

Higher education and the post 2015 agenda. A contribution from the human development approach.

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Introduction

In September 2015, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) were approved at the headquarters of the United Nations in New York. These goals have been designed for the next 15 years and will replace the Millennium Development Goals (MDG). It is certainly positive that HE has been included in a statement of this type at all (unlike what happened in the MDGs), but a careful examination of the targets associated with higher education raises a series of concerns that will be discussed in the next section.

After critically discussing the treatment and purposes linked to HE, the article aims at recovering the real basis of a model of sustainable human development. To do this, it resorts to the central elements of the human development approach, which includes sustainability as one of its central criteria. As many authors suggest (i.e. Leichenko and O'Brien, 2008; Gasper, 2013) a socially just model cannot be established if it is not sustainable, and vice versa. From those elements, we outline a proposal for higher education that includes all spheres of influence: the processes of teaching and learning, research, social engagement and governance of the institution.

Higher Education in the Sustainable Development Goals

In the MDGs, higher education was introduced only weakly in MDG 3 which included the target to achieve gender parity in formal settings for primary, secondary and tertiary education. This generated several critiques that are summarized by Unterhalter (2014, 182) that, “in the MDG, the continuum between all levels of education was ignored and the contribution of higher education to development neglected”. In contrast to that, the SDGs offer a new vision of education. Goal 4 of the SDGs refers to education with the following statement: “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” (UN, 2014, 10).

In addition, among the different targets proposed for monitoring this goal, five are related directly or indirectly to higher education: (UN, 2014, 10-11).

- By 2030, ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, *including university* (Goal 4.3).

- By 2030, increase by [x] per cent the number of youth and adults who have relevant skills, including *technical and vocational skills*, for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship (Goal 4.4)
- By 2030, eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure *equal access to all levels of education* and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and children in vulnerable situations (Goal 4.5).
- By 2020, expand by [x] per cent globally the number of *scholarships* available to developing countries, in particular least developed countries, small island developing States and African countries, *for enrolment in higher education*, including vocational training and information and communications technology, technical, engineering and scientific programmes, in developed countries and other developing countries (Goal 4b).
- By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through *education for sustainable development* and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development (Goal 4.7).

Therefore, the inclusion of higher education as a more significant development actor appears as a positive feature of the new agenda and is able to address previous critiques for its omission. As shown in several studies, the expansion of higher education also offers opportunities to develop the skills and knowledge required to improve conditions of poverty and other inequalities (Unterhalter and Carpentier 2010; Boni and Walker 2013; Walker and McLean 2013; Oketch et al, 2014).

However, this positive consideration of HE also has three main drawbacks. Firstly, the issue of how indicators for measuring the achievement of the targets are selected is at stake. For example, how are they going to measure the quality of higher education and conditions for learning and success, given that this is fundamental if all the goals mentioned above should have any real impact on improved opportunities and education? Compared to the MDGs, it is important to remember that in the MDG2 (devoted to education) the quality of education was measured only through enrolment numbers. As Unterhalter (2014, 182) points out:

“Measuring enrolment in an attempt to document and encourage school provision is not responsive enough to actual conditions. Late entry into school

[...] and other aspects of inequity, such as discriminations associated with race, ethnicity, or language, and exclusions regarding agenda-setting and decision-making, are not captured by the MDG indicator framework. Additionally, the MDG indicators provide no information on the quality of education received.”

Interestingly, the same observation was made by civil society during the making of the post-2015 agenda. In the Global Survey Myworld (UN, 2015) in which 3 million people all around the world participated, the issue of quality of education was explicitly highlighted, pointing out that it is important to go beyond quantitative metrics.

Whilst we agree that it is necessary to go beyond numbers-based quantitative metrics, we are also aware that understanding and evaluating quality is really difficult to capture in a proposal like the SDGs, which need to win wide global agreement for a feasible agenda of change. Indeed aiming at capturing quality and establishing it as a measurable indicator has the associated risk of simplifying something as complex and uncertain as development. Fukuda-Parr, Yamin and Greenstein (2014, 106-112) describe this simplification clearly when referring to their own assessment of the MDGs:

“translating social phenomena into measurable outcomes, involves a transformation that reifies intangible phenomena, simplifies complex concepts, and abstracts social change from local contexts [...] Once these numerical targets were set they were perceived to be “value neutral” and displaced debates about policy alternatives both in global development broadly, as well as within specific fields.”

Secondly, the SDGs place a stronger emphasis on technical and engineering disciplines at the expense of social science and the humanities. Technical and vocational skills, technical education, vocational training and information and communications technology, technical, engineering and scientific programmes, etc. are words stressed in the targets. This is not surprising due to the greater recognition that technical, engineering and scientific disciplines have, compared to social science and humanities (Nussbaum, 2010) as contributors to development. But, at the same time, it affects the concept of development and leads to the question of what kind of development is aimed at if technical and vocational skills are so over-emphasized, and what is the role of HE for development in this scenario? It is interesting in the light of this to note that a study commissioned by the British Council (2014) found that all development programmes, even the most technical, need ‘humanising’, and that an education in the humanities helps develop a base of knowledge and key skills in four main areas of development: critical/analytical thinking; flexibility and tolerance for ambiguity; communication and negotiation; local knowledge. From a pessimistic perspective, we could conclude that

the vision of higher education within the SDGs is an idea of education as a supplier of human capital for the labour market, which, in present times, is shaped by the knowledge society. As Etkowitz and Klofsten (2005, 244) argue:

“Whereas industry and government were the primary institutions of industrial society, university, industry and government [the triple helix] constitute the key institutional frameworks of post-industrial, knowledge-based societies.”

This vision of the university as the main or key actor shaping industrial society has been supported by many development institutions such the Organisation for Cooperation and Economic Development (OECD, 2000) or the World Bank (2002). As noted by the World Bank (2002, 9) “today, economic growth is as much a process of knowledge accumulation as of capital accumulation”.

This leads us to the third and final consideration. Taking into account the technical and industrial view of HE that is shaped by the SDGs, we wonder if this vision of development is coherent with a sustainable pathway as the directions SDGs want to lead us towards. Could a development model based on technical expertise really be sustainable? As O’Brien et al (2010) point out, technical expertise is extremely valuable in some cases, but it has also proved not to be enough to face pressing environmental challenges such as climate change. Additionally, within this outcome based view of education, very often other forms of knowledge produced by people and communities are excluded (Zuber-Skerrit, 2012) and knowledge that comes from other disciplines, such as development ethics, is not considered (St. Clair, 2014). Henceforth, we argue that the idea of sustainability, which is at the core of the SDGs, has been understood shallowly. As Camacho (2015, 19) notes as an example of contradictions within the use of the term sustainable: “unless ‘sustainable’ is given another meaning here, there is no sustainable extraction of non-renewable resources and at the present time we cannot eliminate all uses of metals, oil and gas.” As we will see in our discussion below, our understanding of a real sustainable development implies considering different values that have been at the core of the discussion on human development. Sustainability is one of those, but it should be understood in relation to other values such as equity, diversity, autonomy, participation and empowerment (Boni and Gasper, 2012). All of those are interconnected and shape the meaning of a human and sustainable development.

To conclude this introductory analysis of the targets referring to higher education, there is one positive statement to be found in the SDGs, Goal 4.7, which refers to the importance of the fact that “learners” acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including [...] education for sustainable development and [...] global citizenship” (UN, 2014, 10). This is, undoubtedly, a good proposal for all the educators committed to global citizenship pedagogies (Boni and Calabuig, 2015) and could reinforce their work in the higher education environment. Nevertheless, we are also aware of the limited influence that agreements and texts such as the MDGs or

the SDGs have on the daily life of actual institutions, an issue relevant in so far as it opens the question of accountability, dealt with by some authors (i.e. Fukuda Parr, 2014; Fukuda Parr and McNeill, 2015).

However, from our own experience, we can say that the inclusion of statements concerned with a holistic vision of sustainable development in international declarations can support the work of people who through their daily work at universities aspire to include skills and related human development content in the general curriculum. Particularly in Spain some universities have been using the MDGs in order to boost activities and promote international cooperation at the University (CCD, 2014). Although, due to the reduced vision of development that the MDGs offered and their strong emphasis on poverty, many of these activities have not gone beyond mere information on poverty; nonetheless, others have had a more transformative effect and have served to support specific training on development and international mobility programs (Boni et al, 2015; Boni and Calabuig , 2015).

Capability approach for a human development

However, this contribution is intended to go beyond the analysis of the vision of higher education given by the SDGs. Our aim is to think about a university that really takes seriously a model of truly sustainable development. To this end, this section will review some of the key elements of human development with an emphasis on the capability approach that can help us to imagine this model of a University. We resorted to human development because we understand that we cannot talk about sustainable development if it is not human and vice versa, sustainability is an intrinsic element of human development, as noted at the beginning of the article.

Sen's (1992) capability approach was developed in answer to the question "Equality of what?" Sen's response is to insert capabilities into the evaluative space, that is to understand and measure development as a process of expanding the real freedoms (the capabilities or wellbeing freedoms, the opportunity aspect of freedom), that people enjoy to be and do what they have reason to value (their plural functionings or wellbeing achievements). Well-being is thus understood in terms of how a person can "function", or what a person can actually be and do. The second leading advocate of the capability approach, Martha Nussbaum (2000, 2011), has a slightly different approach when she defines a list of ten universal human capabilities as the fundamental entitlements in a just society, and locates human dignity as foundational to her approach. Her argument is that if we support social justice we need to say more about the content of justice; her list thus lays out her partial theory of justice (Nussbaum, 2011). Both Sen and Nussbaum are helpful for defining the concept of sustainable development within the human development framework. Although we are not especially concerned here with the differences, we do think that on one hand, Sen's strong emphasis on public reasoning is important and, on the other hand, Nussbaum's list and

her emphasis on human dignity also allows a debate from which one can agree or disagree with her list and approach.

In the capability approach we focus on the ends of development that are people's wellbeing, and resources and commodities as the means to those ends. The approach aims at greater precision and attention to micro-data at the level of the individual and each person's valued and achieved functionings and the underlying capabilities to develop and choose those functionings. According to Sen (1999), this requires an enriched "informational basis of judgment in justice", capturing what people are actually able to be and to do. Diversity among people is always understood as constitutive of the richness and normalness of human being-ness – people are diverse in their humanity and such diversity ought not to be the grounds for discrimination or inequalities. This is recognized in the emphasis on having a plurality of functionings from which to choose based on having a wide capability set; which of those functionings are valued will vary from person to person.

Diversity and heterogeneity have consequences for measurement; each and every person presents a different set of capabilities influenced by personal characteristics and social arrangements. As capabilities are potential functionings not necessarily achieved, they may not necessarily be put into practice and therefore observable, although non-observation of capabilities does not imply their non-existence (Lozano et al, 2012). It may be the case, for example, that the individual has freely chosen not to put them into effect. Functionings could be proxies to measure capabilities, although the main evaluative space is the capability set (Gasper, 2004).

If capability is *freedom of opportunity*, agency is *freedom of process*. Agency refers to the ability of the individual to pursue and achieve the objectives they value. An agent is, as Sen notes (1999), someone who acts and makes change happen. As Deneulin (2014, 27) explains, "wellbeing not only depends on what a person does or is, but on *how* [author's emphasis] they achieved that functioning, whether they were actively involved in the process of achieving that functioning or not." Sen's answer to his famous question *Equality of what?* is not only equality and democratically decided basic capabilities but also, and just as importantly, equality of agency and process freedoms (Crocker 2008, 307). This has important implications for higher education: we not only need to pay attention to the capabilities and functionings we would like to expand among the university community and external groups linked to this community, but also who decides and how which are going to be those capabilities and functionings, and how external structural factors influence the process of decision making.

The last characteristic of the capability approach for human development we want to highlight is its multidimensional and integral understanding of good lives. Plurality of dimensions and underpinning values constitute a crucial anchor and guard against easy domestication when applying the ideas to universities. All the values matter, and

support and reinforce each other. The UNDP's standard definition of dimensions of human development covers: 1) empowerment, meaning the expansion of capabilities (ability to attain valued ends), expansion of valued functionings (attained valued ends), and participation (sharing in specifying priorities); 2) equity in distribution of basic capabilities; 3) security; and, 4) sustainability of people's valued attainments and opportunities. Penz, Drydyk and Bose's (2011) work on human development ethics slightly extends this list by highlighting human rights and cultural freedom. Arguably these are already largely subsumed within the UNDP formulation within the range of valued ends to be promoted, equitably distributed, sustained and secured, but are now further highlighted by them. In a more detailed definition of the central values of human development, Alkire and Deneulin (2009, 36-7) identify four interlocking principles of equity, efficiency, participation and empowerment, and sustainability and elaborate each as follows:

1) *Equity* draws on the concept of justice, impartiality and fairness and incorporates a consideration for distributive justice between groups. In human development, we seek equity in the space of people's freedom to live valuable lives. It is related to, but different from, the concept of equality, which implies equality of all people in some space. In human development, equity draws attention to those who have unequal opportunities due to various disadvantages and may require preferential treatment or affirmative action.

2) *Efficiency* refers to the optimal use of existing resources. It is necessary to demonstrate that the chosen intervention offers the highest impact in terms of people's opportunities. When applying this principle, one must conceive of efficiency in a dynamic context since what is efficient at one point in time may not necessarily be efficient in the long run.

3) *Participation and empowerment* is about processes in which people act as agents – individually and as groups. It is about the freedom to make decisions in matters that affect their lives; the freedom to hold others accountable for their promises, the freedom to influence development in their communities. Whether at the level of policy-making or implementation, this principle implies that people need to be involved at every stage, not merely as beneficiaries or spectators, but as agents who are able to pursue and realize goals that they value and have reason to value.

4) *Sustainability* is often used to introduce the durability of development in the face of environmental limitations but is not confined to this dimension alone. It refers to advancing human development such that progress in all spheres – social, political and financial – endures over time. Environmental sustainability implies achieving developmental results without jeopardizing the natural resource base and biodiversity of the region and without affecting the resource base for future generations. Financial sustainability refers to the way in which development is financed without penalizing

future generations or economic stability. Social sustainability refers to the way in which social groups and other institutions are involved and support development initiatives over time, and avoid disruptive and destructive elements. Cultural liberty and respect for diversity are also important values that can contribute to socially-sustainable development. In education sustainability requires quality in processes and to secure educational achievements.

As Alkire and Deneulin point out these four principles are not exhaustive; other values, such as responsibility or justice, could be also considered. However, we agree with Ibrahim (2014) that an intervention inspired by the human development approach should incorporate all the four dimensions; even if its main focus is on one dimension of value, the others must also be considered in relation to the main value chosen. For example, efficiency should not be considered on its own.

Capabilities for a human development as an ethical grounding for universities

Taking into considerations all the above elements highlighted (capabilities, functioning, agency and the ethical underpinning of human development), we argue that this approach offers a multidimensional view on what a good university should look like, embracing all its functions and activities. To illustrate our perspective, we follow a previous framework developed elsewhere (Boni and Gasper, 2012). Our proposal involves attention to different spheres of university work: teaching, research, social engagement, as well as internal governance and policies of universities (for example on admissions and investment), and the physical environment of the institutions. We believe a powerful idea of university excellence is to consider all the activities developed in a university and not only a limited vision of those activities, as followed by current university rankings that privilege research activities (Hazelkorn, 2007) which, in the end, results in a status-competition and the dominance of the Anglo-American model, thereby narrowing the diversity of knowledge (Marginson, 2011).

In our proposal, the different university activities are examined through the main elements of the human development and capability approach. We made a selection of the core values of human development based on the work of Penz et al. (2011) and Alkire and Deneulin (2009). In table 1 we present a description of what is included under each main value.

The well-being dimension will include the expansion of different capabilities, while participation and empowerment include also agency. Sustainability focuses more on long term perspective, holistic understanding, complexity and interdisciplinarity. Diversity and equity are central values in the capability approach and should be taken into account in any university policy. Hence, human development would act as a transversal vector through teaching, research and other cells, which could be filled out by the university. In that sense, the values would hold across all activities and be the

basis for adjudicating choices, priorities and trade-offs. If we use Sen's (2009) idea of comparative assessments, and given the complexity of trying to achieve human development across all levels all at once, a university could make partial agreements about its operationalization of human development, and decide where to begin, judging actions and activities against human development main dimensions.

A good university would in turn, for example, problematize the growing inequality gap in society and discuss better ways of fostering a decent society and forming particular kinds of reasoning graduate-professionals equipped to participate in the economy and contribute to the public good. Universities would undertake research and produce knowledge to understand how to reduce inequalities, working with communities outside the academy to share this knowledge, but also in an inclusive process of knowledge making. Finally the university would make direct contributions to changing the lives of people living in poverty for the better, for example by funding a legal aid clinic, or supporting adult literacy, or providing free health services.

We recognize the challenge of measuring the achievements of a capability-friendly university in ways which are should multidimensional, diverse, contextual and participative. A human-development oriented exercise to measure quality of university work should involve wide participation of internal stakeholders and of stakeholders external to the university community. Likewise, it will have a strongly multidimensional understanding of quality, recognising multiple dimensions as regards the type of activities that should be included in the assesment (education, research, social engagement, university governance and policy, and the university living- and working-environment). To implement a system to assess university activities according to these criteria will be complex and indeed costly, just as the beginnings of the measurement of human development have been. We can imagine a new way of doing university evaluation which considers human development both in the content and in the process of conducting it; or we can think of a certification which includes new dimensions related to human development; or we can envisage a different form of ranking, which despite the inherently reductionist nature of rankings, could hopefully have a long and fruitful trajectory just as the Human Development Index has had (Boni and Gasper, 2012). For example, current university rankings focus on research but if only one dimensions is chosen why can it not be the extent and reach of community engagement or the quality of teaching both certainly harder to measure but there is no reason why full feasibility, if the case for the dimension is sound, should be any reason for non-implementation. In current times when university status is measured by research this argument struggles but the new SDGs might provide some basis for trying to shift the debate. If sustainable development is so crucial to our shared future why is it that universities do not try to measure those dimensions of their work that contribute to this? In this way sustainable development could be the transversal dimension evaluated across core functions of research and so on making for a more focused way of looking at human development in universities. There is much work to be done!

Finally, a capabilities-friendly approach to higher education practices, achievements and policy constitutes, in our view, the theoretical approach that enables us to think about what socially just universities ought to look like for individual and social development. In this view, higher education would be a generative capability multiplier, with flourishing effects for individuals, communities and societies. It ought to be what our universities aim for, human development values should guide change actions, and it should be supported by public policy arrangements.

If we understand universities and their contribution to development in this way, we think that they can be more powerful actors for sustainable development changes. In contrast to the technical, measurable, and human capital-centred view that the SDGs are proposing, human development thinking could offer a different narrative for university policies based on a contextual as well as global contribution of universities to sustainable development. Indeed, human development is deeply contextual, considering diversity and participation of all internal and external stakeholders to be paramount in defining what a good university should be like. However, because it embraces the public good, social justice and sustainability are non-negotiable principles in any definition of a policy narrative for universities.

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