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SDGs and the sources of transformation: local responses to global and poverty crises

Alberto D. Cimadamore, IIEP UBA-CONICET¹

The essential meaning of *crisis* refers to a “difficult or dangerous situation that needs serious attention” (Merriam Webster Dictionary), when “problems must be solved or important decisions must be made” (Oxford Learner’s Dictionary). The world is currently facing multiple crises (e.g., social, economic, health, climate, environmental) that require not only important decisions but also a clear diagnosis, a consistent agenda and strategy to guide and coordinate these decisions. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted by the United Nations (UN) in 2015 constitute an attempt to build such an agenda.

Poverty is at the top of the SDGs included in the Agenda 2030 for sustainable development. This is a clear acknowledgement that poverty is a “difficult or dangerous situation that needs serious attention” that has been causing suffering and death throughout the history. Even though there has been some progress, poverty is still behind most of the preventable deaths. More than 6.3 million children under 15 years of age died in 2017, or 1 every 5 seconds². The vast majority of these deaths – 5.4 million – occur in the first 5 years of life, with newborns accounting for around half of the deaths. At the present -even without COVID-19-related mortality adjustments- the death toll is confirmed by the UN Inter-agency Group for Child Mortality Estimation: more than 5 million children died before turning 5 in 2020 alone. And these deaths are not carried equally around the world. Children in those regions where poverty is higher, like sub-Saharan Africa and Southern Asia “continue to face the highest risk of death and to bear the brunt of the child mortality burden” (UNICEF, 2021, p. 5).

Consequently, one of the arguments accepted by this paper is that poverty eradication should now be urgently addressed and tackled as a crisis within the broader context of sustainable development. The argument is based on the formal commitment made by the international community to transform societies that have been producing and reproducing poverty during their entire existence, consolidating a severe social problem. In this sense, poverty eradication has been appropriately identified by the United Nations as the “greatest global challenge and an indispensable requirement for sustainable development”, prompting the world's governments’ commitment to “working tirelessly for the full implementation” of the SDGs (UN, 2015). It seems it is about time to make the representatives of the 193 States that approved that UN Resolution honor their commitments to the eradication of extreme poverty by 2030.

¹ https://iiep-baires.econ.uba.ar/integrante/cimadamore_alberto

² Mortality estimates released in 2018 by WHO, UNICEF, the United Nations Population Division and the World Bank Group. <https://www.who.int/news/item/18-09-2018-a-child-under-15-dies-every-5-seconds-around-the-world->

A big question asked by many (myself included) is whether the SDGs are more of the same mainstream development thinking and practice we have been seeing for the past seven decades, which evidently could not eradicate poverty. A bigger and perhaps more relevant question is whether we can find, within current commitments and institutional arrangements, effective ways to transform the socioeconomic system that has led to this perfect storm of socioeconomic, environmental, health and climate crises we are facing at the same time.

This paper will focus on the latter question, offering a theoretical explanation of the global structural constraints that have contributed to the crises and persistence of poverty -among other socioeconomic problems-, providing ideas and perspectives on how the implementation of the SDGs at different levels - i.e., subnational or local - can be part of an effective transformation towards a more sustainable world. The theoretical explanation will be based on a model presented elsewhere (Cimadamore, 2007, 2008 and 2021) that identifies some of the main forces originating, sustaining and perpetuating poverty, thus inducing recurrent socioeconomic crises.

Such theoretical exercise can help identify in a quite general way how social and other crisis are generated. Nevertheless, it is necessary to go beyond theoretical exercises and put in place a feasible strategy to deal with the problems that lie at the heart of contemporary crises. In this sense, the chapter will also present some preliminary findings and lessons extracted from an ongoing research on the process of localization of the SDGs in a relatively poor municipality in Santa Fe, Argentina. This problem-solving-oriented research combines the premises of Sustainability Science³ (Cimadamore, 2020) and the education for sustainable development (ESD) promoted by UNESCO⁴ (UNESCO 2012, 2020) to produce useful knowledge and practices to guide the local community and government towards a more sustainable path.

Perspectives on crises

The political economy is a useful perspective to explain, understand and eventually find ways to face recurrent problems and crises of diverse social systems by guiding the decision-making process towards the right direction.

One of the most relevant social problems in the history of humankind is poverty. The suffering and death it brought to humanity has been widely documented throughout the globe. Its social, economic, political, and moral consequences have motivated the 193 states that supported the Resolution of the United Nations General Assembly (AR/70/1) to define the eradication of poverty “in all its forms and dimensions, including extreme poverty” as “the greatest global challenge and indispensable requirement for sustainable development” (UN, 2015. Declaration, point 2).

³ <https://en.unesco.org/sustainability-science>

⁴ <https://en.unesco.org/themes/education-sustainable-development>

How to face such a huge challenge? A first logical step is to understand how the problem under scrutiny is induced, produced and reproduced. Theories have been an essential scientific tool to understand and explain how things work at different levels of complexity. When duly operationalized, they also are relevant tools to search for solutions.

Social theory can be constructed from different disciplinary perspectives. The political economy of poverty streams from an interdisciplinary reservoir and can basically be discerned in the interaction of the two most important structures we have in social sciences: markets and states. From this standpoint, we can explain or understand the production and reproduction of poverty as a result of the processes stimulated by structural arrangements of particular states and markets (Cimadamore, 2007, 2008 and 2021). This view identifies the state as the main structure with the capability of limiting the market failures that produce poverty as well as articulating the institutional arrangements conducive to reducing and eradicating poverty according to SDG 1 within the framework of the Agenda 2030.

If theory is a logical starting point to understand the root of a problem and move to the next step which hopefully is the search for a feasible solution, why is it not done more often? Perhaps this is related to the relative lack of theories that can help us to identify with simplicity and clarity the sources of the problems with which we are trying to deal. This seems to be the norm when we are dealing with complex problems that demand systemic analysis. Systemic theories are particularly difficult because we have to rest on a quite unambiguous definition of the structure of the system to give it meaning and allow the researcher to understand interactions and results in the system under analysis. An additional complication has to do with the basic intellectual nature of structures: they cannot be observed in the real world -they are simply 'invisibles'. They are just ideas organized and defined by the theorists as components of grander ideological perspectives which attempt to explain how different stimuli affect the production and distribution of resources in systems like our contemporary societies.

International systems are even more complex than others due to the existence of different kinds of organizing principles. As examined in a previous work, the state is based on a hierarchical organization of its constitutive elements – constitutional order, government, territory and population – that historically creates and distributes power, while the market is ideally a non-hierarchical structure that creates and distributes wealth based on the relative efficiency of economic agents (Cimadamore, 2021).

The structural conflict that characterizes the political economy of poverty -among many other social problems- emerges from the interactions between states and markets: While the former is based on the concepts of territoriality, loyalty, exclusivity and monopoly of the legitimate use of force, the latter rests on the notion of competition, efficiency, functional integration and interdependence. The contradictions and conflicts that condition the distribution of resources operate in different ways at diverse levels of analysis due to

the specific characteristics of markets and states (national, provincial, municipal) therefore having distinctive effects on socioeconomic relations and agent's incentives.

Markets tend to avoid all obstacles – political or otherwise – to the supply and demand mechanism that explains prices and the conditions by which goods and services are distributed in a given society, while states have the capacity to orient or direct economic activities towards certain social goals, for instance, collective welfare. Naturally, national and municipal states have different capabilities to confront market forces.

Markets also tend to overlook poverty, inequality and other socioeconomic problems. As nominal places where forces of supply and demand operate to trade goods and services, they are functional to wealth production and distribution without focusing on the social cost of maximizing private agents' benefits. In fact, they can create wealth, poverty and inequality at the same time, as we can see everywhere.

In contrast, states have theoretically and historically, the capability to reduce, eliminate and prevent poverty by regulating the undesired effects of a market's operations and promoting welfare actively through social, economic, fiscal and environmental policies.

A way to succinctly visualize the capabilities of political structures to mitigate the social problems created by the operation of market forces is to measure them with and without state intervention. For instance, when 'market poverty' is measured in the United States, it shows a number that does not take into consideration state intervention (i.e., tax credits and/or other social policy benefits) and is normally higher than the poverty level that is captured by the statistical offices. Taking the case of market poverty in the US, it was 28.7 per cent in 2012. During the same period, poverty incidence measured in the standard manner (i.e., considering state intervention) was about half that, showing the extent to which it was mitigated by the use of social policy and other state instruments (Cimadamore, 2016a).

This kind of effective state intervention to reduce poverty at the national level cannot be found at the international or global level. The absence of counter structures to mitigate the effects of globalized markets somehow explains why the globalization process is prone to produce poverty and inequality. It is quite clear that at the international level there is no structure of governance similar to states that is capable of avoiding the wealth concentration that 'free' markets tend to produce. Thus, global poverty can be seen as a result of the absence of a counter-structure to limit the negative effects of wealth creation and distribution resulting from the market's organizing principles.

The operation of the most powerful agents in the international system without the regulations and restrictions that states can impose to redistribute resources facilitates the enormous accumulation of wealth that globalization has allowed, along with the high level of poverty we can observe.

Arguably, states (particularly, at the national level) are the locus where social justice and sustainable development can logically be realized by balancing the structural forces and incentives to respond to social challenges and problems (Cimadamore, 2016a). The achievements of the integrated and indivisible set of goals of Agenda 2030 depend on an effective governance structure that cannot be found at the international level and quite possibly will never exist as long as the main units of the international community continue to be 'national' states. The reason given by traditional and mainstream International Relations theories (like Neorealism or Structural Realism) is the existence of a systemic bias towards the perpetuation of anarchy (i.e. the absence of a formal structure of governance in the terms explained by K. Waltz, 2010 and B. Buzan et al.,1993) that renders unlikely the regulation of markets at that level.⁵

The model or theoretical simplification delineated here guides the concentration of efforts to face the challenges at those levels (national, subnational) where the implementation of socioeconomic policies to confront the multiple crises may potentially be more effective. Within this frame, social policies and social protection arise as states' relevant tools to address poverty and other SDGs and targets. Naturally, social policies need to be part of a consistent set of economic, fiscal, and environmental policies advancing national and subnational development strategies. Otherwise, their proven effect could be easily and swiftly neutralized.

The lack of access to social protection constitutes a major obstacle to economic and social development. Social protection policies are a way to reduce poverty, fulfill basic human rights and address some of the most relevant socioeconomic aspects of the SDGs. The policies and initiatives that combine labor market interventions, social insurance and/or social assistance in cash or in kind may 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 (particularly when income transfers have a large coverage) have a modest impact on the reduction of inequality. It is also important to notice that a relative small proportion of global GDP is required to provide the poor with a minimum of social security (Cimadamore, 2018)⁶.

Notwithstanding, social security systems have not been playing a relevant role in development strategies globally, despite the fact that the international community have

⁵ Author like Nagel (2005) accepts that the nation-state is the primary locus of political legitimacy and the pursuit of justice, and that there is still no institution that can play a comparable role at a global scale. Nagel arguments focus primarily on state (unit) level analysis while the arguments developed here focus on the international (systemic) level.

⁶ According to recent estimates, to guarantee at least a basic level of social security through a nationally defined social protection floor, lower-middle-income countries would need to invest an additional US\$362.9 billion and upper-middle-income countries a further US\$750.8 billion per year, equivalent to 5.1 and 3.1 per cent of GDP respectively for the two groups. Low-income countries would need to invest an additional US\$77.9 billion, which imply a larger proportion of their GDP (ILO, 2022).

been forced to offer strong responses to the crises. The quality of responses varied showing once more how certain forms of state are better suited than others to respond to social crises and distribute resources according to the needs of those negatively affected. States and their agents, the governments (as one of the four constitutive elements of states along with population, territory and constitutional order), have shown instruments with different aptitudes to deal with the Covid-19 pandemic.

States and governments can resort to a similar level of activism they use to confront Covid-19⁷ and work consistently towards poverty reduction targeted by the SDGs as well as other contemporary crises (environmental, climate, etc.). There are no logical or theoretical obstacles to such active role beyond those posed by the special interests that have been colonizing the states and undermining democratic forms of government, and the predatory elites that have been impeding social progress in all latitudes.

The colonization and capture of the state by special interests is perceived as an obstacle to responding to the different crises because neglect the resources and institutional reforms needed to finance social security systems and other measures required to alleviate poverty and mitigate the consequences of the other crises that disproportionately affect the poor, such as climate change. This perception is particularly apparent in Latin America. A regional poll conducted in 18 Latin American countries shows that the percentage of the population that believes their governments work to benefit the most powerful groups of their societies increased from 61 per cent to 79 per cent between 2006 and 2018 (Latinobarómetro, 2018). In countries like Brazil and Mexico these percentages reached 90 per cent and 88 percent respectively. It is reasonable to infer that the current opinion is similar, if not worse due to the effects of the multiple crises taking place in these countries.

Despite of this wide perception and resulting skepticism, the state -through its agent, the government- is, as argued in this chapter, the place to look for the solution. The Agenda 2030 reaffirms that the “state has, and shall freely exercise, full permanent sovereignty over all its wealth, natural resources and economic activity” (UN, 2015, point 18) and also recognizes that “each country has primary responsibility for its own economic and social development” (UN, 2015, point 18).

It is then clear that in both the UN perspective on SDGs and the theoretical framework used here and elsewhere (Cimadamore, 2021) we have to acknowledge global trends and threats while focusing on the state level. It is precisely at that level where we have to look for the capabilities to face the negative effects of the globalized market economies as well as other

⁷ On 30 January 2020 COVID-19 was declared a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC) with an official death toll of 171. By 31 December 2020, this figure stood at 1 813 188. Yet preliminary estimates suggest the total number of global deaths attributable to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 is at least 3 million, representing 1.2 million more deaths than officially reported

(<https://www.who.int/data/stories/the-true-death-toll-of-covid-19-estimating-global-excess-mortality>).

These numbers are significant. However, are less than a half of the preventable children deaths triggered by poverty.

great challenges (environmental, climate, health) that are affecting the planet we are leaving in.

Global crisis and the limits of global responses

During the coming years we will test the thesis that pandemics are catalyst for social change as stated in the 2021 SDGs Report (UN, 2021). One way to do it is to observe how society faces one its most relevant problems, defined in the agenda 2030 as SDG 1: poverty, and particularly, extreme poverty⁸.

The prospects for positive change (i.e. to achieve SDG1 targets 1, 2 and 3⁹) in the forecasted future do not look good. UN reported that an additional 119-124 million people were pushed back into extreme poverty in 2020. Projections indicate that the global poverty rate is to be 7% in 2030 and therefore, the eradication SDG 1 target will be missed. This is supposed to happen despite the fact that governments worldwide have put in place 1600 short-term social protection measures in response to Covid-19, on the top of all of the measures and actions taken to eradicate poverty to reach the SDG 1 targets¹⁰.

This is not surprising. Poverty has been a structural feature in most societies and, despite of the impressive accumulation of wealth we have witnessed during the past decades, most developing countries have witnessed a “skewed concentration of welfare and human development outcomes to the disadvantage of the poor and socially excluded communities. National and international systems have worked very well for the elites, while the majority of the world population continues to suffer multiple deprivations, foremost among them extreme poverty and hunger” (Cimadamore et al., 2016b, p. 3).

This diagnosis, written when the SDGs were launched by the 193 countries that subscribed the Agenda 2030 at the UN General Assembly, is still perhaps more vivid than ever due to the visible socioeconomic effects of the Covid 19 pandemics. Governments worldwide have put in place 1600 short-term social protection measures in response to Covid-19. However, 4 billion people are still not covered by social protection showing how far the world is to achieve the SDGs 1.3 target.

The current situation and prospects suggest to look for feasible solutions. Having discussed the limits of searching for solutions at the international level, the focus should

⁸ Something similar can be done with the other crises mentioned in this chapter. Unfortunately, there is no room to expand further in this contribution.

⁹ SDG1 End poverty in all its forms everywhere. Target 1: By 2030, eradicate extreme poverty for all people everywhere, currently measured as people living on less than \$1.90 a day; Target 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 definitions; Target 3: Implement nationally appropriate social protection systems and measures for all, including floors, and by 2030 achieve substantial coverage of the poor and the vulnerable (UN, 2015)

¹⁰ <https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal1> (access: January 18, 2022), based on SDGs report 2021 <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2021/>

be posed at the national level and -if the implications of this chapter are correct- at the local level.

National responses to the crisis and SDGs

Both the UN and the theoretical approach used here indicates the state as the locus where we can think of possible solutions. States have been identified as part of the problem of systems producing and reproducing poverty. They can also be conceived as part of the solution (Dean, 2005) as the theoretical simplification we are presenting here suggests.

When we descend from the global or international level to the national one, we get into differences which are necessary to explore. Different policy responses show different results at the national level and concrete experiences could suggest paths to be explored in the way to achieve the SDGs. In other words, whether states are part of the problem or the solution (or both at the same time), is an empirical question, not a theoretical one. If true the state has theoretically the possibility to reduce, eradicate or prevent poverty (as may be illustrated by the Norwegian and Chinese cases), the historical experience of other states can show otherwise.

To continue with the argument presented in this chapter, the track record of two states that subscribed the Agenda 2030 and committed themselves to eradicate poverty as an integral part of the SDGs shall be very briefly presented.

Argentina

This is a case where poverty was relatively small half a century ago. After the economic and political crises of the 1970s, along with Neoliberal reforms that have altered the previous relationships between markets and the state, poverty started to increase substantially. It has since reached more than 40% of the population in different occasions.

The current situation shows high levels of poverty and indigence that have consolidated and proved been difficult to reduce despite increased state social intervention, even after the adoption of the SDGs by the Argentinean state. Official statistics show that the number of persons and homes living under the poverty line in Argentina has grown since the adoption of the SDGs as it can be observed in Table 1 below.

The basic food basket (which sets the indigence line) and the basic total basket (which also includes clothing, transportation, education, health and other services and sets the poverty line) indicate that policies implemented by the Argentinean government are not going in the right path to achieve SDG 1 in due time. This could not be surprising in a country that has reproduced poverty for decades due to recurrent political, social and economic crises and made it a structural characteristic of this society.

Table 1: Poverty in Argentina 2016 - 2021

Indicator	2nd. semester 2016	1st semester 2017	2nd. semester 2017	1st. semester 2018	2nd. semester 2018	1st. semester 2019	2nd. semester 2019 (1)	1st semester 2020	2nd. semester 2020 (2)	1st. semester 2021	2nd. semestre 2021
Poverty											
Homes	21,5	20,4	17,9	19,6	23,4	25,4	25,9	30,4	31,6	31,2	27,9
Persons	30,3	28,6	25,7	27,3	32,0	35,4	35,5	40,9	42,0	40,6	37,3
Indigence / Extreme poverty											
Homes	4,5	4,5	3,5	3,8	4,8	5,5	5,7	8,1	7,8	8,2	6,1
Persons	6,1	6,2	4,8	4,9	6,7	7,7	8	10,5	10,5	10,7	8,2

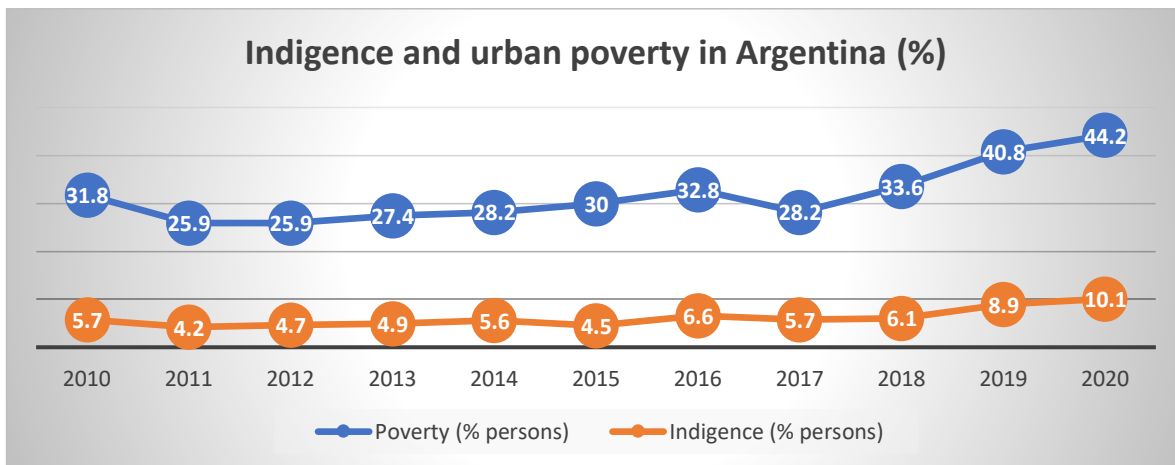
(1) Resistencia's urban conglomerate is not included.

(2) Ushuaia-Río Grande's urban conglomerates are not included.

Source: National Institute of Statistics and Census (INDEC). Encuesta Permanente de Hogares.

A longer view that includes a different measurement of poverty by another source¹¹, confirms the upward trend manifested half century ago. Poverty in Argentina was not a major issue until the middle of 1970s. In October 1974 poverty levels were below 5% of the population according to different sources and ways to measure it. At that point, it began to rise intensely, reaching 20% and continuing its way up just before democracy was installed as a form of government in 1983. (Arakari, 2011, p. 25).

As we can see in the graph below, the continuous growth of poverty during the period in which Neoliberalism has been the main ideological guidance of the political economy of Argentina has consolidated during the past decade, leading to high levels of poverty and indigence, as confirmed also by other non-official sources.



Source: ODSA, UCA (Catholic University of Argentina): Informe de avance: Deudas Sociales en la Argentina 2010-2020. Crisis del empleo, pobreza y desigualdades estructurales en el contexto COVID-19

China

¹¹ The official source (INDEC) made in 2016 methodological changes that affects comparisons and long-term analysis. Due to the controversies generated around poverty statistics, different sources are used in this chapter.

A quite different path can be observed in the case of China. Ten years before the 2030 target, the Asian giant announced the eradication of poverty¹². This was the result of an unprecedented anti-poverty campaign conducted by the state and supported by the extraordinary economic growth achieved in the country. This is a remarkable accomplishment not only at the national level but also at the global scale due to the number of people that were lifted out of extreme poverty. In fact, the Chinese anti-poverty achievements that moved out of poverty hundred of millions of Chinese citizens was the main reason for the optimistic view and statistics published by international organizations and part of the developed world as a collective success in the fight against global poverty.

The unique success in the eradication of extreme poverty in China was due to the combination of health, educational and socio-economic policies aiming to deal with those that were at the margins of the economic success registered over the past decades. The decisive action of the state in a context of a remarkable economic growth validated by both the national and international market, set an example on how the political economy perspective can be used to interpret the achievement of the SDG 1.1. and other targets.

The list of measures communicated by the Chinese government included tailored medical treatments for more than 20 million poor patients, subsistence allowance for over 24 million people, assistance and nursing subsidies for over 24 million disabled people or people with physical difficulties. Educational policies contributed to eliminate dropouts at the obligatory educational level at the same time that rural infrastructure was substantially improved with the construction of roads and railways and the increased reliability and coverage of the power supply. High quality internet access in poor areas was also substantially increased in the context of improvement of the housing conditions of the targeted areas, showing the complementarity SDGs' targets have.

None of these interventions could have been implemented without the ability of the Chinese government to mobilize the social and economic resources required to put an end to rural extreme poverty. Strategic planning and the endurance of actions toward the prioritized target of poverty eradication and alleviation played a crucial role. Relevant to the argument of this chapter, China has implemented a national strategy but called for locally adapted policy planning and targeted assistance programs for households. Information and proper utilization of the big data and digital economy contributed to both the planning and management of the social transformation set in motion.

According to the assessment carried out by the government, the national poverty alleviation data system -which includes information on 128,000 poor villages, 29.48 million poor households and nearly 100 million poor people- ensured that the poverty alleviation resources were used only on impoverished population and in poor areas. Along

¹² <https://www.mfa.gov.cn/ce/cevu//eng/sgxw/t1864046.htm> (accessed on January 18, 2022)

with this targeted approach, local and bottom-up strategies drove the process that broke with the poverty trap that marked the history of this giant country.

Local responses

A big question is if China's national response to poverty eradication is replicable in other economic and political contexts in order to achieve similar results before the 2030 deadline? It does not seem so. The combination of political and economic conditions at national level that has characterized this country during the past decades cannot be found elsewhere. However, the impact assigned in that country to the mobilization and policies managed at local levels opens up innovative bottom-up ways of thinking transformative responses to global challenges synthesized in the Agenda 2030.

Local integral responses seem to be a less ambitious and unsuited approach to deal with the macroeconomic and political issues that condition the political economy of poverty and other social challenges. Nonetheless, these could represent a viable alternative to move forward and provide meaningful responses to the complexity of the SDGs' agenda.

This paper argues that the SDGs localization process at the municipal level is a desirable and viable way to respond to global challenges that affect people in their territories. The argument can be carried on further, saying that it is the most effective way to pursue those goals that directly respond to global economic, social, environmental and health crises that affect differentially the local territories.

The localization process is complex, particularly when relatively small, isolated and poor cities are involved. It aims to integrate SDGs and targets into the local state policies and strategic planning in order to rationalize the use of scarce resources. The support provided by both the national and provincial states is usually not enough to sustain the process of localization. The last Voluntary National Review (VNR) Report of Argentina (2020, page 234) acknowledges that there is still a long way to go.

The second VNR conducted by the National Social Policies Coordination Council (CNCPS) in charge of SDGs in Argentina summarizes the support of the localization processes provided in ten¹³ municipalities (CNCPS, 2020, page 86) out of the 2327 local governments registered in Argentina in 2018 by the National Institute of Statistics and Censuses (INDEC). As possible to infer from these numbers, the task is to incorporate the three dimensions of sustainable development (economic, social and environmental) into the planning of a large number of municipalities of Argentina is quite far away.

¹³ Lanús, Bragado, General Villegas, Vicente López, Galeguaychú, San Antonio de Areco, Crespo, Villa María, Córdoba y San Justo. The Autonomous City of Buenos Aires (CABA) is not included in this list although it is localizing the SDGs. See <https://www.buenosaires.gob.ar/jefedegobierno/secretariageneral/objetivos-de-desarrollo-sostenible> (Accessed on 27 April 2022). More general dissemination activities (workshops, seminars, etc. were reported in other municipalities (NVR, pages 84-85)

However, if this top-down approach is mitigated and a bottom-up strategy is promoted, there are still several opportunities for relatively small cities to use the localization process as a way to improve local decision-making and management through the planning and evaluation tools that are essential to achieve the SDGs. Some of the concrete opportunities the SDGs' localization process offers are recommended by the CNCPS (2018) and have to do with:

- The inclusion of the human rights framework into the decision-making and political processes;
- Strengthening of local bureaucracies;
- Improvement in local statistical facilities and systems;
- Facilitate the revision and improvement of roles within the local public administration;
- Set a local forum and framework for the discussion of the local sustainability aspects of local development.

Despite all these advantages that the localization process may have, it is in general moving very slowly. In fact, it is conceivable that the process could not be fully set in motion in most local governments before the 2030 deadline, even in the cases where it has already started with information and training workshops. Naturally, the Covid-19 pandemic has negatively influenced the localization process, but according to a preliminary research done in the specific case of the Municipality of Vera, Santa Fe (Argentina) the pandemic was not even the main cause.

A preliminary study carried out by a group of researchers and teachers of a tertiary school (CS42¹⁴) at the end of 2021 has detected the lack of information about the SDGs process as the main problem faced by the localization of the Agenda 2030. The local research team of the project on Science, Education and Local Sustainable Development¹⁵ conducted interviews on 24 local governmental and non-governmental organizations whose activities are closely related to the issues dealt by the SDGs, and found that 88% of the organizations where the person interviewed worked did not receive any invitation to participate in the SDGs process. 92 % of the responses confirmed that they have not received any information regarding the SDGs or the localization process either from the National, Provincial or Municipal agencies in charge of SDGs in Argentina.

Something similar occurs at the education level in local institutions. A questionnaire distributed among secondary teachers during the second semester of 2021 indicates that more than ¾ of the respondents did not know the SDGs or the UN Agenda 2030.

Even though the result of this exercise intended to set a baseline for a research-action project aimed to understand local development and contribute with its results to the localization of the SDGs, it is quite revealing of the slow progress made to achieve the

¹⁴ Colegio Superior No. 42, Vera, Santa Fe Province, Argentina: <https://cs42-sfe.infed.edu.ar/sitio/>

¹⁵ <https://cs42-sfe.infed.edu.ar/sitio/investigacion-proyecto/> (accessed on April 08, 2022)

SDGs more than 6 years after the approval of the Agenda 2030 by the UN and the consequent adoption by the Argentine Republic and the Santa Fe Province, where the city of Vera is located.

In this context, a bottom-up approach was introduced. The Municipality of Vera, the Colegio Superior 42 located in the same city and the National Research Council of Argentina (CONICET), recognizing the challenges presented in the preliminary study that set the baseline of the Project, signed at the beginning of 2022 an agreement to cooperate towards the localization of the SDGs and develop a research-action project to inform and facilitate the process¹⁶. A Project named “Science, education and local development” was approved to use innovative methodologies and scientific approaches (like Sustainability Science's co-production of knowledge (Cimadamore, 2020)) oriented to promote a social change towards socioeconomic and environmental sustainability in the city of Vera.

Co-production of knowledge on sustainable development among scientists, non-scientists, educators and decision-makers are key elements of the Project, whose three pillars are:

1. A research-action chapter on public budget and strategic planning aiming to provide relevant information and training to localize the SDGs and facilitate the work of local state institutions (legislative and executive branches).
2. A research-action Project on Education for Sustainable Development based on UNESCO's pedagogy for sustainable development and the organization's Route Plan 2030. This pillar aims to include SDGs in the curricula of the secondary and tertiary public school to promote a long-term social change towards sustainability and mitigation of the various crises faced by the local community.
3. A communication plan conducted by teachers and students aiming to communicate the results of the research projects on local sustainable development and mobilize the local community towards the achievement of a sustainable and just development for all.

The hypothesis that link these three pillars indicates that the transition towards local sustainable development (dependent variable) is a function of: the knowledge that is coproduced and adapted for its local use in the strategic sustainable development planning and management (independent variable #1); the education for sustainable development (independent variable # 2); and a social mobilization oriented to solve the most urgent socioeconomic and environmental problems contained in the SDGs strategy.

It is still early to make an evaluation after a few months of a four-year project that formally started at the beginning of 2022. However, it is possible to report that more than twenty educators are currently reviewing their curricula in order to incorporate a

¹⁶ This agreement and project is part of the work of the Council's Network on Socioeconomic Dimensions of Sustainable Development (RIOSP DDHH). The RIOSPs are “Institutional Networks Oriented to Problem-Solving”, an innovative way of producing knowledge that aims to go beyond traditional ways of scientific research using inter and transdisciplinary research methods and strategies.

(<https://proyectosinv.conicet.gov.ar/riosp/>)

multidisciplinary approach to the SDGs in their teaching activities both at secondary and tertiary school levels. This process is fully supported and supervised by the authorities of the school and the new curricula is expected to be in place by 2023. This is a quite singular achievement in a few months of the implementation of the initiative and quite extraordinary in the context of the province and the country, thus showing the potential for change of this bottom-up approach. Most relevant perhaps, is that the ESD could have a long-term impact on the local society and be part of the transformation to sustainability expressed in the Agenda 2030¹⁷.

At the municipality level, the co-production of relevant knowledge to the planning of sustainable development has formally started also in 2022. A Focal Point (FP) was appointed by the Major of the city with the role of coordinating -as the delegate of the Major- the executive branch activities oriented to localize the SDGs and using the relevant knowledge co-produced as a result of the research project being implemented in a collaborative fashion with the CONICET and the CS42.

It is expected that during the first two years of the project an integral vision of the three dimensions of sustainable development (economic, social and environmental) will inform the design of local policies and decision making. A medium- and long-term planning based on the SDGs local sorting out (i.e., establishing priorities) will orient the administration of resources as well as the relationships with the provincial and national levels.

The limited existing statistical resources to produce the very much needed data and its management will be supplemented by the data produced in the Census 2022¹⁸. This information plus the one generated locally and provincially will be the inputs of the analysis and planification process that will follow the mapping of actors and resources to be carried out in 2022 and 2023.

Halfway from the SDGs approval and the 2030 deadline, the localization process is making rapid progress using the bottom-up approach, something quite unusual at provincial and country levels using mainly a top-down perspective. Preliminary results confirm that this is the way to speed-up the process in an integral way that combines education, co-production and use of knowledge on sustainable development, in addition to planning, execution and monitoring of local policies toward a more sustainable future.

Final remarks

The world is not on track to achieve the goal of ending extreme poverty and hunger by 2030. Around 2,37 billion people were in 2020 without food or unable to eat a healthy balanced diet on regular basis (UN, 2021, page 9). The pandemic is not only aggravating this front but also threatening or delaying the entire process of achieving the SDGs and

¹⁷ The expected impact of EDS can be observed in the work encouraged by UNESCO: <https://www.unesco.org/en/education/sustainable-development> (accessed April 25, 2022)

¹⁸ https://www.indec.gob.ar/ftp/cuadros/poblacion/sintesis_planificacion_censo_2022.pdf

managing this way the multiple social, economic, health, climate, humanitarian and environmental crises the world is currently facing.

The limits that the international system and its organizations have when facing these multiple crises were exposed here in a simplified theoretical way that certainly deserves more attention in another kind of paper. The way it is presented here had the only intention to move the focus to the national (state) level and, more precisely, to the subnational and local level.

The reason to concentrate in the local level is that we cannot find many successful stories at the international or national level when dealing with multiple crises. And when we think we find a successful case of dealing with at least one of the greatest social challenges in the history of humanity (i.e., poverty), it seems quite difficult to replicate in other contexts.

The closeness or proximity local states have with their material components (population, territory, government and institutional order) make its structural influence more perceptible and effective when oriented to effectively deal with market and other institutional failures that disarm societies *vis à vis* the greatest challenges and crises of our time (poverty, climate change, environmental degradation, etc.).

There are also obstacles to the theoretical effectiveness mentioned above. The advantages the local states may have to deal with the perceived effects of crises are neutralized by the deficient provision of financial resources they have available, normally due to the internal organization of the national and provincial (federal) states.

The centralization of the financial and economic power in the hands of federal or national and provincial governments affects the ability of local states to deal with an effective strategy to achieve the SDGs. However, the negative effects this situation naturally entails can somehow be neutralized by knowledge, social mobilization, education and strategic planning and management of sustainable development, as in the aforementioned approach under implementation in Vera (Santa Fe).

The research-action project briefly mentioned here is proving its effectiveness and potential of situated knowledge to transform in a relatively short period of time, the way educational and government institutions face challenges and crises. The short-term positive impacts on the local educational and political system have the potential to produce long-term transformations towards sustainability with minimal financial resources during the first steps of the localization process¹⁹. This shows the initial effects of the co-production of situated knowledge to improve institutional processes aimed at addressing the challenges societies face in their territories.

¹⁹ The financial needs for sustainable development will logically increase with infrastructural and other investments to be done in the process to achieve various SDGs' targets.

Much more must be investigated and proved when examining the sources and paths toward the needed transformations to sustainability set in motion by the Agenda 2030. The ideas expressed here will hopefully contribute in a modest way to the purpose of a book that aims to provide useful perspectives on crises.

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