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Deep Sustainability: The UN Sustainable Developmet Goals versus the Unworkable UN System

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Abstract

Deep Sustainability refers to integration of human beings into the biosphere of planet Earth through a fundamental transformation of culture, spirit, and civilization, including our ways of doing science, business, education, and commerce. The latest assessment of our planetary environmental situation by scientists and environmental experts paints a frightening picture of the consequences should we fail to reach such a deep level of sustainability. Many of the SDGs such as ending poverty and converting civilization to sustainable extraction production, consumption, transportation and disposal are on the mark, but we have seen that they cannot be achieved under the unworkable UN system. Change the design of the system and you change the likely consequences of the system. It is as simple as that—and as profound as that. The Constitution for the Federation of Earth is a blueprint for human survival and flourishing. It is very brief, concise, and clearly designed. We can replace the unworkable UN Charter with the Earth Constitution and integrate all the valuable agencies of the UN into the emerging world federation. This is the way forward for humanity. Indeed, it is the only way to survive as a species within the limited time-frame available to us. Deep sustainability means real transformation of a broken world system. Deep sustainability means human coherence and synergy for truly addressing our most fundamental problems. Deep sustainability means ratifying the Constitution for the Federation of Earth.

Keywords: Deep sustainability, Debt sustainability, Earth Constitution, The New Agenda, Inclusive societies

Deep Sustainability means that human beings must become integrated into the biosphere of planet Earth through a fundamental transformation of culture, spirit, and civilization, including our ways of doing science, business, education, and commerce. It means that we must begin living with one another on the Earth in peace, justice, and harmony, rather than war, inequality, and competition. The latest assessment of our planetary environmental situation by scientists and environmental experts paints a frightening picture of the consequences should we fail to reach such a deep level of sustainability.

The latest information from the association of scientists known as the IPCC (the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, www.ipcc.ch) is alarming. We are already at one degree centigrade above pre-industrial levels and we see the immense disruptions being caused through lethal heat waves worldwide beyond anything previously recorded, intense flooding, crop-destroying droughts, out of control wild fires on every continent, ocean-levels rising, and frequent overwhelming super storms (Romm, 2018).

It is absolutely imperative to undertake massive changes in the ways we extract resources, produce, transport, consumer goods, and dispose of wastes if we want to preserve a viable planetary biosphere for future generations (Speth, 2008; Wallace-Wells, 2019). We must limit the increasing warming to 1.5 degrees or 2 degrees C. at the absolute maximum or our planet may experience an unstoppable run-away warming process that could lead to the extinction of higher forms of life in the next century.

The 17 U.N. Sustainable Goals, affirmed by the UN General Assembly, by and large recognize the kind of world that must be created if we are to achieve a sustainable civilization. They proclaim an "action-agenda" in effect from 2015 to 2030 (https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda). Most of the goals are laudable; they are both necessary and worthwhile if the world is to achieve sustainability. I list here few selected goals with which I want to both illustrate the important needs identified by the goals but also to highlight the unworkable UN system that makes the achievement of these goals impossible.

Goal 1: End poverty in all its forms everywhere.

Goal 2: End hunger and achieve food security.

Goal 3: Ensure healthy lives and well-being for all ages.

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Goal 5. Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.

Goal 13: Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts (including "acknowledging the United Nations Framework Convention of Climate Change" as the key to achieving this goal).

Goal 14: Conserve and sustainably use the oceans.

Goal 16: Promote peaceful and inclusive societies.

Goal 17: "Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development finance."

On the positive side these goals recognize the interdependence of people and the interconnections between all dimensions of a sustainable society—which must include not only the limitation of carbon emissions into the atmosphere but eliminating poverty, assuring food security, improving the health of lives, the equality of women, etc. On the negative side, the goals root this transformative imperative firmly within the current dominant world system characterized by global capitalism and the system of militarized sovereign nation-states. Goal 17 makes explicit that all forms of finance and capitalist enterprises, from local to "international private business and finance" to the World Bank, World Trade Organization (WTO) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) remain the infrastructure for achieving these goals.

Goal 17, therefore, makes it clear that international debt enslavement by the nations of Earth to huge consortiums of private banking cartels (like the World Bank headquartered in Washington, DC) will not be cancelled. Goal 17 counsels "debt sustainability," that is, debt payments can be renegotiated so that poor nations can pay for their radical conversion to sustainability virtually forever. Does this contradict Goal 1 of ending poverty, or Goal 2 of ending hunger, or Goal 3 of healthy living? *Absolutely:* there is no way such goals can be achieved in a world structured around the capitalist idea that the motive for enterprise is the private accumulation of wealth by individuals, banks, and corporations (Raworth, 2017; Screpanti, 2014).

The United Nations, since it founding in 1945, has operated on the assumptions built into its Charter of the exclusive legitimacy of the capitalist system (i.e. no other systems can be allowed to exist or flourish) and the legitimacy of the system of militarized nation-states (that goes back, most scholars determine, some 370 years to the Peace of Westphalia in Europe in 1648). In addition, as many scholars make clear, the USA has been the dominant world hegemonic since the Second World War and, as such, has substantially colonized the United Nations to serve its global interests (Smith, 2016).

It is this world system that is "unworkable" and that ensures the failure of the Sustainable Development Goals. The goals are written to inspire people with beautiful ideals but their presuppositions (of the current brutal, unjust, inequitable, and fragmented world system) make their realization clearly impossible. Let us examine five fundamental concepts that are missing from this Sustainable Development Goals document of some 15,000 words.

First, as we have seen, is the global economic system in which a tiny handful of people today own more than 50% of the world's wealth while the bottom half of humanity lack access to the most basic necessities for living adequate lives. This system is nowhere criticized in the SDG document, but simply presupposed as not only being a problem but as the only acceptable means by which to achieve these goals. In the SDG document, poverty is to be eliminated within a system that places *no limits* on the accumulation of private wealth (Kovel, 2007; Daly, 2007).

Second, the population explosion is ignored and apparently not considered a problem. By common estimates, in 1950 the world had approximately 2.5 billion people. By 1960, it had about 3.2 billion people. By 2000 it had 6.1 billion people and today it has close to 7.8 billion people. The world adds about 80 million new people each year (Catton 1982). Yet since the 1980s, it is widely documented that global agricultural lands have been rapidly diminishing and global fisheries have been severely declining (Speth, 2008; McKibben, 2019).

This obvious lethal threat to our human future is never mentioned in the SDG document. We can't even feed the present population of the Earth with more than one billion people in extreme poverty, and global sources of food have been rapidly declining for decades and the number of mouths to feed increasing by 80 million per year. Are the authors of the SDGs not aware of this astonishing contradiction? Of course, they are aware. The obvious reason that it is not mentioned in the document is political. Powerful forces that dominate the UN do not want it mentioned.

Third, global militarism is not considered a problem in this document. It is not even mentioned. The one

goal concerning "peace" is Goal 16 in which nations are supposed to promote "inclusive peace" within themselves. The fact that the world spends approximately 1.8 trillion US dollars per year on militarism and war is entirely ignored. The fact that approximately half that amount is spent by the United States to maintain a global military hegemony that includes a network of some 725 known military bases encircling the globe is of no concern in the SDG document.

Wars are extremely destructive of the environment, and the production and use of modern weapons extremely toxic (Sanders & Davis, 2009). That there are wars going on in dozens of countries is never mentioned in the SDG document. There is a major schizophrenia here, a major disjunction between reality and the fantasies of the SDG document. Again, it has to be fairly obvious that the SDG document is *deeply political* in a partisan way. The dominant powers allowed it to be written on the condition that it presupposed the exploitative global economic system, that it ignores the planetary population explosion, and that it ignores imperialism, as well as the militarization of the world in which the wealth of the world that absolutely needs to be used to restore the earth and combat climate change is in fact used for war and militarism (Petras & Veltmeyer, 2005; Smith, 2016).

Fourth, the SDG document ignores the fundamental structural issue of the absolute *sovereignty* of nation-states. The document emphasizes planetary solidarity, cooperation, working together, and interdependency while at the same time ignoring the ultimate fragmentation of our planet into some 200 absolute sovereign territories, every one of which has the "right" to militarize itself and is "free" not to honor its commitments to the SDGs and even "free" to withdraw from any climate agreements (Martin, 2021).

On this principle, for example, the USA had the *legal right* to withdraw from the 2015 Paris Climate Accord, just as it has all along exercised its *legal right* to have never signed the 1997 Kyoto Protocol on carbon emissions or the 1994 Law of the Seas Convention. Hence, the SDG document that is named "Transforming Our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development" demands that we unite to transform our world while *simultaneously* affirming the right of every sovereign nation not to participate.

Fifth, this dogma of absolute sovereignty applies to the environment and resources as well. In item 18 of the SDG document's Introduction states: " We reaffirm that every State has, and shall freely exercise, full permanent sovereignty over all its wealth, natural resources and economic activity." The global ecosystem is one, the planetary hydrosphere circulates everywhere, the planetary atmosphere is common to us all, and the forests of the world and many other resources are absolutely essential to all human life and flourishing. Yet, the SDG document says that these common necessities of life are in effect *the private property* of each nation where they happen to be found. They announce this principle under the heading of "The New Agenda." Surely this is part of a political strategy to maintain an *Old Agenda* under a deceptive heading.

Consider again the implications of this dogma of sovereignty, as in the case of Brazil, which happens to host the Amazon forest – the "lungs of Earth" – that produce nearly 50% of the world's oxygen and moderate the global climate. Under the current system, the government of Brazil has the *legal right* to cut down, develop, and destroy the Amazon forest for private gain (which they are in fact busy doing at this moment). Similarly, Saudi Arabia has the *legal right* to pump all the fossil fuel that it "owns" into the global economic system.

Under so-called "international law," the United States has the *legal right* to withdraw its cooperation, even though withdrawal by the world's largest polluter means harming the global climate for all of humanity (Harris 2014). And China has the *legal right* to produce all the CO2 it wants, sending it into the global atmosphere, and increasing the greenhouse effect that is overheating our entire planet. To understand the breadth and absurdity of this dogma of sovereignty is to understand how and why the failed UN system cannot possibly lead to planetary sustainability.

Transformation of Our World System with the *Earth Constitution*

The *Constitution for the Federation of Earth* does not abolish the nations. It unites them, preserving their authority over their internal affairs but placing *planetary affairs* in the hands of the elected representatives of the people of Earth in the World Parliament. The World Parliament consists of three houses: a House of Peoples directly elected by the people of Earth from 1000 electoral districts, a House of Nations with representatives from all the nations on Earth, and a House of Counselors, democratically

elected to represent the whole of our planet and the common good of all (Martin, 2010).

Sovereignty belongs to the people of Earth and the *Earth Constitution* therefore can elaborate democratic world laws based on the *common good* of the citizens of the Earth and future generations. This is impossible for sovereign nations who are structurally required to be concerned with the "national interests" of each nation. The SDG document called "Transforming Our World" is misnamed. The fundamental flaws of "our world" (militarism, economic exploitation, competition among nations, and the dogma of absolute sovereignty) are ignored. Yet these are precisely the flaws preventing sustainability that require transformation.

The *Earth Constitution* unites humankind under the principle of "unity in diversity" and insists correctly that from this principle flows a world which is "the basis for a new age when war shall be outlawed and peace prevail; when the Earth's total resources shall be equitably used for human welfare; and when basic rights and responsibilities shall be shared by all without discrimination." This is literally true. *Consequences flow from system design*.

From the design of the current world system (militarized sovereign states and global economic competition) the negative consequences we see all around us flow: endless wars, extreme wealth and poverty, environmental destruction, etc. From the design of the *Earth Constitution* in which humanity and nations are federated under the principle of unity in diversity directed to the common good, specific consequences also flow: a peace system producing real peace, a justice system producing real, enforceable justice, and a sustainability system producing real sustainability. The *Constitution* sets up democratic world government premised on the common good of the whole of humanity, the biosphere, and future generations.

Hence, under Article 4 of the *Earth Constitution,* the hydrosphere of our planet belongs to the people of Earth, not territorial states. The atmosphere of our Earth belongs to us all, and no nation has the right to pump unlimited greenhouse gasses into the atmosphere. The lungs of the Earth (its forests) belong to the people and neither Brazil nor any other nation has the right to destroy these lungs. Brutal military regimes like the government of Myanmar no longer have the "legal right" to shoot peaceful protesters as they do under the current world of fragmentation. Human rights are *universal,* and this is the level on which they must be protected. This is what "transforming our world" really looks like. The SDGs constitute a political cover-up with truly lethal consequences.

The *Constitution for the Federation of Earth* needs ratification as quickly as possible under the criteria it sets out in Articles 17 and 19. The last three articles (17, 18 and 19) set up *a process by which our world can be transformed,* efficiently and peacefully, to one of sustainability. Sustainability, peace, and justice go together (all three are required) as the SDG document also affirms. But the UN system is unworkable precisely because of its absolute fragmentation among militarized sovereign nations and its complicity with a failed capitalist economic system.

The *Earth Constitution* gives us a process of transformation in these three articles. We can begin Provisional World Government now (Article 19). We can continue through three easily attainable "operatives stages outlined in Article 17, and, once ratified, we can amend the *Constitution* to suit new circumstances and changing human needs under Article 18. If there are items in the *Constitution* that need editing, that is the time to do it, not in the present endlessly arguing about how to make every provision of the *Constitution* perfect according to each person's taste.

Many of the SDGs such as ending poverty and converting civilization to sustainable extraction production, consumption, transportation and disposal are on the mark, but we have seen that they cannot be achieved under the unworkable UN system. *Change the design of the system and you change the likely consequences of the system*. It is as simple as that—and as profound as that.

The *Constitution for the Federation of Earth* is a blueprint for human survival and flourishing. It is very brief, concise, and clearly designed. We can replace the unworkable UN Charter with the *Earth Constitution* and integrate all the valuable agencies of the UN into the emerging world federation. This is the way forward for humanity. Indeed, it is the only way to survive as a species within the limited time-frame available to us. Deep sustainability means real transformation of a broken world system. Deep sustainability means human coherence and synergy for truly addressing our most fundamental problems. Deep sustainability means ratifying the *Constitution for the Federation of Earth.*

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