

The 2030 Agenda

Working Document

Sustainable Development in Dispute



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The 2030 Agenda

Sustainable Development in Dispute

Trade Union Confederation of Workers of the Americas - TUCA

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Fred Redmond - President

Francisca Jiménez - Deputy President

Toni Moore - Deputy President

Rafael Freire Neto - General Secretary

Jordania Ureña Lora - Secretary of Social Policies

Cícero Pereira da Silva - Secretary for Trade Union Policy and Education

Bárbara Figueroa - Secretary for Sustainable Development.

Contents and Writing

Diego Azzi and Gonzalo Berron¹

Editing

TUCA team

Translation

REDES-AT

Graphic design and layout

Nicolas Medina – Real World Radio

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Trade Union Confederation of Workers of the Americas

Buenos Aires 404/406, CP 11000, Montevideo, Uruguay, www.csa-csi.org

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1. This document includes comments from the TUCA team and member trade unions.

Introduction

The United Nations multilateral system has been trying to place sustainable development at the center of its strategy to regain leadership and credibility at this historic time of growing nationalisms, xenophobia, and international rivalries. The international trade union movement has been present at the most relevant sustainable development negotiations at the UN over the past 30 years, promoting the decent work agenda as a way of overcoming antagonisms between job creation and environmental conservation.

In the Americas, and especially in Latin America and the Caribbean, the meaning of development must go beyond the economic sustainability of capitalist accumulation within planetary limits. We cannot overcome historical inequalities within and between nations in the region by maintaining the economies' neoliberal position that favors exporting low value-added primary products. In the political realm, instead of effective social dialogue, we see a renewed trend of withdrawing labor rights and the freedom to form unions. Democracy itself is under permanent attack. In this sense, TUCA has defended the need to think about the region within the sustainable development framework, that is, sustainability conditioned to the democratic interests of the majority of the population, the centrality of the commons, and human rights.

As we will see, while the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) demonstrate that the multilateral system is improving its approach to development, they continue to be insufficient and are problematic in relation to the role given to large capital, especially to large corporations and their philanthropic foundations as key actors in promoting (financing) sustainable development. The privatization of international cooperation for sustainable development, through the creation of a large market for sustainability initiatives, is part of

the UN's strategy to overcome its own budget crisis, and it exposes the conflicts of interest between public needs and private demands. The privatization of international cooperation for sustainable development through the creation of a large market for sustainability incentives – using the euphemism of innovative markets – is part of the UN's strategy to overcome its own budgetary crisis. However, it exposes the conflicts of interest between public needs, the role of the State, and the demands of the private sphere.

Without forgetting the impacts that the COVID-19 pandemic had and will continue to have, we must note that prior to the pandemic, the world was already on the wrong path in order to achieve the SDGs. The trade union movement exposed this at the UN High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF): when countries are classified by income, “all low-income countries perform below the world average. Among lower-middle income countries, only 15 per cent of the group presents values above the world average. Only 30 per cent of upper-middle income countries have values above the world average [in achieving SDG 8].” (WTUMG, 2020)

The trade union movement's understanding of development goes far beyond the SDG framework. TUCA's vision includes the political dimension as a key component of the debate on the development model. Within this perspective, not only is environmental sustainability at stake, but also the democratic nature of political-economic relations and the production and consumption model. From this perspective, the debate within the trade union movement about sustainable development and international cooperation, as reflected in the Development Platform for the Americas (PLADA for its acronym in Spanish), is a powerful tool for advocacy at international bodies and national governments.



TUCA recognizes and defends the need to “radically transform our relationship with nature, the model of development, production, distribution, and consumption of our societies, the core of which is the restructuring of the reproduction and sustainability of life.” (TUCA, 2020/197)

Background on SDGs and the context in which they were developed

The concept of sustainable development brings together three key interrelated and interdependent dimensions that are not easy to balance: economic growth, social inclusion, and environmental protection (ILO, 2018). Although the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment (also known as the Stockholm Conference) took place in 1972, the UN began working on the concept of sustainable development starting in the mid-1980s. The 1987 report by the World Commission on Environment and Development (known as the Brundtland Report) coined the term sustainable development, defining it as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” Environmental policies must therefore include issues like fighting poverty, reducing inequalities, and defending human rights.

Agenda 21 and the Forest Principles were approved at the Rio '92 Conference, that same year the UN created the Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD). The CSD consisted of 53 member States and functioned between 1993 and 2012, with the main task of monitoring the implementation of the commitments approved in Agenda 21.

The Millennium Declaration (United Nations, 2000) created the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Eight general goals, each with specific targets and indicators of achievement, to fight poverty over 15 years (2000-2015). In 2012, the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development – Rio +20, created the framework to begin planning the post-2015 period, when the MDGs would expire. To implement this strategy, the old Commission on Sustainable Development was transformed into a new HLPF, as was decided in the outcome document of Rio +20, “The Future We Want” (United Nations, 2012). That same document also outlines

the political decision to build a strategy based on Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

An Open Working Group (OWG) was created to conduct negotiations and agree on a proposal for 17 SDGs to guide and inform the then called Post-2015 Development Agenda. Although with limitations of representation and power asymmetries among the actors, the OWG experience was different in terms of participation, as trade unions and civil society were able to actively participate and contribute in an informal deliberative process within the UN (United Nations, 2021a), reducing in part the participation deficits of previous periods.

Thus, trade unions demanded the adoption not only of objectives linked to decent work but also of those related to the reduction of inequality and the responsibility of States for climate change mitigation. Likewise, trade unions advocated for respect of the freedom of association as trade unions, collective bargaining, a rights-based approach, and the key role of education workers to ensure a dignified income and permanent training. These goals are integrated in the 2030 Agenda as a vindication expressed by the worker organizations in these spaces.

Since the adoption of Agenda 21, workers and their trade unions have been actively involved in the global debate on sustainable development, primarily in the CSD – first with the leadership of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) and the Trade Union Advisory Committee to the OECD (TUAC). Currently, active participants in the debates include the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), TUAC, and some of the Global Union Federations (such as Education International (EI) and Public Services International (PSI)).

Work and employment in the SDGs

SDG 8 seeks to “promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all.” The goal includes 12 targets and 17 indicators covering a range of topics, such as “per capita GDP growth, labor productivity, the formalization of the economy and labor market, the protection of migrant workers, the situation of youth in the labor market and the eradication of forced labor and the worst forms of child labor.” (ILO, 2018)



Decent Work is also a cross-cutting theme in other Goals, including Goal 1 (No Poverty), Goal 4 (Quality Education), Goal 5 (Gender Equality), Goal 10 (Reduced Inequality), Goal 14 (Life Below Water), and Goal 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions). The recognition of the centrality of the world of work to the SDGs is noteworthy as compared to their predecessors, the MDGs.

It is also important to emphasize the cross-cutting and intersectional nature of the SDGs, since, for example, the freedom of association as trade unions and the elimination of all forms of persecution can be found in SDG 16.

Trade unions recognize and problematize the existing contradictions and distance between the conceptual proposal of SDG 8 and the policies implemented in the region. They denounce that, on numerous occasions, the 2030 Agenda has become part of the governmental narrative that legitimizes and disguises regressive and conservative policies, which increasingly include the violation of fundamental labor rights.

Means of Implementation (Goal 17) and Development Aid

In order to implement all these goals, the UN proposed a specific goal that includes the relaunching of a large “Global Partnership for Development” that already existed in MDG 8. Thus, Goal 17 – “Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development” – consists of two parts: the means of implementation itself and the “Global Partnership”. SDG 17 also recognizes a synergy with the Addis Ababa Action Agenda (AAAA) adopted at the Third International Conference on Financing for Development. This linkage was a victory for developing countries that pushed for SDG 17 to be bigger than the AAAA, which they saw as a Northern agenda, and for the development goals to be truly a common agenda rather than an aid agenda.

The “Global Partnership” is an alliance at all levels and with actors of a different nature. National States and international organizations are primarily responsible for implementation and are considered the ultimate duty-bearers under the 2030 Agenda. By approving this agenda, countries commit themselves to implement it at the national level, to develop strategies, to adjust their national statistics systems and, on a voluntary basis, to issue national progress reports on this agenda.² Through so-called multi-stakeholder processes, States must coordinate with a broad set of actors such as transnational corporations, local governments, regional and international bodies, as well as civil society organizations, religious groups, academia, etc. Businesses can engage in (i) sustainable production processes; (ii) regenerative use of natural resources; (iii) improvement of social labor protection; (iv) corporate social responsibility initiatives; and (v) philanthropic donations. The 2030 Agenda assumes the expansion of private participation: 1- it can increase the amount of development aid without it necessarily meaning higher public spending, and 2- it can generate business for large private economic actors primarily based in developed countries. Similarly, it embraces without reservation the idea that the WTO Doha Round’s free trade agenda can be beneficial. These assumptions have been – and continue to be – strongly criticized by countries, domestic production sectors, and by the trade union movement that sees in them threats to production structures and therefore to employment and working conditions.

SDG 17 also includes instructions for monitoring progress – or setbacks – towards the achievement of the 2030 Agenda, measured through 232 indicators for the 169 targets included in the 17 SDGs. This is no easy task; an entity was specifically created for this purpose (Inter-agency and Expert Group on SDG Indicators - IAEG-SDGs), and after nearly 10 sessions and almost 5 years after the adoption of the SDGs, concluded its work and proposed a “Global Indicator Framework”. Despite this effort, the UN admits that, “on average data is available for only 20 percent of the indicators, and even if available the data lacks sufficient disaggregation to be useful for policy makers.” (Adams and Judd, 2019)

2. States can also set national priorities, developing the necessary indicators based on the adopted indicator system, expanding and modifying them to reflect progress and setbacks in the 2030 Agenda.



Each SDG global indicator has one or more international custodian agencies assigned to “measure” progress or setbacks. For example, the International Labor Organization (ILO) is the only custodian of 11 global indicators, it is custodian along with other agencies for 3 indicators, and participates as an associated agency for 3 indicators (ILO, 2018: 5). The ITUC created a system to independently monitor SDG implementation and developed a matrix for SDG 1, 2, 5, 8, 10, 13, 16, and 17, defining these as priority goals for the working classes and their trade union organizations. It also developed the “ITUC SDG 8 Monitor” that tracks indicators covering 145 countries representing 97% of the world’s population, covering areas such as economic welfare, quality of employment, and labor rights and vulnerability (WTUMG, 2021).

Trade unions have addressed implementation from various angles. The trade union movement believes social dialogue is key for the achievement of the 2030 Agenda; it is fundamental in the practical dimension and because of its systemic nature, but it can only be effective with an enabling environment and an effective institutional framework based foremost on respect for, and protection of fundamental freedoms and rights at work. The trade union movement affirms that, without social dialogue, the “corporate” turn of the 2030 Agenda will be difficult to balance.

Likewise, the trade union movement of the Americas has denounced trending human rights violations, especially of labor rights, as part of the overall context for trade union action in relation to the 2030 Agenda. It is often the States that violate labor rights and maintain anti-union practices while at the same time reaffirming their commitment to the 2030 Agenda in UN spaces.

Trade union concerns about private sector influence appear constantly in the statements made by the Workers and Trade Unions Major Group. The Major Group has denounced the weakness of voluntary standards and has advocated for the need for binding rules for corporations, including greater transparency in public-private operations and compliance with “due diligence” provisions, in line with the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights and the OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises. The trade union movement in the Americas has upheld the need for binding standards regarding human rights and business as early as its Second Congress (2012), in the 2016 Congress Document that mentions the

need for binding standards at the international level, and since 2014 in PLADA. This concern remains a part of TUCA’s analysis and was endorsed in its latest Congress that took place in April 2021, which reaffirmed the commitment and need to move towards a binding treaty to regulate and control transnational corporations and guarantee labor rights in global production chains. The 2020 PLADA update once again proposes an escalation towards better means and binding mechanisms to regulate and control transnational corporations and global production chains as part of the trade union’s programmatic strategy. TUCA and many of its affiliates have actively worked towards the approval of this Treaty in the UN Human Rights Council, and have recognized the advance of corporate power through mechanisms that capture international bodies as well as the institutions at the country level.

Lastly, development finance – included in SDG 17 – has always been a trade union concern, as specific criteria are needed to ensure that incentives for private financing do not become subsidies or perks for the private sector, and that they result in benefits for the creation of decent work. Investments cannot take place without impact assessment, and they require strict adherence to international labor standards. Field studies in our region have shown that the results of this type of initiatives leave much to be desired, and that mobilizing public resources to stimulate the private sector does not necessarily bring good results. Additionally, most of those funds continue to be public in many cases.

Social engagement at the UN and trade unions’ participation

Social and trade union engagement and participation can take place: a) at the international level at the UN and dedicated bodies on specific themes; b) in regional spaces that can be general or thematic; c) in international representations in each country; and, lastly, d) in relation to nation-States, which in UN language are known as “member States”.

The United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN-DESA) has an NGO Department that organizes formal participation by civil society organizations. At the international level, civil society and trade unions channeled their participation in the SDG negotiations process through ECLAC’s



Forum of Countries on Sustainable Development that takes place in March/April and the HLPF, which meets every year in July.

Since 1993, “Major Groups and other Stakeholders” have been the formal mechanisms for social participation in the sustainable development negotiations. The UN Resolution that regulates the participation of these Major Groups states that they can: (a) attend all official meetings of the forum; (b) have access to all official information and documents; (c) intervene in official meetings; (d) submit documents and present written and oral contributions; (e) make recommendations; and (f) organize side events and round tables, in cooperation with Member States and the Secretariat (UN Resolution 67/290, 2013).

The ITUC’s Trade Union Development Cooperation Network (TUDCN) mobilizes national trade union organizations affiliated to the ITUC, ITUC regional organizations – TUCA, ITUC-Africa and ITUC-Asia Pacific – global union federations (GUFs), the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) and the Trade Union Advisory Committee to the OECD (TUAC) and solidarity support organizations (SSOs) on the crosscutting relationship between sustainable development, international cooperation, and decent work. Based on the understanding that trade unions are development actors in their own right, the Network’s objective is to bring the trade union perspective into international development policy debates and improve the coordination and effectiveness of trade union development cooperation activities (ITUC, 2021).

In addition to demanding Decent Work for All, another key pillar of the trade unions’ political position during the entire negotiations process for the 2030 Agenda has been reclaiming and expanding Social Protection Systems. The Major Group affirmed that the Social Protection Floor proposal must be a key component that includes the four social security guarantees defined by the ILO: 1) access to essential health care, 2) basic income security for children, 3) basic income security for older persons, and 4) basic income security for poor workers, the unemployed, and pregnant women (ITUC, 2015).

Many trade union organizations in the region, as well as TUCA itself, have raised social protection as a priority, denouncing how – in the context of the pandemic – governments have cut back on public budgets and social investment, and dismantled State policies and public institutions whose aims are to ensure people’s welfare.³

Understanding that economic growth alone cannot guarantee the full achievement of the ambitions of SDG 8, the *Major Group of Workers and Trade Unions* advocated at the 2020 session of the HLPF for a *New Social Contract with SDG 8* at its core and the creation of a Global Fund for Social Protection as a tool for solidarity. The campaign for a *New Social Contract* proposes a series of policies aimed at reclaiming the role of the State in promoting social welfare, decent work, and sustainable development, in order to overcome the hegemony of neoliberalism, which, with its attacks on rights, calls into question the optimism as to achieving the SDGs.

In terms of regional participation, a Civil Society Participation Mechanism was created during ECLAC’s III Regional Forum of Latin American and Caribbean Countries on Sustainable Development (2018). Social organizations believe this was an important step in highlighting that five years after the approval of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the region is experiencing acute economic stagnation, aggravated by the COVID-19 pandemic. This has increased poverty and structural inequality, and has left most countries in a situation where the SDG targets are far from being achieved or have been delayed.

The TUDCN has contributed to capacity-building among national trade union bodies to advocate with national governments to promote decent work and social dialogue, and to monitor and present trade union reports monitoring compliance with the 2030 Agenda.

At the country level, the 2030 Agenda states that national States have an important role and urges them to “conduct regular and inclusive reviews of progress at the national and sub-national levels, which are country-led and country-driven”.

3. The Labor Observatory of the Americas’ Special Report on “Social Protection and Labor Rights in the COVID-19 Scenario” provides a general overview about social protection, with a focus on some countries in the region. The report is available here: <https://csa-csi.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Informe-ENGLISH-final.pdf>



The “Voluntary National Reviews” (VNRs) are a crucial component of monitoring the implementation of the goals and targets set by the 2030 Agenda. These reviews are a key opportunity for advocacy, both because they can be used to report progress, setbacks or stagnation in relation to the SDGs, and because the absence of such reviews and spaces for dialogue can be denounced in international forums (regional or global), creating situations of public tension for national authorities before their peers. Through TUCA (ITUC, 2021a; 2018; 2017), the trade union movement has been monitoring SDG implementation in Latin America and the Caribbean, and has identified worrisome situations regarding trade union participation in SDG monitoring. Of four cases analyzed, only Argentina has a satisfactory official mechanism for social and trade union consultation and participation. Meanwhile in Colombia, the trade unions report that consultations were not held with them on the 2030 Agenda, and that the government does not see them as partners in SDG implementation. In Brazil, the trade union movement denounces that the government’s VNR to the UN does not report on the reality in the country and instead seeks to present a false image of progress towards the SDGs. On the other hand, Argentina recently created the Social Participation Forum for implementing and monitoring the 2030 Agenda (FPSISA for its acronym in Spanish). This initiative is a good example of institutionalizing civil society participation in the 2030 Agenda as a way of strengthening dialogue between the government and social actors.

Not only in Latin America and in the Caribbean, but also in Africa and Asia, ITUC reports describe governments’ relationships with the trade union movement as generally sharing a “limitation on access to information [that] took various forms, often meaning that it was provided in an ad-hoc, fragmented manner, during meetings convened at short notice.” (ITUC, 2021a)

Special mention should be made of the region’s overall deficit in social dialogue. In most of the countries, trade unions complain that they have not been invited to discuss development plans, but this deficit is also evident even in negotiation spaces specific for trade unions, such as sectoral collective bargaining and addressing complaints regarding violations of the freedom to form unions. It is not possible to separate the long-standing decline of the freedom of association as trade unions and collective bargaining from governments’ commitments to the 2030 Agenda.

SDGs and PLADA

In 2018, TUCA conducted an exercise comparing the SDGs with its own political program on development matters – PLADA – built through a political dialogue with social movements and NGOs coordinated within the Continental Platform for Democracy and Against Neoliberalism. Beyond the fact that PLADA is a regional program, the main difference between the two initiatives is that the proposal coming from the trade union movement of the Americas promotes an alternative development model to overcome the neoliberal model. It is “counter-hegemonic and gathers a set of vindications and demands accumulated over several decades of struggles and joint coordination with other social movements.”

TUCA’s overall analysis shows areas of concordance between the SDGs and PLADA. However, the SDGs “emphasize the role of corporations and not that of the main actors of production that generate wealth and decent work,” nor do they “question the neoliberal model and the dynamics of capital accumulation and concentration that are the source of notable asymmetries and socio-environmental dislocations. They promote a pattern of State intervention based on public-private partnerships. Thus, in this model, the State dissociates itself from the benefits of its economic interventions.” (TUCA, 2018) [Own translation.]

There are certain themes in PLADA that do not appear in the SDGs, and that the trade union movement of the Americas can promote to increase their ambition and its pressure over national authorities: State control over transnational corporations and foreign investment; rejection of international arbitration tribunals; complementarity and diversification of production; emphasis on the importance of freedom of association, collective bargaining, and the right to strike; just transition; progressive taxation; and the free movement of people.



UN Reform and Stakeholder Multilateralism: What is at stake?

The “UN reform” became necessary due to the funding crisis and organizational problems emerging from the “bureaucratization” and fragmentation of the system. These crises led to a crisis of legitimacy regarding the institution’s ability to address humanity’s problems through multilateral cooperation.

The current reform process, led by Secretary General Antonio Guterres, is presented as an administrative process closely linked to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, and seeks to respond to criticism about “a lack of accountability and transparency, ineffectiveness, and the deficit in trust between the organization and its member states in the current system.” (EPRS, 2019)

The reform proposal looks at three dimensions: development (2030 Agenda), administration – a “new paradigm” of management for the General Secretariat, and peace and security. The reform also covers the United Nations bodies and representatives in the territories. It revitalizes the function of the resident coordinator system and centralizes the development agenda in the General Secretariat. It reinforces “the authority and leadership of resident coordinators” as “the highest-ranking representative of the UN Development System at the country level, leading the UN country teams.” Many trade unions have stated that they know nothing about the Resident Coordinator, and that they have had no contact with them nor have they been invited to roundtable dialogues.

This ongoing reform grants a greater role to the General Secretariat, which in fact takes control of UN operations in the countries through the reinvigorated figure of the Resident Coordinator. At the same time, it places the SDG agenda fully at the center. It also gathers the UN regional units and places them under direct command for the implementation and monitoring of the development agenda.

Ultimately, this reform strengthens the power of the Secretary General and gives him greater operational freedom to build “network” governance with stakeholders to achieve the SDGs. This overtly neoliberal stakeholder, or interest group multilateralism “labors under the false assumption that ‘stakeholders’ are equal in participation and resources, and ignores the rights of those ‘stakeholders’ who rely on democratic governance and governments.” (Adams, 2019)

For some analysts, these Guterres-driven reforms fuel the growing push to bend multilateralism towards this new form of parallel global governance now known as “multi-stakeholderism” (Gleckman, 2018). The big problem is that “*multi-stakeholder*” bodies tend to gradually replace multilateral institutions and make decisions on financing, standards, public policies and other issues. Their criteria in most cases respond to the interests of the private sector – which itself participates in the decision-making – and therefore tend to use market criteria in decision-making instead of deciding for the public interest. By promoting this new global governance, the UN only deepens the crisis of legitimacy and efficiency in which it finds itself.

It must be said that multilateralism is in crisis and has lost several battles over the past 15 years: the great financial crisis of 2008; the climate crisis and its inability to identify commitments at the necessary scale and timeline; and, in 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic pushed the multilateral system aside on important decisions, allowing the global market to determine the production of vaccines, medicines, and hospital equipment to deal with the illness that, as of this writing, has already killed more than 4.6 million⁴ people around the world.

In this context, it is clear that multilateralism is in crisis. The crisis deepened during Trump’s term in office during which the United States withdrew from the Paris Agreement;⁵ systematically threatened to withdraw US funds from the UN (the US is the highest contributor to the multilateral system); and threatened to withdraw from the UN Human Rights Council, suspend bilateral negotiations, and systematically disengage with its European

4. John Hopkins University <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html> 17/09/2021

5. The timid step forward that countries took to address the climate problem at the end of 2015, the same year of the 2030 Agenda adoption and the Addis Ababa conference.



partners, the other pillar of globalization. Trump embodied the growing US unease with being challenged in its position as the great hegemon of the planet currently facing the “quiet” power of China, which has become not only the great global factory, but also one of the great financial, scientific, and technological powers of the world.

The Biden administration may bring a resumption of the “old neoliberal globalization” interrupted by the Trump intermission. So far, this thesis is proving true regarding their willingness; the coming years will show if this willpower is enough to tilt the playing field once again towards the US side, or if the transformation of the world will prevent the resumption of the course initiated in the late 1980s. For its part, big international capital, with the World Economic Forum (WEF) as its global platform, is aware of multilateralism’s downfall, which for them was evidenced by its inability to steer the global economy through the 2008 crisis. In 2010, the WEF launched a process of international consultation and reflection that raised a proposal for a Global Redesign (of economic and political governance) centered on “multi-stakeholderism” as a cross-cutting strategy to solve all the world’s problems. In this governance, the private sector is part of the decision-making process, with the right not only to speak but also to vote. In 2020, the WEF proposed a global “Great Reset” in the context of the pandemic, as a great reset of capitalism loaded with positive rhetoric including justice, equity, sustainability, solidarity.

In short, the 2030 Agenda and Guterres’ reform to adjust multilateralism’s institutions to achieve the SDGs enshrine a model of development and administration that serves the interests of the private sector and will further delegitimize the UN system, as it will play a marginal role in relation to multi-stakeholder bodies, even more so in the context of a global geopolitical crisis.

Conclusion

The scenarios for achieving the SDGs in 2030 are not optimistic. Unless there is a drastic change of course, the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic are only going to worsen country performance relative to the first five years post-2015. Until the arrival of the pandemic with its devastating effects on the private sector and household income, the neoliberal agenda of dismantling the social role of the State and

regressive labor reforms remained hegemonic in the Americas, resulting in an increase in precariousness, informality, and poverty.

Even though they are not binding, the SDGs are an international commitment for countries because the governments themselves voted for them. The HLPF and the Voluntary National Reviews offer two advocacy opportunities for trade unions and civil society: the HLPF is the main showcase for the SDGs and States, as well as for the various UN organizations and different “stakeholders” that present their reports and initiatives. Progress and setbacks can be publicly exposed and States that do not take action and are unlikely to meet the goals can be denounced. The same is true at the international level, as we can expose the overall dismal progress of the 2030 Agenda throughout the world as a whole.

At the national level, the SDGs also serve to embarrass governments, pointing out their contradictions and double speak in relation to the commitments adopted at the international level. Contrasting the content of the SDGs and framework documents such as PLADA with the contents of free trade agreements and investment protection and promotion treaties can serve as an additional lobbying tool, along with the Decent Work Agenda. Embracing the 2030 Agenda is “free” for the various “stakeholders” – including trade unions – and has proven to be a space of positive voluntarism, as it does not entail any kind of obligations or accountability. Nor does it create formal obligations for governments. The SDGs, although universal, are not mandatory, and the only ones who could penalize those who do not implement them are the social actors that denounce non-compliance or setbacks at the international level.

The SDGs are far from being a panacea for the structural problems of capitalism and for the challenges of post-pandemic global reconstruction. They are, however, a space of negotiation with a format that favors trade union advocacy not only at the international level but also at the national level by strengthening a strategic institutional framework to pressure governments. They also create a space to mobilize along with other social actors to move beyond neoliberalism and promote a sustainable development model with labor at its center and based on full democracy, with social and environmental justice.





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