

A Law to Save the World?

Sustainable development – in its 2015 UN General Assembly “Agenda 2030” instantiation – seeks to halt climate change, create sustainable patterns of production and consumption, stop the decrease of biodiversity, to end poverty, and more. It is seen as an effective method for mobilisation around a set of global social priorities but has also been criticized for being a futile attempt to save the world without transforming it. More specifically, it has been suggested that there is a lack in both analysis and remedy in relation to how the structural roots of poverty, unsustainability and multidimensional violence are historically grounded in state power, corporate monopolies, neo-colonialism, and patriarchal institutions.¹

This course offers critical analysis of the sustainable development goals and the discourses and interests they serve.² Material from a range of disciplines - history, politics, economics, and law is used for a better understanding of where Agenda 2030 is coming from and where the world it brings into being might be heading. The course focuses in particular on the relationship between sustainable development and our existing global legal order.

The course brings all three spheres of sustainable development - the economy, the environment and the social into focus. For each area, three different sets of questions are discussed.

1. *Viability or futility of Incremental change*: identifies 1) what the sustainable development agenda for each sphere is and the presuppositions on which it is based 2) what the expectations are from existing international law and institutions and 3) the structural ability or inability of those existing laws and institutions to meet the goals set.
2. *Harmony between or conflicting goals*: Sustainable development is often said to imply a holistic approach to global problems, but the different goals exist in tension, even conflict with each other, a problem arguably linked to deriving the goals and targets from existing inter-state agreement. For each sphere, conflict between goals and international legal regimes are analyzed.
3. *Alternative futures*: In this part we look at past and present critiques of incremental change and the fragmentation of economic, environmental and social spheres, with a view to alternative ideas for saving our world.

¹ Ashish Kothari, Ariel Salleh, Arturo Escobar, Federico Demaria and Alberto Acosta, 2019, *Pluriverse: A Post-Development Dictionary*, Tulika Books p. xxvi.

² A 2018 report written for FORMAS (A Swedish research council for sustainable development) refers to previous research that sees three different roles for scholarship in relation to sustainable development: 1) characterizing and diagnosing problems in relation to sustainable development 2) technical, social, economic and normative innovation and 3) contributing to dialogue around sustainable development and coordination between different actors and stakeholders. To these three, the reports adds a fourth: critical analysis of the sustainable development goals and the discourses and interests they serve.

After an introduction to the general framework of analysis in the course the three areas follow in sequence: the economy, the environment and “the social” (focusing in particular on migration).

Teaching is in the form of 2-3 intensive reading workshops for each of the three focus areas. To the substantive questions at offer for each seminar is added a methodological reflection, based on the readings. It can be, for example a specific approach to policy analysis or more general questions such as the role of history for understanding global relationships of power.

The course ends with two concluding wrap-up sessions.

Workshops are led by researchers from e.g. the Faculty of Law, the Political Science department and the Raoul Wallenberg Institute (RWI)/Harvard Law School Institute for Global Law and Policy (IGLP).

The course is examined through active participation in workshops and will run second half of Autumn 2020 at half speed.