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## Power and the Sustainable Development Goals: a feminist analysis

Valeria Esquivel<sup>†</sup>

### ABSTRACT

This article offers a power analysis of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) process and outcomes, from a feminist perspective. Many see, in the SDGs, several opportunities for progress on gender equality and women's rights, if not for transformation. Yet there are many reasons for scepticism, as the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development's vision is not always met with strong enough language, clear policies or funding provisions. Realising the 'transformative potential' of the Agenda in the decade and a half to come will be far from a technocratic exercise – and this is particularly true for the full realisation of women's rights. A first step is to consider how structural power relations are challenged or reinforced in the Agenda and the SDGs, and in plans for their implementation and resourcing.

Desde una perspectiva feminista, el presente artículo ofrece un análisis del poder vinculado al proceso y los resultados de los ods. Muchas observadoras consideran que éstos brindan algunas oportunidades para lograr avances, si no transformaciones, en las áreas de igualdad de género y derechos de las mujeres. Sin embargo, existen muchas razones que hacen que persista el escepticismo, pues la visión planteada por la Agenda no siempre es respaldada por un lenguaje contundente, políticas claras y/o mecanismos de financiación. En la próxima década y media, concretar el "potencial transformador" de la Agenda distará mucho de un ser un ejercicio tecnocrático, lo cual es particularmente cierto cuando se trata de la plena realización de los derechos de las mujeres. El primer paso implica considerar cómo las relaciones de poder estructurales se ven cuestionadas o reafirmadas por la Agenda y los ods, así como en los planes orientados a su implementación y su financiamiento.

Cet article propose une analyse du pouvoir du processus et des résultats des ODD, d'un point de vue féministe. Nombreux sont ceux qui voient, dans les ODD, plusieurs occasions de progrès, sinon de transformation, en matière d'égalité de genre et de droits de l'homme. Cependant, il y a de nombreuses raisons de se montrer sceptique, car la vision de l'Agenda n'est pas toujours accompagnée de mots suffisamment forts, de politiques claires ou des dispositions de financement requises. Réaliser le «potentiel de transformation» de l'Agenda dans la décennie et demie à venir ne sera pas un exercice technocratique, loin de là — et c'est tout particulièrement le cas pour la pleine réalisation des droits de la femme. Une première étape consiste à considérer la manière dont les rapports de pouvoir structurels sont mis en question ou

### KEYWORDS

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justice; gender; growth;  
human rights

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renforcés dans l'Agenda et les ODD, et dans les plans relatifs à leur mise en œuvre et dotation en ressources.

## Introduction

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were signed in September 2015 by the United Nations (UN) General Assembly (UN 2015). Alongside them was the Paris Agreement under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, reached in December 2015,<sup>1</sup> and the outcome document of the Third Financing for Development Conference, which was agreed in July 2015.<sup>2</sup> These, together with the agreement on the SDGs monitoring indicators, which will be finalised in March 2016, form the cornerstones of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. This will shape the development agenda in the coming 15 years even more so than the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) did, during the previous 15 years.

The 2030 Agenda is ambitious in its 17 goals and 169 targets, universal in it applies to all countries, comprehensive as it integrates the economic, social, and environmental dimensions of sustainable development, integrated and indivisible (para. 5), and grounded in the respect, protection, and promotion of human rights and fundamental freedoms (para. 19).

The SDGs are the result of a two-year open consultation process, involving the active engagement of member states (particularly middle-income countries) and civil society groups. This process made it possible to shed some of the most restrictive features of the MDGs, most notably the aid-driven approach to poverty reduction and other 'poor-countries' problems, and the exclusive emphasis on outcomes (or 'results'), as opposed to policies and means of implementation. In contrast, the SDGs do explicitly mention both of these – even if vaguely in many instances. The SDGs list starts out with a continuation of the MDGs in relation to poverty (Goal 1), hunger and food security (Goal 3), health (Goal 3), education (Goal 4), and access to water and sanitation (Goal 6). But it goes beyond the MDGs by taking on board issues that are common to developed and developing countries, most notably gender equality and women's empowerment (Goal 5), inequalities within countries (Goal 10), the need for full and productive employment and for sustainable patterns of growth (Goal 8), consumption, production (Goal 12) (including modern energy; Goal 7), industrialisation (Goal 9), and urbanisation (Goal 11). Equally importantly, the SDGs also focus on a number of *global issues*: inequalities among countries (Goal 10), climate change (Goal 13), marine (Goal 14) and terrestrial eco-systems (Goal 15), the promotion of peaceful and inclusive societies (Goal 16), and a Global Partnership for Sustainable Development, which is, in effect a dedicated goal to the means of implementation (Goal 17).

The strong aspirational language of the Agenda, aiming at 'transforming our world' (as the title of UN 2015 reads) as well as the breath and scope of its 'plan for action' (in the language of the preamble, UN 2015, 1) has been met with cautious optimism from many in the development community. Many commend the fact that the SDGs were not decided by a 'small group of technocrats at the UN basement'. Many see, in the SDGs, several opportunities for progress, if not for transformation. Yet, as we shall see, there are many reasons

for scepticism, as the Agenda's vision is not always met with strong enough language, clear policies, or funding provisions. Realising the 'transformative potential' of the agenda in the decade and a half to come is far from a technocratic exercise – and this is particularly true for the full realisation of women's rights.

### Sustainable development but a traditional take on growth

In contrast to the broad vision of sustainable development that encompasses the economic, social, and environmental dimensions, Agenda 2030 maintains a traditional take on gross domestic product growth, implicitly conflating economic growth with societal progress (Adams and Tobin 2014). Industrialisation is still seen as the main driver of growth, and countries should 'significantly raise industry's share of employment and gross domestic product' (Target 9.2). Economic growth is the 'first and foremost' generator of domestic resources needed to achieve the SDGs (para. 66), tying social protection and other re-distributive policies (Targets 1.3, 5.4, and 10.4) to this 'grow first, redistribute later' proviso.

Goal 8 ('Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all') and its targets make explicit a strong growth–employment nexus. The hope lies in increased productivity, technological change, and resource efficiency, and a mild mention is made of 'endeavouring' to decouple economic growth from environmental degradation, without challenging high growth (as traditionally measured, at 7 per cent in per capita terms for least-developed countries; Target 8.1). Goal 12 on sustainable production and consumption patterns only 'encourages' companies to adopt sustainable practices and to integrate sustainability information into their reporting cycle (12.6). In the same vein, Goal 10, on reducing inequalities within countries, proposes achieving and sustaining 'an income growth of the bottom 40 per cent of the population at a rate higher than the national average'<sup>3</sup> (target 10.1), effectively relying on income growth as the way out of (income) poverty, with fiscal, wage, and social protection policies hopefully moderating capital income (Target 10.4).<sup>4</sup>

This traditional take on growth assumes economic growth happens on its own – a supply-side story that is independent from policies and actions. It also assumes that countries are ultimately responsible for their development, provided their 'policy space' is respected (Target 17.15); and that a 'diverse private sector, ranging from micro-enterprises to co-operatives to multinationals' (para. 41) is just another stakeholder in development. This conceptual approach thus fails to respond to, or challenge, the macro-economic and structural drivers of current patterns of growth – including the structural role of unpaid care and domestic work in supporting economic growth. It also fails to put growth within environmental limits (Raworth 2012).

These elements configure what Peter Utting (2013) has termed 'embedded liberalism' – a softer version than market liberalism, in its emphasis on strong institutions to shape the development process, including stronger institutions at the global level, but which does not challenge the ways inequalities in income, wealth, and power are produced and reproduced at national and global levels, nor does it attempt to transform power relations

between the North and the South, between the rich and the poor, and between men and women (Women's Major Group 2014). Agenda 2030 aims at 'transforming our world', but intends to get there without substantially opposing the powers that be. Power relations are the big elephant in the room of Agenda 2030.

### Power: mentioned once, hardly challenged

A search on the word 'power' in the Agenda 2030 document gives *one* strike only: 'at a time of immense challenges to sustainable development ... There are enormous disparities of opportunity, wealth and power' (para. 14). This diagnosis understands power as a given, not as social relations at both the macro and micro level that 'leverage specific actors, policies and practices and ultimately privilege a particular rationality in the governance of social order' over others (Okereke *et al.* 2009, 63).<sup>5</sup> Yet these social relations of power have been at work as Agenda 2030 was formulated and agreed, and will be working as it is implemented. Powerful actors shaping the course of world development – including big countries, inter-government institutions (particularly those dealing with trade and finances), transnational corporations, and even some huge foundations and international non-governmental organisations with budgets of billions of dollars – could not have failed to mould Agenda 2030, contributing to emphasise certain aspects and marginalise others.<sup>6</sup>

Last-minute negotiations and changes introduced in the text are a good example of these powerful actors at play to guard the *status quo* in international economic governance – or the lack of it. One last minute addition to the text referred to the status of the Addis Ababa Action Agenda (AAAA), now helping 'to contextualize the 2030 Agenda's means of implementation and targets' (para. 62) – an addition that puts means of implementation in the straitjacket of the AAAA. Another last-minute addition qualified the countries' policy space by stressing that this exists 'while remaining consistent with relevant international commitments' (para. 63) – but it is precisely those rules and commitments that constrain countries' policy space. Yet another last-minute insertion was the stipulation that 'maintaining sustainable debt levels is the responsibility of borrowing countries' (para. 69), as if lenders and borrowers were on a par, in what was an otherwise progressive paragraph which also mentions debt relief (Muchhala *et al.* 2015).

The human rights framework has also been a disputed terrain during Agenda 2030 negotiations, and the outcome is less than coherent because of that. A commitment to human rights is strongly present in the Agenda preamble. It reaffirms that the Agenda is guided by the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations, grounded in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, international human rights treaties, and the Millennium Declaration (para. 10), and 'all major United Nations conferences and summits which have laid a solid foundation for sustainable development and have helped to shape the new Agenda' (para. 11). Yet, while these statements act as context, the Agenda does not conceptualise the goals and targets as realisation of rights: they could have been linked to the rights to education, food, health, water and sanitation, social protection, education, sexual and reproductive rights, or women's rights. When looking at the architecture of the UN as an institution, this reinforces the separation of the UN 'development

pillar' from the 'human rights pillar' (and their review mechanisms). During the next 15 years, these might continue to run parallel as a result.

Particularly worrisome is also the rhetoric of accountability, stakeholder participation, social dialogue, and global governance, characteristic of the 'embedded liberalism' identified by Peter Utting and mentioned earlier. The reality is accountability mechanisms which are actually weak, and a lack of historical perspective on the responsibility of powerful actors, particularly transnational corporations, in causing the problems that the SDGs are trying to solve in the first place (Reddy and Harvold Kvangraven 2015). This is exemplified in the case of the public-private sector 'partnerships for development', which are encouraged by Target 17.17, yet have no provisions which would ensure these partnerships will be transparent and accountable (Adams and Martens 2015). Or, maybe more importantly, because it relates to countries' accountability, by the 'high-level political forum under the auspices of the General Assembly and the Economic and Social Council [which] will have the central role in overseeing follow-up and review at the global level' (para. 42).<sup>7</sup> Charged with the enormous task of providing coherence and co-ordination on sustainable development policies, the high-level political forum is, however, based on voluntary country-level reviews, without any universal mechanism to assess each country's contribution to the global realisation of these goals, nor to review and monitor 'multi-lateral agencies, the Bretton Woods Institutions and any corporation or "partnership" wanting to use the UN name, logo or flag' (Bissio 2014, 1). In the words of Roberto Bissio, this is meaningless accountability, if it cannot hold the powerful accountable.

The few mentions of the Bretton Woods Institutions show that they are not bound by Agenda 2030. Paragraph 44 acknowledges the 'importance for international financial institutions to support, in line with their mandates, the policy space of each country', and para. 63 reads that 'national development efforts need to be supported by an enabling international economic environment, including coherent and mutually supporting world trade, monetary and financial systems'. Indeed, national development efforts need this support, but the Agenda does not indicate how this is going to happen, beyond referring in vague terms to these institutions providing 'policy coordination and coherence' to enhance global macro-economic stability (Targets 17.13 and 14). In fact, lack of co-ordination and coherence are neither the sole nor the main reason for macro-economic instability, nor the uniquely required policy response. If one factor was to blame for the recent 'Great Recession' which began in wealthy countries in 2007–8, this would possibly be the unregulated domestic and international financial sector.<sup>8</sup>

The 'theory of change'<sup>9</sup> on macro-economic policy behind the 2030 Agenda seems to be a reliance on 'voice and participation of developing countries ... in international economic decision-making, norm-setting and global economic governance' (para. 44, also Target 10.6, referring to international economic and financial institutions), although it is not clear through which mechanisms this is to happen, or whether the UN can deliver it. The implicit idea is that by 'sitting at the table' and voicing their concerns, power structures of the global economic system changes (Garsten and Jacobson, cited in Reddy and Harvold Kvangraven 2015).

However, we need not look far to realise that sitting at the table is not equal to having power: a year ago, the Greece crisis was a crude reminder of where actual power lies in debt and macro-economic negotiations, even in the supposedly democratic European context.<sup>10</sup> Another example of the hidden dimension of power relations in operation in negotiations (Lukes 1974) are the Addis Ababa deliberations, in which the idea of an international tax body with country-based representation was fiercely opposed by developed countries, and did not come into being (see Nicole Bidegain Ponte and Corina Rodríguez Enríquez, in this issue). What can the indicator proposed to monitor Target 10.6, ‘percentage of members or voting rights of developing countries in international organisations’, actually tell us, when these international organisations just do not exist?

### Women’s empowerment without power?

When I searched Agenda 2030 for the word ‘power’, I found ‘empower[ment]’ in a number of instances. All but one related to women’s and girls’ empowerment, with one more general usage. Target 10.2 aims ‘by 2030, [to] empower and promote the social, economic and political inclusion of all, irrespective of age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion or economic or other status’.

The literature on women’s empowerment is broad and evolving.<sup>11</sup> Yet, as the Expert Group Meeting (EGM) in preparation for the CSW 60 (the sixtieth meeting of the UN Commission on the Status of Women ) advises, women’s empowerment has been used ‘generously but loosely in the international development and humans rights communities ... some definitions are explicitly political and others cautiously technical; some uses are favoured by donors and investors and others by social movements’ (EGM 2016, 1). Although genuine empowerment *always* involves changing unequal power relations, donors and investors tend to favour an apolitical use of the term, in which power relations may actually remain wholly or virtually untouched. When used in this way, the notion of empowerment ‘risks becoming a signifier of righteousness – part of the process of mystification of dominant group interests’ (Mosedale 2014, 1115). In other words, it becomes ‘empowerment without power’.<sup>12</sup>

What does empowerment involve in actuality? In the view of the EGM for CSW 60, ‘women’s empowerment goes beyond the idea that women are empowered when their capabilities are enhanced or when they are able to compete with men for jobs. Empowerment implies secure livelihoods, the ability to enjoy their human rights, a reduction in the unpaid work that hinders the enjoyment of rights, and meaningful participation as actors and leaders in their communities’ (EGM 2016, 1). I have chosen this definition precisely because it comes from a group of practitioners who needed to establish it in order to analyse the SDGs.

Most of the issues present in this definition are covered by Goal 5, to ‘achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls’ and its targets, despite the fact that ‘women’s rights’ are not part of the goal as initially proposed (UN Women 2015). The targets for Goal 5 are ending all forms of discrimination against women and girls everywhere, all forms of violence against women and girls, and all harmful practices (Targets 5.1, 5.2



and 5.3); ensuring universal access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights (Target 5.6); ensuring ‘women’s full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life’ (Target 5.5); reducing (and redistributing to a limited extent) unpaid care and domestic work (Target 5.4); and undertaking ‘reforms to give women equal rights to economic resources, as well as access to ownership and control over land and other forms of property, financial services, inheritance and natural resources, in accordance with national laws’ (Target 5.a).

### *Participation in decision-making and leadership*

Reflecting the analysis above of the notion of equal power between countries at the negotiating tables in UN and other global governance processes, Target 5.5 on women’s political empowerment is equated with ‘sitting women at the table’. Political participation is notorious for the obstacles presented to women from non-elite groups; and class inequality forms a very significant barrier for women in poverty and favours women politicians rather than women’s movements. In contrast, women’s participation in the economic and public realms does provide a broader focus on the participation of women from ‘civil society’.

Though the reasons for Target 5.5’s wording might well be understood as deriving from the difficulties of measuring women’s mobilisation, there is a clear problem with this target which may mean it will prove to be empty rhetoric. Women’s full and effective participation and leadership is not only dependent on women’s own effort and interest in coming to the national and international negotiating tables and having equal opportunities to men to participate – I will come back to this below – but also on access to the resources that act as preconditions for participation (money, time, confidence, and education among them), and on the existence of concrete mechanisms for promoting women’s participation (Goetz and Jenkins 2016a, and their article in this issue). Target 5.c, to ‘Adopt and strengthen sound policies and enforceable legislation for the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls at all levels’ could provide a platform from which to work on such mechanisms, though it is too vague at the present stage.

### *Economic empowerment*

Linked to the question of achieving equality of participation in leadership and decision-making is the issue of economic empowerment. The inclusion of the ‘recognition and value of [the] unpaid care and domestic work through the provision of public services, infrastructure and social protection policies’ in Target 5.2 brings in a crucial dimension of women’s economic empowerment and of well-being (Antonopoulos *et al.* 2012), as well as an impediment to women’s full enjoyment of human rights (Sepúlveda Carmona and Donald 2014). Without explicitly recognising it, the target is mentioning the ways in which unpaid care and domestic work can be redistributed (through public services<sup>13</sup> and social protection policies<sup>14</sup>) or reduced (via improvements in social infrastructure) – both



of which are elements of what can be called ‘distributive justice’ (that is, fairness achieved through the equal distribution of resources; Esquivel 2011, 2014). Interestingly though, the principle of the reduction of women’s unpaid care and domestic work is now widely accepted, even if in an instrumental fashion, as it is seen as an impediment for women’s labour force participation and therefore as detrimental of growth (Elborgh-Woytek *et al.* 2013; World Bank 2011).

However, the second element of women’s economic empowerment in Goal 5, as expressed in Target 5.a, re-emphasises equality of opportunity over equality of outcome. Removing discrimination in access to resources and productive assets, in particular to land, but also to other forms of property, was included in UN Women’s (2013) initial proposal for the SDGs at the outset. It is supported by a wealth of feminist economics literature. The qualification in the target, though, ‘in accordance to national law’, reads strangely within a target that proposes to ‘undertake reforms’, presumably to legal frameworks, when it is precisely in these laws that legal gender discrimination is enshrined (World Bank 2015).

In comparison, Target 1.4 has a much stronger wording, and also has a time frame: ‘By 2030, ensure that all men and women, in particular the poor and the vulnerable, have equal rights to economic resources, as well as access to basic services, ownership and control over land and other forms of property, inheritance, natural resources, appropriate new technology and financial services, including microfinance’.<sup>15</sup> Yet, as the Expert Group report pointed out, women’s economic empowerment cannot stop at levelling the playing field to allow women to be participants in the market economy on a par with men.

This is not the only place Agenda 2030 equates gender equality as equality of opportunity between women and men. Paragraph 20, for example, states that ‘women and girls must enjoy equal access to quality education, economic resources and political participation as well as equal opportunities with men and boys for employment, leadership and decision-making at all levels’. Agenda 2030 does go beyond the narrow MDGs’ assumption that equalising access to education (irrespective of its quality) would be enough to trigger other positive gender equality outcomes – although evidence indicates it *does* trigger economic growth (Kabeer and Natali 2013). But the paragraph uses the language of ‘equality of opportunity for employment’ – as if ‘barriers of entry’ was the only problem women face in the labour market, or as if, in times of macro-economic crisis, both women’s and men’s opportunities for employment were not reduced (though not necessarily in equal terms). In effect, these provisions are not enough to secure women’s livelihoods as paid and unpaid workers and producers – the first part of the Expert Group definition of empowerment – given women’s over-representation among informal workers, pervasive gender wage gaps, and occupational segregation.

The wording of para. 20 competes with the far more progressive, outcome-based and time-bound Target 8.5: ‘By 2030, achieve full and productive employment and decent work for all women and men, including for young people and persons with disabilities, and equal pay for work of equal value’, which opens the door for tackling all the above-mentioned issues. However, this target sits uncomfortably in Goal 8, where there is a

mention of the promotion of sectoral ‘development-oriented policies’ (Target 8.3), but not to macro-economic policy.

### Back to growth and gender equality

As mentioned earlier, central in the embedded liberalism is the understanding that social development fundamentally lies in generating employment through growth, voluntary corporate social responsibility, safety nets, education and training (Utting 2013).<sup>16</sup> The centrality of this supply-side growth rationale in Agenda 2030 runs parallel with all the accepted agreements on women’s economic empowerment in Goal 5. It also matches commitments on girls’ education and women’s training (Target 4.3), on equal opportunities as workers (including migrant workers; Target 8.8) and as small-scale food producers (Target 2.3). The exception – an alternative demand-side growth rationale – might be the target on full and productive employment, which is outcome based, and the pro-poor and gender-sensitive development strategies (Target 1.b), a re-wording of ‘pro-poor macro-economics’ (Cornia 2006).

Importantly, though, is that growth does not automatically translate into gender equality – relying solely on growth is therefore no panacea. Whether or not growth contributes to gender equality depends on growth *patterns*. That is to say, it matters which sectors drive economic growth, and whether they are able to generate decent employment for women. It also matters what role the state takes in redistributing the gains from growth; and the various patriarchal structures that curtail women’s ability to take advantage of the gains of growth (Kabeer 2016). Out of these three reasons for the weak relationship between growth and gender equality, embedded liberalism pays attention only to the second: the need for redistributive policies, including social protection and care policies – although as mentioned before, only *after* having guaranteed growth. The fact that growth takes pre-eminence over redistribution in embedded liberalism matters for gender equality, because redistributive policies, including gender equality ones, are the first to be shed when growth is sluggish or in times of crisis. It is for this reason that the Expert Group report (EGM 2016) identifies financing for the SDGs and for gender equality policies among the main challenges for achieving gender equality within Agenda 2030,<sup>17</sup> voicing their scepticism about the lack of new funds committed for its advancement other than those emerging from profit-led public–private partnerships.

It is also worth noting that patterns of growth – the above-mentioned first weak link between growth and gender equality – are not a static given. In the 20th century, patterns of growth have relied on maintaining gender and class inequalities, as the means to keep labour costs low. But they can and should change to become more sustainable, and less exploitative of women and their dependants, through a range of policies<sup>18</sup> that are the exact opposite of the trade liberalisation and foreign direct investment approach of the AAAA.

If growth does not translate into gender equality, then, why do Agenda 2030’s commitments on women’s economic empowerment and its liberal aspects match so well? The disquieting answer is that the women’s economic empowerment agenda has not challenged embedded liberalism – or worse, that it has bought into it (Fraser 2013). We know,

however, that gender equality cannot be realised without realising other dimensions of social justice (Sen and Mukherjee 2014); and that the reverse also holds: distributive justice cannot be achieved without realising women's rights. Along with the weak human rights language, this is the main reason for the cautious reception of the Agenda by feminist experts and women's movements.

### Agenda 2030 implementation: far from a technocratic exercise

The relative progressive or retrogressive nature of the wording of different goals and targets in Agenda 2030 reflects the negotiations behind them. Perhaps a non-recognised value of the Agenda is having provided the platform for 17 thematic negotiations – each thematic area shaped by different political dynamics, depending on the actors that engaged with them, their relative power and interests. Civil society participation in the Major Groups was crucial for those negotiations to bear some of the existing progressive results, and this is particularly the case regarding the Women's Major Group (see Sascha Gabizon, in this issue)<sup>19</sup> – another proof that women's mobilisation matters to advance gender equality agendas (Nazneen and Sultan 2014).

Yet, goal-setting is a poor way to create an international agenda (Fukuda-Parr *et al.* 2014). The result risks creating 17 new policy and practice silos and losing overall policy coherence across and above the goals.<sup>20</sup> Unfortunately, the MDGs' technocratic template of goals–targets–indicators was transferred into the SDGs. In so doing, the goals and targets give the impression that progress is possible in all fronts – without tensions or inconsistencies between targets – and that they are measurable through quantitative indicators in most cases.<sup>21</sup> If the MDGs' experience with measurement and monitoring indicators is repeated – as the ongoing discussions about indicators seems to indicate – the interconnected character of gender, class, political, and other dimensions of inequalities will again be missed in the implementation phase (Fukuda-Parr 2014; Sen 2013).

The underlying assumption behind the MDGs' template is that means of implementation (policies) are immune to power imbalances (politics). Yet, 'when global goals are perceived to be achievable through technical fixes, the fact that development requires fundamental changes in society is lost' (Reddy and Harvold Kvangraven 2015, 25) – precisely because technical fixes give the Agenda an apolitical 'coating'.

The implementation of the sustainable development agenda will be a deeply political process, though, even more complex than its negotiation was. Ideas and discourse will continue to matter, as the painstaking negotiations, the last-minute additions, and the timid human rights framework, strong in the Agenda introductory paragraphs but weak in the goals, targets, and accountability mechanisms, exemplify. The implementation phase will open new struggles for interpretation over the scope of concepts, responsibilities, policies and achievements, and new terrains for contestation.

The SDG negotiation process has taught 'both the limitations of governments' representation at the global level and the extraordinary potential of multilateral negotiations to yield agreements that transforms power structures' between and within countries (Adams and Tobin 2014, 23). The lack of strong accountability mechanisms in the Agenda

is precisely the result of the current power configuration, and the fact that civil society organisations (CSOs) have had such progressive role does not mean that the future lies solely on their shoulders. 'CSOs have neither the mandate nor the means to close the accountability gap ... Each country is responsible for how it is represented in multilateral deliberation and should draw more consistently from parliaments, sub-national governments, civil society as well as the executive branch of their government' (*ibid.*, 24). In between the international arenas and the on-the-ground experience CSOs bring to the international negotiations, there are multiple political and institutional layers – layers that shape the *processes* of policy and political change required for pro-poor, gender-sensitive sustainable development.

In conclusion, Agenda 2030 combines progressive gender equality targets with targets on women's economic empowerment which limit themselves to addressing liberal concerns in the existing profoundly unequal global economy. As such, Agenda 2030 has an ambivalent nature from a feminist standpoint. To overcome and transcend this, and make the SDGs work for women, it will be necessary to bridge the fissures between and among advocates of economic justice and gender justice, forging stronger and broader alliances and common agendas, including for defending the gains enshrined in Goal 5, in particular at the national level (Sen and Mukherjee 2014).

The present weakness and sketchiness of the arrangements for the Agenda 2030 review mechanisms (at the time of writing in January 2016) does not mean they will not be open for contestation or improvement – even though that will be yet another political struggle. Possibly the most powerful entry point to do so will be to make concrete at the policy level the Agenda's general adherence to human rights principles, thus helping to overcome the relative weakness of the human rights 'pillar' in the UN, in contrast to the strength of the development pillar, and their separation from each other, as mentioned above. Women's rights activists can strategically use Target 5.5 on women's full and effective participation to play in favour of the obligation to include and invite women's rights organisations and movements to full participation in SDG processes, and to demand resources and fundraise for women's rights work and movement-building, in the current 'impact-based' funding environment. Developing technical capacity for gender analysis of macro-economic policy, as well as for engaging in indicator-based monitoring and evaluation processes, will be crucial for women's movements to uncover the political nature of these seemingly technocratic processes, and challenge them.

## Notes

1. SDG 13, 'Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts', is qualified by the acknowledgement that 'the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change is the primary international, intergovernmental forum for negotiating the global response to climate change' (UN 2015, 23). This is precisely the agreement reached in Paris in December 2015. The Paris Agreement will be open for signing by the countries on 22 April 2016 in New York. It can only enter into force once it has been ratified by 55 countries, representing at least 55 per cent of emissions. See the Adoption of the Agreement document, COP 21, retrieved at [www.cop21.gouv.fr/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/109r01.pdf](http://www.cop21.gouv.fr/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/109r01.pdf) (last checked 20 January 2016).

2. According to UN (2015), the Addis Ababa Action Agenda 'is an integral part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development' (para. 40).
3. The wording of Target 10.1 does not contradict income concentration in the hands of the richest. Traditional inequality indicators, like the Gini Coefficient or the Palma ratio contrast the evolution of incomes at different levels of the distribution of income, not only at lower levels, as Target 10.1 does.
4. The chosen indicator for this target is the share of labour income over total income. See UNSD (2015).
5. I am not discussing the nature of power here, and have opted for a fairly general definition. For a discussion applied to climate governance, see Okereke *et al.* (2009).
6. See Adams and Tobin (2014) on the increasing influence of the business sector in shaping development agendas.
7. The high-level political forum will meet every four years (para. 87), and conduct both country-level reviews (para. 84) and thematic reviews on cross-cutting issues (para. 85).
8. For a long read on the gender impacts of macro-economic instability, see e.g. Antonopulos (2014). For a short read, see Heintz (2015).
9. We are in an era of 'theories of change'. There is a vast literature on these methodologies, used by social and economic policymakers and practitioners, but in layperson's terms this translates into a desire to understand and track accurately causal links between activities and events, including planned development interventions, and the changes seen in society which are presumed to be wholly or partly attributable to these activities and events.
10. As mentioned in the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights' consideration of the Greece report, 'the global economic system in recent decades had created a type of a pyramid where on the top one found financial institutions, frequently given a privileged status'. See more at [www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=16568&LangID=E#sthash.aEi9PeLJ.dpuf](http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=16568&LangID=E#sthash.aEi9PeLJ.dpuf) (last checked by the author 20 January 2016).
11. See Naila Kabeer (1999) for an early definition, and a recent review on voice and agency by Gamme *et al.* (2016).
12. For similar accounts on the reluctance of development policymakers and practitioners to use the word 'power' but their acceptance of the 'empowerment' concept, see Eyben (2015) and Batliwala (2007).
13. Universal access to 'quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education' is also proposed in Target 4.2.
14. Social protection policies/systems 'for all' are also mentioned in Targets 1.3 and 10.4. Target 5.4 emphasises that care is a dimension of social protection.
15. Target 2.2 uses a similar wording as a means to 'double agricultural productivity and incomes of small-scale food producers' by 2030.
16. Which have failed to ensure the decline of poverty in the past (Cornia 2006, 23) and seem not to be enough at present (Woodward 2015).
17. The EGM report also lists among the challenges: the accountability of state and non-state actors in promoting gender-equal sustainable development; the asymmetries in the public-private-civil 'partnerships for development'; and data collection and disaggregation to monitor and evaluate the SDGs' progress as a challenge.
18. I am referring to policies that favour domestic demand and labour-intensive tradable sectors that generate decent employment and close gender gaps, for example through the promotion of active labour policies capable of generating employment for women and men; control capital inflows and regulate the financial sector; redistribute both income and assets through tax and income policies; fund and sustain social protection 'for all', including through care policies; and does all the above respecting human rights, environmental and labour standards.
19. On the fluidity of interests opposing gender equality agendas, see Kabeer (2015).
20. On a critical take of 'policy coherence' in the development context, see Siitonen (2016).

21. Monitoring indicators will be decided in March 2016. The state of the debate in December 2015 is reflected in UNSD (2015). Among the qualitative indicators proposed is ‘whether or not legal frameworks are in place to promote equality and non-discrimination on the bases of sex’ for Target 5.1, ‘End all forms of discrimination against all women and girls everywhere’ (UNSD 2015). This is a good example of the advantages and limitations of indicators in general, even qualitative ones. Although the detail of which these legal frameworks has still to be developed, they broadly refer to national legislation prohibiting discrimination on the bases of sex in line with the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), guaranteeing equal pay for equal work and protecting maternity in line with International Labour Organization Conventions, and removing formal discrimination in tax collection, doing business, property and inheritance rights, etc. (UN Women 2015). However, all this means that Target 5.1 translates into ‘ending all forms of *formal* discrimination against all women and girls everywhere’. The monitoring indicator is silent on discriminatory practices, and on the distance between law and law enforcement. The end of all forms of discrimination against women and girls everywhere requires indicators on the existence of public institutions and public policies to ensure law enforcement and the effective protection of women against discrimination, moving beyond formal requirements to the means of implementation. It also requires outcome indicators that measure the elimination of all acts of discrimination against women by persons, organisations, or enterprises. Country reports to the CEDAW Committee, and the guidelines the Committee has put into place, could serve for the basis of the design of such indicators.

### Notes on contributor

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