



**SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF POVERTY AND INEQUALITY
IN THE 2030 AGENDA**

*DESENVOLVIMENTO SUSTENTÁVEL: ANÁLISE CRÍTICA DA POBREZA E
DESIGUALDADE NA AGENDA 2030*

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Abstract: The 2030 Agenda consists of a declaration with 17 goals aimed at achieving sustainable development for the signatory countries by the end of this decade. Regarding goals 1 and 10 of the Sustainable Development Goals, the research question of this article seeks to understand if and how progress has been made in the implementation of these goals, as presented by some authors. Therefore, analyses on poverty eradication and the reduction of inequalities are presented. As a methodological approach, theoretical foundations are presented, based on critical conceptions that aim to overcome the anthropocentric understanding of social and environmental relations, the limits of our planet, and the political aspects that interfere with decision-making processes for solving socio-environmental problems. Data analyses on poverty eradication and the reduction of inequalities are conducted in dialogue with the authors of the theoretical framework. As a result of these analyses, contradictions in poverty eradication and the reduction of inequalities were identified, based on recent research data. These contradictions may be aligned with the interests of economic hegemony, posing a challenge to the current patterns of production relations and productive forces. The results also indicate the need for a deeper political debate to ensure that some goals of Objectives 1 and 10 are more realistic and adapted to the needs of the most disadvantaged populations. Furthermore, the article highlights the need for autonomy and emancipation of less favored populations so that they recognize themselves as actors in the social and environmental processes within their contexts.

Keywords: Social Vulnerability. Social Well-Being. Sustainability.

Resumo: A Agenda 2030 consiste em uma declaração com 17 objetivos que visam atingir o desenvolvimento sustentável dos países signatários até o final desta década. No que se refere aos objetivos 1 e 10 dos Objetivos de Desenvolvimento Sustentável, a questão de pesquisa deste artigo surge em compreender se houveram e como ocorreram os progressos na implementação desses objetivos, conforme apresentado por alguns autores. Desta forma, são analisadas a erradicação da pobreza e a redução das desigualdades. Como caminho metodológico, são apresentados os fundamentos teóricos, baseados em concepções críticas que visam à superação da compreensão antropocêntrica das relações sociais e ambientais,



dos limites do nosso planeta e dos aspectos políticos que interferem nas tomadas de decisão para a resolução dos problemas socioambientais. Realizam-se análises de dados sobre a erradicação da pobreza e a redução das desigualdades, em diálogo com os autores da fundamentação teórica. Como resultado das análises, verificou-se a existência de contradições na erradicação da pobreza e na redução das desigualdades, com base em dados de pesquisas recentes. Tais contradições podem estar alinhadas aos interesses da hegemonia econômica, representando um desafio para os atuais padrões de relações de produção e das forças produtivas. Os resultados indicam, também, a necessidade de um debate político mais profundo para garantir que algumas metas dos objetivos 1 e 10 sejam mais realistas e adaptadas às necessidades da população mais desfavorecida. Além disso, o artigo destaca a necessidade de autonomia e emancipação das populações menos favorecidas, para que se reconheçam como atores dos processos sociais e ambientais nos contextos em que vivem.

Palavras-chave: Vulnerabilidade Social. Bem-Estar Social. Sustentabilidade

Introduction

The 2030 Agenda ⁽¹⁾ has 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). They were set in September 2015 as the result of an agreement between United Nations member countries. These goals cover aspects related to economic and social development. Each SDG has a set of targets with a total number of 169 interdependent targets for the 17 goals. While progress has been made on these targets, they are still very vague as they do not consider the political relations inherent to the implementation processes. Several authors have criticized the implications of the definition of sustainable development (SD) presented in the Brundtland Report ⁽²⁾ because they are too uncertain. They do not define the needs nor the mechanisms needed to achieve an environmentally sustainable society ^(3, 4).

Because of the relationships between the SDGs and their inherent interdisciplinary characteristics, the present study shows the need for progress in the implementation of the SDGs and a focus on targets 1 and 2 of goal 1 (No Poverty) and targets 1, 2, 5, and 6 of goal 10 (Reduced Inequalities) as these goals are strongly interrelated. Thus, the policies adopted to promote improvements in these targets have implications for other targets. The research question of this article aims to understand if and how progress has been made in the implementation of SDGs 1 and 10. Methodologically, this article first develops a critical theoretical perspective to provide consistent support for the analyses. These analyses, in turn, are conducted based on presented data, allowing for an understanding of how poverty and inequalities have either advanced or regressed. In conclusion, the findings of the analyses are presented, along with suggestions for future research and SDG implementations.



Critical Theoretical Perspectives

The critical approaches addressed in this study consider all social and environmental relationships, according to which all living organisms have the right to life, with poverty and inequality intrinsic to the analysis processes. In search of ecological sustainability to face the current socio-environmental paradigm, various theoretical alternatives must be combined with other traditionally critical approaches as neither approach has the “monopoly of truth” ⁽⁵⁾. Therefore, poverty and inequality should be part of a broader debate, with a political focus on the training of citizens on the processes of SDGs. Such an approach should promote ways of establishing a harmonious relationship not only with other forms of life, but also with other human beings while taking into consideration the economic, social, and cultural dimensions. Discussions and analyses regarding poverty and inequality are involved in political processes, as are interests regarding environmental issues. When discussing and deciding on the use of natural resources by humanity, there are different interests from various social groups. In this sense, this article intends to contribute to the construction of processes that can be questioned and contribute to social transformations (such as overcoming poverty and inequalities) as well as environmental transformations considering that the planet has limited resources to meet human needs. Thus, there is no separation between human beings and nature. Humans are part of nature in a complex process of interaction and balance that involves the most diverse areas of knowledge.

For Kopnina ⁽⁶⁾, critical aspects promote the overcoming of anthropocentric compression of social and environmental relations. According to this author, economic growth is convenient and at the same time dissociated from the consumption of resources. Moreover, considering the hegemony of the current paradigm of sustainability through growth, she argues that there has been an increase in inequality and greater pressure on natural resources, which is aggravating the loss of biodiversity, climate change, and the resulting social tensions ⁽⁷⁾. Koehler ⁽⁸⁾ analyzed poverty and inequalities in the 2030 Agenda and showed that although it approaches redistribution, social rights, and awareness of resources while contributing to social protection and assistance policy, it only makes a cursory reference to the need for regulation of the economy. This is rather disingenuous because economic growth and industrial development combined with population growth and consumption are responsible for the increased use of natural resources and are also the main obstacles to environmental sustainability according to critics of the current economic model ^(6, 7, 9).



Nogueira ⁽¹⁰⁾ discussed the contradictions of SD. The author argued that the planet is limited by the Second Law of Thermodynamics and that, in the context of the current productive forces and production relations, the applicability of effective SD would be questionable because it depends on the political context. The limits of the planet are corroborated by data from the Global Footprint Network ⁽¹¹⁾, according to which humanity used the equivalent of 1.75 Earths to satisfy its needs in 2019. A comparison with previous years showed that since the 1970s, humanity has been using natural resources exceeding what the Earth can regenerate each year. Such aspects are part of the political context, as decision-making depends on the interests of different (and often antagonistic) social groups, indicating that the implementation of SD processes is also associated with political interests ⁽¹²⁾. The logic that underpins current market-based environmental policies is related to a frequent search for new products, techniques, markets, and raw materials, which is done through processes in which land, forests, and other resources are commercialized, as their value are derived from the human labor invested in their production ⁽¹⁴⁾. Approaches related to poverty and inequality are not treated with the same degree of importance.

While there is an urgent need to break the current non-sustainable systems, like the lifestyles and routines of a group of people, many are convinced that it is not right to persuade, influence, or even educate people for fear of their worldview being expert-driven ⁽¹⁵⁾. For Ballew et al. ⁽¹⁶⁾, the identities and worldviews of certain groups can be threatened by climate change, leading to wealthier segments of the population underestimating environmental problems in a way that is favorable to their interests. Such groups seek information that corroborates their ideological perspectives and understanding of the world to dismiss the existence of real environmental problems ^(17, 18). Therefore, without a critical analysis of the SDGs that takes into account the political forces between groups of countries, between countries, and within countries with regards to poverty and inequalities, it is difficult to obtain the necessary understanding for the implementation of effective SD worldwide.

Critical Analysis of Poverty and Inequality

The first SDG proposed is “to end poverty in all its forms everywhere.” Target 1.2 of this goal requires significant resources to be mobilized so that programs and policies are implemented to end poverty in all dimensions. According to Nogueira ⁽¹²⁾, the processes of implementing SD serve political interests, with the implementation of this target depending on



the extent of what the most favored social groups are willing to lose to end poverty. Moreover, a more adequate definition of poverty in all its dimensions is necessary, as well as a conversion of the amount of US\$ 1.25 a day, the measure of extreme poverty, set in target 1.1. Focusing on income as a measure of poverty may fail to adequately capture other dimensions of poverty⁽¹³⁾. In an analysis of children's access to health care, the author showed that the use of a minimum amount in dollars to explain the levels of poverty associated with health may not be effective in transforming people's reality⁽¹³⁾. Setting a cash value, in light of the intricate social and environmental relations of our planet, fails to capture the complexity of this goal and demonstrates a lack of understanding of the commercialization of social and environmental issues, according to Pellizzoni⁽¹⁴⁾.

Target 1.2 of SDG 1 states that reducing at least half the amount of people living in poverty according to national definitions is a step forward; however, these definitions need further clarification. Given the great diversity of world cultures, the different social, political, and economic contexts, and the different climates/ecosystems, a fixed value of US\$ 1.25 per day per day may be meaningless even after the values are localized. In his research on inequality, Sen⁽¹⁹⁾, who won the 1998 Nobel Prize in Economics, recognized the importance of income as a means to satisfy needs, but not as a measure of well-being. This approach primarily focuses on economic conditions⁽⁵⁾.

It is possible to achieve the goals mentioned here based on the information presented in the Brundtland Report and implicit in the SDGs. However, according to Edward⁽²⁰⁾ and Edward and Sumner⁽²¹⁾, the impact of economic growth is not significant for the poor and may not be favorable to them. Furthermore, economic growth was not the most effective way to reduce poverty according to them. Therefore, these data were inconsistent in the context of SDG 1. They are also incompatible with the reduction of inequalities stated in target 1 of SDG 10, which concerns the income growth of the poorest population until 2030. This highlights the political nature of the implementation of SDGs, as the rate of poverty reduction has been decreasing since 2013 according to the World Bank⁽²²⁾. In turn, the UN World Social Report 2020 points to the increasing inequality in developed and developing countries, where more than two-thirds of the world's population live (UN, 2020b). It shows the logic of the current economic system: a mechanism that makes it difficult to implement environmental sustainability in SD⁽⁹⁾.

In this regard, Edward⁽²⁰⁾ advocated for the existence of an ethical poverty line defined by an analysis of world consumption based on information from the World Bank⁽²²⁾. However,



the author also reported on the socioeconomic contradictions standing in the way of poverty eradication and raised challenging questions about excess consumption in the developed world. The basis for this ethical poverty line involves studies conducted by economists on the development of welfare measures and their determinants, as well as health-related studies on the life expectancy and well-being of individuals, and individual income levels. Thus, the ethical poverty line shows developed countries the need to justify their excess consumption, instead of merely focusing on ways to lift people out of poverty without considering other factors.

An important consideration regarding the reduction of poverty combined with the economic processes of the current productive forces and relations of production is the existence of limitations imposed by the planet. While there is improvement in regulation and monitoring of global markets and financial institutions that could contribute to poverty reduction per target 10.5, there is no detailed description of the mechanisms used to achieve this target. The current economic system has its aforementioned contradictions, as well as the limitations imposed by the planet.

In response to these limitations, Nogueira ⁽¹⁰⁾ presented the approach of authors who advocate ecological economics. They argue that the current economic model is a closed system, which is a mistake, as economic processes occur fundamentally through the extraction of natural resources, that is, the economic system is open. In this approach, the Second Law of Thermodynamics imposes a limit on the processes of energy transformation on our planet, thus demonstrating that the current economic system is contradictory. Even under these conditions, the current economic system is based on overproduction, which consolidates an uneven distribution and intense exploitation of our planet's natural resources through continuous maximization of market competitiveness and profit generation ⁽²³⁾. Such contradictions corroborate Edward's ⁽²⁰⁾ proposal for the existence of an ethical poverty line.

These data on the current context of the productive forces and relations of production in sustainable development suggest that the eradication of poverty stated in SDG 1 and the reduction of inequalities in SDG 10 have not seen much progress. Data from 2019 indicate that 2,153 billionaires in the world have more wealth than 4.6 billion people ⁽²⁴⁾. Huge inequality is also present in carbon emissions: In 2015, British NGO Oxfam stated that 10% of the world's wealthiest inhabitants are responsible for more than 49% of the total carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions, while the poorest 50% contribute only 3% of the total emissions ⁽²⁵⁾.

According to the United Nations World Social Report 2020 ⁽²⁶⁾, carbon emissions cause climate change and exacerbate inequalities. These data reveal the difficulties related to target



10.6: “Ensure enhanced representation and voice for developing countries in decision-making in global international economic and financial institutions in order to deliver more effective, credible, accountable, and legitimate institutions” ⁽¹⁾. The 2030 Agenda does not address the changes in economic logic (particularly regarding political aspects) needed to overcome such contradictions. This is of utmost importance, as according to some theoretical perspectives, individuals in a more advantageous position due to their greater purchasing power do not recognize the risks related to climate change ^(17, 27).

Another key aspect related to the eradication of poverty and inequalities is the fact that when traditional and indigenous communities are considered, not everything is converted into an economic value within the current economic system. According to target 10.2, such communities should be empowered in social, political, and economic dimensions according to their cultural characteristics, as their processes of interaction with nature can occur in a more balanced way after considering the regenerative capacity of their ecosystems. In traditional cultures, individuals are inseparable from nature, while the cultural practices of everyday life allow subjects to learn about the world they live in ⁽²⁷⁾.

According to Ramos et al. ⁽²⁸⁾, traditional communities usually have forms of organization and production that are not consistent with the current productive forces and production relations predominant in the world, and their production is neither dependent on exacerbated consumerism, nor does it cause imbalance in the existing ecosystems. Thus, the imposition of an economic system, justified by inclusion and reduction of poverty and inequality, may include hidden mechanisms that eliminate the cultures of some places and insert more people into the operating mechanisms of the current hegemonic economic system.

Although they do not contemplate all the SDGs, the analyses presented here have reported difficulties in achieving the referred goals. According to Wackernagel et al. ⁽²⁹⁾, the critical analyses of the main targets of the two goals suggest that the status of the planet’s natural resources seems to be irrelevant when it comes to economic performance. Referring to previously reported data from the Global Footprint Network ⁽¹¹⁾, these authors concluded that humanity using natural resources exceeding what the Earth can regenerate each year is the main physical factor limiting the human economy and the existence of other species. In view of the aforementioned, the consensus on economic growth raises the question of whether a capitalist economy can be environmentally sustainable ⁽⁵⁾.



Final Considerations

As presented, the SDGs appear as a mechanism that allows the implementation of economic development policies capable of eradicating poverty and reducing inequalities. However, the analyses conducted and presented in this article show that, under the current conditions of productive forces and relations of production, the hegemonic interests involved are directed towards market needs to the detriment of basic human needs.

The eradication of poverty and the reduction of inequalities require the creation of economic mechanisms that enable this proportion of the global population to earn a minimum income, even if this necessitates the definition of a monetary value. Income generation demands the extraction of more inputs, products, and goods from nature according to the logic of consumer society, which will lead to more environmental degradation and obstacles to achieving the other SDGs. It is worth noting that an additional focus on social aspects related to environmental issues should not imply less attention to environmental issues. When combined with the other SDGs, the eradication of poverty and the reduction of inequalities can establish relationships with nature that lead to environmental sustainability. Paradoxically, each SDG cannot achieve such intentions alone; that is, the SDGs are integrated and systemic.

The implementation of governmental actions aimed at reducing the extreme disparity in income distribution is essential. However, this only reinforces the existing contradiction in the economic system, as the wealthiest segment of the population has only achieved its status due to its political power, which was granted because of its economic status within the context of current productive forces and relations of production.

To eradicate poverty and reduce inequalities, it is necessary to give nature and human beings the same importance as the economic system, considering the planet's limits. Since all decision-making is ultimately political, and precisely because the less advantaged are politically weaker in power relations, we also need to enhance human values in societies.



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