

(Un)Sustainable Lives

Keynote Address

Challenges for Sustainability Research

Kassel Institute for Sustainability Conference

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Introduction

This working paper is a transcript of Dr Sara de Jong's Keynote Address at the '[Challenges for Sustainability Research](#)' Conference, organised by the [Kassel Institute for Sustainability](#) on 15 September 2022.

This was the first conference of the Kassel Institute for Sustainability about opportunities, problems and effects of transformation in terms of the 17 United Nation (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and their challenges for science. Framed by keynotes on the cornerstones of nature, technology, culture and society, the conference offered presentations and discussions across 25 different panels from a broad spectrum of issues relating to the SDGs. In the Open Space (Sustainability Research Café), the participants of the conference discussed their proposals for research at the Kassel Institute.



Dr Sara de Jong was invited by the Organisers of the conference to be the keynote speaker for the Social Sciences, with 2 other academics covering the Humanities and Natural Sciences. Dr de Jong joined the Politics Department at the University of York as a Senior Lecturer in September 2018. Sara was a Co-Director of IGDC until September 2022 when she started her British Academy Mid-Career Fellowship looking at Brokers of Conflict and Migration.

In this lecture, I would like to share some reflections on how sustainability politics is informed by assumptions and judgements about whose lives are sustainable and unsustainable. To illustrate this, I will organise the lecture around a number of statements recently made by Pakistani academics, politicians and writers, in relation to the devastating floods affecting the country; one of the countless examples of the effects of climate change globally. As will become clear in this lecture, foregrounding their voices is essential to make visible the neglect of certain lives of certain communities across the world.

On the receiving end

I would like to start this lecture by quoting Sara Hayat, a Lahore-based climate change lawyer and policy specialist, who was recently interviewed by international media in response to the floods in Pakistan. In an interview with Al Jazeera on the 29 August 2022, she said:

“We aren't really responsible for climate change. Pakistan isn't. We are just on the receiving end of its impact, really. [...] We contribute less than 0.8 percent to global greenhouse gas emissions. That is literally negligible. And yet look what is happening; we lost more than a thousand lives since June, 23 million are affected, 1 in 7 Pakistanis is sleeping outside in the open.”

I propose that Sara Hayat's statement raises important questions about sustainability, in particular about whose lives are considered sustainable and whose lives unsustainable. As I will develop in more detail, today we witness a contradiction in that the same lives that could be considered *sustainable* from an

environmental point of view, are apparently deemed *unsustainable* politically, in terms of the collective will to commit resources and drastically change ways of living, production and consumption to save them.

Un/Sustainable Lives

The 17 Sustainable Development Goals and related targets have been [described by the UN](#) as “balance[ing] the three dimensions of sustainable development: the economic, social and environmental”. As a scholar who has done at least some of my training and research in the discipline of Politics, it should not come as a surprise that I see politics as an important additional dimension alongside the economic, environmental and social dimensions explicitly associated with the SDGs. I won’t dwell on this general point about the importance and inevitability of a political dimension here, which can be made in relation to the SDGs about gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls – which is profoundly political – and the recognition in the SDGs that “There can be no sustainable development without peace”, as well as many other aspects of the SDGs, including their production and implementation. For instance, I will later in this talk refer to the work of development economist and professor of International Affairs Sakiko Fukuda-Parr who has written several excellent analyses of the importance of politics in exactly the development and the application of the SDGs.

Instead, I want to make the political specific, in unpacking whose lives are considered sustainable and whose lives unsustainable. As Sara Hayat stresses in her statement, there is a disjuncture between Pakistan’s population’s comparatively low contribution to global greenhouse gases and the large number of deaths and persons affected by the floods. Her listing of the numbers and statistics associated with the impact of the floods, betrays a frustration that the large number of victims fails to register in the global political arena and international media.

What makes for a grievable life?

In her 2020 book ‘Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence’, political philosopher Judith Butler raises a number of fundamental questions in light of recent global violence. She asks:

“Who counts as human? Whose lives count as lives? And, finally, *What makes for a grievable life?*” (2020: 20 italics in original).

Butler suggests that the deaths of some people remain unmarked and unremarked, or in other words ‘ungrievable’. While Judith Butler’s examples draw on deaths by military force, it does not require a significant stretch of the imagination to add Pakistan’s high number of flood casualties to Butler’s observation that:

“[w]e seldom, if ever, hear the names of [...] any number of Afghan people, children and adults. Do they have names and faces, personal histories, family, favorite hobbies, slogans by which they live? What defense against the apprehension of loss is at work in the blithe way in which we accept deaths caused by military means?” (Butler 2020: 32) [and I would add here: caused by climate change].

Butler reads the refusal by Western media to mark and commemorate the deaths of some individuals and communities, as a refusal or inability to “recognise these lives as grievable, and thus human lives” (Walker

2015: 144-145). Pakistani author Fatima Bhutto (2022) similarly raises the relative silence in relation to the Pakistani flood victims, when she wrote in a recent column:

“This is a tragedy of nightmarish proportions and yet if you live outside of Pakistan, you probably haven’t heard much about it at all”.

The inability or refusal to mourn the deaths outside of Pakistan indicates not just something about the deaths, but also or even more so about the lives of those who have perished. If their death remains unregistered, this is symptomatic of the deprecation of the values of their lives in the first place.

Hence, I propose that if we map Butler’s concept of ungrievable lives onto sustainability, we can see that some lives are deemed not only ungrievable when they haven’t been sustained, but also not worth sustaining in the first place. Butler indeed points to the relation between the sustenance of lives and their (un)grievability when she argues that:

“Certain lives will be highly protected, and the abrogation of their claims to sanctity will be sufficient to mobilize the forces of war. Other lives will not find such fast and furious support and will not even qualify as ‘grievable’” (2022: 32).

Translated to the context of sustainable development, certain lives will be highly protected and will mobilise significant resources to try to ensure their survival in the face of climate change, while others will not even qualify as grievable when their sustenance has failed.

In the specific context of Pakistan, it is clear that national government failings have exacerbated the impact of the floods. At the same time, it is undeniable that the scale of the issue defies the notion that it is the Pakistani Government’s sole responsibility and that any national intervention could potentially have been sufficient to address the severity of the floods. As Malik Amin Aslam Khan, Pakistan’s former climate change minister, recently noted in [an interview with NPR \(2022\)](#):

“This is beyond adaptation. You know, no matter what we do in Pakistan, this huge deluge of water, which is seven times the normal monsoonal rain like this, hitting Pakistan, it’s almost unadaptable a situation as far as the country is concerned”.

He then continued to illustrate that the lives we have already failed to sustain, the lives of those now dead or without shelter and means of livelihood, are the lives of those whose lifestyle in fact is more sustainable, less damaging to our shared planetary existence. Talking to the interviewer, he noted:

“The ironic part of this whole tragedy is that it is hitting a population which has got probably the lowest carbon footprint in the world. It is really a case of extreme climate injustice that Pakistan is caught in right at the moment” (Khan 2022).

I have used the example of Pakistan here as an illustration of the point that many sustainable lives are simply not being sustained at the moment and that this remains unregistered in hegemonic terms. But these unsustainable lives are not unique to Pakistan. As Leon Sealey-Huggins has noted in his 2017 article, *‘1.5°C to stay alive’: climate change, imperialism and justice for the Caribbean*:

“A world warmed by 2°C entails substantially different implications for Caribbean societies than one warmed by 1.5°C. [I]n contrast to how climate change policy is often presented, there is no universal human subject.” (2017: 2447).

That is, behind concrete decisions on what sustainability measures are to be implemented, are decisions on which lives will be sustained and which lives won't, who is recognised as human and who isn't.

The future is already here

The widely used definition of sustainable development from the Brundtland Report hints at a future that needs to be preserved and made possible, with sustainable development being defined as:

“development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987).

However, a reflection on the current moment through the lens of (un)sustainable lives, draws our attention to the fact that certain lives are already being sacrificed in the here and now.

Mark Nevitt, Associate Professor of Law, recently referred to a quote attributed to science fiction author William Gibson:

“The future is already here. It's just not evenly distributed yet.”

Drawing on this quote, he makes the argument that not only for Pakistan but also other countries and regions in the global South, such as the Sahel,

“a climate-destabilized future is not some faraway science fiction fantasy. Climate change impacts are here, with many people already living in a modern dystopia” (2022).

Some would argue that the distinction drawn here between the sustainable yet un-sustained lives of some and the sustained lives of others with generally more unsustainable lifestyles only has limited relevance. After all, while the future is already here for some, it won't be long before it arrives for others. An Anthropocenic approach offers a macro-view of human changes to and impacts on the planet rather than a differentiated picture. Postcolonial scholar Dipesh Chakrabarty, for instance, whose work in the last ten years has increasingly focussed on the Anthropocene, has noted:

“Left unmitigated, climate change affects us all, rich and poor. They are not affected in the same way, but they are all affected. A runaway global warming leading to a Great Extinction event will not serve the rich very well. A massive collapse of human population caused by climate dislocation – were it to happen – would no doubt hurt the poor much more than the rich. But would it not also rob global capitalism of its reserve army of ‘cheap’ labor on which it has so far depended?” (2016: 108).

Dipesh Chakrabarty is correct that most likely the rich are unable to escape the effects of climate change in the long-term, and even in some cases today. However, it is odd to use that as a reason for refusing to dwell on the differential impact of climate change on different communities. To argue, as he does here, that climate change would eventually also rob the rich of an exploitable labour force, is an awkward way of brushing over these apparently expendable lives and the effect of global capitalism on climate change in the first place.

A slightly modified version of Dipesh Chakrabarty's argument that climate change will eventually reach not just the poor, but also the rich, often resurfaces as an appeal to those who are privileged to demonstrate concern for those already affected. Only a few days ago, UN Secretary-General Guterres appealed to the international community by saying:

“We have waged war on nature, and nature is tracking back and striking back in a devastating way. *Today in Pakistan, tomorrow in any of your countries.*” (US News 2022: emphasis added).

Meanwhile, Pakistani author Fatima Bhutto worried

“that the rest of the world hasn't considered that this epic humanitarian crisis is a peek into the apocalyptic future that awaits us all” (2022).

These understandable appeals, however, risk reaffirming a hierarchy of lives worth sustaining. The Pakistani flood victims are reduced to a prelude of the 'real thing' to come. At most taken seriously as warning signs for a potentially damaging future for others, but not recognised as full part of humanity.

'No one left behind'

'No one left behind' was the promise of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, but it is clear that by 2030 and beyond, many people will have already been left behind. Sustainable Development Goal 10, "Reduce inequality within and among countries" has been hailed as a significant departure from the Millennium Development Goals and the fact that it is a standalone goal and not 'just' a cross-cutting aim, has been considered a victory for developing countries (Fukuda-Parr 2016). At the same time, as Sakiki Fukuda-Parr has persuasively argued, the associated targets and indicators are weak and ill-defined, and do not require countries to diminish the unequal distribution of wealth both within and between countries. Moreover, as she demonstrates, there are competing approaches to inequality, and the current most dominant approach is limited in its application. First, there is the inequality of marginalised populations facing exclusion from social opportunities, for instance based on gender. Secondly, there is the vertical inequality of unequal economic distribution, with those at the top not only hoarding wealth, but also power. Depending on which inequality you seek to address, a different policy response is needed. The first requires greater social inclusion of groups that are vulnerable and marginalised. The second demands a radical rethinking of the economic model that underpins vertical inequality.

The first was much less contested than the second. Indeed, as Sakiki Fukuda-Parr has argued in her 2019 article 'Keeping Out Extreme Inequality from the SDG Agenda – The Politics of Indicators', the catchy 'no one left behind' frame has successfully been deployed to steer the SDG inequality agenda towards social inclusion rather than extreme inequality.

A quote by Mara van Loggerenberg, the UN Foundation's Senior Manager of Policy Initiatives, who was asked in an [interview published by the United Nations Foundation](#), to explain what 'no one left behind' means in the context of the SDG, confirms Fukuda-Parr's reading. She answered as follows:

“It means that the international community has agreed to make a concerted effort to identify and lift up those who are furthest behind first. This means targeting the most vulnerable people who societies so often miss: from youth, and especially girls; to refugees and migrants; to rural farmers and indigenous populations” (Lee 2016).

I argue that this quote illustrates that the ‘no one left behind’ agenda of social inclusion negates the relationship between marginalisation and privilege. It attributes vulnerability to people, as if it is an essential group quality of certain communities, such as women and refugees, rather than questioning how this vulnerability is produced, for instance through discrimination and exploitation. It also presents a teleological account of progress, which naturalises a modern-colonial way of living (cf. Krauss, Jimenez Cisneros and Requena-i-Mora 2022). It leaves unquestioned how those that are ‘ahead’ have often benefitted from the extraction of resources and (productive and reproductive) labour power from those that she describes as “furthest behind”. Mapping this onto the frame I proposed earlier, I suggest that while the more limited equality agenda captured by the slogan ‘no one left behind’ may enlarge the group of those whose lives are deemed worth sustaining, it does not challenge the sustaining of the lives of those who live most unsustainably – in terms of its global impact.

While the remainder of my lecture will be primarily focussed on what Sakiki Fukuda-Parr calls vertical inequality, which she also describes as ‘extreme inequality’ or ‘vertical economic distribution’, I will make a short note on horizontal inequality, i.e. social exclusion. While appreciating that we are at a very early stage of assessing how existing social exclusion impacts Pakistan’s flood victims, it is striking that most commentaries so far, completely lack a reflection on the differentiated impact beyond *regional* variations (i.e. a mention of certain affected provinces and regions). Some that do mention gendered exclusion lack the depth needed for adequate response, including for instance an intersectional approach. Some also potentially reinforce gendered stereotypes and/or reinforce that gendered harm only occurs in this state of exception. For instance, while the CARE Pakistan Country Director, Adil Sheraz, importantly raised the issue of gender-based violence, her statement seems to suggest that regular social structures of control and protection are not harmful to women. As she stated:

“We [...] know from experience that violence against women increases in the aftermath of a disaster. With entire villages washed away, families broken up and many people sleeping under the sky, the usual social structures that keep people safe have fallen away, and this can be very dangerous for women and girls” (CARE 2022).

This negates the fact that the family can also be a site of violence, that ‘homes’ are not always safe for those who live there and that gendered violence and discrimination is often embedded in the social structures that are referred to as protecting women.

A Research Analyst from the Stimson Center, a US based think tank, [noted](#):

“Given the general limitations on women’s mobility and education, particularly in Pakistan’s rural areas, evacuation can be challenging as women are not fully equipped with life-saving skills such as swimming, navigation, or self-defense techniques” (Aamer 2022).

It remains a question if knowing how to swim is enough to escape a tsunami. In cases of comparable disasters in Western countries, culture is unlikely to be introduced in the same way as the explanation (As scholar Uma Narayan pertinently asked: do women in the global North also suffer “death by culture”?) (Narayan 1997, 84). The same analyst quotes an Oxfam report which found that during the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami, 70% of those killed were women. However, while this Oxfam report did indeed suggest as one of the reasons for the high number of female casualties the fact that women were not able to swim, several other explanations are mentioned in alternative sources, which moved away from using “culture” as the sole explanatory tool. For example, that women were particularly affected because they have an important function in the fishing industry: they were waiting to collect the fish from their fisherman husbands (quoted in: de Jong 2017: 174).

However, while this social inclusion or horizontal equality angle is left wanting, it is at least present. What Sakiki Fukuda-Parr calls ‘vertical inequality’, and its effect on Pakistan, is hardly articulated. The aid pledges so far are primarily cast in the language of charity and the projection of soft and economic power by claiming to be a major humanitarian donor. This is in contrast to Pakistan’s own assessment of its situation.

Burning their way to kingdom come

As Pakistan's climate change minister, Sherry Rehman said in an interview with the BBC:

“Richer countries have got rich on the back of fossil fuels... and have been burning their way to kingdom come.” She added that the people of Pakistan “are now feeling the heat - quite literally of other people's development and greed” (Fihlani and Fraser 2022).

Rehman’s statement powerfully articulates the relational dimension about which developed donor countries prefer to remain silent. The unsustainable lifestyles of the West and rising powers are being sustained at the costs of the lives of those whose lives aren’t sustained, despite their limited footprints.

As earlier, now slightly dated calculations from 2008, presented by Andreas Malm and Alf Hornborg showed, the capitalist North comprises of 18.8% of the global population, but is responsible for more than 70% of the emitted CO2 since 1850. The richest 7% of the world emitted 50% of all emissions, while the poorest 45% was only responsible for 7% of the emissions. As they argue, this uneven distribution is not coincidental; rather, as they state it is “a condition for *the very existence* of modern, fossil-fuel technology” (2014: 64). This, of course, as they note themselves, does not take account of country’s domestic inequalities.

But these domestic extreme inequalities do, of course, exist. This is illustrated in a recent blog post about the floods by Oshaz Fatima, a researcher and youth leader from Pakistan. She lamented in a recent blog post about the “absenteeism of feudal lords and local politicians”, who are present when there are upcoming elections, but absent once they have secured their power. As [she wrote](#):

“These politicians live opulent lives in the upscale areas of Dubai and the USA, thanks to the support of their constituents, whenever a catastrophe befalls the underprivileged. Even if they do get there, *what* they do is for picture shoots and giving out money in peanuts, which is itself an insult to the already impacted populace” (Fatima 2022).

This example illustrates the point made by Ulrich Brand, who uses the concept of ‘imperial ways of life’ [or in German: Imperiale Lebensweise] to describe “prevailing patterns of production and consumption that disproportionately rely on global labour power, resources and sinks” (Brand and Wissen 2013: 690). As Brand and Wissen have argued, this imperial mode of living, while emerging from and dominant in the global North, is not exclusively restricted to it and has made significant inroads into the global South. This means “its contradictions [have] intensif[ied]” (Ibid.).

After the fire

Equally, in the global North, we see marginalised populations being further sacrificed to sustain unsustainable ways of living for others. In the UK, Prime Minister Liz Truss, immediately announced upon her election that she would lift the moratorium on fracking. The areas for potential shale gas deposits mainly include the former industrial heartlands [of the Midlands and the north of England](#), with poorer communities. This includes a city formed of former mining villages, Doncaster, just down the road from York, where I live. This stigmatised place – often voted among the worst places to live in the UK – declared a climate and biodiversity emergency in 2019. As the [Council stated](#),

“Doncaster is already experiencing the impact of climate change, which is likely to escalate dangerously over the coming years and decades unless fundamental action is taken”.

This has included several floods and wildfires. The wildfires occurred on land with an industrial history, such as former pits or peat bogs. Some of these have been re-purposed as gas fields and, later, as onshore gas storage facilities. They have long been contested areas: one of the areas affected by wildfires, Hatfield Moors – where the most recent wildfire raged for more than 10 days - is now a national nature reserve. However, it has also been subject to proposals to be repurposed as, respectively, a municipal rubbish site, a regional airport, an ash tipping scheme and a dump for colliery waste.

Sarah Smizz, artist and local councillor shared her grief on her blog when her own area was affected by wildfire this summer (Smizz 2022). I met Sarah in the context of a collaborative research project with my colleague Dr Tom O’Brien on community responses to intersecting crises in Doncaster. The former pit top where the wildfire raged had been the site of a collective community effort which Sarah still cherished. The community had planted 20,000 baby trees just a few months before, in part inspired by the flooding that had previously affected the area. Now nearly all the trees, all the effort was gone.

As an ex-mining town, Doncaster was traditionally one of the Labour party heartlands. Recently, for the first time, one of its areas voted for a Conservative MP to represent them. This political opportunity in Doncaster and other traditional Labour former industrial areas, has attracted interest from the Conservative party. When the town was affected by severe floods in 2019, the then Prime Minister Boris Johnson visited. His opportunistic visit arguably mirrors the ‘picture shoot’ visits by Pakistani local politicians, living comfortably in Dubai and the USA, described by Oshaz Fatima in her blog post that I just quoted. In one of the severely affected areas, Stainforth, an extremely deprived former mining village [with high unemployment and crime rates as well as poor health and wellbeing](#), his visit was met with anger by some of the local residents. One person [shouted out](#): “You took your time Boris! Where have you been?” (Hossein-Poor 2019).

If this was in another area...

In an adjacent council, Tony Nicholson, a local councillor [suggested](#):

“If this was in another area this would be deemed a national emergency. This is devastating for people’s lives” (Halliday and Perraudin 2019).

While the devastation of the floods is different in scope and reach, his frustration mirrors that of the Pakistani writers, bloggers and politicians who I have quoted today, who have found themselves sidelined and ignored, at the margins of media and political attention.

Recently it was announced that two areas of Doncaster, including the very deprived, flooded area that Johnson visited, will receive national funding under the so-called ‘Levelling Up’ agenda. As the catch-phrase ‘levelling up’ doesn’t mean much outside of the UK – and admittedly also not inside the UK – I quote the [BBC explanation](#) which describes it as a “catch-all term for anything seen to bring economic or social benefit to anywhere outside London. The idea is that people and communities who feel they have been left behind get a chance to catch up” (Vincent 2021). As I am sure you have noticed as well, this definition of ‘levelling up’ sounds uncannily like the ‘no one left behind’ social inclusion agenda of the SDGs. Similar to the SDGs’ application of this principle elsewhere, its application in the UK, reveals many contradictions.

It has emerged that a [new clause of the ‘levelling up and regeneration bill’](#) seeks to “remove the requirement for current environmental assessments”, before planning permissions are given to developers. The existing environmental assessments will be replaced with a much weaker form or assessment. The new type will likely avoid parliamentary scrutiny and gives the relevant Government Minister complete discretion to decide to grant planning permission to developers (Greenwood 2022). Moreover, last month, local politicians in the Doncaster area who had been vocal about climate change action [were accused of hypocrisy](#) when they defended the expansion of the local Doncaster airport, after its owners threatened to close it because of a lack of economic viability (Drury 2022). This week, Ros Jones, the mayor of Doncaster who had announced the vote on the climate emergency motion two years ago (Torr 2022), [spoke out in strong defence](#) of the preservation and growth of Doncaster-Sheffield airport. She cited that the airport “supported over 2,700 jobs in the wider economy, [...] contribut[ing] over £100 million per year to the local and regional economy.” As she argued:

“The closure of [the airport] would have an immediate effect on employment and the economic future of Doncaster and South Yorkshire at a time when our economy is beset by challenges on inflation, energy costs and economic confidence following the COVID pandemic”.

The double bind of the SDGs

This impossible and contradictory choice between climate emergency on the one hand and economic downfall on the other hand, encapsulates what Judith Krauss, Andrea Jiménez Cisneros, and Marina Requena-i-Mora, in their recently published article ‘Mapping Sustainable Development Goals 8, 9, 12, 13 and 15 through a decolonial lens’ have described as the “double-bind structure” represented by the SDGs. Quoting the work of García and Cabrejas (1996), they suggest that this double bind structure imposes two conflicting demands: ‘Live as if the environment does not matter because, otherwise, you are threatened by poverty and unemployment’ and ‘Protect nature because, otherwise, you are threatened by catastrophe and extinction’” (quoted in Krauss et al. 2022: 1858). I would argue that this double bind structure is premised, however, on acceptance of the limited social exclusion/inclusion perspective on inequality. Or, in other words, the one emphasised in the narrow reading of ‘no one left behind’, where those left behind are forced to make this impossible decision. Both in Doncaster and in Pakistan, however, there are people and communities who refuse this double-bind.

One of the ways in which they refuse the double-bind is by highlighting the *vertical inequality* at the root of climate injustice. Addressing this vertical inequality - which as Fakuda-Parr has noted - would require a radical reorganisation of our global economic system - would open up options beyond the simplistic double bind.

Reparations, not paper straws

Such a call is exemplified in a punchy statement by Pakistani author Fatima Bhutto who writes:

“Forget solidarity: the global south will not survive this century without climate justice. You in the west are talking about paper straws, we in the global south are talking about reparations” (2022).

With this statement, Bhutto not only highlights the historical uneven and unjust distribution of emissions, and its unevenly felt effects. She also calls for compensation for historical exploitation in order to try to protect some lives and livelihoods in the present. Moreover, Bhutto’s quote points to the perversely differential experiences and interests at stake in the current moment: while the West can afford discussing the merits of paper versus plastic straws, the south is in dire need of the financial means to respond to the disasters that affect them.

As I proposed earlier, the contradiction apparent today is that the lives of those that live often most sustainably from an environmental point of view, are not sustained, i.e. protected politically, including in decisions on how to spend humanitarian aid. Moreover, discussions about funding and resource allocation have increasingly been further clouded by a deliberate obfuscation between environmental and financial sustainability. With ‘sustainability’ now carrying a fashionable and positive connotation, we are witnessing political statements, which exploit the ambiguity of the adjective ‘sustainable’ by attaching it to different or vague nouns. For instance, radical or controversial policy measures can now be presented as ‘sustainable solutions’, leaving deliberately opaque whether the solution can be regarded ‘sustainable’ from an economic or environmental perspective. As Katy Davis already argued in relation to other buzzwords, the “characteristic of successful theory is that it is, paradoxically, inherently ambiguous and obviously incomplete” (2008: 76). Indeed, such ambiguity covers over the potential conflicts between economic and environmentally sustainable solutions.

Rather less substantial and radical than the reparations that Fatima Bhutto called for, the then UK foreign secretary Liz Truss, who went on to be Prime Minister, recently announced aid up to £1.5m for Pakistan (the equivalent of less than 5p for each person affected by extreme rainfall). This already small amount of emergency funding was to be paid out of the UK’s existing aid budget to Pakistan. The announcement drew a sharp response from the cross-party parliamentary International Development committee noting that:

“This government has implemented a policy of sustained indifference to Pakistan” (Champion 2022).

While Liz Truss has since offered a larger aid package (though again a relocation of the existing development aid budget), the observation about ‘sustained indifference’ again calls to mind the work of political philosopher Judith Butler on grievability. The indifference is ‘sustained’ because the financial offer is a reflection of a pre-existing indifference.

Pakistani author Fatima Bhutto (2022) expressed it as follows:

“Our countries and our lives are dispensable for the world at large. We have always known this, but we are simmering with rage now. What else can you feel when [880 million euros] was raised in a day and a half after the cathedral of Notre Dame suffered a fire in 2021 but an entire country of drowning poor must beg for climate aid and assistance?”

As Judith Butler argues in a book chapter published in 2022:

“A life can register as a life only within a scheme that presents it as such. The epistemological nullification or foreclosure of the living character of a population [...] structures the field of the living along a continuum that has concrete implications for the question: Whose are the lives that are worth preserving, whose lives matter, whose lives are grievable?” (2022: 77).

It remains a serious question whether the SDGs as they are currently formulated, measured and implemented provides a scheme in which the lives of all are registered as lives, when their deaths prompt so little response.

Un/Sustainable and Un/Sustained Lives

In the article by Judith Krauss et al. that I mentioned earlier, they make the point that we should not only pay attention to what the SDGs say, but also to what they do not say. In their own words:

“Absences [...] in the SDGs in terms of connections not made and injustices not addressed, deserve equal attention” (2022: 1856).

My reflection today on the unsustainable lives of those who tend to live most sustainably and the sustenance of lives, which are most unsustainable, has tried to capture one of these absences, by drawing on Butler’s concept of ‘grievable lives’, and translating it from the context of violent wars to the climate crisis. It has also addressed the connections between on the one hand, unsustainable but still sustained lives and on the other hand, the sustainable yet unsustainable lives. Recognising the relationality between these categories, is essential to revealing the injustices that underpin it.

Attention to the relationship between un/sustainable and un/sustained lives makes visible the contradictions of hegemonic sustainability politics in general and the ‘no one left behind’ goal in particular. It raises the question what ‘no one left behind’ means when some people or communities are not counted as ‘one’ in the first place, but simply remain ‘no one’.

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