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SDG Localisation and Decentralised Development Aid:

Exploring Opposing Discourses and Practices in Valencia's Aid Sector

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Sergio Belda-Miquel; Alejandra Boni and Carola Calabuig

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Abstract

The approval of the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) has generated intense debates in the aid sector at the global, national and subnational levels. A key question in these debates is whether these measures can address structural problems in development aid policies and practices, such as the lack of accountability and coherence, unequal power relations, or depoliticisation. It seems that this will depend on how the agenda is adopted in the various territories as well as on the different interests at play.

We will address this question by studying the case of the Valencian Autonomous region. This is the region in Spain where institutions have been the most active in establishing the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs at the core of the political discourses and priorities.

We follow a qualitative methodology based on semi-structured interviews with key respondents from the public, civil society and university sectors, participant observation, and the analysis of secondary information. Inspired by critical discourse analysis, we explore the varying and conflicting discourses regarding the potential of SDGs to address the problems that aid policies and practices have, and on the impacts that the adoption of SDGs are producing. We illustrate that the introduction of SDGs in aid policies is a conflictive process modelled by the power dynamics at play.

Keywords: Agenda 2030; SDGs; localisation; international cooperation; development policies; critical discourse analysis.

1. The implementation of SDGs

In September 2015, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) were approved at the headquarters of the United Nations in New York as part of the UN 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development (UN, 2015). These goals were designed for the following 15 years and, since their approval, represent the benchmark for global development until 2030 (Gómez, 2017). Various governments all around the world are using them to set up policy priorities in areas not limited to development (UN, 2015).

In a number of aspects, the Agenda has been recognised to have a transformative potential. Undoubtedly, the 2030 Agenda goes further than its political predecessor, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), and has succeeded in combining the goals of economic and/or social development with those of the environment. Martinez (2017) stresses this combination of the social and the environmental as the pillar of the transformative potential of the Agenda.

Moreover, the Agenda is conceptualised as universal, in the sense of being applicable to all countries. This implies that the decades-old dichotomy of “developed” versus “underdeveloped” or “developing” countries is cast aside (Koheler, 2016: 149). In terms of process, the negotiations for the Agenda were inclusive and constructive, compared to the formulation in all preceding development over the past decades, and in contrast to the evolution of the MDGs (Pogge and Sengupta, 2017; Deacon, 2016; Boni, 2016). Agenda 2030 also formally refers to structural issues, which were absent from the MDGs; it calls for structural transformations and for the removal of the structural challenges hindering the implementation of the agenda. For some experts, the Agenda can boost the processes of social accountability between the State and citizen groups (Cimadamore, 2016). Finally, other experts have recognised the transformative potential in the Agenda due to its recognition of the key importance of creating new quality

partnerships and committing various stakeholders, both public and private, in order to achieve the SDGs (Ruggie, 2004).

In summary, for enthusiastic advocates, the SDGs can provide a solution to long-standing debates on problems in development aid policies and practices: they can create coherence by connecting aid policies and other donors' policies; they can give a central focus to issues of quality partnerships, equal relations and accountability; and they can grasp new clear global and local commitments and efforts for sustainable development.

However, various studies warn of important shortcomings in this potential. As has been the case with other approaches and agendas (authors, 2016), the SDGs do not overcome the depoliticisation of aid discourses and policies as they still frame development problems as technical, managerial and measurable problems. For example, issues of power and key political issues such as redistribution are totally absent from the Agenda (Spangenberg, 2017). Despite the references to structural issues, the new global agenda has been criticised for reproducing the status quo and for not addressing the causes of impoverishment created by the existing dominant capitalist and developmentalist model.

From a rights-based analysis, the agenda is still framed in terms of goals to be achieved, and not in terms of rights to be fulfilled, as a number of social organisations demanded during the negotiations. Pogge and Sengupta (2017) showed that these goals are shielding the world's most powerful agents from any concrete responsibility to achieve the new goals, when, given their wealth and influence, they ought to be taking the lead in providing the resources required for sustainable development and to implement systemic institutional reforms that address the root causes of poverty. Furthermore, Koheler (2016) stresses the silence of the Agenda with regard to power

relations, in the sense of the monopolistic economic predominance of large firms and large nations.

Conversely, there is a fundamental debate about the centrality they give to measurable goals and indicators of SDGs, in the same way as the preceding MDGs did. In a previous study on the MDGs, Fukuda Parr, Ely and Greenstein (2015) reveal the consequences of the simplification that frames development as a process of delivering measurable outcomes: diverting attention from important objectives and challenges; neglecting the need for social change and the strengthening of national institutions; framing the concept of development as a set of basic needs outcomes, rather than as a process of transformative change in economic, social and political structures.

In any case, in “developed” countries, the new global agenda calls for changes both in international development policies—that is, policies affecting aid to recipient countries—and in local policies in their own territory (Koheler, 2016). How connections between these policies are being created or may be created thus emerges as an interesting issue.

In this article, we address the impact of SDGs in the aid policies of the Valencian region (Spain). We focus on the perspectives on different stakeholders on how the adoption of SDGs has affected Valencian international aid policies (that is, policies affecting recipient countries), in relation to key problems of the Valencian aid system identified by local stakeholders and the literature, which echoes the problems referred to above: evaluation, learning and accountability, partnerships and governance of the system, coherence, and the political and social relevance of aid.

It is outside the main focus of the paper to address in depth how SDGs are affecting regional and local policies of the Valencian government in its own territory. However, we will consider how the fact that SDGs involve local policies and that now,

through the adoption of SDGs, Valencia aid policy-makers can influence local policies, is having a strong impact on aid policies.

From this standpoint, we pose some specific questions: What perspectives on the potential of SDGs to solve Valencian aid problems are held by the various actors in the aid sector? How do they consider the present and future effects of the adoption of SDGs in the design and implementation of development aid policies? Addressing these questions will allow us to discuss in more detail whether SDGs can have a certain transformative potential to address aid problems.

Drawing on a critical perspective on policy-making and development, we consider that, in order to understand these discourses and perspectives, it is necessary to understand the relations, the conflicting interests, and the visible, invisible, and hidden power dynamics at play (Gaventa, 2006).

As we will see in more depth, the Spanish aid system is partially decentralised, and regional and local governments, as well as the University, have full autonomy to develop their own aid policies with their own budgets. Thus, they can have their own projects and programmes, partnerships, subsidies and calls for projects to social organisations, etc. This is called “decentralised aid” (Gómez Gil, 2008). Despite the fact that the 2030 Agenda positions States as the main actors for its implementation, the case of Valencia is especially interesting. It is undoubtedly the region in Spain where the adoption of the SDGs has greatest political relevance and has progressed at the fastest rate, also in comparison with the activity of the State and of centralised aid (Gómez 2017). In addition, the regional level is usually absent from the analysis of the effects of global agreements even though, as we will present here, it is a terrain of dispute and conflict between various public and private agents.

In short, the article aims to offer empirical evidence, which is still very limited, on the debates about the potentialities and pitfalls of the implementation of the SDGs for international aid, from a broad critical perspective.

The structure of the text is as follows: Section 2 details the methodology used in the paper; Section 3 describes the case study; and Section 4 presents the results of the analysis, structured in relation to the key ideas in the discourse of the actors and its implications for the policies, practices and relationships in the aid sector of the Valencian Community.

2. Methodology: critical discourse analysis

The paper proposes a comprehensive study focused on a critical epistemological approach (Lincoln et al., 2011), which perceives the social reality embedded in power relations. Based on this principle, we explore the object of study from an approach that focuses on the diversity and conflict when attempting to understand the various discourses, their creation, and their associated practices.

We adopt a methodological strategy inspired by critical discourse analysis. Based on the insights of this perspective, discourses are not only modelled by social processes and political relations, but also model these processes and relations (Fairclough and Wodak, 1997). From this point of view, approaching the discourse implies understanding the text (that is, the spoken or written language), the discursive practice (the processes that give rise to the discourse), and the social practice of which the discourse is part (Fairclough, 1992). It is also crucial to understand the different scales and levels (from the local to the global) that are at play when a discourse is generated, appropriated and recontextualised (Fairclough, 2001). Critical discourse analysis allows social change to be understood on multiple levels, highlighting the

tensions between dominant and alternative discourses and addressing power relations (Marston, 2004).

Inspired by this perspective, this paper addresses how global discourses on SDGs are recontextualised in a given territory. To this end, we analyse and associate the content of the various discourses involving the SDGs: the processes in which they are produced, negotiated and enter into relationship or conflict; and the social practices in the field of development aid modelled by and modelling these discourses.

The information for the analysis regarding the development aid sector was obtained through primary and secondary methods. By “aid sector” we refer to the people and organisations that have a role in aid policies and practices, that is, in the various programmes, projects and other interventions of Valencian stakeholders in recipient countries—the countries considered by Valencian government as those who can receive aid to improve the living conditions of their citizens—which are those recognised as developing countries by the Development Assistance Committee of the OECD.

As a primary method, we interviewed key actors from the Valencian aid sector, carried out with a purposive sample of individuals: two high-level policy-makers from the DG and one from the Valencia City Council department for international aid; two key members of the Valencian non-governmental development organisations (NGOs) Coordinating Committee (CVONGD, the leading network in the sector); two members from leading NGOs in the Valencian Community; one independent development consultant; one university expert; one university vice-chancellor who has expertise in university aid policies and programmes; two directors of the university departments in charge of aid policies and programmes; one academic director of an MSc in development aid. In addition, participant observation was also undertaken, consisting of

attending, between September 2015 and February 2018, key events in the discussion of the SDGs and the aid policy in the Valencian Community. These included the Strategic Conference of the Valencian Aid (2015); the *Ágora* Forum of the City Council of Valencia (2017); and the Participatory Workshop for the development of a methodology for the implementation of the SDGs at the local level (2018).

Among the secondary sources, we consulted various programme documents from the Valencian government, as well as the web pages and strategic documents of the interviewed actors and others that were considered to be fundamental.

3. The case study: Valencian development aid

3.1. Decentralised aid in Spain and Valencian aid

Spanish development aid has historically been partially decentralised, channelled through sub-national actors and Universities, the so-called “decentralised aid” (Gómez Gil, 2008). Over the years, these entities have channelled around 12% of the total volume of official Spanish development aid. Of this, around 8% has been channelled through the autonomous communities, the regional entities that make up the State (PACI, 2016).

Each community has a framework of its own policies, instruments and budget, although they all share common characteristics, such as channelling most of the aid, around 66%, indirectly through NGOs, focusing on the provision of basic social services and infrastructure, and on strengthening the local social fabric in the recipient countries. It has been recognised that decentralised aid is often closely connected with the associative network in the territory of the donor, closer to the citizens, featuring a more horizontal relationship with the recipients, and more engaged with other local

public policies. However, this aid has also been frequently fragmented, erratic and with lack of capacities (Gómez Gil, 2008).

Although the panorama varies greatly between autonomous communities, decentralised aid has generally suffered a severe reduction in resources, in addition to a crisis about its own identity and orientation (authors, 2014).

Regarding the Valencian case, we can identify several stakeholders shaping the aid sector: The Directorate-General for Aid (DG) is the institution in charge of regional international development aid. It is part of the Conselleria (Valencian Government Department) of Transparency, Social Responsibility, Participation and Aid. Aid policies are not given much importance in regional government policies. The policy-makers in charge, along with the whole aid sector, have continuously called for more visibility and political importance to be given to Valencian aid.

NGOs play a very central role in the sector. They channel most of the Valencian aid and have always been a key partner of the DG. NGOs are mostly highly dependent on public resources, and to a great extent on those of decentralised aid. For some medium and small sized organisations, the DG is the main donor. It is a sector with highly motivated volunteers and workers, but with very precarious working conditions: short-term contracts, low salaries, and a high workload regarding bureaucratic and managerial tasks. The CVONGD has been the reference for the sector. This network has been able to gather all of the relevant and reputed NGOs, and to gain legitimacy in order to represent the interests of the sector.

Private stakeholders and businesses do not play an important role in the local aid sector. However, some key entities in Valencian social life, such as the Catholic Church and some labour unions, have their own NGOs.

Beyond the specific interests of stakeholders, they all seem to agree, together with academics, that there are a number of key problems in the system that have not been solved in the past years. These problems also echo the debates on the problems of aid policies and the role of SDGs we referred to in the first section. We mention the following four issues highlighted by interviewees and academics, which will guide the discussions in the next section.

In first place, most stakeholders consider the severe problems of Valencian aid regarding evaluation and learning. For example, one policy-maker mentions that “we do not really know what happens with development projects” (E2), and one expert states that “evaluation has never been oriented to learning and sharing, but to control” (E5).

In second place, improving partnerships and the governance of the systems has long been a discussion in the Valencian aid sector. NGOs, policy-makers and academics agree that the system requires more participation, more confidence and collaboration between stakeholders, and closer partnerships with local stakeholders in the South.

In third place, they all call for more political priority and more social interest regarding aid. This would imply more resources allocated for international aid, more participation of citizenship in organisations and campaigns, and more demands for accountability. As one local policy-maker states: “it would great if citizens or councillors from different political parties were here at my door asking what I was doing and why!” (E6)

Finally, the issue of coherence in policies is frequently mentioned. That is, the demand that the international and local policies deployed by different administrations have to be oriented to global development and global sustainability.

In Valencia, as in some other regions, there was a change in the political cycle in 2015, both in the regional government and in a number of local governments. This led

to great expectations regarding the solutions of these problems. The new government instigated processes to reorganise the aid system and policies, as we shall see below.

3.2. Valencian aid and the SDGs

A new, progressive government was elected to the Generalitat Valenciana (Valencian Autonomous government and institutions) in 2015, ending a 20-year period of conservative rule in the Valencian Community. The new government made the decision to boost development aid. Furthermore, the 2030 Agenda was an official feature in the pact signed by the 3 parties in the coalition that formed the new Valencian government, containing the general guidelines for the new government programme (the *Pacte del Botànic*).

The DG has embraced the discourse of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs with great intensity. Furthermore, the new Valencian government formally entrusted the Directorate-General to align the government's objectives with those of the 2030 Agenda, thus expanding the competences of the DG beyond aid.

For the Directorate General, “Valencian aid had not yet been reformulated, so the fact that the SDGs could be established as a framework [...] was a great opportunity” (E1). The Valencian development aid programme arose at a time of enormous crisis of resources, not only due to budget cuts, but also during a very serious institutional crisis, due to a corruption scandal by the former government. At the time of writing, in February 2019, there are 20 people awaiting trial, nine of whom have already been convicted in a previous trial.

The DG deployed its action in two directions. On the one hand, to align Valencian aid with the SDGs. The aim of this is to explicitly direct the actions of

Valencian aid towards ensuring that the recipient countries meet their goals in relation to the SDGs.

On the other hand, the DG received the mandate to guide the territorialisation and localisation of the 2030 agenda in the Valencian Community and contribute to the fulfilment of the SDGs in its own territory (Generalitat Valenciana, 2015). This implies informing, creating awareness, and engaging with other agencies in the Generalitat Valenciana, its municipalities, and other local entities. As stated earlier, the focus of this paper is on development aid, but the fact that the DG has, since 2015, had a strong voice in guiding regional policies has strongly affected development aid policies.

Several new strategies, normative developments and tools have been used to reframe aid policies. At the broader level, the DG promoted a new regional Law for Aid and Sustainable Development, which frames the entire change in strategy. This Law combines the alignment of the aid policy with the SDGs with the objectives to “extend and integrate the SDGs into all policies and spheres of action of the Autonomous Government through a comprehensive government approach” (Generalitat Valenciana, 2017a). The Law develops aspects such as the tools for aid policy, the governance (including Councils or spaces for participation), the resources, and the stakeholders (including the recognition of private companies and employers’ organisations as relevant for aid).

As a key approach to of this new policy, the DG has promoted what it calls a “smart partnerships” approach. This means creating new alliances between the DG and other stakeholders, both to change aid policies and to implement SDGs in the Valencian territory. The DG wants to go beyond the relations with NGOs and universities to give more importance to other relations (such as those with municipalities) or to create new ones with labour unions, employers’ organisations and other stakeholders. All of this is

in order to “commit all the stakeholders with the SDGs, both in recipient countries and in Valencia” (policy-maker 1). For example, DG has developed the “Alliance of Cities for Sustainable Development”, which aims to ensure that Valencian town councils commit to the SDGs, which many of the main Valencian cities have adhered to (Generalitat Valenciana, 2017b).

The DG has also introduced changes in specific tools and policies regarding aid. For example, it has introduced a number of changes in its calls for grants and subsidies for NGOs to develop projects and programmes in recipient countries. The DG now requires projects to be reframed in relation with SDGs. Also, the DG has introduced changes in the requirements for the monitoring and evaluation of financed projects: they now ask for baselines and for ex-post external evaluations of every project and require much more detail than in the past.

For the development of these new normative and tools, a whole series of participation spaces and occasions have been created. In addition to the regulatory meetings of the Valencian Aid Council (in which the key actors of the sector participate) to ratify the new instruments and laws, there have been a series of conferences, forums and multi- or bilateral meetings. Almost all the actors interviewed recognise that the attitude of the DG has been one of openness, and that there have been numerous spaces for dialogue. However, some criticise that these have often been purely informative spaces, that there have not been discussions aimed at reaching a consensus, but instead have presented predefined ideas about what they wanted to do in any case, or that the interlocutors have been forced to negotiate on issues that they did not consider to be the most important.

In any case, all of the above has made Valencian aid one of the most active agencies in terms of incorporating the 2030 Agenda in its aid policies, and the DG one

of the most prominent institutions in current debates on the subject in Spain. As in some other domains, the Valencian government has been considered as a “laboratory” of aid policies that may be deployed at national level if a leftist socialist government comes back to power.

At the local level, the situation is substantially different. At this level, it does not seem that there have been major changes in aid policies regarding the SDGs. The degree of interest and knowledge is much lower. Almost all the big cities have joined the Alliance but, according to the statements of the people interviewed for this study, this has not had significant consequences in introducing the SDGs in aid policies (or in other policies). The only aspect mentioned by interviewees is the introduction of minor changes in the calls for subsidies offered to local NGOs by most large municipalities.

As for Valencian public universities, they are aware of the new agenda and are generally incorporating it in their discourse and practices (formal teaching, courses, seminars, research, final Master’s Projects, etc.). Two elements have primarily contributed to this: firstly, the Valencian universities belong to the Conference of Rectors of Spanish Universities—CRUE, in its Spanish acronym, a network of 50 public and 26 private universities—the main interlocutor of Spanish universities with the State government. CRUE has been working to encourage universities to incorporate the mandate entailed by the agenda 2030 in their aid policies and in their own daily practices. Second, the Valencian government financially supports university aid policies and projects through agreements, and universities are required in practice to link their aid actions to the SDGs. Due to this support, at present, various specific calls for aid projects, training and awareness-raising actions aimed at a broad public have emerged.

This institutional landscape, however, features a range of actors that have different perspectives on the SDGs. This process of implementing the SDGs is also taking place with some degree of dispute. These issues will be explored below.

4. Results and discussion: Discourses, processes and practices in the positioning of SDGs in the Valencian Community.

4.1 Discourses on the SDGs

4.1.1 The vision of the Valencian Government: enthusiasm for the SDGs as a solution to the problems of the aid sector.

For the DG, the SDGs offer many positive elements to rethink development aid: they are, above all, a common language or umbrella that all actors can understand; they entail the integration of the three dimensions of development (economic, social and environmental); they represent a global, transformative, and processual vision of development.

The SDGs involve a necessary paradigm shift. For the DG the “new paradigm” entails abandoning the “silos” policy, in which each department makes its policies in isolation; ceasing to use developed countries as a model and thus “putting us all in the same lane” (E2); abandoning the idea of aid as financial assistance channelled from the administration to NGOs, and from NGOs to local partners; going beyond the idea of assistance to the idea of interdependence, association, bilateral relationships and mutual commitment; integrating the aid policy with the policy of other government departments under a common approach; placing multi-stakeholder and multi-level alliances at the core. For all the above, the SDGs and the alignment with the global consensus is an excellent basis for a new, more transformative and integrated policy.

According to one senior official, the SDGs “can generate resistance in those who cling to the old [paradigm] [...] If you are following an outdated paradigm, whose limitations have been demonstrated, you will be left alone” (E2). This “old paradigm” refers to the simplistic charity-based aid policy focused on providing grants to NGOs who support their local partners in the South.

All the above is seen by DG as a solution to overcome the various problems of the aid sector: Regarding evaluation and learning, for the DG, the new evaluation requirements they have introduced may help in learning about what works and what does not in the projects financed by the DG. This is because they now demand more information and for it to be framed with regard to the SDGs, so everyone can learn from projects working in a common direction, language and goals.

In terms of partnerships and governance, the common framework of SDGs can help to incorporate new stakeholders (beyond NGOs) in the struggle against global inequalities and for international development. For the DG, a number of stakeholders, from unions to enterprises and consumer organisations may have a lot to say regarding aid policies. This will help to open up aid and international development to society.

By having a common language aligned with an international consensus, aid policies may also receive more social recognition, visibility and political interest. The fact that the DG has the mandate for local policies with SDGs, may also provide more visibility to aid. The DG may now have more political importance in the regional government.

Finally, for the DG, the integration that SDGs bring about between development and sustainability clearly produce coherence between aid policies and the rest of regional policies.

This view echoes some of the aspects of SDGs that we identified as potentially transformative: the DG emphasises issues such as the need for a universal agenda relevant to developed as well as developing countries, and increasing the number and quality of partnerships. However, a number of criticisms remain unanswered regarding the possible pitfalls and limitations of the SDGs as they are framed by the DG, as we will see later. In any case, for the DG, these criticisms may be a minor issue, as the adoption of SDGs opens up a space that gives it the opportunity to politically increase its relevance in the Valencian government, to show itself as a “vanguard” in the adoption of SDGs in national and international debates, and to create and lead new alliances and networks with stakeholders.

4.1.2 A vision from local governments: SDGs bring opportunities but municipalities have little capacity.

This paper has not been able to examine the viewpoint of many local governments, but the vision of the city council of Valencia seems significant; it has the biggest budget in development aid in the entire Valencian Community. One aid manager on this council expressed the opinion that the SDGs can open up some opportunities for the most substantial problems facing the aid sector. For example, they can serve to increase the political relevance of development aid, within the city council itself and with regard to the citizens. By offering a single inclusive framework, the SDGs can bring the opportunity of closer collaboration and activate the potential role of some officials as development aid agents (for example, by participating in technical aid actions promoted by the Valencia municipality).

However, all of this would imply changes in aid policies that are difficult for most municipalities to undertake. Realigning aid policies and creating new collaborations between departments or with new stakeholders for new aid actions in

recipient countries would require resources and personnel which are currently beyond the possibilities of the aid department of Valencia City Council, and—presumably—that of many others. In addition, there are problems that are common in City Councils, including that of Valencia, such as the lack of communication between departments.

In terms of the interests and priorities of city councils, shaped by their limited capacities regarding aid, the SDGs do not provide solutions. They are thus less enthusiastic and more passive in comparison to the enthusiasm of the DG.

4.1.2 Visions from NGOs: critics believe SDGs do not solve problems but aggravate them; others adapt.

In the NGO sector, we see diversity and differences between the different perspectives regarding SDGs. Some voices seem to recognise the potential of the SDGs to improve Valencian aid, whereas others are more critical.

A number of NGOs seem to value the fact that SDGs provide clarity, a common language and a call for coherence between aid policies and local policies, some aspects that have long been demanded by the NGO sector. In this sense, they seem to be open to embracing the new paradigm and adapting to the new policies promoted by the DG (such as framing their new projects in SDG “language” or embracing new partnerships).

However, a group of NGOs, those most politically active regarding aid policies, are highly critical. As we will see, some of their criticisms regarding SDGs are aligned with those mentioned in the first section. In general, they seem to consider that the way SDGs are being adopted in aid policies will not solve the urgent problems of the aid sector, and may even exacerbate them.

Regarding evaluation and learning, they consider that the DG is placing the focus almost exclusively on the evaluation of the projects carried out by NGOs, and on the bases of some indicators coming from SDGs, which are not relevant. From their perspective, the aid sector requires an evaluation of processes (not of single projects),

and needs to be more significant and connected with the specific needs of the partners. Moreover, evaluation should also place its focus on public policies. Policy-makers have to explain what they do, why, and whether they are succeeding or not. Moreover, the focus has to also be placed on the accountability of donor citizens in recipient countries, not solely on the accountability of Valencian NGOs to their donors.

Regarding the coherence of policies, some of those interviewed commented that the single global framework represented by the SDGs and the multiple responsibilities and commitments they establish could be an opportunity for NGOs and other actors to reinforce their traditional demands for policies beyond aid. For example, actions in terms of clean energy, or to boost the social economy. However, they insisted that this may overshadow the requirement and responsibility to dedicate the necessary resources to international aid itself.

In any case, for some interviewees, even though the SDGs demand coherence between policies, they do not refer to key issues for coherence, such as debt, tax havens, or the arms trade¹, “which are a real taboo in SGD discourses” (E4). This is not a specific critique of the DG (as the regional government has limited competence in these issues), instead it appears to be a general criticism of the enthusiasm regarding the transformative potential of SDGs.

Regarding partnerships and the governance of the Valencian aid system, some interviewees also referred to the relevance of the SDGs to generate new alliances between actors. However, they mentioned that quality alliances that already exist may become overshadowed by the call for new alliances, for example, those between NGOs

¹ This is a well-known and empirically supported critique: for example, using data from Oxfam (2018) and the World Bank (2019), it can be affirmed that poor countries lost more money in 2017 from tax evasion than the money they received as development aid.

and some social movements and organisations which maintain discourses that are more transformative than those of the SDGs. From this perspective, the question is how to make these existing alliances more visible and enhance their quality, not to obsessively call for new alliances and seek the participation of new stakeholders. There is a great concern about the growing recognition of businesses as agents of development aid, a fact that is enshrined in the 2030 Agenda and in the various new instruments of Valencian aid, such as the aforementioned Law. For some of those interviewed, this recognition should not be made at all, while for others more clarity is needed on what role business should play, and with what instruments, if a sincere debate is to be had on the matter.

Regarding the social and political importance of aid, there is a risk of the SDGs contributing to the obscuring or even dismantling of development aid policies, by focusing the resources and actions of the DG on activity within the Valencian Community. The DG's focus on sustainability may divert attention from its focus on international development. Several interviewees highlighted the risk that the implementation of the SDGs may distort or obscure the values and positive aspects of the NGO sector, and decentralised aid in general. For example, the new discourse may obscure the centrality of the rights-based approach, which has been the flagship of Valencian NGOs in recent years. Interviewees did not go into the question of whether SDGs may coexist with rights language, but consider that, in the case in Valencia, policy-makers have not underlined the issue of rights in their SDG discourse, but on the contrary, the ubiquity of the SDG language has somehow obscured rights language in aid policies.

In general, for these critics, the discourse on SDGs articulated by Valencian aid policies is hardly transformative. They do not believe the SDGs will provide any added

value for the aid sector, as they do not provide any idea or discourse that the sector has not already embraced some time ago. On the contrary, in matters such as food sovereignty or the feminist struggle, many organisations “go far beyond the SDGs” (E4)².

In even broader terms, several interviewees spoke of the SDGs as a conservative discourse that can be a good vehicle for “green capitalism” or “friendly capitalism” (E5), which continues to place economic development at the core, and that they have “many holes” (E5), such as those related to tax havens or the sale of weapons. For one of the interviewees, this is not surprising: “If the agenda has been approved by neoliberal governments, it is difficult to believe that it is a good starting point” (E5).

In terms of the interests of NGOs, their reluctance to the new policy based on SDGs is understandable, as it opens the way for new players in a sector where NGOs are the central non-governmental stakeholders, it does not build on their political visions, capabilities, and strengths, and may bureaucratise the sector even more.

4.1.3 Visions from the University: different perspectives and the need to develop a clear vision

The people from universities who were interviewed expressed two different positions. On the one hand, the departments responsible for university aid policy have a more

² The interviewee refers to concepts and analysis provided by organisations such as Via Campesina, an “international movement bringing together millions of peasants, landless people, rural women and youth, indigenous people”, etc. (La Via Campesina, 2019). It gathers 182 organisations in 81 countries, and calls for structural radical transformation of the agricultural system, towards a more sustainable and democratic system in which people have full control of food production and consumption. It is a clear example of the myriad of grassroots organisations that are struggling for radical transformations in various domains.

positive vision of the potential of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs. They understand that, despite their limitations and contradictions, they represent an opportunity due to their more integrating nature, which is not focused on the least developed countries. Their assessment is that the MDGs had little impact and did not manage to challenge the universities regarding their way of doing things. The new agenda, on the other hand, involves multiple disciplines and areas, which can make it easier for universities to develop changes at the level of teaching, research, and management. However, some consider that this is not without its limits and risks, given the way in which the SDGs have been formulated: “who is going to tell you that their work does not tie in with the agenda?” (E6). It is perfectly possible to align actions with the SDGs without them being transformative at all. In this sense, the risk is mentioned that the University would end up being limited to designing a system of monitoring indicators based on the SDGs, to the detriment of a true rethinking of the forms of action: “I see the role of the university as more in constructing discourse [...] where the things that are done are connected with the SDGs beyond what can be measured” (E6).

On the other hand, some opinions were very critical of the Agenda and the SDGs, maintaining earlier criticisms of the MDGs and coinciding with the opinions given by some NGOs. In these opinions, the SDGs are not a benchmark for the actions that should be followed, although no one in the university can remain on the sidelines, given the commitment to the 2030 Agenda demonstrated by the Generalitat Valenciana. A university expert who has followed the process of forming the Agenda for years launched a particularly harsh criticism: “the potential [of the SDGs] is practically nil; they may even have a very negative impact, given that they are being constructed to cover up the reality, and in direct contact with the agents that impede social and

ecological development, such as the large transnational corporations, the Davos Forum, or the political powers of the dominant countries” (E7).

Universities still do not have a clear discourse and position on how the SDGs, may transform their aid policies. However, they know about the possible pitfalls and the regression they may entail (such as focusing excessively on indicators).

4.2 Practices changed and created by the adoption of SGDs: The impact of the discourse

At the time of writing this article, the implementation of the SDGs as the basis of the Valencian development aid policy has been underway for only two and a half years. Therefore, it is difficult to evaluate the impacts that the new discourses and practices have had, as all those interviewed acknowledge. It is difficult to assess whether the promises or the fears expressed by the various actors are becoming a reality. However, it is interesting to explore the impacts that the various actors have commented regarding the changes that are already taking place. As it is beyond the scope of this paper to measure these impacts, we instead focus on the perceptions of key stakeholders.

In general, while institutional actors are enthusiastic about the advances, the non-institutional actors interviewed pointed out that the new policy based on the 2030 Agenda does not seem to address the fundamental problems of Valencian aid we have mentioned. Some of the measures that have recently been taken by the DG in this regard may, in fact, have made the situation worse.

In regard to the problems concerning evaluation and learning, the strengthening of the requirements with regard to evaluation may have contributed, according to some interviewees, to further bureaucratising the processes. They would have had very little impact in terms of learning, given the focus in projects (and not process) and in indicators which are nor relevant. On the contrary, these interviewees consider that little

has been done regarding accountability from donors. The Law for Aid and Sustainable Development does not offer any specific tool for this purpose (as was demanded during the negotiation of the law with NGOs), and nothing has been developed.

On new partnerships and the governance of the system, the DG appears to have made great progress to formally commit new actors to advance the SDGs: departments of the Generalitat, municipalities, the private sector, etc., have taken part in meetings and public declarations. Formally, a number of declarations and formal partnerships regarding SDGs have been built around the DG. This commitment with SDGs is already featured in key university documents, and in some new Valencian laws, such as the laws on social responsibility and on participation. However, some interviewees affirm that in this construction of new alliances promoted by the DG, some key stakeholders, such as women's organisations or ecologists, have been absent.

Furthermore, some of these formal commitments, such as the "Alliance of Cities for Sustainable Development" have produced no activity. According to the views of several of the people interviewed, the determination of the Generalitat to get municipal councils to commit to the SDGs for their aid policies and for every local policy is having very little impact, since the resources and infrastructure are insufficient. Alliances would only be of token value, impractical and without much content.

In general, a number of interviewees suggest that the process of implementing the SDGs seems to have generated suspicion and mistrust among some of the traditional actors in the sector. For one of the experts, the implementation of the SDGs seems not to have changed, but actually reinforced a model of aid that makes the actors compete for resources, instead of creating alliances and trust: "calls for projects are based on competition and on offering the best value for money, and not on creating long term processes and relations between the donor (the DG) and NGOs" (E5). For some

interviewees the new evaluation requirements seem “to be based on mistrust” (E4) between the donor and the NGO. However, this does not mean that NGOs, even those that are most critical, are not participating in these calls, as they are all (it seems that mostly instrumentally) trying to continue to receive funding from DG calls for projects.

The introduction of new stakeholders (such as private companies) in the aid arena is also creating some tensions with NGOs, even though, for the time being, this introduction is limited to their participation in meetings. For some critical NGOs, Valencia’s explicit adhesion to the UN Global Compact³ in several key documents is a pitfall in that it formally recognises the importance of the private sector in aid and in international development, which will limit the role of genuine stakeholders such as NGOs and social organisations in this regard. In any case, NGOs are the only organisations currently receiving grants in public calls for projects. It could be said that they do not consider the private sector as a genuine stakeholder for receiving aid funds, and that they are not willing to encounter more players managing public resources and having political influence.

On the governance of the aid system, for these critics, the Law does not clearly establish the role and composition of the Aid Council (the key space of participation in aid policies), which seems to lose importance. In fact, during the negotiation of the Law, NGOs demanded more precision and more importance regarding the definition of the role of the Council.

Concerning the political priority and social relevance of aid, some interviewees considered that for aid to have more political importance a central role has to be given

³ The UN Global Compact is a voluntary initiative based on CEO commitments to implement universal sustainability principles and to take steps to support UN goals.

to the Valencian Parliament in Law, something that was demanded by some actors, but not considered.

In any case, it seems evident that the role of the DG has gained more prominence in the Valencian government thanks to the adoption of the SDGs, championed by the DG. However, some people in the NGO sector affirm that the DG seems to be giving excessive support and concentrating its efforts on issues that are not specific to aid: “The DG is focusing more on sustainability than on aid, and that’s not its role! [...] Why doesn’t the Valencian Government give the mandate of implementing the SDGs in local policies to the Presidential Office? The DG should be focused on aid, not on other things” (E4). For these critics, this may affect the aid budgets in the near future. In fact, in a recent statement the CVONGD “warns that the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development cannot entail a decrease in regional funds for international aid, which only represents 0.1% of the consolidated budget” (CVONGD, 2018). In any case, the aid budget has risen in the last two years.

This last point also involves the issue of coherence of aid. The DG believes that they are now advancing in a complete identification between aid policies and local policies, under the umbrella of SDGs. For critics, this has created the aforementioned situation of not addressing the specific problems of the aid sector. For one expert: “The Law is neither a Law for Sustainability nor for Aid, as it is really vague” (E5). To its critics, the Law only offers vague affirmations regarding key issues such as participation or accountability: “this is why it is not a helpful law, we didn’t need it” (E4).

Finally, for critics, accepting the Global Compact as a key means of advancing in the SDGs is a way to implicitly accept a certain vision on development, aligned with

“green capitalism”, or “capitalism with a human face” (E5), which therefore does not address the key problems of capitalism and growth.

4.3 Positions and interests of the different stakeholders: champions, contesters and passive followers

The process of adoption of SDGs in the Valencian aid sector is full of tensions, where several interests are at play, and with impacts on the relations between stakeholders.

The DG is acting as the *champion* of SDGs. It has found, under the umbrella of SDGs, a space of opportunity in order to politically increase its presence in the Valencian government and in the national and international context as a “vanguard” in the adoption of SDGs. It also offers the possibility for the DG to go beyond aid policies, which has very limited importance in regional policy. For DG policy-makers, this is all good for aid policies.

Several very critical NGOs act as *contesters* to the new discourse and practices: they seem to feel that there is a dilution of the discourse of aid and, in parallel, a loss in the recognition of the relevance and specific role of social organisations in international development. The DG appear to be trying to use the new discourse to dismantle a certain model of aid that is focused on NGOs, as it mistrusts them and undervalues the work they have done in managing most of the Valencian aid budget for decades. Now, with the discourse of SDGs, the DG can bring new actors into the arena of the aid industry (such as private companies). For critics, the process has just begun, but the new norms and tools are laying the ground for these changes.

Underlying this conflict on SDGs, there seems to be a conflict of perspectives on how decentralised the Valencian aid system should be. Some more politicised NGOs seem to support a model highly reliant on NGOs and their relations with social

organisations and movements in the South. They favour a model that supports long term processes and has a strong emphasis on rights, in which the DG and donors have a role as facilitators and resource providers. From this perspective, SDGs provide no real added value.

For its part, the DG highlights an aid model where donors must play a central leading role, with more multi-actors—and less centrality of NGOs—and more aligned with global agendas and languages. This makes the adoption of SDGs very strategic.

Other actors are more passive and act as *followers* of the *champion*, the DG. This is due to their lack of capacities and/or of a clear position regarding SDGs.

A number of NGOs are accepting the new demands and adapting to the new discourse on SDGs in order to continue receiving grants and support from DG—although critical NGOs also obtain grants from the DG, despite criticising its new approach. Universities have capacity and some critical visions among their academic staff; however, managers, due to the influence of national networks and to their links with the DG, keep a low profile and do not hold a critical position. In any case, universities have not made significant changes following the adoption of SDG discourse. City councils feel pressure from the DG to introduce the SDGs in their policies, but have little resources and room for manoeuvre, so they have also addressed very limited changes.

5. Conclusions

The situation of the adoption of SDGs in the Valencian Community seems to be full of diversity and contradictions. The study illustrates, on the one hand, that these tensions echo those identified in literature and at the global level. On the other hand, the paper highlights the key importance of local power dynamics and the various interests at

play to understand the directions that SDG localisation take, the different conflicts that emerge, and the positions assumed by the diverse stakeholders.

We recognise several tensions arising in the case regarding the adoption of SDGs: connecting global development and global sustainability issues may bring coherence but might also obscure the specific role of aid and aid policies; new models of accountability may legitimise the DG and its policies, but might also bring more bureaucratisation and prove useless in terms of learning; new partnerships may enrich the system, but might also give a new role to business, break previous agreements, lead to more competition and deteriorate relations in the sector; the DG may be interested in advancing a “new development paradigm” and becoming a political pioneer, but it might not be interested in engaging in a deep reflection of whether the new paradigm replicates the problems of the old developmentalist system; aid may pursue structural changes under the SDGs, but might only involve adjustments that merely “green” existing systems; SDGs may propose a single framework to inspire policy coherence, but from an approach that might be more conservative than others that already exist, such as rights-based approaches, and may obscure aid policies.

How these issues are valued by the different stakeholders depend on their own positions, agendas and interests, which lead them to enthusiastically adopt, passively accept, or openly reject SDGs. In the case of the regional government, it has been the *champion* in the adoption of SDG discourse in aid. The DG seems to have found, under this umbrella, an opportunity to broaden its competences and its political importance; to gain more influence and visibility in the Valencian and Spanish political scenario; to break what it seems to consider the “monopoly” of NGOs as implementers of policy; to engage with other stakeholders (such as businesses or unions) and lead extensive networks around the “mandate” of SDGs; to broaden its discourse (from just aid to

global sustainability); and to (re)legitimise its policies. Issues such as the increase in bureaucratisation, the risks of opening aid up to the private sector, introducing tensions in old partnerships with NGOs, or reflecting on the limited transformative potential of SDGs do not form part of its agenda.

On the contrary, critical NGOs consider these risks to be of fundamental concern. Moreover, they do not consider that SDGs can address the old problems of Valencian aid. This perspective seems to be coherent with their interests and positions: new SDG-based policies may increase the importance of new stakeholders in a policy arena traditionally influenced by NGOs, which has hitherto managed most of the public funds; connections between development and sustainability may increase the political relevance of the DG, but not the relevance of NGOs and of the aid sector as a whole.

Finally, a number of *followers* may be accepting the new policies and public discourses, but do not seem to have made very deep reflections on how to adopt SDGs, nor are they really convinced about the virtues of SDGs to transform aid policies. Most NGOs operate in a situation of fund dependency, limited capacities, and, in general, very limited room-for-manoeuvre. Accordingly, all except the most critical organisations accept the new policies of the DG, hoping that this will help them maintain access to funds and influence. They have acted similarly in the past, by adopting the MDG or other approaches and policies. Other stakeholders, such as local municipalities, are even more passive followers, as they are focused on other problems and face significant limitations against planning and implementing their own local policies.

Finally, the study also reveals that a critical epistemological and methodological approach is very relevant to understand the dynamics of adoption of SDGs in discourse and practice. More research in this sense is needed to understand how existing power

relations and conflicting interests model the adoption of the new global agenda in different domains.

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