Achieving sustainable development *with equity* in an era of globalisation

Recognizing and respecting local communities and indigenous peoples for creating the future we want

Converted grassland, northern Kyrgyzstan (Marc Foggin)

What is globalisation?

The process of globalisation is broadly understood to be the increasing connectivity around the world – socially, culturally, economically, environmentally, and politically – accompanied by an increasing inter-dependence amongst regions and nations, also often leading to a socio-cultural homogenization. While the phenomenon is not modern (global trade and exchanges of ideas and beliefs have occurred across many centuries), current impacts and rates of change are unprecedented.

Globalisation represents a shrinking of virtual space, whereby the activities of previously autonomous, isolated or remote groups are impacted by other individuals or groups living far away. This is further reflected in what is now known as the science of tele-coupling, which refers to socioeconomic and environmental interactions between distant coupled human and natural systems that have become more extensive and intensive in the recent era.

Emerging from dominant neo-liberal ideologies focused mainly on financial capital and therefore intrinsically placing substantial value on maximising economies of scale through specialisation, the impacts of globalisation are nonetheless multidimensional – with both positive and negative outcomes. However, increasing economic and other disparities between sectors and regions of the world remain a challenge. Globalisation of food systems and associated livelihoods is particularly concerning.

Globalisation and sustainable development: Development by whom? and for whom?

Sustainable development is described as *development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs*. That being said, most current development models are premised not only on a descriptive understanding that we now live in a highly globalised world, but even more so on innate assumptions about globalisation as being helpful – and even necessary – for us as a global community to meet our collective aspirations and development goals. On this basis, unhindered free trade is sought, ideas and opportunities are shared, and levels of productivity are often greatly increased… or at least this appears to be the case, if viewed through aggregated statistics.

What is missed in national and global level reports, however, are the many glaring disparities between different groups, sectors, and regions. When statistics are disaggregated regionally, or by gender, ethnicity, or community, the world begins to appear as a very different place indeed.

Furthermore, what form of development is sought? What constitutes development and progress? And what development goals do we seek to attain, and how should these be measured? Of course, there are the well developed, widely endorsed Sustainable Development Goals, or SDGs. Yet in all of our research studies and in our measuring and monitoring of interventions and impacts, two important issues (problems) remain: (i) multiple values often exist for the complex systems in which people and communities derive their livelihoods, including food systems; and (ii) the common denominator used in most measurements of SDGs is the individual, with little if any account given to matters of community or culture. In both instances, outcomes and overall values should not be assessed on the basis of primarily economic measures.

Samburu pastoralist herding their cattle in northern Kenya (Marc Foggin)

Cattle and cart in Chitwan, Nepal (Marc Foggin)

Local Communities and Indigenous Peoples

Many indigenous peoples and local communities are active custodians or guardians of vast territories that harbor a large proportion of global biodiversity, and they have a well-established, long-standing bond with the land and environment. Especially for indigenous peoples, sustainable development centers on collectively caring for land, water, plants and animals by establishing personal, respectful and reciprocal relations that lead to regeneration and mutual flourishing based on natural and social cycles. Ancient knowledge gained through their traditional livelihoods has given them an understanding of the environment, often reflected in distinctive practices that seek to sustain a 'living environment' for many generations into the future.

Local perspectives on sustainable development thus tend to be more holistic, relational, inclusive, and environmentally responsible.

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples now urgently calls the international community to better respect and promote the inherent rights of indigenous peoples, who contribute significantly, at global scale, to sustainable development.

With many parts of the world clearly exhibiting both biological diversity and cultural diversity, the notion of biocultural conservation is now gaining traction and may also be leveraged to ensure people's well-being and dignity.

While every person's fundamental human rights must be respected, for example in terms of a person's right to good health, education, shelter, etc., the notion of 'rights' clearly also extends to matters of access, use and benefits derived from resources such as clean air, land, water... But amongst many communities and indigenous peoples around the world, natural resources are collectively rather than individually governed and managed, thus development decisions and approaches to measuring and assessing success should not be exclusively reduced to individual people.

Within the globally endorsed SDG framework, the above criticisms are partially redressed with inclusion of the Goals 10, 16 and 17, which are focused on equity, justice, and partnerships — however, fundamentally, local communities' and indigenous peoples' level of engagement with and leadership in processes of assessment and prioritization for development still need to be more strongly advocated and ensured.

This policy brief aims to place the above issues on the table, namely the multiple values of local communities' and indigenous peoples' territories and livelihoods, as defined by themselves, along with further reflection on the nature of our global, broadly Western-centric 'accounting system' for sustainable development, which still inadequately accounts for more community-oriented definitions of the person.

Responding to the 'big issues' of our time

Climate change

Some of the most dramatic changes in the world's climate is occurring in mountain regions, where warming trends are leading to significant loss of glaciers (such as in Central Asia) and consequently to changes in water regimes that critically impact agropastoralist societies. Around the world people depend on being able to obtain both sufficient and reliable water resources from mountain regions, which are source of the vast majority of freshwater for local communities as well as more distant downstream agricultural and urban centres. As climatic conditions change, especially in arid and semi-arid lands, communities become more vulnerable with unpredictable annual supplies of food, revenue, and other resources. In water scarce areas, tensions increase over limited resources, potentially leading to localised conflicts, regional insecurity, and sometimes even to war. Thus, due to global environmental change not of their own making, including climate change, local communities may suffer personal direct harm, and/or they may encounter increasing competition and possibly conflict from incoming stakeholders seeking respite from challenges that have arisen elsewhere. Conversely, climate change can lead people into poverty, or to becoming environmental refugees or refugees on the basis of regional insecurity – both of which exist, for example, in Afghanistan.

On the other hand, local communities and indigenous people have often developed and adapted to environmental changes over generations, and in the process have maintained or cultivated flexibility and adaptability as well as sometimes developing novel approaches to new conditions. It is such wealth of local knowledge and experience and relationships with the natural world that makes the maintenance of biocultural diversity all the more meaningful, for everyone, globally.

Farmer growing quinoa in Tibet (Gongbo Tashi)

It is time for more inclusive conservation and sustainable development...

Inclusive development refers to (or *should* refer to) local communities and indiginous peoples' wellbeing and development *as it is desired and designed* by the people and communities themselves – that is, those who are 'targeted' by the so-called development entreprise. Yet this view should actually go even further, as in addition to being so-called 'recipients' of development, the same people also should be leading in the assessments, design, and implementation of development initiatives and interventions. Externally imposed, top-down models of development are neither sustainable nor fair or just, and many underlying causes of injustice and inequalities seen around the world actually find their roots in various forms of past and on-going colonisation as well as on-going flawed global economic systems. Rather than considering only measures of economic wealth, such as GDP, other values of wealth, prosperity and wellbeing including a healthy environment, vibrant communities, traditions and knowledge systems, and nutritious local foods must equally be acknowledged and valued.

Further, moving beyond the notion of stakeholders – whereby virtually anyone could conceivably claim to "have a stake" (i.e., have an interest in, most often a desire to profit from) a resource, place, or project – the centrality of local communities is of paramount significance, and therefore the *rights* of indigenous peoples and local communities (or IP/LCs) must necessarily trump the interests and plans, often economic, of more distant actors in local affairs. Respecting local people's and local communities' rights is not an optional add-on.

Inclusive conservation and/or development occurs where indigenous peoples and local communities are the key actors governing, managing and conserving their own lands, waters and other gifts of nature, and, as necessary and desired, inviting others also to join in partnership with them to achieve goals, on community-defined terms.

Adapted from Foggin 2020, *Inclusive development...*

Loss of biodiversity

While certain specific and immediate events may sometimes be attributed with reasonable certainty to climate change, such as when landslides occur as a result of unusually intense rainfall, eroding unstable mountain slopes that have been destabilized by drought-induced loss of vegetation... at other times, changes in the environment are more systemic and causality of effects somewhat more difficult to pinpoint with accuracy. It is well documented, however, that biodiversity confers resilience to ecosystems, and to people's livelihoods, and that wildlife has many values – economic and otherwise. There is broad consensus that biodiversity is irreplaceable, that over the past century the rate of loss has been manifold what occurred in pre-industrial times and is increasing, and that – if valued from an economic perspective – biodiversity is worth much, much more than countries' national GDPs.

Protecting biodiversity is therefore of paramount concern for everyone, not just for those people who find wildlife and landscapes to be aesthetically pleasing, or because they feel compelled to steward the environment on the basis of faith motivations. Protection and sustainable use of biodiversity may take many forms, amongst which the establishment of protected areas (such as nature reserves and national parks) is probably the most widely recognized and appreciated by the public. What is generally less known, though, is that the lands and territories governed by indigenous peoples – who make up less than 5% of the global population – contribute to sustainable land management and conservation of nearly a quarter of all land outside Antarctica.

It is imperative, therefore, that we now transform our ways of thinking, feeling, understanding about local communities, indigenous peoples, and biodiversity, and begin a legitimate partnering with them in collective conservation endeavours.

These are unprecedented times, and we need all equitable and fair partnerships, led by the fundamental rights holders, in order to respond effectively to the challenges of climate change and biodiversity loss.

Food systems should be placed beyond the limits of globalisation

Food systems are integrated social-ecological systems in which local communities and their environments mutually affect each other. In essence, in these complex, integrated systems that have developed over generations, people and nature are co-dependant and do not exist apart from each other. Furthermore, people's experiences and memories are tied to place and history, to relationships, to their way of living, and to shared experiences. Hence, for people who live closely with the land, who work the land and its resources as a food system, their very sense of identity – indeed, their culture – is inextricably connected with the place and their ways of living. Thus, to crudely reduce food systems to a single monetary figure and assume it can be exchanged at the press of a button – this is globalisation gone wrong.

Food systems are of much greater value than the purely economic. And as such, they should be delinked from externally driven trade deals.

Kazakh herder moving to traditional summer pastures (Marc Foggin)

Key findings, and recommendations…

Key findings

- People are not purely economic actors, but relational beings
- Identity and culture derive from place and shared experiences
- Local and indigenous knowledge and livelihoods have developed over generations, and they often are well suited for adaptation
- Biocultural diversity may contribute significantly to maintaining and strengthening societal resilience to global changes
- Globalisation increases connectivity in communications, trade and economic efficiencies, however it often also leads to environmental costs and cultural homogenisation

Community meeting in the Tibetan highlands (Gongbo Tashi)

Recommendations

- Delink food systems from globalisation, change the dominant neoliberal economic development narrative
- Encourage and enable local and indigenous people to lead and participate in critical development dialogues
- Focus on family farming (rather than corporations) as basis for food security, including native crops/breeds

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