

When, if not now?

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If the Sustainable Development Goals were a person and this question was asked of it, how would it respond? It would probably say 'my *now* ends in 2030.' *Now* is an extended timeframe of action that still has 10 years to show results. *Now* signals a sense of urgency spread across 15 years in the past and 10 into the future, and if we were to decode the Millennium Development Goals as a contributing continuity we'd have to add another 15 years to it.

How does that make us feel? A *now* that has practically extended over a collective 30 years already, and it is not accountable to us for least another 10 years. Our sense of what the *now* entails, since the start of this pandemic year, has altered. We've been confronted by an emergency—that quickly showed us that this calamity wasn't a health crisis alone. A crises of this magnitude isn't one in isolation, and no matter how relieved placing blame on bats or pangolins makes us feel, the real onus is on us—human action—allowing for a virus festered in animals to be transmittable to humans because of degraded habitats and biodiversity, that we're responsible for. A medicine, a vaccine, and antidote is not going fix the fractures in our socio-economic, administrative systems that can't handle medical tragedies nor be responsible for the collateral unaccounted for damages to lives and livelihoods that has been a bi-product of this tragedy.

This more than anything is an emergency of uncertainty, and the pandemic becomes an unprompted monitoring and evaluation of the Sustainable Development Goals. The total of 169 targets spread across the 17 goals, were set to acknowledge and address inequality. These frameworks of global action, as powerful, well meaning as possible in their articulations also point to certain sections of populations as the problem for this imbalance in society and the world. For example, when Sustainable Development Goal 1 aspires for 'No poverty' this clearly attacks people who are poor and not the mechanisms that propel poverty and create unequal economic societies. Then when Sustainable Development Goal 4 aspires for 'Quality Education' you're attacking the 'illiterates' not the systems that leave out many from attaining a basic education.

Imagine being poor and illiterate, you are made to feel you're the cause for all the problems in the world. Therein lies one the concerns with the SDGs—the words used to frame the goals. We do need new narratives: we need to change our vocabulary: How about instead of 'No poverty' we use 'End capitalism' or 'End wealth accumulation in a few hands'. How about instead of 'quality education' we say: 'Honour traditional knowledge systems' or 'Learn from lived wisdom and experiences' also.

Naming the problem in the agenda is recognizing it exists but we also need to point to the roots of the problem. Who are the biggest drivers of Global poverty? Do we have the guts to call out the global financial institutions, bilateral trade systems, and the neo-liberal global markets that instead of serving everyone equally, exploit the poor and marginalized? When the richest 1% own half of the world's total private wealth, the socio-economic order of world will always be disproportionately positioned.

The people setting and reviewing the Sustainable Development goals aren't the ones who struggle to make ends meet, aren't the ones facing homelessness, displacement or hunger, instead they have an education and the professional credentials that makes them qualified to sit at these conferences and dictate terms.

This is nothing but a mockery of everyday people—mostly the underprivileged, who carry the burden of waiting for justice, promised by the Sustainable Development Goals, and have waited 30 years at least, (since before the Millennium Development Goals), and the pandemic has just exposed these foundational cracks.

If I asked you to think of an imagery representative of the pandemic, your answers would probably be of face masks, lockdowns, food and material hoarding, singing from balconies, understaffed and overcrowded hospitals, death, coffins and solitary burials, among others. In India the most striking image is of the exodus of working class populations, from megacities to their rural homes, caught unawares by the unplanned lockdown, driven away by employers and landlords, and with no public transport available, had to set off on foot. Hours turned to days—hunger, thirst, no rest, respite and shelter, nor sturdy footwear accentuated their vulnerability, despair, and non-Covid death engulfs some on them in their escape from destitution. This imagery is illustrative of a government abandoning its people, when crisis hit. This also translates to a government forsaking its commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals, and not having to be answerable to anyone for doing so.

This is emblematic of what the Sustainable Development Goals are— demonstrating how all 17 goals are linked, showing the entwined cycle of inequality. Being poor means having limited economic resources, leading to a lack of social insurance to even secure a basic living standard, thrusting the poor into unsustainable life ways, and in a pandemic these vulnerable sections are the first to bear the brunt of the affects and consequences of this calamity.

The Sustainable Development Goals are a non-binding agreement, yet they are central to our conversations about transformative justice, because they embody the only component that helps us make sense of this ever changing, sometimes out of control, climate-constrained, pandemic hit existence—Hope! Hope is reassuring, and allows us to dream out of a miserable existence. Yet today I challenge you to momentarily turn your focus away from hope to the hopeless. I want us to pause, from the hurry in wanting to move on. I want us to retreat from thinking and talking about hopefulness, but immerse ourselves instead in the gloom of our times. I want us to confront our fears and pessimism. I want us feel vulnerable, helpless, imbibe sorrow, pain, regret and allow ourselves to cry. I want us to slow down and absorb the doom. I want us to mourn—reconcile with loss, by grieving.

Sustainable Development Goals for me are foremost about dignity—regaining our humanity by experiencing the expanse of our emotions—by conceding to the fact that we don't have the answers to everything nor, are in control of everything, and this allows for a more truthful, empathetic grounding in action. We have to acknowledge human frailty and our coming undone.

This can happen only when we embrace the desolation of this pandemic year. Uncertainty demands to be felt, not masked by optimism that often prevents us from going to the roots of problems—humanitarian and otherwise. In our programmed minds of immediate action for solutions we don't embody the problems and even deliberating how to, when you have not faced the loss, the deprivation, the disempowerment yourself.

If fulfilling Sustainable Development Goals is the responsibility of governments and its agencies, how can civil society and individuals become partners in this? We can by rendering S-D-G into Safeguarding Defendable Goals. We have to enflame ourselves to interpret the goals to mean something that we are stirred to endorse, defend and safeguard. Actions that are grounded in convictions that move, agitate, trouble you are the ones that you would commit to unflinchingly.

The lessons of the pandemic are that our *now* is not a privilege, but a responsibility and accountability towards sustainable living and life ways, within the reminder of the every looming uncertainty. Uncertainty demands surrendering to the unknown; surrendering to the unknowable. When, if not now?