growth, how dare you!”¹³

Thunberg and her young fellow activists also take great care in ensuring that their lifestyles are in line with their rhetoric and their post-material values. They practice the art of low-impact livelihood in an affluent and materialist culture.

All this is admirable, and no one would question their idealism and the authenticity of their struggle for a livable future. Yet, there has been a very similar earlier environmental youth movement more than thirty years ago that also equated environmentalism with lifestyle and resistance against technological change and economic growth (Beck 1986; Braungart and Braungart 1990; Rifkin 1990). This movement emerged in high schools in affluent countries in the 1980s, once school textbooks and documentaries started to highlight the negative side effects of industrialization on the environment, society and human health. Particular concerns were the damages caused to forests by acid rain and the shrinking ozone layer in the atmosphere (Clark et al. 2001). As a result, pressure for political action increased and eventually led to the Brundtland Report outlining the principles of sustainable development in 1987, the Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer, in force since 1989, and the first UN Conference on Development and Environment (UNCED) in 1992 with its ambitious Agenda 21.

7. Technological Change Framed as an Opportunity to Facilitate New Forms of Cooperation

The fourth industrial revolution was a term coined by Klaus Schwab in an article in *Foreign Affairs* in 2015 (Schwab 2015). It refers to the convergence of different technologies in the fields of robotics, artificial intelligence, nanotechnology, quantum computing, biotechnology, 3D printing and the internet of things. Its impact on communication and connectivity in society and the global economy in the 21st century is likely to transform life as a whole on this planet. There are the doomsayers who predict that this will lead to the destruction of many traditional industries, the devaluation of practical skills, the end of privacy and lots of unemployment due to that fact that robots will execute almost any function that humans currently perform. Yet, this line of argumentation ignores one crucial fact: the human mind did not evolve by solving problems on its own

¹³ Transcribed talk by Greta Thunberg available online: <https://unfoundation.org/blog/post/powerful-speeches-un-general-assembly/> (accessed on 13 October 2020).

but through “shared intentionality” enabling well-coordinated group collaboration (Fernbach and Sloman 2017; Hosoya and Schaefer 2020). In other words, individuals are meant to think and work in conjunction with the thinking and working of others. The group intelligence that emerges from shared intentionality of people in pursuit of a common purpose goes far beyond individual physical and intellectual skills and, therefore, also far beyond the capacity of a robot.

Advanced techniques of deep learning may enable robots to do any job faster and better than humans, but they will never be able to create new markets that result in new jobs. These markets are always the result of shared intentionality combining the different mental and physical skills of humans to achieve a particular outcome (Fernbach and Sloman 2017).

New communication technologies can be harnessed to improve the ability of humans to collaborate across space and time and to translate ideas into concrete and safe products and services that help address specific challenges. As such, these technologies are likely to become tools of economic empowerment and increase appreciation for cultural achievements elsewhere, provided that the institutional framework conditions and the physical and digital infrastructure are supportive of such endeavors and inclusive by nature (Juma 2016; Aerni 2018).

8. Reimagining the Contribution of Urban Landscapes to Sustainable Change

New urban spaces that open up for the creation of a new type of industrious city (Hosoya and Schaefer 2020) may serve as an enabling platform designed to re-empower local business—taking advantage of advanced technologies, specialized business services and standardized modules of production that have become user-friendly and affordable. Such an industrious city may emerge in a former industrial zone of a larger established city in a high-income country (Schaefer 2020) or as a greenfield project in the form of a new city designed to better connect rural areas in a low-income country with centers of prosperity (Aerni 2020). An emerging new city can be envisioned as a special industrial zone offering all the amenities and institutions to attract long-term investments, which then result in technology transfer, capacity development and more investment in the production of domestic goods and services, not just for the city with its global network but also for its rural hinterland. Industrious cities must, therefore, be seen in the context of extended urban landscapes integrating rural areas in a fruitful economic symbiosis. Such landscapes comprise various levels of governance that set up coordinating bodies designed to create institutional framework conditions that enable an industrious city and its surroundings to thrive, create valuable new jobs and lower the pressure of migration

(Aerni 2016a). According to Jane Jacobs, such cities prosper and expand if they can achieve their purpose, which is reinventing urbanity as a location that enables productive exchange directed toward the constant creation of new markets adding new work to old work (Jacobs 1969). This purpose can only be achieved, however, by overcoming the bipolar mindset in which business is denounced as an external black box driving the introduction of new technologies and urban expansion at the expense of traditional practices and local culture (Aerni 2018)

9. Public–Private Partnerships for Sustainable Change after the UNCED in Rio in 1992

In retrospect, humankind may have failed to address certain challenges related to biodiversity loss or global climate change that were identified during the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio in 1992 (UNCTAD 2014a). However, there are also success stories that should be acknowledged.

9.1. The Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer

A good example of a success story is the Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer; thanks to its effective phase-out management plan in 1987 to get rid of Chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs), the cause of the existential threat of a growing ozone hole in the atmosphere, humankind was able to avert the looming catastrophe. The plan was implemented by a global public–private partnership providing crucial support to enable poor countries to adopt affordable substitute refrigerants called hydrofluorocarbons (HFCs) (Mäder et al. 2010). While HFCs are safe for the ozone, they are also a powerful greenhouse gas. The Kigali amendment to the Protocol, which entered into force on 1 January 2019, addresses this concern. It aims to replace the use of HFCs with refrigerants that are less harmful greenhouse gases.

9.2. Acid Rain as a Result of Industrial Pollution

Acid rain also ceased to be a major environmental concern thanks to effective action combining effective regulation and scalable innovation: sulfur dioxide (SO₂) and nitrous oxide (NO_x) emissions, which were widely held responsible for the phenomenon of acid rain, have been dramatically reduced in the last 25 years. This was possible thanks to sophisticated filter technologies, flue gas cleaning and catalytic converters in exhaust systems. Incentive-based regulation based on trade in polluting permits helped to make the adoption of these technologies also profitable for companies (Stavins 1995).

9.3. Environmental Agreements Are More Effective If They See Business as Part of the Solution

What these two success stories have in common is the fact that business became part of the solution: through the capacity to innovate (e.g., CFC-free refrigeration and filter technologies) and subsequently convert the innovative prototypes into scalable business solutions, not just in developed but also in developing countries. In addition, business contributed through the willingness to join public–private initiatives to jointly tackle the challenges. Public sector leadership was important in coordinating regulatory and facilitating policies with the most important stakeholders in business and civil society to enable joint effective action (Naam 2013; Juma 1994; Aerni 2015b).

The two large UN conventions on climate change (Framework Convention on Climate Change, UN FCCC) and biodiversity (Convention on Biological Diversity, UN CBD) proved to be less effective. This may not just be related to the complexity of the challenges but also a different mindset that shaped the discourse in the annual Conference of the Parties (COP) of the conventions. They tended to implicitly frame the challenges as the negative externalities of technological and economic change that have to be regulated accordingly (Prins and Rayner 2007; Prathapan et al. 2018; Aerni 2019a).

During the design of these conventions, it was not taken into account that scalable technologies that may effectively help to substitute problematic products and processes were not yet available (Juma 2016). In view of the absence of long-term government initiatives to invest in future-oriented technological transformation, the private sector was also reluctant to respond effectively to more strict regulation through innovation (Goldstein et al. 2020).

Facilitating policies designed to enable change combined with coordinated action with business and civil society would have been a way for governments to address the challenge more effectively. However, neither the Kyoto Protocol on climate change (an extension of FCCC) nor the Cartagena Protocol on biosafety (an extension of CBD) foresee any concrete action plan on technology development and transfer, comparable to the joint action plan under the Montreal Protocol (Prins and Rayner 2007; Overmann and Scholz 2017).

In other words, the role of innovation and entrepreneurship as drivers of sustainable change in business and society was not taken into account, either in the FCCC or in the CBD; and, with it, the opportunities for business to develop a scalable market for environmental goods were largely ignored (Aerni 2015b). The stakeholders that dominated the agenda of the subsequent COPs of these conventions often put ideology before pragmatic action. For example, by opposing the use of advanced

nuclear technology and biotechnology in general, a concrete case-by-case evaluation of different options related to these platform technologies was no longer possible.¹⁴ A balanced assessment of these technologies would have been more in line with the basic principles of risk management that are meant to guide the application of the Precautionary Principle (PP), which environmental activists otherwise very much endorse (Aerni 2019b; Stefánsson 2019). After all, the PP is less about preventing technological risk and more about coping effectively with global environmental threats such as climate change by making use of all available options. In this context, potential technological risks must be compared to potential technological benefits for society and the environment, taking into account the rapid evolution of the respective technology (Aerni 2019b; EC 2002).

10. The Problem with Education for Sustainable Development

According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) aims to “empower learners to make informed decisions and responsible actions for environmental integrity, economic viability and a just society, for present and future generations, while respecting cultural diversity”.¹⁵ Even though no one questions the urgency to teach sustainable development, the concrete content of teaching is kept deliberately vague. It is about “promoting core competencies, such as critical and systemic thinking, collaborative decision-making, and taking responsibility for present and future generations”. However, what this exactly means is left to teachers, who will be free to select educational material that reflects their personal normative views of sustainable development.

10.1. *Predominance of Schematic Views and Lack of Critical Evaluation*

Contemporary educational material on sustainability issues in high schools tends to rely heavily on visual sources taken from social media and research documentaries on business and the environment (Alyaz et al. 2016). This material is often normative in nature; it is associated with advocacy for community solidarity, spirituality and

¹⁴ See Interview with Calestous Juma on 23 May 2015 at the University of Zurich: <https://www.news.uzh.ch/de/articles/2015/technologische-umbrueche-provozieren-immer-kritik.htm> (accessed on 13 October 2020).

¹⁵ See <https://en.unesco.org/themes/education-sustainable-development/what-is-esd> (accessed on 13 October 2020).

traditional knowledge that is believed to contribute to the “unfinished enlightenment project of reason” (Fadeeva and Mochizuki 2010).

Often the discourse on ESD in academic journals lacks any critical self-reflection by comparing stories told in class with actual empirical evidence gathered in the field (Winter 2007). As a consequence, educational material is based on schematic views that do not contain any critical evaluation of prior successes and failures on environmental challenges (Aerni and Oser 2011). Moreover, they tend to portray the use of the Precautionary Principle mainly as a tool to protect society from risks resulting from economic and technological change rather than a tool for responsible and balanced risk management (Winter 2007; Aerni 2013).

10.2. Green Consumerism: Dividing the World into Good and Bad Choices

Empirical research on sustainability textbook content reveals a tendency to frame the issues as a binary ethical choice (Kowasch and Lippe 2019), also associated with “green consumerism” (Moisander 2007). It implies that “you”, as an individual and consumer, have the power to change the world through “your” choice (Rieckmann 2017). Pick the product with an ethical label that stands for your social values on human rights and the environment, and shun products from corporations that have been shamed for undermining these values. While choosing the more expensive product that carries an ethical label also reflects a psychological need for virtue signaling (Orlitzky and Monga 2018), avoiding products from boycotted companies is linked to the phenomenon of ecological scapegoating (Schmitt 2019). As such, green consumerism helps to reduce complexity and provides meaning, identity and a normative orientation. This affective brand identification also makes it easier to re-tell the stories to others (Casidy et al. 2019). Yet, such consumer choices may reveal more about the need to signal one’s prosocial status to others than genuine effort to address global sustainability challenges through concrete collective action (Miller 2001; Luomala et al. 2020). Because green consumerism is so easy to communicate and causes individual well-being, companies often make use of its schematic views in green marketing strategies to insinuate to consumers and customers that they would share their sustainability-related values (Aerni 2013; Autio et al. 2009). Textbooks embrace such views for the same reason: it is easy to tell a good story.¹⁶

¹⁶ “Globi”, a popular Swiss picture book series suited for children in elementary school builds on such easy to tell schematic views. Globi is a jolly parrot who always draws some moral lessons from an experienced adventure. In the Globi edition “the smart farmer”, Globi is told by a female African subsistence farmer that organic agriculture is more sustainable than conventional agriculture. This is

10.3. *Become an Activist! Role Models Communicated in ESD*

The use of visual media in schools, such as documentaries, tend to follow a “win-win” logic, similar to the one of green consumerism. It is designed to generate a good return on investment by responding effectively to the viewers’ need for meaning and orientation (Hirsch and Nisbet 2007). Often, the collection of facts is guided by an approach called selectivity bias (Slater 2007) or application hermeneutics (Langewand 1999). It carefully selects the facts to ensure that the story being told and its core message are clear and unambiguous, and embedded in a convincing narrative with emotional flow (Nabi et al. 2018; Nabi and Green 2015). Incidences that would contradict the core message tend to be omitted or voiced by someone who cannot be trusted. Often the dramatization and personalization reduce research documentaries to a theater play containing actors with good motives, e.g., environmentalists defending “nature” with its endangered species, indigenous groups, and actors with bad motives, e.g., business executives that would like to make profits at the expense of people and the environment (Aerni 2018). In most cases, agency is assigned to NGOs that claim to act in the public interest as well as to the business-oriented perpetrators, while local people and their environment merely provide the “natural” setting in which the action takes place (Rangan 2000).

Most award-winning environmental documentaries or stories about environmentalists, such as “Erin Brokovich: A True Story” by Steven Soderberg in 2000, “Darwin’s Nightmare” by Hubert Sauper in 2004, “We feed the World” by Erwin Wagenhofer in 2005, “The World According to Monsanto” by Marie-Monique Robin in 2009, “This Changes Everything” by Avi Lewis and Naomi Klein in 2015, or “Bruno Manser: The Voice of the Rainforest” by Niklaus Hilber in 2019, use a narrative that heavily relies on ecological and social scapegoating to mobilize the affective power of the movies (Plantinga 2013). All these movies convey the message that the world is being cannibalized by predatory profit-seekers and that an alternative world is possible if we have the courage to fight for it. In other words, become good and sustainable by becoming an activist! It also illustrates the emotional power of providing adolescents with a normative orientation (Aerni 2018; Aerni and Oser 2011; Slater 2007).

Even though the movies claim to be based on a “true story” or “investigative journalism”, they tend to work more with negative emotional frames than facts.

illustrated in the third picture in the e-book, see <https://www.tierwelt.ch/news/unterhaltung/ein-ganz-schoen-schlauer-bauer> (accessed on 13 October 2020). The authors of “Globi” were collaborating with the Swiss NGO Biovision and it proved to be not just a good story but also good marketing for Swiss-based initiatives to promote organic agriculture.

Experimental research showed that negatively valenced messages in fact facilitate a stronger relationship between narrative involvement than positively valenced messages, which are processed by a more cognitive route (Cooper and Nisbet 2016). Often, the focus on creating more narrative involvement through negative feelings in research documentaries may also be due to the growing commercial pressure to entertain rather than to inform (Soppe and Pershina 2019).

The negative emotional frames often used to provide a normative orientation in ESD and heavily rely on ecological scapegoating (Schmitt 2019), which tends to entrench rather than overcome stereotypical patterns of reflection on sustainability and limit the potential of solution-oriented cooperation beyond like-minded groups. This may to some extent explain the anti-business rhetoric by Greta Thunberg and other young contemporary activists for social and environmental justice. They largely associate economic growth with environmental disaster, which explains their skepticism about SDG 8 with its implicit suggestion that business must become part of the solution.

11. “Degrowth” as Applied in Agricultural Policies Has Not Led to More Sustainability

The argument against technology-driven economic change in the degrowth community is very much related to the concept of the agricultural treadmill proposed by Willard Cochrane in 1958 (Cochrane 1958). In a nutshell, Cochrane argued that farmers produce more thanks to economic and technological change. While these productivity increases may benefit consumers due to lower food prices, they would drive farm households into debt and harm the environment. In other words, farming in times of economic globalization would represent a clear case of market failure that requires state intervention. As such, the concept of the agricultural treadmill became the main justification for generous state-support systems for agriculture.

Yet, agricultural subsidies and trade protection turned out to have even more undesirable side effects for the environment because they tended to encourage the overuse of input and monocultural practices (Aerni et al. 2011). It also caused negative consequences for farmers in low-income countries who were not able to compete with the subsidized agricultural exports from high-income countries (Aerni 2011). That is why they are also described as transactions of decline by Jane Jacobs (1984).

In response to these negative side-effects, a system of direct payment has been created in many high-income countries that is meant to decouple farm income from agricultural production and to reward farmers for their other valuable functions in society (e.g., decentralized settlement, environmental stewardship, domestic food

security) that would not be remunerated by the markets. The concept behind it is called multifunctional agriculture and it makes farmers the recipients of an almost guaranteed income provided by the state (Aerni et al. 2009). As such it is comparable to the universal basic income (UBI), an idea that the degrowth movement envisions for society as a whole to break the “productivist logic” and restore the ability of humankind to engage in meaningful and sustainable work, decoupled from any sort of global market pressure (Ferguson 2013; Seidl and Zahrnt 2019).

However, since the system of direct payments for farmers is still a subsidy, it did not lead to the decoupling of income from production (Aerni 2009). It also failed to make farming more attractive for the young generations (Takayama et al. 2020) and the positive impact on the environment was relatively low, even with the introduction of eco-direct payments (Greer 2017; Whitfield 2006; Dempsey et al. 2020).

11.1. New Zealand: An Example of Making Business Part of the Solution in Agriculture

New Zealand, a high-income country where agriculture still matters in economic terms, realized already in the early 1980s, that subsidies for farming will neither save farmers nor will they protect animal welfare or the environment in the long run. Instead, the country remembered the success story of the land grant college system that was established in the United States in the 19th century to address poverty in the countryside. The idea behind it was that a state with limited resources should bring knowledge and investment to the countryside rather than subsidies. In other words, the state should assume the role of a coach rather than a nanny by encouraging more collaboration between research, farming and business and by promoting the new products developed in the domestic agricultural system abroad to increase exports.

Despite problems of agricultural intensification, especially in the increasingly dominant dairy business, agriculture in New Zealand remains overall less extensive than the subsidized agricultural systems in Europe. New Zealand has also become a leader in the development and export of environmental innovation in agriculture (Saunders 2019). As such, the country was able to keep its image in tourism of being “clean and green” while keeping the agricultural sector attractive for the younger generation (Aerni et al. 2009). By reinventing the land grant college idea for the 21st century, the country essentially falsified the Cochrane hypothesis.

What Cochrane failed to realize is the importance of making use of knowledge, the only non-rival resource, to mitigate the impact of agriculture on the environment and to create more value-added for farm products. In other words, knowledge-driven economic and technological change may not always be part of the problem, but can become part of the solution if institutional framework conditions encourage business

to invest in sustainable innovation that proves to be scalable (Naam 2013). If it does so, then the profits earned are actually important because they signal that investing in sustainable solutions can also be profitable and therefore financially sustainable (Aerni 2009).

11.2. The Global Knowledge Economy Makes Diversification through Innovation More Inclusive

Agricultural reform in New Zealand was a sort of natural experiment. It proved that business can be part of the solution in a sector that was largely discounted as the victim of economic globalization. Once agriculture in New Zealand became more open for business under well-designed institutional framework conditions, it also became more diversified, more innovative in the field of sustainable agricultural practices as well as in the creation of new agricultural markets (Saunders 2019). Even improving animal welfare makes economic sense in New Zealand because it is an added value for consumers. Moreover, in view of the mild climate in New Zealand, it makes more economic sense for livestock farmers to let cattle graze outdoors throughout the year and thus largely dispense with energy-intensive indoor management and feeding (Aerni 2009).

What Cochrane did not take into account is that agriculture is not just a commodity business with decreasing returns. If you let farmers, researchers and the state become entrepreneurs who jointly invest in desirable new products and services, then you create diversification through innovation (Etzkowitz and Zhou 2006) resulting in new markets with increasing returns thanks to a specific added value (better for the environment, improved taste, more nutritious, etc.). The New Zealand approach to agriculture proved that this is possible. In this context, the global knowledge economy provides unique business opportunities to make better use of knowledge to create innovation that does not just generate profits for the innovating company but may also create large positive externalities for society and the environment (Aerni 2018).

12. The Importance of Institutional Framework Conditions to Make Business Part of the Solution

Institutional framework conditions play a crucial role in efforts to make business part of the solution. Such framework conditions must go beyond the regulation of harmful business activities but encourage a transition in business toward an inclusive low-carbon economy. This would also require a mission-oriented approach in which the state assumes the role of a risk-taking entrepreneur to build the basis

for the next phase of growth and technological progress (Juma 2016; Mazzucato 2013; Sachs et al. 2019). Even taking into consideration concerns about rebound effects, such an approach may be more effective in addressing global sustainability challenges than merely relying on expensive regulation, subsidies or a universal basic income (UBI) to reduce the negative externalities of harmful business practices and job-displacing innovation (Nabi and Green 2015; Howard et al. 2019; Romer 2010).

A significant number of research publications illustrate how changing institutional framework conditions have induced business to become part of the solution throughout history (Juma 2016; Aerni 2018; Naam 2013; Mazzucato 2013; Nordhaus and Shellenberger 2007; Collier 2018). Moreover, the empirical research by Ester Boserup in Kenya suggested that a region with high population growth rates does not necessarily have to fare worse compared to a region with low-population growth rates (Boserup 1981). After all, it depends on the institutional framework conditions that either encourage or discourage people to explore new forms of environmental resource management. Finally, one of the primary lessons of the 20th century was that the great famines took place almost exclusively in socialist regimes with their focus on protecting agriculture from international trade and promoting self-sufficiency (Boserup 1981; Wemheuer 2014; Nolan 1988).

This past experience with direct payments in agriculture in Europe, the alternative path chosen by New Zealand with its idea of reviving the land-grant college idea and the negative impact of the concept of self-sufficiency on food security in socialist countries is of crucial importance to understand why SDG 8 matters from an empirical perspective. It challenges the normative conceptions popularized by the degrowth movement.

A Universal Basic Income Is Unlikely to Contribute to More Inclusiveness on the Global Level

Degrowth advocates may see a great potential in addressing SDG 8, Target 5 (SDG 8.5) to guarantee decent work for men and women as well as equal pay for equal value by introducing a UBI on the state level as a way to subsidize work. This may be feasible for high-income countries with a strong economy and a large tax base, but it will have unintended consequences; after all, it will not be affordable to low-income countries that have to create a strong economy in the first place to build up the necessary tax base for funding a UBI. In other words, instead of global inclusive development, a UBI will most likely remain an exclusive privilege of affluent countries. Inadvertently, it may create a two-class society within high-income countries consisting of the privileged citizens who are officially eligible

for a state-supported UBI, and the migrant workers from low-income countries who do the work that no one wants to do anymore in high-income countries. After all, they will not be eligible for a UBI but actually do the hard work in these affluent societies (Aerni 2016b).

13. Concluding Remarks

The UN Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs) take into account the past failures and successes in international efforts to cope with global sustainability challenges. One of the major lessons learned from the past is that there is not just market failure, but also state failure. Lots of social and environmental problems are the result of wrong incentives created through government regulation. This was illustrated in this chapter by using the example of agricultural policies in high-income countries and the failure of the international community to address biodiversity loss and climate change in an effective way. In return, it has also been shown that public-private partnerships combined with favorable institutional framework conditions can be quite effective in enabling sustainable change. Examples that illustrate successful cases of collective action are the prevention of the expansion of the ozone hole in the atmosphere and the reduction of polluting emissions in industry.

Sustainable Development Goal 8 (SDG 8) builds upon these insights and recognizes the importance of innovation in enabling inclusive growth, more decent work and a decoupling of economic growth from environmental degradation. In this context, dynamic urban economies play a crucial role as drivers of economic diversification and sustainable change in rural and urban areas alike.

As such, SDG 8 represents a pragmatic and practice-oriented approach that is based on trial and error in the search for scalable solutions. Such solutions may only provide provisional relief since nature and humankind continuously evolve and with it, new challenges emerge that have to be addressed with new approaches by future generations (Naam 2013).

SDG 8 also reflects the fact that for the majority of the people on this planet, who live in low- and middle-income countries, poverty rather than affluence is still the main enemy of sustainable development (Hollander 2003).

Economic growth and economic diversification through innovation (SDG 8.1/8.2) are therefore crucial in offering a future for those who cannot invoke any formal rights because they are not formally employed or are economic migrants with hardly any legal protection outside their country of origin. Correspondingly, development policies that support entrepreneurship and formal market development (8.3), investments in the domestic economy that stimulate job creation and reduce

youth unemployment (8.5/8.6), and policies that protect the economic rights of migrant workers and those in precarious employment (8.8) contribute substantially to the targets of SDG 8. They are designed to reduce poverty and deprivation through the promotion of more inclusive societies.

In this context, one could argue that achieving the targets of SDG 8 is key to achieving all the remaining goals. After all, if the income of the poorest of the poor improves, their access to essential human rights, such as food, shelter, education, health treatment and political participation are very likely to increase as well. Moreover, empirical evidence, based on Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Maslow 1954; Maslow 1968) shows that once the essential material needs are covered, concern for the future of the next generation and the environment increases too (Winston 2016; Brandt et al. 2015; Jacobs 1994; Wilson 2018). This also explains why almost all the other SDGs contain at least one target that refers to business as part of the solution.¹⁷

High-income countries in Europe and the United States successfully addressed these existential and material issues associated with targets of SDG 8 at an earlier stage of economic development and are now more concerned with post-material needs (Aerni 2018).

This may explain why the current global discourse on sustainable development, as well as the teaching material used for "Education for Sustainable Development" (ESD) and largely shaped by stakeholders in affluent countries, contains an implicit anti-business rhetoric. The narrative is based on the view that global economic and technological changes primarily serve the needs of business, often at the expense of essential human needs and the environment. This may also explain why normative theories related to "degrowth" are very popular. They imply that each of us can contribute to save the planet by defending our values against business interests, embracing a more frugal lifestyle and by becoming responsible consumers (green consumerism). This normative approach in ESD provides meaning, orientation

¹⁷ The following targets refer directly or indirectly to business as part of the solution: SDG 1.4 on economic rights, SDG 2A,D,C on the promotion of agricultural investment and trade, SDG 3C,D on investment in health infrastructure and capacities for managing health risks, SDG 4.4 on promoting skills for entrepreneurship, SDG 5A,B,C on promoting the economic empowerment of women, SDG 7B on expanding infrastructure and upgrade technology for supplying modern and sustainable energy services, SDG 9 on promoting sustainable industrialization, SDG 10 3/6 on empowering economic rights and enhanced representation of developing countries in international economic institutions, SDG 11.3 on inclusive urbanization, SDG 12.6 encourage business to adopt sustainable practices, SDG 14.7 on increasing economic benefits to low-income countries by promoting sustainable fisheries and aquaculture, SDG 15.1 on the promotion of sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, SDG 16.3 on promoting the rule of law and equal access to justice and SDG 17 on public-private partnerships.

and identity in an increasingly complex world, but it may fail to help address the real sustainability challenges of the 21st century, including the current COVID-19 pandemic, because it does not recognize that business is an essential part of society. An effective approach to respond to the growing global challenges cannot consist of asking poor people to stop their plans to provide for a better material future for their children. Instead, the focus should be on the transformation of business into a driver of sustainable and inclusive change and the creation of decent jobs. This is of particular importance in view of the current job losses caused by the COVID-19 pandemic in low-income countries. It is estimated that the pandemic will cause 1.6 million workers in the informal economy to lose their livelihoods.¹⁸

Recognizing the value of inclusive business for sustainable change may, however, require a change of mindset recognizing that business is always part of, and not apart from, society. Based on this insight, the public discourse as well as classroom discussions on sustainability would be more about realizing opportunities through innovation and less about merely preventing risks through regulation. In order to realize opportunities, the state must provide incentives to induce people to take the risk to invest in an alternative future. This view is endorsed by the UN institution that is generally associated with the voice of the developing world, the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD). As described in this paper, it endorses the view that business can become part of the solution if effective institutional framework conditions are in place. Such framework conditions mobilize entrepreneurship and innovation for inclusive and sustainable change and discourage environmentally and socially harmful practices, not just in business, but society as a whole. This very practical and pragmatic approach embodies a clear call for a decade of joint action and is likely to be more effective and humane in achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals than the normative approach, which tends to confuse action with activism.

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¹⁸ See more numbers on the COVID-19 Impact on SDG 8 on the Website of the Department of Social and Economic Affairs of the United Nations: <https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal8> (accessed on 15 October 2020).

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