



Sustainable development goals

Christmas is coming and the geese are getting fat,
Please to put a penny in the old man's hat,
If you haven't got a penny then a ha'penny will do,
If you haven't got a ha'penny then God bless you.
(Traditional)

It is customary at this time of the year for numerous charities operating globally to organize succour for the developing world, starting with an appeal for donations. What began as individual acts has now become massively institutionalized as a permanent feature, epitomized above all by the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs),¹ which are heavily oriented towards the relief of poverty. It has long been known that alleviating poverty through charity does not usually help the recipients to become self-supporting; on the contrary, it increases their dependency. It is, therefore, surprising that exhortations to support the SDGs seem to become ever more insistent and importunate. The latest example I have seen is from the Copenhagen Institute.² Perhaps in acknowledgment of the deleterious and unsustainable nature of "pure" charitable donating to alleviate poverty, notional returns on investment in some of the SDGs are put forward. For example, tackling tuberculosis is estimated to cost 4900 MGBP and should "save" (i.e., prolong) 600,000 lives, yielding a benefit–cost ratio of 46. The detailed assumptions and methods of calculation can be found from the website of the Institute;³ the main contribution to return is the increased income (over a lifetime—presumably this too is prolonged by investment in sanitation and healthcare) earned by an educated, healthy individual in comparison with an ignorant, diseased one. While the returns (typically a few hundred or even thousand %) seem impressive in comparison with savings bank accounts (a few %), bonds (5%) or average returns from the stock market (about 10%), they are not especially so compared with the thousands of % of returns obtainable from investment in scientific research and engineering development [1]. As an example, the global annual cost of liver cancer is estimated at 1.64 TUSD [2]. Global population is about 8 milliard, and there is an average of about 3.5 medical doctors per thousand people, the majority of whom are general practitioners offering primary care. If every ten doctors have an

advanced sensor, acquired and maintained for 10 kUSD per annum, capable of detecting incipient liver cancer early enough for preventive and curative treatment to be carried out, most of the cost could be avoided; even if just half were avoided, the return on investment would be about 2,800%.⁴ Note that, given the global connectivity of our present world, an invention made in one place can quickly be disseminated and applied worldwide.

Even these returns pale into insignificance in comparison with what may be obtained by astute wheeler-dealing. A fairly recent case that has come to light in the UK has been described by the Member of Parliament in whose constituency the events took place [4]:

Yesterday Private Eye revealed truly shocking, industrial-scale corruption on Teesside [Teesside is a former steelworks site in Redcar, which is being converted for green industry]. A huge site acquired by the public body South Tees Developments Limited for £12 million in 2019 subsequently received hundreds of millions of pounds of taxpayer investment. Any future sale had to be on market terms, but we now know that private developers exercised their option to purchase for a mere £1 an acre plus inflation, paying £96.79 in December 2022. I have the transfer. The only economic growth that is being delivered is being delivered to the accounts of Ben Houchen's pals Messrs Musgrave and Corney, who, for a bargain £100, will benefit to the tune of £100 million—and all the while the state remains on the hook for the ongoing environmental costs. Will the Leader of the House ensure that the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities comes to that Dispatch Box and tells the House what plans the Government have for a full investigation of this industrial-scale corruption?

This amounts to a return of 100,000,000%!⁵ Teesside is perhaps the largest "brownfield" develop-

¹ <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>

² <https://copenhagenconsensus.com/>

³ <https://copenhagenconsensus.com/best-buys-africa/methodological-guidelines>

⁴ A more sophisticated calculation could be carried out on the basis of quality-of-life considerations [3].

⁵ This figure would be somewhat diminished after taking the time actually spent on the wheeler-dealing into account. Conversely, if the 100 GBP used to buy the land was borrowed, return on investment could be infinite (without taking the time to arrange the borrowing etc. into account).

ment site in Europe, and has presumably come to light because of its sheer size. Doubtless smaller-scale examples abound [5], and may enjoy returns of a similar magnitude. Although the MP mentioned corruption, this is likely to be indirect and concern the means whereby the developers were allowed to buy the land at such an extraordinarily cheap price.⁶

The countervailing viewpoint is that one of the key actors, the mayor of Teeside (Ben Houchen), is an extremely popular figure (re-elected in 2021 by an overwhelming majority, almost 73% of votes cast in a turnout of 34%), hence what he does or is involved in “must be right”.⁷ More specifically, it is asserted that the land would have remained derelict had not private investors been thus incentivized to take up what was ostensibly an unattractive development opportunity.

All of this raises a number of interesting issues, which cannot possibly be tackled exhaustively in this relatively brief editorial, but let us at least look at those that most immediately press for attention.

The first is the validity of the SDGs (also known as the Millennium Development Goals, MDGs). They have already been severely criticized, mainly on the grounds that they are unquantifiable and, hence, it will be impossible to determine whether they have been achieved, or even whether we are approaching achievement [6]. The attempt to rescue them by pointing out modest returns on investment, hence suggesting that it makes financial sense to support them, can be immediately dismissed because far greater returns can be obtained by other means,⁸ and if monetary return is the sole criterion of excellence, then the commercial case for the SDGs, under actually prevailing conditions, is very weak.

The second is the main assumption behind the calculation of the returns from investing in the SDGs, namely the increased earnings as a result of good health, education etc. It assumes an unlimited demand for the kind of work that would attract the increased earnings. A similar fallacy is apparent in the developed world, which for the

past few decades has strongly supported university education, which was formerly received by less than 10% of the cohorts leaving school, but is now received by more than 50%; the justification is based on the calculation of an impressive return on investment via the increased earnings of graduates compared with nongraduates. The fallacy is, of course, the lack of an indefinitely expanding market for graduates [7].⁹

The third is the obvious fact that the returns, such as they might be after dealing with the first and second issues, do not accrue to any individual investor but to society as a whole. The solution to this issue seems to be simple, however—the state must make the investment, because the state as a whole benefits. But this leads immediately to a *fourth* issue—given that the state’s revenues are insufficient, which is presumably why the investment was not made a long time ago, external donations must be used to fund projects—hence the activity of the aid agencies—but these donations are likely to be expropriated by members of the government for adding to their personal wealth, as well as used by the aid agencies themselves for improper purposes.¹⁰ Indeed, one reason why the developing countries are still impoverished is the continuous, large-scale expropriation of revenues derived from the many lucrative resources possessed by most of the countries by members of their governments.¹¹ We have seen, in the USSR under Stalin, what can be achieved by a resource-rich developing country when corruption is stamped out—albeit at great human cost and it is to this day being debated whether this cost was necessary for the development goals to be realized. The USSR also had the feature of being the largest country in the world (by land area) and could develop without being intricately and inextricably connected to the rest of the world, much as China was relatively isolated and self-sufficient during most of its history. Contemporary developing countries, the would-be beneficiaries of the SDGs, are small and easily fall under the tutelage of large, developed economies. The actual

⁶ In May 2023 the Government announced that it was setting up an independent panel to probe claims of “corruption, wrongdoing and illegality” at the UK’s largest industrial zone. The panel is expected to report its findings in 2024.

⁷ Cf. the folktale “What the old man does is always right” (Hans Andersen).

⁸ Cf. ref. 4. Most of the countries primarily targeted by the SDGs are ruled by small cliques who expropriate the wealth of the countries on a grand scale. Often they risked life and limb to get into positions of absolute power, but after having made that “investment” and being firmly ensconced, the returns are vast, and mostly achieved simply by transferring the proceeds (e.g., from a levy on the export of minerals) into their private, foreign bank accounts, completely dwarfing anything that could be achieved by developing their own countries. And we have not mentioned the vast returns obtainable via what is called “finance capitalism” (see footnotes 24–26 in ref. 7a, footnote 91 in ref. 7b, and ref. 8).

⁹ The policy has nevertheless persisted, motivated by the goal of social engineering. It is beyond the scope of this essay to assess the merits of this alternative goal.

¹⁰ E.g., for organizing sex parties. See ref. 8 and <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/2021/04/06/oxfam-accused-rotten-work-culture-congo-former-staff>

¹¹ Mineral resources are usually exploited in archaic, highly wasteful ways. The resources of exotic plants and microorganisms are practically unexploited. Such is the scale of expropriation that the heads of government could easily afford, using their private wealth, to found and lavishly endow several research institutes to enormously improve resource efficiency.

régime of resource extraction and export is too profitable to the latter for them to willingly abandon it. This fourth reason alone is sufficient to vitiate all the painstaking work of the Copenhagen Institute to justify and encourage investment in the SDGs. Equitable world development is possible, but the SDGs are a dead end for reaching that goal. Very different priorities are needed:

- Control of population. At present, development gains are vitiated by population growth. As Elspeth Huxley wrote in the 1950s [9]:

Every baby inherits the necessity to fill its belly twice a day for sixty, seventy, eighty years to come ... if all goes well [this infant] will need before it dies at least twenty tons of rice, the flesh of several bullocks, two or three tons of fish, and vegetables, grain, fruit, spices besides. Say that in one small village twenty babies are born this year. Ten that would otherwise die are saved by doctors, and the next year ten more, and the year after that. In twenty years that means 200 extra people: each year, 4,000 extra tons of rice, the flesh of a dozen bullocks, seven or eight tons of fish. By now the saved ones have in their turn started breeding, and soon the process gets out of hand, as threatening as a cancerous tumour. Where will all this rice come from, this corn, those fish and beasts? Who will grow them, on what land?

- Ensuring that all diseconomies of commercial operations are properly accounted for [12]. The threat of deleterious climate change has brought some movement in this direction (carbon taxes), and of course there have been local initiatives (in the UK, the 1863 Alkali Act was the first national initiative), but all activities need to be covered. The vast complex of nickel refineries laying waste a portion of the fascinating and exotic island of Celebes in the East Indies is a recent, horrifying example of untrammelled diseconomy. It is ironical that the investment justification is the projected growth in electric vehicles, battery storage systems and the like, requiring nickel for lithium-ion batteries, driven by decarbonization; it is doubly ironical that technological advances are making nickel an unnecessary component of these batteries.
- Abnegation of pathological material acquisitiveness among rulers. Given the difficulty of changing an adult character, this implies the need to change the rulers—that is, introduce a different system of governance.

Addressing these priorities undoubtedly poses difficult, some would even say insuperable, challenges. The first step towards tackling them is to clearly enunciate them and initiate debate about them.

In recent years it has become fashionable for some investment funds to devote a small percentage—1% would not be untypical—of the sums they manage to causes “that make the world a better place”. In fact, the investment in liver cancer diagnosis mentioned above falls into that category, because most of the return does not accrue directly to the investor, but to the whole world; the benefit to the investor is greatly diluted. This is the nub of the difficulty. It has often been claimed that for this reason no one will invest in projects for the general benefit, “for the relief of man’s estate”, as Francis Bacon put it [13], hence it is essential for the State to finance scientific research [14], using its taxation revenues. But Kealey has cogently argued, with much evidence [15], that this dilution does not deter private investors from undertaking expensive scientific research; the commercial returns on the investment themselves justify the outlay, without any need to invoke the motive of disinterestedly “making the world a better place”. Even the OECD has concluded that privately funded scientific research boosts GDP more than state-funded research [18]. The concept can be, and is being, extended to other areas of general benefit, such as schooling: low-cost private schools are springing up in many developing countries, offering a much better education than what is offered by the state [19]. They benefit both the entrepreneur who set them up and the wider community. A similar situation would prevail for the entrepreneur who introduced the means of early diagnosis of liver cancer mentioned above: benefits (“profits”) are shared by all participants.

A subsidiary matter concerns migration. For many decades developed countries have encouraged large-scale immigration from developing countries, for example for staffing health services and for construction work. Presumably every immigrant was in some way above average, for example skilled as a medical doctor or simply able-bodied, hence their departure impoverished their native lands and surely retarded their development. The policy of the Chinese government, to encourage migrants established in foreign countries to return by offering them attractive conditions, is a felicitous example of how the deleterious effects of emigration can be not only reversed but even used to advantage. Unfortunately, the SDGs do not directly address mass migration, even though it has become a very prominent worldwide issue.

In conclusion, one should beware of according the SDGs canonical status. Their main use is to initiate debate and discussion, whence more effective priorities will evolve.

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