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The victims of unsustainability: a challenge to sustainable development goals

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Environmental unsustainability is due to both structural features and historically specific characteristics of industrial capitalism resulting in specific patterns of production and consumption, as well as population growth. Sustainability literature criticises the established corporate and political power hegemonies, interested in maintaining economic growth, as well as inability or unwillingness of citizen-consumers to counteract these hegemonic tendencies. Yet, official policies are still targeted at social and economic ‘development’ as a panacea for unsustainability challenges. Instead, renewed accent on social and economic objectives are outlined by a set of sustainable development goals (SDG) that include objectives of fighting poverty, promoting better health, reducing mortality, and stimulating equitable economic growth. What is less commonly critiqued is the underlying morality of unsustainability and ethical questions concerned with the ‘victims of unsustainability’ outside of socioeconomic discourse. The achievement of SDG goals, as will be further elaborated on in this article, is unlikely to lead to greater social equality and economic prosperity, but to a greater spread of unsustainable production and consumption, continuous economic as well as population growth that has caused environmental problems in the first place and further objectification of environment and its elements. This article argues that an invocation of ethical duty toward environment and its elements is required in order to move beyond the current status quo. Such ethical approach to unsustainability can effectively address the shortcomings of the mainstream sustainability discourse that is mainly anthropocentric and therefore fails to identify the correct locus of unsustainability.

Keywords: anthropocentrism; ecological justice; sustainable development goals (SDG)

Introduction

From the promoters of sustainable development, we learn that sustainability can be effectively driven by individuals, institutions and governments that seek to effectively combine social, economic and ecological objectives (WCED 1987).

Also, diversity of perspectives on sustainability is encouraged, assuming that plural and democratic approaches will lead to sustainability, and United Nations (UN 2015) duly organises consultations on sustainable development goals (SDG) developed in 2015. A larger example includes the issue of ecological modernisation and green economy and the belief that economic development, technology and economic welfare will all contribute to the more ecologically benign products and technologies (e.g. WCED 1987; UNEP 2011). Yet, it is clear from the many instances of ‘rich’ countries failing to address even the minimal requirements of controlling the greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions that cause climate change that economic wealth does not automatically lead to choices for ecologically benign forms of renewable energy (e.g. The Economist 2015). Instead, renewed accent on social and economic objectives are outlined by a set of SDG, agreed upon at the *UN Conference on Sustainable Development* (also known as Rio+20 or Earth Summit 2012 (UNEP 2011, 2014a; UNEP-UNDP 2011)). These goals, incorporated into the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in

2015, include objectives of fighting poverty, promoting better health, reducing mortality and stimulating equitable economic growth (Open Working Group 2015). In fact, one of the central concepts outlined is ‘sustained and inclusive economic growth’ (UN 2015). Supposedly, part of this ‘sustainable growth’ would address sustainability itself – also concrete sustainability challenges, including climate change.

Yet, at present, we fail the global aims of cutting down the level of GHG emissions that contribute to climate change, stopping the massive extinction of species and generally bringing our consumption level to the sustainable standards (e.g. Corner 2014; Klein 2015; Washington 2015). Due to vested interests (or sometimes disinterests or ignorance) of a multitude of stakeholders and ‘consumers’, sustainability becomes nothing more than a talk shop. As Washington (2015, p. 36) has noted, sustainability should not be allowed to be high-jacked to justify further ‘business-as-usual’:

If we are to demystify sustainability, we have to be on the same page and speak of the same meaning. In a finite world, we need to accept once and for all that sustainability *cannot* be about further growth. This challenge remains critical, though still denied.

In relation to climate change, Naomi Klein (2015) has commented: ‘Our current economic system is both fuelling

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the climate crisis and actively preventing us from taking the necessary actions to avert it.' If the rhetoric of economic sustainability persists, this will result in nothing more than helping to 'sustain the unsustainable' (Blüdhorn 2007).

The critical observers have observed, however, that implementation of many of these goals are likely in fact to exacerbate environmental crisis and result in victimising nonhuman species (e.g. Hansen & Wethal 2014; Kopnina & Blewitt 2014; Washington 2015). Just as sustainable development, especially in a sense of 'sustaining growth', has been branded to be an oxymoron (e.g. Bartlett 1994), promoting economic development is not likely to address social inequalities (Rees 2010; Wijkman and Rockström 2012; Fletcher et al. 2014; Washington 2015; Black 2016) and exacerbate ecological injustice between species, privileging human welfare over concerns with other species (Crist 2012; Kopnina 2012; Strang 2013; Cafaro & Primack 2014; Shoreman-Ouimet & Kopnina 2016). The achievement of SDG goals, as will be further elaborated on in this article, is unlikely to lead to greater social equality and economic prosperity, but to a greater spread of unsustainable production and consumption to all corners of the globe, continuous economic as well as population growth that has caused environmental problems in the first place and non-abating commodification and objectification of environment and its elements (McKenzie et al. 2015).

This article will address the underlying morality of unsustainability and ethical questions concerned with the 'victims of unsustainability' outside of the conventional hegemonic discourse that supports socioeconomic objectives to the exclusion of ecological concerns. This article will address these main interconnected questions: what are the main victims of unsustainability? What are the ways forward?

Commodification

Some steps to reduce the negative effects of climate change and the loss of biodiversity have been taken. There is growing evidence that market-based approaches may be particularly effective at incentivising practices that ensure forests are managed to deliver highest and best values to stakeholders (by which exclusively humans are meant). However, there are also weaknesses in market-based approaches, the full extent of which is not well understood.

The points of criticism of commodification or economic capture approaches include objections from social justice and ecological justice (justice between species) approaches, as economic capture approach is blamed (1) for promoting social injustice as the hegemonic elites are still controlling a profiting from commodification while the vulnerable communities are merely allowed to use the (free) ecosystem services (Igoe & Brockington 2007; West & Brockington 2012) and (2) because at its core commodification demotes nature and

nonhuman species to commodities (Sullivan 2009; Crist 2012; Cafaro & Primack 2014; Shoreman-Ouimet & Kopnina 2016). A third dimension of criticism can be added: apparent failure of commodification to counteract anything from climate change to biodiversity loss. There is enough evidence that the earth's climate crisis has not abated as carbon emissions have not been stopped but rather increased (IPCC 2014) and that biodiversity loss has in fact accelerated. According to the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), 16,928 plant and animal species are known to be threatened with extinction. This may be a gross underestimate because less than 3% of the world's 1.9 million described species have been assessed for the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species (IUCN https://cmsdata.iucn.org/downloads/species_extinction_05_2007.pdf).

The framing of the environment as a 'common good' has become increasingly common in international environmental governance. The economic cost-benefit worldview is promoted by international political organisations such as United Nations Environmental Program (UNEP) that promotes a number of economic capture approach schemes such as Payments for Ecosystem Services (PES); Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD) (<http://www.un-redd.org/>); and The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity (TEEB) (<http://www.teebweb.org/>). UNEP seeks to integrate an ecosystem service approach into economic frameworks, expanding it to social and economic areas of SDG. REDD+ is a UN-backed programme which seeks

...to create a financial value for the carbon stored in forests, offering incentives for developing countries to reduce emissions from forested lands and invest in low-carbon paths to sustainable development. "REDD+" goes beyond deforestation and forest degradation and includes the role of conservation, sustainable management of forests and enhancement of forest carbon stocks. (<http://www.un-redd.org/Home/tabid/565/Default.aspx>)

Reforestation, allowing natural regrowth of brush and woodland, restoring wetlands and allowing grasslands to recover from overgrazing could take 10–20% of the GHGs out of the air (Agard et al. 2014). TEEB is focused on mainstreaming the values of biodiversity and ecosystem services into decision-making at all levels (<http://www.teebweb.org/>). All these programs, targeted at blotting up GHGs and improving the planet in general, include schemes like vegetation recovery and strict conservation measures in order to benefit humanity.

Yet, when the economic interests are put before protection of environment, economic development objectives are likely to trump over ecological concerns. The deforestation has not abated not only due to corruption that allows illegal logging but also because of concessions for powerful timber companies, and also due to the opinion that economic interests of development should come first (Lang 2015). In fact, deforestation is reaching previously unseen heights in many areas. The same holds for

the so-called 'ecosystem services' with the benefits ecosystems provide humanity and are essential for human well-being and survival well-acknowledged (UNEP), yet at least 60% of ecosystem services are being degraded or used unsustainably (MEA 2005). And while the loss of biodiversity is seen as threatening to human welfare as the importance of biodiversity is seen as providing the multitude of functions it serves for humans, from food to filtering waste (e.g. Elredge 1998), extinction threat has only increased in the last decades. It has been argued that one of the reasons for failure of commodification programs to protect nature is that they tend to be explicitly anthropocentric – placing profit and social objectives before environmental protection (Shoreman-Ouimet & Kopnina 2016). A telling example is a well-known economist Paul Collier who argues that the only ethical responsibility and only rights lie between present human communities and future generations of humans:

Sometimes, in poor societies, it is very important to burn down nature and convert it into more productive assets and hand these on. This is the ethical imperative – that's what stewardship is. Using natural assets productively, creating more value and passing them on, is how we will reduce poverty. But in other cases, the same thought experiment will come up with a different answer – the future may say you are proposing to leave us a nasty climate and we will be awash in man-made assets... (Collier in Lee 2010)

Nature, as it were, is left bankrupt (Wijkman and Rockström 2012).

For(saking) nature?

The failure to address environmental degradation is much greater still in cases where non-human species that are not instrumental to human survival or welfare are threatened. While entire habitats, containing multiple species, may be saved for the sake of humanity, such as forests protected by REDD, the question remains: What is a forest exactly? Is it just a collection of trees and bush, or a vital ecosystem that provides habitat for animals and rich plant life – not to mention sustainable livelihoods for countless small communities? A lot hinges on this question. According to the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), a forest is simply tree cover. By that definition, as Rainforest Rescue, a conservation advocacy group, reflects,

if a plantation company destroys healthy grassland or grabs land from small farmers to plant a vast green desert of rubber trees, it actually counts as 'afforestation'. Multiple species are then doomed to exile or even extinction, as long as ecosystem services or natural resources or other human welfare benefits are successfully and efficiently extracted.

By same token, the concept of 'planetary boundaries' (Rockström et al. 2009) in the context of unsustainability is often framed. 'Planetary boundaries' is the central

concept proposed by a group of environmental scientists led by Johan Rockström and colleagues. In 2009, the group proposed a framework of 'planetary boundaries' designed to define a 'safe operating space for humanity'. While the concept of 'planetary boundaries' is valuable idea in drawing public attention to breaching limits, it is dangerously anthropocentric in strongly suggesting that all we need to do is stay just outside the borders of those boundaries, in our use of (and impact on) the biosphere, in order to be 'sustainable'. While the planetary boundaries of 'Land Use' and 'Freshwater' appear to be infinitely malleable as they can be 'effectively managed' for the benefit of humanity, as far as biodiversity is concerned, these boundaries have long been surpassed. Land Use or Freshwater, while still widely 'available' although degraded or polluted (to humans), actually testify to wild habitat destruction which in itself is the leading cause of biodiversity loss (Fitzgerald 2015). Freshwater and agricultural lands are in fact 'artifactual' system, or at best a hybrid of natural and 'artifactual'. Such a system is essentially human-based, so that human interests and concerns dominate any evaluation (Katz 1999 p. 388). Indeed, today,

while the unspoken conflict between the wild and the tame structures our behaviour and feelings in ways that are generally denied and rationalised, we have even less awareness that the industrial system's takeover of the natural world shapes our theoretical and conceptual views (Kidner 2014).

The 'natural' is either physically or contextually erased, or made to 'work' for humanity. As Jean-Christophe Vié, Deputy Head of IUCN's Species Programme, has contested: '[i]t's time to recognise that nature is the largest company on Earth working for the benefit of 100 percent of humankind – and it's doing it for free' (quoted in Sullivan 2009 p. 2).

What are the main victims of unsustainability?

To answer the first question posed in the introduction, what are the main victims of unsustainability – the main victim of unsustainability is non-human nature. Concerns for poor people, slaves and women have become mainstream in sustainability thinking, yet concern for non-humans...

'Project Human Takeover' has proceeded acre by acre, island by island, region by region, and continent by continent, reaching its current global apogee with the final loss of wild places and the corollary sixth mass extinction underway. What the near future heralds, if we stay on the present trajectory, is the sealing of this nonhuman genocide by means of the Earth being put to work, 24/7, to serve a master, populous race. The proverbial water will be squeezed out of stone, metaphorically and literally, not only to bring people bread but circuses too (Crist 2012 p. 140).

Population

This leads to the question of another important obstacle to sustainability – human population growth. While the structural features cannot be easily addressed due to the established power hegemonies (in particular that of corporate and political elites interested in maintaining status quo), the current political leaders seem equally unwilling to address population growth (Weeden & Palomba 2012; Weisman 2013). In fact, corporate and political leaders as well as the public see population as a good thing, as The Economist journal illustrates:

Europe, North America and East Asia all experienced fertility declines before the second round of population changes (cohabitation and delayed births). This meant they reaped their so-called ‘demographic dividend’ first (this is the economic boost that comes when the size of the labour force rises relative to the rest of the population). That helped them create richer societies with more extensive social services before the costs of ageing kicked in. (The Economist 2013 p. 47)

Thus, considering social, economic and demographic causes of unsustainability, environmental predicament seems dire. However, as commodification proponents have argued, anthropocentric view of nature is sufficient to protect it – simply put, because environment is clearly seemed to serve the interests of present and future generations. But is anthropocentrically motivated protection of environment enough to guarantee sustainable future of this planet?

Anthropocentrically motivated protection

As Eric Katz (1999) has reflected, anthropocentrically motivated protection of nature can SOMETIMES make a positive contribution to the environment. However, this happens *only* in situations dealing with human-made or the human-connected environment, such as in cases of urban air pollution, or indeed climate change that threatens to effect human livelihood. Yet in cases of protection of wilderness and the preservation of endangered species anthropocentrically inclined policies fall short of effectiveness. By *anthropocentrism* Katz (1999 p. 377–378) means both the ‘idea that human interests, human goods and/or human values are the focal point of any *moral evaluation* of environmental *policy* and the idea that these human interests, goods and values are the basis of any *justification* of an environmental *ethic*’.

Empirically, it appears from examining the evidence of rising numbers of endangered species and recent extinctions humans do just fine, for instance, without Sumatran tigers and white rhinoceros. While there are arguments that we need *all* biodiversity to create a ‘safe operating space for humanity’ (Rockström et al. 2009), it appears that humans are reasonably well sustained by planted monocultures, synthetic medicines and electronic entertainment. Indeed, in the words of Eileen Crist (2012 p. 140), we live in a world that is ‘propped by the strengths advanced

industrial civilisation has at its disposal: the rational-instrumental means of technical management, heightened efficiency and technological breakthrough’. The view that the advance of industrialism can be equated with *human* development or ‘progress’, and that human destiny is intrinsically linked to a future defined by science and capital, is dubious as evidenced by many military and industrial disasters, as well as climate change (Kidner 2014). Indeed,

more serious than modern society’s potential ability to technologically fix or muddle through problems of its own making is people’s apparent willingness to live in an ecologically devastated world and to tolerate dead zones, endocrine disruptors, domestic animal torture (aka CAFOS) and unnatural weather as unavoidable concomitants of modern living. (Crist 2012 p. 149)

It is also likely that rather than the apocalyptic planetary collapse in which humans suffer the greatest brunt of their own short-sightedness, a new ‘civilisation’ might be ‘developed’. This ‘sustainable’ society might indeed be ‘established upon a thoroughly denatured planet’:

What is deeply repugnant about such a civilization is not its potential for self-annihilation, but its totalitarian conversion of the natural world into a domain of resources to serve a human supremacist way of life, and the consequent destruction of all the intrinsic wealth of its natural places, beings, and elements. (Crist 2012 p. 149)

Indeed, many species that go extinct do so without so much as a sigh from human beings as their survival was NOT contingent upon human welfare. In this sense, moral ecocentrism is *necessary* if the interests of nonhumans are to be protected outside of utilitarian interests (Shoreman-Ouimet & Kopnina 2016). Thus, in order to achieve sustainability, an invocation of ethical duty toward environment is required.

While the worthy aim of social equality and economic equity of course needs to be supported, a more radical re-orientation of practical priorities and a more inclusive ethical concern for environment may lead to ways forward. Loaded ethical questions need to be considered first. As the UN (1987) formulates it, ‘threats to the sustainable use of resources come as much from inequalities in people’s access to resources and from the ways in which they use them as from the sheer numbers of people’. If SDG’s propose that the poor need to earn (and logically, consume more), do the rich need to consume less? Indeed, if they have to, this raises a host of other ethical questions.

As it is, conventional sustainability discourse offers no alternative to the present state of poverty and inequality. Historical examples of socialist revolutionaries taking resources away from the overconsuming elites and redistributing them to the less fortunate – as in the case of the Russian revolution (with its disastrous consequences) – are wilfully avoided. The redistribution of wealth between the 99% of less prosperous population, hinted upon by the

members of the Occupy movement, could then guarantee that the total global natural resource pie stays the same (considering that population growth is halted). Yet, no such revolution is likely to occur (and judging from the lessons of the Russian revolution, it might be a good thing that it does not). Thus, consumption in the rich countries is far from abating (in fact, most developed countries' governments attempt to promote economic growth); and poor countries are all too happy to emanate this 'progress' (Hansen & Wethal 2014).

Marginalisation of environmental justice and biospheric egalitarianism

Commonly, environmental justice refers to the developed and developing countries or different social groups within one country's unequal exposure to environmental risks and benefits (Gleeson & Low 1999). In some instances, environmental justice includes ecological justice or biospheric egalitarianism, which refers to justice between human and non-human species (Kopnina 2014). It is the former type of justice that SDG's are mostly concerned with.

Yet, the ethical concern for the lives and health of *all* humans implied by SDGs as the most common-sense moral basis is unprecedented in human history, which, in anthropological terms, exhibits no cultural or historical precedent for this global (at least in rhetoric) all-embracing humanitarianism (Brown 2000). Rather, concern with human lives and welfare has its roots in Enlightenment and Western intellectual elites and can be seen as anomalous in cross-cultural perspective. This individualism tradition coincides with the Christian support of what the Monty Mython, the British comedians' song about the Roman Catholics: 'Every sperm is sacred. Every sperm is great. If a sperm is wasted, God gets quite irate' (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fUspLVStPbk>). What is also historically and culturally anomalous is the apparent disregard for natural systems and elements outside of instrumental utility. Numerous anthropological examples show that while not necessarily inherently ecocentric, traditional societies tended to be essentially closer to nature than members of our industrial society (Black 2010; Strang 2013; Kidner 2014; Shoreman-Kopnina 2016). As the UN states: 'Planet Earth and its ecosystems are our home and that "Mother Earth" is a common expression in a number of countries and regions' (Open Working Group Proposal 2015). Regrettably, this recognition gets all but lost in a document that promotes sustained and inclusive economic growth' which, from the ecological justice point of view, leaves little or nothing of the resources of 'Mother Earth' for present and future generations of millions of non-human species.

In the present formulation of SDGs, the wide-spread concern about the health, welfare, human rights, fighting poverty and preventing disease is accepted as 'noble'. Poverty, remarkably, is often seen not as a symptom of greater ills, such as desire for economic growth, unsustainable methods of production and consumption and

population growth, but as a cause of unsustainability, intimately married to ethics. In a critical perspective, poverty is the SYMPTOM of economic growth imperative and high population growth (Rees 2010; Washington 2015). Having all people lifted out of poverty without fixing or radically changing the system of global industrial capitalist production will mean more consumption and greater crisis of resources (Black 2010; Washington 2015). Just 'solving' poverty by making sure that everybody is 'plugged into' the global economy will only exacerbate present challenges – a deeper and perhaps more radical understanding and ethical analysis is needed. According to more critical sources, the root causes, not symptoms, should be treated. For example, stopping climate change by halting the use of fossil fuels is far more effective in the long term than increasing referring to resilience and adaptation, the terms often used by UNEP and increasingly human-interest NGOs (Rees 2010; Washington 2015). The 15th goal of SDG to 'halt biodiversity loss', among other objectives formulated within the same aim in terms of 'management' and 'sustainable use' (<https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdgsproposal>), becomes all but impossible.

In many instances across the globe, extinction due to habitat loss threatens both 'iconic' species (Fitzgerald 2015) such as elephants, gorillas, pandas, tigers and lions and even to a greater degree the less known species. For example, often overlooked in the shadow of its larger cousin, the tiger, the fishing cat in India is rapidly losing its habitat due to draining and polluting marshland and clearing the mangrove forests it needs for survival. Poachers hunt the cats with relative impunity while local officials seem oblivious to their endangered status (<https://www.rainforest-rescue.org/petitions/1014/india-stop-fishing-cat-poaching-now>). Ajith Kumar of India's National Centre for Biological Sciences (NCBS) warns: 'If killing continues like this, the species would become extinct very soon.' (<http://smallwildcats.com/south-asias-forgotten-wildcat-needs-our-help/>). But even the iconic or so-called flagship species, for which conservationists would appear to more easily win public support and recognition (Verissimo et al. 2014). Biodiversity is diminishing, by some estimates, and it is likely that up to two-thirds of existing terrestrial species may be extinct by the end of this century (Kolbert 2014). For those who are unable to participate in or profit from SDGs, non-human species, it seems that some animals are much more equal than others.

Population and environment

One of the pronounced aims of SDG is to reduce childhood and maternal mortality – which certainly is an admirable aim. Yet, such an aim does not consider the long-term effects of population growth. It is not empirically proven that all countries follow the low mortality – low fertility progression, as demographic transition theory assumes. Indeed, in developing world

improvements in medicine and public health have led to a sharp drop in mortality rates and have accelerated population growth rates to unprecedented levels. But fertility rates remain high; much human potential remains unrealized, and economic development is stalled. Agricultural intensification can go some way towards restoring a balance between food production and population, but there are limits beyond which intensification cannot go. (UN 1987)

The average number of children in Niger is 7 per woman, despite lower mortality rates (<http://kff.org/global-indicator/total-fertility-rate/>).

Nor is it empirically possible to have enough resources to 'feed' all people presently alive on this planet, if everybody was living like an average American (e.g. Bartlett 1994; Rees 2010). Indeed, in UN's (1987) formulation, 'An additional person in an industrial country consumes far more and places far greater pressure on natural resources than an additional person in the Third World'.

The UN (2014b) report takes a somewhat contradictory attitude to population and environment. On the one hand: 'A major driver of the overall increase in raw material extraction and use is population numbers. The world's, and each country's, material use is tightly coupled to the number of inhabitants.' On the other hand:

From another perspective, metabolic rates can be seen as the 'material footprint'... These metabolic rates are more than one order of magnitude different for different countries... While global resource use has increased eightfold during the course of the 20th century... average resource use per capita merely doubled.

Further, it is suggested that resource use and population density may in fact actually be negatively correlated, stating: 'It appears that densely populated areas and regions, for the same standard of living and material comfort, need fewer resources per capita [than less densely populated areas]' (UNEP 2014a). While outside of SDGs, the UN has warned that world population reached a stage where the amount of resources needed to sustain it exceeds what is available, in the case of SDGs, UN seems to exhibit a case of cognitive dissonance.

Some academic observers have argued that population displaces attention from systemic issues within the political economy of development, namely, the futility of pursuing sustainable development within the context of a neoliberal capitalism that characteristically exacerbates both economic inequality and environmental degradation (Fletcher et al. 2014). This is, however, only partially true. Indeed, neoliberal capitalism and sustainable development, as currently conceived, does little to address the inequalities. What complicates the matter is that population question is inextricably intertwined with a number of very sensitive political and ideological concerns, as well as ethics. According to Smail (2003, p. 297), chief among these are:

matters pertaining to the enhancement of gender equity; the educational, economic and political empowerment of

women; ongoing controversies surrounding family planning, birth control and abortion; problems of development and modernisation; differential access to resources and/or inequities in their distribution; various forms of pollution and environmental degradation; the implementation of effective public health measures to counteract the consequences of endemic poverty, malnutrition and infectious disease; the apparent growth of nationalism, ethnic/religious tensions and more virulent forms of terrorism; sporadic (military) attempts to expand or redefine national borders; and various problems emanating from increased levels of transnational migration... and the growing number of political/environmental refugees.

What is essential though, as Smail continues, is that short-term means not be confused with longer-term ends: 'Put another way, the human species must be very careful not to lose sight of the overarching and exploding demographic "forest" in the midst of legitimate and deeply felt concerns about particular political/ ideological "trees".' (Smail 2003, p. 297).

This complexity certainly explains some of the difficulty in addressing the population issue. Yet, denying that population growth is one of the major drivers of unsustainability is also one-sided. After all, unless one assumes that the poor do not have a 'right' to escape poverty, and do not migrate, their carbon footprint is negligible. But this is obviously not the ideal of equality and freedom that the critics of overpopulation-as-a-problem profess. Since all human beings on this earth have a right to a decent living, and since – at present – no sustainable system of production and consumption is devised, having over 8 billion people on earth is not going to help long-term survival and welfare of future generations (Wijkman and Rockström 2012). It can, however, serve economic interests – the greater population, the bigger markets (thus possibility of expansion away from the already saturated 'rich' countries), the bigger, once again, economic growth (Blowfield 2013). In a similar way, there is possibly a not so well-hidden agenda driving the 'fight against inequality' – and it is all but altruism altruism. As UN (2015) states, inequality can be a barrier for 'sustained economic growth' (including international trade, international financial system and external debt sustainability), infrastructure development and industrialisation.

Sustainable growth or sustaining growth?

Biodiversity crises and extinction is not included in these objectives other than through the concept of services or resources, as most of the SDG goals are about 'sustainable growth'. Since sustaining (keeping constant) something dynamic (such as growth) is a contradiction in terms and indeed a cause of most unsustainability challenges (Bartlett 1994; Washington 2015), sustaining unsustainability (Blüdhorn 2007) at the cost of nature becomes a norm. As Paul Ekins (1991) has noted, a *sustainable* 'consumer society' is an oxymoron and certainly not something that can be sustained in the long term. While the countries of the global North or West are still driving

global environmental degradation, particularly if measured in per capita terms or from a consumption perspective, yet the developing countries' economies are swiftly catching up (Rees 2010; Hansen and Wethal 2014). The aspiring 'emerging economies' do not seem to be fostering alternative environmentally benign development paths. Following outwardly admirable SDG's objectives, growth strategies pursued in developing countries do in fact allow – and stimulate – economic growth taking the driver's seat, with the 'catch-up' with the rich countries being the overriding goal (Hansen and Wethal 2014).

SDGs also promote 'sustainable industrialisation' and 'sustainable use of land'. Sustainable USE is again a highly anthropocentric term. As critical observers have reflected, unless fundamental issues conserving production and consumption, as well as population growth are addressed, the practice is likely to be ABUSE of ecosystems (Crist 2012; Cafaro & Primack 2014). Besides, USING anything without giving back is ethically problematic – at least as it has been presently framed in the 'enlightened' academic and politically correct public discourse (e.g. using slaves, using women, etc.).

One common ground between those concerned with social inequality and the rights of nonhuman species can be the 'critique of instrumentalism and relation between the domination of humans over animals —as an integral part of the domination of nature in general— and the domination of humans over one another' (Best 2006). According to Crist and Kopnina (2014), historical conquests and displacements of *human* others – indigenous and less powerful peoples deemed beneath 'humanity proper' – are a straightforward extension of anthropocentric logic. Categories of 'savage' have precisely functioned to excise certain groups from humanity and lump them into the sphere of otherness toward which violence and domination can be exercised (Crist & Kopnina 2014). In a similar way, the word 'underdeveloped' or 'developing' so prominent in SDGs may be seen to imply that the poor, vulnerable, marginal people – and in fact entire nations – need to emanate the higher stages of development exemplified by the superior nations (Black 2010). In arguing that we should not speak of 'anthropocentrism' but of 'industriocentrism', David Kidner (2014) maintains that the current status quo is the enemy of both human and environmental interests. The industrialist neoliberalism destroys cultural as well as biological diversity as well as freedom of thought (Kidner 2014). An alternative way of looking at the 'developed' industrial nations and – a generalised – 'traditional' society is that the former could actually learn from the latter the ways of sustainable living perpetuated throughout generations before the industrial revolution, and variable ways of respecting and living in relative harmony with nature.

The ways forward: recommendations

A number of recommendations – that are by no means new but need to be highlighted in relation to critique of

SDG above and to be able to address both human and non-human victims of unsustainability – can be drawn. First, in terms of production and consumption, what is needed is a radical re-orientation of human industry away from those systems that support 'sustaining unsustainability' (Blüdhorn 2007). This includes attempts to employ eco-efficiency, adaptation and resilience thinking or other conventional measures that simply put delay the inevitable crisis without addressing – and completely eliminating – the root causes of unsustainability. This orientation calls for adherence to the truly transformative frameworks, such as Cradle to Cradle (McDonough & Braungart 2002) and circular economy (Ellen MacArthur Foundation 2015). These frameworks promise to reach beyond conventional sustainability which basically makes a bad system last longer – but to design human industries in a way that 'replenishes, restores and nourishes the rest of the world'. The distinction between 'restoration' in a sense of striving for 'good growth' (as in the case of natural growth of trees) is very different from economic growth (McDonough & Braungart 2002) and the essentially taken but not give back system that is implicit in the currently formulated SDGs.

Second, population growth needs to be addressed. Indeed, there is ample evidence that the key factor in lowering population is that it results in higher rates of education and women's empowerment (Weeden & Palomba 2012; Weisman 2013). Yet, if population growth continued to be seen as a 'good thing' as far as business and economic growth is concerned (e.g. Blowfield 2013), and as long as the UN and other international organisations seem to be internally conflicted about the issue, not much progress can be expected. The insistence of UN (1987) that 'all should keep in mind that sustainable economic growth and equitable access to resources are two of the more certain routes towards lower fertility rates' without considering how economic growth has already undermined planetary capacity to sustain even current population seems very short-sighted. The signalling out of inequality as a root cause of sustainability challenges is equally short-sighted when the way of production and consumption and the total number of humans are left the same. In the words of Smail (2003:295) as an essential first step to address the population, we need to establish a difficult but very necessary balance between individual reproductive rights and collective reproductive responsibilities. That is, all of the world's peoples must come fully to terms with the fact that a person's (biological) *right* to have children must now be reconciled with his or her (social) *responsibility* not to have too many. Put differently, hard-won gains in any of the areas of humanitarian concern professed by SDGs, as well as advances in sustainability such as enhanced efficiencies in production and energy use, 'would almost certainly be overwhelmed by continuing and uncontrolled numerical growth' (Smail 2003, p. 297).

Third, ethical consideration needs to be extended beyond human interests and embrace ecological justice.

Just as in the case of social liberation movements, while equality between blacks and whites or men and women was unimaginable in the past – and practically unspoken of other than by rare revolutionaries – the idea of animal liberation, ecological justice and biospheric egalitarianism still needs to take root in the public mind. Obviously, consideration of these perspectives will not be easy, since, as in the case of animal liberation movement, it challenges the anthropocentric, speciesist and humanist dogmas that are so deeply entrenched in socialist and anarchist thinking and traditions, so that supporters of other social equality movements are more likely to mock than engage it (Best 2006). While ‘emancipation from the determining power of anthropocentrism cannot come without a wide-spread rebellion that radically challenges human supremacy thinking’ (Kahn 2010), we need is a ‘radical reconfiguration of who is able to have a voice and of what is expressible in public discourse around “sustainability” ...’ (McKenzie et al. 2015 p. 333). What is thus needed is the new set of ethical imperatives that similar to those ethical imperatives that are now considered to be common-sense (at least in the western world) would include environment – and particularly non-human species – into the moral sphere.

These three recommendations are a far cry from what is currently conceived by SDGs.

The reason why the author believes that the ethical approach is productive and realistic has to do with the empirical observation that presently (Western) citizens concern themselves with moral issues that they were historically much less concerned about, at least on the global scale – such as combatting poverty, secrecy of (all!) human lives, social equality, etc. If one is to assume that such concerns are a result of humanity (or at last of the ‘enlightened’ part of humanity) reaching a certain moral pinnacle (e.g. position of moral non-consequentialism), then there is hope that such altruistic concerns for the humans may evolve into a higher stage of moral development – that is, concern for non-humans. If, on the other hand, we are to assume that human morality is culturally relative and historically specific, there is hope that a new type of morality – biospheric altruism – can be ‘learned’, the way social altruism has been.

The author also believes that the revision of current ethical underpinning is necessary as it currently favours purely anthropocentric perspective insufficient for addressing grave environmental challenges. Engaging with the generalised ‘environment’ not as a ‘service’ or a ‘resource’ but as a collection of living beings is necessary. Simply put, without consideration of environment as anything more than a feedlot of one single species, no legal and strong protection can be expected. Without realising the gravity of environmental predicament, The UN appears to be nothing more than a ‘useful talking shop, but it does not get much done’ (The Economist 2009).

The SDGs need to be critically examined for logic (to eliminate internal contradictions of purpose), motives (who or what profits from proposed policies and who is

victimised by them), relevance (particularly in the world where environmental sustainability is gravely threatened). If ‘People are at the centre of sustainable development’ (Open Working Group 2015), and simultaneously it is the economic growth that is seen as a panacea for social inequalities, and planet is seen as a secondary value, this anthropocentric vision threatens to destroy the very foundations upon which humanity depends. The true victim of unsustainability is the Planet, including – but not limited to – all its people.

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