Original Article

Clarifying Mixed Messages: International Scholarship Programmes in the Sustainable Development Agenda

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The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals include an explicit commitment to "substantially expand" the study abroad scholarships available to developing countries (Target 4b). Although this Target indicates a level of consensus about the benefits of scholarship programmes, it is made ambiguous by assuming coherence among many types of scholarship programme with different aims, approaches, and undergirding theories. In this paper, we examine the potential consequences of underpinning Target 4b through three theories: human capital, human rights, and human capabilities. Through the lenses of these three theories, we find significantly different outcomes projected for the ways that scholarship programs are linked to sustainable development. Additionally, failing to comprehend the theoretical frames that undergird scholarship programs creates an opportunity for diverse (and sometimes perverse) outcomes that may not serve the world's compact for a sustainable future. We propose a way forward through a human capabilities approach.

Introduction

Many look to the sustainable development goals (SDGs) as the "plan of action for people, planet, and prosperity," which is "urgently needed to shift the world onto a sustainable and resilient path" (United Nations (UN), 2015). Sustainable development is defined by the UN as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (2015). Within the SDGs, education is conceived of in multiple ways, including as both a goal unto itself, a "metaphor for social betterment" (Toukan, 2017, 294), and a tool to achieve many other development gains, such as greater environmental sustainability. Despite its omission from the Millennium Development Goals, and

limited presence in the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (Buckler and Creech, 2014), higher education features prominently in SDG Goal 4, in which signatories resolve to "ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university" (UN, 2015).

The inclusion of higher education within the SDGs is noteworthy given that their predecessor — the Millennium Development Goals — roundly ignored the contributions of higher education in global development (Roberts and Ajai-Ajagbe, 2013). More striking than its inclusion, however, is the way in which higher education access is conceptualized both *within* and *between* nations. SDG Target 4b commits signatories to:

> By 2020, substantially expand globally the number of scholarships available to developing countries, in particular least developed countries, small island developing States and African countries, for enrolment in higher education, including vocational training and information and communications technology, technical, engineering and scientific programmes, in developed countries and other developing countries. (UN, 2015)

In other words, the UN and 193 member states have agreed that sponsored international student mobility should be among the tools and outcomes for a sustainable planet. For the first time in a prominent international-level agenda, international scholarships are advocated as a tool for development.

Often accessible only to the elite, international student mobility might seem incongruent with a global sustainable development agenda. Yet many international organizations and national governments sponsor study abroad with the aim that students will build skills and connections to drive social, economic, and civic development in their home countries (see Asian Development Bank, 2007; Perna *et al.*, 2015). The extent to which scholarships successfully meet the goals of various stakeholders is the subject of long-running, although often sparsely detailed, debate (e.g. Strömbom, 1989; Wilson, 2015). Defining and measuring scholarship programme outcomes and impacts also remains a significant challenge for a host of practical and conceptual reasons, such as the long timescale of interventions, difficulty defining an adequate counterfactual, and limited cross-funder cooperation to conduct broader analyses of outcomes (Mawer, 2017). Similarly, little critical analysis of Target 4b has been made public since its adoption in September 2015. This is surprising given the deadline of 2020: any hope of achieving substantial expansion by this deadline must be underpinned by financial and administrative actions — paired with policy amendments — now.

This paper unpacks SDG Target 4b by exploring the intended mechanism that links international scholarships and sustainable development broadly. We do not aim to determine how or why higher education scholarships were included in the

SDGs, but instead to understand the implications seeking to achieve Target 4b. To do this, we focus on three theories prominent in understanding international education for development. As our analysis demonstrates, failing to comprehend the frames undergirding scholarship programs can create diverse (and sometimes perverse) outcomes that may or may not lead to sustainable development. The paper concludes with recommendations to enhance the interpretation of Target 4b and the role of international scholarships in sustainable development.

Background

Scholarships available to citizens of developing countries to study in developed or other developing countries have been part of international education for many decades, with some programs, such as the Rhodes Scholarships, operating for over a century. Yet initiatives grouped under the broad banner of "scholarships" are remarkably diverse (Perna *et al*., 2014), varying by sources and scope of funding; length, level, and field of study; host country and university; and type and extent of the conditions placed on awardees. Nearly every conceivable arrangement within these dimensions is represented in existing (or historical) scholarship programmes.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, administrators and researchers have yet to agree on a single definition of international scholarship programmes. As such, most comprehensive attempts to chart international scholarships do not offer much analytical utility to understanding SDG Goal 4b. Perna and colleagues (2014), for instance, identified a typology of characteristics from 183 scholarship programmes, but based only on those funded by national governments for the *outward mobility* of their own citizens. Other commentaries (Wilson, 2015; Campbell, 2016) acknowledge the differences in funders, motivations, and scale of scholarship programmes, but stop short of offering a formal definition. To date, scholarships have been typically identified by example rather than definition.

The SDGs also failed to provide a firm definition of "scholarship". In response, Bhandari and Mirza proposed a definition in their baseline analysis for monitoring progress against the Target: "A grant or payment (regardless of funding amount) made by a developed or developing country's national government to students from developing countries to support their education at a tertiary level…that will result in a degree, certification, or recognized award" (2016, 4). Although this definition highlights the transactional quality of a scholarship, it unfortunately presumes equivalence among a huge range of initiatives, from fee waivers without travel or subsistence funds to a full-ride doctoral degree.

Since the publication of the SDGs, additional insight has been offered by UNESCO:

> Scholarship programmes can play a vital role in providing opportunities for young people and adults who would otherwise not be able to afford to continue their education. Where developed countries offer scholarships to students from developing countries, these should be structured to build the capability of the developing country…In line with the SDG4 — Education 2030 focus on equity, inclusion and quality, scholarships should be transparently targeted at young people from disadvantaged backgrounds (2016, 14).

UNESCO's commentary contributes considerably to the definition of Target 4b. It is clear, for example, that scholarships in developed countries should build capacity and skills of students from lower-income countries, although the expected outcomes of scholarships for study in *other* developing countries remains ambiguous. UNESCO also clarifies that Target 4b is intended to support young and disadvantaged individuals who are otherwise unable to afford study and that the Target should be in line with *the values* of its parent Goal 4.

Together, these sources provide some insight into the logic assumed by those who framed and signed the SDGs, but they also leave several theoretical questions unaddressed. For example, how (if at all) will scholarships contribute to the broader Goal 4, which includes "lifelong learning", given UNESCO's exclusive focus on "young people" as the target of scholarships?

Most importantly, there is no mechanism detailed of how scholarships might "build the capability" of the students' home countries, or how students might use their newfound skills to achieve social, economic, or civic outcomes. Although Target 4b and UNESCO have indicated that scholarships — and by extension, scholarship recipients — should contribute to the capability of the developing country, there is certainly not a consensus among scholarship funders and designers about the ways such impacts are best achieved. Moreover, by conflating all programs into the umbrella term of "scholarship", nuances of programme design and expectations are lost. The links between the vehicle and the destination are not explicit.

While it is commonplace to find ambiguity in an international agenda with such a broad stakeholder group, we see two main reasons that Target 4b is sending mixed messages. First, the Target aggregates a series of public policy programmes with very different strategies and methods, exacerbated by no unified definition of "scholarship". Second, these various programs have multiple theories of change, and numerous related designs based on these theories — some of which contribute more logically to sustainable development outcomes. It is our contention that much of the difficulty in Target 4b's proposition is the absence of an agreed theory to connect international scholarships and social and economic change in the students' home countries. These differences need to be better understood and incorporated into policy to best capitalize on international scholarships to achieve sustainable development for this planet.

In an attempt to illustrate the possible legacies of Target 4b, this paper explores different readings of the Target through three theories — human capital, human rights, and human capabilities — prominent in understanding international education for development (e.g. McCowan, 2016). Each approach is introduced, outlining the theory of change as it relates to international scholarships. Next, the potential outcomes of Target 4b's call to "substantially expand globally the number of scholarships" (UN, 2015) is analysed through the "lens" of each theory. We argue that by better understanding these frames for Target 4b, national governments and other donors can thoughtfully and responsibly respond to the UN's call for more scholarship programs that lead to sustainable development. While advocating for specific programs and certain programme attributes is outside the scope of this paper, we contend that deeper analysis of theoretical underpinnings can enhance international scholarships efficacy in the sustainable development agenda, while also being fair to the individuals who participate in such initiatives.

Focal Theories

Human capital theory

A significant theory undergirding current thinking in education (Klees, 2016), human capital theory (HCT) holds that financial investment in education leads to increased individual economic output (Becker, 1993; Schultz, 1963), as well as influence the social and economic development of communities (Leslie and Brinkman, 1998; McMahon, 1999). HCT often examines individual wages as the unit of analysis (Sweetland, 1996), with several wide-ranging studies calculating dollar-for-dollar return on greater education investment (Bennell, 1996; Psacharopoulos and Patrinos, 2004). HCT is based on many neoclassical economic assumptions, including that individuals act in rational ways and seek to maximize their interests (Tan, 2014).

McMahon (1999) argues that education contributes to individual returns and wider "community structural effects", positively affecting the individual's firm, household, and community, such as boosting democratization and human rights and reducing poverty and inequality. Similarly, Vila (2000) shows a connection between education and reproductive health, environmental awareness, and stable social structures, among other positive outcomes. In more recent work, McMahon and Oketch suggest that investment in human capital means that the "education of each generation generates non-monetary benefits beyond earnings that benefit each family over the life cycle but also benefits charitable organizations and civic institutions" (2010, 32). These studies, among others, illustrate how HCT provides a functionalist link between investment in education and individual and social gains across many focal areas of the SDGs.

HCT aligns with the rationale of many international scholarship programmes' design: significant financial investment in international higher education will lead to post-education economic activity, which spills over to generate returns within the wider community of the student's home country. This rationale is evident in many public statements about the aims and outcomes of international scholarships. The World Bank Institute, for example, introduces the aim of the Joint Japan/World Bank Graduate Scholarship Program as awarding "scholarships for graduate studies to well-qualified mid-career professionals, who are then expected to apply and disseminate the newly acquired knowledge and skills in promoting the socioeconomic development of their own and other developing countries" (2008, 1). As Perna and colleagues (2014) have noted, the logic underpinning such statements is that human capital can be "imported" by earning degrees abroad, helping to overcome shortfalls and improve capacity at home.

Rights-based education

A rights-based approach to education is tightly bound to the UN Declaration of Human Rights, which states that everyone has the right to pursue education and notes that "Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms" (UN, 1948).

Building from the declaration, a rights-based approach argues for adequate availability of education, equal access to education in both legislation and implementation, non-discriminatory school-based policies, and inclusive pedagogies (Tomasevski, 2004; UNICEF, 2007). The UN states that higher education "shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit" (1948) and, as McCowan (2012) argues, this right to higher education should not be embargoed for the elite, especially when considering the benefits higher education affords for one's career and position within society. Increasingly, advocates of rights-based education include an emphasis on *access to quality education*, as attending school does not always indicate learning (Winthrop *et al*., 2015).

Within this theory, scholarship programmes provide additional access to higher education, often for those with extremely limited opportunity to pursue this right without financial support. For designers of the Ford Foundation International Fellowship Program (IFP), for instance, "IFP represented a new commitment to expand access to postgraduate opportunity globally for communities and social groups experiencing marginalization and exclusion" (Zurbuchen, 2009, 40). Like the UN declaration, IFP intended that increasing access to education would redress inequities and improve cohesion in wider society (Zurbuchen, 2009). Another prominent example, the Albert Einstein German Academic Refugee Initiative (DAFI), provides scholarships to refugees to undertake tertiary-level study and has operated for decades with the aim of securing the rights of vulnerable displaced

populations. Providing access is "both a vital component of and necessary to durable solutions for refugee situations worldwide…DAFI has been and remains today, by and large, the only option widely available for refugees to continue to tertiary education" (Morlang and Watson, 2007, 7). Similar initiatives have also been undertaken at the level of non-governmental organizations and higher education institutions. In the UK, for instance, the Article 26 Network has promoted access to higher education for refugees through negotiated schemes of fee waivers, bursaries, and full-ride scholarships (Murray *et al*., 2014).

Human capabilities

A human capabilities approach is based on the notion that individual "freedom" is achieved when one can apply individual choice in the planning and pursuit of life goals, with the intention of achieving or doing something worthwhile to the individual (Sen, 2000). Towards this end, education expands one's range of choices by helping individuals to develop their *capabilities* or their "potential to function" (Walker, 2010, 909), leading to greater opportunities, ability to understand and interact with the world, and making meaningful choices about their lives (Sen, 2000; Nussbaum, 2006). Walker sums up the human capabilities approach to education: "Capabilities are the potential to…be knowledgeable, to use one's knowledge in worthwhile ways, to be interculturally aware and sensitive, and so on. The question we ask of education is then: what are people actually able to do and be?" (2012, 388).

In a human capabilities frame, education is successful when individuals are able to make important choices and live fulfilling lives facilitated by, but not solely predicated on, individual labour market success and national economic growth (see Walker, 2012). Sen (2000) and Flores-Crespo (2007), among others, have argued that economic productivity gains do not necessarily imply *development* for individuals (or even collectives): economic prosperity can increase in misogynistic, polluted, and oppressive environments. Instead, Nussbaum (1998) has stated that education serves the role of developing a sense of self-awareness and shared humanity, understanding that all human freedoms are connected (Sen, 2009). Lozano and colleagues remind us that the capabilities approach suggests that "education must foster people's ability to see themselves as linked to all human beings by ties of recognition and concern" (2012, 138).

The theory of change rooted in human capabilities posits that international scholarships should help individuals understand their place in society — and their ability to change it. For example, the Open Society Foundations emphasizes this approach in describing their scholarships: "University-based education will empower these [scholarship grantees] to explore and develop intelligent and humane ideas generated by free and open inquiry, critical analysis, and a nuanced understanding of the complex challenges facing open societies" (2017).

Empowering individuals to think differently, more expansively, and with a more refined intercultural understanding is a frequently used rationale for studying abroad generally (e.g. Pedersen, 2010) and scholarships programmes specifically (e.g. Atkinson, 2015).

A human capabilities approach also recognizes and underscores the importance of individual agency: both while on scholarship (e.g., joining an advocacy group) and in how individuals apply their capabilities afterwards (e.g., start a community organization). With enhanced capabilities, graduates may employ them in various ways throughout their life, based on their employment, environment, and other factors; this choice on how and where to apply their skills is an individual's freedom (Sen, 2000). Notably, these choices need not align with the outlook of external actors, including scholarship funders. Such is the case of government-sponsored Iraqi, Syrian, and Transjordanian scholarship students who participated in "subversive" political activity at the American University of Beirut in the early twentieth century (Kalisman, 2015).

Examining SDG Target 4b Through Three Theoretical Lenses

Human capital and Target 4b

The international development community and national governments are familiar with the economic logic of inputs and returns: HCT has longstanding influence on educational planning and policies (Klees, 2016). This familiarity signals that HCT is a pragmatic framework for understanding Target 4b, given the breadth of stakeholders involved in the SDGs and the commonplace economic methods for measuring development (e.g. GDP). Toukan (2017) also provides a compelling argument of the SDGs being mostly rooted in the same liberalist rationale that underpins HCT.

HCT also charts a comprehensible pathway for how scholarship programs can catalyse development. Financial investment made in a person's education can be understood directly in terms of economic output and spill over effects. Although social — particularly non-monetary — gains are notoriously difficult to measure, they are routinely noted as important outcomes (Klees, 2016). As Pscharapolous and Patrinos have put it: "If one could include externalities, then social rates of return may well be higher than private rates of return to education" (2004, 117). In the context of Target 4b, the working hypothesis is that sponsored international education will improve individual human capital and create spill over effects, leading to economic development gains for individual and country.

However, the theory is not as straightforward in practice. For example, an individual's rational economic interests and a government's collective interests may be misaligned. While government sponsors are likely to identify technical capacity needs (e.g., shortage of doctors or technicians) that are consonant with

other SDGs — such as Goal 9: Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure — individual scholarship recipients may view their interests in terms of career trajectory, safety and civic rights, or cultural and social affinity. Similarly, although some scholarship programmes have far-ranging visions, they are typically rooted in present capacity needs, whereas individuals may frame their interests in terms of current *and* future generations' opportunities (Baxter, 2014).

Individuals might also make economically rational post-education choices that do not contribute to sustainable development as intended by the SDG framers. Consider an individual from a rural area of developing country who wins a medical school scholarship at a prestigious North American institution. Returning to live in relative poverty by taking a job at the community clinic in their home town — or even at a top hospital in the capital city — may not be a rational course of action when compared to joining a rich country's hospital staff (and remitting funds home). Additionally, if primary spill over effects are proximate to the educated individual or are concentrated in specific high-income centres (see McMahon, 1999; McMahon and Oketch, 2010), then both emigrating from the home country *and* migrating within the country (e.g. from rural to urban areas) may deprive needy regions of the scholarship recipient's human capital.

These arguments will be familiar to those aware of the debate around "brain drain", particularly of highly skilled individuals in medical and technical professions, that has been well-charted (e.g. Uwaifo Oyelere, 2011; Capuano and Marfouk, 2013). International scholarship programmes are potentially vulnerable to this cost by providing the means for migration and high-skilled employment abroad (Ziguras and Gribble, 2015). While there have been various attempts at compelling scholarship students to return home and work in their home country, the effectiveness of these arrangements in reducing brain drain in both the short and long term has been inconclusive (DAMVAD, 2014; Ziguras and Gribble, 2015).

Perhaps the most worrisome consequence of interpreting Target 4b within the HCT approach, however, is the potential for perverse outcomes. HCT's concentration on economic development does not usually consider social justice, equity, and social transformation (Walker, 2012). The SDGs, conversely, *are* concerned with these topics — notably "reducing inequalities in income as well as those based on age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion or economic or other status within a country" (UN, 2015). Therefore, pursuing international scholarships from a HCT perspective might lead to conflict with other sustainable development goals. For example, a national government could offer more scholarships to men from dominant ethnic groups, assuming they are better placed to convert capacity gains abroad into investment returns at home because of fewer sociocultural barriers (e.g. less discrimination). However, systematic exclusion for women and minorities would be a totally unacceptable social result of SDG Target 4b.

Human rights and Target 4b

A human rights approach is an orthodox paradigm for an international agenda, such as the SDGs, as equal rights across the globe is a core value of the UN. Human rights are also prominent in the major international agreements around education, such as Education For All (Mundy, 2006), and in education work done by numerous bilateral or non-governmental aid agencies, such as the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency and CARE International (Cornwall and Nyamu-Musembi, 2004). Governments around the world are thus familiar with a rights-based education approach — often interpreted as equal *access* to education — and the global governance structures that support these types of initiatives (see Tikly, 2017). Moreover, access to education is relatively straightforward to operationalize if it is the primary goal. Although it takes considerable investment and organization for education to be available and accessible to all, success can be analysed through policy analysis and enrolment and uptake statistics.

Yet using a rights-based theory to underpin Target 4b raises many difficult questions. First, there is the question of whether *international* higher education qualifies as a human right. McCowan's (2012) argument in favour of access to higher education, for instance, does not specify *international* study as part of that right. For example, should expensive government-sponsored MBA degrees at Harvard Business School be a *right* — one that is expanded to be universally available? Put more generically, is it a human right to have equal access to all programs, at all universities, in all countries? If not, why not? Even if there is consensus that international study is a universal right (or constituent within the idea of education as a human right), it would be financially and logistically impractical to implement international scholarship programs for all students (or potential students), especially by Target 4b's 2020 deadline.

Second, focusing primarily on access to education can generate perverse outcomes both by ignoring completion rates and disregarding the quality of the education attained. The easiest way to meet Target 4b under a purely access-driven approach is to provide scholarships for cheap, low-quality tertiary education for which the most individuals could meet the entry requirements, regardless of whether they completed — or derived any benefit from — the course. This would (at minimum) conflict with SDG Target 4.3, which proposes to "ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and *quality* technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university" (UN, 2015, our emphasis). As Robeyns has argued, rights-based education "runs the risk of overemphasizing the legal aspects of rights" and can "induce policy makers [sic] to being contented when they have strictly followed the rules that a limited interpretation of the rights imposes on them, even when additional efforts are necessary to meet the goal that underlies the right" (2006, 70).

A related concern is that Target 4b can be read as promulgating a *right to educational mobility*, rather than a *right to a quality education* (noted in Goal 4), by focusing on study "in developed countries and other developing countries" (UN, 2015). Therefore, a female student travelling to attend a lower-quality university overseas would be considered successful under a rights-based understanding of Target 4b, although she — and her eventual contributions to sustainable development — might be better served by studying a higher quality domestic course.

Finally, and more generally, a rights-based framework views access to education as an intrinsic good (a goal upon itself), but the SDG agenda has many contingencies that are dependent on — or at least require support from — this education having produced quality learning. Examples include the scientific, public health, and civic goals, such as tackling climate change (Goal 13) and safeguarding the world's cultural heritage (Goal 11). Supporting these goals will depend on, among other factors, relevant and specialized education, reintegration and knowledge exchange at home, and individuals' commitment to a sustainable future. A purely rights-based theory is thus insufficient for underpinning a target for extending scholarship programmes.

Human capabilities and Target 4b

A capabilities framing of Target 4b would build on the rights-based approach but shift the focus somewhat from inputs (access to education) to outcomes (capabilities) and the application of this learning (functionings). Using a human capabilities approach has three advantages for linking the vehicle of international scholarships to the destination of sustainable development.

First, individual choice can intersect in a meaningful way with the collective, public domain in which the SDGs are framed. This intersection follows Sen's notion that "capabilities can be enhanced by public policy, but also, on the other side, the direction of public policy can be influenced by the effective use of participatory capabilities by the public" (2000, 18). Developing individual capabilities is thus both a potential remedy to specific deficits identified by the SDGs (e.g. Goal 2: Zero Hunger and Goal 5: Gender Equality) and a reciprocal mechanism for empowering individuals to *shape* policies and ensure their concerns are represented. This is quite different to the outlook of HCT or rights-based theories, which largely construct individuals as compliant within the broader agendas of the "global knowledge economy" and universal human rights.

Second, we might anticipate that international scholarship recipients will both develop capabilities to act meaningfully and, with appropriately selected study programmes, be "well educated to understand the plights of other people" (Nussbaum, 2006, 42), indicating greater understanding of local communities, their complexity and interconnectedness, and increased solidarity with other developing

and developed nations. Not only does this point underscore the transformative nature of education, but it also suggests that scholarship programme graduates are likely to be effective actors within a sustainable development agenda. Solidarity and interconnectedness are central to the SDGs, as is evident in their moniker of the "Global Goals" (UN, 2015). Also, as noted above, international scholarship programmes often focus on concepts such as "intercultural awareness" and may be well placed to "sensitize" individuals in the manner Nussbaum advocates (see, for instance, Tarrant *et al.*, 2014). A human capabilities approach, with its endorsement for global interconnectedness, also alleviates some restrictive pressure on individuals to return and remain at home yet emphasizes a sense of solidarity with those living in the home country.

Third, and building the preceding point, many scholarship programmes allude to a "change agent" or "opinion leader" model (Wilson, 2015), suggesting that expanding an individual's capabilities through education is a prelude to increasing capabilities for a wider population. The MasterCard Foundation Scholars Program's emphasis on *transformative leadership* helps to illustrate this point: transformative leadership is defined as "the act of engaging others, in an ethical manner, to generate positive and lasting change" (MasterCard Foundation, 2017a, 26). Following similar logic, UNESCO's injunction for scholarships to "build the capability of the developing country" (2016, 14) implies that the mechanism for building capability must primarily be based on the action of the individual scholarship recipients, not just in having more foreign study opportunities available. Target 4b could thus be seen as linking to the remainder of the sustainable development agenda by focusing on empowering individual scholarship recipients to develop a broad base of "change agents" able to address the SDGs.

One difficulty with a human capabilities interpretation of SDG Target 4b is that there is no guarantee that scholarship recipients will choose to apply their capabilities in a way congruent with the SDGs or their home country's development strategy. Sen's formulation of agency illustrates this tension: "[An individual's] achievements can be judged in terms of her own values and objectives, whether or not we assess them in terms of some external criteria as well" (2000, 19). Taking the perspective of the SDG framers and signatories, an expansion in available scholarships is not merely to empower individual agents who can act according to their own values, but who *will* act according to the values that underpin the SDGs. For example, an individual with a degree in mining engineering who develops quicker, but not environmentally sound, ways to extrude minerals may be achieving their own career objectives (exercising personal agency) but is unlikely to be acting in line with the objectives promoted in Goal 7: Affordable and Clean Energy. Similarly, while it is not explicitly stated in Target 4b, it seems reasonable to conclude that by specifying fields of study (e.g. engineering), individuals are expected to use their capabilities to specific aims (e.g. enhancing the quality of infrastructure). This outlook is quite different to one

focused on developing into who you can be and choosing freely how to apply your capabilities.

Discussion: Navigating Mixed Messages

Through the lenses of these three theories, significantly different mechanisms, incentives, opportunities, and outcomes are projected for scholarship programs in the sustainable development agenda. Following HCT, students will apply their education to greater economic gain for themselves and their employers, and generate spill over effects to the community where they currently reside. The scholarships should be relevant to the developing country labour market and have a clear pathway to economic returns, but equity of access is less important if the net outcomes in productivity are sufficient. A human rights approach defines success in terms of access to international education for students from least developed countries. Equity is crucial in a rights-based approach, but other concerns are largely irrelevant, except where they represent a breach of equity resulting in some citizens accessing better-quality education than others. The human capabilities approach suggests that students will find ultimate freedom in exercising their talents as they see fit, ideally choosing the path towards building capacity in the home country. The relevance, outcomes, and equity of scholarships are all important for human capabilities, but relevance and outcomes are framed differently to HCT, and equity is concerned with *both* access and outcomes. Ultimately, SDG Target 4b has several potential theoretical frames, each pulling in different directions.

Following our analysis, we conclude that the theories of HCT and human rights dominate — and are mixed — in the framing of Target 4b. The academic and professional fields identified by Target 4b (vocational training and information and communications technology, technical, engineering and scientific programmes) are often closely associated with global HCT approaches to building "knowledge economies" and contributing to economic development (Gürüz, 2011; World Bank, 2000). Yet the Target is situated within the SDG framework, which focuses on universal common interest and is rooted in the UN human rights approach (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, n.d., p. 1). Targeting of scholarships to "developing countries, small island developing States and African countries" may be interpreted through either lens: either as an intervention in geographical regions where human capital needs are most acute, or as an expansion of access in places with fewer higher education opportunities.

Conversely, with its focus on individuals developing capabilities through education and then choosing how to apply them meaningfully, human capabilities theory appears to be the most viable theory to understand how sponsored international higher education leads to sustainable development outcomes. The

theory supports the transformative potential of education, accommodates the dynamic interplay between agentic citizen and national policy, and champions individuals' agency and innovation to address shifting environments and roles.

Perhaps most importantly, in human capabilities theory, education is seen as central to individuals comprehending their role in society and their contributions to a sustainable planet. As Walker reminds us (2012), educated individuals should live a life with "'other-regarding' goals, and commitments and obligations to use one's power on behalf of other human beings by reason of our shared humanity to bring about sustainable changes that would enhance human development in the world" (p. 389). Ruhia, a MasterCard Foundation Scholar studying at the University of Sustainable Development in Ghana, summarizes this idea convincingly: "You are not studying just for yourself; you are studying for the whole world. Let me put it that way because the whole world looks just like one community; you are trying to develop a community and that's the whole world" (MasterCard Foundation, 2017b). This focus is especially appropriate when meeting the interconnected, global challenges outlined in the SDGs.

Synthesis and Ways Forward

Our argument is that, through thoughtful engagement, international higher education scholarship programmes can better support the global contract for a sustainable future. Simply offering additional opportunities to pursue education abroad is not enough and, as we argue above, may actually have perverse effects on national socioeconomic development, as well as negatively influence the participants. Instead, we advocate for scholarships that align with human capabilities theory and facilitate an individual to experience international study and pursue their capabilities in ways they see fit, drawing on a rich, sensitizing education that takes into account individual agency, government policies, technological innovation, and ecological preservation. Within a human capabilities frame, higher education scholarships can be integral to accomplishing the SDGs, with recipients serving as "change agents" with a wider worldview, deep understanding of interconnectedness and solidarity among peoples across borders, and the capabilities to address the dynamic and complex nature of current and future global challenges. These are the types of individuals needed to lead the planet to a sustainable future.

Our analysis suggests several recommendations for operationalizing Target 4b in a manner congruent with other Goals and the broader agenda for sustainable development. First, more programme design could be grounded in human capabilities theory and less based on a narrowly framed version of HCT. While programme model details fall outside the scope of this paper, scholarship programs that allow students to pursue diverse fields of study, engage in dynamic education, and have flexibility after graduation are likely to allow students to exercise personal

agency and respond to the pressing challenges of sustainable development. For similar reasons, our analysis suggests that in fulfilling the substantial increase in scholarships called for under Target 4b, funders should view study in *all* disciplines as potential drivers for sustainable development. Graduates with degrees in women's studies, applied economics, agriculture, law, or education can make significant contributions to many of the SDGs; the horizon of sustainable development is artificially reduced by focusing only on STEM fields. As noted above, to tackle these wicked problems facing the global, sophisticated education, new forms of experts, and dynamic partnerships across disciplines and nations are needed.

At present, the human capabilities approach is unusual in current international scholarship programmes, especially those funded by national governments, which typically adhere more closely to HCT frames. Moreover, among the UN administration, there may be broad acceptance that individual choice should be respected and that by developing capabilities generally we advance sustainable development, but this vision may not be shared by scholarship funders. For example, foreign governments often have their own bilateral agenda in cultivating soft power or trade relations (Wilson, 2014). In addition, both home and host country governments may want to place limits on individual freedom for other reasons, such as requiring individuals to undertake a post-graduation period of work for particular organizations. It is also worth noting that some sponsoring governments may be oppressive regimes who routinely deny freedoms to their citizens and may discourage young educated individuals to express their "freedoms" in these closed societies.

However, by viewing international scholarship programmes through the lens of human capabilities, scholarships hold much promise to establish a cadre of individuals who have developed their capabilities and are poised to address the challenges facing the planet. Indeed, many graduates of international scholarships are *already* working for their national governments, international organizations, and UN agencies (Campbell, 2017), carrying out work that will help meet the SDGs. These individuals have developed their capabilities and subsequently have choices on whether and how they may contribute to their home country's development.

In considering future research and programme design, it is imperative to galvanize support from those *already* educated (or being educated) through international scholarship programmes. Post-programme support by scholarship funders and others will influence how current alumni can better engage with the SDGs and also provides valuable understanding of how *future* scholarship recipients — including those included in Target 4b's recommended expansion — can be supported to meet the SDGs. One starting point would be to explore how opportunities for post-programme support — such as reintegration processes, research or community project grants, rich and active alumni networks — can be

made more widely available, consistently supported, and most effectively used. These activities, designed with an eye towards organizing around the SDGs, might also open the possibility for cross-donor or cross-programme collaborations. Supporting alumni and evaluating programmes are also issues of sustainability: Target 4b is fundamentally about individuals and so confers a moral imperative both to understand the programmes' influence on its participants and, where possible, to ensure the impact is positive.

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