



Sustainable development goals: utopias and perspectives for water management in Brazil

Objetivos de desenvolvimento sustentável: utopias e perspectivas para a gestão da água no Brasil

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ABSTRACT: United Nations agreements, including the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), require political decisions, convergent legislation, strong institutions, inclusive spaces and targeted actions. Due to the scope and nature of its guidelines, the UN 2030 Agenda is characterized as utopian on the one hand and a bold speech on the other, as it exposes injustices and inequalities. Based on this understanding, this essay proposes a reflection on how the SDGs approach both utopian conceptions, in the sense of distance from solid realities, and perspectives, in the sense of opening up dialogues and proactive positions. SDG 6 is adopted - the central theme is water and sanitation management, and the context is Brazil. Given the importance of the role of social actors and institutions for this issue, we highlight possibilities for action by some key institutions in favor of aligning sustainability agendas with national policies and laws. We highlight the possibility of the addition of efforts by key State institutions in support of social actors and collective participation so that sustainability agendas move among utopias and perspectives, beyond activist voluntarism and dependence on private and government power groups.

Keywords: sustainability; institutions; SDGs; actors; convergences.

RESUMO: Acordos das Nações Unidas, incluídos os Objetivos de Desenvolvimento Sustentável (ODS), pressupõem decisões políticas, legislação convergente, instituições fortes, espaços participativos e ações objetivas. Pela abrangência e caráter geral de suas diretrizes, a Agenda ONU 2030 se caracteriza como utópica, por um lado, e um discurso ousado, por outro, pois expõe injustiças e desigualdades a serem enfrentadas. A partir desta compreensão, este ensaio propõe uma reflexão sobre como os ODS se aproximam, ao mesmo tempo, de concepções utópicas, no sentido de distância de realidades objetivas, ou de perspectivas, no sentido de abrir diálogos e posicionamentos proativos. Adota-se o ODS 6 – tema central gestão da água e saneamento – e recorte no contexto Brasil. Dada a importância de protagonismos de atores sociais e instituições para este tema, o texto destaca possibilidades de atuação de algumas instituições-chave em favor do alinhamento entre agendas de sustentabilidade com políticas e leis nacionais. Destaca-se a possibilidade da soma de esforços de instituições-chave do Estado em apoio aos atores sociais e à participação coletiva para que as agendas de sustentabilidade transitem entre utopias e perspectivas, para além do voluntarismo ativista e da dependência de grupos de poder privados e de governos.

Palavras-chave: sustentabilidade; instituições; ODS; atores; convergências.

1. Introduction

The construction of the United Nations 2030 Agenda (UN 2030 Agenda) and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) dates back to a long trajectory of international debates, events and agreements, under the pressure of events that call for decisions converging with sustainability in its various dimensions (United Nations, 2015). These events include environmental degradation, climate change/variation, the persistence of economic and social exclusion that maintains hunger and the deprivation of human rights on all continents.

The document that made the 2030 Agenda official and defined the 17 SDGs and 169 targets, with the signatures of 193 countries, is a sign of the search for consensus, though it does not state conflicting aspects. The breadth of challenges in the UN 2030 Agenda characterizes it as a collection of suggestions or guidelines (Griggs *et al.*, 2013; Winkler & Williams, 2017; Dye, 2018).

From this perspective, the SDGs in fact add to other initiatives in the UN's 50-year sustainability agenda, because inequalities persist in their many

dimensions all over the planet. The Covid-19 pandemic is illustrative, when socio-economic inequalities are accentuated and highlight the contradictions of capitalism; the increase in poverty and hunger, on the one hand, and multimillionaires and billionaires, on the other, oppose the guidelines of the SDGs.

It should be added that lasting progress in collective and democratic construction in this sense requires recognition of the roles of social institutions and democracy as a basis (Mannheim, 1951; Leff, 2001). At each historical moment, these institutions switch between importance and role, depending on the situation, the sense of social construction given to them and the theoretical/ideological choices of powerful groups (Mannheim, 1951). Therefore, the implementation of policies aligned with democratic agendas depends on the protagonism of these actors, including private agents and State organizations. The concept (actually, the hope) of the implementation base of the UN 2030 Agenda follows in this direction, anticipating the voluntary adhesion of those who cause and are affected by socioeconomic inequalities and environmental damage.

Thus, the Agenda resembles a meeting of utopias and raises questions such as: how can agendas such as the SDGs help local institutions and actors to move between utopias and perspectives of progress in the sustainable development agenda?

Without claiming to be exhaustive, this essay presents a reflection on this issue and on main aspects of the SDGs which will be discussed in other articles from this Special Section of the magazine. Different conceptions of utopias and their relationship with the SDGs are presented, highlighting the importance of the protagonism of social actors and institutions whose actions converge to the theses on sustainable development.

With Brazil as a reference, we list the possibilities for key institutions to act in favor of the SDGs and the national policies and laws that support them. A brief focus is on SDG 6, which deals with the management and governance of water and sanitation, which is also the focus of the other texts in this issue. Among the reflections on utopias and prospects for progress in the 2030 Agenda, we point out possible paths for institutional action in line with national water policies as a prerequisite for implementing sustainability agendas.

The essay has three topics, in addition to this introduction: subsection 2 provides the context and trajectory of previous agendas that led to the SDG pact; subsection 3 addresses the utopias surrounding these agendas and the academic debate on their limits and possibilities today. In sequence, we reflect on how some selected key players can act to promote the UN 2030 Agenda, from an institutional perspective. Finally, subsection 4 presents the final considerations.

2. The UN 2030 Agenda and the SDGs: context and collective motivation

The SDGs replace and extend the previous agenda, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), valid between 2000 and 2015, a global experience which, like the SDGs, had the profile of an action plan. The legacy of the MDGs was considered by the UN to be unfinished, with socio-economic, environmental and consumption pattern challenges, among others. The 2030 Agenda, more ambitious and comprehensive than the MDGs, proposes integrating economic growth, social justice and environmental management (United Nations, 2013; 2015). To this end, it contains guidelines, concepts, and indications for a 15-year period (2016-2030) drawn up by a working group of the UN General Assembly.

According to the United Nations (2015), the SDGs are guided by the propositions and principles of the United Nations Charter, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, international human rights treaties, the Millennium Declaration and the 2005 World Summit. It is true that other references, such as the Declaration on the Right to Development and the entire history of the sustainability thesis, have been added to the SDG effort, in which themes such as gender, education, income, production, ways of life, for example, stand out.

The SDGs reaffirm guidelines of UN conferences and summits on environment and development since the 1970s, such as: the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development; the World Summit on Sustainable Development; the World Summit for Social Development; the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and

Development; the Beijing Platform for Action; and the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20). They also reaffirm the outcomes of the Fourth United Nations Conference on the Least Developed Countries, the Third International Conference on Small Island Developing States, the Second United Nations Conference on Landlocked Developing Countries, and the Third UN World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction (Sendai and Tokyo, 2015).

In view of the implementation and monitoring processes, the provision of local indicators and autonomous actions by member countries aims to portray realities according to each country, its institutions, laws, and stages of development. The 232 initial indicators¹ of the SDGs, defined in 2017, lend themselves to comparisons between countries and, in part, to a summary of local parameters and overviews (United Nations, 2015). In Brazil, the federal government began this process between 2016 and 2018, including the adjustment of targets (Ipea, 2018) and actions to internalize, internalize, involve key institutions and public and private actors. However, the federal government stopped activities to improve de SDG since the beginning of 2019, weakening initiatives in other government sphere.

Globally, as in Brazil, the challenge of implementing this agenda is to require proportional efforts with its ambition in terms of SDG targets. Differences between countries indicate the size and negotiating nature of the aimed intentions. Therefore, in addition to not being mandatory, the implementation of the Goals and Targets depends on the coordination of national and local actions,

laws, and policies, as well as the strengthening of institutions and governance systems at the various levels of management (United Nations, 2015).

Challenging national and regional contexts, even before the international agreement on the SDGs, required attention to targets and indicators to overcome the generalist pattern of such agendas (Griggs *et al.*, 2013), not least because of the complexity and interrelationships of old and new challenges. Since the debate that preceded the agreement, criticism has arisen as to its effectiveness and ability to generate change, despite recognizing that its overall aim is to create synergies and avoid "lose-lose" relationships (Winkler & Williams, 2017; Dye, 2018). Swain (2018) and Scherer *et al.* (2018) mention ambiguities, contradictions and even trade-offs (impossibility of achieving opposing positions or purposes due to the clash of interests and logics - example: growth anchored in natural assets vs. sustainable development). The authors point out inconsistencies in the forms of implementation and diagnoses that lack the capacity to induce action by national and local governments.

Due to these gaps in the UN 2030 Agenda, which are evidenced in vague texts of goals and purposes (Winkler & Williams, 2017; Dye, 2018) and without binding legal effects (Biermann *et al.*, 2017), clear difficulties remain, both due to the "objectivity" of markets and traders and the subjectivity of the components of the Agenda, despite its integrative vision of "leaving no one behind". Therefore, while bringing hope, the SDGs raise doubts about the conditions under which they can be practiced (Griggs *et al.*, 2017; Biermann *et al.*,

¹ Although the initial list consisted of a total of 244 indicators, twelve of them were repeated in different targets, so the actual total number of indicators was 232.

2017; Swain, 2018). The ability to induce change is not unanimous among scholars of the SDGs, due to the disparity in actions by member countries and private actors.

Before this agenda, however, the academic debate (Bauman, 2001; Leff, 2001) has expressed concern about the unsustainability of the actions of power groups and the contradictions of capitalism (Harvey, 2008; Piketty, 2015), leading to civilizational impasses and doubts about the continuity of the diversity of life on Earth. To a large extent, these impasses are the result of economic model choices (Harvey, 2008; Piketty, 2015), as the UN itself recognizes in its diagnoses prior to the Agreement (United Nations, 2013; 2015).

In this respect, such agreements can be seen as a natural response, whether in resistance to the chaos to which the market economy tends, as discussed by Marx (2006) and Mannheim (1951), or in the hope of collectively building paths with recognition of the roles of social institutions and democracy as a basis (Mannheim, 1951; Leff, 2003; United Nations, 2015). The secular challenge that motivates such agendas is the need to seek convergences that oppose the political-economic and power realities that cause them. In this sense, even if the UN 2030 Agenda expresses a contradiction when seen through the lens of serving opposite sides of the dynamics of capitalism at the same time, it does not mean that it is a contradiction.

In the absence of a solid theoretical basis for overcoming economic concentration and power, the challenge of overcoming market interests and decision-making systems seems utopian. On the other hand, it is human nature for collective resistance to build utopias, in a process of joining forces for egalitarian and humanitarian progress. In this sense,

the question is: what steps can be taken with the help of agendas such as the SDGs?

Within the context of international agreements, the first answer to this question is necessarily that national laws and public policies are naturally the forms of internalization and implementation of these agendas. The idealization or utopia that opens up this perspective would be broad institutional adherence, the convergence of wills of the private productive sector and collective and community participation in the most diverse forums. This idealization is due to the fact that the SDGs are what is known as a "positive agenda", given their great appeal on socio-economic, environmental, cultural, rights and intergenerational issues that are difficult to formally oppose.

Thus, it must be recognized that, for private agents whose actions do not converge with sustainable development, discursive adherence can occur if they consider it to be more "effective". In this case, the changes would be specific, in one or other of the 169 SDG targets, according to their interests. Within the public sector, social movements and academia, such agendas feed bigger dreams of opportunities for convergence and the promotion of equity between people; the before mentioned humanitarian agenda for which adherence is natural. Along these lines, the possibility of progress resulting from the process of international agreements itself strengthens the democratic action of institutions and actors at the local, regional and national levels, resisting, through organization, new rights and knowledge and control of the strict dynamics of the market, which tends towards barbarism.

Having made these considerations and understanding the limitations and opportunities of agendas of this nature, it is appropriate to summarize the

assumptions that generated the SDGs and their targets, in order to guide the reflection in the following sections. Three central aspects or dimensions of the SDGs are:

i) the voluntary and one-off adhesion of companies/productive sectors and civil society organizations, academia, the press and citizen social activists;

ii) the adhesion of political powerhouses inside or outside governments (e.g. groups of parliamentarians, business associations, management councils, trade unions in general);

iii) the initial adoption of the 2030 Agenda by the State, with the institutionalization of the agreed goals.

Alternatively, we call these three aspects: volunteerism and activist diffusion; positioning of powerhouses; and institutionalization as a State policy. The following sections present the perspectives of the actions of selected actors, based on an understanding of utopia that is linked to sustainability agendas.

3. Prospects for collective action in implementing the SDGs: a necessary utopia?

Ribeiro (1991) had already linked the current of sustained (later sustainable) development to a type of utopia, to an "ideational universe" of great "elasticity" (op. cit., p. 60) that denied the more solid conceptions of the past, at a time when Marxism and "real socialism" were ebbing, and post-modernism and environmentalism were rising. Citing Hopenhayn, Ribeiro (1991) points out that

the understanding of utopia has reflected, since the Renaissance, "an exercise in freedom of spirit" (Hopenhayn, 1988, apud Ribeiro, 1991, p. 64), and has subsequently been adjectivized by various currents in their "own relative efficacies".

Veiga (2017) treats the ideal of sustainable development and the SDGs as utopias with some possible utility, depending on the actions of the actors involved. In the same line of thought, Cummings *et al.* (2018) consider the SDGs to be a discourse in which the positions of rich and poor countries are recorded, in an attempt to include different actors, knowledge and interests, with possible replication depending on the level of mobilization. The authors point to a mismatch between vision and strategy (which they consider transformational), in which implementation and objectives refer to business "as usual", with no clarity as to how the "participatory pluralism" brought about by the 2030 Agenda will be put into effect.

Eskelinen (2021) considers that "the utopian world of the SDGs consists of three main categories": the expression of the political subject; transformative values; and the notion of inclusive and fair prosperity (p. 186). Eskelinen (2021) evaluates that the SDGs are clearly utopian, with conflicts hidden under the curtain of technologies and values that do not connect with concrete measures to transform the reality of agents gaining from the loss of others. According to the author, the implementation guidelines of the UN 2030 Agenda and its governance are marked by the reaffirmation of the international order, the emphasis on national actions and the logic of hegemonic development economy thinking.

In fact, in order to make sense of the values highlighted by Eskelinen (2021), the implementers

of the 2030 Agenda could be inspired by the analyses of, for example, Mannheim (1951; 1972) and Chauí (2008), who approach the term utopia and its contexts from a critical point of view regarding conservatism that defends the status quo. According to Chauí (2008), Marx and Mannheim identify the need for a utopia that is based on a global vision of society, on the side of the poor, and in opposition to the vision of the ruling class. According to the author, the meaning given to utopia in Marx and Mannheim "is not exactly a discourse, but a set of practices and social movements that challenge society as a whole." (Chauí, 2008, p. 12), in other words, it is the defense of action in favor of transformational agendas.

However, since the transformational hypothesis of society is not the focus of the SDGs, as governments and the agendas they drive are limited by the capital's dynamics (Hollingsworth *et al.*, 1997; Lazonick, 2003; Marx, 2006), another contribution by Mannheim (1951) can be useful today: the role of institutions. For the author, by acting in a free, plural and democratic way, they act to avoid the chaos that the market tends to cause (Mannheim, 1951). Thus, the hypothesis we raise in this text, as well as in this section of the magazine, is that there is room to reflect on the movements of collegiate bodies, specific public agencies, academia, social movements and other democratic organizations in defense of sustainable agendas and networking, always bearing in mind their limitations in terms of function and power.

The following subsections look at perspectives (or utopias?) in this regard, bearing in mind the question posed in the introduction to this essay about ways to move forward in implementing the SDGs, even in the face of the difficulties listed.

3.1. The prospect of participatory governance and the integration of policies with the SDGs

The definition of governance does not find consensus in the academic debate. In the context of the UN 2030 Agenda, governance can be understood, in our view, as the design and manifestation of ways to operationalize complex processes or to coordinate and articulate government action, involving a diversity of actors and their demands. "Good governance" (Akhmouch & Correia, 2016) and "democratic governance" (Bevir, 2011) try to differentiate the action of the State in coordinating institutions, policies, and conflicts. This governance only exists if it is supported in the acceptance of the law and command and control measures (when democratically outlined), which becomes the basis for other types of measures, such as economic incentives.

In addition to this interpretation, there has been debates since the 1977 UN forums (Woodhouse & Muller, 2017), adding concepts of integrity, accountability and respect for the law (Integrity, Accountability and Compliance, in the original), which are widespread in institutions that audit accounts, promote justice and are evolving in the areas of management/oversight (Open Government Partnership, 2019). However, at the most basic level, i.e. in terms of implementation, there is a lack of consensus to achieve a utopia of governance that lasts over time, that resists changes of government and that is based on socio-economic inclusion and collective rights.

LeBlanc (2015) and Stafford-Smith *et al.* (2017) consider that the management and governance for the implementation of international agreements such as the SDGs are more comprehensive

and based on integration mechanisms than the previous agenda, the MDGs. However, they raise difficulties that are largely present in the document that formalizes the UN 2030 Agenda, such as:

- i) the need for greater integration between sectors based on strategic plans;
- ii) the establishment of public policies and means of implementation;
- iii) reducing the agenda's dependence on a multi-stakeholder effort;
- iv) and the commitment and involvement of different levels of government (local, regional and national), the productive sector, civil society and international organizations.

In Brazil, we can add the weakening of State institutions to these limitations, especially the Federal Government, in recent years, in opposition to what the 2030 Agenda recommends. As in many countries with complex social, economic, and environmental diversity, there are also uncertainties here as to the type of actions that will be taken on socio-environmental issues due to the level of dissonance (trade-off) between the SDG targets and the interests of power groups.

In this scenario, it must be considered that there are elements of utopia that are necessary and legitimate for the advocates of this UN agenda, especially regarding the prospect of participatory and adaptive governance capable of reaching minimum agreements for the implementation of the SDGs. To this end, it would be essential to get back on track with sustainability actions, through the dissemination of information and the implementation of national legal instruments related to the 2030 Agenda. In addition, it is necessary to penalize economic agents that do not converge with sustainability,

reward those that do, support participatory forums, adjust budgets, and coordinate actions to induce and direct initiatives that converge with national laws and the SDGs.

In the case of SDG 6, for example, in its central theme - universal access to basic sanitation and management of water resources for its multiple uses - among the factors of possible convergence in relation to the implementation of the goals are the policies and mechanisms already structured in the country, which combine environmental protection with participatory management and governance. Particularly in water resources, there is a recognized complexity and dependence on consensus, alliances and actions to integrate policies and management (Novaes & Jacobi, 2009; Abers, 2010; OECD, 2015a, 2015b; Moura *et al.*, 2016).

It is worth remembering that, in Brazil, governance in this area of water resources is structured around collective participation in the multiple uses of water, aspects that are increasingly necessary (OECD, 2015b), despite the recognized difficulties of the current model (Law No. 9.433/1997 - National Water Resources Policy). In other words, there are elements of utopia in the model, based on the collective construction of solutions, co-responsibility and participatory water management and governance. On the other hand, there is not a solid thesis against this utopia that offers a model without a more progressive or evolutionary one. On the contrary, autocratic, centralized, top-down management experiences are known to generate conflicts and cannot be replicated in complex situations, concentrating the control and ownership of water (Abers, 2010; Novaes & Jacob, 2009; OECD, 2015b); and therefore, undemocratic and inapplicable in various conflict situations.

Moreover, formal pacts (a set of legal frameworks and responsibilities of the federative entities) are a premise for any formulation of governance based on sharing, duties, participation, and rights (Acselrad et al, 2004; Novaes & Jacobi, 2009; Abers, 2010; Acselrad, 2010; Moura *et al.*, 2016). There are so many challenges, given that the various models of management and governance of water resources are rooted in utopias that drive their principles and guidelines. In this way, participatory governance on the theme of water and SDG 6 and its utopias in the most advanced sense highlighted herein is the basis of actions converging with democratic and integrated management, starting from the advanced level of the theme's institutionalization in the country (Bronzatto *et al.*, 2018).

In sanitation, the focus of the powerhouse (in government and the policy arena), especially in the process that led to the approval of Law No. 14.026/2020, is directed towards the division of markets and the regulation focused on it (Santos *et al.*, 2020). Participatory structures are non-existent, except for class organizations, social movements, the provision of collegiate systems and signs of validation of regulatory agencies' work plans. Among other utopias, ideologies, and beliefs in market solutions to the great deficit of services (Kuwajima *et al.*, 2020), discourses including the SDGs stand out, amid disagreements about which direction to take to universalize care.

The law's lack of focus on universalization (a utopia as a necessary goal) and its continued feasibility (service, quality, price, and regularity) runs counter to SDG 6. There was even room for a new definition of universalization, which could release concessionaires and the State from their obligation to treat water as a human right. The pri-

vate agents' claim, allegedly not utopian, is that the State cannot be the main provider of solutions for these services, a thesis that was approved in the new legal framework for basic sanitation, under strong influence of the private sector (Santos *et al.*, 2020).

Thus, in the case of SDG 6 - water and sanitation - the conditions of "institutionalization as a State policy" and "volunteerism and activist diffusion" must be considered, returning to the typology presented in section 2 of this essay. As with other SDGs, the challenges that remain in this regard can be summarized as follows:

- i) dependence on agreements between economic powerhouses within the limits of their interests and within the market dynamics they determine;
- ii) the need for a large number of economic agents to adopt the SDGs as a whole, which would be a trade-off in relation to the tendency towards inequalities inherent in capitalism;
- iii) dependence on public policies and resources to reduce fragilities in all dimensions and between regions and sub-regions.

Seven years have passed from the start of the 2030 Agenda, the reference point for the SDGs in Brazil continues to be the reliance on partial agreements between institutions and private actors and local and state governments (CNM, 2017; Brasil, 2018; 2019), in a limited sum of experiences and efforts of a non-disruptive nature. In this respect, the identity of the SDGs with utopias is undeniable, since these non-disruptive efforts imply a dependence on agreements for governance that will at least partially realize the goals.

3.2. *The non-disruptive and non-utopian perspective of the appropriation of the SDGs: the logic of political economy*

Since the studies of Marx (1977, 2006), it has been clear that between idealizations and utopias of a plural and inclusive society, interests anchored in the political economy prevail, resulting from the practice of elite economic power. Currently, studies on the dynamics of capitalism highlight the importance of institutional mechanisms and policies in the face of market dysfunctions and contradictions (Hollingsworth *et al.*, 1997; Lazonick, 2003; Nee & Swedberg, 2005; Boyer, 2009; Piketty, 2014; Dermody *et al.*, 2021). For these authors, however, not only the fundamentals of the economy and its internal dynamism within corporations (such as technical progress, technological innovations, productivity, and allocative efficiency), but also the interactions, agreements, and arrangements between actors shape policies of great relevance, with utopian elements and also with effects on society. It is on this set of aspects that the arguments for the feasibility of humanitarian agendas such as the SDGs are based.

Particularly in the areas of environmental management and economic activities, it is a fact that there is a scenario of incentives and responses to changes in part of the productive segments and value chains, from raw materials to multi-processed products and their marketing (Elkington, 2011; Uncdad, 2014; 2019; Dermody *et al.*, 2021). On the other hand, there have also been setbacks such as trade barriers to poor countries and the appropriation of common goods from others without due compensation or remuneration, such as water, which makes agricultural and mineral commodities possible.

In fact, the most advanced economic agents (concentrators, centralizers, in Marx's conception, 2006), i.e. large economic groups, began to partly assimilate what was considered to be environmental protection spending as an investment, a strategic position, a competitive element or market dominance. Elkington (2011) points out that this new behavior offers a competitive advantage, as well as a paradox to non-dynamic options.

In this sense, an agreement with Brown's consideration (2009, p. 17) is becoming broader, which is: "The traditional way of doing things, 'business as usual', is beginning to sound like the end of the world". This is what Paul Polman (2014), one of the supporters of the 2030 Agenda and representative of a major food company at the time, said about the relationship between the productive sectors, society and the future. Polman (2014) states that there is no prosperity in a world where one billion people go to bed hungry and 2.3 billion have no access to basic sanitation.

However, the market and its productive dynamics show a considerable gap between pro-sustainability discourse and the practice that controls the production and distribution of goods, including those essential to life. As we saw during the most critical moments of the Covid-19 epidemic, the allocation of financial and technological resources at a global level, the production and allocation of vaccines and the control of essential goods to combat the pandemic were largely directed according to the interests of the pharmaceutical sector under the protection of the governments of wealthy countries. We observe the distance between the goals of the SDGs and the theses/utopias/ideals of human rights. The non-sharing of technologies and patentable scientific knowledge is another example that denies

the hypothesis of commitments between peoples and countries to reduce inequalities. The limits of the UN's agendas, which are naturally non-disruptive, are evident, with the political-economic dimension limiting expectations of implementing the 2030 Agenda.

On the other hand, some of the corporations with great local or international economic power, sensitive to consumer's reactions to socio-environmental damage (UNCTAD, 2014; 2019), react to a possible decline in the value of their income and assets on stock exchanges. In order to maintain their positions and market share, they are pushing for their targets of interest in the 2030 Agenda, as long as it is advantageous for them. Examples in this group are large supermarket chains and retailers, major players in the meat, beverages and other food, energy and utilities sectors, and agents in the banking system.

These initiatives from the production, trade and banking sectors, initially driven by the demands of consumers/activists in Europe, are limited to specific convergences with the SDGs. UNCTAD (2014; 2019) suggests convergence with parts of the SDGs, but does not tackle distributive issues between countries and only mentions topics from the environmental agenda, in a section that is disconnected from the social side and inequalities. In this scenario, initiatives such as the Global Agenda (organizations for the SDGs) have been hostage to agreements between different actors, interests and realities, as Biermann *et al.* (2017) and Young (2017) maintain.

The aforementioned increase in the number of billionaires, *pari passu* with the impoverishment of the masses, highlights the liberal options of making work more precarious and the concentration of the

means of production (Piketty, 2014). At the same time, there is no progress in recognizing socio-environmental damage between countries, regions or corporations, an aspect that is absent from the SDGs, illustrating the permanence of trade-offs (Scherer *et al.*, 2018).

Other examples of political and economic divergences in relation to sustainability are, during the SDGs effectiveness:

i) the retreat of governments from formalizing mandatory greenhouse gas emission reduction agreements;

ii) the weakening of environmental management and social protection in catastrophic situations and tragedies, such as the Covid-19 pandemic and the increase in environmental damage in Brazil;

iii) the expansion of humanitarian anti-immigration movements in Europe and the US;

iv) the failure to create or implement funds to support populations in a state of social vulnerability, including food (FAO/UN Fund);

v) the lack of technological transfer, which has been on the agenda since the 1992 UN Conference;

vi) and the strong resistance of productive sectors and power groups averse to the socio-environmental agenda, with environmental degradation in forests, waters, and biomes.

In this way, the appropriation of the UN 2030 Agenda by the economic sector shows the continuity of discourses and market purposes rooted in archaic visions of development. It is important to strengthen the positions of institutions and activists in favor of sustainable development agendas, a perspective that is briefly discussed in the following subsection.

3.3. *The prospect of strengthening State institutions*

Despite the fact that the SDGs are positioned in a contradictory way in relation to the dynamics of power and political economy, a few notes are in order on how they align with the role of State institutions. Among them are those with a duty to act in the face of the reality of the situation, established law and accountability (i.e. budget allocation and the choice of public policies). In this regard, Cosgrove & Loucks (2015) point out that the economic, demographic and technological dimensions accelerate society's ability to modify the environment, consciously or unconsciously, based on knowledge that drives State policy decisions.

This is how concerns about issues such as hunger, extreme poverty, social inequalities, injustice, and power asymmetry demand reactions anchored in the duty to act and in utopias. With a certain degree of autonomy and external power to induce governments, these institutions stand out among those responsible for implementing sustainability policies, budgets and agendas:

- i) academia (for scientific, philosophical and cultural freedom and autonomy, and plurality of positions);
- ii) social organizations (for their willingness to form local partnerships in the face of contradictions of powerhouses in the State and the market);
- iii) the parliament (for its freedom of action, including denouncing and proposing laws that converge with sustainability);
- iv) the bodies that control and promote justice - courts of auditors (TCs) and the Public Prosecutor's Office (MP) - due to their constitutional duties. They

all combine utopias with the performance willingness or commitment, and there is no doubt that the UN Agenda makes sense to them.

In the context of the State, it is worth remembering, following the classification presented earlier (of "voluntary/activist actions", "powerhouse positions" and "institutional adhesion"), that the intertwining that enabled Brazil's initial adhesion to the SDGs refers to this third key aspect or dimension of adhesion to the Agenda. The initiatives to disseminate the SDGs have, with the exception of inconsistencies and delays, reached all branches of government and all federal entities (Ipea, 2018; Brasil, 2017; 2018), although with little participation from society.

Despite the delays in implementing the SDGs until 2017, and the gap in building social and political-economic pacts to support the agreement after 2018, the actions of groups working on this issue in the three branches of government are relevant. These include actions by collegiate bodies, legislative commissions, technical committees, sub-sections of the Public Prosecutor's Office and the TC, and work fronts of federal, state and municipal bodies.

In their constitutional role, the bodies that audit accounts, promote justice and collective and diffuse rights are legitimate centers for inducing and monitoring legislation and inducing applications linked to the SDGs. The assumption of autonomy in the fulfillment of their functions with freedom of action for their members are the basic elements for them to contribute to sustainability agendas. Brazil has a long history of cases in which compliance with laws and sustainability agendas only occurs in response to the actions of these institutions and civil organizations. Some examples are the actions

of the Public Prosecutor's Office against economic agents (in recent years, in tragedies caused by mining companies and illegal deforestation) and against public authorities (in failures or omissions in environmental action and in guaranteeing public services, including sanitation).

The actions of these institutions in this area have shown themselves to be convergent in command and control actions on key points such as:

- i) strengthening of the performance commitment, as a result of agreements prior to legal actions, in the Terms of Adjustment of Conduct (TAC);
- ii) data sharing in the environmental and water resources areas;
- iii) formation of working groups to deal with disasters;
- iv) inducement or obligation to organize management in river basins;
- v) creating or authorizing the imposition of emergency fees (in the face of water shortages and droughts); and
- vi) training actions, audits, creation of sustainability issues specialized areas, among others.

In addition to inducing and directing compliance with national laws and policies, the work of these institutions, when directed at the governing body and entities under their supervision, can also strengthen the culture of obedience to the law. As a result, it is expected that public bodies in a given sector, such as the environment, water and sanitation, will be strengthened by monitoring the minimum conditions for fulfilling their tasks and the requirements assigned.

Taking the example of SDG 6, it is a fact that environmental and water management bodies at

the national level have not yet been strengthened by the advent of the 2030 Agenda, given the lack of prioritization in these areas, which remain heavily dependent on the State in the face of private sector interests. This can be seen in regulatory agencies and participatory collegiate bodies (councils, river basin committees, among others), due to the deactivation of collegiate bodies at the federal level (Presidential Decree no. 9.759 of 2019) and the interruption of the federal government's actions in implementing the 2030 Agenda.

This interpretation of strengthening institutions (and, to a certain extent, command and control actions in management), it should be noted, does not ignore the relevance of economic and financial incentives (Margulis, 1996; May *et al.*, 2003). However, breaking with the status quo and its political and economic inertia has historically not come from the sectors with the greatest economic and political power (Mannheim, 1951; Leff, 2001; Marx, 2006), but through social mobilization. In this way, without inductive actions in favor of sustainability, we can return to the belief that the main gap is the absence of management and planning instruments or mechanisms, and not the divergent choices of political and economic powerhouses. This interpretation softens the responsibility of these actors.

In addition to the account auditing, promotion justice, and the role of civil society in the sustainability agenda, the strengthening of environmental and water management is required as an essential point in the perspective of becoming key institutions for the SDGs, working in:

- i) alliances between and among groups (e.g. NGOs, part of the business community, academia and public agents);

ii) new perspectives on governance, especially at local and regional level;

iii) social and political-economic agreements based on the consumption link, involving retail chains, financial organizations and civil society;

iv) changes in production patterns;

v) the rise of ideas or conceptions of new methodologies and approaches to measuring/quantifying values and ways of using natural resources - such as the Circular Economy, the Nexus and Nexus+ perspective and Natural-Based Solutions (NBS).

Although the Agenda depends on positions that are difficult to converge in the decision-making arenas and also on agreements between political and economic powerhouses for the implementation of the most advanced measures, it is based on the idea that it promotes new pacts and enhances: the continuity of positive agendas (environmental education and communication, qualification of technicians, dialogues, improvement of norms); the construction of governance systems in collective arrangements and constructs in favor of the ideal or utopia of sustainability; management supported by formal social pacts (laws, policies, collaborative spaces, planning, management and evaluation actions) and informal ones (cultural aspects, habits of traditional populations, community initiatives, local associative actions); and the expansion of pressure and inducement agreements/measures on markets, in the key seals of value chains and in their financing.

Under such a wide range of possibilities, laws, management and governance instruments and the actions that implement them are the point of reference between what is utopia in motion, as support for initiatives converging with the SDGs, and what

manifests itself in its static, uncritical form. The first of these utopias and its institutional perspectives, social movements and multidisciplinary partnerships that can guide public policies and budget allocations in favor of present and future agendas to promote sustainability.

4. Final considerations

This article has briefly presented the foundations and limits of the UN 2030 Agenda in terms of its conceptual underpinnings and has highlighted gaps that hinder its implementation. As a voluntary international agreement, the Agenda includes different visions, ideals, utopias and perspectives with the potential for change in line with sustainable development. However, despite the SDGs expressing directives for integrated and inclusive management, supported by participatory governance, within State institutions and partnerships, their implementation remains dependent on the adhesion of powerhouses to comply with national standards aligned with sustainable development.

It is worth noting that the goals of the SDGs, despite maintaining important operational gaps, indicate that, between utopias and realities, their implementation is a natural way to overcome the belief in the sufficiency of the market and the static nature of public policies and their instruments. Repeating other sustainability agendas, both the dynamics and the non-convergent behaviors in the markets require command and control instruments and management incentives so that the guidelines and goals, as collectively constructed utopias, can be implemented.

In the specific case of SDG 6, this sum of efforts also includes the important role of key ins-

tutions (government and civil society bodies and entities, academia, deliberative collegiate bodies, among others) and the incentives provided by law to foster conversations and integrated governance of policies and their management instruments. In addition, the work of bodies such as account auditing and the Public Prosecutor's Office, in line with the national laws of each sector, can strengthen the institutions that deal with water and the environment and the transition from utopias to achievable goals.

From the perspective of governance systems with this approach, based on plurality and connecting utopias and transformative practices, Brazil has, as pointed out in the text, the legal and institutional conditions to take steps forward in line with the SDGs and sustainable development. Even though the first seven years of the SDG agreement have not been used consistently, their content and similarities to national laws keep them as opportunities for Brazil.

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