

## Metamorphosis of Sustainable Development Goals 2030: A Shadow of Kafka's World

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### Keywords:

Class struggle;  
Climate change;  
Inequality;  
Industrialization;  
Kafka;  
Metamorphosis;  
SDGs.

### Abstract

*This article critically examines the United Nations' commitment to achieving balanced and integrated sustainable development across economic, social, and environmental dimensions, as outlined in its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Using a qualitative textual analysis grounded in critical theory and discourse analysis it focuses on goals 1, 8, 9, 10, 13, and 17, to uncover the underlying principles of these goals and explores possible inconsistencies, limitations, and deviations. Inspired by the works of German writer Franz Kafka (1883-1924), it investigates how much any contradictory focuses and deviations within the SDGs resemble Kafkaesque scenarios. It uncovers notable parallels between the spirits of the SDGs and Kafka's narratives, highlighting compromises and distortions in the pursuit of sustainable development. It finds that the goals are prone to prioritizing modern economic growth at the expense of addressing socio-economic disparities and mitigating global warming. It concludes that while the SDGs present an ambitious agenda, their internal contradictions undermine their transformative potential*

## 1. Introduction

In the pursuit of global prosperity and environmental sustainability, the United Nations outlined an ambitious agenda encapsulated in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). As articulated in Agenda 5, persistent challenges such as poverty, inequality, and environmental degradation continue to jeopardize the well-being of billions worldwide. The urgency of addressing these issues is underscored by the recognition that the survival of societies and the planet's biological support system is at risk.

The year 2015 marked a significant milestone as 193 countries committed to eradicating poverty comprehensively and fostering a life of dignity for all (United Nations, 2015). The subsequent establishment of the SDGs aimed to replace the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and provided a framework encompassing

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17 goals across social, economic, and environmental dimensions. Each goal, inclusive of 169 targets, emphasizes the necessity of achieving sustainable development in a balanced and integrated manner.

While the SDGs represent a monumental effort towards global betterment, this research focuses on identifying possible discrepancies and limitations within the framework, specifically concentrating on goals: 1 – No Poverty, 8 – Decent Work and Economic Growth, 9 – Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure, 10 – Reduce Inequalities, 13 – Climate Action, and 17 – Partnerships for the Goals. By identifying the core essence of these goals and scrutinizing their manifestations, the study seeks to shed light on any contradictions that may exist and explores the extent to which these challenges echo the complexities observed in the literary world of Franz Kafka (1883 to 1923).

The current global landscape, marked by the unprecedented challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Russia-Ukraine conflict, Israel-Iran war, and escalating environmental hazards, has introduced new dynamics that impact the trajectory of development. As economic setbacks and growing inequalities shatter the overarching goal of “leave no one behind,” it becomes imperative to reassess the SDGs’ effectiveness in this evolving context.

Despite widespread recognition of the importance of socioeconomic equity within the context of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), there exists a research gap in the literature regarding comprehensive and standardized metrics for evaluating the progress and impact of these goals. Existing studies often focus on overall goal attainment without investigating nuanced indicators that specifically measure the reduction of inequalities among various social and economic strata. Addressing this research gap is essential for a more precise and targeted approach in advancing sustainable development initiatives, ensuring that no one is left behind in the pursuit of a more equitable and sustainable world. Therefore, this study aims to bridge the research gap by critically analyzing the SDGs in light of the contemporary challenges posed by the pandemic, war crisis, and environmental threats, exploring the inherent limitations, deviations, and contradictions within the framework.

## 1.1 Literature Review

This section synthesizes scholarly debates relevant to three critical sub-themes of the SDG framework: inequality, environmental degradation, and labor alienation.

**Inequality:** Scholars such as [Hickel \(2020\)](#) and [Sachs \(2022\)](#) have examined the persistence of inequality under global capitalism, noting that structural disparities are inadequately addressed by SDG 10. The focus on income growth for the bottom 40% does not confront the concentration of wealth in the top 1%, a critical gap that raises concerns about distributive justice. This oversight in the SDG framework has been criticized for prioritizing economic uplift without addressing how wealth is accumulated and maintained by global elites. [Sachs \(2022\)](#) further stresses that income inequality is not just a national problem but a global one, shaped

by international trade, tax avoidance, and financial systems that favor the wealthy. MacNaughton (2019) emphasizes the importance of addressing horizontal, vertical, and global inequalities to advance human rights. Without a more explicit confrontation of wealth consolidation and systemic exclusion, SDG 10 risks reproducing rather than resolving the very inequalities it seeks to eliminate.

**Environmental degradation:** The contradiction between SDG 9 (industrialization) and SDG 13 (climate action) has drawn criticism from researchers such as Hale and Roger (2014), who argue that traditional models of industrial development are incompatible with climate goals. While SDG 9 promotes innovation and infrastructure growth, many of these activities are rooted in fossil fuel dependency, large-scale resource extraction, and carbon-intensive manufacturing practices. The IPCC (2021) underscores the urgency of decarbonization, suggesting that the SDGs lack adequate mechanisms for reconciling growth with ecological limits. Climate scientists have pointed out that even “green growth” strategies often fall short when measured against emissions reduction targets. Furthermore, the SDGs do not sufficiently account for ecological tipping points or the need for degrowth in high-emitting economies. The emphasis on industrial expansion without clear accountability mechanisms risks undermining the very environmental commitments enshrined in SDG 13. These tensions raise serious questions about the long-term sustainability of the development model the SDGs endorse.

**Labor alienation:** Drawing from Marx's theory of alienated labor (1844), scholars have explored how industrial economies perpetuate worker disconnection and exploitation. Marx argued that under capitalist systems, workers become estranged from the products of their labor, the act of production, and their own human potential. This dynamic continues to manifest today, particularly in global supply chains where labor is cheap, expendable, and disconnected from ownership. Kafka's allegories offer a literary parallel, depicting individuals caught in dehumanizing systems. His characters, such as Gregor Samsa in *The Metamorphosis*, symbolize the psychological toll of being reduced to mere cogs in an impersonal economic machine. While Kafka and Marx are often referenced symbolically, this study grounds them within development discourse, showing how their critiques apply to SDG 8 (decent work and economic growth) and its failure to address systemic labor injustices. Despite its aspirational language, SDG 8 does little to challenge exploitative labor conditions or the lack of agency many workers experience globally.

This review demonstrates that while the SDGs are widely endorsed, they are conceptually and practically constrained by unresolved tensions, which this study aims to unpack.

## 2. Methodology

This study uses a qualitative textual analysis grounded in discourse analysis and critical theory. It examines SDG's six goals:

SDG 1: 'end poverty in all its forms everywhere',

SDG 8: 'promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all',

SDG 9: 'build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation',

SDG 10: 'reduce inequality within and among countries',

SDG 13: 'take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts',

SDG 17: 'strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development'.

By examining the language, contradictions, and philosophical underpinnings of SDGs 1, 8, 9, 10, 13, and 17, it interrogates how the goals reflect broader socio-economic ideologies and power structures. Kafka's literary works are used not just metaphorically but analytically, serving as a critical lens to expose bureaucratic and existential inconsistencies within the SDG framework.

The selection of the six SDGs is intentional: they represent intersecting tensions between economic growth, equity, environmental sustainability, and global cooperation. These goals also exhibit the highest levels of philosophical ambiguity and real-world contradiction when implemented, making them fertile ground for critical interpretation.

A key limitation of this study is its exclusion of target-level indicators and quantitative data. However, the aim is to expose structural and discursive contradictions that may not be captured through empirical measurement alone.

### **3. Kafka's World: Alienation and Systemic Entrapment**

To critically examine the internal contradictions of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), this study adopts Franz Kafka's literature as a primary interpretive lens. Kafka's portrayal of alienation, powerlessness, and systemic entrapment offers a metaphorical framework to explore how individuals and nations experience the bureaucratic and economic machinery embedded in global development agendas.

Franz Kafka (1883–1924), a Czech-born novelist who wrote in German and was a German-speaking Jew in Prague, created through his writing an extraordinary strangeness that can burst into everyday life. In many of his stories and novels, the main characters find themselves trapped in strange, nightmarish situations where they are isolated, with no way out of a harsh, oppressive world. Kafka's world of power, alienation, and bureaucratic tangles is strikingly relevant to today's world.

In Kafka's well-known story 'The Metamorphosis,' Gregor Samsa wakes up one morning to discover he has turned into a giant insect, and faces the struggles of living as one. Gregor has to cut himself off from his true self, from his family, long before his actual metamorphosis; Gregor forms no real connections with his family, society, or even himself, due to the demands of his job. His constant need to travel

leaves him completely alienated. He is only worried about his job which he would leave long ago if he would not have to bear his family. After his transformation, when he is suffering from bodily pain and helplessness when he cannot even raise his body from the bed due to his transformation into an insect, he is not worried about his own body; rather he is panicked because he missed the first-morning train to work. He is only worried about whether he will be punished or fired for not going to work on time.

*Even if he did catch the train he would not avoid his boss's anger as the office assistant would have been there to see the five o'clock train go, he would have put his report about Gregor's not being there a long time ago. The office assistant was the boss's man, spineless, and with no understanding. What about if he reported sick? But that would be extremely strained and suspicious as in fifteen years of service Gregor had never once yet been ill. His boss would certainly come round with the doctor from the medical insurance company, accuse his parents of having a lazy son, and accept the doctor's recommendation not to make any claim as the doctor believes that no-one was ever ill but that many were work-shy. (Kafka, 1915/1996)*

The chief clerk, through the door, warns Gregor of the consequences of missing work. In addition, he reminds him that “if we people in commerce ever become slightly unwell then, fortunately, or unfortunately as you like, we simply have to overcome it because of business consideration” (Kafka, 1915/1996). After so much of struggle, at the end of the story, when Gregor dies, his family feels a great sense of relief. Gregor represents the life of working-class people who are caught in a maze of the modern economic system from where there is no escape.

Gregor Samsa's transformation can be seen as a metaphor for the struggles of the working class. His metamorphosis into a vermin represents the dehumanizing effects of modern capitalism. Gregor's condition reflects the alienation workers feel when their humanity is overshadowed by their economic roles. This is evident in the cold response from his employer and family, which underscores the prioritization of economic functionality over individual well-being. As Kafka portrays, Gregor's deteriorating state represents the exhaustion and invisibility that often result from labor exploitation, ultimately leading to his demise, which reflects society's disregard for those who can no longer contribute productively (Sharif & Parveen, 2024; Weiss, 1995).

In exploring these themes, Sharif and Parveen (2024) analyze how Gregor's metamorphosis is symbolic of alienation, focusing on the psychological and social isolation workers face in a system that prioritizes profit over people. Similarly, other research explores the existential and economic dimensions of Gregor's plight, portraying him as trapped in an “economic maze”—an apt reflection of the working class's struggle to navigate societal expectations amid oppressive work conditions (Weiss, 1995)

Transitioning to a broader global perspective, the juxtaposition of Kafka's narrative with real-world economic statistics highlights the paradoxical coexistence of immense resources and pervasive poverty.

#### 4. Findings and Analysis

Despite their internal contradictions and implementation challenges, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) represent an unprecedented global consensus on the need for coordinated, multidimensional development. Their integrative structure, spanning economic, social, and environmental pillars, reflects a holistic approach rarely achieved in previous global frameworks. The universality of the SDGs, applying to all countries regardless of income level, has broadened accountability and inspired local, national, and transnational initiatives. Furthermore, the inclusive consultation process that informed their design helped mainstream development concerns such as gender equality, climate resilience, and global partnership into policy agendas worldwide. These strengths underscore the SDGs' potential as a platform for transformative change, even as this study critiques the philosophical and structural limitations that may hinder their full realization.

The textual analysis of SDGs 1, 8, 9, 10, 13, and 17 reveals foundational contradictions in both philosophical vision and practical alignment. These findings are summarized in the table below:

**Table 1:** Contradictions Between Stated Aims and Practical Implications of Selected SDGs

SDG Goal	Stated Aim	Observed Contradiction
SDG 1: No Poverty	End poverty in all forms	Promotes economic growth without addressing systemic wealth concentration
SDG 8: Decent Work & Growth	Promote inclusive and sustainable economic growth	Encourages labor conditions that may reinforce alienation and inequality
SDG 9: Industrialization	Build sustainable industrial infrastructure	Relies on traditional growth models that worsen climate risks
SDG 10: Reduce Inequality	Reduce income and wealth inequality	Fails to address top 1% wealth concentration; focuses narrowly on bottom 40%
SDG 13: Climate Action	Combat climate change	Undermined by growth-centric policies in SDG 8 and 9
SDG 17: Partnerships	Strengthen global cooperation	Promotes WTO trade models favoring powerful nations

These findings point to a structural misalignment within the SDG framework, where some goals undermine the progress of others.

## 4.1 Interpretive Commentary

Drawing on Kafka's *The Trial* and *The Metamorphosis*, these contradictions reveal a Kafkaesque development system where bureaucratic logic and economic orthodoxy overshadow ethical imperatives. Like Kafka's characters trapped in senseless systems, developing nations are ensnared in global mechanisms that demand compliance but rarely deliver justice. The existential despair depicted in Kafka resonates with countries grappling with conflicting mandates to grow economically while safeguarding planetary and human well-being.

Further, Foucault's theory of biopolitics helps us interpret how global governance frameworks like the SDGs regulate life through knowledge-power mechanisms (Foucault, 1978). By prioritizing metrics like GDP growth and trade liberalization, the SDGs exercise a form of *governmentality* that disciplines both states and populations to conform to a narrow developmental logic (Foucault, 1991).

Habermas's concept of *communicative rationality* serves as a counterpoint. The SDGs lack robust public deliberation and fail to build inclusive consensus among the marginalized. Without a dialogic and participatory foundation, the SDG framework risks replicating top-down decision-making that reinforces existing hierarchies (Habermas, 1984).

## 4.2 Unpacking the Contradictions: A Critical Analysis of Selected SDGs

### 4.2.1 The SDGs' Approach to Extreme Inequalities

UN High Commissioner Zeid refers to three types of inequalities that the global community must address to achieve sustainable development. The first kind is 'horizontal inequalities' which refers to inequalities between social, ethnic, linguistics or other population groups. "These inequalities are often the result of discrimination and historical disadvantages" (MacNaughton, 1919). The second kind is 'vertical inequalities', which refers to inequalities of wealth, income, and social outcomes. The third kind of inequalities is 'global inequalities' between countries. SDGs promise to address all three kinds of inequalities but to extend they are effective.

The total global income is estimated at approximately \$100 trillion annually. According to a recent report from the United Nations (2022), the world population currently stands at 7.97 billion, resulting in an average income of around \$12,547 per person per year. This shows that we have enough resources to end poverty, provide healthy living, create sustainable energy, and protect the environment. However, it is alarming to note that more than a third of the global population lives on less than \$2 per day (Ruth, 2022). Additionally, one in nine individuals goes to bed hungry each night. Prominent economist Jeffrey Sachs argues that if 1,645 affluent individuals, collectively worth \$6.4 trillion, were to take decisive action, poverty could be effectively eradicated. Nonetheless, inequality continues to be a major challenge in our current economic system, arguably representing one of the most significant issues of our time.



Target 10.1 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) addresses economic inequalities and poverty reduction by aiming to "progressively achieve and sustain income growth of the bottom 40 percent of the population at a rate higher than the national average" by 2030 (United Nations, 2022). While this target emphasizes the importance of elevating the income of the lowest earners, it fails to address the widening gap between the bottom 40 percent and the top 1 percent. Currently, the top 1 percent of the population possesses approximately half of the world's wealth, showing a troubling difference.

The SDGs do not adequately confront the systemic processes that contribute to the rising inequality between rich and poor. By focusing exclusively on the income growth of the bottom 40 percent, the SDGs inadvertently allow existing inequalities to either persist or worsen. Instead of emphasizing the equitable distribution and effective utilization of wealth, the SDGs propose economic growth as the primary solution to poverty.

Moreover, the relationship between economic growth and poverty alleviation is both tenuous and uncertain. While global GDP has increased by 271 percent since 1990, the number of individuals living on less than \$5 per day has surged by over 370 million (Hinkel, 2022). Presently, the poorest 60 percent of the global population receives a mere 5 percent of all new income generated by global economic growth, signifying that 95 percent of this income accumulates within the top 40 percent (Hinkel, 2022). According to a World Bank report from 2014, the gross national income (GNI) per capita was \$1,571 in low-income countries, \$6,002 in lower-middle-income countries, \$14,225 in upper-middle-income countries, and \$40,732 in high-income countries. This data reveals that, as of 2014, the per capita income in low-income countries was 26 times lower than that of high-income countries.

Consequently, within the current economic framework, growth is likely to make the gap between rich and poor worse. To achieve the SDGs fully, it has been suggested that the global economy would need to expand by a factor of 175 times its present size. Such an unprecedented level of growth could have catastrophic implications for climate change and environmental sustainability.

#### **4.2.2 The SDGs' Lack of Proactive Preparedness for Global Crises**

The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are a global initiative aimed at achieving sustainable development in economic, social, and environmental dimensions in a balanced and integrated manner. However, these goals lacked the necessary preparedness to cope with unexpected crises, a critical deficiency that has been markedly evident in recent years.

The COVID-19 pandemic precipitated an unanticipated global economic and financial downturn that had severe consequences on the global pursuit of sustainable development. Even before the pandemic, progress toward achieving the SDGs was alarmingly insufficient (Pradhan *et al.*, 2017). The pandemic further exposed the vulnerabilities and weaknesses of the SDG framework, particularly in



developing countries where the economic crisis reached an unprecedented scale (Barbier & Burgess, 2020). A significant portion of the global population was pushed below the poverty line as a result of the economic fallout (Ju, 2020). Moreover, the widespread economic disruption affected employment, business operations, and livelihoods, exacerbating inequality (Djankov & Panizza, 2020).

In addition to economic repercussions, the pandemic triggered a rapid transformation in the education sector, which was forced to adopt digitalized learning methods (Mhlanga & Moloi, 2020). According to UNESCO (2020), over 1.2 billion learners in more than 170 countries experienced disruptions to their education during the global lockdowns. This sudden shift further highlighted the limited preparedness of the SDGs to address the unexpected crisis in critical sectors such as education.

From an environmental perspective, the pandemic also revealed shortcomings in the SDGs' commitment to environmental sustainability. The sudden halt in industrial activities and limited human mobility during lockdowns led to temporary improvements in environmental conditions, such as reduced carbon emissions and enhanced air quality (Drăgan, 2020). These short-term environmental gains underscored how rapidly improvements can occur when proactive measures are taken, exposing the lack of sufficient focus on environmental sustainability in the SDG agenda.

The ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine and the tension between Iran-Israel have further compounded global challenges, coming at a time when the world is still reeling from the destabilizing effects of the pandemic. The United Nations Secretary-General referred to the war as a "horror unfolding before our eyes." The war has led to severe economic regression, a decline in productivity, increasing inequalities, and rising environmental concerns. With fuel and food prices skyrocketing, vulnerable populations, particularly in low-income countries, have been disproportionately affected. The combination of these crises threatens to derail global development efforts and push the 2030 SDG targets even further out of reach.

The overarching challenge for the SDGs lies in their failure to account for unanticipated crises and their lack of a comprehensive approach to achieving sustainable development. While the SDGs were designed to promote progress across various dimensions, the absence of a preparedness strategy has hindered their effectiveness in the face of global disruptions such as pandemics and geopolitical conflicts. Going forward, the SDG framework must incorporate resilience and adaptability to unforeseen crises to ensure that development goals are not only attainable but also sustainable in the long run.

#### **4.2.3 A Kafkaesque Critique of Economic Growth and Global Inequality**

In Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, Gregor Samsa awakens one morning to find himself transformed into a giant insect. However, rather than questioning the cause of his metamorphosis, Gregor remains preoccupied with his job and the financial well-being of his family, as the modern growth-based economy has conditioned him

to comply with the system, unable to think beyond his economic obligations. Similarly, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) and SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure), focus on financial growth without addressing the underlying causes of the world's current transformation. By promoting the traditional model of industrial growth, the SDGs perpetuate the very systems responsible for environmental degradation and climate change, rather than critically rethinking the global economic structure (United Nations, 2015).

Kafka's novel *The Trial* presents a parallel critique of the justice system, wherein Josef K., a bank employee, is arrested without explanation and subjected to an opaque and humiliating judicial process. His arrest and prosecution are overseen by individuals connected to his workplace, underscoring the entanglement of the legal and economic systems. Despite knowing his innocence, Josef K. must endure a dehumanizing and bewildering experience, culminating in his execution at the hands of two executioners. Kafka's portrayal of a legal system that fails to serve justice mirrors the modern economic and legal systems, which often perpetuate inequality and injustice, a phenomenon so characteristic of Kafka's work that it has been termed "Kafkaesque" (Kafka, 1925/1998).

The SDGs' approach to addressing global inequality is similarly ambiguous and, in some instances, counterproductive. SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals), specifically Target 17.10, promotes a "universal, rule-based, open, non-discriminatory and equitable multilateral trading system under the World Trade Organization (WTO)" (United Nations, 2015). However, this target effectively advocates for greater trade liberalization and increased power for the WTO, an institution that has historically favored developed nations. The SDGs fail to acknowledge the exploitative nature of certain trade policies and agreements, which have placed producers in poor and underdeveloped countries in direct competition with well-established European industries that have benefitted from decades of investment and infrastructure (Hilary, 2019).

Trade liberalization policies championed by the WTO, and enshrined in SDG 17, may exacerbate existing inequalities rather than resolve them. By pushing for the opening of markets in developing countries to European goods, such policies can disadvantage local producers, trapping many of the world's poorest nations in cycles of poverty. The SDGs' emphasis on free trade under Target 17.10 creates opportunities for unfair trade deals, widening the gap between rich and poor nations, and undermining the goal of reducing global inequality (Hilary, 2019).

The SDGs' focus on economic growth and trade liberalization without addressing the structural injustices inherent in the global economic system risks perpetuating a "Kafkaesque" world where justice and fairness remain elusive. Just as Gregor Samsa and Josef K. were trapped in systems that denied them autonomy and justice, so too may developing nations find themselves caught in a global economic framework that fails to deliver sustainable and equitable development.

#### 4.2.4 Human Rights, SDGs, and Economic Growth

Goal 8 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) promotes “sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all” (United Nations, 2015, p. 16). However, in a business model that mainly focuses on economic growth above all else, the protection of workers’ rights remains ambiguous. A significant number of workers are alienated within the industrial economic system, producing goods not for self-consumption but for wages and the profit of their employers. This feeling of alienation grows stronger with the sense of being powerless, lost, and disconnected from their work, resulting from their inability to find fulfillment in their work. The inequalities and divisions of labor perpetuated by industrialization significantly contribute to the alienation of billions of workers (Marx, 1844).

In a system that puts economic growth first, even before basic human rights, SDG 8 encounters inherent conceptual challenges. The SDGs seem to combine a business-driven approach with one that aims to protect people’s rights, thereby making the realization of Goal 8 contingent upon economic growth. As a result, millions of factory workers are still stuck in the same tough conditions that have historically marginalized their rights and well-being.

The implementation of SDG 8, which promises “decent work for all” through “sustainable economic growth,” reminds us of how Kafka wrote about power and the sense of being cut off from any real connection in today’s economic world. The SDGs fail to offer significant solutions to the billions of workers laboring tirelessly while enduring profound alienation as they contribute to the global economy (Kafka, 1915/1999).

Furthermore, Target 1.1 states the objective to “eradicate extreme poverty for all people everywhere, currently measured as people living on less than \$1.25 a day” (United Nations, 2015, p. 12). However, a growing body of literature contends that this threshold is inadequate for human sustenance (Hickel, 2020). While some scholars argue that the international poverty line should be raised to \$1.90 per day, others advocate for an increase to \$5.00 per day. If the poverty line were adjusted to \$5.00, approximately 4.3 billion individuals would fall below it, thereby necessitating a reconsideration of the SDGs’ overarching proposal to eradicate poverty.

Kafka’s narratives vividly illustrate a world characterized by uneven power dynamics, class divisions, and economic inequalities. In many ways, the SDGs reinforce the same inequities that Kafka critiqued in his writings over a century ago. Rather than addressing the systemic issues that contribute to societal division, tyranny, and injustice, the SDGs seem to perpetuate a model of growth that pushes the planet and its inhabitants to their physical limits.

#### 4.2.5 Climate Change and the SDGs

Target 9.2 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) emphasizes the necessity to “promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and, by 2030, significantly raise industry’s share of employment and gross domestic product” (United Nations, 2015, p. 17). This target heavily relies on traditional models of economic growth through industrialization, ignoring the past and future consequences of constant industrial growth. Empirical evidence indicates that the pursuit of perpetual industrial growth exacerbates climate change, driving it toward catastrophic levels (Hale & Roger, 2014). Consequently, this target presents a stark contrast to Goal 13, which advocates for “urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts” (United Nations, 2015, p. 20).

A critical examination of Goal 13 reveals a significant oversight in the SDGs: they fail to address the alarming realities surrounding climate change. The SDGs treat the increase in global temperatures and climate change as commonplace events, without exploring the underlying causes or the rapid transformations that have occurred over the past 50 years. This oversight includes the critical role of fossil fuel combustion in producing billions of tons of CO<sub>2</sub> annually, which is a principal driver of global warming and climate change (IPCC, 2021).

Scientific consensus suggests that unless we initiate rapid and substantial reductions in greenhouse gas emissions, global warming will surpass critical thresholds, leading to consequences that could become unacceptable and ultimately disastrous for numerous populations and nations worldwide (IPCC, 2021). The anticipated outcomes include prolonged droughts and intensified heatwaves, which may disrupt global food supply chains. The mechanisms by which the SDGs reconcile the objectives of Target 9.2 and Goal 13 remain unclear and warrant further scrutiny.

#### 4.2.6 Transitioning from MDGs to SDGs

According to a United Nations report, “the Goals and targets are the results of over two years of intensive public consultation and engagement with civil society and other stakeholders around the world, which paid particular attention to the voices of the poorest and most vulnerable” (United Nations, 2015, p. 3). Negotiations for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) began in 2012, set to replace the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) when they ended in 2015. This transition prompts important questions about how effective the MDGs were, particularly in their final three years and adds layers of bureaucratic complexity in assessing their achievements and limitations (Bourguignon *et al.*, 2018).

Moreover, It remains unclear to what extent the UN truly prioritized input from the most disadvantaged throughout the consultation phase of developing the new goals. This lack of clarity raises concerns that the intended inclusivity of the SDG design process may not have been fully achieved, leaving open questions about whether the goals genuinely reflect the priorities of those most affected by poverty and inequality (Alkire, 2016).

## 5. Conclusions

The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) represent an ambitious vision for global development, yet they face significant structural and philosophical challenges that limit their effectiveness. Rather than dismissing the SDGs as fundamentally compromised, this study suggests that their transformative potential is constrained by internal contradictions, most notably the tension between economic growth and social equity, and between industrial development and environmental sustainability.

The goals related to economic expansion (SDGs 8 and 9) often undermine objectives such as reducing inequality (SDG 10) and combating climate change (SDG 13). Similarly, SDG 17's endorsement of liberalized global trade through institutions like the WTO may inadvertently reinforce existing global inequities. The poverty thresholds established by SDG 1 also warrant re-examination, as they often fail to reflect the real cost of living and human dignity in many contexts.

Drawing on Kafka's depiction of individuals trapped in opaque and dehumanizing systems, this paper argues that the SDG framework sometimes mirrors such bureaucratic inertia, designed to be inclusive and responsive, yet often alienating and rigid in practice. This critique is further enriched through the insights of Foucault and Habermas, who underscore the importance of governance structures that are both reflective and participatory.

To move toward a more just and sustainable framework, the SDGs must be reimagined along several dimensions:

- a) Redefine growth by emphasizing well-being, ecological sustainability, and labor dignity over GDP-focused metrics.
- b) Reform global trade norms to ensure fairer representation of developing economies in institutions like the WTO.
- c) Adopt multidimensional poverty measures that account for human development, not just income.
- d) Integrate participatory governance to ensure the voices of marginalized communities are embedded in SDG planning and monitoring.
- e) Align industrial and climate strategies by embedding carbon accountability and transition policies into SDG 9.

With these reforms, the SDG agenda could become more resilient and responsive to contemporary crises. The challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, climate disruption, and geopolitical conflict underscore the urgency of a developmental paradigm that prioritizes equity, adaptability, and ethical coherence. A more self-reflexive and philosophically grounded SDG framework, one that avoids the Kafkaesque traps of bureaucracy and systemic detachment, can bring us closer to achieving meaningful global sustainability.

## Acknowledgement

The author would like to express sincere thanks to Dr. Bijoy Lal Basu for his valuable support in shaping the structure of this paper and for recommending a suitable journal for submission. The author is also grateful to Prof Dr Abdur Rab, whose initiative in organizing an international conference on Sustainable Development Goals at IUBAT in 2018 served as a key source of inspiration for pursuing this line of research.

## Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest related to the publication of this article. All ethical standards, including those concerning plagiarism, data falsification, and duplicate submission or publication, have been fully observed.

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