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THE POTENTIAL OF PARTICIPATORY AND EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING FOR THE PROMOTION OF HUMAN RIGHTS AND THE SDGs

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ABSTRACT

This chapter will consider two experiential learning techniques drawn from human rights education – mooted and shadow reporting – and consider how they might inform initiatives to increase awareness of and participation in the work of the SDGs. It proposes a simulacre reporting exercise as a means of having students engage with the global indicator framework, national and local official data, relevant consultation or observation, and prevailing policy frameworks. This report, that could be drafted as part of a class or clinical group exercise, would enhance data literacy, data analytics, and data-presentation skills but would also encourage students to place normative frameworks in the context of the lived experience of their local communities.

Keywords: Experiential learning; localization; shadow reporting; data; SDG indicators

“One could hardly think of a better way to advance the cause of human rights than to bring together students, who are the leaders, judges and teachers of tomorrow ... to debate some of the crucial issues of our time in the exciting and challenging atmosphere of a courtroom, where they can test their arguments and skills against one another in the spirit of fierce but friendly competition.”

Nelson Mandela, welcoming participants to the 1995 African Human Rights Moot Court Competition¹

BACKGROUND

The concept of “SDG 16+” draws upon an emphasis on interlinkages and co-dependencies between different parts of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and brings together the core governance and safety concerns of SDG 16 with those other targets that play a vital role in undergirding such development.² Among them is Target 4.7 on – among other things – human rights education. Target 4.7 aims to ensure that by 2030

all learners acquire knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including among others through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship, and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture’s contribution to sustainable development.³

Making the connection between human rights education (alongside other pro-developmental and conscious global citizenship education) and the broader SDG 16+ agenda also has implications

¹ Quoted in Gift Kgomosotho, Christof Heyns, and Bongani Majola, “Notes from the Field: Bringing New Life to Human Rights Globally: The Powerful Tool of Schools’ Moots,” *International Journal of Human Rights Education* 2, no. 1 (2018): 1.

² SDG16+ is a concept often associated with the Pathfinders initiative, a group of UN member countries, international organizations, and members of civil and the private sector, see <https://www.sdg16.plus>.

³ See <https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal4>.

for the creation of meaningful *partnerships* for the Goals. Agenda 2030 will not work as an elite-driven top-down exercise in or from New York. It has often been highlighted that one of the advantages of the SDGs over the MDGs is their universality. A corollary of this is the importance of the activation of a “cohort 2030” *across the world*.⁴

The activation of such a cohort will directly contribute toward another vital quality necessary to make the Agenda as a whole function, namely *accountability*. The framework was designed partly to act as a peer-reviewed network of State-level exchange (via fora such as the High-Level Political Forum), but to be effective there must also be a meaningful level of ground-up participatory reflexion. Without education for the general population about the SDGs, this reflexion will only ever be partial.

Thus far, a great deal of sensitization and awareness-raising around the SDGs has been about *branding*. The SDGs have undoubtedly been well-branded, and the cubes and colors have to a certain extent achieved recognition. However, at that level, they will always remain aspirational rather than practical, and organizational rather than operational. The public pursuit of accountability to aspirational objectives will always be inherently political, and though some may argue this is a strength – it is possible, after all, that a politics of generality can empower a more technical process of review – its promises may prove empty, and its energy could easily be misdirected, without capacity at local levels to engage with the technical policy implications.

Therefore, this education regarding the SDGs needs to extend beyond the modification and updating of syllabi within development studies, political science, or international law programmes. Something further is needed to have learners *experience* the ways in which the SDGs can shape policymaking at local, regional, or national levels.

⁴ On Cohort 2030, see Sarah Mendelson, “Young People, the Sustainable Development Goals, and the Liberal World Order: What is to be done?” *Medium*, October 9, 2018, <https://medium.com/sdg16plus/young-people-the-sustainable-development-goals-and-the-liberal-world-order-what-is-to-be-done-fc648e3b2d21>.

TWO EXAMPLES FROM HUMAN RIGHTS EDUCATION

Human rights practitioners will recognize this two-level operation: the way in which the rhetorical deployment of the language of human rights can be divorced from the more mechanical operation of the “work” of human rights protection.

Here, I want to learn from two techniques developed and used within (mainly legal) human rights education as a means of sensitizing while developing both knowledge and skills, at different levels: namely the facilitation of *human rights moots* and the production of *human rights shadow reports*. At least at the university level (and I shall discuss below how at least the moot can and has been deployed with younger learners), these techniques build upon a conviction that the next generation of practitioners will only truly understand the mechanics of human rights law through their use. Participatory and experiential learning offer the potential for transformative engagement both with detail and with purpose.

It is worth noting that at the outset of the African Moot, which imagined a court before which the human rights questions of the continent could be litigated, the African Court of Human and Peoples’ Rights did not yet exist! The dynamic energy created around the prospect and purpose of such an institution was planted in the fertile minds of a generation of law students, who have gone on to become the current cohorts of human rights professionals (and other lawyers) across the continent. Many of them are working in the context where access to justice in front of the Arusha Court is still a remote possibility.⁵

The practicalities of conducting a moot are quite simple: a problem is designed, usually involving a fictitious State (or group

⁵ While the Court was created when 15 States ratified the 1998 Protocol in 2004 (more than twenty years after the first African Moot), direct access to the Court for individuals is limited to matters arising in the jurisdiction of States that have also made Article 34(6) declarations – that is currently only 8 (12 having been made, with 4 having been subsequently withdrawn). See further Frans Viljoen, Keketso Kgomoosotho, Thompson Chengeta, and Nyambeni Davhana, “Christof and mooting,” in *A Life Interrupted: Essays in Honour of the Lives and Legacies of Christof Heyns*, eds. Frans Viljoen et al. (PULP, 2022), 86.

of States, to introduce more complex, public international law questions), and a set of established facts. A litigating posture is then envisioned with an applicant alleging violation of several human rights, and the State, as respondent, disputing the extent to which their conduct violates provisions of the instrument in question (in the case of the African Moot, the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights). Teams are invited to draft written briefs for both of the two parties, and then based on the written submissions, a certain number of teams (in the case of the African Moot, one per country) are invited to the oral arguments.

Moots bring multiple benefits for law students: in addition to the obvious skills development with respect to problem analysis, issue-finding, and research, the written memorials are an opportunity to showcase drafting and argumentation skills. For those teams selected for oral presentation, there are clear opportunities to practise oral presentation and time management. More normatively, well-designed problems or cases allow students to explore the integration and synthesis between different branches of international law.⁶ Likewise, the problem can allow for the important inclusion of topics or populations, spotlighting issues that receive insufficient attention within conventional legal education in particular contexts (minority rights being an obvious example).

These benefits for the development of the advocacy skills of law students have made moots a staple of legal education for centuries. More recently moots focussed on certain areas of law, especially international law, have been developed as a means of encouraging attention and excitement around the possibility for the use of those areas of law, and opportunities for future careers. From the perspective of a global campus for human rights, the competition between teams from the global north and the global south, or across other diverse demographics, can make a strong contribution

⁶ This discussion draws upon Christof Heyns, Norman Taku, and Frans Viljoen, "Revolutionising Human Rights Education in African Universities the African Human Rights Moot Court Competition," in *Advocating for Human Rights: 10 Years of the Inter-American Moot Court Competition*, eds. Claudio Grossman, Claudia Martin, and Diego Rodríguez-Pinzón (Martinus Nijhoff, 2008).

toward universalism. The pride of a team from an African university winning a world moot competition in which teams from elite Western universities were also competing cannot be overestimated.⁷

But there is also a less-advanced, mass-popular version – the National Schools Moot – which is not intended necessarily to guide the next generation of lawyers but rather the next generation of citizens (and – indeed – indirectly, some of the older generations too). Less tied to an international human rights instrument, this model can be a more local exercise in constitutional awareness, where a rights-issue articulated in the SDGs can be argued with reference to the rights articulated in the domestic constitution. As such it can form a core part of a civics education curriculum for learners of any age. One theory of change here is that the activity not only has an impact on the learners themselves, but also upon family members and others with whom they discuss activities from their school day.

Such a device for suffusing an awareness of the SDGs, the “future we want,” and the legitimate expectations of the public concerning the steps taken by their governments to achieve them could be transformational.

However, a potential complication arises given the obvious significance of a confrontational or adversarial dimension of a legal proceeding for how the role-play of a moot court works. It is sometimes contended that one of the significant merits of the SDGs over conventional human rights frameworks, for those looking to advance justice and governance objectives, is that they represent a less-confrontational framing for important questions of rights. As such, therefore, it is difficult to conceive how one could create an “SDG moot” with an applicant and respondent.

Indeed, this challenge is in ways symptomatic of a broader concern about how human rights practitioners should leverage the SDGs: if the aspirations laid out in Agenda 2030 are treated like other rights documents, and passivity on the part of the State is

⁷A South African university first won the Jessup International Law Moot Court Competition in 1999; the Nelson Mandela World Human Rights Moot Competition (which began in 2009) has been won by teams from Jamaica, Brazil, Argentina, and Kenya.

responded to using the same grammar as in human rights politics, then an important opportunity to renew the agenda of justice may be missed. But at the same time, as discussed above, if the SDGs are allowed to remain aspirational rhetoric, rather than applied policy to confront demonstrated problems, then increasing awareness and literacy of them will be a hollow victory.

This highlights the significance of another potential benefit or consequence of a human rights moot that Christof Heyns and others have recognized. The design of the problems, and the fact that participants must prepare both sides of the case, lead to an outcome they described as “placing positivism in context.”⁸ Where legal rules meet real-world conditions, operative policy consideration (“lesser of two evils”) or principles of fairness may impact the interpretation of positivistic rules. Just as lawyers must learn to place rules alongside priorities, such as cost-effectiveness, development practitioners must wrestle with the interplay between internationally declared objectives and governmental realities such as sticky bureaucracies or the independence of magistrates and judges. They must also comprehend how policy choices are shaped by, for example, the collection of priorities or the lack of investment in data-processing within government records.

In addition to mooting, one can add another example of a participatory and experiential exercise from human rights education, namely the classwork of *shadow reporting*. This is usually undertaken by clinical groups in a law school setting (rather than as an individual assignment) and can involve direct engagement with both international mechanisms and individual rights-holders.

From a pedagogical perspective, this exercise seems more useful for getting into the detail of a particular issue or context, and maybe less useful for sensitizing a class to the mechanics of a wider process, and it relies upon a much higher baseline level of knowledge. But it still introduces important dimensions of the system to which it contributes (usually UN or regional reporting processes): starting, simply, with the fact that the process is going

⁸ Heyns, Taku, and Viljoen, “Revolutionising Human Rights Education,” 20–21.

on, that the State in question has participated; at a more granular level, allowing exploration of the issues at question and what the State has said about itself.

Unlike mootings, shadow reporting does not involve role play but can still involve adversariality that can so contribute toward participatory learning by way of its critical perspective toward the State's official position. This requires students to test the assumptions of the narrative presented in the State's representation, to whatever treaty body, and to research a particular issue, or potentially a wide range of issues, using both official and unofficial data. An effective shadow report will both contextualize and augment. The process of writing it will involve challenging the veracity of objective claims made by the government and discussing the fairness of subjective assessments presented. This lays the groundwork for public accountability with respect to the implementation of national or other development agendas.

Meanwhile, like a well-designed moot problem, shadow reports can be used to cast a spotlight on subjects which are receiving insufficient attention elsewhere within a curriculum, or within national policy debates. The whole point is to add a perspective to the reading of the main report, often on behalf of a minority group whose interests have not been sufficiently included. In this respect, shadow reports that give a voice to otherwise ignored communities can strongly reinforce the SDG principle of "leave no one behind." Importantly, rather than the fictional fact-pattern of mootings, in this case, students work with real issues, sometimes on behalf of actual clients. Engaging with these clients, directly learning the way in which existing policy may be excluding or marginalizing them is an important alternate way of "placing positivism in context." These opportunities for consultation with, or at least close empirical observation of, affected communities can be some of the most enriching experiences of clinical legal studies.

These engagements can turn shadow reporting into fully participatory learning, but even without them, the process of producing such a report will be a more engaged form of assignment than a typical essay. It is also worth underlining that, alongside their pedagogical benefits, the products of this process, the shadow

reports themselves, often play a vital role in facilitating the work of international organizations, and as entry-points for constructive dialogue with governmental stakeholders at national level.⁹

Shadow reports can make a vital contribution to the way in which treaty bodies undertake meaningful reviews of State practice. Depending upon the character of the mechanism to which they are submitted, they can also be the basis for direct engagement with officials for students themselves.¹⁰ At the very least, they provide the sense of making a contribution to a real-world process, and the sense of satisfaction when a pertinent question is asked of a State representative on the basis of research that had been contributed to the Secretariat by way of a shadow report. Neither experience should be underestimated. Likewise, shadow reports provide a mechanism for students effectively to advocate for real-world clients in front of real-world mechanisms, allowing them to appreciate the responsibility of representation as well as to tackle substantive issues.

THE PROPOSAL: A SHADOW OR SIMULACRE SDG REPORT DRAFTING PROCESS

The contribution here, then, is the proposal of an exercise for role-played participatory reporting – fusing the benefits of mooting and shadow reporting into a single exercise that can contribute toward a more sophisticated understanding of the operationalization of the SDGs, rather than just the branding.

⁹ See, for example, Joel Pruce, “The Ferguson Uprising, Shadow Reporting, and Human Rights Experimentalism,” *Human Rights Quarterly* 45 (2023): 88–108. See also Eric Tars, “Human Rights Shadow Reporting: A Strategic Tool for Domestic Justice,” *Journal of Poverty Law and Policy* 42 (2009): 475–85.

¹⁰ An increasing array of international human rights actors, both intergovernmental and nongovernmental, are leveraging the enthusiasm of law clinics to assist in the mechanics of State review. This kind of involvement for students is of course a tremendous opportunity, but it extends a little beyond the remit of what could be considered shadow reporting.

This exercise could be run with senior schoolchildren (maybe 16–18 years) as well as with university students in a politics, governance, or human rights class. In order to make it a manageable classroom exercise, and for the reasons discussed above related to the overlap with human rights education, SDG 16+ should be an explicit framing.¹¹

In cases where the State in question has recently produced a Voluntary National Report (VNR) or another form of an SDG Report (SDGR), it may make sense for this exercise to produce a genuine shadow report, one that engages directly with the real product. Given the participatory and inclusive way in which States are encouraged to produce VNRs, there may well be official opportunities to engage with the process. At present, the international consideration of VNRs (such as there is one) does not provide a forum for the discussion or strategic publication of shadow reports, but again, opportunities might be sought nationally.

Alternatively, given the proliferation of Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs), another possibility would be for universities to engage with local authorities in their city or municipality in order to contribute toward the drafting of some kind of comprehensive local review.¹² As noted, these can be an opportunity to highlight the interests of a particular community, as part of “leaving no one behind.”¹³

In other circumstances, though, it is proposed that this could be an entirely simulacre report writing process, at the national level.

¹¹ Within the SDG16+ agenda, there is a wide array of different material to cover, and educators may feel that a further narrowing of scope is appropriate, perhaps selecting 10 indicators for students to choose between.

¹² For an interesting review of the state of VLRs, see Fernanda Ortiz-Moya, Zhonghan Tan, and Yatsuka Katoaka, *State of the Voluntary Local Reviews 2023: Follow-Up and Review of the 2030 Agenda at the Local Level* (IGES, July 2020), <https://www.iges.or.jp/en/pub/vlrs-2023/en>.

¹³ See, for example, the SDG Audit of Black Communities in Kansas City, Missouri conducted as a capstone project at the Columbia University School of International and Public Affairs, https://www.sipa.columbia.edu/sites/default/files/2024-06/For_Publication_KansasCityTaskForce_Mann%20%282%29.pdf.

What Should Such a Report Include?

This chapter is not the space for a detailed discussion of what actual VNRs or SDGRs ought to look like (indeed, not even to suggest that there is a singular model), but it is worth dwelling on what might be encouraged for inclusion within a shadow report so as to create the richest engagement for the students with the full range of the SDGs.

The students should be guided in how to find, verify, present, and discuss the various types of data. They should explore which policy-making organs are likely to have the greatest role to play with respect to each of the many issues potentially raised by the target and indicator framework. Finally, especially for more advanced students, they ought to explore how peer-reviewed or other research from the academy or other sources might inform or critique government policies that have been adopted.

Data

There should be detailed engagement with the agreed international indicator framework, including reference to the feasibility of collection and presentation of the relevant data based on official statistics. This data aspect is an element of the SDGs that often gets overlooked in introductory texts and is considered too technical. This tendency is a serious misstep, and certainly, at the university level, an underestimation of the capacity and potential of students. However, when presenting the exercise, it is worth bearing in mind that the teacher or lecturer may need to dwell on how these indicators interact with the relevant targets, rather than relying on the students' background reading. Moreover, in the event that an official statistic is not available, or an available official statistic only partially captures the scope of the indicator, then they should engage in a discussion of localization (or domestication) and the use of proxy indicators.

Domestication, and especially a normative assessment of the appropriateness of domestication in specific cases, seems likely to be a non-intuitive concept to students who are not well-grounded in empirical social science research, or who are not familiar with

the mechanics of official statistical organizations. This presents an opportunity to increase students' awareness of such mechanics and the agencies involved (and in certain cases, potentially the opportunity for engagement with such agencies).¹⁴

Students should also be introduced to the principle of disaggregation. This has become a buzzword for the SDG community in a way that has arguably been slightly overwrought.¹⁵ Statistical confidence is surely the first hurdle and while, for administrative data, the capacity to disaggregate is merely a function of granular collection, for some of the other (and some of the most important and least well-covered indicators) survey-based data, the "lift" required to get results that can be disaggregated becomes a lot heavier. However, the principled normative reason for the emphasis on disaggregation where possible is an important means of unpacking what it really means to "leave no one behind."

One part of disaggregation that may be accessible, and which may appeal to a student group, would be localization. In contexts that are more data-rich, universities may wish to consider a simulacrum VLR rather than a simulacrum VNR, regardless of whether, as noted, they are formally collaborating with local authorities.¹⁶ In circumstances

¹⁴ For example, with respect to SDG Indicator 16.1.4, which concerns perceptions of safety, but in many cases has been adapted to local conditions. Students might be invited to discuss the merits of using survey data about perceptions of safety collected only from heads of households, or a survey question that has only asked about how safe a respondent feels walking in their local neighborhood rather than one that doesn't specify "local neighbourhood" but does specify "at night."

¹⁵ For a range of commentary on approaches to disaggregation and its significance for the SDGs, see the reports of the Inter-Agency and Expert Group on SDG Indicators, <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/iaeg-sdgs/disaggregation/#:~:text=Data%20Disaggregation%20for%20the%20SDG,of%20leaving%20no%20one%20behind.>

¹⁶ In the UK, for example, a research institute at the University of Bristol partnered with local city authorities and an Alliance of other stakeholders to produce the UK's first Voluntary Local Review in 2019. See *Bristol and the SDGs: A Voluntary Local Review of Progress 2019* (2019), <https://www.bristol.ac.uk/media-library/sites/cabot-institute-2018/documents/BRISTOL%20AND%20THE%20SDGS.pdf>. In the acknowledgments of that report, the authors highlight informative contributions made by

where it is not possible to reinforce an official local process, the university should still consider having the students design some form of public consultation as part of their writing process.

In many contexts, the students will be frustrated in their search for official data about large proportions of the indicator framework. This frustration is worth exploring from a normative perspective (including in the context of SDG Target 17.19 focused on measurements of progress by 2030) but also creates a learning opportunity with respect to the way approximations might be inferred from imperfect or over-specific, non-official sources of data. There should also be opportunities to evidence a report with more narrative data, telling stories about the impact of policies, or about the persistence of challenges, by drawing upon observational research or consultation.

Having been introduced to the official indicator framework and encouraged deeply to research specific parts of the SDG 16+ agenda, it is likely that students will want to propose a number of additional indicators. This could be a valuable part of the exercise, and an opportunity to explore the policy equities involved, and the potential process for making such a proposal.

Policy

Perhaps the greatest difference between a typical shadow report and the proposed simulacre exercise lies with respect to the applicable policy environment. Whereas a shadow report would assume that the case for existing policy has already been expressed, and rather focus on its shortfalls, and make the case for reforms, in the simulacre exercise the students are encouraged to be carrying the government pen, making the case for the progress that has been made, now more than half-way through the lifespan of the SDGs.

The report would fundamentally be asking: what are the policies and programmes that contribute most directly to the achievement of these targets? Depending on the structure of the State (for example, whether there is a centralized planning department, or a

other cities and municipalities: Los Angeles and New York in the US, and Santana de Parnaíba in Brazil.

national development plan), this research may look quite different, but in most cases, it will involve developing a granular knowledge of how high-level policy goals are translated into administrative action.

Of course, where students have been able to engage with a prior VNR, or even a baseline report, then such a policy review can focus on more recent policy innovations. Where these reports have not been written, then a more holistic analysis may be appropriate. In addition to presenting the intention of the policy, however, depending on the data revealed, the report may also need to include a realistic analysis of the challenges faced in the implementation of these programmes.

Applied Research

The inclusion of applied research, especially peer-reviewed technical research is probably more appropriate in the case of university-level students (though advanced school-age students could be introduced to curated examples). This could be a particularly interesting part of the exercise for multi-disciplinary human rights classes, or for other groups with a diversity of academic backgrounds. There is also the potential for students at a more advanced level to consider the design of their own research with the indicator framework in mind, or for a linkage to be designed between this reporting exercise and further research of the clinical group.

Again, there would be a subtle distinction between the shadow and simulacre versions – whereas the former can adopt an advocacy stance of “this seems to work; why is the State not doing it?” while the latter – in circumstances where State policy is unresponsive to available evidence – is harder to draft. As discussed in the next section, one device to assist here would be the role-play of consultants, creating a little space between the author and the responsible government ministry.

The Possibility of Role-Play

Acknowledging the reality of the way in which many States go about drafting their VNRs or SDGRs, one way of presenting this

exercise to a class would be to envision a contract as consultants, rather than government actors themselves.¹⁷ This would allow the teacher to act as the government agency contracting the service, the client, and can create potentially helpful learning moments.

Alternatively – or additionally – classes could create a simulacre of the kind of intra-ministerial drafting teams that many States use to ensure widespread contributions to their SDG reporting. Small teams could act as representatives from those governmental departments whose work is most implicated by the targets included among SDG 16+ (Justice, Police, Correctional Services, Social Development, Home Affairs, Education, etc.). Another team, representing the consultants, could then canvass these departments for briefings on the relevant policies.

These “report drafting committees” would likely be a venue for interesting role play in contexts where States have already engaged in some way with the SDG process – creating an opportunity for an overlap between simulacre and shadow drafting. Where the prior engagement has shortcomings – for example, where a questionable decision has been taken with respect to domestication, where relevant data has been excluded from reporting, where policies have (in the view of the class) been mis-represented – then the teacher could role-play a scenario where the “consultants” make representations to their “client” about a revised approach in the “upcoming” report.

THE POTENTIAL

Just as with the clinical techniques from human rights education discussed here, the proposed exercise seems likely to have several pedagogical upsides. The exercise provides an opportunity for a detailed investigation of various problem areas addressed by the SDG 16+ agenda, the design of the various targets, the utility of the indicator framework for measuring them. Beyond this, the exercise

¹⁷The exercise could be run as either an individual or group-based exercise. The possibility for role-play is perhaps greater as a group exercise, but some preambular individual preparation would likely add value.

will require a qualitative and deeply contextualized assessment of the extent to which that developmental challenge is experienced in the given context, or how the marginalization of certain groups may exacerbate it. Moreover, the exercise can provide an informative lesson about the current state of the problem (coupled with data literacy skills, data analytics, and data-presentation). It will introduce the current state of government policy directed toward the problem area, which could involve a political assessment of motives and values. It should involve consultation with affected groups, or at least close observation of their lived experiences. Finally, it will offer an opportunity for a potentially detailed literature review of the “pracademic” literature on “what works?”

More broadly, of course, the central thrust of the exercise is to lead to greater ownership of the SDGs, both in their aspiration and purpose, but also in the practice of development, and of the instrumentality of the indicator framework. Both this knowledge and experience can play a foundational role in gestating and growing “cohort 2030.”¹⁸

In considering this broad potential significance, it seems worth weighing the merit of the emphasis on the data and the government processes (the simulacrum report) over the advocacy for greater attention paid to “what works” and (nongovernmental) development programming (more akin to the shadow report). Put differently, why is it significant that students become aware of and engaged with the mechanics of the SDGs in addition to the purposes and objectives?

This is not a binary option: especially for younger learners, it is important that the promise of “what works?” or “what can work?” is centered as well as questions such as “is there political will to achieve this?” But, especially now, during the second half of the lifespan of the SDGs, it seems important to focus on questions of review and, to return to the theme introduced at the outset, *accountability*.

¹⁸ Mendelson, “Young People, the Sustainable Development Goals, and the Liberal World Order.” See also Sarah E. Mendelson, “Building the Field of Sustainable Development,” *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, Winter 2020, https://ssir.org/articles/entry/foundations_should_invest_in_building_the_field_of_sustainable_development.

The set of questions this entails – (i) to what extent is a goal being advanced by existing policy? (ii) are there particular groups who are being left behind? (iii) what can be done to catch up? – could be one of most transformative impacts of a human rights-based approach upon the work of the SDGs. For learners, these are not questions that can be encouraged without creating opportunities to engage with the targets of SDG 16+ in a more instrumental and data-driven way. Exercises such as the one proposed here, whether simulacre or connected with material assistance to official processes, can help achieve this outcome.