

# THE UN SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS, PEACE AND THE CHURCHES

## WORKSHOP

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### **The Sustainable Development Agenda.**

At the turn of the century the United Nations introduced the so-called Millennium Goals. A new century had started, there was hope for real change.

These eight Millennium Goals were developed by experts and directed at the development of the 'developing' countries in the southern hemisphere. They were rather technical and limited in scope.

However, in 2015 the UN launched the *Sustainable Development Goals or – Agenda*. These were aimed at stimulating sustainable development in both the southern and northern hemisphere. In contrast to the Millennium Goals these were developed after a broad consultation process. Amongst those consulted was the Act Alliance.

These SDG's consist of 17 major goals and 169 sub goals.

I will not tire you by summing up all the sub goals, but will just briefly mention the 17 main goals:

1. No poverty
2. Zero hunger
3. Good health and wellbeing
4. Quality Education
5. Gender equality
6. Clean water and sanitation
7. Affordable clean energy
8. Decent work and economic growth
9. Industry, innovation and infrastructure
10. Reduced inequalities
11. Sustainable cities and communities
12. Responsible consumption and production
13. Climate action
14. Life below water
15. Life on land
16. Peace, justice and strong institutions
17. Partnerships for the SDG's



The SDG's were adopted by 190 member states of the United nations as global development priorities.

Although in the course of this workshop I cannot help but discuss them critically, I must admit that this is the first attempt at an integrated approach to the global development agenda, which is to be commended. Although one could well ask whether both positive and negative synergies between the different objectives are sufficiently being considered. We must, of course, recognise that policies will have adverse as well as beneficial outcomes.

The art of (good) government is to balance these - sadly, few (if any) governments even try to do this, let alone when this is to be done at the UN-level.

So far however they are the most important global effort to advance worldwide development.

The important question remains though in how far they really advance *sustainable* development, particularly of the poorest countries.

### **The SDG's: are they really advancing *sustainable* development?**

In an SDG index to assess countries' average performance on SDG's developed by the Bertelsmann Stiftung those countries ranking high also happen to have a high per person ecological footprint and those ranking low a low ecological footprint.

So the SDG's underperform where sustainability is concerned.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See: Wackernagel, Hanscom and Lin, 'Making the Sustainable Development Goals Consistent with Sustainability', 2017, In: Frontiers in Energy Research, Open Access.

This index discerns three categories:

- Those that *decrease* resource dependence/ecological footprint (e.g. increasing availability of water, crops, clean energy )
- = 14 % of the weight of the index
- Those that *increase* resource dependency/ecological footprint (e.g. requiring additional resource consumption: building schools, hospitals )
- = 67% of the weight of the index
- Those that *neither decrease or increase* resource dependency/ecological footprint (securing equal rights for women, increasing transparency of decision-making)
- = 19 % of the weight of the index

In other words: resource demanding goals outweigh resource saving aspects of the SDG's nearly five to one!

An example: Goal 13: Climate action is measured in two ways: carbon emissions per person and vulnerability to climate change. However carbon emissions per person correlates positively with income and vulnerability negatively. So since rich countries have more resources to protect themselves from the consequences of climate change (the Netherlands!) countries such as Bangladesh lack those resources. This already raises a serious question as to the differing development capacities of countries in the northern and the southern hemisphere. Furthermore of the *first category* with the potential to *decrease* resource dependency - (6 clean water and sanitation, 7 affordable clean energy, 11 sustainable cities and communities, 12 responsible consumption and production, 13 climate action, 14 life below water, 15 life on land) which together constitute 13,6 % of this SDG index - SDG 13 climate action contributes merely 3 %.

When plotting countries' development achievement (UN development index) on a horizontal axis and their resource use (Global Footprint Network) on a vertical axis we find that e.g. Germany ranks 6, Netherlands 8, and e.g. Nigeria 141 and Congo 147.

In other words: the rich countries show high human development *and* high ecological footprint and the poor countries low human development *and* low ecological footprint. Higher footprint countries also have a much higher carbon dependency.

Clearly therefore: the resource dependency of the rich countries is not globally replicable. Moreover the UN itself notes that so far a mere 17,5 % of the worldwide energy need is provided for by renewables! And you bet that most of that is situated in the northern hemisphere!

And when we look at yet another index of the SDG achievement of the OECD countries, where the colour green indicates good progress, orange and red (considerable) distance to the target to be achieved, it becomes rather red and orange before our eyes.... So we still have a long way to go! (See appendix 1).

More importantly however the weight the SDG agenda gives to *development* and the lack of attention that it gives to *resource dependency /ecological footprint* makes it fall short of advancing development without further depleting the natural resource base.

Let us look at this from yet another perspective: that of *Earth Overshoot Day*.

Worldwide we are consuming the natural resource base that our planet is capable of (re) producing in 365 days in just only 212 days. During the remainder of the year 'we live on credit' so to say.

Earth Overshoot Day would therefore be on the 1<sup>st</sup> of August.

However at a national level the US has its Overshoot Day already on the 15<sup>th</sup> of March, the Netherlands on the 14<sup>th</sup> of April, Germany of the 2<sup>nd</sup> of May, the UK on the 8<sup>th</sup> of May, whilst this is only the 27<sup>th</sup> of July for Ukraine, the 4<sup>th</sup> of September for Thailand, 14<sup>th</sup> of October for Albania, and the 13<sup>th</sup> of December for Jamaica.

Thus the US needs 5 and the Netherlands 3,5 times our Planet Earth!

In other words:

The above illustrates that the SDG Agenda still does not further a model of development that makes all of us share resources worldwide in a manner that makes us succeed to live within the planet's natural limits.

Moreover the international community took too much time to take meaningful action to combat climate change in the context of the Paris Agreement, so targets may have to be adjusted and the pace of change needs to be increased.

Nevertheless the SDG Agenda is a step in the right direction. It needs amending.

But above all it can only work if there is a transformation of the dominant economic model in the direction of what the WCC calls 'An Economy of Life for All' for us to be able to really pursue sustainability. After all ignoring the constraints put on us by the planetary limits is not in keeping with the Gospel option for the poor and vulnerable or the care for creation.

The fewer the (scarce) resources still around, the lowest income countries and people will lack the means to compete for them and provide for their energy-, food- and water-security!

We need security for all: inclusive security.

And we need a circular instead of a linear economy, one that is geared towards an 'economy of the enough' and is guided by ecological and ethical principles<sup>2</sup>.

Thus we need both ecological and economic justice!<sup>3</sup>

### **The SDG's: are they really advancing the (sustainable) development of the poorest?**

Looking more closely at SDG 1 No poverty, SDG 2 No hunger, SDG 8 Decent work and economic growth and SDG 10 Reduced inequalities one cannot but conclude that the present way in which these are formulated clearly lack an analysis of the root causes of poverty and underdevelopment. In a recent document produced by the World Council of Churches and the Act Alliance entitled 'Called to Transformative Action' this lack of analysis in the SDG Agenda is –on second thought as far as the Act Alliance is concerned, see above - also seriously criticized.

In other words: the SDG Agenda does not question the dominant economic model at all! As was the case with the Millennium Goals the assumption is that eventually economic growth will 'trickle down'. However this has never been established. Instead the gap between

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2 Conference of European Churches, Ecology-Economy Working Group, Brussels, 1995, 'The Dominant Economic Model and Sustainable Development; Are they Compatible?'

3 Conference of European Churches, Thematic Reference Group on Economic and Ecological Justice, Brussels, 2018, 'Sharing God's Earth and its Riches Justly'

rich and poor is only growing wider both within nations, between nations and between the small rich elite and the large group of poor people worldwide!

Moreover an overview of the SDG Index and Dashboard Reports of 2017 by Jeffrey Sachs shows that rich countries even generate so-called ‘spillovers’ which affect the ability of poor countries to achieve the SDG’s negatively. Amongst them are tax evasion, arms trade (!) and misappropriation of the global commons by the rich countries.<sup>4</sup>

As indicated earlier therefore, I am convinced that we will not achieve true sustainability and more equality without transforming the dominant economic model!

So my answer to the question contained in the heading is:

*in my considered opinion: no they don’t!*

### **The SDG’s: do they really contribute to achieving Just Peace?**

Let us have a closer look at SDG 16 Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions.

In the description we find concern about rising ‘*international homicide*’, ‘violence against children’, ‘human trafficking’ and ‘sexual violence’ - all of which are indirect/implicit references to WAR being waged in many places today, without mentioning it openly.

Similarly ‘corruption’ is seen to be a threat to building a just society and strong and transparent governments, but an emphasis on maintaining (classical) human rights and actively building democratic and transparent governments is lacking.

Let alone that mention is made of the ‘opportunity costs’ constituted by the enormous investments in armaments worldwide. What miracles in terms of true sustainable development could we realize when these would be redirected to investing in peace!

Once more this requires a transformation of the dominant economic model.

A more sustainable and just economy.

*Peace in the marketplace* as one of the four dimensions of Just Peace.

Justice as a precondition for true peace.

Since the United Nations expects religions to contribute to the SDG Agenda as a partner under the SDG 17 Partnerships to – amongst else- be ‘peaceful channels for the resolution of conflict’ and ‘uphold human rights, especially for the most vulnerable’, as well as ‘mobilize people everywhere , especially the young, to act for a better world’, religions and churches should call on governments of member states and the UN as a whole to demilitarize the world, declare war and armed struggle to settle political conflicts illegal and release those enormous financial resources to build peace and sustainability for all!

So again the answer to the question is:

*in my considered opinion: no they don’t!*

Kees Nieuwerth,

Karlsruhe, 24 th November 2018.

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<sup>4</sup> The Sanders Institute, Jeffrey Sachs, Overview SDG Index and Dashboard Report 2017, <http://www.sandersinstitute/blog/overview-sdg-index-and-dashboards-report-2017>

**And now: bringing it closer to home: some questions for us to answer!**

**SDG 1: No poverty:**

Are you willing to pay more tax in order to have a larger development cooperation budget for the Right Sharing of Resources?

Are you willing to ask why people are poor – and whether financial constraints are the only problem?

**SDG 2: Freedom from hunger:**

Would you be willing to eat insects rather than pork/beef/chicken?

Are you willing to accept a healthy diet based on plants rather than animals?

**SDG 3: Good health:**

Would it be a good idea to make fast food more expensive than slow food?

Would it not be necessary to make the products of ‘conventional’ agriculture more expensive (incorporating externalities) and those of biological agriculture less expensive?

**SDG 4: Quality education:**

Should we add some of our national education budget to the development cooperation budget earmarked for quality education in the southern hemisphere?

**SDG 5: Gender equality:**

Do you agree that women should take a more prominent role in management functions and leadership?

**SDG 6: Clean water and sanitation:**

What do you do yourself to reduce the ‘plastic soup’?

**SDG 7: Affordable clean energy: ?**

Should ‘developing nations’ get solar and wind technology transferred *for free* by the (companies in) the northern hemisphere? And should ownership be locally (ideally cooperatively) based?

**SDG 8: Decent work and economic growth:**

Are you checking whether what you buy is produced in an ecologically and socially responsible way?

**SDG 9: Industry, innovation and infrastructure:**

Are you vigilant in monitoring whether industrial activity in your region is detrimental to biodiversity and the natural environment?

**SDG 10: Reduced inequalities:**

Are you comfortable amongst people who are different from you? Do you make them feel welcome and included?

**SDG 11: Sustainable cities and communities:**

Do you know about the transition town movement and are you willing to learn about their objectives?

**SDG 12: Responsible consumption and production:**

Are you contributing to the development of biological/ecological food production as a consumer?

**SDG 13: Climate action:**

Do you support the energy-transformation towards renewables even if it costs you more as a consumer?

**SDG 14: Life below water:**

Do you sometimes eat rare types of fish that do not have the Marine Stewardship label?

**SDG 15: Life on land:**

Should your government support nature conservancy not only in your own country, but also in countries in the southern hemisphere?

**SDG 16: Peace, justice and strong institutions:**

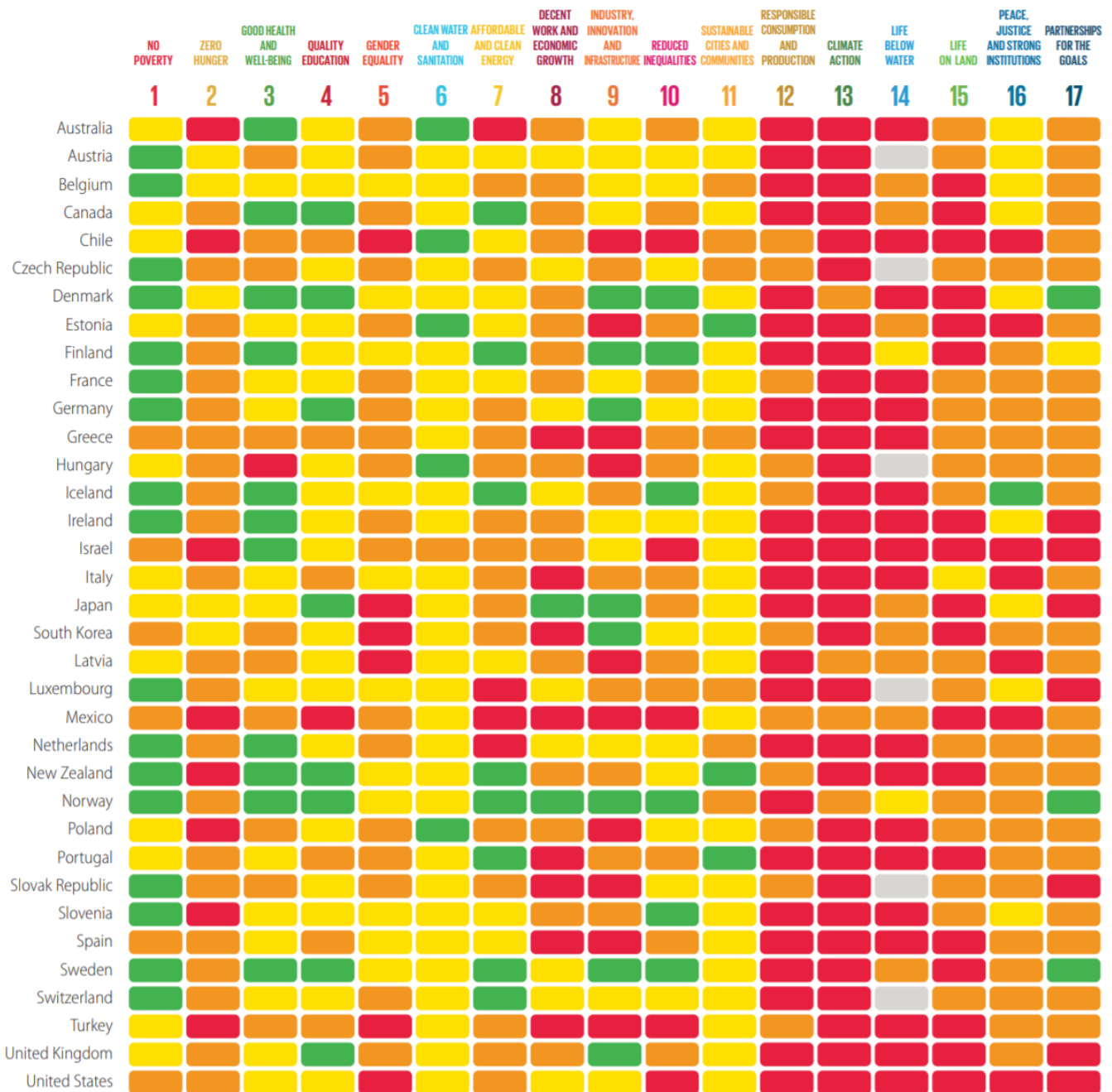
Should your country provide hospitality to more people fleeing war and armed conflict elsewhere in our one world? Should your country curb arms exports and arms industry?

**SDG 17: Partnerships for SDG:**

Should the churches be more critically involved in the implementation of the UN SDG Agenda ?

Source: <http://www.sdgindex.org/assets/files/2017/2017-SDG-Index-and-Dashboards-Report--compact.pdf>

Figure 3 | SDG Dashboard for OECD countries



A green rating on the SDG Dashboard denotes SDG achievement, and is assigned to a country on a given SDG only if all the indicators under the goal are rated green. Yellow, orange and red indicate increasing distance from SDG achievement.

For more information on the dashboard methodology, refer to part 2. Full metadata on the indicators used is available at [www.sdgindex.org](http://www.sdgindex.org)

Source: Authors' analysis