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Article (Accepted Version)

Hopper, Trevor (2019) Stop accounting myopia: – think globally: a polemic. *Journal of Accounting and Organisational Change*, 15 (1). pp. 87-99. ISSN 1832-5912

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Stop Accounting Myopia: – Think Globally: A Polemic¹

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Abstract

Purpose

The paper covers issues raised in my plenary address to the Journal of Accounting and Organizational Network Conference held in Melbourne in November 2017. This called for accountants, whether professionals in practice or in academia, to broaden their vision of accounting and accountability beyond the financial accountability of organisations, and serving corporate and capital market interests, to consider how it can help achieve sustainable development goals.

Design/methodology/approach

The discussion is based on personal experience, cognate literature, and policies of major global institutions.

Findings

Whilst the need for financial reporting will remain, there is a pressing need for reporting to measure, monitor and make accountable organisations' obligations to help achieve sustainable development goals established by global institutions such as the United Nations. Areas of importance discussed are accounting for human rights, mitigation of climate change, securing decent work, increasing accountability - especially civil society democratic participation, and a greater and more equal partnership with stakeholders and developing countries to address their needs.

Research limitations/implications

The article is a personal polemic intended to provoke reflection and reform amongst accountants.

Practical implications

The paper outlines areas where accounting could and has addressed human rights and sustainability issues, and the implications for reforming accounting practice and education.

¹ I wish to thank Jesse Dillard for his comments on an early draft of this article. The usual disclaimers apply.

Social Implications

The social implications are vast for they extend to major issues concerning the preserving the planet, its species, humankind, and enhanced democratic processes for civil society and developing countries.

All our dreams can become true if we have the courage to pursue them – Walt Disney

1. Prologue

As one gets older, flashbacks to the past become more vivid. This was so in the reflections that informed this address, which is concerned with accounting scholarship in the past, present and future. Perhaps surprisingly, key personal recollections were not academic papers, though I would not wish to disparage their influence, but rather incidents bearing on my role as an academic. Four came to mind.

The first occurred during an academic visit to Japan in 1994. In a seminar I was asked what my theory of double entry book-keeping was. I replied that there was no underlying theory – it was merely a set of equations. It transpired that the questioner, along with colleagues, disputed this, claiming that it manifested balance and reciprocal obligations. I cannot claim to understand the theory well but as time went by I became less satisfied with my response. The arguments resonated with my thoughts about transactions and actions being interdependent and mutually interacting within systems at various levels. Actions may pursue different goals but eventually to survive they must adapt and reach constrained equilibriums.

The second was exposure to Paolo Quattrone's historical work when he was undertaking post-doctoral work at the University of Manchester in the late 1990s. He had studied accounting within the Jesuit Order in Italy during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, especially with respect to how they accounted for sins and the saving of souls (Quattrone, 2004). Despite my agnosticism, this proved fascinating, as it suggested in its earliest days, accounting and accountability transcended the materialistic to personal and moral obligations. Accountancy's antecedents and applications did not exclusively lie in the concerns of merchants and owners of estates - accounting is not just an economic phenomenon but a moral endeavour.

The third was a plenary address by Abe Briloff at a Critical Perspectives Conference in New York in 2002. Abe Briloff, though an accounting professor, was more oriented to practice rather than conventional academic accounting scholarship. He was an early critic of accounting, who argued that various accounting scandals were manifestations of a desecration of the covenant accountants have with society, i.e. being designated as professionals granted legal privileges presumes that they serve the public interest. His criticisms also extended to much academic accounting. They remain valid today. In a time when 'experts' are denigrated by some politicians and their 'facts' replaced by untruths,

public trust and reliance on academic analyses have never been higher. However, much accounting remains wanting in this respect.

The fourth was a conversation in the late 1990s with a printer in a British Legion club near Wolverhampton where every Sunday I drank with friends before leaving next day for several days at the University of Sheffield, where I was then a lecturer. The printer pointedly asked me what I did whilst at Sheffield. I responded by telling him how we trained accountants for businesses such as his. He looked at me scornfully and responded that he believed the point of a university was to study the meaning of life. I felt ashamed and I still regret my response that sacrificed the defense of academic study and the pursuit of knowledge for immediate utilitarian ends.

Such reflections shaped my thoughts on what to say in this plenary, namely how accounting might better serve society and the planet. This requires extending its remit beyond optimizing the depletion of natural resources; increasing civil society influence, especially by the poor and marginalized, within democratic processes; and rendering governments more accountable for public interest goals within and beyond their immediate jurisdictions.

2. Creating Accounting with a Global Moral Compass

To achieve this accounting must pay more heed to global policies and institutions, rather than the needs of corporations and capital markets.² It needs to be less myopic. More focus needs to be placed on the accounting and accountability implications of agreements and policies from the United Nations (UN), the World Bank (WB), and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).³ It is fashionable in some political circles to deride such bodies, sometimes with justification, but, as will be demonstrated, they help orchestrate policies that better serve humankind and, given the global threats facing the planet, they are essential for co-ordinated international policies. Under this rubric, five examples relevant to accounting are addressed, namely human rights; sustainable development; increasing the voice of civil society, especially the poor and marginalised; decent work; and partnership with developing countries to alleviate poverty.

2.1 Human Rights

The UN General Assembly in December 1948 made a Declaration of Universal Human Rights. These moral principles detail standards of human behaviour, protected in local and international law, that extend to everyone and cannot be taken away. The rights are: all are born free and equal; no discrimination; the right to life; no slavery; no torture; equality before the law; no unfair detainment; public trials; innocence until proven guilty; privacy; freedom of movement within countries; a safe place to live; a nationality; marriage and a family; ownership of personal possessions; freedom of thought and expression; public assembly; democracy; social security; workers' rights; recreation; food and shelter; education; copyright; a fair and free world; and responsibility to others.

² It is not that such research is not required or is socially undesirable but that accounting scholarship places undue weight to business and neglects other important areas.

³ This is not an exhaustive list by any means – it is merely illustrative and a useful starting point.

In 2011 the UN Human Rights Council unanimously endorsed Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights regarding relations between governments, business and civil society, and the role of companies. Governments are legally obliged to uphold human rights and companies to respect them. This calls for a business to:

- *Have a policy commitment regarding human rights approved at the most senior level, informed by relevant internal and/or external expertise*
- *Make this publicly available internally and externally*
- *Directly link human rights expectations of personnel, business partners and other parties to its operations, products or services*
- *Instigate systems, due diligence, and processes to identify, prevent, mitigate and account for their (and their supply chain's) impacts on human rights based on appropriate qualitative and quantitative indicators*
- *Have processes to remedy adverse human rights impacts they cause or contribute to*
- *Conduct meaningful consultation with potentially affected groups and other relevant stakeholders.*

This has implications for accounting. McPhail and Ferguson (2016), in reviewing recent developments in human rights accounting, claim that the Guiding Principles potentially mark a significant change for business accounting. Regulatory agents such as the WB and OECD have adopted the Guiding Principles and many nation states have become signatories. Hence corporations will have to assume responsibility for human rights and report accordingly, using appropriate quantitative and qualitative indicators. This extends beyond their own business and its jurisdiction to their supply chain globally. To help corporations and others, the UN has developed a Guiding Principles Reporting Framework and a database and analysis of company reporting. International accounting standards for human rights reporting may emerge.

Many large corporations have started to produce human rights accounts. For example, Unilever, the first company to publish a stand-alone human rights report based on the Guiding Principles Reporting Framework, covers issues of discrimination, fair wages, forced labour, freedom of association, harassment, health and safety, land rights, and working hours. Some companies undertook human rights reporting before the UN Framework. Primark was an early signatory to the Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh, now signed by over 200 garment brands and retailers, trade unions and NGOs, following the Rans Plaza factory collapse that killed more than 1000 workers. In 2016 Primark entered a partnership with the UK's Department for International Development to improve working conditions for garment workers in developing markets worldwide.

The process, politics, legality and design of human rights accounting is an important emergent issue insufficiently researched or taught on university courses, despite considerable corporate, governmental and professional activity in this area. Important topics needing research include analyses of what corporations are doing; evaluations of prototype reporting schemes; the role, if any, of accounting standards and standard boards; whether accountants should prepare reports; whether enforcement and regulation should be legislated for rather than relying on voluntarism; and redressing power imbalances, e.g. should host countries of multinational corporations regulate the latter's fulfillment of human rights globally?

2.2 Sustainable Development Goals

In 2000, the Millennium Summit of the UN established eight development goals for its 191 member states for achievement by 2015.⁴ Each goal had 21 specific targets and more than 60 indicators. Detailed results by country over time are monitored by the WB World Development Indicators. According to Mc Arthur and Rasmussen⁵ of the Brookings Institution, at least 21 million extra lives were saved due to accelerated progress towards the goals, but their achievements and accelerations varied considerably across goals and geographies. Given the predilection of many accounting researchers to quantitative mining of statistical archives, it is surprising that, to my best of my knowledge, so little accounting research use these as dependant variables, whereas market-based criteria continue to predominate.

In 2015 the Millennium Development Goals were superseded by seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for achievement by 2030. The aim is to end poverty, protect the planet, and ensure prosperity for all. The goals are: no poverty; zero hunger; good health and well-being; quality education; gender equality; clean water and sanitation; affordable and clean energy; decent work and economic growth; industry, innovation and infrastructure; reduced inequalities; sustainable cities and communities; responsible consumption and production; climate action; life below water; life on land; peace, justice and strong institutions; and partnership for the goals. The Report of the Inter-Agency and Expert Group on Sustainable Development Goal Indicators (E/CN.3/2016/2/Rev.1), Annex IV, whose adoption was agreed at the 48th session of the UN Statistical Commission in March 2017 and ratified at General Assembly in July 2017, proposes 232 indicators of progress, measured by country and disaggregated, where relevant, by income, sex, age, race, ethnicity, migratory status, disability and geographic location, or other characteristics, in accordance with the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics (General Assembly resolution 68/261). Countries are responsible for monitoring progress, but again global comparative statistics are also monitored by the WB World Development Indicators.

Triple bottom line reporting (TBL) is a means whereby organisations can account for broader societal goals (Elkington, 1997). Its emphasis on reporting for sustainability reflects a stakeholder holder approach to accounting and eschews mainstream accounting's commitments to primarily serving capital markets. Reporting covers three areas, profits, people and the planet. It has been adopted by many, mainly multinational corporations, e.g. General Electric, Unilever, Proctor and Gamble; and public sector organisations, e. g in Australia, the European Union, and Eugene City, USA. It seeks to measure their degree of social responsibility, its economic value, its environmental impact, and to consciously evaluate their impact of investment and business decisions, alongside their financial returns. For example, Cascade Engineering, a private firm, reports TBL social variables that include, average hours of training/employee, welfare and career retention, charitable contributions;

⁴ They were: to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger; to achieve universal primary education; to promote gender equality and empower women; to reduce child mortality; to improve maternal health; to combat HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases; to ensure environmental sustainability; and to develop a global partnership for development.

⁵ How successful were the Millenium Development Goals? J. Mc Arthur & K. Rasmussen, Jan 11, 2017, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/future-development/2017/01/11/how-successful-were-the-millennium-development-goals/>. Accessed 6/11/2017.

and environmental variables covering safety incidents, lost or restricted workdays, sales in dollars per kilowatt hour, greenhouse gas emissions, usage of recycled materials, water consumption and amounts to landfill (Atu, 2013).

However, TBL has difficulties. Critics argue, with justification, that the factors are difficult to measure, vary across types of organisation, and are difficult to aggregate. However, help is at hand. The Global Reporting Initiative (GRI), a global alliance of governments and public and private sector organisations formed in 1997, has begun issuing global standards for sustainability reporting developed by a Global Sustainability Standards Board. They provide standardized reporting guidelines concerning the environment within the GRI Indicator Protocol Set, which contains 30 environmental performance indicators spanning energy, biodiversity and emissions criteria. The GRI work closely with related UN bodies and provide assistance and advice on developing performance measures for organisations to publicly report on their economic, environmental and social impacts, and how they contribute towards sustainable development.

Nevertheless, the problem of aggregation of variables within and across categories remains the subject of considerable research and debate. However, their reduction into a single financial measure is dangerous. Current popular investment appraisal techniques ignore and even exacerbate such matters with their emphasis on quick financial paybacks. Many issues, e.g. preserving biodiversity, cannot and should not be commodified, and acting to maximise a unitary measure, as in much financial economics, is unnatural and undesirable. Any individual devoting themselves to maximising single financial goal would at best be regarded as obsessive and at worst mad. Moreover, as developers of triple bottom line reporting acknowledge, there is a fourth dimension to be considered, namely time, which incorporates preserving the planet and its biodiversity, and maintaining intergenerational equality.

Organisations pursue multiple goals and must respond to pressures from a wide variety of stakeholders. We live in a pluralistic society beset with conflicts and different values, many of which transcend financial valuation, though they have financial implications. Accommodation requires trade-offs and where possible consensus. If accounting and accountability is limited to financial flows and the exclusive pursuit of profitability then it is of limited utility for sustainable development, which requires systemic thinking emphasising survival, flexibility, and mutual accommodation of internal and external factors suitably measured. If sustainability is, as it should be, to fall within the remit of accounting, major revision is required on what is taught and researched within accounting education and training institutions, its underlying theorisation, what is measured and what organisations are held accountable for, and how it this is regulated and audited.

Time, space and personal expertise limit my capacity to trace the relation of accounting to each SDG. Instead discussion is limited to four interlinked areas, climate change and sustainability, giving civil society voice and influence, decent work, and global partnership, especially with poor countries. Important areas not covered include how more conventional company accounts might detail their record of innovation, and issues of concerning the legal personality, reporting, and tax jurisdictions of multinational corporations, whose income can dwarf that of many nation states.

2.3 Climate change and sustainability

A lucid statement on climate change is contained in Pope Francis's encyclical, *Laudato Si*, extracts of which are below.

Never have we so hurt and mistreated our common home as we have in the last two hundred years. (53)⁶ Doomsday predictions can no longer be met with irony or disdain. We may well be leaving to coming generations debris, desolation and filth. The pace of consumption, waste and environmental change has so stretched the planet's capacity that our contemporary lifestyle, unsustainable as it is, can only precipitate catastrophes, such as those which even now periodically occur in different areas of the world. (161)

There is an urgent need to develop policies so that, in the next few years, the emission of carbon dioxide and other highly polluting gases can be drastically reduced, for example, substituting for fossil fuels and developing sources of renewable energy. (26) International negotiations cannot make significant progress due to positions taken by countries which place their national interests above the global common good. Those who will have to suffer the consequences of what we are trying to hide will not forget this failure of conscience and responsibility.

Reducing greenhouse gases requires honesty, courage and responsibility, above all on the part of those countries which are more powerful and pollute the most. (169)

We are not faced with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather one complex crisis which is both social and environmental. Strategies for a solution demand an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the underprivileged, and at the same time protecting nature. (139)

The principle of the maximization of profits, frequently isolated from other considerations, reflects a misunderstanding of the very nature of the economy.

The encyclical is relevant to all, not least academics and the accounting profession worldwide. Issues that arise regarding climate change, discussed at various junctures below, are the rate and effect of climate change, policies to mitigate this, the responsibilities of rich countries and leaders, its interconnection with policies to reduce poverty, and theory and ideology.

The rate and effect of climate change and policies to mitigate this must be seen in the context of the 2015 Paris Climate Agreement to keep temperature increases in this century to at least below 2 degrees Celsius. This essay cannot fully review social and environmental research that has grown exponentially since the 1970s. An excellent source for those wanting more details is the Centre for Social & Environmental Accounting Research website <https://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/csear/>. Instead I wish to mention just one article, Rob Gray and Markus Milne (forthcoming), two longstanding pioneers and major researchers in the area. They argue that only a fundamental re-appraisal of (western) humanity's current taken-

⁶ The numbers refer to sections in the encyclical.

for-granted narratives offers any hope for biodiversity and sustainability; humankind is the root cause of most (if not all) current species extinctions; and possibly it may eventually produce its own extinction, which may be beneficial for the planet. This is not, in my view, alarmist but alarming and credible. Putting faith in the Paris Agreement is erroneous. It is unlikely to mitigate impending environmental disaster. The targets are not being met; they contain implausible assumptions, for example on savings accruing from untested or even yet to be invented technologies; monitoring and enforcement is weak; and in the meantime, coal-fired power stations and deforestation continue unabated.

Global warming is primarily caused by rich countries, though its effects will fall particularly hard on developing countries. What can accountants do to redress this? First and foremost, full support must be given to institutions such as the UN Commission on Sustainable Development, the OECD, and the GRI who, *inter alia*, are seeking to develop systems for sustainable accounting and accountability. These need to embrace triple bottom line accounting covering economic,⁷ ecological,⁸ and social⁹ and time issues. Although many companies voluntarily provide sustainability reports, which is welcome, many are accused of 'greenwashing' and confining their analysis to 'business case' scenarios rather than addressing fundamental issues of environmental degradation and sustainability in its broader sense. Accounting for sustainable development is currently voluntary, unregulated, and sometimes devoted more to preserving corporate brand images (Laufer, 2003). Given the urgency of environmental degradation and the slow and partial response by organisations to this problem, there is a persuasive case for making accounting and accountability for sustainability compulsory, with suitable provision for its global regulation and independent audit. This prompts the question of who might do this, given that current training largely leaves accountants unprepared for such tasks, and the rise of policy-makers within the UN and GRI presently establishing sustainable development standards. Will the rise of other institutions establishing measures, systems and standards for SDGs represent a challenge or an opportunity for accounting academics and practitioners? Whatever, standards boards must develop mandatory standards that provide sufficient transparency for meaningful accountability for sustainability.

Academia also has major responsibilities. Sustainability must be central to the curricula, especially concerning systems of monitoring, regulation and enforcement, where we have specific expertise. Also, we must recognise that theories and methods based on short-term financial aims to maximise profits that deplete finite world resources are part of

⁷ These include accountability and transparency, corporate governance, stakeholder value, and economic and financial performance.

⁸ These include energy and water consumption, greenhouse gas emissions, production of hazardous and non-hazardous waste, recycling, and packaging.

⁹ These include community investment, working conditions, human rights and fair trade, public policy, diversity, safety, and anticorruption.

the problem not the solution. Yet they still dominate accounting research and teaching. Finally, sustainability should permeate the organisation of academia. For example, should students where possible attend their local university to cut down on transport and accommodation expenses? Should this plenary be delivered remotely from the UK rather than incurring carbon costs from a long flight? Failure to do so will constitute a 'failure of conscience and responsibility' proclaimed by Pope Francis. Below illustrations of possible accounting reforms are discussed.

2.4 Giving civil society voice and influence

Granting civil society political voice is a SDG (no. 16). The accounting implication is that accessible, transparent budget information is a necessary (but insufficient) means of increasing government accountability. However, major impediments to achieving this lie in the political arena. As Pope Francis claims, many countries 'place their national interests above the global common good' and electorates remain uninformed and/or uncommitted to policies that alter their lifestyles and restrict their immediate material benefits. Rich countries and rich elites are especially prone to resisting changes, especially the redistribution of resources to the poor, integral to SDGs. Recent events in the USA and UK are depressing manifestations of this, especially the manipulation of popular discourses through false information by parties with vested interests. Under such circumstances the moral obligation of academics to pursue and propagate the truth is vital. As Briloff proclaimed, academics and professional accountants have a responsibility to seek truth and justice for all, which transcends other pressures, otherwise we desecrate our covenant with society.

It is often assumed that reporting on SDGs is essentially a technical matter and this will produce the desired results - there is a fixation in much social and environmental accounting literature that disclosure will make everything come right. However, the changes required entail major social and political changes, including redistribution, limits on growth, population control, and new trade policies, which are being and will be resisted. Propagating the need for social and environmental accounting and achieving SDGs has relied extensively on experts and single issue movements, and has neglected how the necessary changes can come about. Also and unfortunately, much accounting teaching and practice is disengaged with political issues and processes. For example, its neglect, not least in allegedly leading journals, of issues such as tax evasion and multinationals' financial reporting for taxation, is worrisome. Failing to engage with politics is a political act as much as doing so. We need more work on accounting that enhances democratic processes, engages a wider range of stakeholders, especially civil society and poor and marginalized groups, and recognizes different beliefs about the nature of the world and its order (see Brown and Dillard (2015; Brown et al., 2017).

For example, the International Business Partnership (IBP) collaborates with civil society worldwide to analyse and influence public budgets to reduce poverty and improve governance. It seeks to make public finance systems more transparent and accountable by making budget processes (how budgets are proposed, debated, implemented, and evaluated) more transparent and open to public input; formulating budget policies (who will pay what

taxes, or how much money will go to specific programs) that effectively address the needs of the poor and marginalized; and creating stronger and better budget rules, regulations, and institutions to resist corruption and mismanagement, and ensure more effective and efficient use of public resources.¹⁰ A typical case involves Samarthan, an Indian non-government organisation (NGO) devoted to promoting good governance that, with IBP support, helped strengthen the implementation and accountability of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme in Madhya Pradesh, which seeks dignified employment for India's rural poor. This was achieved despite facing powerful opposition by vested interests and previous weak oversight, and the need to improve complex and fragile ecosystems (Halloran, 2017). The IBP provides guides and toolkits, and materials for workshops on increasing civil society capacity, and its open budget survey measures indicators of civil society influence and involvement and budget transparency worldwide. Yet we teach and research little of this. Once again academia lags practice. The SDGs promote greater civil society participation, but accounting research has neglected, or failed to embrace developments in this area. For example, when reviewing articles in *Management Accounting Research* (a relatively liberal journal) over its first twenty-five years we only found one that explicitly discussed accounting and democracy (Hopper and Bui, 2017). Similarly, meaningful accountability to employees has almost disappeared from accounting's research agenda.

A notable example of accounting researchers' neglect is civic participation in budgeting, developed in the 1980s by the Brazilian Workers' Party, which believed that electoral success is not an end in itself but a springboard for developing radical, participatory forms of democracy. Their model of participation in budgeting has received extensive attention in development studies and public administration but not accounting. The initial scheme, in Porto Alegre, Brazil, commenced in 1989, and subsequently has spread throughout Brazil and elsewhere, e.g. New York, Reykjavik, Toronto, and within Sri Lanka, Uganda, and India. Participatory budgeting is a democratic and deliberative decision-making process involving citizens, especially those neglected by traditional methods of public engagement, such as poor, non-citizens, and youth residents. It enables them to identify, discuss and prioritize public spending projects, and to allocate parts of municipal or public budgets accordingly. It can bring more equitable public spending, greater government transparency and accountability, and increase public participation, democratic citizenship and learning (Shah, 2007). Normally its basic steps are; community members identify spending priorities and select budget delegates who develop specific spending proposals, with help from experts, e.g. NGOs. Then community members can vote on which proposals to fund, and the city or institution implements the top proposals. Participatory budgeting is in its seventh year in New York City. Last year over 100,000 citizens participated to brainstorm ideas for improving schools, parks, libraries etc., which went on a ballot where everyone can vote, including noncitizens. It is one of largest civic engagement activities in the USA. In Reykjavík – capital of Iceland, from October 2011 anyone can propose an idea for improving the city or allocating its infrastructure budget, anyone can vote for or against it, and the 15 most popular ideas are submitted to the city council. The scheme has been

¹⁰ <https://www.internationalbudget.org>

remarkably successful: 58% of the city's people have taken part, the council has adopted 200 proposals resulting in better amenities and it has brought a resurgence of civic life.

As yet, civil society involvement in accounting, and accountability of organisations to civil society remains an under-researched and neglected area, despite its centrality to global policies.

2.5 Partnership with developing countries

Partnership, especially between rich and poor countries, is a central plank of the SDGs. This should be seen in the context of international treaties such as the The Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness, 2005, and its follow up, the Accra Agenda for Action, 2008, which endeavor to strengthen, deepen and accelerate implementation of the Paris Declaration's targets. Together they seek to improve the quality of aid and its impact on development. The Accra Agenda for Action proposes specific implementation measures, and a monitoring system to hold donors and recipients mutually accountable for their commitments.¹¹ Identified areas for improvement cover: ownership – developing countries should participate more in development policy formulation; stronger leadership on aid co-ordination and more use of local systems for aid delivery; inclusive partnerships - all partners - including donors in developing countries and elsewhere, foundations, non-governmental organisations and civil society - should participate fully; delivering results - aid focused on real and measurable impacts on development; and capacity development - helping countries to manage their own future.

Such aims represent opportunities and pressing needs for accounting academia to address, particularly regarding partnership, especially between rich and poor countries. However, regrettably this has not invariably been forthcoming with respect to accounting, as our review of the impact of globalisation upon accounting in developing countries revealed (Hopper et al., 2017). For example, the representation and needs of developing countries have been neglected by international accounting standard setting bodies; there is a catalogue of failed implementation of expensive accounting systems imported from the West by Western consultants with only slight local involvement; and sometimes global expansion policies of Western professional associations in completion rather than partnership with indigenous professional associations, have hindered the development of the latter.

The neglect extends to academia. For example, few articles on accounting in developing countries, especially ones focussing on sustainable development rather than accounting for multi-national companies, have been published in our so-called leading 'international' journals. To what extent do our rating systems for journals stymie such research and unconsciously reproduce institutionalised bias towards richer countries and their firms? Do intellectual property rights associated with publications prohibit knowledge transfer from

¹¹ Their fundamental principles cover: ownership - developing countries should set their strategies for poverty reduction, improving their institutions and tackling corruption; alignment - donor countries should support these objectives and use local systems; harmonisation: donor countries coordinate, simplify procedures and share information to avoid duplication; results - developing countries and donors should shift their focus to development results and monitor progress; and mutual accountability - donors and partners are accountable for development results.

rich to poor countries and do we as academics take steps to mitigate this? Whilst often our students come from developing countries, often paying premium fees, do we cover accounting needs in their home countries and do we provide scholarships for them out of our rich pickings? Have we been assiduous in helping increase their capacity and expertise of accounting tailored to the needs and problems of developing countries? For example, our syllabuses, teaching and research concentrate on the private sector and neglect government accounting, which is vital for developing countries given the state's greater involvement in development matters. In short, accounting academe in rich countries, with honourable exceptions, has failed to exhibit the spirit of partnership contained in the Paris Declaration.

2.6 Decent work

The SDG goal of partnership extends to labour and SDG (8) of providing decent work. Since the global financial and economic crisis of 2008, there has been increased urgency among international policy-makers to deliver better quality jobs along with social protection and respect for rights at work, to achieve sustainable, inclusive economic growth, and eliminate poverty. Again, accounting academia often lags practice. The International Labour Organisation's Decent Work Agenda embraces poverty reduction and fair wages, job creation, employee rights at work, social protection and social dialogue, and gender equality,¹² which have been integrated into the SDGs, GRIs and many triple bottom line accounting reports.

Productive employment and decent work are key elements to achieving a fair globalization and poverty reduction. This has encouraged some governments to introduce decent work accounting. For example, Denmark has developed indicators for comparative analysis measuring labour force participation, employment ratios, involuntary part-time employment, fixed term employment percentages, unemployment, activity rates, educational and vocational training, working hours, the level and growth of wages, and wage and income distribution. There has been a growth of gender responsive budgeting. For example, some governments have incorporated aspects covering gender issues. The Iceland Parliament rejected provisions in income tax system that favour men, Mexico has developed an annex tracing the allocation of funds aimed at gender equality and women's empowerment, in Austria outcome objectives in budgets must address gender issues, Canada has a gender impact assessment framework, and Belgium has integrated gender considerations into budgets and its Parliament must discuss them.

The right to association and the need to involve unions is critical. For example, returning to the Rana Plaza tragedy in Bangladesh, two competing governance initiatives from Western firms to improve workplace safety in their supply chain, notably the Bangladesh ready-made garment sector emerged: The 'Accord for Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh' (Accord) and the 'Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety' (Alliance) (Donaghey and Reinecke, 2018). The Accord adopted pluralist Industrial Democracy principles, resulting in unions, labour, NGOs and firms in the supply chain being involved in the scheme with legal powers to

¹² The International Labour Organisation's indicators measure: employment opportunities; adequate earnings and productive work; decent working time; combining work, family and personal life; work that should be abolished; stability and security of work; equal opportunity and treatment in employment; a safe work environment; social security; social dialogue with employers' and workers' representation.

hold firms accountable. In contrast, the Alliance, set up largely by American firms with a record of anti-trade unionism, but also concerned with threats to their brand image, followed a traditional unitary corporate social reporting approach with little involvement of labour in its design or enforcement, and was not legally binding. Whilst both schemes may have produced positive results and fostered effective problem-solving in the short run, the Accord scheme 'is necessary to build governance capacities involving workers in the long run, (ibid, p. 14) and is more consistent with the aims of partnership in SDG goals.

Accounting research has been unhealthily obsessed with capital market needs to the exclusion of those of labour and labour markets. There is a case for incorporating and/or adapting decent work issues into organizational reporting. If governments can do this then why not corporations? Why do we not pursue a more balanced approach covering all stakeholders? Why do we not promote industrial democracy?

3 Conclusions

The above topics chosen for discussion are illustrative not exhaustive. However, to return to the thoughts that influenced my choice of topics detailed in the prologue, we need to focus more on global issues, policies and institutions. In so doing, we need to incorporate notions of balance, interdependency between people, nations, and their impact on the precarious health of the planet. This requires greater consideration of inclusivity, especially with respect to the poor and marginalised, labour, and civil society, which in turn requires greater scrutiny of how accounting information and reporting processes can promote dialogue and democracy. Lastly, and most importantly, there is the moral issue in our role as academics and professional accountants. A depressing trend I have encountered is the response by many, often younger academics, that they would love to do such work, but it may not get published in outlets rated highly in research journals that deans insist they should publish in. This is tied to the commercialisation and commodification of universities, increasingly reproduced in many accounting degrees (Hopper, 2013, 2016). However, as Pope Francis's encyclical makes clear, this raises moral issues for individuals and organisations, including universities and academics, as my printer friend pithily made clear to me. As Albert Einstein, speaking as a union member, stated, 'by academic freedom I understand the right to search for truth and to publish and teach what one holds to be true'.

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