

An Open Letter to the United Nations

On the need to address income inequality and endless material growth

As the UN and the world's governments ratify the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) today (September 25), we must be clear that they do not represent the best interests of the world's majority – those that are currently exploited and oppressed within the current economic and political order.

The SDGs claim they can eradicate poverty in all its forms by 2030. But they rely primarily on global economic growth to achieve this tremendous task. If such growth resembles that seen in recent decades, it will take 100 years for poverty to disappear, not the 15 years the SDGs promise. And even if this were possible in a shorter timescale, we would need to increase the size of the global economy by a factor of 12, which, in addition to making our planet uninhabitable, will obliterate any gains against poverty.

Rather than paper over such obvious madness with false hopes, we must address two critical issues head on: income inequality and endless material growth.

If poverty is to be truly overcome by 2030, then much of the improvement in the position of the impoverished must come through reduction in the enormous inequality that has accumulated in the last 200 plus years. The richest 1 percent of humanity will very soon own over half of the world's private wealth. It would take only modest reductions in inequality to deliver large increases in the socio-economic position of the poorer half of humanity.

The SDGs do talk about reducing inequality. However, their prescription is technocratic, obscure and wholly incommensurate to the task at hand. For example, Target 10.1 states that by 2030 they will “progressively achieve and sustain income growth of the bottom 40 per cent of the population at a rate higher than the national average.” It is hard to imagine a less robust or ambitious goal. This commitment allows inequality to grow without limit until 2029, so long as it then begins to be reduced. The SDGs thus fail to endorse the only means that can achieve their stated goal of ending poverty: substantial inequality reduction, starting now. In effect, they perpetuate severe poverty and leave this fundamental problem to future generations.

The other essential task is for the world's nations to adopt a saner measure of human progress; one that gears us not towards endless GDP growth based on extraction and consumption, but towards the wellbeing of humanity and our planet as a whole. There are plenty of options to choose from, all of which have been ignored in the SDGs. Instead, Target 17.19 says only that they will, “by 2030, build on existing initiatives to develop measurements of progress on sustainable development that complement GDP”. Another urgent challenge passed down to the next generation.

It is possible to overcome poverty in a way that respects the Earth and helps tackle climate change. The planet is abundant in wealth and its people infinitely resourceful. In order to do so, however, we must be prepared to challenge the logic of endless growth, greed and destruction enshrined in neoliberal capitalism.

It is time to envision a new operating system, based on social justice and symbiosis with the natural world. As currently formulated, the SDGs merely distract us from addressing the challenges we face.

September 2015

Signed by over 2,000 people including **Naomi Klein**, Canadian award-winning author, journalist and activist.

The 2016 Sydney Peace Prize

Naomi Klein will be awarded 2016 Sydney Peace Prize on Friday 11 November at 6.30pm in Sydney Town Hall. Following the award ceremony, Naomi will present the City of Sydney Peace Prize Lecture.

Sydney Peace Prize Jury's Citation

“Naomi Klein: For exposing the structural causes and responsibility for the climate crisis, for inspiring us to stand up locally, nationally and internationally to demand a new agenda for sharing the planet that respects human rights and equality, and for reminding us of the power of authentic democracy to achieve transformative change and justice.”

Sydney Peace Foundation on Peace with Justice

“We advocate for peace with justice - recognising that to achieve true and lasting peace, we must, beyond ending war and violent conflict, address deep injustices and structural inequality.”