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The Sustainable Development Goals: Promoting Education for Utility or Transformation?

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UTILITY OR TRANSFORMATION?

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ABSTRACT

This paper uses the analytical approach of critical discourse analysis (CDA) to examine the dominant discourse(s) surrounding sustainable development and education that the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) espouse. Focusing on SDG 4, which aims to "to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education for all and promote lifelong learning," I analyze the extent to which SDG 4 promotes a utilitarian and/or transformative approach to education, and what the implications of such approaches are on achieving sustainable development. I use the official United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development policy document as the basis for my analysis, as well as previous global education policies, academic articles, and books on discourse analysis and education policy to build my argument. My findings show that despite transformative language used throughout the Agenda, the SDGs primarily espouse a pro-growth model of development and a utilitarian approach to education. I conclude that for SDG 4 to truly contribute to sustainable development, there needs to be a shift in the dominant educational discourse such that issues of social and environmental justice are placed at the heart of educational priorities, and that the notion of 'quality' education be challenged and expanded to encompass more than a focus on economic outcomes.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

I.   Introduction

Launched in 2015, the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development or Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) - the new Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) - offer an ambitious vision for achieving "sustainable development." The SDGs aim to eradicate global poverty, fight inequalities and tackle climate change through the multipronged approach of achieving 17 integrated goals covering social, economic, and ecological issues the world faces today. Through its very construction, the SDGs, similar to any other policy, convey *dominant discourse(s)* or ways of framing and defining the notion of "sustainable development," and in doing so, likely ignore marginalized discourses, which can be problematic when assessing who truly benefits from this development agenda.

In this paper, I will present a critical discourse analysis of the Sustainable Development Goals, with specific emphasis on Goal 4, which focuses on quality education. SDG 4 aims "to ensure inclusive and quality education for all and promote lifelong learning", and has 10 associated targets to be achieved by 2030. The purpose of conducting a critical policy discourse analysis of the SDGs is to understand the dominant discourse(s) that this set of goals espouse and to identify the discourses that have been silenced from the SDG framework. By conducting a critical discourse analysis, I aim to understand the approach to improving access to quality education SDG 4 promotes. Furthermore, I will explore the possible implications of this approach in terms of achieving "sustainable development", specifically within the broader context of neoliberalism and globalization. The central research questions I aim to answer are: "What dominant

discourse(s) do the Sustainable Development Goals Agenda 2030, and specifically the

Sustainable Development Goal 4, espouse? To what extent are the SDGs consistent with

the currently dominant neoliberal capitalist development model?"

This year, 2016, marks the first year of the implementation of the Sustainable

Development Goals. Over the next 15 years, countries across the globe will be actively

involved in achieving the 17 goals and 169 targets outlined in the SDG framework. Unlike

the Millennium Development Goals which were only directed at developing countries, the

SDGs are universal and therefore apply to all countries. Given their sheer breadth and

influence, the SDGs will play a crucial role in informing and directing the development

agendas and programs that countries across the world implement over the next 15 years.

For this reason, it is important to be cognizant of the dominant development values that the

SDGs promote. By prescribing a certain path to achieving "sustainable development," the

SDGs likely privilege some interests over others, and may favor certain development

ideologies over others. It is imperative to understand the context within which the SDGs

have been created, whose interests the SDGs are truly serving, and how the SDGs may

affect sustainable development initiatives being undertaken around the world.

As this paper centers on Sustainable Development Goal 4, I will first explore the

importance of focusing on education within the context of neoliberalism and globalization,

and will outline the two current dominant approaches to education – the utilitarian

perspective and the transformative perspective. I will then introduce the analytical

approach I will be using, which is Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Following this, I

will delve into a brief overview of the major global education policies of the last 20 years,

which will lead into my critical discourse analysis of the Sustainable Development Goals, and specifically, SDG 4.

II.   Why focus on Education?

Over the last two decades, education has increasingly become recognized as key to achieving economic development and social mobility. In the era of globalization and the emergence of neoliberal economics, countries now participate, willingly or unwillingly, in an increasingly competitive global economy, where *knowledge* is considered key to successful participation. Gibson-Graham (2006) defines globalization as:

> A set of processes by which the world is rapidly being integrated into one economic space via increased international trade, the internationalization of production and financial markets, and the internationalization of a commodity culture promoted by an increasingly networked global telecommunications system (p.121).

While there are several dimensions of globalization, in the economic sense, it is defined by practices favoring privatization, fiscal austerity, deregulation, free trade, and reductions in government spending; these practices are encapsulated in the economic system of 'neoliberalism.' More succinctly, Harvey (2005) defines neoliberalism as "a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedom and skills within an institutional framework characterized by property rights, free markets and free trade" (p.2). Within this ideology, Büscher et al. (2012) argue, social and ecological affairs are subjected to capitalist market dynamics (p.5).

Globalization and neoliberalism have drastically changed the way knowledge and education are perceived and valued. In a globalized world, technology drives efficiency and economic growth and "knowledge assumes a powerful role in production, making its possession essential for nations if they are successfully to pursue economic growth and competitiveness" (Stromquist and Monkman, 2000, p.7). Knowledge today is viewed as a form of capital that is determined and produced by those in power. Education, or "the formal process of instruction, based on the theory of teaching, to impart formal knowledge to one or more students" serves to disseminate and reinforce what constitutes as knowledge (UNESCO). The neoliberal approach to education recognizes education as a means of accumulating human capital to increase economic growth, labor productivity and technological skills for the labor market. Additionally, this view also perceives education as possessing private benefits and therefore ought to be subject to standard principles of economics such as competition. This conception of knowledge as capital is often referred to as the "knowledge-based economy" – a term that OECD defines as an economy that is "directly based on the production, distribution, and use of knowledge and information" (OECD, p. 7). Within such an economy, knowledge is embodied in human beings (as human capital) and in technology, both of which are central to generating economic growth. A neoliberal conception of knowledge, then, perceives education systems as designed to provide children and youth with the skills necessary to function within a knowledge-based economy.

The implications of globalization and the "knowledge-based economy" on education systems have been significant. According to Stromquist and Monkman (2000),

the increasing importance of the global market has had a number of repercussions on formal schooling, such as "an increased focus on efficiency and productivity; a shift from child-centered curriculum to work preparation skills; the transformation of education from a public good to a marketable commodity; and the decreasing autonomy and independence of teachers to the hands of administrators" (p.9). Other characteristics of education systems within a globalized and neoliberal system include the standardization of curricula, the use of standardized high-stakes testing, and the prioritization of STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) disciplines over humanities and social sciences. These characteristics all fall under a primarily employment-oriented focus of education - often termed as a 'utilitarian approach' to education.

A utilitarian perspective "portrays education as a social investment designed to ensure that succeeding generations are able to assume their place as productive citizens within an established socio-economic order" (Maclure et al., p. 367). Such an approach is not a recent phenomenon – in fact, in the 1950s and 1960s, development and education initiatives existed within the framework of 'human capital theory', which "rested on the assumption that formal education is highly instrumental and even necessary to improve the production capacity of a population" (Fägerlind and Saha, p. 47). Human capital theorists claim that for any economic growth and development to occur, two requirements are necessary; firstly, the improvement and greater efficiency of technology, because higher technology results in greater production; and secondly, the utilization of human resources in the employment of technology. The human capital approach is also based on certain assumptions, articulated by Rizvi and Lingard (2009) below:

The human capital theory considers all human behavior to be based on the economic self-interest of individuals operating within free competitive markets. It assumes that individuals are equally free to choose. It also assumes economic growth and competitive advantage to be a direct outcome of the levels of investment in developing human capital. It suggests that in a global economy, performance is increasingly linked to people's knowledge stock, skills level, learning capabilities and cultural adaptability (p.80).

Evidently, the human capital and utilitarian approaches to education are very similar, in that both assume that investment in human capital directly results in economic growth, and therefore development. Both approaches disregard, or place less importance on other values and outcomes of education.

These approaches to education contrast starkly against a *transformative* approach to education, which "conceives the main purpose of education as addressing the inequalities and injustices that are embedded in the larger society. A transformative approach views education as a force for liberation, encouraging learners to regard the world critically and to acquire skills and aptitudes necessary for generating fundamental change" (Maclure et al., 2009, p. 367). According to Maclure et al. (2009), these two contrasting perspectives – despite being strikingly divergent – have for many years been intertwined in educational plans and programs in developing countries. They argue, however, that this reconciliation of two radically different approaches almost never leads to an upset of the established bureaucratic structures of national school systems. Rather, the incorporation of transformative education rhetoric in educational policies only serves to "depoliticize the concept of educational change," as policymakers continue to ensure that "the transformative perspective is consistently rendered subservient to the utilitarian view of education" (Maclure et al., 2009, p. 369). The difference between education policy today

and education policy in the 1950s-60s, which was explicitly based on human capital theory, is that the focus of education policy today struggles between these two drastically differing perspectives, often portraying itself as in alignment with the ideals of transformative education, yet inherently utilitarian in practice.

My intention behind focusing on SDG 4, *Quality Education*, is to more closely examine the ways in which, if at all, this goal grapples with utilitarian and transformative perspectives of education. I am interested in seeing if one of these two approaches dominates SDG 4, how this approach has been framed, and what the implications of such an approach are on achieving 'sustainable development', particularly in developing countries. By performing a critical discourse analysis, I will be able to identify the dominant discourses and approaches to education present in the SDG framework, and examine the ways in which particular discourses are subverted.

III.   Analytical Approach: Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is "a type of discourse analytical research that primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context" (Van Dijk, p. 352). The underlying philosophy of CDA is that language is a form of social practice that establishes and reinforces societal power relations. Based on this assumption, CDA denies the possibility of a neutral and rationalist view of the world, instead viewing the use of language as highly political. If *language* is the medium through which hidden power

relations are constructed and reinforced, *discourse* refers to the specific way in which language is used, in combination with thought and action. According to Gee (1990), discourse is "a socially accepted association among ways of using language, of thinking, and of acting that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group or a social network" (p.1). By virtue of belonging to a certain group, discourses are highly constructed, as expressed by Stuart Hall (1992) below:

> A discourse is a group of statements which provide a language for talking about – i.e. a way of representing – a particular kind of knowledge about a topic. When statements about a topic are made within a particular discourse, the discourse makes it possible to construct the topic in a certain way. It also limits the other ways in which the topic can be constructed (Hall, 1992, p. 201).

A Foucauldian conception of discourse is rooted in the belief that power constructs knowledge. Dominant ideas, concepts, and facts, therefore, are shaped and disseminated by those in power, and reinforced by dominant structures. By legitimating and normalizing these ideologies, dominant structures obscure the relationship between power and ideology, and ultimately maintain power hierarchies.

The notion of 'critical' in CDA is derived from the Frankfurt School and Jürgen Habermas. Critical theory, from the perspective of the Frankfurt School, claims that social theory should be oriented towards critiquing and changing society as a whole, in contrast to traditional theory which is oriented solely towards understanding or explaining society. This understanding of critical theory is based on the beliefs that critical theory "should be directed at the totality of society in its historical specificity," and that it should improve the understanding of society by taking an integrative approach to analysis (Wodak and Meyer, 2009, p.6).

In practice, CDA includes a detailed textual analysis at the level of the policy text while also situating the analysis within broader economic and political contexts and institutions (Luke, 1997). The aim of CDA, is "to systematically explore the often opaque relationships of causality and determination between a) discursive practices, events and texts, and b) the wider social and cultural structures, relations and processes" (Fairclough, 1995, p.135). By examining these relationships, CDA "investigates how such practices, events and texts arise out of and are ideologically shaped by relations of power and struggles over power, and examines how the opacity of these relationships between discourse and society is itself a factor securing power and hegemony" (Fairclough, 1995, p.132-33).

Using this dual approach to understanding policy discourse allows one to recognize similarities and discrepancies between what policies are advocating on a textual level and how they function within the larger economic and political context. Rizvi and Lingard (2009), for example, argue that education policy today is fundamentally linked to the dominant discourse of social efficiency (utilitarian perspective), which is a product of the dominant neoliberal ideology. This approach "requires education to play an important role in developing workers able to contribute to the economic productivity of nations and corporations. Its focus is not as much on the needs and development of individuals as on the efficiency with which educational systems operate" (p.78). Within this model of education "emphasis is on the system's capacity to make an adequate return on investment, assessed in terms of its contribution to producing workers with knowledge, skills and attitudes relevant to increasing productivity within the knowledge economy" (p.78). Using

this analysis, education policy has been constructed with the underlying ideology of education as a means of participating in the 'knowledge-based economy' and contributing to economic growth, thereby satisfying the broader neoliberal agenda.

The purpose of a critical discourse analysis is to understand "how discourses emerge, and how they become hegemonic and recontextualized, and finally, how they become operationalized" (Simons et al., 2009, p. 62). Rizvi and Lingard (2009) articulate that in order to analyze policy, one must understand policy as not merely a specific policy document or text, but as both a process and a product; it "involves the production of the text, the text itself, ongoing modifications to the text, and processes of implementation into practice." (Rizvi and Lingard, 2009, p. 5) In this paper, I will analyze the following policy texts: Transforming Our World - 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which will be the focus of the analysis, as well as previous global education policies such as the Education for All (EFA), The Earth Summit Agenda 21 (Chapter 36); and the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development. I also base my analysis on academic articles and books on discourse analysis and education policy.

IV.   The Context of Policy Making: Production and Meaning

When examining the production of the text, it is imperative to be aware of the power dynamics associated with policy formation and implementation – to be cognizant of whose voices are heard and unheard during the policy planning and implementation processes. Policymaking is inextricably linked to power, and is, fundamentally, a political process. Policies are inherently value-laden. "Values pervade policy processes and policy

content" and these values invariably privilege the interests of the policymakers, or those in power – over the policies' so-called intended beneficiaries (Rizvi and Lingard, 2009, p.16). David Easton encapsulates the interrelationship between policies and power, defining policy as the "authoritative allocation of values", drawing attention to "the centrality of power and control in the concept of policy, and forcing us to question not only whose values are represented in policy but how these values become institutionalized" (Simons et al., 2009, p.21). Easton argues that policies articulate and presuppose certain values that are legitimated by an authority, such as the government or international bodies such as the World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF), or the United Nations (UN):

> The essence of policy lies in the fact that through it certain things are denied to some people and made accessible to others. A policy, in other words, whether for a society, for a narrow association, or for any other group, consists of a web of decisions that allocates values (Easton, 1953, p.129-130).

Within the past two decades, these decisions that allocate values through policy, are increasingly taking place outside of the nation state. While traditionally, the values reflected in policies articulated national interests, more recently, "global considerations are entering the articulation of values as never before" (Rizvi and Lingard, 2009, 16). In the context of education, "the values that national systems of education now promote through policy are no longer determined wholly by policy actions within the nation-state, but are forged through a range of complex processes that occur in the transnational and globalized work spaces" (Rizvi and Lingard, 2009, p.22).

With globalization and the emergence of global multilateral institutions like the United Nations, the World Bank, the IMF, and OECD along with *epistemic communities[1]*- national governments hold increasingly less power when it comes to education policy and program design. Today, "national systems of education are embedded in a framework of global power relations…Nation states are located within a complex web of ideas, networks of influence, policy frameworks, financial arrangements, and organizational structures" that collectively, can be termed "the global architecture of education" (Jones, 2006, p.43). Within this system, global power relations exert an enormous amount of influence on how education is constructed at the local context.

'Authority' within this transnational system is not limited to a certain entity or fixed epicenter; rather, "transnational and pluralist patterns of engagement are rooted in diverse foundations of global legitimacy, power, and influence" as opposed to the sovereign authority of independent states (Jones, 2006, 48). When thinking about global education policy, such as SDG 4, then, it is important to consider the role of individual nations and the amount of autonomy they truly have within this system. Referring to Antonio Gramsci's *hegemony*, which demonstrated "how ideas held consensually could replace coercive force as an instrument of social order", Jones (2006) argues international agencies have been able to extend their reach through the 'consensual' acceptance of ideas that underpinned them, a socially constructed consensus" (Jones, 2006, p.48). In other words, the ubiquitous power of transnational organizations existing within transnational

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[1] Transnational networks of like-minded actors linked together through a convergence of interest, outlook and technique (Jones, 48).

networks and systems has allowed certain ideas to become dominant, through a process of so-called 'consensus.'

Dominant 'consensual' ideas inform policy, which in turn, contribute to the homogenization of education, or as Boli, Meyer, and Ramirez (2000) term the "world institutionalization of education." This term is rooted in the belief that "interests and motivations in educational theory, policy, and practice intersect with and are driven by powerful global constructions of educational values and techniques. Despite the persistence of local uniqueness, education around the world is seen to become increasingly standardized" (Jones, 2006, p.49). Education policy plays a central role in establishing and reinforcing educational values and techniques, which in turn, influence the kind of education initiatives countries choose to undertake.

Since SDG 4 is the latest global initiative to address educational access, quality, and outcomes, it is imperative to understand the global power asymmetries that have come into play in the creation of the SDGs. In performing a critical discourse analysis of the SDGs, and specifically SDG 4, I will be able to understand the dominant global discourses present in the policy framework, how these discourses arose, and how they may influence sustainable development practices being undertaken over the next 15 years.

V.   **Major Education Policies**

In order to understand the ideology behind the Sustainable Development Goals, it is imperative to first explore the education policies and initiatives that preceded it, and to recognize the ways in which they are similar to and different from the SDGs. While universal policies focusing on the rights of children were introduced as early as 1924, with The Declaration of the Rights of the Child, the last two decades have witnessed a surge of global education policies, beginning with the Education for All (EFA) initiative in 1990.

The World Declaration on Education for All (EFA) was adopted during the World Conference on Education for All in Jomtien, Thailand in 1990, following a period of economic crisis and structural adjustment in the 1980s. During this period, governments were compelled to either reduce or cap their expenditures on education, leading to a decline in educational access and quality. The World Conference on EFA, then, was an opportunity for world leaders to gather together to map out the future of education and development initiatives. The goals of EFA included achieving universal access to learning; a focus on equity; emphasis on learning outcomes; broadening the means and the scope of basic education; enhancing the environment for learning; and strengthening partnerships by 2000 (UNESCO, 1990). Of particular importance was EFA's emphasis on improving educational access for women and girls, and to underserved populations. EFA adopted both a utilitarian and transformative approach to education – "with its focus on [both] human capital development and wealth creation, as well as its orientation towards social justice and the well-being of traditionally marginalized and disadvantaged populations" (Maclure et al., 2009,p. 403). With that said, the transformative aspect of the EFA policy

discourse was largely overlooked by governments, for a number of reasons including "political conservatism, resource scarcity, and the dependence of poor and often highly indebted countries on international lending agencies espousing principles of neoliberalism and market-oriented development policies" (Maclure et al., 2006, p. 404). Ultimately, despite attempts to at least appear "transformative" the EFA was highly utilitarian in practice.

While the EFA did produce some positive outcomes, most of these goals were not achieved, leading to the implementation of a range of other global education initiatives over the next two decades. The results and impact of the EFA were assessed at the World Education Forum in Dakar, Senegal 2000, during which a new framework – the Dakar Framework for Action on Education for All, was adopted by 164 governments. Together, they pledged to achieve six goals that were largely similar to those presented by the EFA; for example, the Dakar Framework also stressed the importance of educating girls, children in difficult circumstances, and those belonging to ethnic minorities. Through its emphasis on ideas of "education as a 'fundamental human right' and as a key to 'poverty elimination', 'peace and stability', and the inherent capacity of learners to transform societies", the Dakar Framework also presented, at least at face value, a largely transformative approach to education (UNESCO, 2000).

The same year that the Dakar Framework was launched, the Millennium Development Goal 2 was also introduced. Goal 2 of the MDGs aimed to ensure that by 2015, children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling. Considerable efforts were made by governments to expand primary

education enrolment worldwide; specific statistics reported by UNDP (2015) indicate that

the primary school net enrolment rates in developing regions reached an estimated 91% in

2015, up from 83% in 2000. With that being said, many critics questioned the quality of

education children were receiving and the values education systems worldwide were

imparting.

All three of these initiatives –Education for All (1990), the Dakar Framework

(2000), and the Millennium Development Goals (2000) – "maintained the ideal of

education for transformation as a common inspirational threshold." (Maclure et al., 2009,

406) However, none were successful in truly transforming education systems and in

instigating social justice and social change. All three policies adopted the idea of education

as a basis of social transformation, yet failed to address the intricacies of reversing rigid

processes and structures of formal schooling. These policies' preoccupation with meeting

predetermined quantitative "goals" and "targets" also hindered their ability to effectively

take a transformative approach to education reform, as summarized by Maclure et al.

(2009):

> The international emphasis on targets and goals such as enrolment levels and
> completion rates is itself symptomatic of a utilitarian preoccupation with
> *quantification* rather than with *educational quality* and *relevance to local
> context*…The strict adherence to the MDGs and the EFA agenda is akin to relying
> on internationally standardized 'templates' or 'blueprints' that are essentially
> utilitarian in their focus and ignore the complexities of history and culture (Maclure
> et al., 2009, p. 407).

Irrespective of the transformative language used in these policies, that reflect the greater

goals of education such as poverty elimination and peace building, all three initiatives –

through their very structure and language - were essentially utilitarian in nature.

In more recent years, there has been a shift in education policy from focusing on access to education to promoting 'education for sustainable development', in alignment with the broader sustainable development discourse that drives the current development agenda. The UN defines sustainable development as:

> Meeting the needs of the present without compromising future generations. Sustainable development is a vision of development that encompasses respect for all life—human and non-human—and natural resources, as well as integrating concerns such as poverty reduction, gender equality, human rights, education for all, health, human security and intercultural dialogue (UNESCO).

> Education for sustainable development (ESD):

> Aims to help people develop the attitudes, skills, perspectives and knowledge to make informed decisions and act upon them for the benefit of themselves and others, now and in the future. ESD helps the citizens of the world to learn their way to a more sustainable future" (UNESCO).

Sustainable development first became a universal priority in 1987, when the World Commission on Environment and Development published "Our Common Future" or the Brundtland Report, in which they proposed a new model of development, one that "sustains and expands the environmental resource base" (WCED, 1987, p. 1) This was followed by the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, where *education* as a key component of sustainable development was first recognized. Under chapter 36 of Agenda 21, education is referred to as "critical for promoting sustainable development and improving the capacity of people to address environment and development issues" (p. 2). The notion of sustainable development was reaffirmed in the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005-2014), which aimed to "integrate the principles, values and practices of sustainable development into all aspects of education and learning, in

order to address the social, economic, cultural and environmental issues we face in the 21ˢᵗ century" (UNESCO). These ideals have since been reiterated in The World Conference on Education for Sustainable Development (2014) and in The Future We Want (2012) declaration, in [the latter of] which member states reaffirmed their commitments to the right to universal access to primary education, but also stressed the importance of improving:

> The capacity of our education systems to prepare people to pursue sustainable development, including through enhanced teacher training, the development of sustainability curricula, the development of training programs that prepare students for careers in fields related to sustainability, and more effective use of information and communications technologies to enhance learning outcomes (The Future We Want, 2012, pp. 229-235).

By "preparing people to pursue sustainable development" global education and development initiatives portray a new vision for the future that incorporates a holistic approach to understanding social, ecological, and economic issues. This is the approach to development that the Sustainable Development Goals espouse. Yet beyond the jargon and the rosy ideals of transformative education and social change that current development initiatives portray, it is imperative to question the extent to which these Goals truly are achieving 'sustainable development' and whether or not sustainable development is even possible within a neoliberal system. Keeping transformative and utilitarian views of education policy in mind, I will now explore the development discourse(s) present in the Sustainable Development Goals Framework, and particularly in SDG 4, by conducting a critical discourse analysis.

VI.   The Sustainable Development Goals

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) or the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable

Development are a set of 17 goals that build on the original 8 Millennium Development

Goals (MDGs) which were committed to achieving by 2015. The SDGs were launched to

meet the unmet targets of the MDGs, while also adopting a broader sustainability agenda

that covers a wider range of social, environmental, and economic issues. Both the MDGs

and SDGs are United Nations initiatives, with the United Nations Development Program

(UNDP) leading these sets of goals. Unlike the MDGs, which were explicitly crafted by

the West and directed toward developing countries, the SDGs are universal and apply to all

countries. Moreover, the SDGs adopt a more holistic and integrated approach to

development, recognizing the interconnections between different areas of development,

and the importance of supporting progress across the multiple goals to achieve 'sustainable

development.'

<u>Power and the Production of the SDGs</u>

A fundamental difference between the SDGs and the MDGs is the adoption of a

more 'participatory' approach to policy design. One of the policies that preceded the SDGs

was *The Future We Want*, a declaration that specified the need for greater inclusion of civil

society and marginalized populations universally in the creation of global development

policies. In response, the UN produced *A Million Voices*, a document that reflected the

voices of governments, think tanks, NGOs, civil society, and academics who offered their

input concerning the post-2015 development framework. Additionally, the UN also

launched the *My World Survey* which allowed individuals across the globe to vote online

for the top six issues they wished to see in the SDGs. These more participatory initiatives contrast starkly against the policy formulation process for the MDGs, which was left solely in the hands of a small group of UN experts.

The Sustainable Development Goals' participatory emphasis is evident in the very language used in the policy framework. References to *A Million Voices* and the *My World Survey* are clearly made: "The Goals and targets are the result of over two years of intensive public consultation and engagement with civil society and other stakeholders around the world, which paid particular attention to the voices of the poorest and most vulnerable" (United Nations, 2015, pp. 6). Similarly, the Framework's emphasis on working "in a spirit of global solidarity"; "embarking on a collective journey" to ensure that "no one will be left behind"; and adopting a "people-centered approach" also makes clear the SDGs effort to appear participatory and reflective of the needs of all populations, particularly "the poorest and most vulnerable." The SDG framework utilizes unifying rhetoric, stressing the importance of all countries playing their part to "free the human race from the tyranny of poverty and want to heal and secure our planet." Using the word "tyranny" serves to unite countries against a common "enemy" or to achieve a common dream. Likewise, statements like: "Never before have world leaders pledged common action and endeavor across such a broad and universal policy agenda" also present a highly unifying rhetoric, emphasizing the historical significance of this event (United Nations, 2015, pp. 18).

Alternatively, by recognizing "different national realities, capacities and levels of development" and "respecting national policies and priorities" the SDG framework does

not adopt an overtly regulatory stance, choosing instead to respect national policies and priorities that must be considered when implementing the SDGs. The SDG framework emphasizes that each Government will decide how these aspirational goals and targets should be incorporated into national planning processes, policies and strategies, thereby providing governments with a significant amount of agency over the implementation process. On the surface then, by "involving" marginalized voices in the policy formation stages, by using unifying rhetoric, and by recognizing the role of governments in tailoring the SDGs to meet their own national contexts and realities, the SDGs appear highly participatory.

Critics, however, argue that despite attempts at appearing inclusive, the SDG creation process was ultimately led by a small group of experts, similar to the MDGs, and pandered to the interests of a handful of major groups – primarily businesses and industries. According to Ahmed (2015), formals statements issued by 'major groups' involved in the planning process reveal that marginalized groups like indigenous people, civil society, and women "remain deeply concerned by the general direction of the SDG process – whereas corporate interests from the rich, industrialized world have viewed the process favorably." The power that the 'Business and Industry' group exert, Ahmed (2015) argues, is disproportionate to other major groups, with the Global Business Alliance (GBA) – set-up by corporations to represent their mutual commitment to 'market-based solutions' significantly influencing the SDG framework. Ultimately, then, although the SDGs involved a range of stakeholders in the planning process, the power dynamics

between those groups, and the amount of influence they were truly able to exert were unequal.

In conducting a critical discourse analysis, it is imperative to therefore recognize that the very process of producing the SDGs was deeply entrenched in unequal power dynamics. Beyond examining who was responsible for drafting the SDGs, it can be argued that the very language used to write the SDG Framework is exclusionary in its Western, scientific orientation. As seen in the case of previous development agendas, the use of goals, targets, and numbers is a fundamentally Western approach to achieving development, and in many ways is overly simplistic. William Easterly (2015) argues the concept of formulating goals and targets reflects Western obsession with "action plans." It is assumed that having a well-defined "action plan" ensures results, failing to take into consideration other more effective routes to sustainable development.

SDGs and "Sustainable Development"

As seen with the emergence of 'education for sustainable development' initiatives in the 1990s, the notion of 'sustainable development' has come to dominate the current development agenda. Yet the term itself is unclear, allowing people with diverse interests to use it to serve their own agenda.

According to Kumi et al. (2013), for example, the term has been interpreted in several ways, such as: "economic development that is complementary to environment and society; a process of development that emphasizes intergenerational equity; and a process of ensuring environmental services on a very long-term basis" (p. 6). These varying

interpretations have resulted in a lack of consensus regarding the true aims of sustainable development, and the means of achieving these aims. Generally speaking, sustainable development, according to Kumi et al. (2013) is rooted in the belief of "creating a balance among environmental, social, and economic goals" - yet often "presents a simplistic view of the inter-relationships between these components and the broader neoliberal agenda" (p. 6). When framed within the neoliberal agenda, which aims to enhance economic growth and productivity based on the principles of market competition, the notion of 'sustainable development' becomes problematic because a neoliberal system promotes the interests of the market over social and environmental development. The relationships between neoliberal economics and 'sustainable development', is thus, inherently contradictory, and begs the questions - *how sustainable are the SDGs, truly? To what extent do the SDGs function within as opposed to against the neoliberal agenda?*

On a textual level, the Sustainable Development Goal Framework places achieving 'sustainable development' as its focus, calling for "a world free of poverty, hunger and disease,"; "a world of universal respect for human rights and human dignity"; "a world in which humanity lives in harmony with nature" and also "a world where every country enjoys sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth and decent work for all" (United Nations, 2015). The language used showcases the SDGs' commitment to achieving sustainable development through the integrated approach of ensuring social, ecological, and economic sustainability. When examined more closely, however, the goals – particularly those focusing on ecological and economic development are contradictory, and ultimately adhere more toward a pro-growth model of development, despite attempts

at presenting an alternative vision. For example, while *Goal 12: Ensure sustainable production and consumption patterns (SCP)* calls for more efficient use of natural resources and the need to halve global food waste by 2030, none of the other goals explicitly address the need to reduce consumption. The language used to address big businesses in this Goal – "*encourage* companies, especially large and transnational companies, to adopt sustainable practices and to integrate sustainability information into their reporting cycle" – is not particularly forceful, and is perhaps the only attempt made in the Framework to directly address big businesses for their environmentally destructive actions. Similarly, while there is some mentioning of "decoupling economic growth from environmental degradation" in *Goal 8: Inclusive and sustainable economic growth*, the language used, once again, is not forceful enough or clear – rather, the notion of 'decoupling' is merely slipped into target 4 of this Goal. In contrast, target 1 "Sustain per capita economic growth…at least *7 per cent GDP per annum* in least development countries" is more clearly defined.

While their language is compelling, and while certain goals (ex. Goal 12) do attempt an alternate vision of achieving sustainable development, the SDGs do not aim to transform the existing global economy. Escobar's (1995) critique of the entire notion of sustainable development as "placing a premium on economic growth over the environment" effectively articulates the contradiction of developing the SDGs within a neoliberal framework. Escobar writes: "this approach purports that only minor adjustments to the market system are needed to launch an era of environmentally sound development, hiding the fact that the economic framework itself cannot hope to accommodate

environmental considerations." (Escobar, 1995, p197) By not emphasizing reductions in consumption, decoupling, and the actions of big businesses enough, the SDG Framework is built on a faulty construction of 'sustainable development' that simultaneously encourages economic growth and environmental sustainability.

The limitations of this conception of and approach to sustainable development are reflected in Goal 4, which I will elaborate upon in the next section.

VII.   Sustainable Development Goal 4: Sustainable Education?

Sustainable Development Goal 4, which aims to ensure inclusive and equitable education and lifelong learning opportunities for all, is considered a vital goal, given the importance ascribed to education in addressing other areas of development, such as health, gender equality, and economic growth. Earlier in this paper, I wrote about the two dominant approaches to education that education policy presently wrestles with – the utilitarian approach, which views the primary purpose of education as preparing children to work within an established socio-economic order with the ultimate goal of achieving economic growth, and the transformative approach, which views the primary purpose of education as addressing societal inequalities and injustices. In conducting a critical discourse analysis, I aim to see how these approaches are constructed within the SDG Agenda, and whether or not one of these approaches is more dominant than the other.

The Sustainable Development Goal 4 is a direct product of the Incheon Declaration (2015), which was welcomed by over 100 countries, non-governmental organizations and youth groups at the World Education Forum 2015. This Declaration presented a vision for

the future of education that has since been used to inform the ten targets of SDG 4. The title of the Declaration, "Education 2030: Towards inclusive and equitable education and lifelong learning for all" reflects the renewed efforts by the UN and international community at large to ensure that all communities benefit equitably from education and lifelong learning opportunities. This emphasis on "inclusive" and "equitable" access to education is a significant improvement from previous education initiatives such as the EFA and MDGs, which focused more on equal (as opposed to equitable) access to education. The Declaration explicitly recognizes "inclusion and equity in and through education as the cornerstone of a transformative education agenda" (pp. 7).

The Incheon Declaration proclaims: "Our vision is to transform lives through education, recognizing the important role of education as a main driver of development and in achieving other proposed SDGs" (pp. 5). The Declaration emphasizes its "holistic" and "integrated" approach to education, and the cross-cutting role of education in improving other areas of development. In doing so, the Declaration presents a more transformative approach to education, recognizing the numerous positive benefits of education that extend well beyond economic growth. The language used throughout the Declaration presents a highly transformative vision, and is best captured in paragraph 5 below, which describes the proposed SDG 4 ("Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all") as:

> ... Inspired by a humanistic vision of education and development based on human rights and dignity; social justice; inclusion; protection; cultural, linguistic and ethnic diversity; and shared responsibility and accountability. We reaffirm that education is a public good, a fundamental human right and a basis for guaranteeing the realization of other rights. It is essential for peace, tolerance, human fulfilment and sustainable development. We recognize education as key to achieving full

employment and poverty eradication. We will focus our efforts on access, equity and inclusion, quality and learning outcomes, within a lifelong learning approach (UNESCO, 2015, pp. 5)

The language used in this section combines a number of transformative ideas pertaining to the aims of education. By emphasizing a "humanistic vision of education" the Declaration places issues of human rights and social justice, alongside other transformative objectives, at the center of education, and as necessary for "peace, tolerance, human fulfillment, and sustainable development." These ideals take precedence over the economic benefits of education, which only appear toward the end of the paragraph. By recognizing education as a "public good," and a "fundamental human right," the Declaration also makes clear its commitment to ensuring equitable access to education for all. In addition to the social justice/human rights approach to education, the new education agenda that this Declaration proposes also stresses the need for gender equality, quality education, and lifelong learning opportunities.

On a surface level, then, the Incheon Declaration proposes a promising vision for the future of Education. SDG 4 exhibits several of the prominent ideas of the Incheon Declaration. The first two targets of SDG 4, for example, make explicit the need for quality education:

4.1: By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes.

4.2: By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education.

Furthermore, SDG 4 makes considerable mentioning of improving access to equitable

education for marginalized groups such as persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples,

and children in vulnerable situations, as seen below in target 5. Likewise, target 8

recognizes the importance of creating education facilities that are child, disability, and

gender sensitive.

> 4.5: By 2030, eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and children in vulnerable situations.
> 4.8: Build and upgrade education facilities that are child, disability and gender sensitive and provide safe, non-violent, inclusive and effective learning environments for all.

The emphasis of these four targets on quality education and equitable access to education

is a significant improvement from the MDGs, which focused more on enrolment rates and

educational access as opposed to educational quality and equity. Yet despite these

improvements, the notion of *quality* education remains vague. While target 4.1 does seem

to specify that it is up to national governments to determine "relevant and effective

learning outcomes," what these outcomes might look like, remains vague. Furthermore, it

is unclear whether an improvement in educational quality means transforming existing

systems by adopting new and innovative curricula and teaching methods, as well as the

validation of multiple forms of knowledge, or whether it means improving existing

systems to ensure stronger standardized test results.

The remaining associated targets present both utilitarian and transformative

perspectives of education, yet it is clear in the language predominantly used, and in the

way the targets have been formulated and structured that the utilitarian approach assumes a

more prominent role. The Framework opens with reference to the importance of science, technology and innovation as necessary means of driving human progress: "The spread of information and communications technology and global interconnectedness has great potential to accelerate human progress, to bridge the digital divide and to develop knowledge societies, as does scientific and technological innovation across areas as diverse as medicine and energy" (United Nations, 2015, pp. 15). By emphasizing the importance of utilizing technology to develop knowledge societies, the SDGs do, to some extent, promote a pro-growth model of development and a utilitarian approach to education.

Specific targets are also more utilitarian in nature. Target 4.4, for example - "By 2030, substantially increase the number of youth and adults who have relevant skills, including technical and vocational skills, for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship" - clearly emphasizes the employment-oriented focus of utilitarian education, gearing youth and adults to work within the established socio-economic system. Three out of the ten targets, including this one, emphasize technical skills and training; this is particularly evident in target 9, which calls for increased numbers of scholarships made available to youth and adults in developing countries "for enrolment in higher education, including vocational training and information and communications technology, technical, engineering and scientific programs, in developed countries and other developing countries." There is an explicit focus in this target on STEM fields, making clear the importance ascribed to technology in maximizing efficiency in production.

In contrast, only one target explicitly presents a transformative approach to education – this is target 7:

4.7: By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development.

This target conflates a number of transformative objectives of education that are assumed to contribute to 'sustainable development', such as, human rights, gender equality, peace and non-violence and global citizenship. The focus of this target, however, remains ambiguous. By lumping these very diverse objectives into one target, it is also unclear how they will be incorporated into a classroom setting or an education system, how they will be measured, and how they contribute to sustainable development. Furthermore, terms like "global citizenship" are undefined, and can even, as Koyama (2015) argues, be problematic if the terms of "global citizenship" are being defined by those in power. The overall vagueness of this target, along with its placement towards the end of the list of education targets, suggests that its inclusion is ultimately, superficial.

Target 7 is also the only target in SDG 4 that explicitly mentions 'sustainable development.' Barring this target, there is nothing to suggest that this set of targets is any more likely to produce sustainable development than previous educational initiatives such as the EFA or the MDGs. The limited emphasis on sustainable development in this goal is a shift away from the Education for Sustainable Development discourse prevalent in previous initiatives such as the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005-2014) or Agenda 21, produced during the Earth Summit in 1992. The language used in Chapter 36 of Agenda 21, for example, is far more explicit in emphasizing a transformative approach to education. The Agenda calls for "integrating environment and development as

a cross-cutting issue into education at all levels"; "a thorough review of curricula to ensure a multidisciplinary approach to education"; "due respect to diverse and traditional knowledge systems" etc. Target 7 is the closest SDG 4 comes to explicitly engaging with sustainable development but its failure to make any mentioning of transforming curricula; adopting and validating alternative education systems and types of knowledge; or integrating environmental and/or development issues into education programs, are significant limitations.

The question then emerges - how 'sustainable' is SDG 4, truly? If sustainable development, as the UN definition suggests, is development that aims to "meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs," then a pro-growth/ utilitarian development discourse will not satisfy this definition. Sustainable development will only be achieved if ecological concerns are placed at the center of the development discourse, and if a more integrated approach to development is promoted. Sterling (2001) argues that the entire notion of 'education for sustainable development' is problematic in that "education can only contribute to social transformation if it relinquishes the modernist agenda characterized by managerial, mechanistic and transmissive approaches and comes to be informed by an ecological paradigm characterized by 'whole systems thinking', participation, empowerment and self-organization" (Selby, 357). By merely integrating aspects of 'sustainable development' into only one target, and emphasizing the economic benefits of education in at least four different targets, SDG 4 does not make significant strides in transforming the existing education discourse. For education to truly contribute to social transformation, a more

holistic and integrated approach ought to be taken, one that, as Selby (2006) suggests, requires the creation of new and innovative pedagogical forms that: focus on the centrality of place and the interconnectedness of life based on local realities and everyday experiences, that value different knowledge forms and educational outcomes, and that center on environmental and development issues.

In failing to adequately recognize cultural differences as shaping people's lifestyles and development aspirations in different ways, SDG 4, and for that matter, the entire SDG Framework, limits conceptions of 'development' and 'sustainability' to Western modes of thought. SDG 4 makes no mentioning of non-Western knowledge forms such as Indigenous Knowledge that "reflect the unique ways that specific societies make meaning of the world and how such forms of knowledge address local problems and solutions that are context specific" (Owuor, 2008, p.2). Research by Owuor (2008) shows that by promoting an *endogenous* approach to education, that "involves the contextualization of the school curriculum by integrating indigenous knowledge with other relevant and useful knowledge forms into formal education", local problems can more readily be addressed by local models of sustainability (p. 1). Such an approach places decision-making power in the hands of local communities to define how indigenous knowledge can best be used to address social, economic, and ecological issues in a sustainable manner. The limited emphasis on alternative knowledge forms demonstrates the SDG's adherence to dominant Western conceptions of knowledge and the knowledge-based economy.

Ultimately, while Sustainable Development Goal 4 does make attempts at presenting a transformative approach to education by recognizing the role of education in

promoting sustainable development, peace, and gender equality (among others), these objectives are not placed at the heart of the goal; more emphasis appears to be placed on the economic gains of education. Through its language, content, and structure, SDG 4 promotes a utilitarian approach to education more than it promotes a transformative approach. By failing to recognize other forms of knowledge, ways of life, and conceptions of development, SDG 4 is firmly rooted in a pro-growth, Western conception of development.

VIII.   Conclusion

Based on this critical discourse analysis of the Sustainable Development Goals, it appears that on a textual level and on a contextual level, the SDGs can be read in very different, even contradictory ways. The SDGs grapple with both a pro-growth and transformative view of 'sustainable development', and both encourage and exclude participation. On the surface, the SDGs exude a promising image of the future of 'sustainable development' but a closer look reveals a highly confused path toward achieving its goals. These contradictory ideals can be seen in SDG 4, which grapples with both utilitarian and transformative approaches to education, yet ultimately renders its transformative ideals subservient to its dominant utilitarian focus. Through its validation of STEM, technical and vocational skills, and education for employment, SDG 4 largely functions within a neoliberal capitalist model of development.

The role of education in instigating sustainable development is crucial. A transformative approach to education can have cross-cutting impacts, contributing to

gender equality, peace, human rights, environmental sustainability and a myriad of other objectives that a utilitarian approach will not achieve. For SDG 4 to contribute to sustainable development, there needs to be a shift in dominant educational discourse; the aims of education must be expanded such that a 'quality' education is no longer associated with standardization, efficiency, and employment, but instead viewed as a fundamental human right and a catalyst for social change. Education must be valued and used as a tool to recognize and act upon societal inequities, placing issues of social and ecological justice at the heart of its objectives.

For this paradigm shift to occur, the utilitarian approach, which has dominated educational discourse well before the creation of the SDGs, and has consequently become normalized and accepted by society, must be challenged. Knowledge must be recognized as fundamentally political and as a product of power. Through this recognition, spaces of resistance may be created, where alternative conceptions of education can come to the forefront. It is only by challenging and expanding the definition of 'quality' education, that education can truly have a lasting impact on other areas of development, thereby contributing to a more holistic and integrated approach to achieving sustainable development.

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