The Southern origins of sustainable development goals: Ideas, actors, aspirations

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ABSTRACT

With the increasing importance of 'emerging powers' in the global economy, questions are raised about the role of developing countries in shaping global norms. The assumption in much of the literature has been to see global norms as originating in the 'North' (or the 'West'). Recent research has begun to challenge this view. This paper contributes to this debate in studying the agency of the South in the adoption of sustainable development as the consensus framework for international development (SDGs). Based on documentary and archival research, interviews with stakeholders, and direct participant observation of the SDG negotiations and consultations, the paper chronicles the ideas originating from the South in the emergence and subsequent evolution of the sustainable development concept and the adoption of the SDGs. We highlight the role of key individuals as norm entrepreneurs at the origin of sustainable development as they challenged the North-led understanding of the environmental challenge in the 1970s and 1980s, and the agency of Southern actors in proposing an alternative vision as a successor to the MDGs. We chronicle the agency of Southern actors in promoting some key priorities of sustainable development. We argue that these ideas originated from the perspective of the knowledge, lived experience, policy experience, theorizing and analysis of the Global South. We find that norm entrepreneurship involved contesting mainstream views and advancing marginalized ideas. The case also illustrates international norm emergence as a long term process of contestation and evolution.

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1. Introduction

The growing economic importance of developing countries has generated debate about the future of global governance, and the role that they play in shaping global institutions and norms. The assumption in much of the International Relations literature on norms has been to see developing countries as passive adopters rather than creators of international norms (Helleiner, 2014, p. 359). Acharya further argues that not only have such ideas been under-recognized, that they are 'dismissed as radicalism or foolhardiness', or if occasionally one is accepted, 'they are dismissed as imitation. If they prove to be creditable, the credit is usually given to the Western training of the person who invented the idea or to his/her Western collaborators, or to Western governments and institutions that backed them. One way or the other a Western origin or connection is found to legitimize the idea.' (Acharya, 2016, p. 1157) The dominant view of the South as norm takers has begun to be questioned in the recent literature on the role of the South as normative agents, generating new ideas or in promoting and shaping new global norms (see for example papers in recent edited collections such as Gaskarth, 2015; Helleiner, 2014; Weiss & Abdenur, 2014; Weiss & Roy, 2016). Many of these studies show diverse ways in which individuals, groups and states of the South (or 'non-Western' or 'post-colonial' world) have generated or promoted ideas that influenced global institutions and norms over the decades (Acharya, 2016; Abdenur, 2014; Weiss & Abdenur, 2014; Helleiner, 2014).

This paper examines the agency of the South in the emergence of sustainable development as the consensus framework of international development. In September 2015, the UN General Assembly adopted *Transforming Our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals* (UN, 2015) [hereafter referred to as the SDGs] which established a consensus framework for international development to succeed the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) which were in place between 2000 and 2015. The new framework introduced a

significant normative evolution in international development[1]. The SDGs did not discard the poverty priorities of the MDGs; instead, they subsume them into a new framework. The SDGs reframe 'development' as 'sustainable development' and identify a broad set of inter-related challenges including environmental destruction, social exclusion and inequality, economic transformation, and governance. Moreover, they reconceptualize development as a universal challenge, and set out goals applicable to all countries, not just developing countries. This distinguishes the SDGs from the MDGs, which were essentially an aid agenda (Fukuda-Parr and Hulme, 2011). As the title of the Declaration suggests, it aims to set out an 'transformative' agenda, that is more ambitious than the MDGs. We argue that ideas and actors from the South had a significant role in originating and driving these shifts, and in shaping the framework that better responds to their realities, analyses based on their knowledge, and aspirations.

In this paper, we consider the SDGs to be a consensus normative framework. Norms are expected standards of behavior, defined in the International Relations literature as 'standards of appropriate behaviour for actors with a given identity' (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998, p. 891). The SDGs are a framework including a large number of norms. Global goals are important in influencing policy making and in setting priorities for investment because they are pervasively used by stakeholders to justify their actions (Fukuda-Parr et al., 2014). They are also important tools of communication which frame discourses, that influence thinking and policy making by describing problems in a particular way, highlighting some issues while casting others into the shadow (Fukuda-Parr et al., 2014).

Our aim is to understand the agency of the South in generating and promoting ideas, not just in defending their economic or political interests. A great deal has been written about sustainable development as a [mostly problematic] concept and discourse, including historical accounts of its evolution, critical analysis of its incoherence, and political analysis of the interests that were won or compromised. While these accounts have assumed the positions of South states in international negotiations to be pursuing their economic and political interests, this paper focuses on their positions as based on ideas and world views that are generated by individuals based on development economics theorizing and analysis, and shaped by their world views that are informed by history and lived experiences and aspirations for the future in the post-colonial context.

Since its origins in the 1950s, the field of international development has borne witness to a constant process of contestation over ideas and evolution of consensus norms where the dominant norms recede and re-emerge. The field has accumulated a rich body of ideas and knowledge, including diverse theories, empirical analyses, and experiences of policy making and of people. These ideas have competed to influence policy choices of governments, donor agencies, think tanks, civil society, academy, and other stakeholders in the field. Those ideas that win in this 'marketplace of ideas' became dominant and become accepted as legitimate standards or norms.

But like in the marketplace of goods, the competition amongst ideas depends on how effectively they are promoted. According to Finnemore and Sikkink (1998) the process of norm emergence proceeds in three stages, driven by individuals as by institutions, motivated by ideals as by interests: 'norm emergence' resulting from sustained advocacy of individuals committed to the idea ('norm entrepreneurs'); 'cascade' as the idea gains momentum as more individuals, institutions and states embrace it in order to gain legitimacy or respectability in the community; and 'internalization' when the idea becomes accepted as a standard and is no longer questioned (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). This paper identifies norm entrepreneurs from the South, and trace their influence at two key points in the evolution of the sustainable development norm: in laying the foundations of the sustainable development concept in the 1970s and 1980s; and then in the emergence of the SDGs from 2011 to 2015.

Research for this paper is based on documentary and archival review, interviews with individuals who were involved in the SDG negotiations - as members of government delegations, UN technical support teams, NGOs, think tanks and academia - as well as the participant observations of consultation meetings, and negotiations[2].

2. Origins of sustainable development

The emergence of 'sustainable development' as an international issue originated with the challenge by Southern intellectuals and governments to reframe the nascent international environmental debates in the developmental context. They argued that the developing world needed economic development and that poverty was the result of, not the source of, environmental destruction. The objectives of environmental sustainability therefore had to be integrated into a development strategy, but with a new model that encompasses concerns for economic and social equity, and the need for an enabling international environment for development. In this section we chronicle some of the milestones in the emergence of the concept and the key actors and ideas that were instrumental in shaping it.

2.1. Reframing environmental debates: from limits to growth to our common future

The origin of the term 'sustainable development' can be traced back to the response of developing countries to the limits to growth narrative that originated with the Club of Rome in the late 1960s to the early 1970s. Scientists, economists and humanists from ten countries gathered in Rome with a mutual concern over limited natural resources, population growth, ecological degradation and the role of economic development in these dilemmas (Mebratu, 1998). They published two influential texts – *Limits to Growth* (Meadows et al., 1972) and *Mankind at the Turning Point* (Mesarovic, 1974) – calling on society to recognize the limits to economic growth and to find alternative paths (Meadows et al., 1972).

International debates, such as in the preparation for the 1972 Stockholm UN Conference on the Human Environment, were driven by concerns for natural resource scarcities, pollution crises and over-population (Schrijver, 2010). It was argued if the consumption levels and carbon emissions of developing countries were to reach that of the industrialized countries, the planet's finite resources would be breached (Redclift, 2005). Prominent Stanford biologist Paul Ehrlich wrote that the implication of resource shortages for developing countries is that of 'de-development,' and that developing countries should accept a state of semi-development (Ehrlich & Ehrlich, 1970). Other intellectuals such as George Kennan asserted that the Western leadership is indispensable to avert an apocalyptic scenario of a global 'wasteland' (Kennan, 1970). This Northern-led narrative posed challenges for developing countries that were pursuing a catch-up strategy to

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[1] In this paper we understand global goals to be a vehicle for norms. Goals are effective in articulating normative standards – priorities, objectives, principles – that guide the behavior of the stakeholders.

[2] Xxxx attended several consultation meetings and OWG as invited expert. Xxxx participated in numerous consultation processes including all of the OWG sessions as member of a civil society organization.

transform their economies to become economically self-sustaining and to improve living standards.

Developing countries responded to the North-led environmental discourse by raising urgent concerns about the inequalities between industrialized and developing worlds, in consumption of resources, carbon emissions, economic power and the levels of poverty. They were also alarmed by the consequences: according to economist and policy maker from Pakistan, Mahbub ul Haq many in the South "worried that Western environmental concern could lead to additional trade barriers, miserly development assistance allocations and the consequent entrenchment of extant global inequalities" (Haq, 1976, 86). When the Canadian diplomat and environmentalist Maurice Strong was appointed secretary-general of the Stockholm Conference in 1970, one of his key objectives was to engage developing countries (Dodds et al., 2012). At that point, the deep dissatisfaction among South policymakers prompted talk of a developing country boycott of the Stockholm Conference (Manitou Foundation & Strong Foundation, 2017; Manulak, 2017). Strong met with leaders in 30 developing countries to assure them that the conference would make a compelling case for the relationship between environment and development and the need for environmental policy to facilitate sustainable development (Schrijver, 2010). He then established a working group which met in Founex, Switzerland in 1971. The Founex Seminar formulated one of the first discursive analyses of the environment-development nexus, and shaped the intellectual and conceptual foundation for a global declaration and action plan on environment and development in Stockholm (Manulak, 2017; Mebratu, 1998; Strong, NA; Dodds, Strauss, & Strong, 2012). As we shall elaborate later in this paper, this report presented a distinct perspective to defining the problem of environmental sustainability and framing the search for a solution; as a problem of poverty, and development as a part of the solution (Iglesias, 1971; Corea, 1972; Haq, 1976b).

The twenty-seven participants included many of the most respected development economists of the day, many from the South, including the Nobel laureate Sir Arthur Lewis (St. Lucia), Samir Amin (Egypt), Gamani Corea (Sri Lanka), Mahbub ul Haq (Pakistan), Miguel Ozorio de Almeida (Brazil), William Kapp (Germany), Enrique Iglesias (Uruguay), Pitambar Pant (India), Ignacy Sachs (France and Brazil), Jan Tinbergen (Netherlands), Shigeto Tsuru (Japan), and Barbara Ward (UK) (Manitou Foundation and Strong Foundation, 2017). These members participated as individuals, not as representatives of their governments (Engfeldt, 2006). Strong describes the high intellectual level of the discussions which were 'intense and passionate, characterized by a degree of intellectual rigour' (Strong, NA).

Participants from the South played a central role in the preparations, the debates and drafting the report, particularly Mahbub ul Haq and Gamani Corea who constituted the secretariat together with Barbara Ward of the UK. They prepared the meeting, including commissioning background papers on a range of topics. Corea chaired the meeting while Haq was rapporteur and the two drafted the report which Strong describes as 'one of the milestones in the history of the environmental movement, an absolutely seminal document' (Strong, NA). With Haq as skeptic turned architect, the Founex report emphasizes that the environment challenges in the South are different from those in the North, and that they needed to be solved through a broader development strategy that incorporated environmental sustainability as a priority. It also recognized resource and international aid as an essential means to achieve sustainable development.

The next milestone in conceptualizing sustainable development was the World Commission for Environment and Development (WCED) – the Brundtland Commission – which published the seminal text, *Our Common Future* (1987). An independent body appointed by the UN Secretary General in 1983, the Commission involved 22 members of which 13 were from developing countries. Their articulation of sustainable development has come to be the widely used definition of the term: "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (WCED, 1987). The report stressed the 'needs' of the world's poor, to which overriding priority should be given, and the imbalance between consumption patterns and volumes of developing and developed countries (WCED, 1987). The report thus argued that "perceived needs are socially and culturally determined," and therefore sustainable development required two core components. First, the "promotion of values that encourage consumption standards that are within the bounds of the ecologically possible and to which all can reasonably aspire," and second, "a production system that respects the obligation to preserve the ecological base for development" (WCED, 1987, para 42, 58).

2.2. Key actors

While Corea and Haq played a central role in the Founex process, there were many others who engaged in the debates of the 1970s–1980s that led to the emergence of sustainable development as an international norm. These voices brought a rich array of expertise and analysis of development problems from diverse regions and political persuasions. Notably, the Founex seminar included: Samir Amin, the noted pioneer of dependency theory from Egypt; Enrique Iglesias, the Uruguyan economist who would later head the Inter-American Development Bank; Pitambar Pant, economist/statistician and adviser to Prime Minister Nehru; and Ignacy Sachs, the French Brazilian academic and eco-socioeconomist. Notable voices in the Brundtland Commission included: Bernard Chidzero, the Zimbabwean economic policy maker and politician, Emil Salim, economist from Indonesia who served in several policy capacities including Minister of Environment; Shridath Ramphal, Minister of Justice and Foreign Affairs from Guyana who would become the Secretary General of the Commonwealth Secretariat.

These individuals were 'norm entrepreneurs' in the sense of advocating ideas on the basis of altruistic motivations rather than for material or political gain. They were committed to finding a solution to the tensions between the two global crises of environment and underdevelopment. Though many had held policy positions in their governments, they were acting as individuals in these international commissions which were intellectual debates rather than diplomatic negotiations between states.

While they had diverse backgrounds, their ideas reflected the perspectives of developing countries – the knowledge based on technical analysis, policy experience and peoples, values and aspirations. They were highly trained development economists, trained at Cambridge, Oxford, Sorbonne and other leading universities of the West. But they were not ivory tower economists nor ideologues. They were all actively engaged in using their training to address the big social, economic and political challenges of their countries and the world at large, either in government or as public intellectuals. Most had been born under colonial rule, experienced independence struggles, and their approach to development economics was grounded in the political economy and history of their countries[3]. Many were also at the cutting edge of development economics thinking of their times, and questioned orthodox ideas, such as the primacy of economic growth. Distributional equity, both within and between countries, was an important concern for many of them, especially for Amin, Corea, Haq, Iglesias and Sachs. For

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[3] See for example personal reflections by Haq in (Haq M. u., ; Haq M. u., 1996)

example, as a Planning official in Pakistan, Haq had been a firm believer in industrialization and growth as a path to development. However, after realizing that a decade of growth had done little to change the conditions of life for the rural poor, and that the benefits of 'success' in growth had been captured by the 22 industrial family groups that continued to own much of the national economy, he changed his mind and began to argue that the real objective of development was to improve the lives of people (Haq, 1976).

They were conscious that the perspectives and analyses of the South differed from those of the North. Some of those involved were key players in the N-S Roundtable, a forum founded by Barbara Ward that sought to 'influence the climate of ideas' (Haq, 1997, p. 5) and "to bridge a gap in the North South dialogue process by bringing together key policy makers, academics and research analysts in their personal capacities in an independent intellectual forum where they could discuss global issues free of the constraints and formalities of the official fora and where they could forge common approaches to major world issues, particularly those affecting North South relations" (Haq, 1997, p. 3).

2.3. Core ideas

These intellectuals from the South sought to shift the Northern dominated debate and reframe it – redefine the problem of the environment – from the perspective of priorities and real conditions of life in their countries. As the Founex Report states, 'to a large extent, the current concern with environmental issues has emerged out of the problems experienced by the industrially advanced countries…. the major environmental problems of developing countries are essentially of a different kind. They are predominantly problems that reflect the poverty and very lack of development of their societies' (Founex Seminar, 1971). The Southern intellectuals defined the problem of environmental sustainability in the developmental context, and transformed the debate from 'environment' to 'environment-development.' They argued that environmental challenges needed to be addressed as a priority objective within a national development strategy. This approach emphasized, among others, three concerns which continue to be important pillars of sustainable development as the concept evolved over the decades: people-centered development and ending poverty and distributional equity as key objectives; structural transformation of national economies and reforms in global economic governance to create an enabling environment for development; and the role of the North in addressing its high consumption patterns and the transfer of financial resources and technology.

First, environmental challenges such as pollution and natural resource depletion were situated as the sources of poverty, inadequate housing, disease, poor sanitation and vulnerability to natural disasters (Iglesias, 1971; Corea, 1972; Sachs, 1972; Haq, 1976). In turn, a large part of the redress to environmental dilemmas in the South points to "human-centered development," in that improvements in human welfare will eventually yield positive effects on the environment (Haq, 1976, 108). Informed by empirical analysis of their countries (Lele, 1991, 614), many rejected that growth would 'trickle down' to the poor and argued for proactive measures, especially through social expenditures (Corea, 1972; Haq, 1976; Ramphal, 1987; Salim, 1983). Growth was a means to improving human lives and therefore had to be equitably distributed and create employment (Iglesias, 1971). Moreover, Amin, Iglesias and others were skeptical of an economic model based on exports of natural resources to the North, that would not only continue dependence on cheap labor but also exacerbate environmental destruction (Amin, 1976; Iglesias, 1971).

These ideas were important in shaping the Founex Report and subsequently the 1972 Stockholm Declaration, which states, for example "In the developing countries most of the environmental problems are caused by under-development …" (1972, 1). The Brundtland Report emphasizes that "growth by itself is not enough" (WCED, 1987, para 6), arguing for "ensuring equitable opportunities for all." (WCED, 1987, para 6). This led to the idea of satisfying basic human needs for all people, while respecting certain environmental constraints, introduced in the Brundtland Report (WCED, 1987) and that continues as an underlying principle of sustainable development. Ramphal (1980), Salim (1983) and others argued that the priority to meeting basic needs in the present required qualifying the principle of inter-generational equity with intra-generational equity in the Brundtland report. Thus *Our Common Future* emphasizes equity in both spaces, stating at the outset, "Even the narrow notion of physical sustainability implies a concern for social equity between generations, a concern that must logically be extended to equity within each generation" (WCED, 1987, para 3).

Second, in line with theories of Dependency and Structuralism, economists from developing countries argued that sustainable development required an enabling environment in the global economy. Enduring structural challenges such as high external debt, exchange rate instability, and deindustrialization weaken the ability of states to invest in people. This undermines the national capacity to pursue human-centered development (Chidzero & Gauhar, 1986). Moreover, to pursue policies such as structural diversification, reforms were necessary in areas such as market regulations, financial flows, trade prospects, foreign direct investment, and the transfer of technology that would create economic and social opportunities in the South (Amin, 1976; Haq, 1996; Iglesias, 1971). A central concern was trade protectionism in developed countries including through "environmental standards" that increase export prices (Founex Report, 1971, para 4.4). These ideas influenced the Stockholm Declaration, in which the fourth paragraph states that "industrialized countries should make efforts to reduce the gap between themselves and developing countries" (1972). The Brundtland report expands on these issues of role of policy reforms in reducing global inequalities.

These ideas drew on research and empirical analysis of country experiences that showed where macroeconomic policies can be contradictory to environmental sustainability, such as austerity measures to 'balance budgets' that undermine financing of national environment and social programs, debt that fuels dependence on natural resource exports, commodity price collapse and over-exploitation of the ecosystem (Lele, 1991; Makhijani & Browne, 1987; Ramphal, 1980, 1987; Salim, 1983; South Commission, 1990). Southern environmentalists such as Shiva (Shiva, 1993) and Lele (1991) argued that dominant approaches to global economic exchange lead to biodiversity erosion.

These arguments have continued to be present in the concept of sustainable development as articulated in international normative documents, starting with the Brundtland report that highlights the importance of "fundamental changes in international economic arrangements so as to make them more equitable" (WCED para 26), and further reflected in the declarations of successive UN Conferences on the Environment and Development (UNCED). Nonetheless, the issue has been controversial, resisted by most governments of the North, with agreements reflecting varying forms of compromise.

Third, a near unanimous view among Southern actors is the idea that the provision of financial and technological means – through aid, trade, technology access – is required to align economic and social development with environmental sustainability in the South would have to come from the North (South Commission, 1990; Najam, 1994; Iqbal & Pierson, 2017). While this was a matter of material interests of states, it was also based on an economic

argument that measures to protect the environment would slow the pace of development (UNCTAD, 1972). It was also a matter of post-colonial justice; industrialization had bestowed on developed countries great reservoirs of wealth, "disproportionate benefits, and at the same time caused the very environmental problems that developing countries are now being asked to resolve" (Strong, 2001, 123 quoting Haq in 1971).

The Founex Report advances these South arguments, while the Stockholm Declaration invokes a more general sense of "cooperative spirit" to be exercised through "multilateral or bilateral arrangements" (1972, Principle 24). A decade and a half later the Brundtland Report revives the issue and recommends an aid target of 0.7 percent of GNP to be reached by 1985 and 1 percent by 2000. The proposal of financial and technological provision is ensconced in a broader vision for sustainable development rooted in interdependency between the North and South (Ramphal, 1987). Developed country policies bear great impact on the development prospects of the South, and requires a cooperation "to achieve economic harmony between nations," without which environmental sustainability in the South is a limited pursuit (Salim, 1983, 131). In this context, two more important principles that have their roots in the ideas of the South are the need for the North to address consumption and production patterns, and the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities in sharing the burden of costs to address environmental destruction.

As the concept of sustainable development evolved through subsequent UNCEDs from 1992, through to 2012, these ideas generated by Southern intellectuals on the foundational role of economic and social development in achieving sustainability, human centered development as a basis for intragenerational equity, global policy reforms and international economic cooperation shaped and defined the concept of sustainable development. The next section examines how these ideas were promoted in formulating the SDGs.

3. Emergence of the SDGs and the competing visions of development

Although sustainable development norms existed as international consensus since the 1980s, they were segmented as relevant to the environment field and were not understood to be firm guidelines for policy making on social and economic issues. Its emergence as a dominant framework for development occurred through the Rio + 20 UNCED in June 2012 that created a mandate to develop the SDGs.

Although the official narrative of the SDGs emphasizes the agenda as building on and encompassing the MDG poverty agenda, the SDGs also arose as a challenge to its limitations. One of the major dividing lines in the elaboration of the post-2015 agenda was between a commitment to continue the MDG poverty agenda with some modifications – 'MDG+' – and an alternative to pursue a different vision that would be broader, more ambitious and transformative and address crises of rising inequality, persistent poverty, climate change, rising violence and more.

Though the MDGs were the consensus framework, there were many critics, particularly from NGO networks, academia, and governments of the South. The problem was not what was in the MDGs but what was left out: that failed to take on the 21st century challenges of growing inequality, ecosystem limits, and historically rooted unjust institutions. They reduced development to ending poverty, replacing earlier definitions of development as transformation of the productive potential of national economies (Chang, 2010; Fukuda-Parr, 2017; Gore, 2010). Though governments of the South were not openly opposed to the MDGs, many had misgivings (Fukuda-Parr, 2017). Middle income countries were frustrated with the narrow vision of an agenda focused on ending

extreme poverty with targets that they had already met and called them 'Minimum Development Goals'. African countries were at once in support of an agenda that gave attention to them but also frustrated by the narrow framework that did not include key priorities such as infrastructure and industrialization that later became the backbone of the Africa common position[4]. Policy think tanks and policy advocacy NGOs, academics with a Global South perspective found the MDGs oddly simplistic, setting a narrow agenda that left out much that had been learned over the 20th century about development as a complex challenge of structural transformation, institutional reforms, expanding freedoms and choices, macroeconomic policy approaches, governance and the role of the state. The MDGs addressed only one of the urgent crises of the 21st century and left the neoliberal economic model unchallenged as the potential source of these crises. Most significantly, they criticized the top-down process by which the MDGs were formulated, by the UN SG and staff, without consultation with member states and other stakeholders (UN System Task Team on the Post 2015 Development Agenda, 2012). Their implementation as 'one size fits all' targets for all developing countries without taking account of national realities was problematic.

3.1. Proposal to create SDGs – Rio + 20

The alternative vision and process came to be pursued through the 2012 Rio + 20 UN Conference on the Environment and Development (UNCED). This turn of events owes to the norm entrepreneurship of an individual delegate from the South, Paula Caballero Gómez of the Delegation of Colombia who proposed the idea of setting the SDGs in the preparatory process for Rio + 20. She was a civil servant but also a passionate advocate of sustainable development who had appreciated the MDGs but felt the limitations of their narrow and unambitious agenda. (Dodds, Donohue, & Roesch, 2017). She saw an opportunity to 'galvanize political will for an agenda for sustainability and equity', and concerned that the preparatory debates were fixated on issues that did not have "the potential for incentivizing the deep transformations at scale so urgently needed on a planet that is breaching so many boundaries all at once, while remaining stubbornly inequitable at many levels." (Caballero, 2016, p. 1)

It was a novel idea that, she recalls, was initially 'largely met with a skepticism – and in all truth, a healthy dose of derision.' (Caballero, 2016, p. 1). But it gradually gained support, and was proposed by Colombia and Guatemala at the informal consultations in Brasilia in early 2011. It generated interest from a wide range of countries and civil society, enough for The Netherlands to host a meeting, attended by other delegations such as Mexico, Kenya, India, UK, Norway, and the US (Caballero, 2016). A core group began to form behind these ideas. The alliances made to promote this concept was not the G-77 but a diverse group of like minded delegations, from all regions including both developed and developing countries[5].

There was resistance from multiple concerns: that the SDGs would undermine the unfinished agenda of the MDGs; that combining environment and development would weaken commitment to development. There were counter proposals to stick with the MDG+ approach, and to separate goals for developed and developing countries. The advocates of the SDGs persisted, strategically organizing private consultations, public side events, adjusting their proposals in response to comments. Along the way, the idea gained support from a wide range of delegations and civil society groups and international organizations. (Caballero, 2016; Dodds et al.,

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[4] Interview with #37, #31
[5] Interview #36

2017) It gained momentum to become the center piece of negotiations and to be included in the outcome document of Rio + 20.

The proposal to create the SDGs was the initiative of individual delegates, not states. In addition to Caballero, other norm entrepreneurs persuaded their delegations and organizations to support the initiative, many of whom were from the South such as Farrukh Khan from Pakistan who was the coordinator of the G77, members of the Brazilian leadership, and Alicia Bárcena, the Executive Secretary of ECLAC, among others (Caballero, 2016).

The mandate to set the SDGs was ultimately included in the Outcome document adopted at Rio + 20. The document emphasized that the MDG poverty agenda would be an integral part of the SDGs which would have a broader scope including climate change, inequality and other priorities. Though this was a clear position of the promoters of the SDGs, they were seeking to foster a paradigm of development that departed from the conventional thinking that conceptualized development in a North-South mindset, and as a separate set of issues from environmental sustainability[6]. They were working within the framework of UNCED and their conceptual framework was sustainable development with an ideational history originating in Founex, with normative commitments to concern for inequality between the North and South, human-centered development and an enabling global economic environment. Moreover, UNCED had its own epistemic community. Compared with the international development community, it was dominated by environmentalists where developing countries had more influence.

The SDG advocates were also aware of the need for a new politics to forge a consensus on the SDGs[7]. They were deliberate in building broad based support for the SDGs. Thus, Colombia did not formally approach the G-77 and China for their support until the proposal had gained broader support. At that point, they became an important partner, in large part due to the personal convictions of Khan, the lead coordinator[8]. Developed countries such as Switzerland and the United States, and civil society organizations were also important in pushing the agreement on the SDGs through the Rio + 20 document. However there is little doubt that several governments of the South, particularly Colombia, Guatemala and Brazil, played a leading role in propelling the idea of a development agenda that departed from the MDGs.

The SDG promoters were careful to spell out a specific process for elaborating the SDGs in the outcome document. Concerned that the traditional GA negotiating procedures organized around regional blocs would stymie new thinking, they proposed a specially constituted body to formulate a proposal for the SDGs – the Open Working Group (OWG) of 30 members structured as six representatives from each of the five regions, and that would be open to civil society participation (Chasek & Wagner, 2016). The structure included 'major groups' of civil society, in addition to all the proceedings being open to observers.

3.2. Post-2015 and OWG

Alongside Rio + 20, the UN Secretary General (SG) launched consultations on the successor agenda to the MDGs, the "Post-2015 process" starting in 2011. One of the initiatives was to appoint a High-level Panel of Eminent persons (HLP), co-chaired by UK Prime Minister Cameron, Liberian President Johnson-Sirleaf, and Indonesian President Yudhoyono, to propose an outline of an agenda. The HLP worked with the premise of completing the work of the MDGs[9], proceeding by asking 'what to keep, what to amend, and what to add' (HLP, 2013).

The HLP submitted its report soon after the OWG process opened. While the HLP report emphasized 'sustainable development' and included environmental goals, it proposed an MDG + agenda, where poverty goals were supplemented with additional goals for energy, peace and justice, jobs and equitable growth without addressing structural elements of the sustainable development concept. The HLP report did not gain momentum. According to interviews with government delegates and UN staff who were involved in the negotiations[10], there was push back among some member states to the HLP report which was seen as a continuation of the aid agenda of the MDGs created by donors without consultation.

The alternative vision of sustainable development gained momentum in the OWG as the new framework for a global agenda. NGO networks and think tanks from the South made effective use of the space created for non-state actors in the post-2015 and OWG processes for open and multi-stakeholder negotiations. It should also be noted that the co-chair for the OWG process from the South, Ambassador Macharia of Keyna, was particularly instrumental in nurturing the open process of multi-stakeholder consultations by actively listening to civil society and organizing daily morning meetings with them (Chasek & Wagner, 2016; Kamau, Chasek, & O'Connor, 2018; Dodds et al., 2017).

4. Southern advocacy: three priorities

While the last section emphasized the agency of individuals as norm entrepreneurs, this section identifies role of national governments, NGOs and think tanks in shaping the SDGs. We examine negotiations on three issues that were important elements of the sustainable development as conceptualized by the South in the 1970s and 1980s. These priorities were central elements of the sustainable development concept at its origins, and draw on theories and analysis of the South, such as Dependency, Structuralism, and the industrial policy practice of East Asia. These priorities were championed by actors of the Global South - national governments, NGOs and think tanks, (such as Development Alternatives for a New Era, Oxfam, Third World Network, Social Watch, and the South Centre). They allied with international civil society groups such as Center for Economic and Social Rights, International Trade Union Confederation, Public Services International and Society for International Development.

4.1. Economic transformation: inclusive and sustainable industrialization

It is often remarked that the 17 SDG goals can be grouped into four main areas: poverty (Goals 1–6); economic transformation (Goals 8–10); environment (Goals 10–15); governance and partnerships (10, 16–17). Structural change, particularly diversification into manufacturing and technological upgrading was a core element of the Founex concept of sustainable development as an integrated strategy of sustainable economic development that fosters social inclusion and environmental conservation. The economic transformation agenda in the SDGs is not just about economic growth but about structural change for sustainable development, particularly for employment generation and improving the wage of workers, as well as introduction of sustainable technologies. The core idea is that sustainable improvements in living standards cannot be achieved when the economy is depending on primary commodity exports that are subject to the vagaries of international market prices, and on low productivity agriculture. Nearly half a century after Founex, diversification into higher value added and

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[6] Interviews #29, #31, #32, #33
[7] Interview with Caballero
[8] Interview #36
[9] Interview #42

[10] Interviews #7, #13, #19, #25, #29

employment generating activities remains a major challenge and a strategic priority for developing countries (United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, 2012; UN DSD). Moreover, these challenges are becoming even more pressing as recent studies show countries undergoing 'premature deindustrialization' and global opportunities for industrialization shrinking (Rodrik, 2015).

Structural change – particularly industrialization and technological innovation – continues to be a strategic priority for developing countries, and persistently pursued by developing countries in international agreements. The agenda has been reflected in many ways in UNCED agreements but neglected in mainstream policy frameworks since the 1980s. It was not part of the MDG framework which also did not include related issues of economic growth, employment and infrastructure. While the importance of diversification, especially through labor intensive manufacturing is generally recognized, the role of state intervention and external economic environment to promote it have been highly controversial amongst economists and industrial policy has been discouraged by international donors since the onset of neoliberal agendas in the 1980s (for brief insight to this controversy see Chang, 2009; Wade, 1996).

The inclusion of industrialization and structural change in the SDG framework was propelled by African countries. Policy makers and economists in the region had begun to give renewed attention to this priority as policy[11]. The Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), in particular, took the initiative of investing in policy research, drawing on the experience of East Asian countries and focusing on industrial policy and developmental macroeconomic policy approaches (ECA, 2014, 2015, 2016). These analyses emphasized the proactive role of the state in nurturing enterprises, encouraging technological upgrading, strengthening capabilities and skills, removing infrastructural bottlenecks to growth, reforming agriculture and providing finance (ECA, 2015).

African policy makers built a collective regional strategy[12]. Carlos Lopes, the then Executive Secretary of the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) was particularly committed to this idea, having invested in ECA's policy research on these issues. He worked with Nkosazana Dlamini Zuma, the then Chair of the African Union (AU) to create a platform – Common Africa Position – to negotiate for African voices in the SDG framework (African Union, 2014).

During the OWG sessions, the African Group led the proposal for a stand-alone goal on inclusive and sustainable industrialization as a path to sustainable development, stating: "Job growth requires a structural transformation of African economies through industrialization that induces value addition and economic diversification" (Third World Network, 2013). The G77 argued similarly: "industrialization is a powerful tool to generate inclusive and sustained economic growth, create productive employment and decent work and lift millions of people out of poverty. It will help developing countries, especially African countries, to address the issues of unemployment as well as employment quality, including underemployment, informality, vulnerability and working poverty" (G77 and China, 2013).

This understanding of the role of industrialization for sustainable development was not shared with developed countries who argued against industrialization as a priority. The negotiating group comprised of the US, Canada and Israel attempted to frame the issue as issues of decent work, worker's rights, social protection and education opportunities, without once mentioning industrialization or structural transformation (UN DSD, 2013). Similarly, the statement from the EU highlighted "governance, transparency and

participative government methods," as well as "social protection systems successfully promoting higher labor market participation." without reference to industrialization.

Ultimately, the agreement on infrastructure, industrial development and domestic technology development in SDG goal 9 and targets 8.2, 9.2, 9.b and 17.7, reflects a noteworthy legitimization of a subject that had been too controversial be raised in international negotiations.

4.2. International trade and finance

Reforms in the international financial, trade and economic architecture includes policies related to, for example, trade, financial regulation, lending, debt, aid, international tax cooperation and illicit financial flows. The argument that global reforms are indispensable to make development sustainable united developing countries, who collectively negotiated this position. The global reforms argument reflects an enduring priority of developing countries, rooted in analysis of the ways that the structure and rules of the global economy affects development outcomes. This analysis draws on the theoretical approaches of Dependency theory and Structuralist Economics developed by Latin American economists during the 1960s – Furtado, Prebisch, Sunkel, Cardoso, and others – who sought new explanations for obstacles to economic development that their countries faced. These ideas informed developmental policies of developing countries of the 1960s and 1970s: import substitution industrialization in Latin America and industrial policy in East Asia. Marginalized from mainstream economic policy making since the 1980s and 1990s it continues to inform analytical work and policy thinking amongst economists, think tanks and civil society in the South, who in turn influence the thinking of policy makers in developing countries. In recent years, the approach is being reconsidered for the neoliberal era by leading economists such as the José Antonio Ocampo (*Growth and Policy in Developing Countries: A Structuralist Approach*) and Justin Yifu Lin (*New Structuralist Economics*) (Ocampo et al., 2009; Lin, 2012).

These analyses were also behind the political demand for a New International Economic Order (NIEO) from the Third World in the 1970s. While NIEO became defunct with the onset of debt crises in the 1980s, and is often discredited as ideologically radical and extreme, the political aspiration and the economic ideas of structuralism are still alive. As Ambassador Kamau who had chaired the OWG writes with his coauthors, the NIEO reforms 'remained unfinished business for much of the South and was still considered a goal "very much worth pursuing"' (Kamau et al., 2018, p. 19).

International trade and finance have always been a central theme of UNCED frameworks. Developing countries have advocated for such reforms across various UN conferences and processes over the years. They had also been leading advocates for more effective financial regulation in developed country financial markets in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, and a more equitable global governance system, including a more effective voice and representation for developing countries.

At the OWG's thematic debate on global economic governance, developing countries took the position as a bloc (G-77 and China) that "the UN system should address the interlinkage between economic globalization and sustainable development", particularly the need for "close coordination of macro-economic policy decisions with other global governance, including the multilateral trading system, aid architecture, poverty eradication and sustainable development, including challenges posed by climate change" (G77 and China, 2014). Through the OWG process, developing countries individually and collectively advocated for a stand-alone goal on a renewed articulation for a global partnership for development. Such a partnership would include reforms to systemic global issues, such as financial deregulation, the importance

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[11] Interview #37
[12] Interview #37

of debt restructuring and imbalanced agricultural subsidies, for example, based on strengthened international cooperation (Muchhala & Sengupta, 2014). They also advocated for these means of implementation (MOI) targets to be included in each of the substantive goals, with specific measures to address policies and rules that constrain the achievement of other social, economic and environmental goals.

Developing countries also pursued two general principles that are drawn from negotiated UNCED norms: first, the differentiation between developed and developing countries; and second, developing countries being required to take action on sustainability without adequate MOI (Muchhala, 2014). Universality had to be reconciled with the reality of stark differences in resources and capacity. The seventh 1992 Rio Principle on common but differentiated responsibilities (CBDR) was repeatedly stressed by developing countries who argued that while SDGs are universal to all countries in nature and relevance, the degree of national responsibility in the implementation of the goals should be differentiated in accordance with the varying capacities, realities and developmental levels of countries (G77 and China, 2014). A cursory interpretation of this mandate of universality and differentiation could jeopardize the balance, coherence and impact of the SDGs.

Among the most salient issues in the OWG negotiations was illicit financial flows (IFFs) which raised alarm when data calculated showed that the developing world as a whole lost approximately $7.8 trillion during the 10-year-period from 2004 to 2013 (Global Financial Integrity) . IFFs lead to taxable financial resources being funneled away from developing countries, weakening their ability to finance sustainable development and exacerbating inequalities among countries. African countries were particularly strong advocates, calling for the elimination of IFFs (African Union, 2014, p. para 73).

Reforms to the policies and frameworks in the international financial and trade architecture is reflected through various SDG targets. Some of the most significant include: target 16.4, on illicit financial and arms flows; target 17.4 on supporting debt financing, debt relief and debt restructuring; target 17.12 on market access for least developed countries; target 10.5 on regulation and monitoring of global financial markets; and target 10.6, on developing countries in decision-making in global international economic and financial institutions; targets 10.a and 10.b on aid and financial flows to LDCs, African countries and small island developing countries. The framework also addresses trade and investment rules that could obstruct the achievement of other SDGs, such as: target 3.b on intellectual property flexibility relevant for access to medicines and public health more broadly; and 2.b on agricultural export subsidies important for food security.

Alliances with civil society and the women's rights movements played a pivotal role in the creation of the global reform agenda. These groups pursued a range of advocacy strategies such as: delivering interventions and joint statements during the negotiations; organizing side events with panel presentations and interactive discussion with member states, the generating sign-on statements and petitions; issuing and disseminating articles, reports and briefing papers; organizing strategy workshops to build awareness and advocacy momentum; and bilateral advocacy with member states. The Women's Major Group called for a structural transformation involving reforms in global finance and trade policies "firmly rooted in human rights obligations and the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities" (Women's Major Group). The UN Non-Governmental Liaison Service produced recommendations compiled from a series of international civil society consultations in 2013 which included, for example, reforms to the international financial, tax, trade and investment architecture and the adoption of strong safeguards in the implementation of public-private partnerships (UN-NGLS).

4.3. Inequality

The issue of inequality between countries is closely related to international trade and finance, and the last section explained the roots of these positions in the economic analysis from the South. However, Southern agency in formulating the inequality agenda pursued broader aims and drew on other ideas. Concern of the South with inequality – both between and within countries – has been at the origin of the conception of sustainable development of the 1970s and 1980s. As the post-2015 process commenced, the South – particularly Latin America – was also an important source of new analysis on the relationship between inequality, growth and development that provided the intellectual basis for advocacy on reducing inequality as a goal in the SDG framework.

Since the 1980s, many countries of Latin America experienced economic crises and difficulties in restoring stable growth. Starting in the late 1990s, new research on Latin American economies began to ask whether inequality – long assumed to be compatible with economic growth – was a source of inefficiency. A rich international debate and literature emerged showing inequality could be a constraint to growth (for example ECLAC on Latin America, 2010, and Stiglitz on the US)[13]. At the same time, a number of Latin American countries began to take up reducing inequality as an important political objective. They pioneered innovative policy initiatives that led to unprecedented declines in inequality, bucking global trends (Cornia, 2014).

The inclusion of inequality in SDG framework is widely attributed to the insistence of developing countries (Third World Network, 2014) and the persistent advocacy of international civil society networks (Saiz & Donald, 2017). During the final stage of OWG negotiations (April-July 2014), the stand-alone inequality goal was one of the most difficult to reach agreement on. It was initially included in the draft SDG text circulated by the Co-Chairs for review, removed, then restored again in the final text (Third World Network, 2014). Its ultimate inclusion in the list was a result of repeated intervention by developing country negotiating groups, as well as a handful of other countries[14].

In the Post-2015 and OWG debates, the goal on inequality was a site of contestation. Powerful members of the donor community – large bilaterals, philanthropies, and influential academics – opposed a stand-alone inequality goal (MacNaughton, 2017; Fukuda-Parr, 2019). They did not argue against reducing inequality as an important objective. The arguments turned not on inequality per se, but on whether inequality would address poverty and marginalization alone, or a broader set of issues including extreme inequality (distance between top and bottom of the distribution and the role of the elite), and inequality between countries (Fukuda-Parr, 2019). It was apparent to all that the issue of inequality had to be in the framework; the MDGs had been highly criticized for neglecting inequality, and growing extreme inequality and was becoming a major public issue, and it was in the terms of reference of the HLP (UN Secretary General, 2012). Instead, they argued that inequality should be reflected across the goals such as access to water and education, and that a stand-alone goal would be redundant. This effectively framed inequality as a poverty concern focused on the marginalized and excluded, keeping out issues of concentration of income and power at the top, and inequality between countries. Thus, while inequality was in the terms of reference of the HLP for post 2015 agenda, its report did not include an inequality goal while arguing that the agenda should 'leave no one behind'. According to officials and advisers involved in debates, many from donor coun-

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[13] See for example ECLAC's 2010 flagship report (ECLAC, 2010)

[14] Interviews #22, #32

tries were concerned with domestic political sensitivities in advocating for reducing inequality[15]. Inequality framed as poverty keeps out of the debate the issues of systemic and macro-level policy drivers of inequality and redistribution as a solution.

Advocates of a stand alone goal included civil society groups and international policy networks – with a representation of NGOs and think tanks from the South such as Social Watch, Third World Network and the South Centre – many developing country governments, and ultimately the G77 and China. They argued for a broader perspective on inequality, encompassing issues of poverty and exclusion, and extreme inequality, inequality between countries, and structural obstacles to sustainable development. Civil society engaged in the OWG process were committed to highlighting inequality in diverse forms, including gender inequality, extreme inequality within countries, inequality of social, economic and cultural rights and the discrimination of certain groups such as the disabled, elderly and LGBTQI. Civil society from developing countries across various regions consistently highlighted the structural causes of inequality, including macroeconomic policies, financial regulation and taxation policies and their role in generating economic resources for the purpose of inequality reduction through redistribution (UN-NGLS).

The civil society coalitions organized into Major Groups (e.g. coalitions of NGOs in women's rights, trade unions and worker's rights, youth advocates, and so on) also proposed a specific target to establish measures of inequality among countries. International NGOs and think tanks such as Centre for Global Development, Oxfam International and Center for Economic and Social Rights, produced analytical reports, policy briefs and organized discussion sessions between leading policy analysts and member states.

The arguments for inequality as a priority focused on both instrumental and intrinsic reasons. Technocrats argued that inequality had destructive effects on democracy, economic efficiency, and social stability. They included prominent experts in the development community including political scientist Michael Doyle and Nobel Laureate Joseph Stiglitz (Doyle & Stiglitz, 2014). Some 90 leading academics signed a letter to the HLP recommending a stand-alone goal on inequality. Ideas from Latin America and the knowledge of empirical research and policy experience in that region were key sources of these technocratic arguments.

But perhaps the moral issue of inequality was more compelling. Oxfam's (2014) report, "Even it Up: Time to end extreme inequality" hit a moral nerve by demonstrating that the richest 85 people across the globe share a combined wealth equivalent to that of the poorest 3.5 billion of the world's population. The report articulated inequality as inherent in enduring poverty, economic instability, environment and development challenges, raising the alarm in the OWG on the imperative to address inequality as a global norm (Oxfam, 2014). Only a stand alone goal would signal equality and equity as a moral ethos with an agenda for action.

Support for a stand-alone goal and for a broader concept of inequality gained momentum over time. But until the end, the contestation continued, not only on whether there would be a stand alone goal, but on what would be included as targets and how they would be measured. Ultimately, while the goal to reduce inequality within and between countries was agreed, the targets and indicators remain weak.

5. Conclusions

This paper has identified and chronicled some significant contributions of ideas and actors from the South in shaping the SDGs. The concept of sustainable development originated with challenges from the South to a Northern led analysis of the world's environmental challenge. Individuals such as Mahbub ul Haq, Gamani Corea, Ignacy Sachs, Shridath Ramphal, Samir Amin, Emil Salim, and many others played a central role in formulating the concept through the Founex seminar and the Brundtland Commission. These ideas drew on their particular understanding of the challenges of development, their theorizing and analysis, much of which challenged mainstream assumptions and prescriptions.

In the emergence of the SDGs, Paula Caballero from Colombia was the quintessential norm entrepreneur who originated and drove the idea of creating the SDGs that would change the dynamic of formulating the follow up to the MDGs. The reconceptualizing of development from a donor aid framework for meeting basic needs to a universal agenda for socially inclusive, economically equitable and environmentally sustainable development would not have happened without the agency of individuals like Caballero, states, and numerous civil society advocates. As Butch Montes, the UN representative of the South Centre, remarked, 'if it had not been for the Global South, the 2030 Agenda would be an extension of the MDGs'[16]. Individuals, NGOs, think tanks, and governments of the South were skillful in their advocacy and in diplomacy to achieve the agreement. They were not only effective in using the space opened up by the multi-stakeholder structure of consultations, but strategic in creating new spaces by introducing the OWG process.

The agendas they pursued that are highlighted in the paper: structural change, international trade and finance, inequality are long standing priorities that draw on some of the key elements of the original thinking about sustainable development. The thinking is informed by development economics research and theorizing from the South, such as Dependency theory and Structuralism on global inequalities and new ideas about inequality as a threat to economic efficiency and democracy.

The negotiations over the SDGs did not achieve all that developing countries advocated. Many elements would not be in the framework without the agency of the South - such as industrialization and technology, inequality, international trade and finance, consumption and production, among others. However, there were many compromises and the strong language of many goals is watered down by ambiguous targets and indicators (Fukuda-Parr & McNeill, 2019). The framework is often criticized as inadequately transformative and incoherent. Nonetheless, the adoption of the SDGs is a game changer in thinking about development. Its redefinition transitions development from a post-colonial to a global project. As former president of Ireland Mary Robinson remarked, 'The universal nature of the new sustainable development agenda was hard won and transformative. No longer are we talking about development with a donor-recipient mind-set. No country has achieved sustainable development. Every country is challenged, in different ways, to achieve the seventeen goals. Only through action at home and cooperation internationally can transformation be achieved.' (Robinson, 2017)

In much of the international relations literature, norms have been characterized as being static. Finnemore and Sikkink's norm dynamics identify the third and final stage of norm emergence as when the idea has a 'taken for granted' character (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). More recent literature emphasizes the dynamic nature of norms (see for example Coleman & Tieku, 2018; Acharya, 2004). Our account of the SDG negotiations highlights the formation of norms as a process of intense political contestation in a marketplace of ideas, driven by ideals and values, and diverging world views, but also by material interests. Norm creation in international development is a constant and never ending process of contestation amongst competing ideas, and it may not

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[15] Interview #7, #17, #42

[16] Interview #31

always be new norms that are created, but old norms that rise from the margins. The South may not have been a source of norms, but norms by definition are mainstream ideas. Ideas from the South have been out of the mainstream, and as in the case of the emergence of sustainable development as a concept, and of the SDGs as a development framework, these ideas came from the margins to the mainstream. The contestation is not only about ideas derived from different world views and analyses but material interests. This case highlights the need for more research on the process of norm contestation in the emergence of norms.

Declaration of Competing Interest

Acknowledgements

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