

The Idea of Universality in the Sustainable Development Goals

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Sustainable Development Goals are . . . universally applicable to all countries, while taking into account different national realities, capacities, and levels of development and respecting national policies and priorities.

—Outcome Document, UN Open Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals

With the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) due to “expire” in 2015, interstate negotiations are underway at the United Nations on a post-2015 development framework, with a set of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) at its center. For the last year an Open Working Group, comprising thirty states and state “troikas,” has been working toward an initial draft of the goals.¹ The outcome document, outlining seventeen goals and many subsidiary targets, was released in July 2014, to form the basis for a further year of negotiation. The “principle of universality” has been widely characterized as a foundational value of the goals. This article investigates this principle, and its implications for the structure and substance of the SDGs.

The idea of universally applicable goals is present in both the outcome document of the 2012 Rio Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20), which mandated the negotiations on the goals, and the introduction to the current draft of the goals. This marks a departure from the MDGs, which are widely viewed as focusing on extreme poverty and thus as being directed toward poor countries.² Nevertheless, despite an apparent “emerging consensus that the post-2015 agenda should be universal,”³ there is less agreement over what universality *means*, and how this demand should be reflected in the framework. In its

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most basic form, universality might seem simply a matter of the scope of the resulting framework. Actors have, however, employed and extended the idea in various ways. For example, it has been a vehicle for arguments for or against different goals, or for specific levels of commitment within goal areas. At the same time, the SDGs acknowledge differences between states by allowing for differentiation at the country level.

This article seeks to trace and clarify what the principle of universality should be thought to mean, what its implications are, and how it might be reconciled with country-level difference. The first of these issues is conceptual, while the second and third issues are more substantive. They ask how universality frames, constrains, and orients the goals, and how the need for differentiation should be interpreted and realized. Through my analysis, three distinct (though related) senses of universality emerge. I term these “universality of application,” “universality of content,” and “universal but differentiated responsibilities.”⁴

It might be thought that an analysis of universality in the SDGs is unnecessary, since a commonly accepted understanding of universality already exists in the neighboring context of universal human rights. Two points are appropriate by way of response. First, universality in a human rights context is not simple or uncontroversial. Universal human rights can be understood as being universal in several senses. At a minimum, they can be thought universal in *application* (that is, standards appropriate to governing the conduct of all relevant actors); universal in *justification* (that is, underpinned by arguments that no rational or reasonable person could reject); or universal in *content* (looking past local or national affiliations).⁵ Jack Donnelly’s account of the “relative universality” of human rights, for instance, identifies seven ways in which human rights could be universal.⁶ For this reason, appealing to the universality of human rights as a parallel to the universality of the SDGs might not yield a ready or straightforward analysis.

Further, the distinction between the SDGs (as nonbinding “aspirational” goals) and rights (as *claims* or *entitlements*) is important, both conceptually and practically.⁷ While there are potent arguments that the SDGs should be rights-based, the language of rights—and ideas of entitlements, claims, and duties—is almost wholly absent from the body of the current SDG proposal. Human rights are expected to bind—both morally and, to a greater or lesser extent, legally. The Sustainable Development Goals are explicitly *not* expected to do so.⁸ They will be accompanied by a monitoring framework, but eschew a language of responsibility and accountability. This is not to dismiss the value of a project assessing the links

between human rights and the SDGs, but to indicate that transferring the notion of universality from one to the other is not straightforward.

The role of universality and difference in wider discussions of development should also be acknowledged, though it is not my central concern here. For some of its critics, development is problematic—and has been problematic throughout its history—precisely because of the universal pretensions of its Western-centric perspective.⁹ In response, alternative accounts of development, such as post-development, appeal to a reaffirmation of local difference.¹⁰ It is not immediately clear, though, how far this critique is a rejection of universality, or instead a rejection of *what* is being universalized. How are we to interpret an ambition of “an ethics of development that subordinates economic objectives to ecological criteria, human dignity, and social justice,”¹¹ if not as universal? This larger set of debates over development is not the immediate concern of this article, but it represents an important context for the SDGs. Critics of development as economic growth might view the recognition of environmental issues, participation, equality, and reform of global institutions in the SDGs as offering a better vision of development than what has gone before. Indeed, the SDGs might represent a chance to correct “the distortions” of the Millennium Development Goals and “recapture the narrative” of development.¹²

The issue of universality and difference in the SDGs is politically important in at least four ways. First, it bears on both the structure and content of the framework that results. As I discuss below, universality can be thought of as a demand of the whole framework, the content of individual goals, and/or the responsibilities for realizing them. Second, how universality is understood, and how successfully it is judged to have accommodated state-level difference, may be key to the success or failure of the negotiations. Third, UN member states are also beginning to ask what universality will mean in practice for their countries, in their specific contexts.¹³ An examination of universality, then, helps determine what it might require of states after agreement in September 2015. Fourth, countries have their own accounts of what universality is and how far it should extend. These different accounts, which can clash, will serve to legitimate some outcomes of the SDGs over others.

Lastly, the idea of universality is also a useful lens through which to highlight key theoretical and normative issues in relation to the goals. While there might not be a direct parallel between universal human rights and the universality of the SDGs, *universalism* in moral and political philosophy has been thought central to moral cosmopolitan theories of global justice, such as those of Thomas Pogge and Simon Caney.¹⁴ A clearer account of universality in the context of the SDGs is a starting point for a clearer

assessment of the relationship between such theories and the SDGs. The academic normative analysis of the SDGs is in its infancy. It is helpful, though, to note two links to cosmopolitan theory. One worthwhile question concerning the SDGs is how far they incorporate a cosmopolitan account of global justice. For instance, the Open Working Group (OWG) outcome document offers commitments on basic human needs, global equality and equity, and democracy and political liberties, and these can be evaluated against the *desiderata* specified by cosmopolitan theories of justice.¹⁵ Second, a key question for cosmopolitan theorists is how a cosmopolitan account of justice can be realized within a system of institutions that are profoundly interstate (notwithstanding the complexity and plural character of the global institutional framework).¹⁶ The SDGs, again, might be evaluated in this light.

The article proceeds in four parts. First, I give a brief outline of the SDG framework, its origins, and the current UN process. Second, I outline a conception of the universality of the SDGs as defining the scope of application for the goals—their “universality of application”—and ask how even such an affirmation of universal scope might constrain the substance of the SDG agenda. Third, I discuss a prominent way in which the content of the goals might be thought universal in terms of its level of ambition—the adoption of “zero-based” goals. I term this formulation “universality of content.” Lastly, I outline the different potential tensions between universality and differentiation, and draw a distinction between differentiation in targets and responsibilities. From the latter, I develop and critique an account of universality as “universal but differentiated responsibilities,” that is, an account of fair burden-sharing for the goals. Each of these three senses of universality makes a separate claim with respect to a distinct aspect of the SDGs, as summarized below:

Sense of Universality	Referent Object	Key Claim
Universality of application	Whole SDG framework	The SDG agenda addresses common concerns, and so generates demands for all.
Universality of content	Ambition of each goal	Each goal should aim at global “zero,” and hence zero in every country, or at “access for all” (as applicable).
Universal but differentiated responsibilities	Responsibilities for realizing the goals	The SDGs must distribute responsibilities fairly.

THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS FRAMEWORK

The Sustainable Development Goals are a central piece of the post-2015 development framework. With the Millennium Development Goals due to have run their course by the end of 2015, the outcome document of the Rio+20 summit in 2012 committed the United Nations and member states to the development of a replacement set of goals running to 2030, aiming to replicate the successes and avoid the weaknesses of the preceding framework, while simultaneously ensuring a greater focus on *sustainable* development.¹⁷ Currently, the SDGs comprise the following seventeen goals, as found in the OWG outcome document:

- Goal 1: End poverty in all its forms everywhere.
- Goal 2: End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture.
- Goal 3: Ensure healthy lives and promote wellbeing for all at all ages.
- Goal 4: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.
- Goal 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.
- Goal 6: Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all.
- Goal 7: Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable, and modern energy for all.
- Goal 8: Promote sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all.
- Goal 9: Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization, and foster innovation.
- Goal 10: Reduce inequality within and among countries.
- Goal 11: Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable.
- Goal 12: Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns.
- Goal 13: Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts (acknowledging that the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change is the primary international, intergovernmental forum for negotiating the global response to climate change).

- Goal 14: Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas, and marine resources for sustainable development.
- Goal 15: Protect, restore, and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss.
- Goal 16: Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development; provide access to justice for all; and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels.
- Goal 17: Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development.

The SDG architecture has four components: goals, targets, indicators, and means of implementation. It comprises the above set of “aspirational” and “global” goals, each of which has further *targets* that are meant to be more precise and action-guiding in nature. Especially on the urging of the G-77 and China, the goals also specify *means of implementation*.¹⁸ Currently, goal 17 covers overarching and underpinning issues, such as trade and finance for development, while specific means are detailed under each goal area. Each target will be associated with particular *indicators*: metrics and yardsticks that will be used to monitor and assess progress.

The focus of the goals—the idea of “sustainable development”—is itself contested. The understanding of sustainable development emerging from the 1992 Earth Summit specifies sustainable development as having social, environmental, and economic components.¹⁹ The precise balance among these elements, however, is unclear. For some, the idea of sustainability foregrounds the need to acknowledge, and develop within, planetary boundaries. For others, the focus is on poverty alleviation realized through economic growth.²⁰ There is disagreement about how far peace and civil and political human rights are features of sustainable development.²¹ Given all this, some scholars view the idea of sustainable development simply as a “green wash” or as too vague to be helpful. Others suggest that the flexibility of sustainable development contributes to its usefulness.²² If sustainable development has the status of a norm—albeit a vague one of uncertain power—the SDGs present an opportunity to promote its acceptance, and also a chance to lend greater specificity to its content.²³

A wider post-2015 framework extends beyond the SDGs in a number of respects. First, other global negotiations sit alongside it, most notably the climate change treaty to be agreed at the UN Climate Change Conference in late 2015. Second, it is embedded in negotiations over financing for development more generally, and over the nascent High-Level Political Forum, which is conceived of as the apex of the monitoring mechanism for the goals.²⁴ The presence of parallel processes proved helpful in streamlining the process of the OWG toward agreement through 2013–2014, providing opportunities to leave aside contentious issues of financing and accountability. Third, there will be a round of negotiations and assessments of the indicators used to measure progress toward the targets, perhaps extending past a declaration of the goals themselves.

With the SDGs due to be signed off at a UN summit in September 2015, my analysis is undertaken while the goals are not yet finalized. Individual goals, and indeed the total number of goals, might be subject to change over the coming months.²⁵ If anything, this makes the case for additional clarity on universality more compelling at this juncture.

THE SDGs AS UNIVERSALLY APPLICABLE

Universality or universal applicability is most readily understood as a claim about *scope*—about the range of relevant objects or actors that this agreement covers. In the words of the Rio+20 summit outcome document, and the introduction to the OWG outcome document, the goals must be “universally applicable.” To say that the scope of something is universal is to say it extends to all. But *what*, precisely, extends to all?

Universality of application might look like merely a synonym for global reach. It could appear to make no claim—and set no limit—on the *content* of what will be applied. However, on closer inspection this formulation, even in this barest form, does normative work by setting some limits on the subject matter of the goals. First, to make a case for universal application is to say that the goals must identify issues that affect all. For example, the recent European Union communication, *A Decent Life for All: From Vision to Collective Action*, stipulates that a “universal agenda should be built around goals and targets that are of concern and relevance to all countries.”²⁶ Here, universality constrains the list of goals. In effect, it says that the issues addressed must be significant global ones. Second, to set a universal global goal is to set goals for *all* countries, aggregated together, at the level required

to achieve that goal: consequently, “global goals become *de facto* national goals too.”²⁷ On this account, a universal set of goals will potentially have implications for *all* state actors, guiding or constraining their actions. If these universal goals are to be achieved, they must be able to generate concomitant objectives for states (though how these commitments should be distributed is a further question).

This account of universal application is in contrast to the Millennium Development Goals. The MDGs were goals, in effect, only for developing—and especially least developed—countries, with only goal 8 having an explicit transnational component. This goal, to “develop a global partnership for development,” has seen little progress.²⁸ While the MDGs were proclaimed as “global” goals, as a UN Technical Support Team report writes, “‘global in nature’ and ‘universally applicable to all countries’ are distinct concepts. The MDGs were global in nature, but most were not universally applicable to all countries.”²⁹ In this respect, an account of universality in the two related senses above goes beyond merely being “global.” It sets the stage for a discussion of what individual states should be expected to do, and sets a baseline expectation that every state should do *something*. For example, the G-77 and China position in the OWG, that “a truly universal agenda requires tangible deliverables and commitments for developed countries as well,”³⁰ can be seen as consistent with, and an expansion of, this account of universality of application. Crucially, developed countries that adopt the goals are adopting standards for the assessment of their own progress. Thus, the goals could potentially yield an ambitious social justice and sustainability agenda *within* developed countries as well as developing ones.³¹

The idea that the SDGs must include, as a whole, “deliverables and commitments” for everyone has been extended further by some states. As one example, submissions by developing countries on goal 12, concerning sustainable consumption and production, maintain that this specific goal is important precisely because it generates demands for action by the more developed countries, and so is needed to ensure that the framework as a whole is universal.³² On this understanding, the demand for the framework as a whole to be universal can lead us to support particular goals targeted more at one set of countries or another in order to maintain universality as a “balance” across the whole document. As another, more problematic example, the Permanent Representative for India invoked universality during a Working Group session thus: “The principle of universality demands an agenda which is equally relevant as well as applicable to both developing and developed countries.”³³ The idea of *equal* relevance is a significant extension to the core

understanding I have outlined above—and one that, as I discuss below, raises difficulties. Universal application as I describe it here is a demand of the whole agenda. It is compatible with some goals being focused on issues that are distinctively global in nature, and others that may be more relevant to some countries rather than others. One reason to be wary of a demand of equal relevance or equal applicability of all goals to all countries is that it might be hard to make sense of such a demand, given the diverse range of issues the goals address.

The content of the SDGs is further constrained if the *universal applicability* of the goals is linked, logically and practically, to the *universal acceptability* of the goals. Being voluntary and nonbinding, these goals will direct only those countries who adopt them. Formally, then, they must be acceptable (post-bargaining, and in the light of state interests and values) to all, including the major global powers. For example, the representative of Russia on goal 16—concerning peace, access to justice, and good governance—maintained that:

Goal 16 might be for some reasons important to certain groups of countries or regions. But at the same time, SDGs should be universal. Universality of goals implies that they can be equally applicable worldwide because they are based on common approaches, stay within the agreed framework of Rio+20, and enjoy support by everyone. This is clearly not true in the case of Goal 16.³⁴

Clearly, there are wider issues at stake in this case. Goal 16 is concerned with a number of civil and political human rights. I suggested earlier that the senses of universality in the context of human rights and the SDGs are separate, and here they can be usefully contrasted. Precisely with respect to such basic protections for individuals, the consent of those states that might be suspicious of such rights looks unlikely to be attained. However, it does not (arguably) pose a weighty challenge to the existence of such rights as moral entitlements.³⁵ In this respect, the idea of universal human *rights* is independent from the consent of a particular state in a way that an avowedly voluntary set of universal *goals* is not. Reflecting this, goal 16 in its final form is unarguably weak on civil and political rights, constrained by acceptability as a result of states' "red lines"—that is, by the limits of what they are willing to accept.³⁶

Having outlined the key features of "universality of application," it is worth pausing to consider the consequences of such a principle. Importantly, it directs states toward goals that address issues of global importance, and so sets out a common basis for the agenda. It might also be thought to express solidarity by inviting

or directing all states to consider their contribution to achievement of the goals. Lastly, it sets the stage for assessing how the benefits and burdens of achieving the goals should be distributed. However, if, as I have suggested, universal applicability indeed requires universal acceptability, this constitutes a further constraint on the content of the goals. Indeed, it might be that this list of provisional goals in its current form is the product of precisely such a constraint. However, universality of application does not specify the levels at which goals should be set, precisely how goals should be framed, or who should be responsible (and in what measure) for achieving them. In the next two sections I look at how rather different senses of universality might address these further questions of substance and responsibility.

SDGs: UNIVERSAL IN NOT JUST APPLICATION, BUT CONTENT?

The idea of universality has also been invoked to do further normative work at the level of the content of the goals themselves. One prominent interpretation of universality, widely found within and beyond the United Nations, is the idea of *zero-based* SDGs and concomitant targets as “universal” or “zero” goals.³⁷ Such targets set the end-point or final ambition for the goals at “zero” in each of the relevant dimensions (whether regarding extreme poverty, as in current goal 1, or the elimination of violence against women, as with current goal 5).³⁸ Many other goals and targets are expressed in a correspondingly universalistic way as a demand for access *for all* to a certain good. In this sense, universality functions as a constraint on the way that the *ambitions* of individual goals are framed. It demands that the goals be “universal in content.” In what follows, I first indicate two further ways in which such goals might be thought an expression of “universality of content.” I then move on to clarify and defend the normative importance of “universal” or “zero” goals.

First, the universality of zero-based goals might be taken as inherent in the way they aim at the eradication of something bad, everywhere. They set the same end-point for all states, “since getting to zero worldwide directly implies getting to (or near) zero in every country.”³⁹ Second, they are also universal in the sense that they command looking past bases of discrimination and “leave no one behind.”⁴⁰ As the 2013 report of the High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons⁴¹ expresses this demand:

The next development agenda must ensure that in the future neither income nor gender, nor ethnicity, nor disability, nor geography, will determine whether people live or die, whether a mother can give birth safely, or whether her child has a fair chance in life.

... This is a major new commitment to everyone on the planet who feels marginalised or excluded, and to the neediest and most vulnerable people, to make sure their concerns are addressed and that they can enjoy their human rights.⁴²

Zero-based goals are recognizably cosmopolitan in form, since they suggest that membership of social and economic groups or even states should not provide grounds for differentiating the ambition for the goals. These goals are to be realized for all human beings.⁴³ This is not to say that the SDGs should be regarded as a cosmopolitan project, or as a full reflection of a cosmopolitan account of distributive justice. In this respect, though, they are nondiscriminatory, and might even prove to generate a requirement to prioritize the most marginalized.

The idea of zero-based goals as a demand for universality of content is separable from the universal application of the set of goals as a whole, but nevertheless compatible with it. One such way to connect the universality of the agenda, and the universality of specific zero goals, would be to take the unit for universal application not as states, but as the people who make up those states. Both of these senses reflect the commitment that the SDG framework must be “people-centred.”⁴⁴

The universality of zero-based goals has been critiqued by, among others, Thomas Pogge and Nicole Rippin. In their policy paper on the post-2015 agenda, Pogge and Rippin contend that zero goals only claim to be universal. They write: “Such goals *appear* to make demands on all countries and yet effectively exempt those that are already at or near zero.”⁴⁵ There are two components to the objection: first, that zero-based goals are unfair; second, that they are not compatible with universality of application.

In the senses I have just outlined, zero-based goals are the epitome of universality, since the same goal applies to everyone, they set one benchmark for all, and they look past potential bases for discrimination. However, this is nonetheless compatible with such goals being unequal in *effect* or in *demandingness*, since equal targets will necessarily be unequally demanding for different countries. If the objection is that zero-based goals are incompatible with the idea of universal application, I think the objection is misplaced. Universality in the contexts I have examined so far—in both the idea of universal application, and of universal zero-based goals—is not a principle of equal, fair, or equitable application. Goals, to be universal, need not make equally weighty demands on all countries. However, Pogge’s critique is accurate and important in suggesting that universal

targets and goals that set the same goals for all will be unfair *unless* responsibility is correctly allocated for achieving these targets. There is a “justice-shaped hole” here, and the fairness of goals that are universal in the sense of “leaving no one behind” is contingent on the fairness of the wider framework. However, zero-based goals do not themselves necessarily exempt more developed countries from action. Such goals are compatible with assigning these countries weighty responsibilities to help less developed countries meet them. At this juncture, we could appeal to cosmopolitan accounts of global justice to supply such an account of fair shares.⁴⁶

Goal 17 of the OWG outcome document, which covers global means of implementation for the goals, might be thought the right place to address this issue of burden-sharing. It does explicitly acknowledge some actions on which developed countries should lead—for example, overseas development assistance. Beyond this, though, the current formulation specifically avoids allocation of responsibilities. It prefers instead the language of a “global partnership for development,” reflecting the politically contentious nature of the commitments associated with the SDGs. This section on global means of implementation was a late addition to the goals, appearing in its current form at the twelfth session of the OWG, and it is currently inadequate at recognizing this dimension of fairness within the SDGs.

Zero-based goals do indeed look demanding, and especially so for least developed countries. Further, many commentators have critiqued them on grounds of pragmatism.⁴⁷ Unachievably idealistic zero-based goals could fail to motivate or engage states and actively harm the power of the resulting framework.⁴⁸ Such goals might open up too great a gap between the aspirations that drive the framework and what states might realistically be expected to achieve in the fifteen-year time frame. This could permit a great deal of discretion for states in how they choose to prioritize and advance toward the goals. There is, therefore, a clear role for a set of more realistic and attainable targets at *country level* that nevertheless track the global goals. The advantages of zero-based goals, however, should not be overlooked. First, they are clearly and easily communicable in a way that targets set higher than zero might not be. Second, if these goals are together to be taken to define the “world we want,”⁴⁹ it looks odd to set the ambition for the eradication of serious harms and wrongs *short* of zero. Lastly, as I outlined above, goals set short of zero invite discrimination against those hardest to reach.

UNIVERSALITY AND DIFFERENTIATION IN TARGETS AND RESPONSIBILITIES

I have identified two distinct senses of universality that might each serve to guide and constrain the goals. As mentioned earlier, the universality of this framework is adopted simultaneously with the principle of state-level differentiation, that is, the need to “[take] into account different national realities, capacities, and levels of development and [respect] national policies and priorities.”⁵⁰ In this section I set out the key features and issues involved in this demand, and then assess the current proposal for target-level differentiation offered in the outcome document of the OWG. Finally, I discuss an alternative formulation that seeks differentiation and universality in responsibilities rather than targets. This, I suggest, constitutes my third sense of universality as “universal but differentiated responsibilities.” I conclude by examining the plausibility of such a formulation of universality, and how it relates to the previous senses.

On the most abstract, formal account of universality as purely a matter of *scope*, there need be no tension between universality and difference. It is quite compatible to say that the goals should apply universally to all, but that the nature of this application is something that each country should determine for itself. However, more substantive senses of “universal application” and “universal content” could potentially constrain countries to a greater degree. The idea of differentiation will also affect how this relationship should be characterized. For instance, we can identify three relevant components of national difference present in the Working Group formulation of universality and difference. The first demand for national differentiation arises from *different national starting points*. Were zero-based goals to be adopted, countries’ differential starting points would raise a question of fairness and attainability, and differentiation might need to be protected as a way to reflect that difference in starting points. A second, related, basis for differentiation might be not different starting points, but differential *capacities for progress*—viewed *positively* as the social resources available, and *negatively* as the scale of the obstacles to progress toward the global goals. Again, this might give rise to differentiated targets to be met. A third basis for differentiation would be the protection of national *flexibility* in how to meet these goals and targets, out of a concern, for example, for state sovereignty or state-level collective determination. These differing senses of universality, and differing grounds for differentiation, combine to yield a variety of relationships.

In response, the OWG's formulation sets the *goals* as universal, with the imperative that state-level difference is given its due at the *target* level. As the OWG outcome document states: "Targets are defined as aspirational global targets, with each government setting its own national targets guided by the global level of ambition but taking into account national circumstances."⁵¹ Undoubtedly, there are important political and practical imperatives behind this formulation. Politically, a framework stipulating too great an impact on national sovereignty jeopardizes state support, and so becomes less universally acceptable. Practically, local adaptation could generate tailored and achievable targets, frame suitable indicators, and enable local accountability.⁵²

However, there are important drawbacks to this formulation. "Universality of content" demands that each goal should be met for everyone, everywhere. Discretion, though, permits a departure from this logic. As differentiation increases the scope for countries to set their own levels of ambition, we might worry that this will adversely affect those who are politically excluded or hardest to help.⁵³ The greater the discretion, too, the more the framework might result in a gap between aspiration and achievement. This subverts the universality of the goals through problems of *sufficiency* and *fairness*. There is a problem of *sufficiency*, since every country could achieve its self-selected target, but without contributing the level required for global achievement of the relevant target. Country-set targets will require careful coordination to ensure that global goals are realized. This is especially so when the global goals, in areas such as environmental protection, track distinctively global goods or threats: any one state's discretion may threaten the ability of the goals to protect a given good for all. There is a problem of *fairness*, since target-setting discretion allows states to set targets that limit their ambitions compared to other states. Discretion born out of the imperative of differentiation might sometimes be *required* by reasons of fairness, as in the case of the three grounds for differentiation outlined above. However, discretion can also erode fairness and, since actors care about not bearing an unfair share, it has the potential to undermine state and public support for the framework. It might result, for example, in a situation in which it made no sense for any country to set for itself anything other than the lowest possible level of ambition.

Target-setting within an account of universally applicable zero goals is a narrow arena in which to consider fairness and differentiation. There is a wider critique of the OWG formulation from those who want differentiation first and foremost in the *responsibilities* assigned. The third sense of universality I identify, universality

as “universal but differentiated responsibilities,” arises from this critique. China’s statement at the thirteenth OWG lamented that “a ‘universal’ agenda is now dangerously implying that there is no such thing as developed country or developing country, that there are no differentiations.”⁵⁴ The objection here seems to be that allowing for differentiation for country-level contextual variations downplays or neutralizes the collective differences between developed and developing countries. Elsewhere, China and the G-77 have advanced a logic of “common but differentiated responsibilities” (CBDR), on which developed countries have greater responsibilities by virtue of their greater resources, and also on the basis of a special historical liability in respect to development via colonialism and greater resource use.⁵⁵ A number of civil society organizations, too, link universality and CBDR in just this way.⁵⁶ Alvin Leong expresses this link when he writes:

A universal agenda can recognize that there are global development norms that are generally applicable to all countries (in this sense, all countries are equal or non-differentiated) and yet at the same time recognize that while all countries have responsibilities, different countries have differentiated responsibilities due to historical responsibilities and differing financial and other resources and capabilities (in this sense, based on principles of equity). In essence, a truly universal agenda would require the *integration of equality and justice* (equity).⁵⁷

This idea of universality as requiring a fair account of differentiated responsibilities is distinct from the narrower senses of “universal application” and “universal, zero-based content” so far discussed. However, it is not clear why a demand for *universality* must go beyond such senses. The quote from Leong starts by suggesting that a universal agenda *can* recognize country differences—and indeed invokes universality as “application”—but concludes that “a truly universal agenda” would “*require*” the integration of equality and equity. Similarly, to return to Pogge and Rippin, their initial specification of a universal set of goals begins with universal application—a framework “that assigns clear-cut tasks to every country.” However, they soon specify that the task is to agree upon “truly universal goals, i.e., goals that involve a fair and reasonable assignment of genuine tasks to all.”⁵⁸ This rapid move from universality of application that assigns some task to everyone, to an account of universality that assigns a *fair share* of the burdens—and nothing less—to everyone, bears further examination. The use of “truly” by both Pogge/Rippin and Leong suggests that this was always the essence of universality correctly understood. The implication is that any global actor

affirming anything short of this extended sense has not thought about universality hard enough. However, this is not clearly true. The grounds for demanding fair burden-sharing within the SDG framework are, I believe, morally compelling. But the grounds for demanding this *as a matter of universality* are less clear.

One important question is how this third sense of universality stands in relation to the two senses I have previously outlined. First, this kind of universality looks as if it is a demand of the whole framework, not just of individual goals. Pogge and Ripstein, for instance, talk of goals that “involve” a fair and reasonable assignment of responsibilities in a way that takes universality as some way removed from the content of the goals and targets at the global and state level. “How should these targets and goals be differentiated?” is not the central question addressed by this sense of universality and difference. In fact, as an account of how far country-level targets should reflect global targets, “universal but differentiated responsibilities” looks potentially unattractive. It is not intuitive that targets for each goal should straightforwardly track responsibilities, so that countries with lower responsibilities for the poverty of their people should have a lower target in respect to various aspects of improving the lives of their people. This account of universality should instead be understood as a wider, system-wide demand.

This third sense, furthermore, might look incompatible with the preceding two. Its advocates are clear that it demands more of the SDG framework than universality of application or content. However, the two senses of universality that I have outlined above both bear on the idea of “universal but differentiated responsibilities.” The kind of universality and differentiation at issue in this third account, like the first sense of universality I identified, still makes a claim concerning scope of application. Here, though, it is the application of the *responsibilities* accompanying the SDGs that is at issue. An account of universality and differentiation in this sphere, just as one concerning goals and targets, faces the same issues about how far differentiation is compatible with universal responsibilities, and about the correct grounds on which to differentiate responsibilities.

Furthermore, the level of ambition for each goal, addressed by the second sense of universality as “leaving no one behind,” is conceptually related to an account of fair burden-sharing. An account of global justice needs to specify not just the fair share but also the fair share of *what total*. It must define the target point for an account of justice, to be kept in mind when levels of responsibilities are assigned. Simon Caney has recently suggested that an approach beginning from a concern with fair burden-sharing can be meaningfully contrasted with one that works back from the

imperative of resolving the problem at issue.⁵⁹ I am not sure how deep this distinction runs, but it might well be that an approach to fairness that took universal-as-zero goals and targets as the end-point would *look* different, at least, to one that made the universality of the goals inseparable from the fairness of any distribution of burdens. I do not have space to explore here the ramifications of whether fairness is demanded as a requirement of universality or as a separate test. My initial assessment is that this attempt to link universality and fairness needs further work to establish exactly what it is asking for and how it relates to the other senses of universality. But this is not to deny that the fairness of this framework is vital. Without the right account of the end-point to be achieved and of how burdens should be allocated to realize that end, the SDGs could not be said to be just.

There is a different defense of this use of universality as a vehicle for claims about fairness. It might be that the idea of “true” universality as fairness is a purely rhetorical move, to be assessed on strategic grounds. It is fully expected, of course, for actors to import their own content and interpretations via universality, and to use it as part of a shared language in which to conduct negotiations. This third sense might present a well-meaning attempt on the part of NGOs or some states to do just that—to frame universality as a way that commits states to justice, too. In so doing, it might create a place for fairness in the SDGs in a way that would otherwise not be possible. There are risks in such a strategy, however, especially given the divisive and difficult questions of evaluating global responsibilities for development. While one such account puts universality in the service of fairness, another might equally stress the role of interest. Given that what is at stake here is the allocation of burdens for realizing the SDGs, the promotion of differentiated responsibilities—and resistance to the idea—carries real benefits and costs for states. In one respect, these principled and pragmatic motives yield the same outcome. The more different (and perhaps incompatible) senses of universality are operating around the discussions, the less it can be said that there is any real consensus on universality after all. In place of universality as the potential “touchstone” for this agreement, the prospect is raised of a complex series of debates about the metatheoretical division of labor between principles and across the SDG framework, unlikely to be resolved reflectively within a year of interstate negotiations.

NOTES

¹ The Open Working Group (OWG) was co-chaired by the Permanent Representatives for Hungary and Kenya, and developed their proposal through interstate dialogue over thirteen sessions between March 2013 and July 2014.

- ² See, for example, Paul J. Nelson, “Human Rights, the Millennium Development Goals, and the Future of Development Cooperation,” *World Development* 35, no. 12 (2007), pp. 2041–55; and Ashwani Saith, “From Universal Values to Millennium Development Goals: Lost in Translation,” *Development and Change* 37, no. 6 (2006), pp. 1167–99.
- ³ John Norris, Molly Elgin-Cossart, and Casey Dunning, *Universality in Focus* (Centre for American Progress, May 12, 2014), p. 2, cdn.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/Universality-report1.pdf.
- ⁴ In choosing the phrase “universal but differentiated responsibilities,” I am conscious of the similarity to the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities: I address this link in my final section.
- ⁵ See Peter Jones and Graham Long “Universalism, Relativism and Difference” in Darrel Moellendorf and Heather Widdows eds. *The Routledge Handbook of Global Ethics* (London: Routledge, 2015) pp. 82–94.
- ⁶ Jack Donnelly, “The Relative Universality of Human Rights,” *Human Rights Quarterly* 29, no. 2 (2007), pp. 281–306. Relatedly, Dembour’s four schools of human rights disagree over “what it means to say they are universal.” Marie-Benedicte Dembour, “What Are Human Rights? Four Schools of Thought,” *Human Rights Quarterly* 32, no. 1 (2010), pp. 1–20.
- ⁷ In the context of the MDGs, see, for example, Philip Alston, “Ships Passing in the Night: The Current State of the Human Rights and Development Debate Seen Through the Lens of the Millennium Development Goals,” *Human Rights Quarterly* 27, no. 3 (2005), pp. 755–829; and Nelson, “Human Rights,” for discussions of this relationship.
- ⁸ To be sure, human rights in their international legal form are, like the SDGs, constrained by the power of states. They are constituted largely by “voluntary” conventions and treaties, and admit of a range for national discretion. But such conventions generate and reflect baseline obligations against which countries can be—imperfectly—held to account. It remains to be seen whether the SDGs will eventually gain this kind of status.
- ⁹ Arturo Escobar, *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World*, 2012 ed. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2012).
- ¹⁰ See Escobar, *Encountering Development*; and Gustavo Esteva and Madhu Prakash, *Grassroots Post-Modernism: Remaking the Soil of Cultures* (London: Zed Books, 1998).
- ¹¹ Escobar, *Encountering Development*, p. xxvi.
- ¹² Sakiko Fukuda-Parr, “Recapturing the Narrative of International Development,” in Rorden Wilkinson and David Hulme, eds., *The Millennium Development Goals and Beyond* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), p. 49.
- ¹³ Norris, Elgin-Cossart, and Dunning, *Universality in Focus*, is one example of such an analysis. Other national governments are also conducting formal or informal assessments on similar lines.
- ¹⁴ See, for example, Simon Caney, *Justice Beyond Borders* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), ch. 2; and Thomas Pogge, *World Poverty and Human Rights* (Cambridge: Polity, 2004), e.g., pp. 92–94.
- ¹⁵ I am thinking, for example, of the set of commitments on civil, political, and distributive justice that Caney outlines in chapters 3–5 of *Justice Beyond Borders*, or the account of distributive global justice offered by Gillian Brock in *Global Justice: A Cosmopolitan Account* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009). See also Martha Nussbaum’s “ten principles for the global structure,” against which the SDGs might be evaluated. Martha Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2006), pp. 315–24.
- ¹⁶ Benhabib describes this “central contradiction” thus: “although territorially bounded states are increasingly subject to international norms, states themselves are the principal signatories as well as enforcers of the multiple human rights treaties and conventions through which international norms spread.” Seyla Benhabib, *Another Cosmopolitanism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 31.
- ¹⁷ See United Nations, *The Future We Want* (2012), www.uncsd2012.org/content/documents/727The%20Future%20We%20Want%2019%20June%201230pm.pdf. An important project would be to examine how the consensus on universality as part of the SDGs has come about, in both the narrow context of negotiations on development (stretching back, via the MDGs, to the 1992 Earth Summit and beyond) and the wider context of change in global politics, but this is something I cannot attempt here.
- ¹⁸ See for example, Group of 77 and China, *Common Position on Means of Implementation for SDGs*, sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/4209G77%20common%20position%20MOI.pdf.
- ¹⁹ United Nations, *Plan of Implementation of the World Summit on Sustainable Development* (2002), para. 2, www.un.org/esa/sustdev/documents/WSSD_POI_PD/English/WSSD_PlanImpl.pdf.
- ²⁰ In these ways, debates over sustainable development echo Dryzek’s analysis: John Dryzek, *The Politics of the Earth* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 143–62.
- ²¹ For an overview of these and other issues, see, for example, Sharachandra M. Lélé, “Sustainable Development: A Critical Review,” *World Development* 19, no. 6 (1991), pp. 607–21; and Chris Sneddon, Richard Howarth, and Richard Norgaard, “Sustainable Development in a Post-Brundtland World,” *Ecological Economics* 57, no. 2 (2006), pp. 253–68.

- ²² For an allegation of “green wash,” see Bill Adams, “Sustainable Development and the Greening of Development Theory,” in Frans J. Schuurman, ed., *Beyond the Impasse: New Directions in Development Theory* (London: Zed Books, 1993), pp. 207–22. For a more positive view, see James Meadowcroft, “Sustainable Development: A New(ish) Idea for a New Century?” *Political Studies* 48, no. 2 (2000), pp. 370–87.
- ²³ It might be thought that the SDGs could readily be understood as a “tipping point” for the norm of sustainable development. However, placing sustainable development within Finnemore and Sikkink’s life-cycle of norms would, I think, be complex. Though I cannot explore this further here, the negotiations exhibit features of all three stages of their model. See Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink, “International Norm Dynamics and Political Change,” *International Organization* 52, no. 4 (1998), pp. 886–917.
- ²⁴ The High-Level Political Forum is a new UN body created under the auspices of the General Assembly and the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). Within it, high-level representatives of all member states are tasked with “political leadership, guidance and recommendations for sustainable development” and given the mandate to “follow up and review progress in the implementation of sustainable development commitments.” UN resolution 67/290 (July 9, 2013), “Format and Organizational Aspects of the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development,” UN document A/RES/67/290, www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/67/290&Lang=E.
- ²⁵ Currently, this looks very unlikely, though some targets may be renegotiated.
- ²⁶ European Commission, *A Decent Life for All: From Vision to Collective Action* (2014), p. 3, ec.europa.eu/europeaid/sites/devco/files/part1-a-decent-life-for-all.pdf.
- ²⁷ Global Agenda Council on Benchmarking Progress (GAC), *Getting to Zero: Finishing the Job the MDGs Started* (April 17, 2012), p. 15, www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/papers/2012/4/17%20millennium%20dev%20goals%20carthur/0417%20millennium%20dev%20goals%20carthur.pdf.
- ²⁸ Indeed it is expressed in ways that resist measurement. For further discussion, see Sakiko Fukuda-Parr, “Millennium Development Goal 8: Indicators for International Human Rights Obligations?” *Human Rights Quarterly* 28, no. 4 (2006), pp. 966–97.
- ²⁹ United Nations Technical Support Team, *TST Issues Brief: Conceptual Issues*, sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/1729tstissuesconceptual2.pdf.
- ³⁰ G-77 and China, *Poverty Eradication, Building Shared Prosperity and Promoting Equality* (Presentation to Open Working Group, New York, May 5, 2014), www.g77.org/statement/getstatement.php?id=140505c.
- ³¹ To highlight two examples, target 10.1 stipulates “inclusive growth” that limits income inequality; target 5.1 commits to ending all gender discrimination (OWG outcome document).
- ³² G-77 and China, “*Poverty Eradication*.”
- ³³ “Statement Delivered by the Counsellor to the Permanent Mission of India to the UN, General Comments on the Working Document and Focus Areas 1 and 2” (Eleventh Session of the OWG, May 5, 2014), sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/8926india.pdf.
- ³⁴ “Points by the Russian Delegation on Proposed Goal 16, ‘Achieve Peaceful and Inclusive Societies, Rule of Law, Effective and Capable Institutions,’” (OWG, June 19, 2014), sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/10494russia.pdf.
- ³⁵ See, as an example and discussion of this view, John Tasioulas, “The Moral Reality of Human Rights,” in Thomas Pogge, ed., *Freedom from Poverty as a Human Right* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 75–102.
- ³⁶ Target 10 under goal 16, for example, tackles fundamental civil and political rights thus: “ensure public access to information and protect fundamental freedoms, in accordance with national legislation and international agreements” (my emphasis).
- ³⁷ For an example of UN agencies using the “universal or zero” formulation, see the OWG’s “Statistical Note for the Issue Brief on Promoting Equality, Including Social Equity” (January 16, 2014), footnote 4, sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/3085statnote1.pdf. For an example of a civil society organization doing the same, see Save the Children, *Framework for the Future* (London: Save the Children, 2014), p. 4. See also Kitty van der Heijden, Simon Høiberg Olsen, and Andrew Scott, *From Solidarity to Universality: How Global Interdependence Impacts the Post-2015 Development Agenda* (February 2014), www.irf2015.org/sites/default/files/publications/Retreat%20%232_Background_Paper_1_Universality.pdf.
- ³⁸ To preempt an obvious criticism, these targets should be understood as “statistically,” or “roughly” zero. Though there are good reasons for departing from strictly “zero” goals, every weakening in this respect creates scope for discrimination and exclusion, as I discuss in the next section.
- ³⁹ GAC, *Getting to Zero*, p. 15.
- ⁴⁰ The commitment to “leave no one behind” was a prominent message of the High-Level Panel Report on the Post-2015 Framework (see note 42). It is identified as the first of five “paradigm shifts” in United Nations, *A New Global Partnership: Eradicate Poverty and Transform Economies through*

- Sustainable Development* (New York: UN Publications, 2013), e.g., on p. 7, www.un.org/sg/management/pdf/HLP_P2015_Report.pdf.
- ⁴¹ The High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons comprised twenty-seven members, including heads of state, CEOs and UN officials. It was convened by the UN Secretary-General as part of the preparations for the post-2015 framework.
- ⁴² United Nations, *A New Global Partnership*, p. 7.
- ⁴³ As Pogge puts it, “every human being has a global stature as an ultimate unit of moral concern.” Pogge, *World Poverty and Human Rights*, p. 169.
- ⁴⁴ OWG outcome document, para. 4.
- ⁴⁵ Thomas Pogge and Nicole Rippin, *Universal Agenda on the Multiple Dimensions of Poverty: Background Working Paper to the High-Level Panel* (May 2013), p. 4.
- ⁴⁶ Notably, these might be shares of a positive duty to aid, a negative duty to cease to harm, or some combination of the two. See, for example, Simon Caney, “Global Poverty and Human Rights,” in Pogge, ed., *Freedom from Poverty*, pp. 275–302.
- ⁴⁷ Charles Kenny and Casey Dunning, “2030: Let’s Hope It’s Half This Awesome,” www.cgdev.org/blog/2030-let%E2%80%99s-hope-its-half-awesome.
- ⁴⁸ For a summary of the challenges of goal-setting and progress within the area of hunger—at the global and national level—see Sakiko Fukuda-Parr and Amy Orr, “The MDG Hunger Target and the Contested Visions of Food Security,” Working Paper, Harvard School of Public Health (May 2013), fb.harvard.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2013/09/Goal-1_Hunger_FukudaParr_Orr_WorkingPaper.pdf.
- ⁴⁹ United Nations Development Group, *A Million Voices: The World We Want* (New York: UNDG, 2013).
- ⁵⁰ OWG outcome document, para. 18.
- ⁵¹ *Ibid.*
- ⁵² For a discussion of these reasons, see CIGI/KDI, “Post-2015 Development Agenda: Goals, Targets and Indicators” (2012), www.cigionline.org/sites/default/files/MDG_Post_2015v3.pdf.
- ⁵³ Furthermore, this formulation does not demand that countries set their own targets mapping on to every global target.
- ⁵⁴ G-77 representative at thirteenth OWG, as quoted on Global Policy Forum, “Means of Implementation nearly toppled process of SDGs agenda,” www.globalpolicy.org/component/content/article/252-the-millennium-development-goals/52671-means-of-implementation-nearly-topped-process-of-sdgs-agenda.html.
- ⁵⁵ I do not have space to assess CBDR as an account of fair burden-sharing in this context. I am unsure of the merits of CBDR, which mixes forward and backward looking accounts of justice—as the right principle when applied beyond its roots in environmental protection to development more generally. For an analysis—and critique—of the idea of CBDR, see Christopher Stone, “Common but Differentiated Responsibilities in International Law,” *American Journal of International Law* 98, no. 2 (2004), pp. 276–301.
- ⁵⁶ On the G-77 and China position, see H. E. Sacha Llorrenty, Statement to the Ninth Session of the OWG, www.g77.org/statement/getstatement.php?id=140303c; and, as an example of CBDR linked to universality by civil society, see “The Concept of Universality in the Context of the Post-2015 Framework,” Beyond 2015.org, www.beyond2015.org/sites/default/files/Universality.pdf.
- ⁵⁷ Alvin Leong, “The Pursuit of Universality,” Post2015.org, August 26, 2014, post2015.org/2014/08/26/the-pursuit-of-universality/.
- ⁵⁸ Pogge and Rippin, *Universal Agenda*, p. 4.
- ⁵⁹ Simon Caney, “Two Kinds of Climate Justice: Avoiding Harm and Sharing Burdens,” *Journal of Political Philosophy* 22, no. 2 (2014), pp. 125–49.