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To Engage with the UN SDGs, the 'How' Is Just as Important as the 'What': A Case for Engagement with the Aid-Effectiveness Framework.

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COMMENTARY

To engage with the UN SDGs, the "how" is just as important as the "what": A case for engagement with the aid-effectiveness framework

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Mullins and Olson-Buchanan (2023) build upon a focal article I coauthored (Gloss[1] et al., 2017) regarding limitations to industrial-organizational (I-O) psychology's engagement with global problems. Although their call to more fully engage with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is well stated and critically important, it is incomplete. As they admit, "other standards, such as those put forward by the [World Economic Forum] and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), may also provide useful guidance and encourage commentaries that illustrate the benefit of such approaches" (p.16). It is my aim to do just this. In particular, I highlight that the SDGs focus predominately, albeit not exclusively, on *what* global priorities to address, as opposed to *how* to address these priorities.[2] Indeed, a variety of frameworks including the International Labour Organization's (ILO's) Declaration on Social Justice for a Fair Globalization (International Labour Organization, 2022) and the United Nation's (UN's) Global Compact (United Nations Global Compact, 2015) focus on issues of how stakeholders should engage in global development only to a limited extent and in certain domains. Yet, as I argue below, *how* I-O psychologists pursue global goals is just as important as what goals they address.

Efforts to help others in the guise of humanitarian and international development work have been littered with failures, controversies, and unintended negative consequences for some of the world's most vulnerable and marginalized populations (see Easterly, 2007; Gloss & Foster-Thopmson, 2013). Examples are both egregious and obvious (e.g., the committing of crimes against local populations by peacekeepers) yet also subtle but nonetheless harmful (e.g., projects that lead to the waste of needed resources or undermine existing progress by other stakeholders). At their core, many failures and abuses stem from an asymmetry of power (MacLachlan et al., 2010) — in particular, between stakeholders providing aid and development assistance, herein aid *donors* (prominently including international multilateral organizations like the World Bank, higher-income countries, middle-income countries like China, civil society organizations, and private sector organizations) and those receiving such assistance, herein aid *partners* (prominently including lower countries and communities). Because many I-O psychologists tend to come from relatively privileged backgrounds and tend to hold a powerful professional status (see Gloss et al., 2017), they risk exacerbating the problematic power dynamics that tend to exist between aid donors and aid partners.

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[1]Gloss is my former surname.

[2]I note that SDG 17 focuses on strengthening the means of implementation and revitalizing the global partnership for sustainable development.

The OECD proposed a useful framework to promote the effectiveness of aid and development efforts—and in particular, to help combat power asymmetries between aid donors and aid partners. This "aid-effectiveness framework" stems from the Paris Declaration for Aid Effectiveness (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2005) and the associated Accra Agenda for Action (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2008). Like the SDGs, the aid-effectiveness framework was developed with extensive consultation from diverse global stakeholders and built upon decades of learning from mistakes and successes in the world of international development. The aid-effectiveness framework is perhaps best articulated as a set of five principles enshrined in the Paris Declaration: management for results, alignment, mutual accountability, ownership, and harmonization. Although some of these principles will strike I-O psychologists as best practices in organizations and prerequisites for effective consulting, others might not be as intuitive or obviously beneficial.

As a data-driven science, I-O psychologists will likely resonate with calls for *management for results*: the need to rigorously evaluate, and then direct, one's efforts using valid measures of intended outcomes. Yet adhering to this principle in the pursuit of the greater good will likely test and advance our efforts to measure a broader diversity of outcomes. In particular, a salient outcome in international development work is the psychological and structural empowerment of marginalized populations (see Sen, 1999), concepts that are sometimes difficult to measure especially on nonindividual levels of analysis (see Gloss et al., 2017).

A second principle is *alignment*: the need to ensure that the goals of aid donors are congruent with the goals of aid partners. As a profession that often is defined by professional consulting relationships, many I-O psychologists will intuit the need for aligning their goals with the goals of the people and organizations with whom they work. However, as argued by Lefkowitz (2008), I-O psychologists often hold a managerial bias that might prioritize organizational priorities over the welfare of individuals without higher levels of organizational standing or power. Frequently in international development work, there are a variety of stakeholders with only partially overlapping goals. For example, aid donors like corporations running corporate social responsibility (CSR) projects or social enterprises might seek shorter-term or more superficial outcomes (e.g., number of donations made), whereas aid partners might be more interested in longer term and more systemic outcomes (e.g., greater economic capacity). It will be critical for I-O psychologists to wrestle with the ethical dilemmas and optimum approaches that stem from working simultaneously with both aid donors and aid partners.

Third and fourth principles of the aid-effectiveness framework are *ownership* and *mutual accountability*. The principle of *ownership* highlights the need for aid partners to play prominent roles in overseeing and participating in any efforts designed to help them. In a similar manner, the principle of *mutual accountability* prioritizes the importance of ensuring that aid partners can hold aid donors accountable for the results of aid efforts. Both principles might resonate with insights regarding transformational leadership, procedural justice, and participatory decision-making because of the prominence and respect given to those of lower power status in such approaches. However, supporting these principles might also require greater effort and care to prioritize and support the participation of stakeholders (e.g., entry-level employees, community members, those living in poverty, and representatives of local ecosystems) with which I-O psychologists might not typically engage (see Gloss et al., 2012). Moreover, the active inclusion of such stakeholders is likely to present difficulties (e.g., language and coordination issues) and work at ends with certain aspects of short-term organizational/project effectiveness. Nevertheless, these principles are critical in the longer term success and ethics of aid and development efforts.

The fifth principle of the Paris Declaration is that of *harmonization*: the need to ensure that one's efforts to help others are coordinated with, and do not undermine the work of, both other aid donors and the efforts of aid partners. This principle might be the most alien to many I-O psychologists given that the frequent underlying logic of many consulting and organizational objectives is one of for-profit competition. Although for-profit efforts by social enterprises and

other businesses are promising approaches to tackling global problems, some aid efforts are not well-served by pure for-profit competition. Many social and environmental problems are only successful addressed by a diverse assemblage of public, community, and charitable organizations whose displacement by a more "effective competitor" would result in damage to communities and ecosystems. Moreover, displacing or working at odds with related efforts might help to undermine community harmony and stability—an important developmental goal. Thus, I-O psychologists might find that simple benchmarking efforts to be insufficient to promote harmonization and might need to identify and join forces with diverse and complex networks of existing stakeholders in enduring partnerships and/or joint ventures.

Each of the aid-effectiveness framework's principles represent critical best-practices as our discipline engages in helping to advance the UN's SDGs. However, these principles are not undisputed and since their establishment, they have often not been widely respected by key development actors (Brown, 2020). The lack of observance of key aid-effectiveness principles has had detrimental effects in efforts toward global development (e.g., da Silva Nunes et al., 2023). Nevertheless, the Paris Declaration, a vehicle of the OECD, has been criticized for not admitting to a more complex international development system that prominently includes the private sector and civil-society organizations; moreover, the Paris Declaration was largely premised on a North–South aid donor to aid partner arrangement that does not admit to the active role of South–South aid and development efforts—including by such countries as Brazil, China, India, and South Africa (Abdenur, 2014). Consequently, the field of I-O psychology should engage with underlying principles of the aid-effectiveness framework while being cognizant of the importance of supporting South–South cooperation. Such an emphasis, and a more prominent role for civil society and the private sector, has been envisaged by the Global Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation (GPEDC) established at the 2011 Busan High Level Forum (Mawdsley et al., 2014). Despite the more recently developed principles of the GPEDC, I argue that I-O-psychology should stick to the aid-effectiveness framework given that norms for local ownership and harmonization have been arguably watered down in the GPEDC — leaving the potential for a renewed "tyranny" of the interests of aid donors over aid partners (Taggart, 2022).

By engaging with the aid-effectiveness framework, I believe that I-O psychology will both help to advance the greater good and develop unique research insights and practical capabilities. We will likely discover new and refined best practices and by doing so extend an understanding of a diverse range of topics, including leadership, organizational development, training, and teamwork. In short, our charge and our future as a profession is both to focus on global priorities like the SDGs and to focus on *how* we pursue those goals.

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