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Issue on Achieving a Sustainable Society

Exploring beyond the green economy spectrum

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Abstract

Sustainable development became an important component of global policies since the release of the Brundtland report in 1987. It provides a framework to introduce sustainability into politics in order to balance economic growth, social prosperity, and environmental enhancement. During the financial and climate change crisis in 2008, based on the sustainable development framework, the green economy emerged as a path to recover the economy with a strong focus on environmental and social aspects. Nevertheless, socioeconomic inequality, global warming, and biodiversity loss are still global issues. Hence, amid new calls for green stimuli in different countries, this article discusses about the progress of the green economy and suggests to consider perspectives of development beyond the green economy discourse. In that sense, this article provides insights of approaches from the Global South including the Buen Vivir, Social Solidarity Economy, the Tribunal on the Rights of Nature, Kametsa Asaika, and the Zapatista Autonomy.

[Keywords]: Sustainable development, green economy, pluriverse, Global South

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INTRODUCTION

Sustainable development is perhaps one of the main topics in global policymaking. Its popularity started after the release of the Brundtland Report in 1987 (Dresner, 2008) and even though it is not a synonym of sustainability, it did introduce important notions of sustainability into global politics (Mulligan, 2017). As Lafferty and Meadowcroft (2000) argue, sustainable development has contributed to reframing the relationship between environment and development in policymaking processes. Besides, it has fostered the synergy of domains that were not considered compatible previously (ibid).

Sustainable development emerged in a context where peace, freedom, development, and environment were relevant global challenges and objectives (Kates et al., 2005). It marked an important moment in history where the United Nations (UN) demonstrated that they could take the lead and steer the world to a sustainable scenario as envisioned in the UN Stockholm conference of 1972 (Mulligan, 2017). Nevertheless, it is at least worrying that three decades later the sustainable future sought by the Brundtland Report is still far from reach.

In fact, during that time, social, economic, environmental, and ecological issues have been worsening (see UNDESA, 2020; IPBES, 2019; IPCC, 2019; IPCC, 2018). For instance, between 2007 and 2010 there was an important simultaneous financial and climate change crisis (Bina and La Camera, 2011). To tackle that double crisis, global organisations, governments, firms, NGOs, and other stakeholders proposed a couple of measures under the name of Green Economy (Newton and Cantarello, 2014). The Green Economy provided at that moment a framework for economic recovery based on a transition to a green path including climate change mitigation and poverty alleviation programs and projects (Buseth, 2017). Nevertheless, a decade later, global warming and climate change are still one of the main concerns for global environmental policies as well as biodiversity loss and socioeconomic inequality. As Brand and Lang (2019) indicate, Green Economy instead of solving global environmental problems has only displaced them.

In that sense, it is logical to question ourselves if a new green stimulus should emulate former measures or frameworks such as Sustainable Development and Green Economy, or if it is time to

consider different approaches for development. Therefore, this essay is divided into two parts. The first will describe the evolution of the Green Economy. And the second, will present different forms of development mainly from the Global South that might be useful to consider in the effort to achieve a sustainable society.

From green economy to new green deal

One of the first appearances of the term Green Economy was in the book *Blueprint for a Green Economy* by Pearce et al. (1989). The book did not define explicitly the term but did give some insights that were later incorporated into Green Economy. For instance, the book argued that the natural capital should be adequately valued in economic terms to incorporate environmental issues into the economic development. Nevertheless, it was not until the global double crisis between 2007 to 2010 that Green Economy became relevant. That financial crisis led many countries into recession and into higher levels of debt which resulted in a high number of job losses and business broken (Newton and Cantarello, 2014). That crisis had implications in other sectors such as oil and gas, and food production (ibid.). Simultaneously, there was a growing concern about the impacts of global warming and ecological degradation driven by anthropic activities (Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, 2005; Stern, 2007).

To face those crises, several countries – most of them developed ones – embraced Green Economy (Newton and Cantarello, 2014). It is defined as “one that results in improved human wellbeing and social equity, while significantly reducing environmental risks and ecological scarcities”(UNEP, 2011a). In practical terms, it was a strategy to promote recovering of the economy while enhancing the environment and improving social wellbeing (Bina and La Camera, 2011). Likewise, it soon became a global international strategy promoted by the United Nations’ agencies and other international organisations (UNEP, 2011a). Even though it was deployed under different labels including green growth, sustainable growth, and green new deal, several international organisations used them interchangeably (Allen and Clouth, 2012; Bina and La Camera, 2011; Borel-Saladin and Turok, 2013; Newton and Cantarello, 2014).

Furthermore, one of the main objectives of the Green Economy is to decouple economic growth from environmental degradation (UN, 2015). Decoupling could be done by promoting economic growth without reducing the stock of natural resources (resource decoupling) or without producing any negative impact on the environment (impact decoupling) (UNEP, 2011a, 2011b). In that sense, Green Economy encourages the reduction of global footprint in different sectors (UNEP, 2011a). For instance, UNEP (2011a) recommended investment in critical ecosystem services and low-carbon projects as a strategy to reduce global ecological and carbon footprint. Likewise, Green Economy has also encouraged investment towards technological innovation to achieve an efficient use of natural resources (Knuth, 2017; UNEP, 2011b). Indeed, Green Economy fostered several strategies including cleaner production, waste hierarchy, industrial ecology, and circular economy, green infrastructure, nature-based solutions, and bioeconomy (Loiseau et al., 2016).

UNEP (2011a) has reported evidence that indicates a relative decoupling trend. However, the same agency accepts that decoupling could be affected by the Jevon's paradox which suggests that any measure to improve resource efficiency will paradoxically result in an increasing demand for such resources (UNEP, 2011b). In that sense, some scholars argue that Green Economy and its decoupling objective are a dangerous discourse since it makes society believe that a zero-impact economic growth is possible (McAfee, 2016; Wanner, 2015). Even more radical critiques claim that Green Economy has not achieved any real decoupling but instead has hidden and displaced environmental impacts to other regions with weak environmental policies (Brand and Lang, 2019; McAfee, 2016). In fact, according to Hickel and Kallis (2019), Green Economy might not achieve its decoupling objective by 2030 as expected by the Paris Agreement.

As Jackson (2011) argues, green stimulus in the long term will return the economy to its initial patterns of continuing consumption growth. This could explain why after several Green Economy measures in the last decade, environmental and social global issues such as social inequality, global warming and biodiversity loss are worsening. For instance, the World Social report (UNDESA, 2020) indicates that income inequality has increased by 71% percent of the global population located in developed and some middle-income countries. Likewise, the Global Assessment Report on biodiversity and ecosystem services (IPBES, 2019) indicate that ca. 1 million species are facing

extinction, and most of them within a decade due to human activity. Additionally, the Climate Change and Land report (IPCC, 2019) suggests that 25% of Earth's ice-free land is likely to be under human-induced degradation.

Despite those crises, it is undeniable that any attempt to promote a sustainable future is welcome. For instance, in recent years there have been new proposals related to the Green Economy such as the US Green New Deal presented by congresswoman Ms. Ocasio-Cortez, and the European Green Deal from the European Commission. Likewise, similar proposals have been suggested given the current circumstances as evidenced in the news (see Ambrose, 2020; Baczynska and Abnett, 2020; Harvey, 2020a, 2020b). Nevertheless, this essay suggests that it is time to focus on different development initiatives that lie beyond the green spectrum.

Exploring beyond the green spectrum into the Global South

In the last two decades a large variety of alternatives have emerged to counter the dominant capitalist regime (Kothari et al., 2019). Those alternatives have put in evidence the capitalist, patriarchal, racist, statist, and anthropocentric roots of that regime (ibid.). Some of them are renewed versions of antique views of indigenous people, while others are the result of recent social and environmental movements against the status quo of development (Demaria and Kothari, 2017). But they all have in common a shared view of current development in capitalist terms as a destructive force, and propose new forms of development that respects nature, coexistence, and justice (Kothari, 2020).

As Wallgren et al. (2020) explain, there is a current global trend of remarkable political innovations and active new social movements aiming to discuss and contribute to the transformation of normal development. They do not aim to replace sustainable development or the Green Economy, but instead they “intend to re-politicise the debate in the much-needed socio-ecological transformation (...)” (Demaria and Kothari, 2017, p. 2592). Nevertheless, all those initiatives and movements are still scattered and lack articulation (Kothari, 2020). That situation makes it difficult for them to thrive amid a capitalist system (Wallgren et al., 2020).

As the title of this paper suggests, some main points from those alternatives will be briefly presented for the debate. For instance, the Buen Vivir claims for a development disengaged from growth and

critiques the modern separation between humanity and nature (Chuji et al., 2019). It suggests an ethical opening by acknowledging the rights of nature (ibid.). Another alternative is the Social Solidarity Economy which involves community ownership; democratic, non-hierarchical, and consensual decision-making; and mutual cooperation and embeddedness in a local socio-ecological context (Johanisova and Vinkelhoferova, 2019). Furthermore, there is the Tribunal on the Rights of Nature which appeals for a different form of the relation between humans and nature (Avila-Santamaria, 2019). This tribunal and its members provide a space where nature manifests in the voice of a representative and hence receive the same treatment as another human being (ibid.). Moreover, the Kametsa Asaiki is an alternative that argues that the wellbeing of one subject depends on the well-being of the community and nature (Caruso and Sarmiento, 2019). Finally, the Zapatista autonomy movement appears as an interesting model of politics in which the government is organised in work areas that change over time from municipality to municipality (Leyva-Solano, 2019). In those areas, all the positions are rotational, collective, and unpaid (ibid.).

The alternatives presented in the above paragraph are only a few of several that have been collected by Kothari et al. (2019) in the book *Pluriverse* as an attempt to present new development views, frameworks, and concepts. Nevertheless, they could contribute with a new approach towards the paths to take to recover the economy and society after the pandemic.

Conclusion

A sustainable society will only be possible in a world where a balance between social, environmental, and economic factors is established. Since the release of the Brundtland report and the popularisation of sustainable development, several packages of measures have been implemented including Green Economy. Unfortunately, despite several efforts, those measures do not seem to provide the results needed to tackle the current social and environmental crises.

In that sense, this article questions the current call from governments, international bodies, and similar organisations to opt again for a green stimulus to recover the economy after the impacts from the Covid-19 pandemic. Therefore, as an attempt to contribute to the debate of the transformation that is required, this essay demand to pay attention to radical alternatives from the Global South.

This demand does not want to impose any of these views, on the contrary, it looks forward to increasing the awareness of other forms of development that could contribute to the transformation needed. As the Zapatistas movement argued, it is possible to create a world where other worlds can exist (Esteva, 2020).

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