

Sustainable Development in international relations theory: its presence or absence A proposal for a new paradigm

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Abstract

Along with the goals and targets set up by the United Nations in the 2030 Agenda, the concept of Sustainable Development has a great significance in the discipline of International Relations, since the beginning of the new century. In fact, contents studied and analyzed by International Relations are very linked to practically all the issues addressed in the Sustainable Development Goals (hereinafter, SDGs). First, this paper aims at showing and analyzing the gradual incorporation of Sustainable Development into the theory of International Relations. Second, it raises a need for a mainstream that contributes, on the one hand, to the theoretical development of the discipline and, on the other, to the progress towards sustainability and that of the planet through the attainment of the SDGs. The mentioned mainstream could be called «Sustainable Development Paradigm».

Keywords: paradigms, theories, International Relations, Realism, Structuralism, Liberalism, Reflectivism, Sustainable Development.

Resumen

El desarrollo sostenible como concepto, así como los objetivos y metas adoptados por Naciones Unidas en la Agenda 2030, tienen una gran relevancia en la disciplina de las relaciones internacionales desde principios del nuevo siglo. De hecho, los contenidos estudiados y analizados por las relaciones internacionales guardan una estrecha vinculación con prácticamente todas las problemáticas que se abordan en los Objetivos para el Desarrollo Sostenible (en adelante, ODS). Por ello, uno de los fines de este artículo es mostrar y analizar la progresiva incorporación del desarrollo sostenible en la teoría de las relaciones internacionales y, dos, plantear la necesidad de una corriente que contribuya, por una parte, al desarrollo teórico de la disciplina y, por otra, al avance hacia la sostenibilidad y el progreso del planeta a través del logro de los ODS. La mencionada corriente bien podría denominarse «paradigma del desarrollo sostenible».

Palabras clave: paradigmas, teorías, relaciones internacionales, realismo, estructuralismo, liberalismo, reflectivismo, desarrollo sostenible.

1 Introduction

International Relations (hereinafter, IR) arise out as a scientific discipline after the end of the First World War, that is, in a context of destruction and death caused by the last and most harrowing military confrontation which took place in contemporary history. Since nothing comes from nothing in human history, everything is inscribed in its historical context and in consonance with times, places, individuals, and societies. It is therefore essential to consider the emergence of the discipline of IR in its particular circumstances, and to that end, we must set up the theoretical origins of certain intellectual, doctrinal, and ideological approaches. From the very beginning, the key theoretical aim of the new discipline—but not the only one—is to analyze events and phenomena arising and evolving within the framework of international society and, as a praxis objective, to predict the emergence of those that might jeopardize international peace and security. It is obvious that IR are one of the latest sciences to make its mark on the academic and scientific scene of the social sciences and, as in other knowledge sectors, it has emerged to address human issues.

At the start of the 20th century, one of the greatest concerns of mankind and one that aroused the interest of the new discipline of IR was to prevent such terrible experience of World War I from happening again. Peace thus became the principal core to the first theoretical strand of the new science: Idealism. That «theory» led to the creation of international organizations and International Law as essential instruments for attaining peace and eradicating war from IR. At that time, there was no explicit interest in concepts such as «development» or «sustainability of the planet», either by academic internationalist forums or by international politics spheres. As a result, these new concepts became scientific, political and social concerns on the international agenda decades after the creation of the discipline of IR. In particular, it was in 2015 that the SDGs' policy was embodied through United Nations General Assembly Resolution 70/1, and therefore the 2030 Agenda as implementer program for sustainable development. The preamble of this resolution actually states: «We are determined to foster peaceful, just and inclusive societies which are free from fear and violence. There can be no sustainable development without peace and no peace without sustainable development». Thus, the full and definitive connection between peace and sustainable development comes nearly a century after the emergence of IR, through the most representative organization of international society: the United Nations. As mentioned above, the new discipline has been committed to international peace and security since its inception, although it was not until the beginning of the 21st century that the United Nations decided to establish an intimate and clear link between sustainable development and peace. Surely prec-

edents exist in the second half of the 20th century and, it is worth recalling that the Secretary General of the organization, Boutros Boutros-Ghali (1992-1996), pointed out this relationship when stating that «development is not only a fundamental human right, but also the most secure basis for peace».¹

This paper aims at analyzing the gradual incorporation of sustainable development concept into the theoretical narrative of IR. That science is soon to show greater plurality and theoretical diversity, and even a proliferation of strands in which each proposal seeks to explain dynamics, powers and phenomena that coexist in international society and lead international actors to behave in a certain manner. This idea was emphasized by Robert W. Cox, an outstanding figure in IR, when he claimed that, beyond giving order to a discipline, all «theory is always for someone, and for some purpose». He added: «All theories have a perspective. Perspectives derive from a position in time and space, specifically social and political time and space» (Cox 1981, p. 129). In view of the above, he identifies two types of theories. *a)* The first are *solving theories* or *problem-solving theories*. These ones take the world as they find it and are defined as explanatory theories of international reality, which they consider *immutable* and *permanent*. According to the Canadian professor, also known as «rationalist» or «positivist approaches», they «assume the world as it is, including its power relations», and aim to explain facts or events (*rational explanans*) occurring in international reality and «solve the problems posed by its functioning» (Barbé 2007, p. 86). *b)* The second are comprised of those known as *critical theories*, which include strands that call into question the existing social and power relationships. This is because one of their main tasks is to criticize, question and change the prevailing order in international society.

Therefore, while *rationalists* focus on knowledge and interests and consider facts to be immutable, *reflectivists* are composed of diverse and fragmented theories which aim to be constitutive of international reality and to *deconstruct* the theoretical postulates of the positivist approach. In any case, one crucial question remains: how can we embed sustainable development concept in IR theory and what repercussions derive from its eventual integration? Moreover, as an IR paradigm, what is its real meaning?

2 Sustainable Development overshadowed by International Relations Theories

Also known as *paradigms of IR*, the first theories were developed during the Cold War era, and motivated by a specific political, economic, social, and cultural context, dominated by the bipolarity

1 Boutros Boutros Ghali, *An Agenda for Development*. <https://archive.globalpolicy.org/component/content/article/226-initiatives/32314-an-agenda-for-development-report-of-the-secretary-general.html>.

of the international system embodied by the United States and the Soviet Union. The mainstream paradigm during the mentioned stage was the Realist one, a theory that mostly focused on national security issue in its military conception, and was conceived to analyze, interpret, and serve as a guide for US foreign policy. At that time, the States leading IR based their leadership primarily on military power and force.

The two superpowers followed the realist premises and initiated an arms race that determined the pulse of international relations from 1945 to the end of the 1960s. Thus, we can observe that, from the outset, the concept of «security» was a determining factor in analyzing the theories of the new discipline and, as international society was evolving, that concept was gradually becoming multidimensional. In his study on the *American centrism* that pervades the discipline of IR, Arenal has no doubts that the security of the United States has been the main subject of the debate for the realist paradigm (Arenal 2014). Beyond national security and military force, associated with the phenomena of war and peace, there are no other topics of interest in the realist theory, except for some texts extracts by one of its most emblematic figures: Hans Morgenthau. The great exponent of the dominant paradigm provided a theoretical base for international aid, although this was imbued with the logic prevailing in many donor countries during that period, which consisted of directly associating aid with their foreign policy or commercial interests. In other words, it is difficult to detect the presence of the concept of «development» in that period, and even less that of sustainable development.

2.1. First glimmers of Sustainable Development in International Relations Theory

Since the 1960s and notably the following decade, two new paradigms emerged to explain IR and weaken the leadership of realism. We refer, particularly, to *transnationalism* or *globalism*, and to *structuralism*. Both paradigms come up at a time when the development discourse is gaining some academic interest and becoming institutionalized at the international level because of several factors. The following stand out: the economic crisis (as a consequence of oil price fall); the appearance of new States on the international scene concerned about economic development; the appearance and progressive consolidation of various international organizations committed to the development and welfare of humanity, which understand that military force must give way to cooperation. However, their coincidence in time contrasts with the substantial differences between the two theoretical strands.

First, *transnationalism* focused on interpreting and explaining the changes following the appearance of new actors working on the international scene and the new challenges to international peace

and security. This objective reality favored the emergence of new dimensions of security. Its field was expanding and the military dimension of the traditional concept of «security» was joined by the economic, social, environmental, and energy dimensions, issues of concern following the development of risks and challenges related to these areas and which are under consideration. This was outlined in important documents from the time; for instance, as the former Secretary-General, Lamberto Zannier, pointed out, the *Final Act of the 1975 Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe* recognized «key economic, social and environmental issues that are fundamental to sustainable development, as we understand it today».² Thus, environmental concerns and development began to acquire a certain importance on the international agenda, and with the transnationalist paradigm new threats emerged in an era of clear interdependence and growing cooperation. In this sense, rather than fundamentally oppose the theoretical postulates of the realist paradigm, most of the scholars of globalism sought to outline and expand it, prioritizing and linking the transnationalization phenomena, the strength of cooperation, the growing complexity and interdependence among stakeholders, and the new issues with the central concern of IR: peace and security.

In short, unlike realism, *globalism* includes a much broader field of stakeholders and subjects of study in its analysis of international society, as it must be. Indeed, new States and various international organizations had already appeared in the 1970s, fostering cooperation for problem solving in IR. Moreover, at that time new threats of international relevance were already becoming apparent, clearly jeopardizing economic development and international peace and security. Resource crisis, economic growth, trade relations, human rights, climate change, and environmental protection, among others, were issues of concern to IR theorists and were addressed in the security debate. As Du Pisani noted, it was then that «the Enlightenment promise of linear and continuous improvement of the human condition had proved to be a Myth of Progress, because it was based on human hopes and aspirations rather than human potentialities and limitations» (Du Pisani 2006, p. 89). Therefore, traditional concepts and topics of the security agenda of IR were modified, particularly within the political framework of the bipolarism of the 1970s, to advance new forms of understanding the object of study of the new discipline.

Having said that, we can affirm that the *transnationalist* or *globalist paradigm* interprets IR in more complex and consistent terms because it does so not only in time of peace or war, but also in matters related to economic and social welfare. Furthermore, it stresses that, in a context of progressive interdependence, the achievement of the current goals is only possible through cooperation and interaction between different national governments, international organizations, multinational companies, and non-state actors. In fact, the

2 L Zannier, «Fostering Peace and Sustainable Development: A genuine commitment of the OSCE». <https://www.un.org/en/chronicle/article/fostering-peace-and-sustainable-development>.

emphasis on the need to build international cooperation institutions to manage interdependence explains why transnationalists are the heirs of the idealist tradition.

As a result, the specific questions concerning development and economic, social, and environmental well-being became the main topics on the research agenda of the globalists. And that is precisely why, in the theoretical foundations of the mentioned paradigm, we can find the early glimmers of sustainable development in the theoretical narrative of IR. However, it is worth recalling that in the viewpoints expressed by the two reformed versions of *realism* and *liberalism*—we are referring to the *neo* strands that took shape during the 1980s— was pointed out that both security and economic welfare are important goals, and these versions only differed from each other when it came to determining the priority of States, as well as the mechanisms for their attainment. As Mónica Salomón remarks, «neorealists, such as traditional realists, emphasize security and military superiority; for neoliberals, economic priorities are the basic for States», and they insist on the strength of cooperation instead of military force. The author continues: «Neoliberals argue that international regimes and institutions mitigate anarchy's constraining effects on cooperation» (Salomón 2002, p. 18).

Second, we should mention the so-called *structuralist* (or *neo-Marxist*) *paradigm* within this first group of theories. It emerged in the historical context of the 1970s, that is, following the end of international colonial regime. This new theoretical mainstream, which finds its intellectual roots in the work of K. Marx, among others, focuses on the study of global poverty and development issues. As stated by its representatives, it is intended to analyze and explain why poor countries fail to achieve the level of growth of the rich ones. In this regard, it must be recalled that between 1950 and 1980, high growth and prosperity rates were recorded in European and North American countries. According to the followers of this theory, the capitalist economic system «exploit» the peripheral nations through multinational companies and transnational corporations, which had experienced spectacular growth after World War II, both in quantitative and qualitative terms due to their relevance in international society. In fact, they conceive the world through a multi-headed octopus (rich countries and the «center») with tentacles (poor countries and the periphery). In other words, it is a «conflicting image, expressed in the Marxist theory of exploitation» (Barbé 2007, p. 70). Therefore, structuralist theorists see IR as a struggle between rich and poor classes rather than a competition between States, and their main purpose is to study the causes which generate inequality and, in their judgement, foster underdevelopment in part of international society.

Among these authors, the Argentinian economist Raúl Prébisch deserves special recognition for his theoretical contributions. In his famous text *The Economic Development of Latin America and Its*

Principal Problems, he analyzes and describes the center-periphery asymmetry and its negative effects. The study, which made Prébisch a key figure in thinking about global economic development, was followed by other papers, such as *Biosphere and Development* (CEPAL Review, 1980), in which he addressed the cause-effect relationship that was already apparent between the gradual environmental degradation and the growth and economic development models in place, mainly in more developed countries. In short, it was a plea for attention to the consequences that the prevailing economic model was having on sustainable development. Thus, it seems clear that it was from the 1970s onwards and with the structuralist paradigm that underdevelopment issue got in the very heart of the theoretical narrative of the new discipline. For Michael Banks and others who use the concept of an *inter-paradigmatic debate*, «each paradigm offers different interpretations of IR and invites debate between them» (Smith 1995, pp. 18-19) and, certainly, the interpretation of *structuralism* accelerated a debate which would lead with time to one of the great savior myths of humanity: Sustainable Development.

Accordingly, it would not be an exaggeration to say that, on the one hand, the developmental perspective serves as the forerunner of the embedding process of sustainable development in IR. It results from the growing dissatisfaction with the theory and practice of conventional development, and the consequent appearance of anti-capitalist social movements. On the other hand, *structuralist* and *transnationalist paradigms* were precursors to sustainable development within the discipline of IR, from opposing approaches. However, it is evident that it was not, until the beginning of the 21st century, that global development and environmental protection goals converged to finally become the sustainable development challenge. This new or renewed concept gives way to a more comprehensive process of transformation in international society and within the framework of a multipolar, anarchic, and turbulent order.

Despite its theoretical contributions, *structuralism* was relegated to the margins of the discipline for two fundamental reasons: first, because it did not respond to the dominant parameters in Western capitalist countries; and second, because of the prevailing ethnocentric viewpoint of IR. Indeed, the leadership of the USA and, in general, that of Europe in the interpretation and analysis of international society censored and «marginalized the few theoretical contributions carried out in other non-Western cultural spheres» (Arenal & Sanahuja 2015, p. 35). Thus, critical contributions, such as the growth-dependency theory, were formulated in terms of underdevelopment and included, in part, by Latin American and European scholars to the theoretical narrative of IR. They were marginalized and hushed up to the extent that they undermined the foundations of the dominant traditional paradigms.

In conclusion, each of the mentioned paradigms offers a perspective on the different problems and issues of interest in the historical context in which they arise, as well as on the potential instruments and mechanisms for achieving peace and security, both national and international. Also, each one contributes to the new discipline depending on international politics issues that it addresses. However, development, particularly, has a new dimension that must be translated and broadened in the field of paradigms, first because it provides a multidimensional approach; and second, it gives a viewpoint from other perspectives that generalizes the discipline's research agenda.

2.2. From concern for environmental protection and economic growth to global sustainable development

In the 1970s, environmental protection and its linkage with development were already explicit goals of the international community. In 1972, the UN Stockholm Conference on the Environment stated that «the protection and improvement of the human environment is a major issue which affects the well-being of peoples and economic development throughout the world [...]». By then, the growing concern about environmental degradation and the consequences of the post-war economic boom favored the emergence of numerous anti-system and environmentalist movements.³ They would focus on criticizing the lifestyle promoted by the capitalist economic system, although, as we have said, *structuralism* did not explicitly consider the environment within the theory of development. Moreover, these anti-system movements coincided with the emergence of new environmental concepts resulting from economics science. Indeed, economics, was fundamentally, the discipline that studied development, and from that decade onwards, some authors, such as Ignacy Sachs, defined new concepts, for example *eco-development*, which was precursor to the later *sustainable development*.⁴ That is to say, other proposals started to emerge from economics, namely the alternative to the already known duality between the benefits caused by the increase of production and the costs of reducing the planet's habitability. In short, economics began to consolidate an idea of sustainability where the best approach was a standard of living for present generations which would not undermine that of future ones. Thus, the roots of the concept of «sustainable development» —which implies that economic progress is an element that should not be separated from environmental protection— are to be found in environmental economics.

But it was also during the 1970s that ecological concerns spread from the local to the global level as result of the gradual deterioration of the planet, largely due to the negative impacts of economic and business activities. In addition, the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear disaster,

3 The Club of Rome was founded in 1968, an NGO composed of scientists and politicians who share a common goal: to raise awareness of the effects of human activity on the planet. In 1972, commissioned by the Club of Rome, the *Meadows Report*, entitled *The Limits to Growth*, was published. It pointed out what is now a reality: the finiteness of planet Earth and the incompatibility of global growth.

4 Ignacy Sachs was a Polish-born economist considered to be one of the pioneers in the building of the «development» concept as a constructive relationship between economic growth, social welfare, and environmental preservation. The term *ecosocioeconomy* was coined by the economist Karl William Kapp.

which shocked the world, should not be underestimated. A year after that accident of unlimited environmental and human dimensions, the report *Our Common Future* was released by the World Commission on Environment and Development chaired by Gro Harlem Brundtland. That relevant report focused on the link between social and economic growth, on the one hand, and on human environment and natural resources, on the other. A groundbreaking point will be that the report challenges the long-standing assumption that economic goals, such as poverty reduction and economic growth, must take precedence over environmental concerns. In general, lifestyle in developed countries was not under debate or questioned, unlike the authors of the structuralist paradigm who, as we have explained, did. Moreover, it was argued that the more advanced and prosperous countries should pursue the goal of higher economic growth to help the poorer ones to recover.

However, the main contribution of the Brundtland Report was the concept of «sustainable development», understood as the one «that meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs».⁵ In other words, sustainable development pursues economic, technological, and social progress, etc., without compromising the future generations, due to the negative impact these improvements may have, mainly on the ecosystem.

Although criticism was leveled against the concept by various authors from different fields (Aguilar-Hernández 2018, pp. 265-279),⁶ sustainability became, with its pluses and minuses, the guiding principle for global development based on three essential pillars: economic growth, social development, and environmental protection and, more relevantly, it was accepted by many international actors (States and organizations), thereby fostering multilateralism. In fact, during the 1990s, world events and summits were held, and sustainable development was the main theme and challenge to be met. In other words, sustainable development began to take shape as the world's political goal par excellence and one of the main challenges for the international community. That is precisely why IR theorists did not hesitate to extend studies into climate change, environmental degradation, and sustainable development in subsequent years, considering them as threats and challenges to international peace and security (Luterbacher & Sprinz 2001).

In 1992, during the historic Earth Summit, or UN Conference on Environment and Development held in Rio de Janeiro, measures for implementing sustainable development were discussed. Principle 1 of the Rio Declaration proclaimed that «human beings are at the center of concerns for sustainable development», which explains why the conference focused on two priority themes: *a)* a green economy in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication; and *b)* the institutional framework for sustainable

5 World Commission on Environment and Development (1987), *Our Common Future*.

6 The concept was questioned by authors such as Enrique Leff, who stated that «the discourse of sustainable development promotes a strategy of appropriation that seeks to “naturalize” the commercialization of nature» (Leff 2005, p. 23). See also Latouche (2007, p. 46).

development. Two years later, because of the Summit of the Americas convened in Miami, the American leaders pointed out that «faced with differing development challenges, the Americas are united in pursuing prosperity through open markets, hemispheric integration, and sustainable development».⁷

To these important international conferences, we must add others held in the first decade of the 21st century; for instance, the World Summit on Sustainable Development 2002, with the adoption of the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation, which included concrete measures, quantifiable and time-bound targets, through a more specific approach (Díaz 2004, p. 3). By then, it was clear that sustainable development was emerging, especially in contexts of liberal democracy and free markets, as a pillar of contemporary universalism. However, as transnational, and global problems became more complex and interconnected, sustainable development was seen as a roadmap or mental guide to ensure international peace and security, resulting in increased cooperation and multilateralism. Likewise, the notion of «sustainable development» and its theoretical formulation have evolved from a political and legal perspective, bringing together different spheres of IR, such as economic, social, and environmental (Rodrigo 2015). In this way, the basis was laid for sustainable development to become, in short, a useful concept in the field of IR and, especially, to serve as leverage for the building of a singular theory of this discipline. Therefore, after analyzing the gradual and slow embedding of sustainable development within the international agenda, it is worth considering the impact of the new concept on the convulsive theoretical transition that the discipline of IR had been undergoing since the 1980s.

3 **Sustainable Development, a subject that looms large in the theoretical debate on International Relations**

The sustainable development concept is consolidated at the theoretical level and becomes a priority objective on the world agenda at a time of profound changes or even of a revolution within the theoretical field of the discipline of IR. We recall that, the «old» positivist monopoly, related to the Western hegemonic worldview, was increasingly becoming weaker due to its difficulty in predicting and explaining events, phenomena and dynamics taking place in the international society at the end of the century. Such changes have precisely led to the vigorous development of new theoretical approaches of critical and groundbreaking nature in relation to the «classical» theories. For some authors, like Yosef Lapid, that situation was an «intellectual transition» (Lapid 1989, p. 236), while others, including Arenal, referred to it as a stage of

7 In http://www.summit-americas.org/i_summit/i_summit_dec_en.pdf.

«crisis» in the theory and discipline of International Relations. Thus, according to Arenal:

As a result, we can talk about a global system crisis and about one of the prevailing theories of IR [...]. We are dealing with a global crisis that decisively affects the theory of IR which finds itself at a time when the prevailing theoretical models [...] are not capable of adequately interpreting the new realities. This requires rethinking the theoretical bases used to date in the study of IR (Arenal 1993, p. 8).

Critical tendencies were integrated into the new post-positivist theoretical axis, and they were accompanied by new tools and methodologies for the analysis of international society. In addition, ideological and cultural factors played a preponderant role in the configuration of the new «theories». However, most of them do not clearly show what their research agenda is. It is precisely for this reason that one of the fathers of transnationalism, Robert Keohane, suggested that, despite their scientific contribution, reflectivist theories would remain on the margins of the field, until they were able to delineate clear empirical research programs focused on the study of important issues of the international agenda (Keohane 1988, p. 392).⁸ And, certainly, as we shall see later, none of these new theoretical approaches explicitly proposed sustainable development as a question to be studied.

Other notable emerging mainstreams include social-constructivism, critical theory, modernism, and feminism. This proliferation of «theories» will coincide in part in time with a historical context of great political upheaval. Symbolic events are proof of this political *tsunami*: the fall of the Berlin Wall and real ones, the fall of European communism and the far-reaching political changes in the Central and East European countries, resulting in the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. In fact, in the light of the above, internationalists acknowledged the inability of traditional doctrines to explain or foresee the striking events and the emergence of other stakeholders (for instance, China), which implied certain modifications in the hierarchical stratification of the international order.

The first narrative of this second theoretical phase is social constructivism, a kind of «bridging theory», that explains interaction between reflectivist and rationalist approaches (Wendt 1992, p. 394). This new mainstream, included within IR in the mid-1980s, mainly driven by the scientific work of Alexander Wendt, provides different tools by introducing into the analysis elements such as identity, ideas, or processes, which until then have been insufficiently considered for the study of international society. In fact, among the main theoretical positions held by social constructivism, the following are worthy of mention. First and foremost, it proposes the study of IR as a social construction and social interactions —whether between individuals or States— as the mainstay of the constitution of societies. In this sense, two key elements of constructivism may

8 See E Barbé and JP Soriano, «Del debate neorrealismo-neoliberalismo a la (re)construcción del discurso dominante en relaciones internacionales», in Arenal and Sanahuja (2015), pp. 139-140.

be: first, that human associations are clearly determined by shared ideas rather than material forces and, second, that identities and interests of purposive actors are constructed by these shared ideas. Thus, the aim of this new theory is to understand how the role of ideas gives shape to international system; that is to say, constructivists go beyond material reality, by including the effect of ideas and beliefs on world politics. Moreover, constructivism holds that «anarchy is what states make of it» (Wendt 1999, p. 1). According to this assertion, it should be noted that sustainable development is what States make of it and, today, most of members of the international community jointly steps up policies to address climate change mitigation and the achievement of development, growth, and sustainability, through the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. In this line, it might be said that Sustainable Development is a concept developed and shared by the international community, which has been consolidating through various multilateral initiatives within the framework of the United Nations.

Particularly, constructivism's interest in social structures and norms explains why one of the priority topics of its «research agenda» is the study of international institutions and regimes, as well as the analysis of regionalism, which in turn can play important constitutive role in shaping identities. It seems evident that, from the United Nations, major strides have been made in constituting an identity centered on sustainability, and indeed an implementing program has already been adopted: the 2030 Agenda for the achievement of the SDGs. In short, constructivism has broadened research agendas by focusing on the role of international organizations or structures in shaping the identities and interests of States as well as their behavior (Tah Ayala 2018).

Another striking mainstream within the post-positivist conception is the critical theory. Starting from a reflectivist epistemology, it is an eminently constitutive theory. According to José Antonio Sanahuja, one of its leading experts in Spain, «it is assumed that all knowledge must be contingent, historical and fully integrated in social and economic life, to the extent that the supposedly objective reality only makes sense through social relations and, particularly, through the agents, and their interests, values, practices present in the social order and in the international order» (Arenal & Sanahuja 2015, p. 159). In addition to describing societies, critical theory aims to transform them and is aware of the role they can play in shaping social processes. As stressed by Salomón, it helps to «reveal ideologies that, openly or surreptitiously, are present in the social-political discourse and that hinder social change» (Salomón 2002, p. 24). In other words, as Cox noted, «a critical theory of IR should be concerned, first and foremost, with change in the world order» (Cox 1983; Salomón 2002, p. 27); thus, it would require changing the social ties that bind individuals to each other within States.

However, the aspects mentioned so far do not significantly alter the research topics of critical theory. That is precisely why scholars such as Linklater argue that, rather than a new paradigm, this theory and its approaches invite «all social analysts to reflect upon the cognitive interests and normative assumptions which underpin their research, without implying that all research must be critical-theoretical from now on» (Linklater 1992, p. 91; Salomón 2002, p. 27).

In addition to the critical theory, post-structuralism also stands out. This mainstream has not succeeded either in escaping from its «marginal position», within the discipline of IR. Cornago rightly notes that post-structuralism remains the greatest challenge from the margins and serves as a «driving force» to the dominant mainstream of IR, both from the point of view of its reflectivist epistemology and the incorporation of hermeneutics, and other methodologies focused on the analysis of language (Cornago 2015, pp. 219-241; Arenal & Sanahuja 2015). Thus, from its proposals for change, both from the critical and post-structuralist mainstream, sustainability can be effectively pursued as a means of transforming (an essential feature of its theoretical foundations) and achieving sustainable and advanced new social and international order.

Finally, the last type of narrative within the reflectivist approach of IR is linked to feminism, a strand that pursues gender equality, that is, to put an end to the unequal status of women in the field of the discipline. Consequently, one of the main achievements of feminist theories is the introduction of gender issue into the international agenda, thus challenging the foundations of knowledge and academic output which, historically, had not taken it into account. Tickner clearly stresses that «International Relations discipline has for the most part resisted the introduction of gender into its discourse» (Tickner 1992, p. 153). However, once feminism has been presented as a theory in the field of IR, the challenge posed by its scholars is to continue promoting gender equality. To that end, feminist approach should have greater influence in the analysis and interpretation of international reality, among other things. Nevertheless, historical experience has proven, quite objectively, that feminist approach has not been reflected, or sufficiently translated into studies and theories that have been developed in IR, *inter alia* because diplomacy and politics have been essentially dominated by men. Nonetheless, in the light of the above, it could be argued that there are promising times ahead, since the strong interest towards the new discipline among women in academic and diplomatic spheres, presumably means that feminist approach will prevail in the more immediate future. Accordingly, female presence in the different spheres of IR is an accomplished reality, at least in university education and diplomacy, which will undoubtedly boost the discipline's commitment to educating for sustainability. The crucial thing is that through the 2030 Agenda, gender equality is also promoted by the international community. SDG 5 proposes policies and

adopts instruments aimed at eradicating some of the most evident scourges of vulnerability, disempowerment, and inequality of women in today's international society.⁹

Moreover, there is neither an explicit consideration to sustainable development from the reflectivist approach, nor does it form part of the research agenda of the alternative mainstreams. However, the theoretical foundations of the post-positivist approaches could be the philosophical basis that press for a new theory of sustainable development in IR. After all, such theories consider intersubjective beliefs and values as inputs to bringing about international social change. The concept of «sustainable development» has the potential to «unify» all States on the planet, along with a whole set of influential stakeholders, to generate positive political, economic, social, and cultural change on the international scene. As UN General Assembly Resolution 70/1 shows, «never before have world leaders pledged common action and endeavor across such a broad and universal policy agenda».

In essence, the new concept has been in the twilight of IR theories for a long time, although it has sometimes captured attention in those cases where the theoretical narrative has emphasized the multidimensional and multisided nature of security and development, and factors determining the future of global society. But clearly it can be accepted that sustainable development has been evident and intends to remain in IR theories, despite its terminological wrapping in different political contexts. This is because it responds to basic goals of the global community set down in the mentioned Resolution 70/1, in terms of «areas of critical importance for humanity and the planet».

4 21st century: the theoretical-practical crystallization of Sustainable Development. Towards a new narrative of International Relations

The 21st century is deeply concerned about the drift and effects that certain issues, which have been present throughout mankind's history, have on the stability of global society. In addition, there is now a greater awareness that these issues, which are clearly matters of priority for the discipline of IR, have been at the root of the serious challenges to international peace and security. On the one hand, poverty, inequality, and violence that generates human rights violations and wars; and, on the other hand, threats that are more current in nature and have acquired significant relevance in the global agenda, such as environmental degradation and the creeping effect of climate change. As a result of this analysis, the interna-

9 Durán and Lalaguna P, Morán Blanco S and Díaz Barrado CM (2019). Goal 5: Gender Equality. Thomson Reuters Aranzadi, Navarra.

tional community decided to undertake a range of actions aimed at establishing commitments to remedy the acute issues suffered most directly and negatively by some regions of the planet.

The first of these actions was the adoption of the Millennium Development Goals (hereinafter, MDGs) —within the framework of the UN—, a series of eight time-bound targets for the year 2015 focused on sustainability, strengthening democracy and gender equality, among others. Therefore, the year 2000 not only marked the turn of the century, but also defined an international agenda for development to address global challenges: social, environmental, political, and cultural, through the implementation of the MDGs. However, by the deadline of fifteen years set in agreement and after launching the stocktaking exercise, political leaders decided to redesign a new lead to progress known as 2030 Agenda, establishing a global framework to achieve sustainable development, end poverty, protect the planet and ensure prosperity for all people; in short, to eradicate, where possible, all situations and phenomena that prevent the world from being socially sustainable and which represent the main threats to the achievement of an international order of well-being, equity, and security.

Since then, this new peace-focused agenda seeks to usher in a new era of development and a new spirit of global solidarity. Indeed, peace, development, human rights, democracy, and environmental protection are the core elements of sustainable development and undeniable values of the current international system. In fact, the very formulation of the 2030 Agenda is carried out from the political perspective or what is known as *soft law*. It is not without reason that Sanahuja states they are a «powerful source of legitimacy, the result of discussion among experts and imperative moral arguments» (Sanahuja 2014, p. 60). Thus, it seems evident that, judging from what has been said, the concept of «sustainable development» and its implementing program —the 2030 Agenda— are linked to the discipline of IR in two directions: by the object of study and by the multilateral relations of cooperation that are fostered among IR actors.

a) Object of study of IR discipline

The contents of the SDGs strengthen the close cooperation between peace, security, and development, and focus on the main issues addressed by the discipline of IR since its creation at the beginning of the 20th century. Indeed, issues raised in the SDGs are strongly linked to the matters dealt with by the new science. To give just a few examples: SDG 16 addresses the concepts of democracy and peace, as well as the main challenge to international security; while SDG 7 analyzes affordable and clean energy to ensure environmental security; SDGs 1 and 10 are focused on economic and social inequalities that cause poverty and are at the root of many armed conflicts. In short, there is a clear linkage between some of

the subjects of the SDGs, directed toward the sustainability and development of the planet, and those of the research agenda of IR.

The above shows that sustainable development is a principle that has political consequences and, thus, the achievement of this goal, which is a key to security and international order, has become one of the main challenges facing the international community and the discipline of IR particularly. In fact, and as we have noted, the concept of «sustainable development» entered, albeit timidly and separately, the lexicon of IR hand in hand with paradigms such as *structuralism* and *transnationalism*. Moreover, through the SDGs, the new discipline includes the principles of *idealism*, which call for the adoption and compliance with international law and the establishment of a multilateral international order. Thus, idealist theory, precursor of liberalism, did not focus only on political aspects, but also paid attention to economic and cultural ones, as do the concept of sustainable development and its Goals. Among the various challenges of idealism, mention might be made of its proposal to minimize conflict and maximize cooperation among nations. And a theory or paradigm of sustainable development will precisely help to move forward in the construction of a new order aimed at the fulfillment of the SDGs, through the strength of cooperation, the increase of duly managed institutionalization, and the progressive consolidation of a common global identity based on sustainability.

Surely, means or instruments are available to make a theoretical proposal aimed at forging an international system that protects States and their citizens, and bodes well for the future. This is the notion of Sustainable Development tabled by the UN's World Commission for Environment and Development in 1987, among others; and its implementer program, the 2030 Agenda, adopted within the framework of the United Nations. This narrative proposal should first explain the international reality of the present time and, in that sense, be shown as a theory that includes elements of the *solving theory* or constitutive theories. Second, it may focus unconditionally on the fulfillment of the SDGs, through a research agenda (case study) aimed at promoting global solidarity and cooperation, and the configuration of a world order based on the respect of international law. To sum up, such tools and mechanisms minimize conflict in international society and generate a future with incentives for humanity. Furthermore, in line with the idealist approaches, States may make their own interests subject to those of the «global community» through sustainable development since, today, the struggle for States' survival (realist theory) need to be remedied by the struggle of the international community and all its actors for their own survival.

But we must also leverage on principles defended by *critical theories* or reflectivist strand, that stand for an end to a worldview based on the principles of Western technological civilization, which

are often seen as universal and obvious; in short, to place modern Western values and alternative value systems on the same footing, to clear up this global cultural asymmetry between the West and the rest. As noted by Enrique Dussel, «social power is the emancipatory force with the capacity to overcome the civilization crisis through organized and conscious action, directed towards a triple reparation: regeneration of the social fabric, restoration of the seriously damaged natural and planetary environment, reconstitution and strengthening of the dominated, excluded, exploited cultures of the peripheral worlds» (Dussel 1977, in Toledo & Ortiz-Espejel 2014, p. 27). Sustainable development establishes common and shared civilizing principles.

Lastly, it is also worth stressing the important role the foundations or features of *feminist theory* play in developing this theoretical proposal. It cannot be overlooked that the achievement of gender equality and the empowerment of women, as advocated by this mainstream, are entwined with SDG 5. In fact, since the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, numerous initiatives have been carried out by public and private organizations to make women visible and address some of the questions the pioneers of the feminist movement asked themselves, such as: where are the feminists? Why did they not appear or were they prevented from appearing in areas where only men had a place, for example, international politics? Well, the SDGs and the implementation of the 2030 Agenda show the incorporation of some of the feminist theses or, at least, place women at the center of concern of the international community and as essential actors of sustainability.¹⁰

b) Method. International cooperation between different international stakeholders and multilateralism

The method or implementer program of the sustainable development theory of IR can be the 2030 Agenda itself, set out to guide the international community along the path that leads to achieving dynamic and sustainable economic systems; in short, a world with better living conditions, less inequalities and one which does not jeopardize the resources needed for future generations. In addition, the 2030 Agenda stresses the importance of the participation of various actors in achieving the goals. SDG 17, under the title «Partnerships for the goals», states that «a successful development agenda requires inclusive partnerships —at global, regional, national and local levels— built upon principles and values, and upon a shared vision and shared goals placing people and the planet at the center». Indeed, having overcome the *realist or state-centric paradigm* by the very evolution of international society, sustainable development and its implementing Agenda are only possible with the support and participation of each and every one of the actors, committed through strategies, integrated, and interrelated actions, and strong global partnerships, to the challenge. These include governments or States,

10 It involves what has been called the «feminist perspective», which is included, for example, in the General Guidelines of the 2030 Sustainable Development Strategy, approved by the Spanish Government in 2021: https://www.agenda2030.gob.es/recursos/docs/Directrices_EDS.pdf.

international organizations, civil society, business circles, academic and cultural community; in short, as clearly proposed by transnationalism and neoliberalism approach, the SDGs can only be achieved through multilateral and institutional cooperation. In this sense, vital roles need to be played by international organizations, especially those working in the areas of peace and security, and with a direct impact on development to make progress towards the ambitious 2030 Agenda. Many agencies are already doing so; for example, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) has expressed its willingness to contribute to this crucial undertaking and, in the *Maastricht Strategy Document for the Economic and Environmental Dimension* (2003), its Member States agreed on a political commitment to sustainable development and defined concrete measures as well as areas of cooperation.¹¹

The foundation or relevant premise of a theory of Sustainable Development should precisely be the active involvement of all actors of the international community in the transition towards sustainability (public and private, civil society...), as well as the coordination among them to create new synergies. Points 5 and 6 of the Outcome Document of the 2012 UN Conference on Sustainable Development reaffirmed that «people are at the center of sustainable development and in this regard [...] we commit to work together to promote sustained and inclusive economic growth, social development and environmental protection [...]»; in short, this perspective of sustainability creates bridges between national and international by pursuing the building of strategic alliances between institutions, universities, companies, social organizations... As Daniel Innerarity points out in his book *The Democracy of Knowledge*, the challenges facing international society require a «great mobilization of knowledge» (Innerarity 2011) as a mechanism to move towards an intelligent society. The growing complexity of societies, the intensity of relations and interactions between the different international stakeholders, interdependencies, but also vulnerabilities, call for a more intelligent and less chaotic organization. In this context, science, and specifically IR, and academic community must become involved —as most do— in the fulfillment of the SDGs and help to the transformation of international society, through their contribution to ideas and the training of knowledge workers.

Therefore, cooperation and multilateralism among the different actors involved in IR —already considered by transnationalism— are the best method and the starting point for sustainable development. Furthermore, it is necessary to move towards greater institutionalization, waiting for it contributes to a better management of international society, because a system based on the application of public and private policies and international legal norms is the best guarantee of economic and environmental sustainability. Based on the above, the discipline of IR should opt for the configuration of Sustainable Development «paradigm». And, in addition to contrib-

11 This is explained in the following link: <https://www.osce.org/magazine/306696>.

uting to its theoretical shaping, it could become the narrative platform from which to progress towards sustainability and require the adoption of more proactive and binding measures to achieving the ambitious SDGs.

This paradigm would set Sustainable Development as the unit of analysis and the different SDGs as case study or main issues of the international agenda. It would also include aspects of both paradigms (neo-neo approaches or rationalism) and critical theories when designing factors and features of the new theoretical narrative. Indeed, *solving theories* provide the instrument of institutional cooperation that integrated transnationalism, since initiatives and policies of the different international organizations more concerned with peace, security, the strengthening of democratic institutions and the protection of human rights will support the attainment of sustainable development. On the other hand, *critical theories* call for change and common action to build a new social order and acknowledge «the need for a new non-Western universalism» (Sanahuja 2018, p. 122); they provide a critical mass to make sustainable development the core idea and the driving force of a new international order. As we have already said, this core idea has the means and the program implementer for its achievement: the 2030 Agenda, agreed by the international community as a whole. There should be no doubt that the SDGs are the roadmap for a better world and the global framework for multilateral cooperation on sustainable development. As stated in General Assembly Resolution 70/1, which gives substance to the SDGs, «the goals and targets are integrated and indivisible and balance the three dimensions of sustainable development: economic, social and environmental». In essence, Sustainable Development theory in IR needs components of many of the theoretical narratives developed within the framework of the new discipline. Moreover, they are necessary for sustainability concept because it focuses on several dimensions of security and, as the Argentinian internationalist Miryam Colacrai points out, «if we intend to characterize our world today, there can be only one definition: a world of complexities. That real world is so far from being analyzed and considered from a single theoretical mainstream» (Colacrai 2000, p. 57).

5 Conclusions

Based on the above, it is appropriate to consider the following:

First, the historical development of the discipline of IR is characterized by the multiplicity of paradigms and strands, namely, the coexistence of different theories. For some scholars, this only con-

firms a healthy «theoretical (and methodological) pluralism». Thus, for Arenal, one can

assume a pluralism of paradigms as the only way to adequately analyze and understand the complex international reality of our times and, on the other hand, to place ourselves in a theoretical perspective that aims to assert the values and interests of a global and human nature, rather than exclusively of a State, of IR, as the only way to really offer fair and valid solutions to these dramatic and serious problems of international society (Arenal 1989, p. 607).

Whereupon, with these words, this internationalist seems to leave the way open to a new paradigm within the theoretical narrative of IR, which may well be Sustainable Development. Indeed, it is, at present, the one that has a greater capacity to offer fair and valid solutions for the international community as a whole and for the ultimate attainment of international peace and security intended by the discipline.

Second: after World War II, security —defined in military terms— was the major concern of the dominant powers in international society and this ethnocentric viewpoint of reality was transferred to the theory of the discipline with the development of a narrative whose theoretical fundamentals were focused on national security. International society has evolved and security in a military key has been progressively displaced by other issues, such as development and environmental protection, which have become core issues in international politics and required other instruments to be addressed. It was therefore in the context of bipolarism that development, environmental protection, and Sustainability Goals were defined, requiring multilateralism and cooperation between the different players in international society. However, it was not until the 21st century that these challenges became definitively the aim of sustainable development, a more comprehensive process of social transformation. Thus, the developmentalist approach heralded the process of integrating sustainable development into the theory of IR. As it was the case with the concept of security in the 20th century, that prism, which was studied and analyzed from the *solving theories* of the discipline of IR, has been extended and has moved on from a very restricted understanding of development to a multi-dimensional concept (economic, social, and environmental). In the era of globalization, the main concern of international society is the sustainability of the planet, as well as economic and social progress. This was pointed out by the UN Resolution 70/1 and, therefore, this would seem to be sufficient justification for developing a theoretical, comprehensive, and global proposal, focused on the universal problem par excellence of the world agenda: sustainable development.

Finally, it is clear that, through the paradigm of international sustainability, the theoretical narrative of IR is witnessing an evolution in the study of this discipline, from the national security pro-

posed by realism to sustainable development as the main instrument for international peace and security. In any case, it is a political concept that has implications for other sectors of IR. Particularly, it could bring together and explain the existing realities of international community, and that motivate State and non-State actors to commit themselves in fulfilling the Goals and targets contained in the 2030 Agenda. It is an open and cumulative paradigm, which will also have the virtue of revealing aspects that best define the ontological composition of the international community, obscured by the theory of IR.

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