

An Open Letter to the United Nations: the Sustainable Development Goals, income inequality and endless material growth

Monday 12 October 2015, by [CHOMSKY Noam](#), [ENSLER Eve](#), [GOLDTOOTH Tom](#), [GRAEBER David](#), [HEDGES Chris](#), [KLEIN Naomi](#), [MITTAL Anuradha](#), [NORBERG HODGE Helena](#), [PATKAR Medha](#), [Petition / Sign-on Letter](#), [POODE Thomas](#)
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An Open Letter to the United Nations:

As the UN and the world's governments prepare to ratify the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) on September 25th, we must be clear that they do not represent the best interests of the world's majority — those that are currently exploited and oppressed within the current economic and political order.

The SDGs claim they can eradicate poverty in all its forms by 2030. But they rely primarily on global economic growth to achieve this tremendous task. If such growth resembles that seen in recent decades, it will take 100 years for poverty to disappear, not the 15 years the SDGs promise. And even if this were possible in a shorter timescale, we would need to increase the size of the global economy by a factor of 12, which, in addition to making our planet uninhabitable, will obliterate any gains against poverty.

Rather than paper over such obvious madness with false hopes, we must address two critical issues head on: income inequality and endless material growth.

If poverty is to be truly overcome by 2030, then much of the improvement in the position of the impoverished must come through reduction in the enormous inequality that has accumulated in the last 200 plus years. The richest 1 per cent of humanity will very soon own over half of the world's private wealth. It would take only modest reductions in inequality to deliver large increases in the socio-economic position of the poorer half of humanity.

The SDGs do talk about reducing inequality. However, their prescription is technocratic, obscure and wholly incommensurate to the task at hand. For example, Target 10.1 states that by 2030 they will “progressively achieve and sustain income growth of the bottom 40 per cent of the population at a rate higher than the national average.” It is hard to imagine a less robust or ambitious goal. This commitment allows inequality to grow without limit until 2029, so long as it then begins to be reduced. The SDGs thus fail to endorse the only means that can achieve their stated goal of ending poverty: substantial inequality reduction, starting now. In effect, they perpetuate severe poverty and leave this fundamental problem to future generations.

The other essential task is for the world's nations to adopt a saner measure of human progress; one that gears us not towards endless GDP growth based on extraction and consumption, but towards the wellbeing of humanity and our planet as a whole. There are plenty of options to choose from, all of which have been ignored in the SDGs. Instead, Target 17.19 says only that they will, “by 2030, build on existing initiatives to develop measurements of progress on sustainable development that complement GDP”. Another urgent challenge passed down to the next generation.

It is possible to overcome poverty in a way that respects the Earth and helps tackle climate change. The planet is abundant in wealth and its people infinitely resourceful. In order to do so, however, we must be prepared to challenge the logic of endless growth, greed and destruction enshrined in neoliberal capitalism.

It is a time to envision a new operating system, based on social justice and symbiosis with the natural world. As currently formulated, the SDGs merely distract us from addressing the scale of the challenges we face.

Signed by the below representatives:

Maude Barlow
Noam Chomsky
Eve Ensler
Tom Goldtooth
David Graeber
Chris Hedges
Naomi Klein
Anuradha Mittal
Helena Norberg Hodge
Medha Patkar
Thomas Pogge
and over 2,000 citizens from across the globe.

P.S.

* <http://therules.org/petition/sdg-open-letter/>