

Divergent Futures: Neoliberal Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Regenerative Path of *Laudato Si'*



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I. Introduction: The Crisis of Global Governance and Competing Visions

A. Contextualising the Dual Mandates of 2015

The year 2015 marked a critical institutional juncture in global governance, witnessing the adoption of two seminal frameworks intended to address escalating global poverty and environmental instability. On the one hand, the United Nations (UN) member states unanimously adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, thereby institutionalising the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).¹ On the other hand, Pope Francis issued the encyclical *Laudato Si' (LS): On Care for Our Common Home*.⁴ Both documents share the lofty common objective of ending poverty and ensuring planetary well-being, yet they employ drastically different philosophical foundations, economic strategies, and operational methodologies.³

While the SDGs provide a "shared blueprint for peace and prosperity for people and the planet" through quantifiable goals and international partnership¹, *Laudato Si'* offers a profound theological, anthropological, and ethical treatise. The encyclical's message, addressed to "every person living on this planet"⁴, delves into the spiritual and structural roots of the current ecological crisis.⁵ These differences

result in distinct challenges and opportunities for creating a future grounded in sustainability and ecological solidarity.³

B. Thesis of Systemic Incompatibility

This report advances the critical argument that the UN SDGs and *Laudato Si'* operate on fundamentally opposing foundations and orientations, precluding any meaningful long-term harmonization. The SDGs, rooted in the mainstream global policy discourse, are structurally constrained to work within and rely upon the neoliberal economic order, primarily seeking to manage environmental and social crises through technical fixes and market expansion. Conversely, *Laudato Si'* proposes a pathway away from this paradigm, demanding a "total anthropological and socio-political revolution".⁶

The divergence is manifest across four key dimensions: economic dependency (growth versus degrowth), ideological focus (sustainability versus integral ecology and justice), organizational governance (hierarchical management versus active democracy), and ultimate intended outcome (maintenance versus regeneration). The inherent conflict dictates distinct futures, necessitating radically different governance needs and generating non-overlapping practical outcomes.

II. Paradigm I: The UN SDGs and the Constraints of Neoliberal Development

A. Operational Framework and Policy Reach

The SDGs constitute the mainstream global policy framework for sustainable development, building upon the legacy of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and earlier agreements like Agenda 21.¹ They highlight the necessary connection between environmental, social, and economic aspects of development.² The implementation strategy emphasises the importance of national sustainable development strategies, framed as cyclical, interactive processes of planning and participation.⁷

However, the global policy implementation of the SDGs is highly contested. While they are often perceived as a hegemonic agenda imposed by the Global North, detailed analysis of national development plans suggests otherwise. The return of comprehensive national development planning is largely a "movement from below," driven by national governments, particularly in the Global South. Evidence indicates that only about half of the national development plans published since 2016 genuinely adopt the SDGs as their central focus or inspiration, with a significant portion not mentioning them at all.⁸ This inconsistency demonstrates that the SDGs often function less as a coherent, globally enforced master plan and more as a diplomatic language or a compliance metric utilized selectively by nations seeking specific policy signals from international partners, rather than serving as the sole engine for domestic policy formulation.

B. The Growth Imperative and the Neoliberal Critique

A central critique levelled against the SDGs is their entrenchment within the neoliberal economic structure, driven by an unwavering commitment to economic expansion. The 2030 Agenda explicitly recognises that strategies to end deprivation "must go hand-in-hand with strategies that... spur economic growth".¹ Industry analysts emphasise that the SDGs are anticipated to be a fundamental driver of corporate revenues and earnings, projecting they could unlock economic opportunities worth at least US\$12 trillion annually by 2030.⁹

This massive economic potential structurally binds environmental solutions to market mechanisms and corporate integration into core growth strategies.⁹ The observation that the solutions to ecological stress are designed to be profitable suggests that environmental concern is converted into a monetised opportunity, effectively sustaining the underlying structural drivers (such as resource overconsumption and profit maximisation) that originally necessitated the crisis. Sustainability is thus professionalised and commercialised, linking the success of environmental action to the perpetual expansion of capital.

This orientation perpetuates what critics identify as the "outdated, GDP-heavy paradigm" created in the 1930s.¹⁰ While there is official recognition that Gross Domestic Product (GDP) alone is insufficient to guide future development¹⁰, the economic metrics and targets of the 2030 Agenda overwhelmingly prioritise growth.¹ This inconsistency highlights a profound internal contradiction: the system acknowledges the inadequacy of the growth metric, but the political and financial architecture supporting the UN cannot detach from the growth imperative, resulting in an impossible attempt at harmonisation.¹¹

C. Critical Deficits: Power, Justice, and Coherence

Academic scrutiny reveals that the SDG framework exhibits crucial deficits in addressing systemic inequality and power dynamics. The goals are critiqued for failing to name or adequately address power conflicts, raising concerns that the development paradigm subtly establishes hierarchies that can "prolong the old colonial power relations into the 21st century".¹¹ This suggests that the concept of development itself, by dividing the world into "developed" and "less developed," carries inherent political and moral ambivalence.¹¹

Furthermore, the SDGs are characterised by a "shallow commitment" to racial justice and equality, falling short of addressing systematic racism and xenophobia, thereby weakening their central pledge to "leave no one behind".¹² This failure to adequately address root causes of horizontal and vertical inequalities¹³ is compounded by inherent policy trade-offs. Significant tensions exist, particularly between the goal of economic growth (SDG 8) and goals related to environmental sustainability and climate action (SDGs 13, 15).¹⁴ These trade-offs confirm that the SDG structure tends to view ecological restrictions as mere conditions or "footnotes" to be managed within the overriding priority of economic expansion.¹¹

III. Paradigm II: *Laudato Si'* and the Revolutionary Call for Integral Ecology

A. The Philosophical Core: Integral Ecology

In stark contrast to the quantifiable, policy-centric approach of the SDGs, *Laudato Si'* grounds its vision in the philosophical and theological concept of *Integral Ecology*. This concept originates from the observation that the global issues currently faced reflect the profound interconnectedness between humans and the natural world.¹⁶ Pope Francis argues that the social and environmental issues confronting humanity are not distinct crises, but rather "one complex crisis with both social and environmental dimensions".¹⁶

Integral Ecology thus requires a holistic approach that simultaneously considers the interactions between political, economic, cultural, social, and theological systems.⁵ This perspective offers an essential "counter accent" to the SDG fixation on "socio-technically producible and countable things," focusing instead on cultural dimensions and deep-seated human values.¹¹

B. Justice, Rights, and the Post-Colonial Ethos

Laudato Si' places the vulnerable and marginalised at the centre of its ecological concerns, arguing that ecological conversion is inseparable from advocacy for environmental justice and care for the poor.¹⁹ This focus on integral human development and social justice positions the encyclical as a critical tool for interpreting development through a power-critical and post-colonial lens, challenging traditional hierarchical development models.¹¹

The framework employed by *Laudato Si'* introduces a moral imperative that fundamentally reshapes the sustainability discourse. It utilises a populist moral discourse that constructs an antagonistic political frontier: a global 'us' (the Earth and the poor) against a 'them'—the "indifferent" political, technological, and economic elites.²² By framing environmental degradation as "a sin against creation," the encyclical shifts responsibility from specialised technical committees to the moral consciousness of humanity.²² This

approach creates an environment where structural power relationships are exposed and challenged, driving a demand for systemic transformation, rather than consensual technical management, which is the hallmark of the SDG approach.⁵

C. The Requirement of Anthropological Conversion

The depth of change required by *Laudato Si'* moves beyond mere policy adjustment, demanding a "radical change in the conduct of humanity".⁴ This involves a comprehensive "ecological conversion," which necessitates changes within oneself, characterised by gratitude, gratuitousness, and a loving awareness of universal communion with creation.²³

This conversion is not merely a spiritual exercise but a prerequisite for structural reform. *Laudato Si'* is correctly interpreted as a "manifesto for a new world" rooted in a total anthropological and socio-political revolution.⁶ The central causal claim is made explicit: "There will be no new relationship with nature without a new human being. There is no ecology without an adequate anthropology".⁶ This establishes a hierarchy of transformation where economic and ecological reform are dependent variables, contingent upon the independent variable of human moral and self-perception change. This entirely opposes the SDG framework, which generally treats economic growth and technical efficiency as primary drivers that will, in turn, resolve social and environmental deficits.

IV. The Divergence in Outcome: Sustainability Versus Regeneration

A. Critique of Standard Sustainability (The "Maintenance" Model)

The concept of sustainability, as applied in mainstream discourse and embedded in the SDGs, is primarily concerned with maintaining the current viability of global economic and social systems by mitigating or managing their adverse environmental impacts.¹¹ It seeks harmonisation among competing factors—economic growth, social inclusion, and environmental protection.⁵ This approach is criticised for focusing on the symptom (managing planetary boundaries) rather than the disease (the structural validity of the growth model that necessitated the crisis).

B. Regeneration as Restoration and Systemic Renewal

Laudato Si' pushes beyond this maintenance paradigm toward **regeneration**. Regeneration implies not just reducing harm but actively restoring and renewing damaged ecological and social capital. This is evidenced by the promotion of regenerative practices, such as regenerative agriculture, which aims to restore soil health, protect biodiversity, and ensure food security.²⁴ Regeneration, in this context, is inextricably linked to the required spiritual and anthropological renewal.⁶ It shifts the goal from sustained mitigation to profound, systemic restoration.²⁴

C. The Irreconcilable Economic Conflict: Degrowth

The incompatibility between the two frameworks crystallises in their opposing views on economic growth. While the SDGs are built on unlocking massive economic opportunity and spurring growth¹, *Laudato Si'* fundamentally critiques the industrial growth model as the originator of global undesirable developments.¹¹

The encyclical recognises that the ecological overexploitation of global resources is the inevitable consequence of the spread of the Western model of prosperity.¹¹ Consequently, *Laudato Si'* posits that "degrowth" in the affluent regions of the earth is both an inevitable consequence of ecological limits and an ethical requirement (LS 193).¹¹ This ethical necessity for contraction in wealthy nations stands in direct opposition to the economic expansion mandate of the SDGs, particularly SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth). The SDGs, in attempting to harmonise conflicting goals, are viewed as bypassing the deep, structural conflict between the neoliberal concept of unlimited prosperity and undeniable ecological limits.¹¹

V. Management Architecture: Mainstream vs. Transformative Governance

A. SDGs: Hierarchical Management and Technical Implementation

The managerial architecture supporting the SDGs relies on conventional, often top-down and hierarchical structures necessary for large-scale governmental and corporate coordination. Implementation is channelled through national sustainable development strategies, which emphasise cyclical planning, technical management of progress, and corporate integration.⁷

The integration of SDGs into corporate management, often incentivised through financial products designed for Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs)²⁶, reinforces a focus on quantifiable results and accountability through measurable indicators.¹³ This managerial approach, focusing on technical planning and data disaggregation, reinforces the SDG concentration on "socio-technically producible and countable things".¹¹ Such management is optimised for efficiency and compliance within established organisational hierarchies, which mirrors the corporate or state model.²⁷

B. LS: The Call for Radical Organisational Change and Active Democracy

The goals of Integral Ecology and regeneration—which require challenging power structures and undertaking systemic, anthropological revolution—are inherently ill-suited to conventional hierarchical management. The necessary "radical change in the conduct of humanity"⁴ must be supported by an organisational framework that promotes profound structural change and democratic ownership. *Laudato Si'* necessitates that citizens adopt an "active role in political decision-making" at all local, regional, and national levels to mitigate environmental damage.²⁸ This commitment to active democracy demands management practices that reject the top-down, anti-democratic structures often observed in conventional organizations.²⁹

The principles of non-hierarchical, or "flat," organisational structures align directly with the LS ethos.³⁰ Such models foster community, open communication, and shared ownership, thereby promoting a decentralised "ecology of relations" necessary to address complex, systemic ecological issues.²⁹ While these flat structures present management challenges, such as potential role ambiguity and complexity in conflict resolution³⁰, their inherent participatory nature is critical for achieving social and ecological justice by moving decision-making away from centralised elites.²² Practical, localised examples of Integral Ecology in action—such as the Bethany Land Institute and Tent of Nations—demonstrate success through self-sufficient economic models that integrate nature, education, community, and social resistance.¹⁸

Table 1 summarises the profound structural differences between the two paradigms, illustrating why harmonisation is conceptually untenable.

Table 1: Comparative Analysis of SDG and Laudato Si' Foundational Elements

Feature	UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)	Laudato Si' (LS) Integral Ecology
Underlying Economic Order	Neoliberal; Growth-centric; Market-driven solutions; GDP-heavy ⁹	Post-growth; Anthropological/Social Revolution; Ethical economy; Degrowth required for affluent regions ⁶
Primary Focus	Policy goals (quantifiable targets); Harmonization of growth, inclusion, and environment ²	Holistic systemic change; Interconnected crisis of humanity and environment (Integral Ecology) ¹⁶

Management Model	Mainstream, hierarchical (national plans, corporate integration, top-down) ⁷	Radical, participatory, non-hierarchical, communal (Ecological Conversion/Synodality) ²⁸
Ultimate Horizon	Sustainability (maintaining viability within neoliberal constraints) ¹¹	Regeneration (ecological renewal and systemic restoration of damaged capital) ⁶
Critique Addressed	Power conflicts, socio-technical fixation, lack of cultural dimension ¹¹	Superficiality, individualistic action, lack of deep moral/anthropological change ²²

VI. The Convergence of Ecclesial and Ecological Governance: Synodality as Regenerative Management

A. Synodality as the Practical Path for Integral Ecology

The implementation of the radical socio-political and anthropological vision of *Laudato Si'* finds a direct structural parallel in the Catholic Church's recent emphasis on synodality, especially as proposed by Pope Francis. The core linkage rests on the understanding that abusive relationships towards the earth and abusive relationships among human beings are mutually reinforcing and inseparable.⁴ Therefore, the path toward realising ecological and social justice, which requires a paradigm shift, must be the path of synodality.³²

Synodality, meaning to walk together," is defined as a specific "way of being and acting" that promotes the genuine participation of all baptised persons.³² This institutional commitment to mutual listening and communal deliberation provides a crucial framework for translating the moral and spiritual demand of *Laudato Si'* into concrete organisational practice. The adoption of this methodology offers a robust mechanism for community conversion, which Pope Francis notes is equally important as individual ecological conversion for achieving lasting change.²³

B. The Governance Model of the Inverted Pyramid

Pope Francis has explicitly distanced the Church from the managerial ethos, asserting that the Church is not a "large multinational company run by managers" and does not rely on "marketing strategies".²⁷ This rejection of the corporate-managerial model aligns perfectly with the need for non-hierarchical structures identified in implementing *Laudato Si'*.

The vision of synodality is often conceptualised through the image of the "inverted pyramid," which reinterprets hierarchical ministry and leadership as a form of circular authority focused on service.³² This structural ideal directly aligns with the radical management practices needed for Integral Ecology, demanding a style of leadership rooted in co-operation, collective intelligence, shared governance, and communal deliberation.³² By prioritising the active democratic process and the voices of all community members, synodal practice structurally centres the needs of the poor and vulnerable, fulfilling the justice requirement of *Laudato Si'*.¹⁹ Thus, the organisational form becomes an ethical prerequisite for achieving a just outcome.

C. The Mutual Benefit: LS Reinforces Synodal Practice

The convergence of these two mandates positions the Catholic Church—a vast, hierarchical global institution—as a unique management laboratory for implementing radical, non-hierarchical organisational blueprints. Synodality provides the structured process necessary to prevent the encyclical's spiritual fervour from dissolving into fragmented, 'movementist initiatives' lacking ideological coordination.⁶ By offering a universal, structured process of mutual listening and shared deliberation ³² synodality provides the necessary institutional architecture for the "community conversion" demanded by LS.²³

The successful translation of the *Laudato Si'* vision into concrete action requires that the "ecological conversion, the cultural conversion, the pastoral conversion and the synodal conversion are interrelated".³² The practice of synodality thus strengthens the Church's capacity to fulfil its mission of serving the common home, providing a governance model radical enough to reject the neoliberal constraints inherent in the mainstream sustainability discourse and pursue genuine regeneration.

VII. Conclusion and Pathways for Radical Action

A. Synthesis of Divergence and Incompatibility

The analysis confirms the systemic incompatibility between the UN SDGs and *Laudato Si'*. The SDGs, operating within the structural constraints of neoliberalism, prioritise the harmonisation of economic growth with environmental management, relying heavily on technical solutions, quantifiable metrics, and conventional corporate governance.⁵ The SDG framework attempts to stabilise the current system. In contrast, *Laudato Si'* provides a revolutionary critique, rejecting the anthropocentric and technocratic paradigms responsible for the crisis.⁶ It demands an Integral Ecology, prioritising justice, cultural dimensions, anthropological conversion, and ultimately, degrowth in affluent regions.⁶ The goal is not merely sustainability maintenance but complete systemic and ecological regeneration.

B. Management Imperatives for the Regenerative Path

The path to regeneration demands a radical break from mainstream management practices. The conventional hierarchical models employed for SDG implementation are structurally designed to perpetuate centralised power and technical efficiency, which inherently conflict with the ethical demands of Integral Ecology.

The implementation of *Laudato Si'* requires a transition toward transformative governance, characterised by active democratic processes and non-hierarchical structures.²⁸ The Catholic Church's practice of synodality offers a living example of how a massive, complex institution can deliberately adopt a flat organisational style—the "inverted pyramid"—to foster collective intelligence and communal deliberation necessary for deep-seated ethical and ecological change.³² This alignment demonstrates that for regenerative futures to be realised, the management architecture itself must undergo a conversion, moving from an efficiency-driven, top-down model to an ecology-driven, horizontal structure. Table 2 illustrates the necessary management shift required to move from the SDG compliance model to the LS regenerative model.

Table 2: Proposed Management Model Shift: From SDG Efficiency to LS Regeneration

Management Dimension	SDG/Mainstream Management (Efficiency-Driven)	LS/Regenerative Management (Ecology-Driven)
Organizational Structure	Vertical, centralized command, clear hierarchy (Corporate/State Model) ⁷	Flat, holacracy, non-hierarchical, distributed network (Synodality, Ecology of organization) ²⁹
Decision-Making Process	Expert-led, top-down policy planning, technical solutions, compliance reporting ⁷	Active democratic process, communal deliberation, mutual listening (Inverted Pyramid) ²⁸
Accountability Focus	Quantifiable results, measurable targets, ex ante/ex post impact assessment ¹³	Moral/Anthropological change, ethical conversion, process quality, shared responsibility ⁶

Primary Driver	Economic opportunity, resource optimization, risk mitigation ⁹	Universal communion, gratuitousness, care for the common home (Theological imperative) ⁴
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C. Future Research Directions

Future academic inquiry must focus on the practical scalability of these radical organisational models. Comparative organisational studies are needed to assess the long-term environmental and social outcomes achieved by large corporations that adhere to standard SDG reporting metrics, versus those of community-based or faith-based organisations that implement synodal and flat management structures (holacracy) for ecological objectives. Furthermore, detailed research into how developing nations integrate the principles of integral ecology within post-colonial development planning, potentially leveraging concepts like the Green New Deal's focus on democratic transition ³³, will be crucial to defining a viable, transformative pathway beyond the limitations of neoliberal sustainability.

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