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THE TERRITORIAL DIMENSION OF THE UN SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

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Abstract:

This article explores potential points of intersection and complementarity between several human geography related policy goals and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). At the same time, it identifies promising directions for delving more deeply into fundamental policy goals associated with spatial planning and territorial cohesion. Inspired by the advantages associated with the holistic and interdisciplinary approach of human geography, the article proposes two additional SDGs for the 2030 Agenda to reinforce territorial cohesion and planning processes. It concludes that the identification of the SDGs is excessively predicated on a prevailing conceptual triad (economy + society + environment). Thereby, it undercuts a common assumption that crucial human geography related policy arenas are not seen as essential pillars of sustainability processes. In particular, the research intends to fuel the clamour for more holistic approaches to sustainable development policies.

Keywords: Spatial Planning, Sustainable Development Goals, Human Geography, Territorial Cohesion, Territorial Governance, Territorial Cooperation.

1. Introduction

Sustainable development, as a global policy goal, arrived on the heels of the United Nations (UN) more than forty years ago (Sachs, 2015). Inspired by the adoption of the Millennium Development Goals in 2000, the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) of 2012 decided to propose a set of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that incorporate three dimensions of sustainable development in a balanced and interconnected way (UNGA, 2012). What dimensions are these? With their fuzzy echoes on mainstream and prevailing conceptual approaches to development theory (Medeiros, 2019a) and rather straightforward policy strategic thinking, they are clearly identified in the UN document as being economic, social and environmental concepts.

On a very fundamental level, the SDGs convey an understanding of human development approaches which puts the improvement of people's lives as the central objective of development (Stewart, 2019). This implies broad-based and all-encompassing sustainable development policy approaches to ultimately enable people (Neumayer, 2012), by enlarging people's choices and promoting sound territorial development processes. The stance outlined here lays bare critical development issues associated with human geography, such as historic patterns of uneven development across the world and consequent spatial inequalities (Dabinett, 2017). Most instructive in this regard is the galvanizing difference that the inclusion of spatial planning and territorial cohesion policy goals (Medeiros, 2019b) could make for a more robust sustainable development global agenda.

While retaining its traditional capacity for rich empirical work, in recent years, human geography has become a highly fragmented discipline (Farole et al., 2010). Human geography continues to show, nonetheless, mounting concerns for global development patterns (Pulsipher et al., 2020), whilst providing a scientific basic argument and impetus for setting international goals for development (Horner, 2020; Liverman, 2018), with the advantages spurred by a holistic and interdisciplinary perspective (Chang et al. 2008). In this light, this article highlights the advantages of this perspective vis-à-vis the mainstream economic + social + environmental policy conceptual encapsulation which dominates the elaboration of the SDGs. To consolidate this narrative, two additional goals for the 2030 Agenda are proposed, with a view to reinforce territorial cohesion and spatial planning policy processes, largely based on the European context. In the end, the two proposed SDGs intend to demonstrate how the disconnection between geography and the SDGs can be addressed. In this line, this article reinforces and amplifies the need for a more influential role of human geography in the elaboration of public policies (Martin, 2001). Moreover, it offers an additional contribution to ongoing academic conversations on the relevance of territorial cohesion and spatial planning processes towards a sounder, more effective, and more integrated

implementation approach for public investments, to achieving positive territorial development trends in all territorial scales (Medeiros, 2019a). In short, the context of our analysis, renders two fundamental scientific questions:

- What are the fundamental human geography concepts for promoting sustainable development included in the SDG? If any?
- Why could the inclusion of spatial planning and territorial cohesion related policy goals in the SDGs contribute to improve sustainability development processes across the world?





In the following section we argue that a more fruitful way forward to implement sustainable development is to pursue sustainability based upon a territorial encompassing development approach, vis-à-vis the apparent territorial-less SDGs. Moreover, it prompts the reader to confront the presence of human geography in the selected policy components of the SDGs. To tease out wider implications for the proposed policy approach, the third section debates the importance of two human geography related policy goals for sustainable development: spatial planning and territorial cohesion, and related components. The article ends with concluding remarks on how human geography could have a decisive place in the design of sustainable development policy goals.

2. Territorial-less UN Sustainable Development Goals?

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development presents itself as a plan to transform our planet into a more prosperous, peaceful, and free world. For this, 17 SDGs, associated with 169 concrete targets, were profoundly preconditioned by an integrated and indivisible balance between “the three dimensions of sustainable development: the economic, social and environmental” (UN, 2017: 5). The broadly conceptual dominant triad of the UN sustainable development approach can be simply portrayed by associating each SDG with a related main concept. By not countering dominant conceptions of mainstream theories of development, 14 out of 17 SDGs grapple with the conceptual overriding triad of ‘economy + society + environment’. In a complementary and seemingly discrete way, two SDGs (10 and 11) can be linked with spatial aspects of global development (Figure 1).

One useful entry point to relate the SDG 10 (reduce inequality within and among countries) with spatial aspects of global development is its generic policy rationale relation with the underlying policy goal of achieving a more balanced and harmonious territory. Indeed, the use of word 'countries' clearly provides a spatial character to this SDG, as the proposed policy actions to reduce spatial inequality should, ultimately, imply a spatial transformation favouring more balanced territories in the focused policy areas: social, economic and political inclusion. Reflecting an imprint of a selected

set of policy development processes, this SDG is far from depicting all the policy dimensions, and respective components, associated with the territorial cohesion policy goal (Medeiros, 2016). In a similar manner, the spatial character of the SDG 11 (make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable) is appreciated by its connotation with human settlements and, in particular, with cities. Then again, the proposed spatial integrated and sustainable planning rationale is largely centred in urban spaces, thus limiting its territorial development scope.

SDG	Development Main Pillar	SDG	Development Main Pillar
 1 NO POVERTY	A1 - Fair income;	 10 REDUCED INEQUALITIES	
 2 ZERO HUNGER	A2 - Adequate nourishment;	 11 SUSTAINABLE CITIES AND COMMUNITIES	A8 - Public transport
 3 GOOD HEALTH AND WELL-BEING	A4 - Health;	 12 RESPONSIBLE CONSUMPTION AND PRODUCTION	B2 - Sustainable productivity; E3 - Natural resources
 4 QUALITY EDUCATION	A5 - Education;	 13 CLIMATE ACTION	E1 - Climate change;
 5 GENDER EQUALITY	C1 - Gender equality	 14 LIFE BELOW WATER	B3 - Blue economy;
 6 CLEAN WATER AND SANITATION	A3 - Potable water;	 15 LIFE ON LAND	E2 - Biodiversity;
 7 AFFORDABLE AND CLEAN ENERGY	A6 - Energy;	 16 PEACE, JUSTICE AND STRONG INSTITUTIONS	A9 - Justice; C2 - Security
 8 DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH	A1 - Fair income;	 17 PARTNERSHIPS FOR THE GOALS	A7 - Communications/Technology; B4 - Fair trade; E1 - Capacity building
 9 INDUSTRY, INNOVATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE	B1 - Green economy;	No-SDG	C3 - Culture; E2 - Participation; E3 - Information E4 - Cooperation

Pillars of development: Quality of life / B - Sustainable economy / D – Sustainable environment / E – Sustainable governance / F – Sustainable spaces

Figure 1. Pillars for a developed and sustainable world and the UN SDGs. Own elaboration.

The reading of Figure 1 confirms that the SDGs are founded upon a concern with the inclusion of the comprehensive array of fundamental sustainable development dimensions and components. This panorama runs parallel with considerable interaction and cross-fertilisation in order to avoid compartmentalised policy approaches which make little sense in an increasingly globalised world. Even so, the approach does not incorporate any call for the dominance and adoption of any holistic and territorial conceptual and theoretical framework, which supports sustainable development processes.

In this regard, a rich vein of theoretical reasoning holds constraint and complementary views of this central concept of our age. Sachs, (2015), for instance provides an insightful debate around the concept of sustainable development, whilst adding ‘good governance’ as a fourth dimension that must also be achieved via sustainable development processes. Others reflect on emerging development perspectives that have begun to permeate the academic discourse, by adding a ‘territorial dimension’ (read, for instance, spatial planning processes) to the sustainable development understanding (Medeiros, 2018a; 2020). In this economy-society-environment conceptual vacuum, the identification of two SDGs directly related to human geographical analysis opens a host of intriguing questions, both on their relevance and their amplitude to a territorial strategic approach to sustainable development processes. Delving more deeply into both, the reading of Table 1 offers a range of answers which can be summarised in the following topics:

- Despite not being directly mentioned, the underlying rationale for promoting territorial cohesion processes is partly reflected in SDG 10. For this, mostly economic, but also social, political, and governance related measures are invoked to achieve it. Therefore, fundamental dimensions to achieving territorial cohesion, such as the promoting of a more polycentric urban system (Medeiros, 2016) and overall spatial planning processes (Hoch, 2019) are not invoked. In all, SDG 10 reverberates mainstream econometric arguments in a complex interplay that largely limits the territorial perspective that should penetrate territorial cohesion policy goals.
- SDG 11 is specifically dedicated to the urban dimension of development, which has a clear ramification with territorial development aspects. Unlike SDG 10, this one presents far more concrete and targeted objectives, clearly associated with urban development aspects. These include integrated and inclusive urban development approaches, whilst supporting planned, environmental and good governance processes, and the promotion of public transport, risk management and affordable housing. Impelled by the rising global urbanisation process (Caprotti et al., 2017), this SDG provides the only sound territorial development nuance to the UN 2030 Agenda for

Sustainable Development. In fact, in a shifting international context of uncertain change, one global territorial trend has built up momentum for several decades: the increasing urbanization process. In a seemingly point of no return, recent figures estimate that more than 50 per cent of the world’s population lived in urban settlements in 2018. The projected percentage for 2030 is 60% (UN, 2018), and 70% by 2050, making issues related to the growth of the urban population among some the most important challenges for a sustainable world (Vesco and Ferrero, 2015).

Table 1. Geographic related SDGs main components

SDG	Component
Goal 10 – Reduce inequality within and among countries	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Achieve economic cohesion at the national level - Promote social, economic and political inclusion - Eliminate discriminatory laws, policies and practices - Adopt fiscal, wage and social protection policies - Regulate and monitor global financial markets and institutions - Ensure enhanced representation and a voice for developing countries - Implement planned and well managed migration policies - Implement the principle of special and differential treatment for developing countries - Encourage official development assistance and financial flows - Reduce to less than 3 per cent the transaction costs of migrant remittances
Goal 11 - Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ensure access to adequate, safe and affordable housing and basic services - Upgrade slums - Provide access to safe, affordable, accessible and sustainable transport systems - Enhance inclusive and sustainable urbanization and capacity for participatory, integrated and sustainable human settlement planning and management - Strengthen efforts to protect and safeguard the world’s cultural and natural heritage - Decrease the direct deaths and economic losses caused by disasters - Reduce the adverse per capita environmental impact of cities - Provide universal access to safe, inclusive and accessible, green and public spaces - Support economic, social and environmental links between urban, peri-urban and rural areas by strengthening national and regional development planning - Increase the number of cities and human settlements - Implement integrated policies and plans towards inclusion, resource efficiency, mitigation and adaptation to climate change, and resilience to disasters - Support least developed countries

Source: own elaboration – based on UN (2017)

Altogether, there are a few arguments sustaining closer linkages to a semi-territorial policy approach, considering the main pillars for identifying the territorial dimension of policies proposed by Medeiros (2017). Based on these, one can infer that the SDGs have a partly territorial dimension:

- (i) The need for anticipating territorial impacts based on the main dimensions of territorial development and cohesion: in this regard, the SDGs include several economic, social, and environmental policy goals, and a few territorial governance and territorial articulation policy goals in the mix. However, it is hard to dispute the lack of emphasis upon a more territorial focus.

- (ii) The need for designing territorial policy strategies which anticipate territorial integration and territorial sustainability processes: in this domain, the SDGs incorporate fairly-well the policy integration and sustainable policy strategies when it comes to the support for more sustainable territorial development approaches. However, the place-based policy and bottom-up development processes are absent from the SDGs' rationale. Similarly, territorial cooperation processes (cross-border, transnational and interregional) which are taking place across the world and with special intensity in Europe (see Medeiros 2018b) are mostly ignored by the SDGs.
- (iii) The inclusion of distinct territorial policy scales: in this dimension, the SDGs incorporate a myriad of territorial scales for policy intervention: urban, peri-urban, rural, local and sub-regional, regional, national and international/world.

Due to its multidimensional nature, the concept of sustainable development presents critical junctures with human geography. As Willis (2014: 586) underlines, “for geographers, the spatial dimensions of development have been the focus; moving from straightforward descriptions of patterns of development inequality, to more recent considerations of the discursive constructions of development spaces and the co-relationships between development practices and place”. The broad approach of thinking in terms of spatial relations that characterizes thinking, in human geography circles (Boyle, 2015), also validates the role of this scientific field as a cornerstone to the elaboration of sustainable development strategies (see Figure 2).

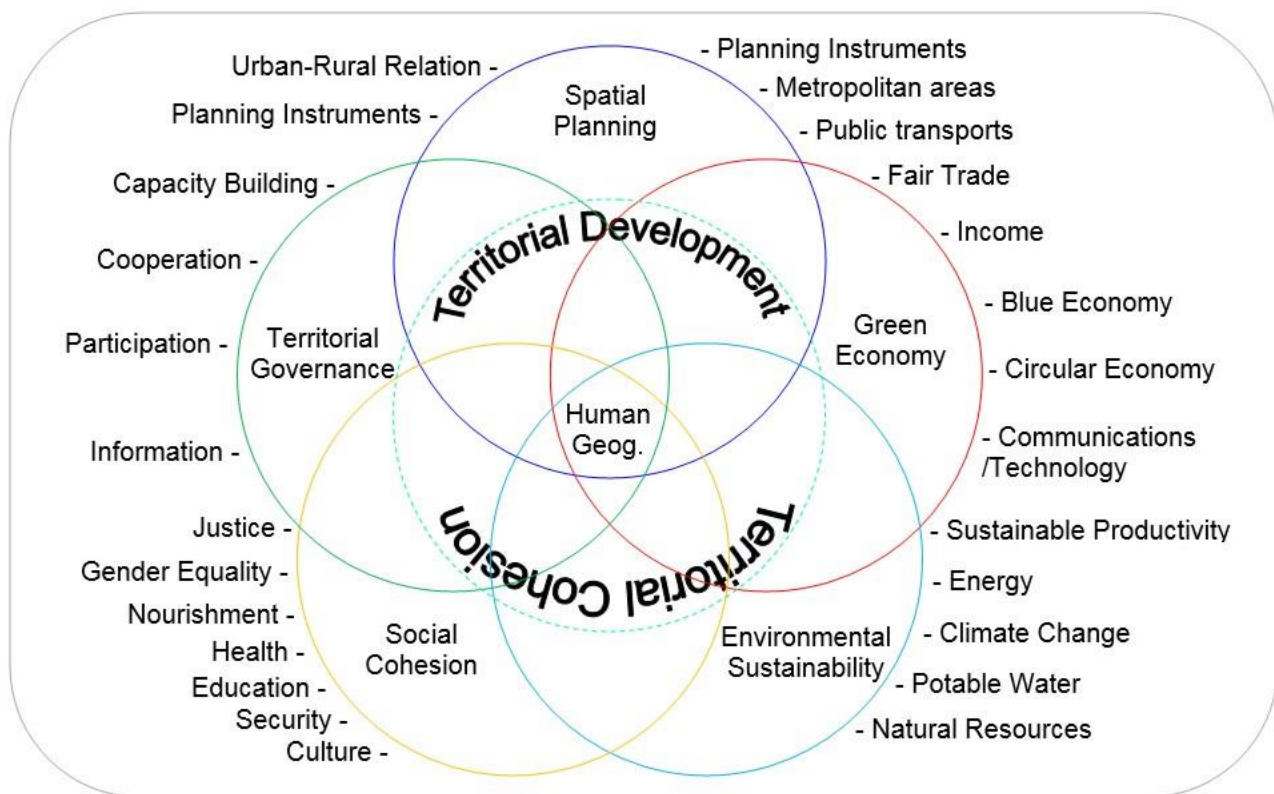


Figure 2 – Human Geography and Sustainable Development: a multi-dimensional proposal

In this line of thought, human geography can also play a foundational role in supporting the inclusion of three distinct spatial-bound SDGs by virtue of their relevance to sustainable development processes. The first could be maintained as SDG 11 (Make cities and human settlements sustainable), supported by the increasing importance of urban settlements around the world. The remaining two could replace the vague, dispersed and largely econometric SDG 10 (Reduce inequalities within and among countries), based on broader concerns being aired by modern geographers (Johnston and Sidaway, 2016): one SDG focused on territorial cohesion and another highlighting spatial planning processes. Both will be developed in the following section.

3. A case for a more cohesive and planned territory within the UN SDGs

3.1. Spatial Planning

There are a number of distinctive features of spatial planning processes that link it to sustainable development. To begin with, spatial planning is a fundamental process to anticipate territorial trends and manage space in order to meet territorial development needs. A myriad of examples can also present a case to show how spatial planning processes have profoundly influenced the adoption of place-based and integrated longer-term development strategies, by facilitating inclusive debates between all territorial levels and involved stakeholders (Kidd and Shaw, 2013). One salient point that

reflects the importance of spatial planning to promote sustainable development processes is its role in managing competing demands for land (González et al., 2015). This is particularly important as territories worldwide are becoming more urbanised (UN, 2018). In these circumstances, the challenge is how to plan an increasingly urbanised and, at the same time, increasingly sustainable world. An enduring view holds that spatial planning systems, policies and processes tend to have considerable territorial impacts, in particular in the fields of environment, transport, rural and regional development (Medeiros, 2019b).

Across the world, several examples can be found to illustrate appeals to move towards spatial planning which promotes sustainable development processes (Kawakami et al., 2013). In the EU, “sustainable development and spatial planning were first brought closely together in 1992 when Denmark held the EU presidency” (Waterhout, 2008). At the heart of this relation, Haughton et al. (2010: 3) point out that, “for professional planners engaged in spatial planning, much of their everyday work involves building understanding and consensus around how best to reconcile widely divergent views of what constitutes good design, sustainable development, ‘the good society’ and competitive economies!”.

Similarly, Morphet (2011: 218) concludes that “effective spatial planning is characterised as part of a wider programme of change which incorporates vision, reductions of the influence of climate change, sustainable development and economic stability and growth and is able to deliver these changes at various spatial scales from national to local levels”. More concretely, Kawakami et al. (2013: 1) propose concrete planning interventions focused on “land-use patterns, housing development, transportation, green design, and agricultural and ecological systems”, to achieve more sustainable urban forms.

The spatial planning discourse can also be intertwined with public perceptions of sustainability, by adding key pragmatic and technical dimensions when forging more efficient compact cities (de Roo, & Miller, 2019). Emanating from this discourse, Blewitt (2018: 5) notes that “the origins of our present crises can often be traced back to problems with urban design and planning”. Based on the idea in which sustainable development is about the notion of *enoughness* and what can be repaired, Silberstein and Maser (2014), conclude that resolving our social-environmental problems goes way beyond environmentally safe commodity production and technology, and that problems must be solved at their source with adequate policies and planning. In such a vision, strategic spatial planning can be mobilised “as a way to initiate constructive action in support of ecologically sustainable development in communities” (Marten, 2001: 181). For all the actions to produce desirable, concrete and long-term sustainable development, the institutional hegemony at global sustainable development fora, should not continue to be heavily dependent upon the support

of corporate power, and to be mostly guided by northern hemisphere countries (Redclift and Springett, 2015).

In sum, the emergence of environment-led approaches to sustainable development, or “the pursuit of an ecological modernisation agenda within planning” reflects “a particular choice, based on particular readings of the meaning and nature of sustainable development” (Haughton and Counsell, 2004: 55). In this context, spatial planning should be seen as a crucial process to cement more integrated and efficient approaches to sustainable development policy. This follows from the spatial planning implementation advantages in anticipating territorial trends and to make use of available holistic knowledge on territorial development processes. Taking this further, the following SGD and main policy actions related to spatial planning could take place within the UN SDGs (Figure 3).

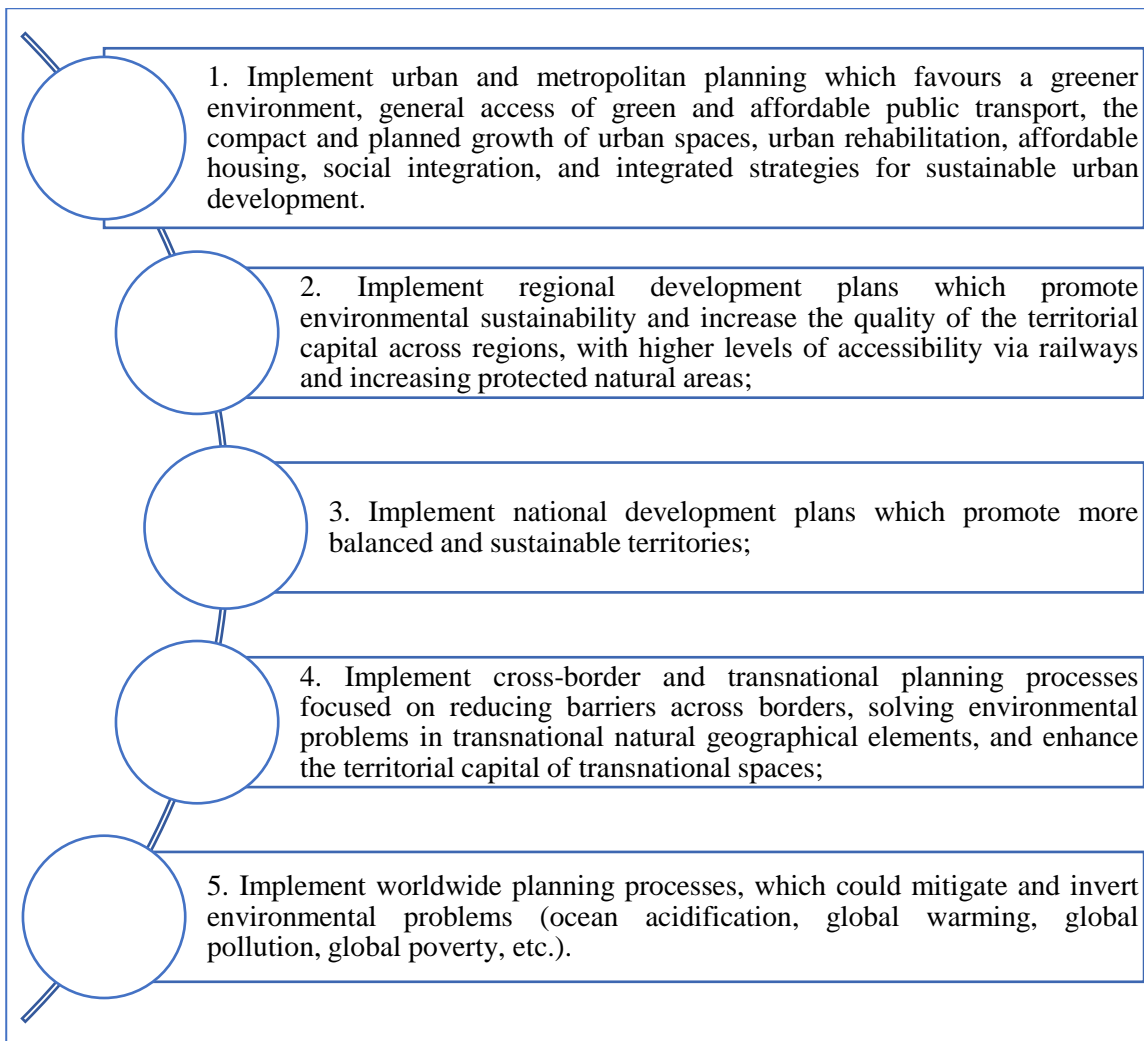


Figure 3. Goals for the proposed SDG: Promoting spatial planning processes for sustainable development. Source: own elaboration

3.2 Territorial Cohesion

Territorial development has long established inter-disciplinary roots that reach up not only to geography, but also to economic, social and environmental studies. Conversely, Territorial Cohesion is a relatively recent and fuzzy EU concept (Dao et al., 2017). The interconnected and multidimensional nature of both territorial development and territorial cohesion concepts is an argument to confound them. The fact is, at the national level, positive territorial development trends are common. These, however, tend to favour already more developed regions (normally capital cities and other large metropolitan urban areas), thus provoking persistent territorial exclusion trends vis-a-vis intended territorial cohesion processes (Medeiros and Rauhut, 2020).

Hence, the shift towards territorial cohesion has a universal frame of reference that is most dramatically expressed in the SDG 10, which invokes the need to reduce inequalities within and among countries. However, as previously mentioned, this SDG fails to cover all fundamental

dimensions associated with territorial cohesion processes, like the need to promote polycentric urban networks, territorial governance and cooperation processes, and positive socioeconomic and environmentally sustainable territorial trends (Medeiros, 2016).

As stated, intrinsic to territorial cohesion processes are territorial governance and cooperation processes. In a networked world, the notions of territorial governance and territorial cooperation have become manifested as a powerful unifying bond of sound territorial development processes, notably within EU policymaking (Stead, 2014). At the same time, corporate social responsibility has made rapid strides across the world, in recent years, the notion of sustainability being one of its modern manifestations, which is testified by the publication of environmental reports (Crowther et al., 2018).

As regards territorial governance, it is comfortable to assume that human geography can provide a profound contribution to embrace multilevel governance as an analytical framework for a complex issue such as sustainability (Homsy et al., 2019). These ideas follow relatively recent theoretical imaginaries in which good governance is a paramount pre-condition to achieve economic, social and environmental development objectives (Rodríguez-Pose, 2013). In a different prism, as Stead (2014: 1380) acknowledges, the idea of territorial governance can be linked as a useful starting point to the sound management of territorial dynamics or development.

As well as territorial governance and cooperation, urban polycentrism is often understood as a main pillar of territorial cohesion (Medeiros, 2016). The notion of ‘urban polycentricity’ has become embodied as a policy objective since the publication of the European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP), in 1999). Seen, for some as a bridging concept combining equality and efficiency, urban polycentricity can be understood as a counterweight to the excessive concentration of population and socioeconomic activities in one or two major metropolises (Rauhut, 2017). In this regard, Faludi (2006: 668) presents another argument in favour of polycentrism, by claiming that “a balanced and sustainable development, invoked in the subtitle of the ESDP, translates effortlessly into polycentric development”.

In a way, SDG 10, by seeking to reducing territorial inequalities, is ultimately invoking the implementation of territorial cohesion processes at the national and transnational levels. The problem, from a geographer’s viewpoint, is the excessive focus on the related policy actions on socioeconomic and legal/financial/governance aspects of territorial cohesion, and the consequent lack of emphasis on fundamental pillars of territorial cohesion, such as polycentrism and territorial cooperation. As expected, being a holistic concept, territorial cohesion touches all SDGs one way or another. Even so, we suggest an alternative SDG for territorial cohesion, and related main goals (Figure 4)

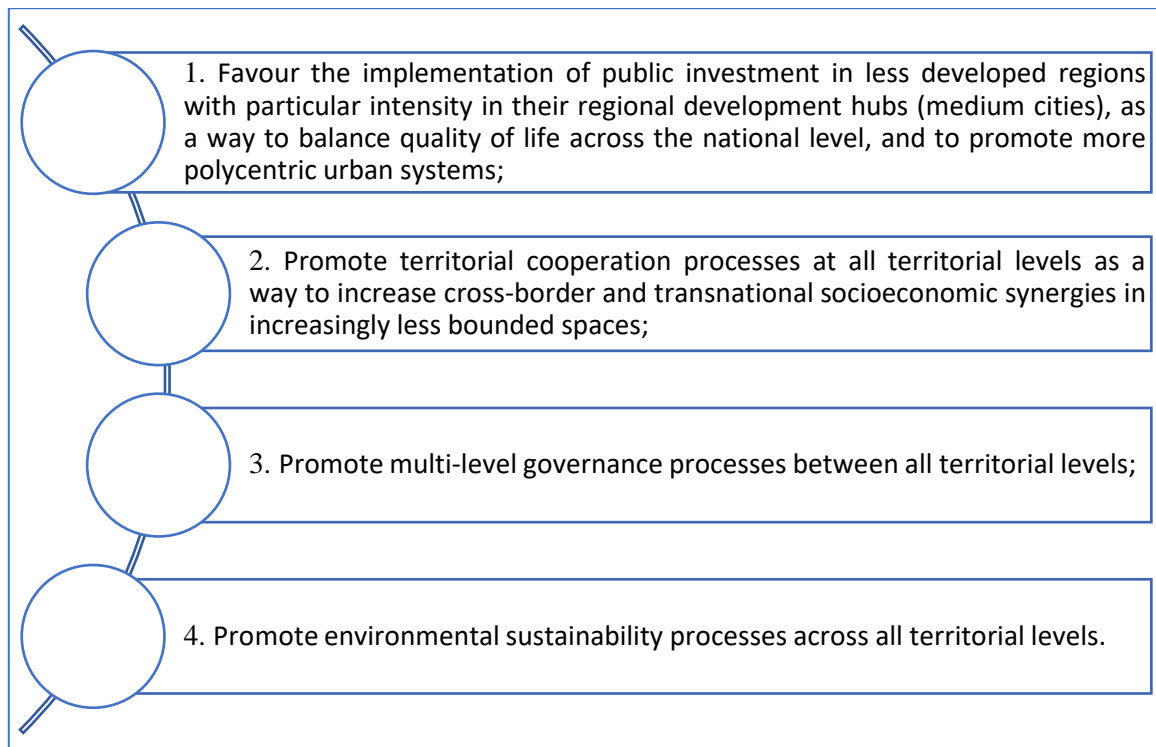


Figure 4. Goals for the proposed SDG: Achieving territorial cohesion processes within and among countries

Conclusion

Aiming at transforming our world, the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development outlines 17 SDGs and related targets. This article, critically discusses the relevance of key human geography related concepts, such as spatial planning and territorial cohesion, within the policy targets of these SDGs. It generically concludes that only two SDGs (10 and 11) include actions related to human geography distinctive scientific analytic themes: SDG 10 – Spatial Inequalities and SDG 11 – Urban Development. However, the related political actions of both SDGs fail, in our view, to translate a necessary holistic and territorial perspective intrinsic of the human geography thought.

In this stance, we throw down the gauntlet that it is time that human geography, as a holistic discipline, concerned with global sustainable development, takes centre stage in the definition of the UN SDGs. Crucially, the building of a new global prosperity, as the grand challenge of our era, should not rely solely on economic scientific theories and narrow visions of growth. In view of the above, when echoing concerns for global territorial inequalities within UN debates, the role and relevance of human geography becomes evident, as it embraces fundamental concepts that are key vehicles to achieving sustainable development processes, as explained along the text. These include spatial planning as a crucial instrument to develop strategic and planned sustainable development policies at all territorial levels, and to produce appropriate policy recommendations. In breaking through persisting boundaries of global development, the transition into a global sustainable development

process also requires the implementation of transnational planning strategies, following the example of the EU's macro-regional strategies.

Alongside spatial planning, the UN SDG, to reduce territorial inequalities within and among countries, would gain by following the human geography holistic rationale of territorial cohesion, instead of merely invoking the correction of income growth and the promotion of social, economic and political inclusion processes. As a complement, urban polycentrism, territorial cooperation and multi-level governance processes should be integrated within the action goals of a newly designed SDG aiming at achieving territorial cohesion processes in all territorial levels.

By enabling interdisciplinary connections and by encouraging multi-spatial and multi-level governance dialogue, human geography stimulates fresh and holistic thinking concerning sustainable development processes with a global perspective. By and large, global sustainable development processes entail complex governance and planning arrangements that should be managed by knowledgeable actors and institutions. The role of human geography here is, once again, crucial as a discipline which mirrors and debates all the main dimensions and components related to sustainable development in an integrated and interdisciplinary manner. But more importantly, human geography entails key multi-dimensional concepts (spatial planning, territorial cohesion and territorial development) which underpin global development processes. As such, it should have a more prominent role in the elaboration of the SGDs, as way to counteract the present scenario in which most policy strategy designs around the world are mainly driven by economic scientific rationales.

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