Identity, Territories, and Sustainability

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Identity, Territories, and Sustainability: Challenges and Opportunities for Achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals

BY

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Foreword

The separation of the environment from its social contexts may be seen at the root of the interlocking social, environmental, and climate crises we face today. With the adoption of Agenda 2030 in 2015, the international community finally acknowledged the need to address questions of the economy, society, and environment in one frame. This acknowledgment has entered international agreements through the 17 Sustainable Development Goals in Agenda 2030. But what might this mean in practice for different places and for the people living in these places in different parts of the world? As a recent issue on rural sustainability in Europe showed us (Arora-Jonsson et al., 2023), what sustainability means in one place may be quite different from another. This is where Salvatore Monaco's book on *Identity, Territories, and Sustainability* comes to our aid. The author takes on the arduous and much needed task of getting to the bottom of the relationship between territorial and collective identities, territorial policies, and what that might imply for sustainability.

Territories have been defined as bounded spaces – regulated, policed, and given meaning by the state and people. Territorial policies, including those seeking to promote sustainable development, may be seen as ways of influencing and controlling resources and people in a bounded space. The disregard of peoples, territories, and culture in policy-making in favor of the belief in science and economic development to solve our environmental and social problems are what I have come to see as the blind spots of policy-making. These blind spots lead us to overestimate our ability to do what is right and to act undemocratically without necessarily meaning to do so. Policymakers continue to treat as merely technical matters and decisions that are actually social and political ones and disregard the insight that culture too is politics (Arora-Jonsson, 2017).

Through the various chapters in his book, Salvatore Monaco brings culture, identity, and everyday relationships back into a discussion on sustainability. He stresses the importance of considering the complex interweaving of social, cultural, political, historical, and biophysical factors in shaping different sustainability trajectories in each place. Drawing on diverse case studies from around the world, the author demonstrates how environmental and social justice concerns have gained prominence in public debates and how territorial policies shape sustainability actions.

Sustainability in policy-making could be both positive and negative. As Stiernström (2023) shows us, defining a policy as sustainable can make it appear "just and good" regardless of what the policy infers and even if this entails the sacrifice of rural territories, such as by mining operations.

Salvatore Monaco's case studies examine diverse sustainability outcomes through the examination of grassroots movements and their role in shaping environmental and social justice discourses. He shows the pitfalls of territorial policies, such as those promoting the "green revolution" in countries in the global South, that disregarded traditional practices and local identities in favor of Western agricultural models. This resulted in the loss of biodiversity, environmental degradation, economic vulnerability, and lasting health problems.

Importantly, the book highlights the importance of taking the natural environment seriously and the differences that arise in different environments in relation to inland water bodies, land, forests, seas, or mountains. He brings attention to the work carried out by people, eco-social work, and championing social justice critical for sustainable territorial development.

As we navigate the many challenges with him, the book brings home to us all the importance of how collaboration and territorial identities can be catalysts for positive change, ushering in an equitable, inclusive, and prosperous future.

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Introduction: Integrating Territorial Identity into SDGs

Abstract

The text introduces the theory of integrating territorial identity into the discourse on sustainability. It stresses the importance of considering for each place the complex interaction among social, cultural, political, historical, architectural, biophysical, geological, and hydrographic factors in shaping sustainable development trajectories. Sustainable development must certainly involve environmental, social, and economic aspects in an integrated manner, but it must be "territorially desirable" in the meantime. This vision represents a fundamental paradigm for a new way of approaching the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the path to sustainability. The proposed approach acknowledges that the way of achieving SDGs cannot be implemented without any differences worldwide. Instead, it must account for the specificities of each area and territory and the compatibility of actions with the identity of places.

Starting from '68 Movements around the world and growing out of the demands for social change, public awareness about the importance of sustainability has been increasing. Student protests, civil rights claims, and pacifism endorsed by 68ers contributed to creating a favorable context for discussing the interconnections between the struggle for social justice and environmental protection, which emphasized how social injustices often manifest as environmental injustices as well (Bryant & Bailey, 1997; Eckersley, 2004).

In the subsequent years, one of the regions where a strong commitment to the intersection of environmental and social issues was observed in the United States, where the civil rights movement, women's movement, and peace movement created a context for fruitful discussions on sustainability (Szasz, 2007). Opposition to the Vietnam War prompted many activists to reflect on the underlying causes of the conflict, including the impact of the military industry on the environment and human health (Young et al., 2004).

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In Europe, during the '70s, the environmentalist movement gained strength and influence. Germany was one of the pioneering nations in promoting environmentally sustainable policies and practices. The German environmentalist movement addressed issues such as nature conservation, nuclear energy, and waste management (Dobson, 2007), setting the stage for claims that gradually spread to other regions.

The impact of the movements of the '60s and '70s extended well beyond the borders of the United States and Western Europe. In many other countries, both in the Global North and South, movements and organizations that embraced environmental issues as an integral part of the struggle for social justice emerged. In Latin America, for example, some indigenous movements and environmental organizations supported the defense of lands and natural resources against industrialization and the expansion of extractive activities (Martínez-Alier, 2003).

Attention to public participation and environmental justice has also been supported by new environmentalist movements, echoed by several scholars (Arora-Jonsson, 2013; O'Neill & Nicholson-Cole, 2009). In particular, the environmental justice movement has addressed the issue of environmental inequalities and highlighted the importance of including the voices of vulnerable communities in environmental decisions. The movement emerged in the United States in the '80s as a response to the environmental inequalities disproportionately affecting low-income and marginalized ethnic communities (Bullard & Johnson, 2000). The perspective of environmental justice highlighted how the most vulnerable communities are often exposed to greater environmental risks, since disadvantaged groups bear the negative effects of environmental decisions without real decision-making power. In this regard, Robert Bullard (1993) has introduced the concept of "environmental racism" to highlight how environmental inequalities are often linked to racial and socioeconomic factors. Anthony Giddens' work (2009) on the interconnection between social and power inequalities has further emphasized how inequalities are inherently linked to access to resources and opportunities which are necessary conditions for achieving sustainability. For instance, income inequalities can result in significant differences in individual ability to develop sustainable habits, such as purchasing eco-friendly products or accessing using low-impact technologies. Similarly, power inequalities can prevent certain social groups from political decisions and resource management.

The need to pursue environmental, economic, and social sustainability has led various actors to promote policies and practices aimed at fostering equitable economic growth, ensuring social inclusion, protecting the environment, and preserving natural resources. A key approach to achieving these goals has been the establishment of national sustainability councils or commissions which act as advisory bodies to the government, bringing together representatives from various sectors of society to formulate recommendations and strategies for sustainable development.

At the supranational level, bodies and institutions promoting sustainability have been established across different continents. In Europe, the European Union (EU) has a range of bodies and agencies working to promote

sustainable policies and initiatives. The European Commission, the European Parliament, and the Council of the European Union play a key role in shaping and implementing environmental and climate policies at the community level. In Africa, the African Union (AU), founded in 2002 on the principles of equality and interdependence among member states, has established through its Agenda 2063 a series of goals for the continent, including peace, sustainable development, human rights, democracy, and promotion of local and regional economies. The first continental report on the implementation of Agenda 2063 was presented by President Alassane Ouattara of Ivory Coast on February 10, 2020, marking the beginning of a biennial reporting cycle through which progress toward the objectives in different areas of the Agenda and geographical regions are monitored. In the United States, the governmental body responsible for environmental protection and the promotion of sustainable development is the United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). The Agency was created on the proposal of President Nixon and became operational on December 2, 1970. The EPA is led by an administrator appointed by the President and confirmed by the Senate. It develops and implements environmental policies, regulations, and programs to reduce pollution, preserve natural resources, and promote sustainable practices.

To address global issues, the United Nations (UN) organization helps facilitate dialogue and collaboration among countries with the aim of fostering international cooperation. Through various specialized agencies, programs, and funds – such as the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) – the UN provides technical support, financial resources, and coordination efforts to promote sustainability on a global scale. The UN was founded on October 24, 1945, after World War II. Its mission is to promote peace, international security, and social and economic progress. It consists of several organs, including the General Assembly, the Security Council, the Economic and Social Council, the Secretariat, and the International Court of Justice. Each member state has a representative in the General Assembly, which is the principal organ responsible for decisions on global issues. The UN also organizes conferences and international summits that bring together world leaders, experts, and representatives of civil society to discuss global challenges and adopt concrete commitments.

The UN Conference on the Human Environment, held in Stockholm in 1972, represents a focal moment in the history of the environment and sustainable development. This global event marked the first attempt to bring together political leaders, experts, and representatives of civil society to discuss the environmental challenges the world was facing. The conference highlighted the importance of addressing environmental issues holistically, recognizing that economic and social development must go hand in hand with environmental conservation. It also sheds light on crucial topics such as pollution, deforestation, natural resource management, and biodiversity conservation. In addition, it recognized the interconnectedness between the environment and social

development, emphasizing that sustainable natural resource management and greater social equity are both essential to ensure a sustainable society. The Stockholm Conference produced a declaration that presented guiding principles for international environmental action. Among these points is the principle of common but differentiated responsibility, underscoring the need for a shared global commitment to addressing environmental challenges while considering the differing responsibilities between developed and developing countries. The important role of governments in promoting sustainability through policies and concrete actions was pointed up too. The Conference also laid the groundwork for a growing commitment in the field of environment and sustainable development at the international level. It paved the way for the creation of organizations and initiatives addressing these issues. Moreover, it facilitated the adoption of international treaties aimed at protecting the environment, such as the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. A series of initiatives and meetings that contributed to defining the concept of sustainable development followed, such as the establishment of the World Commission on Environment and Development, known as the Brundtland Commission. It was established in 1983 under the leadership of then-Norwegian Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland, in order to address environmental and development issues. Emphasizing the need to strike a balance between socioeconomic needs and environmental conservation, the Brundtland Commission played a key role in defining and promoting the concept of sustainable development. In their seminal report "Our Common Future" (WCED, 1987), the Commission defined the concept of sustainable development as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." Recognizing that sustainable development cannot be compartmentalized into isolated concerns, the Brundtland Commission's assertion illuminated the need to view economic progress, social equity, and ecological resilience as interwoven threads within the fabric of progress. This interplay emphasized that promoting well-being for the present and safeguarding opportunities for future generations hinges upon a comprehensive understanding of how economic choices resonate through social dynamics and reverberate within the ecosystem.

Building on these developments, the UN Conference on Sustainable Development, commonly known as the Earth Summit, took place in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. This conference marked a turning point in the global promotion of sustainable development. World leaders, government representatives, and international organization officials gathered to discuss and put forward concrete, shared measures to address environmental challenges and promote balanced and equitable development. During the conference, a fundamental document known as Agenda 21 was adopted. This document was prepared as an action plan for the 21st century and provided guidelines for promoting sustainable development at the global, national, and local levels. Agenda 21 underscored the importance of active participation of civil society, local communities, and non-governmental organizations in the decision-making process, recognizing the fundamental role

of collaboration and partnership among all stakeholders. One of the most significant aspects of the Rio Earth Summit was the commitment made by participating countries to adopt international instruments for the promotion of sustainable development. During the conference, three important non-legally binding instruments were adopted: the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, and the Convention on Biological Diversity. These international agreements provided a regulatory framework to address issues regarding key environmental and climate change. The conference also paved the way for further international initiatives in the field of sustainable development, such as the subsequent UN Conferences on Climate Change (COP), which led to the adoption of the Kyoto Protocol in 1997 and the Paris Agreement in 2015, representing significant milestones in the fight against climate change. The Kyoto Protocol was an international treaty that established binding obligations for industrialized countries, historically major contributors to greenhouse gas emissions, to reduce the greenhouse effect. The protocol introduced the concept of "emission quotas" assigned to countries, which means that the countries were required to commit to reducing their emissions within a specified period. The document also introduced financial instruments such as the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM), which promoted collaboration between industrialized and developing countries to reduce emissions and promote sustainable development. The Paris Agreement, adopted in 2015 during COP21, marked a significant further step in the fight against climate change. Its main goal was to limit the increase in global average temperature well below 2 °C above pre-industrial levels and to pursue efforts to limit the increase to 1.5 °C. The agreement also established the objective of making global emission reduction efforts consistent with minimizing the negative impacts of climate change and adapting to its effects. The Paris Agreement garnered widespread support from countries, including major greenhouse gas emitters like China and the United States. This agreement also recognized the importance of climate adaptation and emphasized the need to provide financial and technological support to developing countries to address the challenges of climate change. The significance of this effort was further underscored during the COP28 in Dubai in 2023. In pursuit of climate justice, the 198 delegates formalized, within the framework of the "Global Stocktake," the establishment of a Fund dedicated to the group of 46 least developed nations, which, despite being among the least polluting, are among the most affected by global warming. This fund will be financed through voluntary contributions.

The relevance of the Brundtland Commission's definition of sustainable development also played a key role in shaping the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which were formulated in 2000. They represented a set of eight global objectives to be achieved by 2015. These goals included eradicating extreme poverty and hunger, promoting universal education, reducing child and maternal mortality, promoting gender equality, sustainable management of natural resources, and combating HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases. The adoption of the MDGs catalyzed global commitment to meet these challenges and led to better

coordination of international efforts in achieving the established goals. Achieving the MDGs was a complex and challenging task that required concerted efforts from governments, international organizations, civil society, and the private sector. To check the progress toward the MDGs, a monitoring system at the global and national levels was established. The UN, along with other international organizations, played a key role in supervising and evaluating countries' efforts to achieve the MDGs. It is important to emphasize that not all MDG targets were achieved by 2015. However, substantial progress was made in many areas. For example, in the context of the MDGs, notable advancement was made in reducing extreme poverty in various countries. According to the "Millennium Development Goals Report" (UN, 2015), from 1990 to 2015, the percentage of people living in extreme poverty worldwide decreased from 37% to 13%. In particular, Brazil made significant strides in this aspect. Another example pertains the access to primary education. Albania was noted as the country that made the greatest progress in this area, with a substantial increase in enrollment rates. Another area of significant headway was the reduction of child mortality, with Cambodia being an example which made the main advances in this field. The adoption of the MDGs and the monitoring system contributed to raising awareness about the challenges of sustainable development and spurred concrete actions in many countries. During the UN Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20) held in Rio de Janeiro in 2012, recognition emerged that the MDGs had significant limitations. World leaders emphasized the importance of addressing the environmental, social, and economic dimensions of sustainable development in a more integrated manner. For instance, the conference highlighted the need for greater attention to equality and social justice in pursuing SDGs. Additionally, the conference recognized the need to strengthen the international institutional architecture for sustainability and proposed the idea of establishing new SDGs to guide the global post-2015 agenda (Andonova & Hoffmann, 2012).

Building on these reflections, an Open Working Group of the UN was established in 2013. Its major role was to discuss and negotiate SDGs. This group consisted of representatives from different countries, who spent two years trying consistently to define a set of new targets and objectives that would guide the sustainable development agenda. They consulted with civil society, the private sector, non-governmental organizations, and other stakeholders to unit diverse contributions and coordinate perspectives for the development of the new global sustainability strategy. In September 2014, the UN published the report "The Road to Dignity by 2030: Ending Poverty, Transforming All Lives and Protecting the Planet," which provided a basis for the discussion and formulation of new goals set to be achieved by 2030.

Just one year later, the UN General Assembly adopted unanimously the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which includes the new 17 SDGs and their related 169 specific targets. One of the distinctive features of the SDGs lies in their ambition and coverage. While the MDGs primarily focused on reducing extreme poverty and related social issues, the SDGs address the interconnectivity of contemporary societal challenges. Their definition was guided by principles

of greater inclusiveness, and respecting human rights, within the limitations of the global arenas (Arora-Jonsson, 2023). The SDGs encompass themes ranging from poverty, health, education, gender equality, energy, environment, infrastructure, justice, and peace, to partnerships. This recognition reflects the understanding that achieving a specific SDG can influence the progress toward other social objectives. For example, improving access to education can have a positive impact on poverty reduction and gender equality. Another distinctive element of the SDGs is the universality. While the initial targets of MDGs were mainly developing countries, the SDGs were designed to involve all nations, recognizing that sustainability is a global challenge requiring the participation of all countries. This universal approach reflects the awareness that the challenges of sustainable development are interdependent and require a common commitment from all global actors. After the adoption of the SDGs, countries began working to integrate them into their national policies and define action plans for their achievement.

Despite the broad support for the SDGs as a tool to respond to sustainable development challenges, they are not without criticism. Some observers argue that the SDGs are overly ambitious and unrealistic given the complexity and magnitude of the challenges they address. Concerns have been raised that the SDGs may be too numerous and too extensive to be effectively implemented (Le Blanc, 2015; Sachs et al., 2019). Another criticism pertains to the lack of a clear financing strategy for the SDGs. Since achieving the goals requires substantial financial resources, a clear roadmap to ensure necessary funding would have been opportune (Biermann et al., 2017; Georgeson & Maslin, 2018; Mawdsley, 2018). Additionally, the ambiguous role of the private sector in achieving the SDGs has been highlighted, with some concerns about the possibility of economic interests prevailing over social and environmental benefits (Cavaliere, 2017; Spaiser et al., 2017). Other criticisms relate to the lack of effective reporting and monitoring mechanisms (Costanza et al., 2016). Even though a strengthened monitoring system has been developed to measure progress and make informed decisions to guide necessary policies and actions for achieving the SDGs, significant challenges in obtaining accurate and timely data on a global and national scale have been underscored (Ruggerio, 2021). The monitoring system relies on a set of indicators that measure progress toward each goal. Information is collected by querying various data sources, including national statistics, surveys, reports from international organizations, and independent assessments. Monitoring the SDGs poses a complex challenge due to the diversity of national contexts, limitations of available data, and difficulties in ensuring the coherence and accuracy of collected information (Klopp & Petretta, 2017; Mair et al., 2018; McArthur & Rasmussen, 2019). Furthermore, the concern that achieving the goals may promote a "tick-box" approach has been raised, with member states focusing solely on meeting the indicators without addressing the root causes of issues (Teichmann & Wittmann, 2022). Final, some observers have highlighted that certain goals may conflict with each other or require difficult choices (Hüsing et al., 2017; Pradhan et al., 2017). For example, the tension between promoting clean energy and protecting employment in the fossil fuel sector has been noted (Rosin et al., 2020). At the same

time, historically the improvement of health and nutritional status globally also resulted in increasing greenhouse gas emissions and food waste (Hiç et al., 2016).

The aforementioned criticisms should not be perceived as a negation of the intrinsic value of the SDGs, but rather as crucial insights to initiate constructive debate on optimizing the feasibility and effectiveness of these goals in achieving concrete global sustainability. Addressing these criticisms with commitment and an open mind can contribute to enhancing the adaptability, realism, and efficacy of the SDGs in promoting real and lasting change toward tangible global sustainability. These critical reflections, proposed alternatives, and new ideas constitute the fundamental elements in shaping a clearer understanding of sustainability as an extremely complex and articulated social phenomenon.

This book aims to make a significant contribution to the ongoing and lively discourse surrounding sustainable development. It is rooted in the belief that the discussions on sustainable development, until now, have only scratched the surface of the intricate concept of territorial identity, only partially considering the true essence of territories and their specific needs. A territorial perspective of the world unfolds as a framework that values the cultural and natural specificities of places at the local, regional, or national scale. Despite the extensive debate on the need to adopt a territorial perspective (Jessop et al. 2008; Mitchell 1991; Storey, 2001), the concept of territory has not always received the attention it deserves (Agnew, 2020). According to Stuart Elden (2005) in most cases "territory tends to be assumed as unproblematic. Theorists have largely neglected to define the term, taking it as obvious and not worthy of further investigation" (p. 10). Often the term territory has been used interchangeably with "land" or "space," although it "connotes something more precise. Territory is land or space that has had something done to it, it has been acted upon. Territory land has been identified and claimed by a person or people…" (Cowen & Gilbert, 2008, p. 16). As suggested by Michel Lussault (2007), territory differs from other forms of space, being a "structured by principles of contiguity and continuity" that "depend less on the material aspects of space than on the systems of ideas (*systemès idéels*) that frame the space in question, as well as the related practices that take place there" (p. 113). There is also the "territorial trap," which is the mistaken assumption that the spatialities of state power and state territory are homomorphic (Agnew, 1994). Territory cannot be reduced to either national territory or state territory, as it possesses conceptual autonomy independent of the nation-state (Sassen, 2020). Instead, the territory must be interpreted as an intricate weaving of social, cultural, economic, political, historical, architectural, biophysical, geological, and hydrographic factors. Territorial identity gives rise to a rich tapestry, akin to a quilt, where each piece plays a fundamental role in completing the overall picture of a place.

The society that evolves within a territory serves as the needle that weaves the diverse patches of this identity quilt. Shared stories, cultural traditions, social dynamics, and interpersonal relationships are the invisible threads that bind every individual to the environment around them. In this context, a form of "territorial imagination" emerges, uniting people and making them feel like integral parts of a broader whole. This intricacy is made up of various societal groups, with