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Global justice, international relations and the Sustainable Development Goals' quest for poverty eradication

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The paper examines the notion of global justice in the changing context of International Relations and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) approved by world leaders in 2015. Structural differentiation of states and the international system is presented as a way to explain limitations and possibilities in the quest of poverty eradication and global justice. The paper ends by assessing how international poverty law and human rights approaches can team up in the search for accountability, defined as the key to transit towards a more just world. It concludes that the political and legal responsibilities emerging from the universal policy agenda of the SDGs (to be implemented according to rights and obligations of states under international law) could pave the way towards global (social) justice.

Keywords: poverty; global justice; Sustainable Development Goals; inequality; human rights; international relations; accountability

Introduction

Poverty has been part of our societies for the entire history of humankind, although its meaning and extent have varied through time and places (Spicker, 2007; Spicker et al., 2007). During the past decades, however, the international community has consolidated a discourse on the eradication of (extreme) poverty that has been articulated in various international commitments (such as the United Nations Decades for the Eradication of Poverty, the Millennium Declaration, and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)/Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) initiatives).

Simultaneously, the notion of global justice has been explored more progressively by diverse disciplines as a way to address some of the most pressing issues of our time, including poverty, inequality and massive violations of socio-economic human rights.

The links between global justice and poverty open up various relevant lines of inquiry, while at the same time expressing the potential to substantiate the discourse and practice of poverty eradication in the language of rights, justice, and law.

This paper is the result of discussions that emerged during a panel organised by Comparative Research Programme on Poverty (CROP) at the 2015 World Social Science Forum in Durban, South Africa. The session addressed the issue of how global justice can be used

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to analyse the most relevant anti-poverty initiatives of our time: the MDGs/SDGs process. In particular, the panel discussed the following questions:

- How can the MDGs/SDGs and targets be evaluated through the lens of global justice?
- How do the proposed SDGs address the links between poverty, inequality and global justice?
- Do the proposed SDGs articulate effective mechanisms to ensure personal and institutional accountability as well as the promotion of global justice?

Naturally, this paper does not attempt to answer all these questions. Its modest objective is to discuss the intrinsic links between poverty and global justice in a way that would prepare the terrain for a more potent discourse and practice on poverty eradication and prevention. International anti-poverty initiatives within the context of a renewed discourse on development provide an anchorage to ground momentarily a discussion that is bound to continue in the years to come.

The 17 SDGs and 169 targets represent an unequivocal move forward towards global (social) justice that needs to be corroborated by results, that is, the achievement of the integrated and indivisible set of goals and targets enunciated in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (United Nations General Assembly, 2015, Art 18). Key to the realisation of these goals is the establishment of an accountability system that provides incentive to accomplish what has been agreed upon by world leaders. The lack of a centralised governance structure at the international level is a drawback, but should not be considered a major impediment to the significant move forward towards the realisation of global justice represented by the SDGs.¹ Existing commitments towards poverty eradication – among many other objectives related to global justice – are reinforced by the international recognition of their intrinsic relationship to human rights. Accountability and enforcement of what has been decided can therefore be implemented using existing legal and political mechanisms already in place at both the state and inter-state levels. Independent (from states and international organisations participating in the SDGs process) evaluation of the implementation of these commitments is an indispensable first step for accountability and enforcement of what has been agreed internationally.

The paper starts with a discussion of the notion of global justice in the changing context of international relations (IRs) as a discipline and practice. It then goes on to analyse it further within the context of the so-called political economy of poverty. Structural differentiation between the state and international system is presented as a way to explain limitations and possibilities in the quest of poverty eradication and global justice. The paper concludes by examining how international poverty law (IPL) and human rights approaches can team up in the search for accountability, defined as the key to transiting towards a more just world.

Global justice in the changing context of IR

In the history of IR states have been the primary locus of political legitimacy for pursuing global justice. This idea has been evolving, but states are still the main structures in the contemporary international system capable of guaranteeing and enforcing the rule of law.

Global justice is a concept that has been associated with the realisation of social justice (Nagel, 2005) and therefore relates to the fair distribution of opportunities and wealth in a given space and time. At a very basic level, global justice implies the realisation of fundamental human and social rights, especially the right to

(...) a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control. (United Nations General Assembly, 1948, Art 25, 1)

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) recognises in its preamble “equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family” as the “foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world” (United Nations, 1948). That is, it acknowledges the existence of universal and pre-political rights that operate as limits to the use of power by private and public agents and aim to generate the conditions for human well-being.

A distinction is made between the so-called negative rights (such as bodily inviolability) and other forms of rights (e.g. socio-economic rights) even though both types are included in the UDHR. Nagel, for instance, argues that socio-economic justice is distinctive because it depends on positive rights that we do not have in relation to all other persons or groups because these rights only arise when we live in a political society under strong centralised control (2005, p. 127).

This argument could be contested because some basic socio-economic rights and duties, similar to those included in Art. 25 of the UDHR, arise as a result of our condition as “members of the human family” regardless of the type of governance structure within which we are living. Even Nagel seems to agree on this when he signals that “the most basic rights and duties are universal, and not contingent on specific institutional relations between people” (2005, p. 130).

Beyond distinctions made in the literature on the subject, human rights provides the foundations for contemporary society and generates obligations for state’s governance structures (United Nations, 1948). There is also wide consensus regarding the multi-dimensionality of poverty (OPHI, 2013; World Bank, 2015).² The constitutive dimensions of poverty are not arbitrary, and according to Delamonica, are all based on human rights. Therefore, material deprivations (such as lack of food, water or housing) and monetary poverty can be considered human rights violations, as they are associated with the impossibility of maintaining a minimum standard of living (Delamonica, 2016, pp. 51, 70).

Deprivations of material sources of living are not only a violation of human rights but also an impediment to justice. For around 2000 years justice has been defined as “the constant and perpetual will to render to everyone his right” (“*Iustitia est constans et perpetua voluntas ius suum cuique tribuendi*”; Ulpian definition cited by Emery, 2002, p. 26). Clearly, the poor are deprived of some of the most basic rights a human being can have, despite the fact that they have been acknowledged by an international legal instrument such as the UDHR.

Every human being has these inalienable rights (United Nations, 1948), and compliance is a necessary condition for any just social order. Poverty – especially in its most severe and extreme forms – constitutes a violation of the above articles of the UDRH. Any society (local, national or global) or structure of governance (states and international organisations) that does not have the constant will to render everyone its rights can be labelled as unjust. The level of poverty shows how unjust a society can be. It also shows how much social injustice societies are able to tolerate despite the fact that there are more than enough resources available to eradicate extreme poverty.

Universal human rights are considered “the source of the constraints on the external exercise of sovereign power” (Nagel, 2005, p. 136) and the implementation of these rights is to be accomplished by “a form of organization that claims political legitimacy

and the right to impose decisions by force” (Nagel, 2005, p. 140). According to this perspective, states are the political structures where the realisation of human rights and the pursuit of justice is possible. In this respect, global justice (understood as socio-economic justice) is unlikely to spread unless strong supranational institutions are created (Nagel, 2005, pp. 114, 146).

This hypothesis opens up a relevant discussion about the enforcement of international commitments on socio-economic rights and goals aiming to generate the conditions for a more just global society. In the absence of supranational institutions, the recently approved set of SDGs and targets that replaced the previous MDGs have the question of accountability as a core issue for their realisation, as will become clearer in the course of this paper.

Global justice has not been a central issue of IRs as a discipline despite its importance for the well-being of human beings and societies. The lack of centrality of this concept in the theoretical and empirical production of the discipline has been particularly noticeable during the past decades when variations of Realism and Neorealism were the main lenses through which scholars and practitioners saw the world. The problem of global poverty has also been conspicuous by its absence from the core of IRs theory, despite the fact that everyone is conscious of the fact that it is a severe condition affecting societies all over the world.

One of the reasons for global justice being left aside in the IR discipline was probably that power and national interests (defined in terms of power) were omnipresent as independent variables explaining or predicting agents’ actions. From the 1970s, relatively successful criticism (coming from Liberals, Constructivists, Feminists, Institutionalists, Neomarxists and other relevant IR theoretical perspectives) (Cox, 1986; Keohane, 1986; Tickner, 1992; Wendt, 2005) challenged the pre-eminence of Realist and Neorealist models, but even then, neither global justice nor global poverty was salient in the literature imparted in many IR programmes at the university level.

Poverty was absent from the curricula of IR studies in prominent Latin American universities during the first decade of the current century (Cimadamore, 2012). This might also be the case in many other parts of the world, where the mainstream IR approach continues to be Realism, Neorealism and/or different variations of this intellectual tradition (Cimadamore, 2012; Durfee & Rosenau, 1996).

However, after the end of the Cold War social realities that had been kept more or less invisible became more and more striking. This is arguable due to the fact that once the conflict that marked the post-WWII era moved off the central stage, it became more obvious that poverty was the cause of more deaths than all wars put together during the past century (Pogge, 2011). At the same time, it constituted a flagrant violation of human rights; rights that were acknowledged by the international community.

These facts were perhaps the reason for a rise in the visibility of global justice as a concept in the academic world during the first years of the twenty-first century (Pogge, 2011, p. 10). Questions centred on global justice seem to be filling a vacuum still open in the field of IRs (in general) and international politics (in particular). Mainstream IR theory (that could be identified with different variations of Realism and Neorealism and the emblematic works by Morgenthau, 1986 and Waltz, 2010) does not pay too much attention to the question of global social justice. Without relevant theories paying due attention to social aspects of inter-state relations, they tend to fade in the universe of a discipline that is still very much focused on strategic issues.

The notion of global justice was made visible by the work of philosophers (such as Rawls, Pogge, 2008, 2011 and Nagel, 2005), while most IR theorists were looking at other aspects of social reality. Nevertheless, founding scholars in the discipline of IR

have left some room for moral questions relating to justice, but they have placed them well behind the interests defined in terms of power in the list of principles governing IR.³

The precedence of interests and power politics can be observed when Morgenthau acknowledges the individual's moral right to sacrifice himself in defence of moral principles at the same time as he argues that the state has no right to let its moral judgements get in the way of "successful political action". In his words, Realism "considers prudence – the weighing of the consequences of alternative political actions – to be the supreme virtue in politics. Ethics in the abstract judges action by its conformity with the moral law; political ethics judges action by its political consequences" (Morgenthau, 1986, p. 21).

This view of Classical Realism is based on a narrow definition of rationality that assumes that moral principles cannot be fully realised but must at best be approximated through the balancing of interests that set the stage for the functioning of rights. This perspective tends to predict that a moral political order originating from abstract principles (such as global justice) cannot be effectively attained (Morgenthau, 1986). In this vision, interests defined in terms of power have an explanatory capability that ideas, moral values or universal rights do not have.

It is open for discussion how current this line of thought is. A recent essay on the Ukraine crisis (one of the salient contemporary conflicts) by a leading IR expert shows that Realism is very much alive when interpreting the causes of war and conditions for peace in world politics (Mearsheimer, 2014). The relevance of military conflicts on the international stage conditions the IR debate in a way that tends to keep social justice out of the main focus. However, the salience of the current international campaign towards a sustainable future makes it "unrealistic" for the discipline to ignore the quest for sustainable development, poverty eradication and global justice.

Global justice and the political economy of poverty

The way in which the realisation of global justice can be conceived depends to a great extent on the theoretical view we have about the structural characteristics, constraints and incentives that are peculiar to the international system.

If we accept the premise that the realisation of global justice depends on the existence of an effective governance structure, somehow mimicking the state at the international level, many generations to come would be deprived of it. Some of the most potent theories in IRs (e.g. Neorealism) predict that it would be impossible to get such a structure in place due to the systemic bias towards the perpetuation of anarchy, that is, the absence of a formal structure of governance with the monopoly of the legitimate use of force (Buzan, Jones, & Little, 1993; Waltz, 2010).

Anarchy is commonly defined as the absence of central government over the units in the systems (as opposed to hierarchy which assumes a central government over all the units). The argument defended by Neorealism (allegedly the most elegant IR theory) is that states are like units subject to the survival logic of self-help and thus, pushed towards sovereignty. Therefore, if all the units are sovereign, the organising principle among them is anarchy. Anarchy is a self-reinforcing principle because it "tends to generate like units and like units, by pursuing sovereignty, generate anarchy" (Buzan et al., 1993, pp. 38–39).⁴

The governance system required to promote global social justice requires that, to a certain extent, individuals, firms and states receive the "assurance that their conduct will in fact be part of a reliable and effective system. The only way to provide that assurance is through some form of law, with centralized authority to determine the rules and a centralized monopoly of the power of enforcement" (Nagel, 2005, p. 116). I consider (based on

the lessons of structural realism, constructivism and institutionalism in IR) that there are many possible variations to the traditional IR model whereby only “a centralized monopoly of the power of enforcement” provides the opportunity to create a “reliable and effective system” for IRs. The search for viable alternatives to the standard IR model is crucial for the realisation of global justice and the SDGs, but it evidently exceeds the objective of this paper.

The search for an international central authority to realise rights and enforce commitments would keep us trapped for many decades to come because the self-reinforcing (structural) characteristic of the international system seems to be a strong impediment to providing the kind of assurance Nagel claims is necessary. In the world in which we live, a centralised authority is not only impossible but also undesirable (at least from the point of view of the most powerful units of the system that are also the main beneficiaries of the current world order) in our contemporary inter-state system. This reality will probably change (I would say it is already changing), but we need to find ways to make the commitment to eradicate poverty (as part of the strategy of the SDGs) enforceable *under a reliable and effective system with high levels of de-centralisation*. This is logically possible since the states are the units from which the goals and targets ought to be reached.

Poverty and social injustice are not natural phenomena. They are produced and reproduced in societies through actions and omissions of agents operating under systems that allow and tolerate them. The political economy of poverty could be simply understood as a way of examining social relations from the study of interactions between the two most important structures in social science: markets and states. These structures have very different organisational principles (as can be seen in Table 1) that induce quite different forms of social organisation and distribution of resources. Markets tend to avoid all obstacles (political or otherwise) to the supply and demand mechanism for fixing prices (although in practice, market actors may actively seek to distort the free operation of the market in the pursuit of profit), while states have – at least in theory – the capacity to orientate or direct economic activities towards certain social goals, for instance, the welfare of their populations (Cimadamore & Lizárraga, 2008, pp. 12–13).

Markets tend to overlook (and even produce) poverty, while states have the capability to reduce, eliminate and prevent poverty. As nominal places where forces of demand and supply operate to trade goods, services or contracts, they are functional to wealth production and distribution without focusing on the social cost of the maximisation of economic benefits. In fact, they can create wealth and poverty at the same time.

This process can be shown when poverty levels are measured without the effects of state intervention. When, for instance, “market poverty” is measured in the USA, it can be seen what the poverty rate would be without state intervention (i.e. tax credits and/or other benefits). It is significant that market poverty rose from 27% to 28.7% between 1967 and 2012 in the biggest economy of the international system that had formally declared a “war on poverty”. During the same period, when measuring normally (i.e. taking state intervention into consideration) the incidence of poverty was about half of these percentages, showing how it was mitigated by the use of social policy and other state tools (The Council of Economic Advisers, 2014, p. 3).

Figure 1 shows the importance of the type of policies in shaping trends and how policy change can alter the expected results. The rise of Neoliberal economics coincided with the shift in the trend of poverty reduction in the most relevant economy in the world and the noticeable increase in the concentration of wealth in the top income quintile.

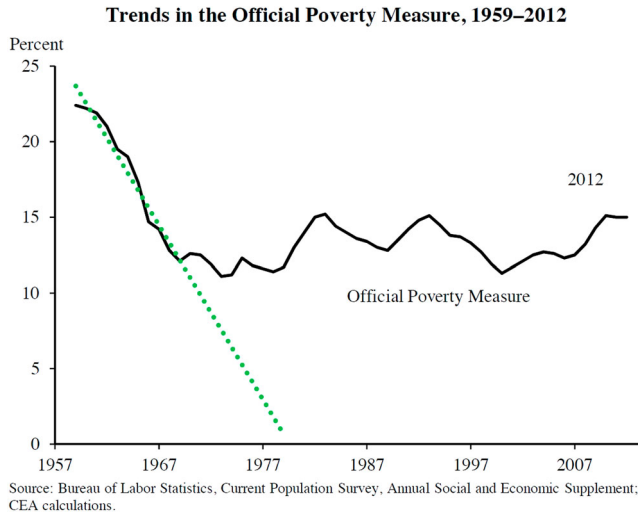


Figure 1. Trends in the official poverty measures, 1959–2012.
Source: U.S. Census Bureau and CEA calculations and the Council of Economic Advisers (2014).

As shown in Figure 2, incomes in the top quintile of the income distribution rose significantly until the end of the twentieth century in contrast with the reality of the bottom quintiles, which experienced little change from the beginning of the 1970s.

The rise in inequality has been pointed out as a leading explanation for the lack of progress in reducing poverty (The Council of Economic Advisers, 2014, p. 17). This kind of explanation is valid not only for the USA. The historical debate on trends in income distribution highlights the issue that the poor have benefited relatively little from the post-WWII growth that was registered in different parts of the world, showing the limitations of economic growth to bring about equitable societies and social justice.

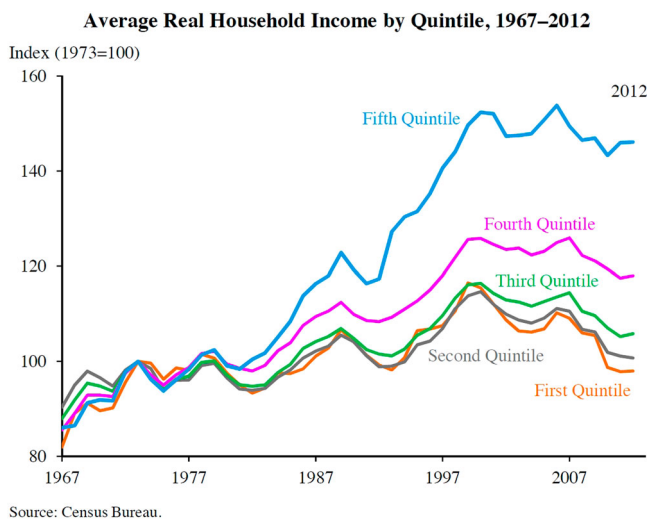


Figure 2. Average real household income by quintile, 1967–2012.
Source: Department of Commerce, Census Bureau and the Council of Economic Advisers (2014).

The political economy of poverty can help us to understand why poverty and inequality increase in the presence of economic growth. The basic explanation is related to the way in which markets and states interact and produce concrete results in the distribution of wealth.

History shows how certain forms of state are better suited than others to distribute the wealth created in economic markets. It also shows how other forms of state are prone to poverty creation – particularly in countries in the south where vested interests voluntarily or involuntarily support the policies that produce poverty (Wilson et al., 2001, p. 13) or let the free markets distribute the wealth. In other words, history shows how the state can be as much part of the problem as part of the solution. In any event, the performance of the state in such matters is a matter of empirical evaluation (Dean et al., 2005, p. 17).

An approach focused on the interaction of the two main structures existing in social sciences (states and markets) provides the opportunity to see the structural barriers and opportunities to reduce or even eradicate poverty. It also indicates how theoretical notions used by mainstream IR theories help us to explain both poverty production and the limitations to the implementation of global justice (Table 1).

The table shows one of the main reasons why the globalisation process is prone to produce poverty: at the international level the order principle is anarchy. There is no

Table 1. The political economy of poverty production.

MAIN CONSTITUTIVE ELEMENTS OF THE POLITICAL SUBSYSTEM	MAIN CONSTITUTIVE ELEMENTS OF THE ECONOMIC SUBSYSTEM
LEVEL 1: NATIONAL SYSTEMS	
Structure	Structure
(1) State	(1) Domestic Market
Main agents	Main agents
(1) Government	(1) Producer organisations
(2) Social groups and organisations	(2) Consumer organisations
(3) Citizens	(3) Individual producers
	(4) Individual consumers
Ordering Principle	Ordering Principle
(1) Hierarchical, based on a constitutional order and power relations	(1) Non-hierarchical, based on economic logic (maximisation of profits) and different levels of regulation
LEVEL 2: INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM	
Structure	Structure
(1) Community of States (formally non-hierarchical)	(1) International market
Main Agents	Main Agents
(1) Intergovernmental organisations	(1) Firms (multi-national corporations, international banks, etc.)
(2) Government representatives/STATES	(2) International producer organisations (OPEC, etc.)
(3) Non-governmental organisations	(3) International organisations (World Bank, IMF, WTO)
Ordering Principle:	Ordering Principle:
(1) Anarchy, based on community principles (e.g. sovereign states, “formal equals”) and power relationships that are reflected in different international regimes.	Anarchy, based on economic logic and very loose regulations. CAPITAL can move relatively well and fast but LABOUR cannot.

Source: Cimadamore (2007, p. 24–25).

structure of governance similar to a state that is potentially capable of mitigating the poverty-producing effects and wealth concentration that free markets tend to produce.

The operation of most powerful agents in the international system, without the kind of regulations and restrictions that states are able to impose, facilitates the enormous accumulation of wealth that globalisation has allowed. It also creates the variations in relative power of these agents *vis-à-vis* governments, thus influencing domestic politics through different mechanisms. Regulatory capture (i.e. when a regulatory agency, formed to act in the public's interest, eventually acts in ways that benefit the industry or sector it is supposed to be regulating, rather than the public) is one of these mechanisms.

Notions such as anarchy, used by the above two-level model, are normally accepted in the IR discipline and practice. Once they are accepted and utilised to interpret how the world works, the structural limits for global justice to be realised under current international institutional order are more visible. This is why – as pointed out above – some authors can accept that states are the locus where social justice can be logically realised.

However, existing international treaties, conventions and other legal instruments can conceivably provide the playing ground for the implementation of minimum standards to eradicate global extreme poverty in the path towards the realisation of global justice.

The contemporary quest for global justice and poverty eradication: MDGs to SDGs

The Resolution adopted by the UN General Assembly (GA) on 25 September 2015 (A/70/L.1) “Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development” is a milestone along this path. The agenda approved by the Heads of States and Governments of the world establishes 17 SDGs and 169 targets based on the acknowledgement that “eradicating poverty in all its forms and dimensions, including extreme poverty, is the greatest global challenge and an indispensable requirement for sustainable development” (UN, 2015, preamble).

The level of commitment is clearly stated at the beginning of the document: “All countries and all stakeholders, acting in collaborative partnership, will implement this plan”, which is “grounded in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, international human rights treaties, the Millennium Declaration and the 2005 World Summit Outcome” and in “full respect for international law” (UN, 2015, Art. 10).

Never before in the history of IRs have world leaders pledged common action and endeavour across such a broad and universal policy agenda to be implemented in a manner that is consistent with the rights and obligations of states under international law (UN, 2015, Art. 18).

Following up the discussion presented above a question naturally arises: What are the conditions (structural and material) for SDGs –in particular – and global (social) justice – in general – to be implemented?

International or global justice is becoming more and more relevant with regard to the extent to which global inequality and poverty are more visible and undermine sustainability as well as the basis of democracies all over the world. The UN Agenda 2030 confirms this assessment in its careful language and ambitious reach. However, the question aims at finding out where to concentrate international efforts to achieve the SDGs and the agreed objective to eradicate all forms of poverty everywhere. Judging from recent history (MDGs), accountability and enforcement are the key words to reasonably expect the SDGs to be realised.

In broad terms, international justice has concentrated on international conflicts (mainly wars), as these have been perceived as the greatest threat to human suffering. International

socio-economic rights, the fulfilment of which is the ultimate objective of the SDGs, have received less attention, despite the fact that violation has resulted in more victims than have been produced by wars (Pogge, 2011). United Nations' strategies and the practice of IRs reflect the priority given to security (and some specific economic issues such as trade) in the architectural design of the international justice system in the post-WWII order.

Nevertheless, the need to deal with the causes of human suffering and violation of human rights nominally defended by the international community (United Nations General Assembly, 1948) was increasingly visible in the international agenda until it peaked at the end of the twentieth century. The Millennium Declaration, MDGs and SDGs marked a new chapter in the evolution of the international order, and opened the door to new approaches to global justice that concentrate on economic and social aspects that were left behind in the traditional approaches to IR (Nagel, 2005; Pogge, 2011).

The quest for global justice and poverty eradication was legitimised by a wide international consensus. Unfortunately, the enforcement and accountability aspects did not receive the same attention as the goals themselves. This can be inferred from the results and lessons extracted from the MDGs experience (Cimadamore et al., 2013).

Structural limitations to social change and a lack of accountability and enforcement of commitments are plausible explanations for the limited results experienced in the pursuit of poverty eradication and social justice that was reinvigorated before the end of last century.

The UN GA decided in 1997 that

the objective of the first United Nations Decade for the Eradication of Poverty is to achieve the goal of eradicating absolute poverty and reducing overall poverty substantially in the world, through decisive national actions and international cooperation in implementing fully and effectively all agreements, commitments and recommendations of major United Nations conferences and summits organized since 1990 as they relate to poverty eradication. (UN A/RES/51/178, 11 February 1997)

Focusing on extreme poverty eradication, the Millennium Declaration conveys in its Art. 11 that no efforts will be spared “to free our fellow men, women and children from the abject and dehumanizing conditions of extreme poverty”. In Art. 12 the Heads of States and Governments committed themselves “to create an environment – at the national and global levels alike – which is conducive to development and to the elimination of poverty”.⁵

The stage was then set to create the conditions for a poverty eradication campaign that was materialised in the MDGs initiative. The reality was that these decisions were translated into the modest formula of Target 1A of the MDGs Goal 1: “Halve, between 1990 and 2015, the proportion of people whose income is less than \$1.25 a day”.

The 2013 report of the high-level panel of eminent persons on the post-2015 development agenda got back on track and recovered the language of poverty eradication when conceiving “A new global partnership: eradicate poverty and transform economies through sustainable development” (United Nations, 2013a). This document spoke in the same language as the UN Open Working Group Proposal for SDGs. It defined poverty eradication as “the greatest global challenge facing the world today and an indispensable requirement for sustainable development” (UN GA, 2012, p. 1; United Nations Open Working Group, 2014, p. 1), in line with the renewed push towards the formula for the SDG Goal 1 “End poverty in all its forms everywhere”.

The Millennium Declaration and other formal commitments at the international level that ended up in the SDGs provide a political and institutional basis for poverty eradication and

prevention. There are common but differentiated responsibilities at various levels, which with proper accountability and enforcement mechanisms can have a good chance of success.

As demonstrated above, the international community has been mobilising towards the common objective of poverty eradication and global justice. However, substantial results at a global level have not yet been achieved, arguably due to the lack of effectiveness exhibited by governments and international institutions that have the main responsibility for eradicating poverty.⁶ Political, institutional and macro-economic frameworks inconsistent with effective measures against poverty have been maintained despite ample evidence showing that they produce and reproduce poverty. Consequently, the number of poor people remains very high, despite the observed discourses and interventions motivated by the MDGs process at various levels.

The goal set in the SDGs proposal to “end poverty in all its forms everywhere” implies reducing extreme poverty to zero while at the same time dealing with other forms of poverty within the context of the SDGs. Less ambitious targets co-exist in the agenda of some of the main international actors in the worldwide effort to eradicate poverty.⁷

So, are the SDGs a better step forward towards global justice?

The reading of the 17 SDGs and its 169 targets suggests that the simple answer to the above question is yes, they are. They are an unequivocal move forward towards global (social) justice that needs to be corroborated by results, that is, the achievement of the “integrated and indivisible” set of goals and targets enunciated in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (UN, 2015, Art 18).

Sustainable Development Goals

Goal 1. End poverty in all its forms everywhere (Target 1.1: by 2030, eradicate extreme poverty for all people everywhere; Target 1.2: By 2030, reduce at least by half the proportion of men, women and children of all ages living in poverty in all its dimensions according to national definition)

Goal 2. End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture

Goal 3. Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages

Goal 4. Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all

Goal 5. Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls

Goal 6. Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all

Goal 7. Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all

Goal 8. Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all

Goal 9. Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation

Goal 10. Reduce inequality within and among countries

Goal 11. Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable

Goal 12. Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns

Goal 13. Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts

Goal 14. Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development

Goal 15. Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss

Goal 16. Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels

Goal 17. Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development

Source: UN GA A/RES/70/1, 2015.

The eradication of poverty in all its forms and dimensions has been defined as the greatest global challenge, not only with regard to sustainable development, but also in the context of a more just world. Ambitious targets have been set accordingly.

However, the challenge is enormous, particularly if we see it in the light of the preceding experience with the MDGs. A critical evaluation of the more modest results of the MDGs, based on existing evidence, indicates that continuing with the same policies and measures currently being implemented will not be enough to eradicate extreme poverty and achieve a substantial reduction in other forms of poverty by 2030 (Cimadamore et al., 2013).

The MDGs approach concentrated on lifting a certain proportion of people out of poverty while retaining a Neoliberal model of development that continues to produce poverty and tolerate massive violations of human, social and economic rights. Unprecedented success in poverty reduction in China has allowed prominent members of the international community to declare success at a global level, despite the fact that the number of people living in poverty remains very high. Moreover, it is possible to argue that the number of people who have escaped from poverty is – at least partially – cancelled out by the number of persons who have become impoverished due to the financial crisis or macro-economic policies implemented and encouraged by existing regimes.⁸

Reducing extreme poverty to zero while eliminating other forms of poverty everywhere cannot conceivably be achieved by maintaining the policy framework and development strategies currently in place. Social protection and basic income measures need to be implemented to help the poorest and hardest-to-reach people living well below the extreme poverty line. These policies and measures must be sustained over time in order to keep these people out of poverty and make sure that their children are able to escape the poverty trap.

The contemporary quest for global justice and poverty eradication needs to prepare the ground to move beyond the immediate objective of extreme poverty eradication. Extreme poverty – the type of poverty targeted in the first place – is defined by an income below \$1.25 (2005 US currency purchasing power) per person per day.⁹ A more comprehensive definition of poverty is needed (one sensitive to the multi-dimensional nature of poverty) in order to capture its complexity. Meanwhile, the extremely low line needs to be revised upwards in order to be consistent with progress towards the goal of ending poverty in all its forms everywhere.

Targets need to ensure that inter-generational transmission of poverty is prevented by the implementation of social protection floors (as defined for instance by the International Labour Organization (ILO)¹⁰) and macro-economic policies prioritising full “decent” employment and equitable distribution of economic resources. In this sense, Target 1.3¹¹ needs to be operationalised following the ILO or other similar adopted models.

Lack of access to social protection constitutes a major obstacle to economic and social development and “the fundamental human right to social security remains unfulfilled for the large majority of the world’s population. Only 27% of the global population enjoy access to comprehensive social security systems, whereas 73% are covered partially or not at all” (International Labour Office, 2014, p. xxi; similarly Social Protection Floor Advisory Group, 2011, p. xxi; Cichon, 2013, p. 22).

Social protection policies are not only a way to fulfil basic human rights, but they are also effective in reducing poverty and inequalities. Those policies and initiatives that combine labour market interventions, social insurance and/or social assistance in cash or in kind contribute to inclusive and sustainable growth. Combinations of income support to the poor with enhanced access to social services in areas such as health and education

have not only the potential to reduce poverty, but could also have a modest impact in the reduction of inequality (particularly when income transfers have a large coverage). Decades of European social history show that social security systems are powerful tools to combat poverty and inequality. It is also known that probably less than 1% of global GDP is required to provide the poor with a minimum level of social security. Notwithstanding, social security systems are not playing a salient role in development strategies (Cichon, 2013, p. 23).

At the end of the first decade of this century, global GDP was 10 times larger than in 1950 (in real terms). Yet despite the six decades of strong economic growth that followed the adoption of the UDHR, “access to adequate social protection benefits and services remains a privilege, afforded to relatively few people” (SPF Advisory Group, 2011, p. xxi).

Child poverty (both income and multi-dimensional) should be specifically targeted by social protection policies and closely monitored in order to break the vicious circle of poverty reproduction and make zero poverty possible. Chronic and severe poverty also need to be targeted, prioritised and monitored from the beginning of the SDGs process.

Goal 1 is directly and indirectly related to all SDGs, but it could be argued that success in the eradication of poverty is especially dependent on immediate and substantial progress towards Goals 2, 8, 10, 16 and 17.

Target 16.3 to “promote the rule of law at the national and international levels and ensure equal access to justice for all” is particularly relevant in terms of achieving global justice. Its achievement will be a huge challenge as more than half the global society has no access to justice. The Commission on Legal Empowerment of the Poor hosted by the United Nations Development Programme estimated that four billion people around the world “are excluded from the rule of law” and are therefore deprived of the chance to better their lives and climb out of poverty (2008, pp. 3, 1). According to the Commission “there is compelling evidence that when poor people are accorded the protections of the rule of law, they can prosper” (2008, p. 2).

Poverty indicators need to be monitored within the context of macro-economic labour and social policies in order to observe the trend in areas where anti-poverty policies have so far proved ineffective. For example, if we take the case of Sub-Saharan Africa, we can see that during the last three decades the number of poor people doubled despite many anti-poverty initiatives being in place. Clearly, doing more of the same will not allow the international community to achieve SDG # 1 (Table 2).

Measuring, monitoring and evaluating are necessary elements of success. Universities’ involvement in the measuring and monitoring process can increase the level of transparency, accuracy and independence from national governments and international bodies responsible and accountable for reaching the goals. This kind of monitoring was missing in the MDGs process, and if we can learn from experience, it is clear that an independent and transparent mechanism needs to be established if poverty is to be eradicated within the time frame of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Table 2. Sub-Saharan Africa (developing only): number of extreme poor at \$1.25 a day (PPP) (millions).

1981	1984	1987	1990	1993	1996	1999	2002	2005	2008	2010
204,93	239,08	256,8	289,68	329,98	349,18	375,97	390,23	394,78	399,34	413,73

Source: World Bank, Poverty and Inequality Database.

IPL and the search for accountability

Accountability is crucial to the realisation of any kind of commitment. It is conceivably even more relevant for commitments made in an international system structurally characterised by anarchy (as defined above).

States have made an international commitment to poverty eradication in the pursuit of global justice. The most relevant commitments are summarised in the SDGs. Governments are the representatives of the states and are therefore legally and politically responsible for fulfilling the commitments formally made by the main units of the international (i.e. inter-state) system. International organisations were key players in the elaboration, implementation, evaluation, and supervision of international initiatives aiming to eradicate poverty. They also have important levels of responsibility in the achievement of the agreed goals. Therefore, the representatives of the states and international (inter-state) organisations are clearly in the first line of any possible accountability system.

A useful contribution to the fulfilment of national and international commitments aiming to eradicate poverty and promote global justice – such as the one included in the UDHR and the Agenda 2030 for sustainable development – would be to systematically identify the reasons why those responsible for the realisation of rights and the achievement of the goals set in the commitments are not doing their job properly.

This task can only be done by way of a systematic evaluation carried out by independent (of the states, international organisations, and other direct responsible) institutions (such as universities) as a first step towards accountability in the quest for poverty eradication and global justice.

“Everyone is entitled to a social and international order in which the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration can be fully realized” as is clearly stated by the UDHR (United Nations General Assembly, 1948, Art 28). The first task is then to identify institutions and agents that are accountable for the full realisation of those rights. A similar statement can be made in relation to other commitments included in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and intrinsically linked to the fulfilment of basic human rights.

Evidently, those responsible for the maintenance of a social order in which the rights and freedoms set forth in the UDHR *are not* “fully realized” can be considered as “accountable” for the suffering that order causes when solutions are possible but not in place. There are of course different levels of responsibility and accountability, but such a (necessary) discussion is beyond the limits of this paper.

Changes in the legal discourse and practices – including the notion of responsibility, accountability, and enforcement – are needed in order to promote the fulfilment of human rights aimed at eradicating poverty. CROP has been working with poverty advocates worldwide for over a decade, seeking to “re-envision legal discourse and practices in the hope that transformative lawyering can become an even more effective tool for redressing poverty” (Williams, 2006, p. 1).

Research in the field of IPL has found that “human rights discourse provides an important idiom in which to formulate demands for poverty reduction, draw attention to unrealized or ‘unacquired’ rights, and mobilize opposition to economic imbalances”. It has also observed that “human rights principles, while empty vessels in the abstract, can be defined to serve as the foundation of an articulable moral code” rejecting the false dichotomy often drawn between morality (rights without remedies) and law (legally enforceable entitlements) by arguing that, “while often not enforceable through ordinary legal claims, human rights can provide general principles of justice that ‘guide judicial decision-making’”. In this way, human rights concepts are conceived as potentially offering

“political instruments to mobilize dissent, protest, opposition and collective action aimed at social and economic reform”. Human rights discourse is thus conceived as an “important rhetorical medium for advancing an anti-poverty political agenda within an IPL framework” (Williams, 2006, p. 8).

The fact that human rights are not generally enforceable as ordinary legal entitlements in contemporary societies is seen by Williams as a serious limitation of the IPL approach. Williams and other authors working with similar theoretical frameworks thus argue for IPL to embrace a universally recognised human rights framework for poverty reduction. At the same time, they acknowledge the difficulty of addressing poverty without the option of legally enforceable entitlements (Williams, 2006, pp. 8–9).

The identification and development of effective enforcement mechanisms is a crucial task towards the realisation of global justice through existing international (i.e. inter-state) commitments.

Conclusion

Existing international treaties, conventions and other legal commitments provide the stage for implementation of the minimum standards they set to eradicate global extreme poverty. This can be seen as a step along the way towards realising global justice. World leaders have unambiguously agreed that “eradicating poverty in all its forms and dimensions, including extreme poverty, is the greatest global challenge and an indispensable requirement for sustainable development” (UN, 2015, preamble) and, I would add, for global justice.

Never before in the history of humankind have so many state representatives committed to a broad and universal policy agenda to be implemented according to the rights and obligations of states under international law (UN, 2015, Art. 18). Political and legal responsibilities emerge from this commitment and pave the way towards global justice. SDGs Target 16.3 “promote the rule of law at the national and international levels and ensure equal access to justice for all” was set to ensure that goals such as poverty eradication and other similar goals are closely linked to global justice. This approach has the potential to positively affect strategies against poverty that are visibly dominated by economists.

The focus on justice as defined during the past 2000 years can perhaps prove more successful than perspectives applied so far. It is now time for states and inter-state organisations to implement the newest development agenda and put into practice “the constant and perpetual will to render to everyone his right”, thus expressing the sense of justice that has pervaded the last two millennia.

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Notes

1. Here I am disagreeing with Deacon’s view (see his article in this special number) of the centrality of improved global social governance to the search for global justice.

2. Although there is widespread consensus that poverty is a multidimensional phenomenon, there is much less consensus on whether it is useful to aggregate across different dimensions to construct a multidimensional measure of welfare and, if so, how to do so in a way that is conceptually sound and readily interpretable. (World Bank, 2015, p. 6)
3. Two of the six principles of Classical Realism presented by Morgenthau (1986) address the question of global moral principles that have direct implications for conceptions of justice brought in mainstream IR theory:
 - (#4) Universal moral principles cannot be applied to the actions of states in the abstract; the circumstances of time and place must be considered. The state must place its survival above all other moral goods and actions are to be judged by their consequences; and (#5) Moral laws that govern the globe are distinct for the morals of any one nation.
4. This notion of anarchy is closer to Neorealism (Waltz) than to Structural Realism (Buzan et al.) because the self-reinforcing effect is derived from the similar functions the units (states) are assumed to have. Buzan et al. contemplates the possibility that the units have different functions, thus opening up the possibility for political structures to change over the time. This is in my view a more adequate way to deal with the issue of structural change in contemporary IRs; however, the Neorealist argument has been dominating world views not only in theory but also in the practice of international politics.
5. The Millennium Declaration outlines strategies for action that were designed to meet the goals and commitments made by the 147 heads of state and government, and 189 member states in total (cf. United Nations General Assembly [UN GA], 2001).
6. The United Nations informed that “the MDG target has been met, poverty rates have been halved between 1990 and 2010, but 1.2 billion people still live in extreme poverty”. This meant that “about 700 million fewer people lived in conditions of extreme poverty in 2010 than in 1990” (MDGs Report, 2013a, p. 6). However, it should be highlighted that China alone was responsible for lifting more than 526 million of the 700 hundred million people out of extreme poverty (accounting for 75% percent of the total reported progress), while in other regions (such as Sub-Saharan Africa) poverty increased from 290 million to 414 million during the same period. (World Bank: Poverty and Inequality Data Base, 2014. Date of access: 9 May 2014).
7. The President of the World Bank Jim Yong Kim expressed in 2013 an institutional commitment to eradicate chronic extreme poverty, defined as those extremely poor people living on less than \$1.25 Purchasing power parity (PPP)-adjusted dollars a day, “to less than 3% of the world population by 2030” (<http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2015/06/22/world-bank-chief-economist-sets-up-new-commission-on-global-poverty>, accessed on 12 January 2016).
8. See note 7, the increase in the number of extreme poor in Sub-Saharan Africa.
9. The World Bank currently uses an updated international poverty line of US\$1.90 a day, which incorporates new information on differences in the cost of living across countries (the PPP exchange rates). The new line intends to preserve the real purchasing power of the previous line (of \$1.25 a day in 2005 prices) in the world’s poorest countries (<http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2015/10/04/world-bank-forecasts-global-poverty-to-fall-below-10-for-first-time-major-hurdles-remain-in-goal-to-end-poverty-by-2030>, accessed 21 December 2015).
10. Social protection floors are

nationally defined sets of basic social security guarantees that should ensure, as a minimum that, over the life cycle, all in need have access to essential health care and to basic income security which together secure effective access to goods and services defined as necessary at the national level. (<http://www.ilo.org/secsoc/areas-of-work/policy-development-and-applied-research/social-protection-floor/lang-en/index.htm>, accessed 12 January 2015)
11. Implement nationally appropriate social protection systems and measures for all, including floors and by 2030 achieve substantial coverage of the poor and the vulnerable.

Notes on contributor

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