

The Transition from MDGs to SDGs: Rethinking Buzzwords

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Abstract While, much like its predecessor, ‘eradicating poverty’ remains the central and overarching narrative of the new development agenda, it looks beyond, affirming renewed and broader emphasis on ‘inequality’ and ‘sustainable development’, and at the same time, drawing attention to a set of ‘transformative’ goals. With the adoption of the new sustainable development agenda that is set to frame development thinking, practice and actions in the next 15 years, this chapter draws attention to selected keywords or buzzwords, specifically that of ‘inequality’ and ‘sustainable development’, asking, at a primary level, what do these buzzwords signify? Yet, the chapter also aims to look beyond the conventional. While the United Nations texts provide the primary point of analysis, this chapter is also strongly influenced by the challenge to include fictional representations of development within wider forms of development knowledge, given their ability to offer new insight and perspectives into development issues. Building on this challenge, at the secondary level, the chapter compares and contrasts the findings of policy texts with those of popular media in their representation of inequality and issues of sustainability. The chapter concludes by identifying what knowledge is revealed about ‘inequality’ and ‘sustainable development’, while emphasising that ‘eradicating poverty’ remains a key connecting and compelling buzzwords. It also highlights ‘transformation’ as an emerging buzzword, arguing that the term remains open to interpretation.

Keywords Millennium development goals · Sustainable development goals · Transition from the MDGs to the SDGs · Sustainable development · Fiction · Sri Lanka · Policy and popular communication

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1 Introduction

In September 2015, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the new sustainable development framework, *Transforming Our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, an agenda that will guide development policy, thinking and practice over the next 15 years. Building on the plot set forth through its predecessor, the *Millennium Declaration*, the agenda has, as its central narrative, ‘eradicating poverty in all its forms and dimensions’ (United Nations General Assembly 2015: 1). Embedded in this overarching narrative is renewed and broader emphasis on the notions of ‘inequality’ and ‘sustainable development’, while the agenda also introduces a set of 17 goals and 169 targets that are ‘people-centred’, ‘integrated’, ‘universal’ and ‘transformative’. Drawing on the existing literature, this chapter regards these key terms and phrases of the new development agenda, such as ‘eradicating poverty’, ‘inequality’, ‘sustainable development’ and ‘transformative’, as buzzwords. It primarily asks, with the adoption of the new development agenda, what do these buzzwords signify—how do they represent ideas and knowledge of development? Yet, looking beyond the agendas and framework that influences policy, there is a secondary question that the chapter asks taking forth the challenge placed by Lewis et al. (Lewis 2014a, b) to consider wider representations of development to gain alternative insight into today’s key development challenges. As such, it asks, how do these buzzwords compare with their alternative understandings—understandings that ordinary folk may derive of them?

Sachs (2010a: xvi) once contended, ‘development is much more than just a socio-economic endeavour; it is a perception which models reality, a myth which comforts societies, and a fantasy which unleashes passions’. Building on this premise, Cornwall (2010: 1) regards these models, myths and fantasies as being ‘sustained by development’s buzzwords’. Buzzwords define what is in vogue and produce certain frames of knowledge and understanding of ‘development’ (Cornwall 2010). They are passwords for funding and influence, and justify interventions, yet, remain ambiguous, open to diverse interpretations and are often taken for granted (Cornwall 2010). Buzzwords are such that, amidst delusion, disappointment and disaster, they continue to dominate global and national policies as well as the thinking and language of grass-roots organisations (Sachs 2010a: xv). And it is here that development’s mystery lies.

This chapter is placed against the broader debates and discussions surrounding the transition from the millennium development goals (MDGs) to the sustainable development goals (SDGs) and is particularly influenced by two pieces of edited volumes, the *Development Dictionary* and *Deconstructing Development Discourse: Buzzwords and Fuzzwords*, which deconstruct selected buzzwords that make up today’s development lexicon. It argues that, against the backdrop of the adoption of the new sustainable development framework, it is perhaps the time to set about the task of unravelling the mystery of development’s buzzwords once again, while at the same time, looking beyond the conventional meanings of development policy to their broader understandings in popular representations.

In the 2000s, the MDGs became ‘a rallying force for development’ with its promising and unifying narrative of development through poverty eradication (Kharas and Zhang 2014). Since then, among the significant progresses made in achieving the targets set out through the MDG framework were efforts in improving the lives and conditions of those living in extreme poverty. The *Millennium Development Goals Report 2015* notes that globally, the number of those living in extreme poverty “declined by more than half, from 1.9 billion in 1990 to 836 million in 2015” (United Nations 2015). Despite these achievements, millions across the world are ‘being left behind, especially the poorest and those disadvantaged because of their sex, age, disability, ethnicity or geographic location’ (United Nations 2015: 8). Inequality—gender inequality and widening gaps between rich and poor households, rural and urban—as well as climate change and environment degradation, and conflict are identified as being among the biggest threats to human development (United Nations 2015). Inequality is increasingly seen as hindering the well-being of nations and people, increasing instability, and political and social tensions (UNDP 2013), while emphasis has also been laid on the need to promote sustainable development that takes into consideration the needs of both the people and the planet (United Nations 2014) (see also Servaes and Oyedemi 2016a, b).

It is against this justification that this chapter seeks to draw understandings of the common phrases of ‘inequality’ and ‘sustainable development’, while examining ‘poverty eradication’ as a key connecting and compelling buzzword that continues to be central in development policy narratives, and identifying ‘transformative’ as an emerging keyword of today’s changing development lexicon.

In examining these buzzwords, this chapter considers selected texts and adopts a two-pronged approach. At a primary level, this chapter recognises that policy documents provide key insight and information into development processes, as well as spell out the development plans and actions. As such, findings are drawn from key United Nations texts, including the *Road Map towards the implementation of the UN Millennium Declaration (2001)* and *Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2015)*. In addition, given that this chapter is derived from an earlier piece of work that was undertaken prior to the adoption of *Transforming our world*, the analysis also draws on *Road to Dignity by 2030: Synthesis report of the Secretary-General on the Post-2015 Agenda (2014)*, which was initially examined.

Yet, how do these findings of ‘poverty’, ‘inequality’ and ‘sustainable development’ fit in with broader understandings of the buzzwords? As such, at a secondary level, I am influenced by the challenge that Lewis et al. (2014a, b) places, to look beyond conventional forms of representations of development and include broader and wider forms of representations in order to gain alternative insight into key development concerns, debates and discussions. Thus, the findings of policy texts are compared and contrasted with those of popular media in their representation of development, specifically, inequality and issues of sustainability.

As such, along with the United Nation texts, the fiction selected for analysis are written by Sri Lankan authors: *Samsara* (2001) and *Sam’s Story* (2009). The reason

for the selection of Sri Lankan texts is driven partly by my own position as a Sri Lankan and the country's changing development landscape. Sri Lanka has made steady progress in achieving the MDGs through the escalation of a nearly three-decade-old conflict and a post-conflict era. The country's positive MDG performance as compared to other South Asian countries is also significant. For example, in reduction of poverty and hunger levels, and achievements in education and wage employment, Sri Lanka has made noteworthy progress in the region, while in improving maternal health the country's achievements are on par with those of more advanced economies (United Nations Sri Lanka 2015). Yet, as Sri Lanka looks set to embrace the new SDGs, new challenges have emerged, specifically in the areas of inequalities within and between regions, environmental sustainability and issues of reconciliation that question the key notions of sustained and inclusive growth and environmental protection. For many Sri Lankan writers, the country's conflict provided the setting and a central narrative for their work, giving them a platform to express aspects of the struggle that remained unspoken, and explore the conflict through different lenses.

2 Media as Vehicles of Meaning Production

Media and texts act to produce meaning through language (Hall 1997). Language constructs and transmits meaning operating as a 'representational system', where signs and symbols, for example, written words, represent concepts, ideas and feelings about specific events, enabling the audience to read, decode or interpret their meanings (Hall 1997). Semiotics, the study or science of signs, provides a general model of understanding the role of language as vehicles of meaning and representation in society (Hall 1997). Ferdinand de Saussure distinguished between two elements of the 'sign' which were fundamental to the production of meaning (Hall 1997). He identified the actual written word or image as the 'signifier', while the mental concept or idea associated with that word was defined as the 'signified' (Hall 1997). However, signs are arbitrary (Deacon et al. 2007), and the value of any sign derives from its relation to other signs (Chouliaraki and Fairclough 1999).

The texts produced by the UN have been chosen for analysis given their over-arching and universal nature. *The Road map towards the implementation of the United Nations Millennium Declaration (2001)* (Henceforth referred to as: *Road Map*) is identified given its significance as setting a new normative framework for international development in 2000 (Kharas and Zhang 2014). The 2000 Millennium Summit, which saw the adoption of the Millennium Declaration, and the subsequent MDGs recorded the largest gathering of world leaders at the time (Fukuda-Parr and Hulme 2009). The Summit saw leaders 'committing their nations to a new global partnership to reduce poverty' and achieve the MDGs by 2015 (United Nations 2000). Similarly, the *Road to Dignity by 2030: Synthesis Report of*

the Secretary-General on the Post-2015 Agenda (2014) (Henceforth referred to as: *Road to Dignity*) and *Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2015)* (Henceforth referred to as: *Transforming Our World*) were selected primarily against their significance as defining the development agenda from 2015 onwards. The texts introduce the new post 2015 development agenda aimed at ‘ending poverty, transforming all lives and protecting the planet’ (United Nations 2014: 1). While building on the MDG narrative, the SDGs look beyond with the aim of promoting sustained and inclusive economic development and environment protection (United Nations 2014).

Yet, according to Escobar (1995), there is a need for more research on the languages of development at the local level to derive a better understanding of some of the key concepts and modes of operation. While policy and academic literature construct knowledge of development problems in ways that justify policy responses, literary works offer new insight and alternative understanding into development concerns (Lewis et al. 2014a, b). It is against this rationale that findings of the policy texts are contrasted and compared with popular communication.

Samsara (from the short story collection: *In the garden secretly and other stories*) by Jean Arasanayagam was published in 2000. The short story collection received the Sri Lanka State Literary Award in 2001. A collection of seven stories, it highlights the themes of war, rebellion, displacement and dispossession. *Samsara*—the last story of the collection—tells the story of Mudiyanse, who helps the narrator—a public school teacher—clear their garden of wild growth. It is through the narrator’s interactions with Mudiyanse that his story emerges. Following the death of his parents, Mudiyanse is cast aside by his family and denied his share of inheritance of land, leaving him destitute as he now makes a meagre living by working in the houses of the estate, carrying out tasks such as cleaning gardens, cutting grass and sometimes helping with construction work. However, his obsession of reclaiming what is rightfully his leads him to be labelled as a madman and cast aside by his own villagers. *Sam’s Story* by Elmo Jayawardena was first published in 2001, with the manuscript having received the Gratiaen Prize for Fiction in the same year. The version of the text chosen for analysis is a later edition, published in 2009. *Sam’s Story* is narrated through Sam who comes from an impoverished background to work as a houseboy in an upper-middle-class household. The story shifts between Sam’s current comfortable circumstances to his impoverished childhood with powerful imagery that gives a voice and a face to the poor (Perera 2002). Using irony and humour, *Sam’s Story* draws a stark understanding of the ‘rich versus poor’ notion, while also highlighting how illiteracy and lack of awareness in rural settings can lead to harmful impacts on the environment and using the ethnic conflict and the country’s changing political climate as the backdrop to the story.

3 Changing Buzzwords and the Role of Fiction in Development

3.1 *Development: Changing Definitions and Buzzwords*

The definition of development remained vague after it emerged as a password in the post-Second World War period (Rist 2010). The ‘program of development’ presented by Henry Truman in 1949 provides a useful starting point in understanding the meaning of development.

We must embark on a bold new program for making the benefits of our scientific advances and industrial progress available for the improvement and growth of underdeveloped areas (Esteva 2010: 1).

There is echo of President Truman’s sentiments in crucial United Nations documents of the time, which aimed to design ‘concrete policies and measures for the economic development of underdeveloped countries’ (Escobar 1995: 4). Such representations of development are hegemonic and ethnocentric (Escobar 1995; Esteva 2010).

According to Servaes and Malikhao (2008: 159), ‘the central problem of development was thought to revolve around the questions of ‘bridging the gap’ and ‘catching up’ by means of imitation processes between traditional and modern sectors...’ These phrases, ‘catching up’ and ‘bridging the gap’, capture the essence of economic development equality (Lummis 2010). Lummis (2010) provides a useful introduction into ‘equality’ while highlighting its vagueness and multiple significations. Steadily accelerated economic growth can lead to equality or towards reducing inequality (Lummis 2010), while inequality is also reflected in poverty and insecurity (Standing 2010).

While inequality thus remained a key buzzword, words such as ‘interdependence’ ‘integration’, ‘global’ and ‘unified’ also gained prominence in the development lexicon (Servaes and Malikhao 2008). Yet, the move towards more local responses to development, the failure of top-down development projects and the increased attention paid towards economic and technical factors as leading to social and ecological problems led to the rise of the ‘sustainable development’ or the ‘sustainability’ narrative (Escobar 1995). This narrative was further reinforced through the 1992 document, *Our Common Future* also known as the *Brundtland Report*, which captured the essence of the narrative through its definition of sustainable development as development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (Sachs 2010b).

3.2 *The Role of Fiction in Development*

According to Pawling (1984:4), ‘popular fiction reflects social meanings and [...] intervenes in the life of society by organising and interpreting experiences which

have previously been subjected only to partial reflection'. Within the overall notion of popular fiction, Nussbaum (1995) identifies novels as particularly significant in public reasoning. The reason for this, Nussbaum (1995) argues, lies in its ability to foster 'sympathetic imaginations'. Novels,

...construct and speak to an implicit reader who shares with the characters certain hopes, fears and general human concerns, and who for that reason, is able to form bonds of identification and sympathy with them (Nussbaum 1995: 7).

Thus, novels not only represent development issues, but also enact feeling and imaginations, allowing readers to recognise, connect and 'form bonds of sympathy' with the inner lives of others, various human needs, desires and specific social situations, most often with people and situations vastly different to that of the reader (Nussbaum 1995). They portray everyday realities, experiences, and human and social conditions, allowing readers to identify with such realities (Pawling 1984).

These arguments are echoed in the more recent works of Lewis et al. (2014a, b), which formed a key influence of this research. Emphasising that fiction cannot be considered as fact and should be considered alongside products of development, such as policy reports, academic or scholarly writings, they argue, fiction produces valid and alternative knowledge into development processes, while also capturing the humanistic side of development that is often overlooked in policy documents (Lewis et al. 2014a, b). The power of fiction also lies in its accessibility, wide reach and ability to engage readers by humanising issues (Lewis et al. 2014a, b). Thus, with little development of jargon and buzzwords, as will be evident through the argument of this chapter, fiction perhaps offers different ways of understanding of what we may or may not know about 'poverty', 'inequality' and 'sustainable development'.

4 Buzzwords in Development Policy

4.1 Poverty

'Poverty' remains one of the most compelling buzzwords in development policy literature (Cornwall 2010). Yet, *Road Map* highlights a key problem in the signifier and the signified of 'poverty':

Development and poverty eradication: the millennium development goals

In order to significantly reduce poverty and promote development it is essential to achieve sustained and broad-based economic growth. The MDGs highlight some of the priority areas that must be addressed to eliminate extreme poverty.

(United Nations General Assembly 2001: 18–19)

In addition, a later part of the text makes reference to ‘alleviating poverty’.

While emphasis remains on the phrase, ‘poverty eradication’, its use almost interchangeably with ‘reducing’ and ‘alleviating’ poverty is a main problematic. Toye (2007) identifies poverty alleviation, poverty reduction and poverty elimination as carrying three different significations. He regards poverty alleviation as ‘temporising’ the concern, rather than confronting it, while ‘poverty eradication’, although carrying the ‘right degree of gritty determination and radicalism’ has a ‘utopian feel about it’ (Toye 2007: 47). Therefore, ‘poverty reduction’ is recognised as the ideal choice of action in improving the conditions of the poor, given the most resolute and realistic of the three (Toye 2007).

Significantly, in the *Road Map*, ‘poverty’ and its related phrase, ‘poverty eradication’, are presented in conjunction with other buzzwords, specifically, ‘development’ and ‘economic growth’, constructing a strong link between poverty eradication, economic growth and development, with economic growth as essential to eradicating poverty, which in turn would promote development.

This then leads to the question of what is signified by poverty and poverty eradication. Rahnema (2010) argues that in ancient Europe, the poor—or the pauper—was opposed only to the powerful, rather than the rich. On the other hand, there were—and still are—references made to those ‘living poorly’ or the voluntary poor (Rahnema 2010). More commonly, however, ‘poverty’ converges an image of ‘a kind of generalised lacking, or a state of being without some essential goods and services’ (Toye 2014: 45). It signifies the beggar and the street vendor, the homeless, landless, the weak and the hungry (Rahnema 2010). Poverty is also a feature of underdevelopment (Mohanty, as cited in Escobar 1995). There are clues in the text that provide meaning to poverty, specifically its association with those whose income is ‘less than one dollar a day (2001: 19), while the *Millennium Declaration* (United Nations General Assembly 2000: 4) speaks of the ‘dehumanising conditions of extreme poverty’. Poverty eradication and development then, is, making efforts to ‘free [...] fellow men, women and children’ from these ‘dehumanising conditions’ (United Nations General Assembly 2000: 4).

4.2 *Inequality*

While ‘poverty eradication’ is thus highlighted, the analysis of the *Road Map* indicates the lack of the use of, ‘inequality’ and ‘equality’. This is significant given that the Millennium Declaration recognises the ‘collective responsibility to uphold the principles of [...] equality’ (United Nations General Assembly 2000: 1). The primary mention of ‘equality’ in the *Road Map* is in relation to gender, ‘To promote gender equality and the empowerment of women as effective ways to combat poverty, hunger and disease, and to stimulate the development that is truly sustainable (United Nations General Assembly 2001: 24)’. Thus, while equality is a

concern, it has come to be used in development more often with gender (Smyth 2010), signifying an empowered woman, with equal rights and opportunities as a man.

Standing (2010) argues that inequality is reflected in poverty and insecurity. Yet, signs are arbitrary, and considering their signified can be subject to history (Hall 1997). Living in Sri Lanka, against the backdrop of a 27-year-old conflict that caused tension between the country's Sinhalese majority and the Tamil minority, the buzzword 'equality' draws a mental image of all segments of the community, that is, both males and females of all ethnic communities of the country, having access to equal opportunities, enjoying the fruits of development equally and working together for peace. This image is perhaps cliché. Yet, equality is present in any belief that people ought to come under the same set of rules (Lummis 2010). Further breaking down the signified of equality, Lummis (2010) goes on to identify two families of meaning of the buzzword: equality as justice or fair treatment, and equality as indicating sameness or homogeneity.

In contrast to the *Road Map*, the new development agenda affords greater emphasis on 'inequality'. *Road to Dignity* states that the new sustainable development agenda must 'address inequalities in all areas, agreeing that no goal or target be considered met unless met for all social and economic groups' (United Nations 2014: 19). This statement is listed as an essential element of the new agenda. In addition, unlike in the *Road Map*, *Transforming Our World* recognises the multiple dimensions of inequality with the use of the signifier in relation to gender, income and opportunity. Further, sustainable development goal 10, reads, 'reduce inequality within and among countries' (United Nations General Assembly 2015).

Such use of the buzzword, and its use in relation to other keywords, is significant in drawing much-needed renewed attention to ensuring 'equality', and the need to address inequalities. However, the analysis observes that such a use of the buzzword in the new development agenda contributes to an alternative understanding of the signified of the term as portrayed by Standing (2010) in his reflection that the primary objective of the welfare state, while some believe should be to promote happiness, is also to promote social justice, income inequality and equal life chances.

4.3 *Sustainability*

Scoones (2010) regards 'sustainability' as a boundary term, linking environment and economic development concerns, and as one of the most widely used buzzwords in recent decades. Early signifiers of 'sustainability' meant managing forests in order to preserve them on a long-term basis (Scoones 2010) and, as discussed in the literature review, it was the text, *Our Common Future*. Another signifier of 'sustainability', drawing on Escobar (1995), is associated with the notion that it

represents bottom-up development, involving wider community participation and local initiatives in development processes.

Emphasis on ‘sustainability’ in the *Road Map* is made through the notion of building a framework for a global partnership to accelerate sustainable development in least developed countries and small island developing states. In comparison, along with inequality, sustainability is given similar emphasis in the new development agenda, which highlights the need to ‘integrate sustainability in all its activities, mindful of economic, environmental and social impacts’ (United Nations 2014: 19). *Transforming our world* contains further related phrases such as sustainable agriculture, sustainable management of water and sustainable industrialisation. Drawing on Scoones (2010), such phrases signify good development. Scoones (2010) observes that the link between the two strands of science and policy through such phrases and pairings of the terms can be a positive force in development and goes on to pose the question, will sustainability become the unifying concept of the twenty-first century, linking different groups? He is confident that ‘sustainability and its wider agenda is here to stay’ (Scoones 2010: 89).

5 Buzzwords of Popular Fiction

5.1 *Poverty, Exclusion and Enforced Differences*

In *Samsara*, comparison is drawn between the ‘housing estate’ where the narrator lives and ‘wadiya’ or the hut of Mudiyanse (Arasanayagam 2000). The hut is described as a ‘fragile shelter’ covered with ‘dried coconut fronts’ which keeps out the rain and cold air at night (Arasanayagam 2000: 136). Such imagery acts to signify poverty and powerlessness. Yet, the narrator herself lives in a housing estate. In Sri Lanka, the term ‘housing estate’ refers to a type of public housing, subsidised or low-income housing, provided for government employees of ministries and services, such as public school teachers (Samaratunga 2013). Within the sign of ‘housing estate’, drawing on Samaratunga (2013), is the signifier, meaning ‘economically weaker groups in society’. A mental image of these houses as lowly and of convenience is further formed as it is narrated that they ‘stuck like awkward protuberances in the landscape, unlike the houses in the original village, which merged in with the earth’ (Arasanayagam 2000: 135). This serves as a metaphor for the lives of the narrator and Mudiyanse, who, portrayed as ‘an outsider’ and ‘scarecrow’, depicting a sense of displacement and exclusion within their own community (Arasanayagam 2000). For example, the narrator parallels him to an ‘old weathered scarecrow’ (Arasanayagam 2000: 148). I argue here that ‘scarecrow’ has multiple significations. On one hand, it depicts the notion of simplicity, while on the other hand, it carries with it the meaning of powerless to act or speak. The narrator, however, is able to sympathise with Mudiyanse, as she reflects, ‘we too felt like outsiders’ having being displaced themselves several times

and struggling to service on their meagre income (Arasanayagam 2000: 148). By thus sympathising with Mudiyanse, the narrator also draws our attention to the need to feel empathy for the other, highlighting that it is only then that another would understand their condition.

Mudiyanse's obsession with reclaiming his lost inheritance led him to be regarded as a madman and being rejected by his own village and friends (Arasanayagam 2000). Sent away by his own brothers to a mental asylum when his demands got more insistent, Mudiyanse reflects,

The people began to say "*pissu, pissu* [mad, mad]". I was not mad at all. One day they fastened manacles on my wrists and I was taken away. While I was there, in the asylum, my whole body would tremble when I was subjected to the electric shocks treatment (Arasanayagam 2000: 139).

Similarly, Mudiyanse's treatment as an outside is further evidenced in the village children calling him, 'crocodile', with the narrator stating, 'the animal image had its special connotations of fear and threat' (Arasanayagam 2000, p. 140). Through this animal image, Mudiyanse is also dehumanised, reflecting the dehumanising conditions of poverty that the Millennium Declaration (United Nations General Assembly 2000) speaks of.

What is significant, and alarming here, is that Mudiyanse's status as an outcast and a madman is constructed by society itself—it is a label accorded to him by his own village. Drawing on Escobar (1995), evident here is the notion of powerful groups constructing a certain image of the powerless, as an outsider. At the same time, Pawling (1984: 117) argument is also valid that 'perceptions of snobbery' lead to inequalities.

Much like Mudiyanse who lived in a hut, Sam speaks of his home, 'together in that one-roomed shack, the six of us had done our best to make something for our lives' (Jayawardena 2009: 102).

The readers are taken further in rural life as Sam recollects,

There isn't much that has changed in our village. The men still dig sand from the river and drink *kasippu* [strong alcohol] in the evening to forget their troubles. The women go to tap rubber from the trees and come home to empty kitchen and try to find things to cook for their nightly meal (Jayawardena 2009: 172)

The text thus provides us insight into Sam's life and an alternative image into the notion of poverty. Such imagery, also helps the reader, as Nussbaum (1995) argues foster one's sympathetic imagination with the reader made to see, hear, think and feel the pain and sufferings of the poor. Sam's innocent description of the poor is powerful raising questions on their conditions of living, their ability to survive, right to decent work and access to basic services.

5.2 *Inequality*

As opposed to the vagueness of ‘inequality’ in policy texts, the statement below provides an alternative signified.

Back home in our village, it was very difficult when somebody fell sick. That is why so many died so young. There were no vans [...]; no one to carry us to the doctor [...]. We were very lucky if we got medicine.

When we fell ill seriously we had to find our own way to the nearby town and wait for hours in a long line to see the doctors who worked in the government hospitals [...] At such times, we were worse than dogs.

Bhurus was lucky. He was from the River House. The River House was a rich house. That made all the difference (Jayawardena 2009: 76).

Bhurus is the dog in the River House where Sam serves as a houseboy. Summarising Sam’s words, inequality is seen here as the difference between the rich and the poor. It is ironic that while even a dog of a rich house receives care in sickness, the poor have little access to services and face injustice, sometimes treated ‘worse than dogs’. The negative impact of such inequalities and poverty is also highlighted, as many villagers died with little access to care. Thus, in Sam’s understanding, being rich made all the difference.

5.3 *Sustainable Development*

Sam draws readers’ attention to another vital question related to sustainable development, as he recounts how in the village they threw everything, including all dirt, into the river along with their houses were built (Jayawardena 2009). Having moved into the River House, Sam is taken aback and fails to understand why the Madam (the Master’s wife) constantly reminds him not to throw dirt into the river by the house and instead collect it in garbage bags (Jayawardena 2009). Sam’s confusion is evident, as he throws dirt into the river when the Madam is not there, asking, ‘I don’t know why she was worried about collecting dirt in bags and not throwing it all in the river [...] She spoke as if the river would mind’ (Jayawardena 2009: 13). Sam’s statement is innocent, comical and at the same time raises alarming concern, as he leaves us with a question, how do we tell him that the river would mind?

6 Changing Buzzwords

The purpose of using both policy and popular media was to better understand ‘the relationship between different accounts and forms of representation within development writing as well as noting the multiplicity of voices and logics’ (Lewis et al. 2014a, b: 30). Against this statement, I argue that we have now heard from distinct voices. What links all these voices together, I argue, is the common theme, buzzword or signifier of ‘poverty’, while its logics and representations provide a point of comparison.

Until now, the two strands of texts of policy and popular media were considered separately. Yet, how do their findings compare and contrast with each other? While ‘eradicating poverty’ remains central to the new development agenda, given the framework’s renewed emphasis on ‘inequality’ and ‘sustainable development’, this discussion specifically asks, what type of knowledge and understanding is revealed about these buzzwords that feature prominently in today’s development lexicon?

6.1 Inequality

The cross-analysis of the texts reveals that inequality remains a contested buzzword, open to multiple significations. Based on the findings of the analysis, I categorise the following types of knowledge revealed about ‘inequality’:

Inequality resulting from a ‘rich versus poor’ syndrome, leading to the urgent need to look beyond merely eradicating poverty.

As discussed earlier, Sam makes a powerful assertion that being rich ‘made all the difference’ (Jayawardena 2009: 76). Making his statement count further—almost as if meaning to cause some embarrassment—the poor is compared to the dog of the rich household. While inequality here is closely linked to poverty, it also raises a haunting alternative that reducing poverty would not merely address the issue, but rather, there is a need to consider the causes and structures that lead to poverty, a matter that has little focus in policy documents. However, it must be stated that, as opposed to the *Road Map* that used inequality mainly in conjunction with gender, *Road to Dignity* is promising in this respect with its emphasis not just on reducing poverty, but also on inequalities, and in all areas of development.

Inequality and ‘the perception of snobbery’.

Pawling (1984: 117) regards the ‘perception of snobbery as the crucial ethical problem in an unequal society’. Perception is embedded in representation. Representation, for example, leads to the construction of certain perceptions and frames of understanding (Hall 1997). Escobar (1995) and Esteva (2010) perceived ‘development’ as hegemonic and a Eurocentric ideal. Applying such arguments in a

narrower sense, *Samsara* highlights how the notions of hegemony and power are evident within social groups and structures itself. Mudiyanse is portrayed as a madman, fuelling ideas of an outcast and a threatening being (Arasanayagam 2000). Further, Mudiyanse is dehumanised, reduced to an animal, as he is labelled a crocodile. The difference here is enforced and constructed by society itself. Therefore, drawing on Pawling (1984), by contrasting fiction with the findings of policy texts, what emerges is a society, where difference, unhappiness and the dehumanising conditions in which people live can very well be enforced, with those living in extreme poverty, with little knowledge of systems and access to services, are pushed further towards the status of the subaltern in the social structure, leading to inequalities.

Equality as providing equal life chances, development for all and in all sectors.

Transforming our world takes the notion of inequality further in their pledge that ‘no one will be left behind’ (United Nations General Assembly 2015: 1), and that ‘no goal or target be considered met unless met for all social and economic groups’ (United Nations 2014: 19). Significantly, the new development agenda goes on to recognise the multiple dimensions of inequality with regard to gender, income and opportunity, while also identifying the need to ‘reduce inequality within and among countries’ (United Nations General Assembly 2015: 14). Thus, with the new development agenda, a broader notion of reducing inequality is presented, signifying ideas and knowledge of equal life chances, opportunities and access to services for all segments and sectors of society.

6.2 Sustainability

In contrast to the understanding of inequality, what is noticed is the limited attention paid to the notion of sustainability in literary texts. However, based on the findings, the following understandings have been derived of the buzzword:

Sustainability as requiring change, but also transformative.

Both policy texts link the buzzword closely with ‘partnership’. While the *Road Map* highlights the need for a global partnership for sustainability development specifically with regard to the least developed small island states (United Nations General Assembly 2001), *Transforming our world* speaks of the need to ‘strengthen the means of implementation and revitalise the global partnership for sustainable development’ (United Nations General Assembly 2015: 14). It recognises that sustainable development requires transformations; for example, in building partnerships that must be inclusive and participatory involving all stakeholders and accountable to people, which in turn, has the potential to transform societies. Further, the text affirms that sustainable approaches must be adopted in all aspects of development and production, including agriculture, manufacturing, water and

sanitation and job creation (United Nations General Assembly 2015) and, drawing on Scoones (2010) sustainability thus becomes crucial for good development. Such emphasis leads to an urgent call for change, and perhaps confirms a further argument raised by Scoones (2010) that sustainability is here to stay.

Sustainability and knowledge—would the rivers mind?

Popular media leads to the construction of an alternative type of knowledge relating to sustainability. For example, Sam recounts how the men in his village still dug sand from the river bed and how most of the village houses situated near the river threw everything—all the dirt—in the river (Jayawardena 2009). Sam continues his habits when he goes to work at the River House and fails to understand why the Master’s wife insists that the dirt is collected in garbage bags instead of dumped into the river. Here, one is left to wonder, whether Sam was more aware of the impact of his activities, will his condition and attitude change? Ironically, *Road to Dignity* recognises that human activities are at the centre of posing a threat to sustainable development and points to the harmful nature of such activities (United Nations 2014). As highlighted earlier, the text also speaks of the need for sustainable approaches in all sectors and livelihoods, including managing water resources, waste and chemicals (United Nations 2014). This emphasis is significant; however, taking stride from Sam’s situation, we wonder, is what promised in the new development agenda sufficient?

7 Conclusion—From Old to New Buzzwords

Scoones (2010: 160) asks, ‘can old buzzwords be reinvigorated and reinvented for new challenges, or does it need discarding, with something else put its place?’

Transformation is defined as the new development agenda’s ‘watchword’ (United Nations 2014: 3). With the buzzword implying ‘change’, there is emphasises on the need to ‘embrace change’, in the ‘management’ of societies, economies and the planet (United Nations 2014). This transformation is to be realised by promoting patterns of growth that are more inclusive, sustained and sustainable, which in turn, will help tackle issues such as climate change, promote effective governance and ensure good development (United Nations 2015). Yet, the signification of ‘transformation’ or ‘transformative’ as portrayed in the new agenda is rather ambiguous, as it emphasises on the need for transformations in different aspects, such as rural development, agricultural systems, trade and financial sectors.

Cornwall (2010: 13) argues that it is given ‘the very ambiguity of development buzzwords that scope exists for enlarging their application to encompass more transformative agendas’. It is here then, in the very ambiguity of buzzwords, that development’s mystery lies. The broad nature of buzzwords holds promise, multiple interpretations and disappointment. But, buzzwords continue to matter in development, specifically for the reason that they continue to draw attention to,

frame understandings and produce knowledge about key development concerns and ways of addressing them. The sustainable development narrative with its promise to leave no one behind is appealing. Yet, as the new sustainable development agenda is being put into action, and as the agenda's dominant buzzwords of 'inequality' and 'sustainable development', along with its promise of 'transformation' and the overlying objective of 'eradicating poverty', continues to define and persuade policy, I am particularly drawn to what Sam says—rather, pleads,

Sometimes I wished they could all become poor, I mean really poor like my family; at least for a short time. Then they would know what this business of being poor was all about (Jayawardena 2009: 159).

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