(The Problem with) UN SDGs as a Measure of Environmental Sustainability in Libraries, and an Exploration of Alternatives

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Introduction

Year over year, we are continuing to observe the impacts of the climate crisis worsen, from floods, fires and storms, to climate refugees and climate anxiety. As Dr. Kimberly Nicholas so succinctly frames the climate crisis: "It's warming. It's us. We're sure. It's bad. We can fix it."[1] All jobs are climate jobs—library professionals need to respond to the call for action to reflect on their professional scope of influence to determine the ways in which we can have an impact and push our institutions towards meaningful change. Ultimately, as a society, we need to reduce our emissions and increase our support for those who are and will be disproportionately impacted by the climate crisis. How can we know what we've increased or decreased if we haven't explicitly measured our actions in the first place?

In 2015, the United Nations adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which centres 17 goals meant to simultaneously recognize and inspire action on targets related to health, education, inequality, economic growth, and climate change.[2] These United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs) categorize and rank progress within and between countries based on the 17 goals. It is modeled on the premise of a "triple bottom line": social, environmental, and economic facets.

This paper seeks to address the question of how to assess sustainability in academic libraries. While the UN SDGs are one of, if not the most, prominent forms of thinking about sustainable assessment in higher education, the inadequacy of the UN SDGs should cause pause and prompt consideration of alternative measures of sustainability in academic libraries and libraries more broadly.

I will first explore the merits of, and more concerningly, some of the deeper issues I see with implementing the UN SDGs as a measure of sustainability assessment. I will contrast the capitalist underpinnings of the UN SDGs against both the necessity for degrowth, as outlined in Andreas Malm's *How to Blow Up a Pipeline*, and refusal, via Jenny Odell's *How to Do Nothing*. I will then propose alternative forms of sustainable assessment that may be more productively deployed in the context of academic libraries that address the gaps found in the UN SDGs such as the Sustainability Tracking, Assessment & Rating System (STARS), true cost assessment (TCA), and honouring Indigenous knowledges.

The American Library Association and Sustainable Libraries Initiative's National Climate Action Strategy for Libraries defines climate action as: climate change mitigation (reducing greenhouse gas emissions), climate change adaptation (increasing community resilience to the impacts of climate change), and climate justice work (acknowledging the climate crisis's impact on marginalized communities).[3]

There is no question that the climate crisis is severe; the questions remaining are regarding the degree of severity. Even if as a society we could stop emitting carbon entirely today, there are consequence we will face due to the warming we've already seen, and the

associated feedback loops because of the existing warming. Since it is impossible to stop all emissions today, looking at the trajectory of how well and fast we reduce our emissions matters greatly.[4]

There are some things the UN SDGs do well that must be acknowledged. They break a complex issue with many moving parts into smaller more manageable parts, which can draw in engagement – we may not all be able to contribute to every SDG or every facet of the issue of the climate crisis, but there are parts that some of us are well positioned to contribute to through our interests, skills, and resources. In the realm of academic libraries in particular, the use of UN SDGs as a point of metadata are a helpful dimension for ease of discoverability concerning individual goals. Scopus, for example, has a new feature that enables searching based on SDGs. While there are some merits to this system, they do not overcome the built-in fundamental flaws.

The Problem with the UN SDGs

Goals, not grades

As a form of assessment, there is implicit bias in the SDGs since assessment is reported by national statistical offices and not externally verifiable in many ways (when they're reported at all – the 2024 UN SDG Progress report noted only 135 of the 169 targets can be assessed due to insufficient data).[5] Comparing the data of one country to another is not comparing like to like, because, as Andreas Malm points out, not all emissions are equal: there is a difference between luxury versus subsistence emissions.[6] As such, to follow a scheme of data tables without context that would compare the greenhouse gas emissions of the richest nations, and their luxury emissions associated with private jets, yachts, and numerous mansions against the poorest nations and their cattle or rice paddy emissions that comprise the nation's livelihood is morally reprehensible. Beyond the issue of data scarcity and inequity, some of the definitions for data collection are also inadequate, such as the definition for poverty, currently defined as "surviving on less than $2.15 per person per day".[7]

The UN SDGs do not explicitly mention Indigenous populations or colonization and its ill effects. While the UN noted that "Indigenous peoples are at the heart of the 2030 Agenda,"[8] marking this population as an implicit inspiration, only 6 direct references to the world's Indigenous population in the 2030 Agenda does not do enough to make explicit the fact that the populations most at risk from the climate crisis are the world's most vulnerable communities; the same communities who least contributed to the climate crisis to begin with.[9]

The inherently political components of the UN SDGs are also a problem. At face value, the fact the SDGs are an initiative from the United Nations seems like a good thing because it is a respected organization worldwide that demands widescale cooperation, which is precisely the scale that the issue of climate change demands. This very aspect is also a drawback, however: the politics of trying to get entire nations to cooperate is truly despairing to behold. Since the first UN Climate Change Conference of the Parties (COP) in 1995, worldwide annual C02 emissions have grown 60 percent.[10] Malm highlights the futility of the political circus that is the COP, noting that "[i]n the twenty-five years after the

delegates left, more carbon was released from underground stocks than in the seventy-five years before they met."[11]

Finally, the premise of the triple bottom line upon which the UN SDGs is based is capitalist in nature, and no inherently capitalist system can solve the climate emergency in any meaningful way. As Malm notes: "we find ourselves between two scissor blades: on the one hand, unbending business-as-usual, taking emissions ever higher and confounding hopes for mitigation; on the other, delicate ecosystems crashing down – the extraordinary inertia of the capitalist mode of production meeting the reactivity of the earth."[12]

Capitalism: the elephant in the room

When considering the UN SDG data portal for any given nation's individual goals and their progress, generally the positively trending goals are related to capitalism, which have an inverse relationship to goals related to human rights and climate change. For example, to be improving on goal 8 "decent work and economic growth" or goal 9 "industry, innovation and infrastructure" often comes at the expense of progress on goal 12 "responsible consumption and production." It may not be possible to focus on the triple bottom line of society, environment, and economic growth all at the same time – adopting this system of belief and assessment extends the delusion that we can continue the way we currently are in society in a relentless race towards progress and limitless growth without ill effect on people and the planet. As Malm succinctly states: "This is the impasse in which the climate movement finds itself: the historical victory of capital and the ruination of the planet are one and the same thing."[13]

Economic growth is contraindicated to 'solving' the problem in many ways. As social and planetary health economist Kate Raworth writes, "[t]oday we have economies that need to grow, whether or not they make us thrive. What we need are economies that make us thrive, whether or not they grow."[14] Boundless growth, year over year return on investment and value for shareholders may not be possible to make the type of strong headway we need to truly stave off the worst possible outcomes of the climate crisis. The triple bottom line of social, environmental, and economic sustainability may be impossible to obtain in a capitalist society. In a circular economy that doesn't measure boundless growth as success, perhaps economic sustainability could be in balance with social and environmental sustainability, but with the system as it currently stands, it is doomed to fail.

Moreover, we have seen that our global economy is capable of handling a short-term slow growth season in the COVID-19 epidemic. As Malm notes, "If a pandemic can induce governments to take emergency actions, why can't a climate breakdown that threatens to kill off the very life-support systems of the planet do the same?".[15] This sentiment extends to all our institutions: from the smallest library to the largest education institutions. To uphold social sustainability in dimensions regarding health, we stayed home from work, and there was certainly a downturn in the global economic markets. The creative reimagining of the way our world worked needed for COVID was a shorter-term implementation than what would be needed to mitigate the worst possible outcomes for the climate crisis, and as such it may be the case that moving away from traditional measures of economic success may have to be a part of the solution.

The problem with UN SDGs as they apply to assessment in (academic) libraries

To apply the UN SDG's shortcomings to assessment in libraries: it is easy to see what we're already doing, map our activities to the UN SDGs, give ourselves a gold star, and carry on without making any meaningful change in our day-to-day operations. The SDGs are an easier target to meet than to do the work of assessing and reducing emissions or assessing and increasing actions towards climate justice. In a 2024 study, Webb & Slattery found that only 11 of 31 Canadian Association of Research Libraries (CARL) member institutions had environmental climate-related content throughout the libraries' website, policies, goals, or strategic plans; yet 30 out of 31 demonstrated commitments that align with at least Goal 4 (Quality Education), Goal 10 (Reduced Inequalities), or Goal 13 (Climate Action).[16]

The inverse is also true, and not in a good way: it is tempting to think we may not be able to have an impact on some goals, where we in fact could. For instance, it would be reasonable for a library mapping their activities to think they would not be able to impact goal 14, life under water. However, through climate action that made a meaningful reduction in greenhouse gas emissions, the rise in temperature would slow, which would result in the ocean's rise in temperature to also slow, which means that there is an indirect link to that goal. It is possible to conduct similar thought experiments with each of the goals, given the interconnected nature of the UN SDGs. This interconnection is, as I mentioned earlier, a strength of the UN SDGs in mapping the nuance of sustainability at large, however when it comes to quantifiably measuring and assessing the impacts of what we *are* doing, and more importantly, what we *can* do, that nuance can obscure the larger goal of curtailing the climate crisis.

Sam Knights, a founder of Extinction Rebellion writes that "[m]ore and more people are joining this movement as they realize that the climate crisis – and the associated crisis of capitalism and colonialism that caused it – will not be solved by gradual reform and rotten compromise. This is a crisis that requires radical system change on a scale never seen before [...] The problem is our complete and utter failure to imagine any meaningful alternative."[17] As such, rather than simply stating that I think we ought not to use the UN SDGs as a form of assessment in libraries, I'd like to point you in the direction of some alternative means of assessment that are not built upon or otherwise intertwined with economic measures of success, and instead centre the concept of degrowth. To turn from the status quo approach of the triple bottom line, it may be helpful to first bolster ourselves with a language of refusal.

When there is a majority or status quo approach, as is the case with basing climate action assessment on the UN SDGs (as is currently the case both in the literature and in practice), to do or propose something else ascertains the status of a "refusal."[18][19] Odell instructs that "refusing productivity and stopping to listen [...] entails an active process of listening that seeks out the effects of racial, environmental, and economic injustice and brings about real change."[20] What I am proposing here is to refuse what may seem at face value like the commonsense approach to climate conscious assessment in favour of a more nuanced approach that takes into account local context, and embeds climate justice into our measurements.

As Odell writes, "What is needed, then, is not a 'once-and-for-all' type quitting but ongoing training: the ability not just to withdraw attention, but to invest it somewhere else,

to enlarge and proliferate it, to improve its acuity."[21] It is in this spirit of reinvesting our attention into climate action assessment that I offer you the following alternatives. I will note that it is possible and preferable to adopt elements of each into library assessment, pending the context of what goals, programs, or services are being assessed. I am not advocating for a whole integration of only one system, or any system over the other, and instead offer these as alternative suggestions for building in an environmentally sustainable assessment component into library activities that ideally don't solely rely on, start or end with the UN SDGs.

Alternative forms of assessment based on degrowth

Sustainability Tracking, Assessment & Rating System (STARS)

STARS was developed and is maintained by the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education (AASHE). The first version of the STARS rating system was published in 2007. The checklist has been updated over the years, with the most recent iteration launched June 18th, 2024.[22] The STARS checklist is entirely open access.[23] Scoring operates on an incremental, binary, or tiered system, and each goal has a minimum requirement and target to earn full points. While some items on the checklist may not directly apply to all academic libraries (they may apply more readily to the parent institution, for example, AC 2.2 or 3.1 undergraduate or graduate programs with sustainability-focused learning requirements), it is a great way to explore the items within a library's scope of influence, with direct units of measurement attached (e.g. OP 3.1 "potable water use per person", OP 5.1 "energy consumption per square meter", OP 6.1 "greenhouse gas emissions inventory and disclosure", or AC 8.4 "Support for open access publishing").

Ideally, the parent institution will or has enrolled in the STARS process. In some cases, an institution may have created an account but never completed a report or has only completed one report and let the certification expire. Putting aside the potential for a literal gold star, the STARS program is still a great framework for academic libraries (or libraries in general) to consider for many reasons.

Referencing STARS resources and materials to help inventory what areas of climate action to focus on in a library and how to begin to benchmark and assess impact over time can be helpful, even only as an internal measure year over year instead of as a full-scale institutional report as the program imagines. Leveraging these pre-existing materials helps save the resources of determining where and how to begin, and also can lend library staff the language needed to communicate to stakeholders the goals and efforts in progress, as well as wins over time.

None of the STARS checklist depend on growth or financial progress year over year, and the most recent iteration of STARS published in 2024 features "more robust indicators of racial equity and social justice."[24] This is evident in the entire categories devoted to Social Equity (e.g. PA 6.1 "Support for students from underrepresented groups" and PA 8.2 "Percentage of employees with marginalized gender identities") and Wellbeing & Work (PA 12. 1 "Number of weeks of paid maternity leave" or PA 13.2 "Percentage of employees that receive a living wage"). This commitment to people and the planet over financial gain sets the STARS program apart from many other forms of sustainable assessment.

True Cost Accounting (TCA)

This means of accounting aims to find the monetary value of a product beyond the simple marketplace value (e.g. what a buyer will pay), by adding a dimension of the cost of environmental and social impacts of a product to its face value. Stein et al. define TCA as: "data from the life cycle assessment [...] combined with impact monetization." Life cycle assessment includes the quantification of environmental impacts on health (e.g. human toxicity, particulate matter formation), water (e.g. freshwater ecotoxicity, marine ecotoxicty), soil (e.g. urban soil use, terrestrial acidification), and climate (e.g. climate change, carbon dioxide).[25] In recent years, the term has been adopted primarily by the food and agriculture industries.

While TCA does technically have an economic component to it, the premise is to add social and ecological dimensions to existing financial accounting procedures for organizations. In this way, it is a form of assessment that does not necessarily depend on perpetual financial growth as a pillar, but instead challenges the status quo of modern capitalism and accounting to look at costs beyond the monetary. For example, a case study from Bebbington & Larrinaga highlights a 2010 report from the Spanish Railways that documented saving 2297 million euros in diverted costs due to reductions in air pollution, carbon emissions, and noise that would have otherwise been expended due to road travel.[26]

Rubino & Veltri note that "such a science is inherently uncertain, and that a quality sustainable accounting science, instead of returning precise arithmetical data with the help of sophisticated calculus, should accept to coproduce the knowledge (to construct the costs) with the organizational stakeholders, who know the context in which the entity operates and decisions are taken."[27] Some data elements that contribute to TCA are based on assumptions or may have fluctuating or unknown value and are therefore best estimations. The practice it still valuable in adding nuance and context into decisions that may have heretofore been based solely on monetary value (which, if we consider daily market fluctuations, also seems arbitrary).

This form of sustainable assessment would do well to be adopted by higher education institutions at large, but there is certainly a place for it in academic libraries and libraries in general. When considering the costs of acquiring collections or licenses, for example, true cost accounting would look beyond the monetary value of the product, to add dimension to cost in terms of greenhouse gas emissions for shipping or for data storage, and could also account for downstream social costs saved, such as the number of loans denoting the number of copies of a book were saved from unique purchases, and the costs associated per book (e.g. paper, ink).

Indigenous Knowledge

The causes of the climate crisis are inextricably bound to colonialism. As Vandana Shiva writes: "The extermination of biological diversity and of indigenous cultures that know how to live in peace with Mother Earth is part of one extinction, one interconnected war against life. Ecocide and genocide are one indivisible process, and they began with the idea of the colonization of the Earth as the 'civilizing mission' of a 'superior race.'"[28] One crucial step

towards assessing our climate impact in a way that is line with climate justice is to listen to the lessons that Indigenous peoples in our communities are sharing, and heed their ways of knowing, although they might not fit neatly within the parameters of metrics we would normally assess.

Indigenous peoples all around the world bare centuries of ancestral knowledge that come from primarily observing the nature that surrounds them, which is the original form of climate resilience and preparedness. Hindou Oumarou Ibrahim writes:

> Indigenous peoples are the guardians of ancestral knowledge that draws from the environment the solutions of everyday life. These solutions are priceless. It is a treasure for all of those who have to face climate disorders, because it helps them to cope with the worst of its consequences, such as droughts, floods, hurricanes. In the Pacific Islands, indigenous peoples transmit from generation to generation the varieties of edible plants that can feed an entire people after a typhoon and so allow them to survive when all crops are destroyed. In the Sahel, the enders know which source continues to flow at worst time of droughts. In tropical forests, indigenous peoples know which plants best protect against some epidemic diseases such as malaria or dengue fever.
>
> Indigenous peoples are also the ones who best protect nature, because it is their work tool. In the heart of tropical forests, it is in the areas populated by hunter-gatherer communities that we can find the most biodiverse areas. In the Sahel, annual transhumance contributes to the natural fertilization of soils, this developing a great green wall that prevents desertification. In coastal areas, from the Central American Kuna to the Pacific Maori, traditional fishing methods preserve corals, mangroves, and other unique ecosystems that are the most effective barrier to rising sea levels.[29]

A key component, then, to follow a framework set out by Indigenous Knowledge's method of inquiry to assess our impact in the library requires room to observe. What measures we gain when we input quantitative statistics would be enriched with context if we were to have reflective time built into our processes to remark upon patterns we may notice, and how those patterns may differ from seasons past.

This alternative is the least proscriptive form of assessment, as it is necessarily local.[30] There is not a single way to adopt such a framework, as it must be built in relationship between a library and the Indigenous peoples that were the original habitants and stewards of the land. The needs of a library's community in a fire prone area will differ greatly from the needs of a library's community in a flood prone area, a drought prone area, an urban heat island, and so on. Integrating local Indigenous knowledges into assessments for a library's climate impact lends itself particularly well to the climate justice and climate change preparedness facets of the ALA-SLI definition of climate action.

SDGs as a Last Resort

As Thorpe and Gunton note on their case study mapping the SDGs to the University of Southern Queensland Library, "adopting a mapping approach, rather than a measurement or assessment process, to projects and activities is an easier first step to working with the

SDGs in academic libraries."[31] Although ease of use is only one factor necessary for assessment, generating momentum and action where there was none prior is a meaningful first step.

In an example of what Jenny Odell calls a "third space" in a language of refusal (e.g. "I will participate, but not as asked"),[32] I will concede that if it is not feasible to use another system for sustainable assessment, whether that is because using the UN SDGs is in alignment with what the parent institution has committed to doing and expects assessment in similar language from the library, or another reason, every effort should be made to go beyond simply mapping what the library is already doing to one of the goals, and should engage in a more meaningful way with an emphasis on action. After mapping what the library *is* doing, a logical next step would be to identify gaps and opportunities of what the library *could* do (or could do better). Most importantly, library administrators should plan means of monitoring and evaluating the progress of activities towards their corresponding goals.

Each SDG has specific targets. For example, SDG 4 is "Quality Education" and features specific targets such as "4.A Build and upgrade education facilities that are child, disability and gender sensitive and provide safe, nonviolent, inclusive, and effective learning environments for all" or "4.B By 2020, substantially expand globally the number of scholarships available to developing countries…".[33] Mapping library activities beyond the goal level, and through to specific targets not only makes more meaningful change, but also provides greater context for communicating the impact of the library's activities.

Conclusion

While there is some value in familiarization with the UN SDGs in a limited number of library endeavours such as metadata tagging or educating staff and patrons about sustainability, the criticisms of the UN SDGs outweigh the potential gain of adopting such a problematic system only for it to reach the end of its lifespan in 2030 anyways. We need solutions that go beyond short-term thinking and reach to intergenerational systems of learning and action instead to lessen the impacts of the climate crisis as much as possible.

Academic libraries, and libraries in general, would do well to implement forms alternative to the UN SDGs to measure and assess sustainability. Though there may not be a single most efficient form of sustainable assessment for academic libraries given the varying contexts of each institution and its local community, alternative forms of assessment to consider implementing could include the Sustainability Tracking, Assessment & Rating System, true cost accounting, and honouring Indigenous Knowledges. These methods of assessment do not have a built-in expiry (and in the case of Indigenous Knowledge, is timeless). Furthermore, and most importantly, these systems of assessment do not make the mistake of centring economic growth and progress, but instead understand that there may be some short-term trade-off in expense to adopt healthier systems for people and the planet. Overall, these alternative forms of assessment are intersectional, restorative, and socially just ways to enact change. Ultimately, resources that libraries consistently find themselves short on may be misplaced on projects simply mapping actions we are already doing to the UN SDG's goals without meaningfully moving the needle on the climate crisis. By contributing to climate

action directly, libraries will necessarily have a downstream impact on each of the UN SDGs.

Acknowledgements
Thank you to Morgan Barker for encouraging my initial doubts of the UN SDGs, and for the conversation prompting me to explore alternatives, such as those used by Morgan and her colleagues at Cal Poly Humboldt.

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[7] UN, "Goal 1."
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[11] Malm, *How to Blow Up a Pipeline*, 6-7.
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[14] Raworth, "A New Economics," 149.
[15] Malm, *How to Blow Up a Pipeline*, 2.
[16] Slattery, N. & Webb, J. "Mapping the Landscape of Sustainability-focused Efforts at Canadian Research Libraries."
[17] Knights, "Introduction: The Story so far," 11-13.
[18] Odell, *How to Do Nothing*, 64.
[19] See Hahn, "Refusing Growth," 173, for more on climate conscious critical refusal in libraries.
[20] Odell, *How to Do Nothing*, 22.
[21] Odell, How to Do Nothing, 93.
[22] Sustainability Tracking, Assessment & Rating System, "History."
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