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Engaging with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG):

Gaps, Opportunities and Challenges

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Development Studies and the SDGs

- Mapping an Agenda

On 25 September 2015 the United Nations General Assembly adopted 17
Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 169 targets with its resolution
Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.[1] Since then,
the SDGs or Agenda 2030 have emerged as the ultimate reference point not only
for sustainable development, but also often as a justification for applied
development studies.

SDGs did not fall from heaven. They were the result of a long process of
negotiations. They do not cover all aspects related to development studies and
cannot claim ultimate power of definition over development, notwithstanding
their strong influence in the debate. While policy makers and the aid industry
within international collaboration tend to link almost everything nowadays to the
SDGs, development studies should not become hostage of such a limited

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[1] United Nations, General Assembly, seventieth session, Agenda items 15 and 16.
Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 25 September 2015. A/RES/70/1, 21
October 2015, *Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.*

perspective. Rather, development studies, while engaging with the SDGs and contributing to their implementation, should maintain a certain critical distance to the dominant norms and paradigms implemented.

This presentation explores the concepts of development and development studies and their links to Agenda 2030. It revisits earlier efforts towards a new development paradigm and thereby looks beyond the SDGs. [2] It examines the efforts towards sustainable development as a concept within an emancipatory discourse, which should be rooted in global solidarity, justice and human dignity. An agenda rather transcending then being in full compliance and within the confinement of the SDGs is advocated to maintain ownership by scholars over development studies instead of surrendering the power of definition to the political and aid bureaucracy.

What is Development?

Development is a frequently used term. It is common currency in as diverse global forums as the World Economic Forum (WEF) as well as in the arena of the World Social Forum (WSF) established as the alter-globalist counter-forum. Given such wide panorama, it should not come as a surprise that the United Nations (UN) never undertook a serious definition, but "focused largely on international programmes and plans for development, rather than on defining the notion of development itself".[3] Development is not easily providing a common denominator, even among those considered to be like- or at least similarly minded. At a closer look those involved in the academic discipline of Development Studies most likely do not share a common understanding, concept and definition of what this weird animal called development means, implies and describes.

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[2] The text draws in part on the following previous articles: "Whose World? Development, civil society, development studies and (not only) scholar activists", *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 35, no. 6, 2014, pp. 1082-1097; "Knowledge is Power – and Power Affects Knowledge: Challenges for Research Collaboration in and with Africa", *Africa Development*, vol. XL, no. 4, 2015, pp. 21-42.

[3] Otto Spijkers, *The United Nations, the Evolution of Global Values and International Law*. PhD thesis, University of Leiden. Antwerp/Oxford/Portland: Intersentia 2011, p. 455.

Aram Ziai has tried to offer a navigating tool through this jungle, which left behind the former Eurocentric all-encompassing and hegemonic mainstream concept. He suggests that development could be considered as "a bundle of interconnected and normatively positive processes which took place in some parts of the earth but not in others."[4] While he considers this as a pragmatic working definition, he is sensitive enough to suggest at the same time that such an understanding offers reasons for its critique. He therefore resorts to the view of the anthropologist James Ferguson, for whom development "is the name not only for a value but also for a dominant problematic or interpretative grid through which the impoverished regions of the world are known to us."[5] But Ziai remains aware that this is not the full story, as such a characterization tends to blur socio-economic and socio-political as well as socio-cultural phenomena often related to power, privilege and exclusion. The misleading implication remains, that developmental initiatives and their institutions could solve them. He identifies this as a structural problem:

> because of the normative connotation of the concept processes intended to bring about 'development' form a common ground for donor institutions, planning ministries, concerned social groups and NGOs. Who could be against 'development'? It is much more difficult to find support for political initiatives which point to conflicts on the national or international level and side with marginalized, exploited or oppressed groups.[6]

Ziai's effort is however still not far reaching enough. It enters the contestation over who holds the power of definition over development. Why not accept instead that development is merely a technical term, only implying changes, no matter in which direction. Setbacks, processes of destitution, climate change, migration, pauperization and marginalization are as much elements of development within a context of growing disparities between people both locally as well as globally as

[4] Aram Ziai, *Postcolonial perspectives on 'development'*. Bonn: Centre for Development Research/University of Bonn 2012 (ZEP Working Paper 103), p. 4.
[5] James Ferguson, *The Anti-Politics Machine. Development, Depoliticization and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1994 (originally 1990), p. xiii; quoted in ibid.
[6] Ibid., pp. 4f.

what is generally associated with positive effects of development. In the history of the expansion of Europe over the rest of the world in the name of "development" – then often dubbed as "civilization" – the worst atrocities and crimes tantamount to genocide were committed. Development is at times a monstrous cloak or a cloak for monsters.

Let's look rather into the challenges we are facing to contribute to a better life for as many people as possible in our world, without giving such social struggles any terminological connotation. In doing so, I do of course not suggest some kind of "anything goes". We should always remain loyal to the fundamental coordinates for our compass as defined by human rights, social justice, equity and equality and not least empathy and solidarity as reference points against which our minds and deeds ought to be measured. In that sense, one opts out of a futile claim over what development means by seeking to remain in compliance with these basic values. Put differently: support of struggles striving emancipation is just one of many – at times antagonistic – notions of so-called development.

Consequently, being engaged in development studies, we look into social processes and the changes, seeking to find meanings and explanations, maybe even interventions – hopefully for the better. But even for that is no guarantee. The best-intentioned 'do-gooders' are often a high risk for causing further damage, if not protected by a constant process of critical self-reflections about what we are doing and how we are doing it – and the purposes and motivations driving us in our engagements. The "securitization of development", i.e. the increasingly inter-connected military and civilian components of intervention in the name of "progress" would be a case in point.[7]

The Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation had since the early 1970s been among the idea-based organisations giving priority to explorations challenging the dominant paradigms in search of "Another Development" and providing a forum for these voices to be heard. The initiative was based on the shared conviction that our late-capitalist industrial mode of production and its accompanying value and

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[7] Jens Stilhoff Sörensen and Frederik Söderbaum (eds.), *The End of the Development-Security Nexus? The Rise of Global Disaster Management*. Uppsala: Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation 2012 (*Development Dialogue*, no. 58).

belief system mystifying the technological rationality had already too far advanced into a dead end street.

The report of the Civil Society Reflection Group on Global Development Perspectives[8], which had been prepared as an input to Rio+20, is among the examples of a wider alliance of civil society agencies in part inspired by the earlier initiatives of "Another Development". It stresses among others the continued role of states in our globalized, unequal world of the 21st century. We sometimes tend to wrongly assume that state agencies and institutions have been degraded to toothless tigers vis-à-vis corporate and financial power. While the latter definitely plays an eminent role, states through their laws, judiciary, governments and administrations clearly continue to have some say in national and global affairs – if only they want to. Some of those occupying political and administrative commanding heights in societies might be tempted to use proclaimed (and at times indeed also real) limitations to state power as a weak excuse to avoid confrontation with those holding economic power by not taking responsibility and initiatives. – Meanwhile others guided by more autocratic mindsets in despotic regimes have no problems to insist on the holy principle of national sovereignty as the flip side of the evasiveness to accept and deal with social problems both locally as well as globally.

The Reflection Group's "Mindset Appeal" therefore rightly so demanded (in vain) from the Rio 2012 Summit to "re-affirm the State as the indispensable actor setting the legal frame, enforcing standards of equity and human rights, and fostering long-term ecological thinking, based on democratic legitimacy."[9] States remain relevant if not decisive entities and battlefields over the future of societies and the wellbeing of the people composing these societies. This is of course, where the Agenda 2030 as adopted by the UN Member States becomes a relevant reference point when measuring realities against declared goals.

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[8] Civil Society Reflection Group on Global Development Perspectives, *No future without justice. Report of the Civil Society Reflection Group on Global Development Perspectives*. Uppsala: Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation 2012 (*Development Dialogue*, no. 59).
[9] 'Urgent Appeal to Change the Mindset', Statement by the Reflection Group, New York, 6 March 2011; reproduced in Civil Society Reflection Group, *No Future Without Justice*, op. cit., p. 5.

Which Kind of Development Studies?

Given the efforts for "bringing the state back in", one tends to agree with the warning that "it would be highly premature for development studies to replace the paradigmatic importance of the state by that of civil society".[10] Let us not pretend that development studies were and are not to a large extent also state-centered. After all, they were also originally an integral part of the expansion of Europe into the rest of this world, if only in very fragmented and cryptic forms of early so-called civilizing missions as advocated by missionaries, some colonial administrators and other pioneers of anthropology (maybe more than any other academic discipline the midwife or sibling to development studies). From colonialism to development studies was only a small step. Modernization was about "development" and the power of definition what this supposedly entails for people affected by the expansionist project.[11] Progress was tantamount to civilizing the "savages", and if necessary, to "exterminate the brutes", if they objected to their destiny.[12] In this context, the initial developmental studies were strictly speaking more motivated by and serving the promotion of Western development in colonial settings.

Times have changed. With the decolonization processes state sovereignty introduced a new and important element into the North-South relations. It gave birth to bi- and multilateral development aid and collaboration since more than half a century, while it largely continued to follow patterns of a one-dimensional modernization path. The ideological differences at the height of the Cold War

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[10] Frans J. Schuurman, "Globalization and Development Studies: Introducing the challenges." In *Globalization and Development Studies. Challenges for the 21st Century*, edited by Frans J. Schuurman. London: SAGE 2001, pp. 3-14 (here: p.13).
[11] See Mark Duffield and Vernon Hewitt (eds.), *Empire, Development & Colonialism. The Past in the Present.* Woodbridge: James Currey 2009.
[12] See i.a. Dirk A. Moses (ed.), *Empire, Colony, Genocide. Conquest, Occupation, and Subaltern Resistance in World History.* New York: Berghahn 2008; Henning Melber with John Y. Jones (eds.), *Revisiting the heart of darkness – Explorations into genocide and other forms of mass violence.* Uppsala: Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation 2008 (*Development Dialogue*, no. 50).

could not hide that the premises for social development in both camps did not really differ in terms of the anticipated needs to 'modernize' based on a growth model resembling an imitation of Fordist features of industrial societies as the aspired goal. Since then, development studies have to a large extent emancipated from being an instrument of further expansion of the West into the rest. Similar to social anthropology, development studies were able to critically revisit and reflect on its premises and the underlying notions and assumptions. Development Studies have shifted their focus from seeking formulas and recipes to understand local processes with the intention to "develop" the people towards analyzing the underlying social structures and the reproduction of hierarchies, both locally as well as globally. This included also at times the ambition not only to better understand such structures but also to contribute to their transformation.

By doing so, the earlier North-South dichotomy has in tendency been replaced by a focus on the globally dominant structures, which operate with local bases and at the expense of people everywhere. Processes of enrichment correspond with those of marginalization and impoverishment. The global pact among elites results in "collateral damage" also in the former metropolis, where destitution becomes a daily phenomenon. Development studies are confronted with new social realities even in those countries, which promoted this discipline as a tool to "help others" in far away places. Those in search of "Another Development" since the early 1970s were not any longer considered as visionaries out of touch with realities, but increasingly respected for being pioneers. "Coming to terms with nature"[13] entered the agenda of those seeking emancipation through social struggles. "Metahumanism" challenged the reductionist rationality guiding the dominant discourses since the era of enlightenment as one of the hallmarks of modernity.[14]

Development studies as a result translated at least to some extent – like area studies - into global studies. The we-they divide between members of different

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[13] Leo Panitch and Colin Leys (eds.), *Coming to Terms With Nature. Socialist Register 2007*. London: Merlin Press 2006.
[14] John Sanbonmatsu, *The Postmodern Prince: Critical Theory, Left Strategy, and the Making of a New Political Subject*. New York: Monthly Review Press 2004, pp. 203ff.

societies in different parts of the world was increasingly less important than the common grounds for the struggles for emancipation against the monstrosities of the unleashed markets seeking profit maximization at the expense of the welfare state even where it existed before. Human dignity was discovered as a relevant category, applicable to all human beings everywhere.

> The challenge for development studies is to re-establish its continued relevance to study and understand processes of exclusion, emancipation, and development. This cannot be achieved by clinging to its once treasured paradigms, but can be achieved by creatively incorporating the new Zeitgeist, without giving up its normative basis, i.e. the awareness that only with a universal morality of justice is there a future for humanity.[15]

"Opposing the pathologies of globalization", as a key aspect identified for the work of International NGOs[16] might also be a task for development studies, even as global studies. Their relevance will be ultimately measured against their contribution to a better future for as many people as possible.

The UN and the SDGs

A recent thesis documents the value-based nature of the UN, with its Charter as "the constitution of the world". It points to the evolution and crystallization of the enshrined values over the subsequent 65 years until 2010.[17] By doing so, it stresses the world organization's essential contribution to the design of a normative framework based on fundamental values. But it also points to the neglect such norms are treated with in the daily business of negotiating and adopting programs for implementation, which follow often a more pragmatic approach when seeking at least formal consensus. A practitioner and international

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[15] Schuurman, "Globalization and Development Studies", *op. cit.*, pp. 13f.
[16] Jean-Mark Coicaud, "Conclusion: INGOs as Collective Mobilization of Transnational Solidarity: Implications for Human Rights Work at the United Nations." In *Ethics in Action. The Ethical Challenges of International Human Rights Nongovernmental Organizations*, edited by Daniel A. Bell and Jean-Marc Coicaud. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2007, pp. 279-301 (here: p. 284).
[17] Spijkers, *The United Nations,* op. cit.

civil servant, who acquired most intimate insights and knowledge as regards the UN Development System, has made a similar observation:

> while goal-setting has been one of the means of translating words into action, the UN's normative approach has not been sufficiently emphasized. A prime example is found in the UN's most important and original paradigm of human development.[18]

The UN Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro (1992) and the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg (2002) were indeed among the more recent relevant markers in a series of top-level global meetings, which were continued in other forums all over the world with a focus on development. They created normative reference points such as the Convention on Biological Diversity and the Framework Convention on Climate Change in order to meet the challenges – with little to no effect in stopping the environmental deterioration and the approaching collapse of our basic minimum requirements for reproduction such as water and air. Never mind the Kyoto Protocol, Copenhagen's COP 15, the subsequent COPs in Mexico, South Africa and elsewhere, as well as the latest grand finales at Rio+20 and the Paris Accord: substance actually had not advanced much since the first environment related global conference of its kind in Stockholm 1972, when the major challenges were already diagnosed. And as the US American withdrawal from the Paris Accord just signaled, the nature of such commitments is considered anything but binding.

As skeptics predicted, progress has not advanced much beyond square one. Despite more than 300 multilateral agreements negotiated and entered into since the early 1970s, the world's climate faces collapse. Political and institutional constraints have stood in the way of a solution. The tendency of governments to place narrow state interests above global survival comes at a life-threatening price. It is therefore not surprising that many concerned persons had few if any expectations or illusions that any of the global summits would actually demonstrate the required problem-solving capacity. Despite all the declarations,

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[18] Stephen Browne, *Sustainable Development Goals and UN Goal-Setting.* London and New York: Routledge 2017, p. 2.

declamations and lip service, policy responses and adaptations fall short of addressing the challenges. The logic of the era of the Enlightenment, in which human beings utilize nature for short-term gain without concern for long-term survival, approaches bankruptcy. The pseudo-omnipotence of the anthropocentric arrogance of power meets its limitations in the face of the unleashed forces of nature. The grand ideas of rationality, seeking to create a world of its making, have - despite latest technological advances manipulating the biological diversity and turning it into a global monoculture - to ultimately capitulate when nature rebels or collapses.

Taking stock provides a sobering result: There has been no linear, progressive evolvement of steps forward in the UN's norm-setting history. After setbacks during the decades of the Cold War era it peaked in the 1990s with several global summits defining new aspirations and visions: Vienna, Copenhagen, Cairo, Beijing and other global events suggested a pseudo-willingness for problem solving. But the declarations adopted were often bordering more to wishful thinking than mapping realistic pathways towards implementation. Setbacks showed the limitations of the declarations. They mainly suggested technocratic solutions to problems, which run deeper. By doing so, they also diverted attention from the more principled values at stake.

The adoption of the SDGs follows despite the accompanying rhetoric the same pattern. They "are more technical than normative, giving insufficient attention to the UN's own norms and standards".[19] This is underlined by the fact that as late as March 2017 a total of 244 indicators were added to the 17 goals and 169 targets. This reinforces not only a management problem but creates the misleading impression, that a proper and detailed check list would be sufficient to deal with the major challenges our world and the dominant lifestyle is facing. Goal-setting is of course a wholly legitimate exercise, albeit with a limited impact over time. Rather: "Goals need to recognize and embrace all of development's realities, beyond the merely technical, and emphasize more normative approaches

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[19] Ibid., p. 3.

in keeping with the original principles and values of the UN."[20] Global goals therefore should not be "an image of the fragmented system"[21], but instead be re-designed "around concepts of bottom-up human development concerns rather than top-down sectoral priorities".[22]

As a result, SDGs continue to reinforce a silo approach sub-divided into economic, social and environmental pillars. Cross cutting issues (such as gender and human rights, racism, xenophobia, homophobia, migration and displacement, to mention only some more obvious ones) remain confined to a specified goal – if at all. Or they feature only as tokenism in a vague declaration of intent, when it is stated towards the end of the document in para 74(e) among the guiding principles: "They will be people-centered, gender-sensitive, respect human rights and have a particular focus on the poorest, most vulnerable and those furthest behind."[23] In contrast, the concrete wish list, however, does not adequately recognize these commitments. It is specified as follows: 1) end poverty; 2) end hunger; 3) well-being for all; 4) equitable quality education; 5) gender equality; 6) water and sanitation for all; 7) energy for all; 8) decent work for all; 9) inclusive and sustainable industrialization; 10) reduce inequality; 11) sustainable cities and human developments; 12) sustainable consumption and production; 13) combat climate change; 14) sustainable use of the oceans, seas and marine resources; 15) sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, halt and reverse land degradation and biodiversity loss; 16) justice for all and effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels; 17) revitalize the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development.

As the Introduction claims: "These are universal goals and targets which involve the entire world… They are integrated and indivisible and balance the three dimensions of sustainable development."[24] But the same paragraph starts with the clarification: "This is an Agenda … respecting national policies and

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[20] Ibid., p. 5.
[21] Ibid., p. 110.
[22] Ibid., p. 133.
[23] United Nations, *Transforming our world,* op. cit., p. 32.
[24] Ibid., p. 3.

priorities".[25] In other words: "America first" is by no means a deviation from the spirit of the Declaration, but a legitimate act of patriotic self-interest. And here is another problem: almost as often as the word "sustainable" (which is included in 11 of the 17 goals) features in the context of implementation the word "voluntary": As stipulated in no uncertain terms under 74(a), follow-up and review processes "will be voluntary and country-led ... and will respect policy space and priorities".[26] Obviously, as so often before, these commitments as much as the normative frameworks like several generations of human rights ratified by the UN Member States and supposedly being domestic laws too, once again remain a lofty promise. – The exit option is already part of the deal.

Challenges and Constraints for Development Studies

Already the adoption of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) introduced a significant shrinking of space for Development Studies in as much as these impacted on the allocation of funds through state agencies and related institutions. In many cases, research proposals were measured against their functionality with regard to the MDGs. Increasingly funding tends to be project-related, which is not conducive to long-term planning and investment in human resources and institutional collaboration. This seems to be confirmed by the observation that "successes seem to be more frequent when dealing with applied research geared toward the development of technical 'solutions' – for instance in the area of health or civil engineering - than in the case of more fundamental research in social sciences writ large."[27] Meanwhile, with the adoption of the SDGs, many funding applications are forced to adjust their aims towards more practical, implementation-oriented research closely linked to the defined goals. But SDGs

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[25] Ibid.
[26] Ibid., p. 31.
[27] Gilles Carbonnier and Tiina Kontinen, *North-South Research Partnerships: Academia Meets Development?* Bonn: EADI (EADI Policy Paper Series), June 2014, p. 16. For a considerably modified later version see Gilles Carbonnier and Tiina Kontinen, "Institutional Learning in North-South Research Partnerships", *Revue Tiers Monde*, no. 221, Janvier-Mars 2015, pp. 149-162.

should not become a straight jacket for development-related studies. Efforts seeking to address the fundamental obstacles towards sustainability should not risk to loose sight of imminent problems existing in terms of socio-economic realities produced by and testifying to the current reproduction of a fundamentally flawed and unsustainable form of human reproduction.

Therefore, the SDGs should not serve as a reference point to abandon engagement with other issues, which impact on the mind set, the dominant configurations in societies and asymmetries in global orders and the continued abuse of natural resources as well as a further promotion of inequalities. Some of the current issues requiring consideration by concerned social scientists would include the discussion about social protection floors as much as a critical interrogation of the emerging hype on the assumed positive role of the middle classes[28] as well as the potential governance options by means of a taxation policy, to mention only a few of the relevant issues. These are intrinsically related to concepts of social policy, justice and sustainability. If the social sciences are indeed useful in efforts to "untangle the processes by which global environmental change affects societies, and thus help them to respond to it in context-sensitive ways"[29], then a mere "switch" from rigorous social analyses (including class analysis) towards environmentally oriented research is not a solution. While it might be a correct observation that there exists a continued lack of interest among social scientists in global environmental change, this cannot result in abandoning the original strength of the disciplines. As the World Social Sciences Report 2013 recognizes:

The insights of traditional social sciences have often been dismissed as

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[28] See for a critique of such discourses Henning Melber, "Africa and the Middle Class(es), *Africa Spectrum*, vol. 48, no. 3, 2013, pp. 111-120 and "Where and What (for) is the Middle? Africa and the Middle Class(es)", *European Journal of Development Research*, vol. 27, no. 2, 2015, pp. 246-254 as well as the contributions in Henning Melber (ed.), *The rise of Africa's middle class. Myths, realities and critical engagements*. London: Zed Books 2016 and Johannesburg: Wits University Press 2017.

[29] United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and International Social Science Council (ISSC), *World Social Science Report 2013. Changing Global Environments*, Paris: OECD Publishing and UNESCO Publishing, 2013. Quoted from: *World Social Science Report 2013. Summary*, p. 14.

value-laden, contextual, and therefore unreliable. Yet attention to context and values may be precisely what is needed to lead humanity out of its current predicament. The growing engagement of the social sciences in global change research is a sign of their readiness to deliver. This engagement now needs to be accelerated.[30]

There remains a need to equate sustainability with notions of justice, equality and civil as well as civic, political and socio-economic rights for individuals and collectives within a world of cultural and religious diversity impacting on and shaping norms and values as well as life perspectives. This requires the pursuance of the same goals with differing but complementing responsibilities to transcend borders not only geographically but also mentally and beyond narrow disciplinary confinements, while paying respect and give recognition to diversity and otherness when seeking and establishing common ground. Last but not least, despite all these demanding aspects, one should never compromise on quality, but rather re-define the criteria for meaningful quality and relevance - for both, knowledge and life.

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[30] Ibid., p. 9.