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Development postcolonial: a critical approach to understanding SDGs in the perspective of Christian social ethics

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Non-technical summary. By distinguishing between developed and less developed nations, the concept of development subtly establishes hierarchies and a supposed comparability, which is highly ambivalent from a socio-ethical point of view. The idea of holistic development in Catholic social teaching focus on cultural dimensions and therefore sets an important counter accent to the fixation on socio-technically producible and countable things. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) lack a coherence between the social and the ecological components as well as a naming of power conflicts. For a power-critical, postcolonial and participatory concept of development, their interpretation could learn substantially from the encyclical *Laudato si'*.

Technical summary. The paradigm of development is subjected to a radical critique in parts of the academic debate: Is the idea of development, which in a gesture of aid divides the world into “developed” and “underdeveloped” nations and thus establishes a hierarchy, still politically and morally justifiable at all? Has this concept possibly become a backdoor to prolong the old colonial power relations into the 21st century, even to increase them in some cases? Is development one of the great utopias of the 20th century that promised freedom and brought division? Is the ecological overexploitation of global resources the inevitable reverse side of the spread of the Western model of prosperity disguised as “development”? Do the SDGs act subcutaneously as enablers of Western imperial power, or do they represent a genuine paradigm shift? This article explores these questions in four steps: 1. Is the age of development is over? 2. The ideal of “integral development” – steps of a revision process 3. In the tension between ecological and social goals: A Comparison of the “Sustainable Development Goals” and the Encyclical *Laudato si'* 4. Priorities and strategies of a “post-utopian development policy”.

Social media summary. The shadows of colonial thinking are still effective today in development concepts fixated on countable factors of socioeconomic efficiency.

The paradigm of development is subjected to a radical critique in parts of the academic debate: Is the idea of development, which in a gesture of aid divides the world into ‘developed’ and ‘underdeveloped’ nations and thus establishes a hierarchy, still politically and morally justifiable at all? Has this concept possibly become a backdoor to prolong the old colonial power relations into the 21st century, even to increase them in some cases? Is development one of the great utopias of the 20th century that promised freedom and brought division? Is the ecological overexploitation of global resources the inevitable reverse side of the spread of the Western model of prosperity disguised as ‘development’? Are the SDGs also an ecological cloak for the extension of the colonial concept of development into the 21st century? Do they act subcutaneously as enablers of Western imperial power, or do they represent a genuine paradigm shift? This article explores these questions in four steps:

- (1) Is the age of development is over?
- (2) The ideal of ‘integral development’ – steps of a revision process.
- (3) In the tension between ecological and social goals: a Comparison of the ‘Sustainable Development Goals’ and the Encyclical *Laudato si'*.
- (4) Priorities and strategies of a ‘post-utopian development policy.’

1. Is the age of development over?

In his inaugural address in 1949, U.S. President Harry S. Truman divided the world into developed and underdeveloped regions and promised help for the weaker for the benefit of all. This thinking set a precedent and shaped a new era of global cooperation in the decades that followed. Despite all its positive aspects, the concept harbors a deep ambivalence:

‘In the second half of the 20th century, the guiding principle of “development” was enthroned over nations like a powerful ruler. It was the global political program of the postcolonial era. Innocently, the term came

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across, but it paved the way for the West's imperial power over the world. As in the West, so on earth, was, in short, the message of "development".' (Sachs, 2018, p. 245)

Over time, differentiated theories of the restraining and promoting factors of development have been put forward. An influential development theory was formulated by Ulrich Menzel in the early 1990s. Menzel understands it to mean statements that 'explain why economic growth, industrialization, social differentiation and mobilization, mental change, democratization, and redistribution have occurred in the industrial societies of Western Europe, North America, and East Asia (these processes are called development) or why in the rest of the world these processes are absent, incompletely realized, or merely a caricature of these processes can be observed' (Menzel, 1993, p. 132). 'Development' thus represents a set of interrelated socio-economic and political processes that are positively valued and that take place in some regions and not in others. Three aspects are constitutive of the concept of development (cf. Sachs 2018, p. 246):

- Chronopolitically, it imagines a linear time in which all peoples of the earth move forward with the goal of somehow comparable and measurable progress. The idea of development is heir to the belief in progress that originated in Christian eschatology with its concept of time oriented toward completion. It postulates that Christian hope is not only directed to a hereafter, but should already become effective here and now as a liberation to ever greater possibilities of human development.
- Geopolitically, it distinguishes between the 'developed' and the 'underdeveloped' countries, with the intermediate stage of the 'emerging countries' soon being defined as an additional category. This places the diversity of peoples in a hierarchy of rich and poor nations and perceives them accordingly. The development paradigm divides the world into donor and recipient countries and is in some ways a relic of colonial history cushioned by the promise of global social and growth policies.
- In terms of civilization policy, development is usually measured in terms of gross domestic product, making economic performance and consumption levels authoritative reference factors (Fioramonti, 2013, 2014). Due to the rapid globalization of markets after the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989, transnational corporations have assumed an impulse function of consumption-centered development. Their goods reach the farthest corners of the globe and create lifestyles that are converging worldwide. The symbol of this development today is, for example, the smartphone, which shapes the lifestyles of the global upper and middle classes to a great extent.

1.1 Development thinking lives on the suggestion of comparability

Development thinking is subject to the suggestion of comparison and measurement. The dimension of cultural identity and specificity is systematically ignored. The focus is on what can be measured economically. The most commonly used indicator for measuring economic performance is gross domestic product (GDP). The magic number of GDP shaped the idea of progress and was the godfather in the birth of the idea of development, because it supposedly objectively provided a worldwide target of possible increase and improvement (Fioramonti, 2013, pp. 9–12). It has evolved from a measure to quantify the economic performance of a particular country to a key indicator for measuring

prosperity. Inasmuch as rising GDP is often associated with improvements in many areas of care and work, and there is no other such easily comparable measure in economy, this is quite understandable and practical.

Under the influence of Amartya Sen, United Nations (UN) development policy since 1990 has used the human development index, which measures education and life expectancy in addition to purchasing power, rather than GDP as the guiding metric (cf. e.g. Stierle, 2013). Nevertheless, development thinking remains under the suggestion of comparison and measurement and a striving for increase:

'Development thinking thrives on the dictatorship of comparison. Wherever one looks, the data have the sense to make comparisons in time and space. Comparisons expose deficits. Reducing deficits in the world, on the other hand, has been the business of development for 70 years.' (Sachs, 2018, p. 253)

Especially, due to the enormous progress in data collection and processing in the course of digitalization, thinking in the categories of numbers and comparisons is experiencing a new high point, which is unnoticedly encouraging the old development thinking. Thus, the digital data revolution has the effect that linear concepts of development and progress, although they have long been considered questionable and overcome in theory, live on increasingly in the practice of comparison and measurement today. In the digital age, the UN is also increasingly working with statistical comparisons by means of comprehensive digital data collection, often with little reflection.

1.2 Data can also justify counter-narratives

One can also select data and facts in such a way that they tell of the 'reverse side' of the supposed success story of development. Ecological figures, for example, testify to deep environmental degradation. In China in particular, the enormous success of development in recent decades has been bought by ecological overexploitation that is unprecedented in human history: the water table is falling rapidly in northern China, deserts are spreading, smog in the cities is impairing the quality of life and life expectancy, and confidence in the health compatibility of some foodstuffs has been damaged despite a state-directed information policy. Globally, ecological files demonstrate that the current approach to development is deeply ambivalent.

The promise that the gap between rich and poor will close continuously, both globally and within societies, seems to many today to be an illusion. In any case, the expectation that this would be an automatic side effect of capitalist prosperity development has been relatively well refuted (cf. Piketty, 2014). The economic progress is bought by the externalization of the ecological costs. Development thinking had to concede two fundamental setbacks: the persistence of poverty and the finiteness of nature (cf. Sachs, 2018, p. 248). Ideas of development and progress have 'run a course not uncommon in the history of ideas: what was once a historical innovation then became a convention for a long time, finally coming to an end in general frustration' (Sachs, 2018, p. 246). The great social utopias of the 20th century (including, e.g. socialism) have proved deeply ambivalent and have given way to a disillusionment that is sometimes summarized as the end of the utopian age (cf. Fest, 2007; Hinkelammert, 1994).

This diagnosis of the exhaustion of utopian energies, however, applies only to part of the zeitgeist: at the same time, the utopian

is returning with unimagined dynamism, for example, in the context of digitalization, which is not infrequently linked to far-reaching visions of a comprehensive improvement in efficiency and life chances. A considerable portion of the funds for development cooperation in the field of education is being channeled into digital equipment for schools because it is hoped that this will lead to decisive progress. The fact that this simultaneously promotes orientation to the image worlds of the West, as well as incidentally the sales markets of the digital industry, does not seem to bother anyone. 'Development' is a more elastic container term that, despite all criticism, continues to attract new utopian energies. Thus, the concept has endured as a world perspective, not least because it is 'embedded [in] an international web of institutions, from the UN to ministries to NGOs' (Sachs, 2018, pp. 246–247).

1.3 Development idea is the extended arm of the belief in progress

The idea of development is the extended arm of the belief in progress. It is heir to the enlightenment-optimistic search for a better world. This was based on the assumption of general progress (in the singular), consisting of progress in science, technology, economy, politics, culture, and morals. This is now largely relativized. Even in the field of scientific theory of the natural sciences, the thesis has prevailed that progress is not to be understood as a linear accumulation of knowledge, but is characterized by breaks and paradigm shifts (cf. Vogt, 2019, pp. 18–28). This is even more true for cultural developments.

Despite the theoretical shattering of concepts of progress immanent in history, the scientifically and economically guiding basic models of late modern society are predominantly characterized by a strict orientation toward constant optimization. For the lack of a consensus on substantive standards of progress, the quantitative increase of productivity and available knowledge becomes a structurally indispensable compensation. After various experiments in social planning and social technology, the fields of medicine, biotechnology, and artificial intelligence have now become the central drivers of progress.

Critics of such concepts of progress often refer to the dialectic of enlightenment: by absolutizing instrumental reason, the one-sidedly interpreted enlightenment loses its critical potential and leads to a 'doom of progress' (Löwith, 1983). In this broad field of the critique of progress, very different traditions are mixed, be it from the critical theory of the Frankfurt School, the philosophy of postmodernism, Christian theology, or the ecological discourse. The latter counters the ambivalences of progress with the postulate of a return to natural moderation.

1.4 Christian hope between consolation of the hereafter and social functionalization

Modern faith in progress and development is inconceivable without Christian eschatology (i.e. the doctrine of the last things) and the associated dynamic of hope for the future (cf. Remenyi & Tück, 2013, p. 60). Even if this has sometimes been reduced to an individualistic and otherworldly promise of salvation, the biblical witness clearly argues that Christian faith calls for an active hope that keeps the world open to God (cf. Benedikt XVI, 2008, nos. 34 and 35). The performative, world-changing potential of Christian hope is (Christologically) a power of liberation already effective in the present (cf. Remenyi & Tück, 2013,

pp. 67–68). At the same time, this hope transcends every possible concept of progress and development. It therefore turns critically against secular utopias which, under the guiding categories of reason and freedom, have transformed Christian hope into an inner-historical optimism of progress (cf. Remenyi & Tück, 2013, p. 61).

Against this background, the encyclical 'On Hope' (spe salvi) unfolds a guide to being a Christian under the ambivalent conditions of late modernity in its simultaneity of illusionless resistance to utopia and constant breaking open of new figures of hope (Benedict XVI, 2008, no. 22). She counters the 'secular eschatologies of an immanent-historical completion of man' (Benedikt XVI, 2008, no. 21) with the insight that in the field of morality such a linearly increasing history of progress is unthinkable, because every human being has to learn anew unjustifiably to do the good and to leave the evil: 'Freedom requires that every human being, every generation is a new beginning' (Remenyi & Tück, 2013, p. 70).

A theology of hope can help neither to fall into utopia nor into resignation. It is crucial that it does not simply shift the Christian expectation of the future and eschatology to a beyond in a salvation-individualistic way, but at the same time critically questions its secularization as a promise of absolute fulfillment immanent in history. In doing so, it is important to consistently uncover ambivalences of a shortened reception and transformation of Christian conceptions of time and thus to contribute to a sober rationalization of the discourse on development policy beyond utopian charges or resigned shortenings.

The decisive consequence of a theology of hope is that the concept of development is neither to be stilled by a consolation of the hereafter, nor may it be functionalized linearly for socio-economic purposes. It is centrally about the cultural dimension, which defies easy comparability and socio-technical operationalization. This cultural dimension is expressed today in the scientific-interdisciplinary discourse especially in postcolonial studies.

1.5 Postcolonial critique of development thinking

In the development discourse, it is common for processes that took place in Europe, the European settlement colonies in North America and later also in some Asian countries to be declared the historical norm (cf. Ziai, 2010, p. 400, 2015). It is not only Eurocentrism that appears problematic, but also the overly simplistic, depoliticizing pattern of perception and explanation for social phenomena of various kinds. 'The predominant effect of this interpretive grid is the depoliticization of social inequality as a "development problem" – often interpreted as a lack of capital, technology, or expert knowledge' (Ziai, 2010, p. 401). Development approaches tend toward paternalism or even a 'dictatorship of care' (Ziai, 2010, p. 407), neglecting the difference of various worldviews and identity constructions. Not infrequently, patriarchal and imperial power structures are supported, marginalizing women's potential (cf. Dhawan, 2009; Eriksson Baaz, 1995). The International Monetary Fund functions as a disciplining instrument of westernization through its lending conditions (cf. Ziai, 2010, pp. 409 and 420).

Eriksson Baaz, in her postcolonial analyses of the representation of the self and the other, concludes that despite the rhetoric of partnership, those working in development organizations 'locate themselves as developed and superior in contrast to a backward and inferior Other' (Eriksson Baaz, 1995, p. 166). Dependency theory does little to change this perceptual construction. It is inadequate from a postcolonial perspective because it does not sufficiently critique the subordination of culture to

political economy, the perpetuation of binary oppositions in the schema of center and periphery, and the addressing of the West as a sovereign subject to a subjugated, passive South: 'By equating the analysis of history with the analysis of the uneven development of global capitalism, dependency theory forgets that it (like Marx and Lenin before it) uses Europe as a universal model' (Kapoor, 2008, p. 10).

Another example of the covert persistence of colonial thought patterns is the good governance discourse. The adjective 'good' conveys 'a moralistic tone that implies not merely that developing countries have "bad" governance, but also that the West is the model for "good" governance and Western donors decide what is "good" and "bad"' (Kapoor, 2008, p. 30). This results in a 'complicity of liberal cosmopolitan expressions of solidarity with global structures of domination' (Kapoor, 2008, p. 53), due to an 'inadequate engagement with the historical processes that have placed members of a global elite in a position that now enables it to act as benefactor of the general public' (Kapoor, 2008, p. 53). The 'politics of helping' serves to mask economic and geopolitical interests and to intervene once again in the global South (cf. Dhawan, 2009, p. 55).

1.6 *Résumé: irresolvable tension between development thought and postcolonialism*

There is thus a tension between development studies and post-colonial studies. Although at first glance both have a common subject area (the global South and North-South relations), a closer look reveals the following clear differences (cf. on following Ziai, 2015, p. 407). While knowledge in development studies is usually under the imperative of its translatability into practical problem-solving and planning implementations, knowledge in postcolonial studies is often limited to critiques of representations. Development research is primarily concerned with measurable socio-economic changes, mostly at the macro level (economic growth, income distribution, and purchasing power). Postcolonial studies are much more concerned with cultural issues, representations, and identities, and micro-level experiences and processes.

To sum up: world society is caught in a conflict of ambivalence that makes it cling to the concept of development despite massive criticism of it. The deeper cause of this is a loss of reference to transcendence, which seems to leave only the two false alternatives of utopia or resignation. What is needed is confidence beyond linear development utopias, a confidence that relentlessly names the abysses and ambivalences of the modernization processes that many countries of the global South and the Far East are undergoing at an accelerated pace and recognizes them as systemic socio-ethical challenges without leading to a course of modernization denial. The question is whether the concept of 'holistic development' offers a way out here or whether, on the contrary, it is rather a cover for naive development optimism. The evaluation of the paradigm of holistic development is to be measured against the state of the controversial debate between development and postcolonialism discourses.

2. The ideal of 'integral development': steps of a revision process

2.1 *Development as a key theme of the encyclicals*

The theme of 'development' has a particularly prominent place in Catholic social teaching: no other theme has been taken up and developed in four variations: first in the 1967 encyclical

'*Populorum progressio*,' which is considered the Magna Charta of the Church's idea of development and development cooperation. Then in 1987 in '*Sollicitudo rei socialis*' by John Paul II, which strikes a much less optimistic tone and deals with the permanence of development and poverty problems. Finally, in Benedict XVI's encyclical '*Caritas in veritate*' (2009), which unfolds the concept of civil economy and identifies love as the main path of Catholic social teaching. A fourth step is the doctrinal letter '*Laudato si*' (2015) by Pope Francis, in which poverty reduction and ecology are conceived together, which at the same time implies a profound transformation of development thinking.

In the 1967 encyclical '*Populorum Progressio*,' Pope Paul VI describes development as a comprehensive process that goes beyond the economic dimension and concerns the whole person. Development is not an option among others, but a right of all people to be able to develop on this earth in all its dimensions. This 'fundamental law' (PP 22) is based on the dignity and equality of all human beings as creatures of God. Paul VI sees in development not only a right but also a duty for all (PP 44). Politically, it is a condition for the preservation of peace (PP 76–80: 'Development – a new name for peace'). The situation of underdeveloped countries is addressed as a social question that has become global (PP 3), characterized by a polarization between hunger and abundance, misery and luxury, acceleration and stagnation, and stability and instability.

The central concern of the encyclical is to break up the economic narrowing of the term 'development' and to expand it through a holistic understanding of political, social, economic, cultural, personal, and religious development (PP 6–42). On the basis of *Populorum progressio*, the Pontifical Commission for Justice and Peace was founded in 1967. This established itself as the starting point and coordination center for a worldwide network of intensive development and social work of the Catholic Church, which offered and offers important impulses for integral development through its closeness to the people. 'Development, in this perspective, is very closely linked to concern for the common good and to a solidary use of the goods of this earth' (Marx, 2019). Through the Club of Rome, the encyclical influences the emergence of the concept of sustainable development, which also has an integral claim (cf. Vogt, 2013, pp. 183–190). However, the very positive concept of development is considered ambivalent and in need of differentiation in the scientific discussion today. Theologically, it can be asked whether *Populorum progressio* links the hope for the Kingdom of God too closely to expectations of social development and functionalizes it politically.

2.2 *Laudato si': ecological extension of the development paradigm*

The encyclical '*Laudato si*' offers a synopsis of social and environmental challenges in 'Care for the Common Home.'

'There are not two crises side by side, one of the environment and one of society, but a single and complex socio-environmental crisis. The ways to solve it require a holistic approach to fight poverty, to restore dignity to the excluded, and at the same time to take care of nature' (Franziskus, 2015, 139).

Development as chronopolitics finds no place in the encyclical:

'The arrow of time is replaced by spatial awareness in the papal circular. Indeed, in the current global style of thinking, the primacy of space

over time has become established, the combination of things in virtual or geographical space is more important than their sequence in time. Incidentally, this epochal shift in consciousness is also a reason for the fading of the idea of development.’ (Sachs, 2018, p. 254)

The encyclical’s spatial thinking is expressed in its subtitle: ‘On Care for the Common Home.’ The wealthy should refrain from appropriating the environment of the poor. The encyclical calls the expansive appropriation of resources by the rich an ‘ecological debt’ (Franziskus, 2015, 51).

Underlying the concept of integral development is the guiding idea that everything is interconnected (Franziskus, 2015, 16 and more). ‘In general, the whole encyclical can be read as a declaration of interdependence, which would replace the declaration of independence in the nation-state era’ (Sachs, 2018, p. 254). Instead of the North-South scheme, which is found only in a few paragraphs (Franziskus, 2015, 170–175), the principle of one interdependent world is the main focus: ‘Interdependence obliges us to think of one world, of one common plan’ (Franziskus, 2015, 164). In this, all living beings are accorded rights of existence according to the principle of a primacy of being over being useful. ‘Each creature possesses its own goodness and perfection’ Franziskus, 2015, 69).

3. In the tension between ecological and social goals: a comparison of the ‘Sustainable Development Goals’ and the encyclical *Laudato si’*

3.1 A world future treaty sets new standards

The adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by the UN in September 2015 sets a political framework and standard against which any debate on an integral and holistic development must be measured today. The SDGs combine social and ecological goals. If one tries to assign them individually, the first group dominates 7:5 (social: ending poverty, food security, healthy lives for all, education for all, gender equality, water and sanitation, sustainable energy for all; environmental: sustainable cities, sustainable consumption and production, combating climate change, preserving oceans, protecting terrestrial ecosystems). The SDGs ‘concretize human rights obligations and environmental imperatives and underpin them with targets, nothing more, nothing less’ (Sachs, 2018, p. 249). This was a crucial breakthrough after years of blocking binding commitments in the climate and development conferences.

‘The 2030 Agenda is a multilateral “godsend in turbulent times.” [...] It could provide a framework for this global economy, for national societies, also for Germany, for a social contract for inclusive and sustainable development. The 2030 Agenda can become a modernization, justice and peace project at the same time.’ (Messner, 2016, p. 10)

3.2 Strengths and weaknesses of the SDGs

The set of goals formulated in tough negotiations has many strengths, but also some weaknesses and disagreements that are only superficially hidden. Against the background of a high appreciation for the overriding importance of the SDGs as currently the most important ethical-political compass for global development, some conceptual weaknesses will be identified in the following, so that the implementation of the SDGs can respond even better to the actual challenges and ambivalence in the future (see also, ICSU, 2017; Welthungerhilfe, 2021; Ziai, 2015):

- (1) The means to implement the SDGs are far from sufficient. Goal 17, ‘global partnership,’ formulated at the initiative of the countries of the South united in the group of 77 (G77), remains vague in many respects as to exactly what cooperative implementation and financing of the SDGs should look like. UN members could not agree on a timetable for implementing the goal that each developed country should invest 0.7% of its GDP in development assistance. It would need a binding financing basis on a completely new footing, for which certificate trading (for the right to carbon dioxide emissions) or a transactional financial tax would be suitable. However, there is no agreement on this yet.
- (2) The SDGs conceptualize hunger reduction primarily as an increase in agricultural production. However, many people go hungry because they have no money for food. Increasing production alone does little to combat this. What would be crucial is more ‘food sovereignty’ in the sense of empowering people to produce their own food. The key importance of small-scale farmers for socio-culturally beneficial food sovereignty is not sufficiently addressed in the SDGs. Concentrations of power in agricultural markets are not mentioned as a problem.
- (3) In the goal of ‘education for all,’ higher education is neglected in comparison with elementary education, and digital upgrading is strongly emphasized in a relatively uncritical manner. Whether it is in any case the decisive way to improve education is debatable.
- (4) Job creation is intended as a stimulus for growth (at least 7% according to SDG 8). How this fits with the environmental goals is not clear.
- (5) The cultural dimension, which is crucial for social cohesion and the dynamics of the overall development process, is only covered relatively vaguely.
- (6) For many goals, it is unclear whether governments will agree on robust, measurable, and realistic indicators and a credible information policy in order to maintain the promised transparency regarding the achievement of the goals.
- (7) The SDGs are not binding under international law. Countries are allowed to set individual priorities. There is a lack of institutions that can effectively drive implementation in cases of conflict.

The promise of a complete eradication of hunger and poverty is utopian. It cannot be ruled out that, due to climate change, wars, water shortages, soil erosion, and the decline of fish stocks, global development will take a very different direction from that envisaged by the UN. Causes and deeper interrelationships of development constraints are traditionally not identified in UN documents.

Nevertheless, the SDGs have set benchmarks against which the global sustainability process and the concept of holistic development will have to be measured in the future. The concrete formulation of goals can protect against getting lost in the complexity and abstractness of social science analyses or ethical postulates. The SDGs provide a framework that can no longer be negated in the global development discourse. They testify to a deep awareness of the challenges and the tasks:

‘We can be the first generation to succeed in eradicating poverty, and at the same time perhaps the last generation that still has a chance to save our planet. If we succeed in achieving our goals, we will have changed the world for the better in 2030.’ (Vereinte Nationen, 2015, p. 50)

The states emphasize the ‘common but differentiated responsibilities’ of all to participate in the ecosocial survival program. Strikingly,

the classic narrative of ‘development’ recedes in the rhetoric. The SDGs are more of a survival program. In this respect, the word ‘development’ in the title is in some ways a semantic deception. The SDGs should have been more precisely called ‘Sustainable Survival Goals,’ that is, not SDGs, but SSGs (thus Sachs, 2018, p. 250).

However, there are linguistic reasons for sticking to the concept of development if it is understood in a sufficiently differentiated way. Development is to be understood primarily intransitively: one does not develop someone, but oneself. Development cannot be exported. Help consists of improving the conditions for others to develop and to unfold their potential. Unlike the Rio Agenda 21 (1992), which was essentially an aid program for the countries of the South, the SDGs assume that all countries must change. They are also a program for the transformation of the countries of the North. The concept of such a comprehensive transformation has replaced that of development, or at least embedded the concept of development in a new understanding of global interdependence (Vogt, 2018).

3.3 Differences between SDGs and encyclicals

In contrast to Agenda 2030, *Laudato si'* assumes that the industrial growth model is responsible for numerous undesirable developments (cf. Hickel, 2015). He considers ‘degrowth’ for the prosperous regions of the earth to be inevitable and ethically required (LS 193). The Pope can be called a critic of expansive modernity (cf. Brand & Wissen, 2017). The SDGs, on the other hand, understand the necessary ecological restrictions rather as conditions and ‘footnotes’ of the growth model. They harmonizingly bypass the deep conflict between the neoliberal concept of freedom, prosperity, and humanity and the ecological limits (cf. Haber et al., 2016; Messner, 2016; Weizsäcker & Wijkman, 2018).

One can well illustrate the difference of the texts by looking at the consumption issue: while SDG 12 (‘Ensure sustainable patterns of consumption and production’) aims primarily at more efficiency in the use of resources, *Laudato si'* focuses on frugality and sufficiency as a new guiding principle for consumption in the countries of the North. The Pope attacks the power interests and greed of the rich as well as the financial system. The UN text, on the other hand, barely addresses the reasons for the constant reproduction of poverty and environmental degradation.

‘While the 2030 Agenda wants to make strong corrections to the global economic model, the encyclical pleads for pushing back the hegemony of the economic and calls for more ethical responsibility at all levels. In doing so, Agenda 2030 relies on a green economy with a social democratic twist, whereas the encyclical envisions a post-capitalist age, supported by an eco-solidarity change in mentality.’ (Sachs, 2018, p. 258)

The Agenda 2030 can be categorized as thinking about ecosocial modernization, in which the globalization narrative of the 1990s is modified rather than fundamentally challenged. The encyclical, on the other hand, promotes a cultural change, a common good economy, and a winding down of the imperial way of life of the transnational upper and middle classes (cf. Sachs, 2018, p. 259). These few examples illustrate that the two 2015 flagship texts speak at completely different levels of perception, problematization, and analysis of ecosocial transformation. For this very reason, they can complement each other well.

Despite all their differences, both texts agree on the critical assessment of the current state of the world and are characterized by a strong impulse of disaster management that does not tolerate

any delay. Both conclude that there is a need to revise the concept of development, although in different ways it remains up in the air whether this represents an ecosocial extension or a fundamental reconceptualization. Both texts are urgent calls for a new quality of solidarity-based world domestic policy as a survival program.

4. Priorities and strategies of a ‘post-utopian development policy’

4.1 Ethical systematics of integral development

If someone attempts to grasp the concept of an integral and holistic development systematically, the following aspects are of central importance (cf. Müller, 2018, p. 168):

- (1) any ethics that deals with development must take into account both – the principle of universality and that of particularity and thus plurality.
- (2) Its basic goals must be globally oriented, that is, they must focus on development in the industrialized countries as well as in the developing countries.
- (3) This approach must also include future generations (principle of sustainability).
- (4) The justification of such development-based ethics should be interculturally accessible and communicable.
- (5) A purely theoretical justification is not sufficient. The development goals must also be accepted factually in very different contexts.
- (6) Such ethics should be a basis for national (regional and local) development processes as well as for worldwide solidary cooperation.

From a Christian point of view, taking the experience of suffering seriously as a normative-heuristic starting point speaks against the general abandonment of the idea of development:

‘Suffering is to be understood in a holistic sense, i.e. it has manifold dimensions. However, it is always a matter of basic human experiences that are relatively independent of culture and are nowhere simply accepted, but cry out, as it were, of their own accord (before any reflection) for their overcoming or at least demand a plausible explanation. In such negative experiences it thus becomes dialectically visible what is to be striven for. It is thus one of the characteristics of suffering that it contains a normative appeal.’ (Müller, 2018, p. 168)

It is crucial to note that people in all cultures have the capacity to participate in the suffering of others, to spontaneously sympathize with them (*compassio*), and to feel empathy. The fact that all people share the moral intuition that suffering is to be overcome argues for understanding it not merely as a subjective feeling, but as rooted in a universal moral judgment (cf. Müller, 2018, p. 169).

4.2 Holistic concept of suffering and poverty

‘From this approach, the primary goal of all development is to overcome human suffering in all its forms and dimensions, or at least to limit it as far as possible. From this holistic understanding of development, all further development goals are to be unfolded and justified. At the same time, it provides a basic criterion against which all development must be measured.’ (Müller, 2018, p. 169)

A central suffering is poverty. This has multiple dimensions. It is a complex economic, social, political, cultural, and ecological phenomenon, which today, because of the global interdependencies,

can only be understood and tackled with a worldwide perspective. Nevertheless, we have become accustomed to understanding poverty primarily as a lack of income and assets. On the one hand, this has the advantage of making the phenomenon measurable and enabling appropriate political action programs to overcome it. On the other hand, it obscures the context of poverty, which is essential for theology and the church.

4.3 Culture- and context-sensitive development ethics

A holistic understanding of development must respect the intrinsic value of each culture, which includes the diverse religious traditions. Respect for religious freedom is a fundamental human right. It is also important for development policy reasons, since otherwise it is difficult to win over countless people to cooperate in necessary measures and reforms. This is especially important in the countries of the South, where culture and religion are closely interwoven (cf. Stierle, 2018).

On the other hand, religions, at least in their social forms and political influence, also share in the ambivalence of every culture, for they never exist in pure form, but always only in socio-cultural mediation. The measure of human suffering is therefore sometimes a criterion for an objectively justified criticism of religion. Religious communities, too, must allow themselves to be asked what they contribute to overcoming suffering, where they stand in its way, and where they perhaps cause suffering themselves. An important aspect is the tension between religions. Shared experiences of human suffering and a common commitment to people have proven to be the best basis for inter-religious dialog.

4.4 Participation and subsidiarity

The goals and justification of development arise *ex negativo* from what people suffer from, for example, hunger, disease, poverty, or violence. Suffering can have many faces and causes, with the physical, social, and psychological dimensions usually interacting closely. A rather sublime, but often quite central form of suffering for people can be when they are deprived of their socio-cultural identity and experience themselves merely as objects of planning and foreign determination by others.

'If human beings are at the center of all development, then this primary development must be from below. All development, whether private, state or international, must therefore help people to help themselves, because the people concerned know their needs and living conditions best, have the greatest interest in improving their situation and usually have a wealth of practical experience in solving their everyday problems. Their active participation, not only in the implementation of measures and assistance programs, but already in the process of decision-making, is indispensable.' (Müller, 2018, p. 171)

Empirical research supports the thesis that participation is a key to overcoming poverty (cf. Einsiedel, 2020). It enables ownership and thus an understanding of 'development as freedom' (Bliss, 2002; Sen, 1999). This is also the basis of the capability approach (cf. Sen, 1999, pp. 87–110), which focuses on expanding people's opportunities for action through empowerment. Participation and freedom are not, as is often read, a secondary characteristic of poverty or poverty reduction, but a defining characteristic: poverty is a lack of opportunities for realization (Einsiedel, 2020, pp. 30–64; Sen, 1999). According to Amartya

Sen, someone is poor if he or she has no opportunity to use his or her abilities. From a social-ethical point of view, the problem of poverty is not to be measured primarily in terms of a certain quantity of goods allocated for individual needs, but in terms of the social withholding of elementary freedoms through despotism, lack of economic opportunities, neglect of public facilities, suffocating control, or exclusion from social processes of communication and exchange.

4.5 The regulatory ethical framework: making world trade fair

Global trade, which has expanded rapidly, especially since the 1990s, has played a crucial role in reducing global poverty – particularly in Asia (cf. on following Marx, 2019). At the same time, the problem of inequality has grown in societies and worldwide. There are not only winners, there are also numerous losers in world trade. This is often dominated one-sidedly by the interests of the economically stronger. There is a lack of binding global agreements and a better organization of the negotiating power of the economically weaker states. A fair and sanction-proof regulatory framework for the world economy would be the decisive hinge for global development and poverty eradication. Pope Francis calls for a restoration of the primacy of politics (cf. LS 189).

4.6 Development policy as preventive migration avoidance?

The high migration pressure from countries of the global South is a consequence of unjust global economic conditions, which deprive these countries of a considerable part of their natural and social resources. The isolation of the rich countries is becoming less and less successful. Fear of foreign infiltration is dividing many Western societies. Against this background, the argument that development aid or cooperation is the best way to prevent migration has become a strong motive. However, this argument stands up to critical scrutiny only to a very limited extent. After all, it is not the extremely poor who have the opportunity to migrate, but those who are equipped with a certain minimum standard of finances and education. Thus, development cooperation that is only reactive and charitable in its focus on overcoming extreme poverty could actually increase migration pressure in the short term.

Nevertheless, development partnership is ethically required for reasons of justice and wisdom. For this purpose, however, it is not enough to provide one-off disaster relief, but rather to promote attractive living conditions and social and political stability in the countries of the global South from a long-term perspective. This is then also ethically much more sensible than an uncontrolled opening of the borders. After all, the people who emigrate are often the most valuable 'resources' of the countries of the global South, and they are needed there on the ground. 'Brain drain' is a form of sublime exploitation.

'Fair regulations that do justice to the situation of migrants as well as the resident population, of "sending countries" as well as "receiving countries", are not easy to find. This is precisely why it is important for the global community to find frameworks that give direction and order to the decisions of individual countries. The global compacts on refugee management and migration agreed by the United Nations in early 2019 are one such attempt. One can hope that they will provide impetus for more equitable solutions in the difficult field of migration.' (Marx, 2019)

4.7 Balance between realism and utopian energy

Johannes Müller describes his approach to development policy as ‘realistic-utopian’ (Müller, 2018, p. 171) insofar as it starts from the concrete reality of suffering and is satisfied with the ‘utopia’ of reducing it as far as possible. The realistic-utopian approach avoids the fixation on abstract goals, which often seem unattainable and thus demotivate people or lead them to want to implement them authoritatively or even violently. By looking at concrete suffering and the next steps for overcoming it, this approach stays close to the people, their experiences, hopes, and potentials. This realism allows for ‘no ready-made recipes or definitive solutions’ (Müller, 2018, p. 171). Since suffering can never be finally and completely overcome, the struggle against it is a process that cannot be concluded. Political realism is the art of the possible (cf. Hinkelammert, 1994, pp. 17–38; see also Albertz, 2006).

The strong political efficacy of ‘utopian reason’ in very different variants – be it rationalist-enlightenment, anarchic, Marxist, neoliberal, or developmental – is a specific feature of modernity (cf. Hinkelammert, 1994, pp. 9–10 and 17–171). It has always been able to mobilize a great deal of energy for social awakenings. A fundamental experience, however, was and is that many positive development processes of increasing prosperity, more security, expanded technical capabilities, more (market) freedom, or even more state control are always associated with new risks, ambivalences, or possibilities of abuse (Fest, 2007). The ‘post-utopian’ awareness of these ambivalences is also salutary for the development discourse. From an ethical point of view, the constant examination of the impact of social and developmental, technical, rationalist, or romantic utopias and supposed progress against their actual effects in terms of overcoming suffering is an important reality test. The balance between ‘utopian energy’ and sober realism is of crucial importance, especially for development policy.

4.8 Empirical balances on poverty reduction

In 1990, the UN proposed the following measure of extreme poverty: poor in an absolute sense is someone who has less than the equivalent of 1 U.S. dollar per day to live on. This definition (since raised to \$1.90 as an inflation adjustment) has the advantage of allowing comparable measurement data worldwide and over longer periods of time. Methodologically problematic, however, is that the calculation of purchasing power parities is based on a basket of goods that is often not representative for the analysis and evaluation of the living situation of the poorest.

If one uses the UN benchmark as a basis and compares in percentage terms, the proportion of poor people in the world population is decreasing: from 44% in 1981, it has fallen to just under 10% in 2015 (cf. BPB, 2017). This is an enormous success. It is also a reduction in absolute terms. The successes in poverty reduction are mainly due to the rapid economic growth of the past 15 years in China and some other parts of Asia. At the same time, the debt of many countries is increasing, as is the discrepancy in income at the margins of world society: the income of the richest 50 million people (less than 1% of the world’s population) is equal to the combined income of the poorest 2.7 billion people.

China is considered a prime example of the success of programs to overcome poverty through expansive growth. Since 2014, China has been the most efficient economic power on

earth, after the country had been estimated to be only half as strong as the USA in this respect as recently as 2005 (cf. Sachs, 2018, p. 250). At the same time, the consequences of the profligate use of resources are nowhere more noticeable than in the Asian economic miracle country: more than 80% of the rivers are considered polluted. Sixteen of the world’s 20 most polluted cities are in China. The annual growth of 10% over longer periods in recent decades has high ecological and sociocultural costs. The giant ‘Middle Kingdom’ has long been in the process of securing global access to natural resources, such as fertile soils or ores, thus inciting a geostrategic struggle for raw materials. ‘There is nothing to quibble about: At present, a successful exit from poverty and powerlessness leads straight to entry into the ecological predatory economy’ (Sachs, 2018, p. 251).

4.9 Green and inclusive growth

In response to the aforementioned ambivalences, the UN advocates the concept of ‘inclusive growth,’ which aims at broad-based ‘pro-poor growth’ as well as environmentally sound ‘green growth.’ The SDGs link the various qualifying proximity provisions, and define ‘sustained, inclusive and sustainable growth’ as a goal (SDG 8). Whether the conditional provisions of the targeted growth through the pair of terms ‘inclusive and sustainable’ is enough to manage the tension with ecological conservation interests is open to doubt:

‘In contrast, the sparrows are whistling from the rooftops that inclusive growth, driven by financial markets, is an impossibility because it always produces new inequality. The same applies to the slogan of green growth. [...] the prescriptions for green growth all rely on a decoupling of nature consumption and economic growth, although historically an absolute decoupling, i.e. decreasing resource consumption even with increasing GDP, has not yet occurred.’ (Sachs, 2018, p. 252; cf. also: Wissenschaftliche Arbeitsgruppe für weltkirchliche Aufgaben der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz, 2018)

In terms of development ethics, the rhetoric of embellishing adjectives should be accompanied by some suspicion. However, it is not mandatory to reject them wholesale, as green and inclusive growth is quite possible and necessary in many sub-fields. Developing these fields is necessary if the concept of sustainability is not to remain in a merely restrictive interpretation and lose its innovative, dynamic, and open-ended side. However, green and inclusive growth must be flanked by elements of sufficiency and frugality as well as social security and work for all. It needs a change in values and culture as a basis. This issue is being discussed above all under the heading of ‘post-growth economy.’ [...] ‘post-growth-economy’ and ‘transforming the idea of progress’ (Vogt, 2021, p.147–183).

4.10 Summary

The shadows of colonial thinking are long. They are still effective today in development concepts fixated on countable factors of socioeconomic efficiency, which neglect the factor of cultural autonomy. The setting of ecological goals by the Western industrialized countries is also often perceived and rejected by countries of the global South as ‘colonialism in green disguise.’ At the same time, the exploitation of ecological resources in these countries for the benefit of the industrialized nations and a small group of winners in the southern countries is a new form

of colonialism. The SDGs neglect the clear naming of power and system conflicts. Here, Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato si'*, also published in 2015, speaks a clearer language in the liberation-theological and social-critical tradition. The interpretation of the SDGs can also learn a lot from the encyclical in terms of turning away from linear growth concepts. Without increased efforts to achieve coherence between social and ecological goals and a clearer awareness of the cultural dimension of development, it will not be possible to implement the SDGs in a way that can be translated into action.

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