# Nurturing Alternative Futures

## Living with Diversity in a More-than-Human World

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## 2

## Demystifying the Promise of Sustainability through the China-Pakistan Donkey Trade

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# 2 Demystifying the Promise of Sustainability through the China-Pakistan Donkey Trade

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In May 2022, hundred scholars from 17 countries wrote to the United Nations (UN) urging it to rethink its model of sustainability, which is currently being implemented via the 2015–30 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). They highlighted that SDGs have a strong allegiance to global capitalism, have failed to achieve food security and equality, and have worsened environmental, social, and economic conditions. Technofixes, they suggested, are "merely a convenient myth" and there is an emergent need to rethink the "systemic problem" within the global sustainability mechanism, which mostly recommends continual economic expansion rather than equitable degrowth (IFLAS 2022).

In this chapter, I criticize the *promise* of sustainability as an overarching idea that ensures a secure future and wellbeing for all. I suggest that we need to reconsider and reinterpret sustainability as a theoretical category and policy tool, with a focus on relationality. This call is inspired by the "multispecies turn" and the "ontological turn" in the social sciences and humanities, which encourage us to consider not only our entanglements with other living selves, including domestic companions (Govindrajan 2018), industrial animals (Blanchette 2020), wild beasts (Hussain 2019; Mathur 2021), forests and plants (Kohn 2013; Chao 2022), fungi (Tsing 2015), spirits (Nadasdy 2007; Taneja 2018), and viruses (Keck 2020; Doron 2021), but ask us to understand and study contact zones where "becoming is always becoming with" (Haraway 2008, 244). As we become-*with* Others, these contact zones emerge as a space of encounter to imagine our knotted bonds and entangled relatedness with more-than-human life forms that encapsulate our material, spiritual, and emotional worlds. However, as I show, despite the emergence of sustainability as an ethical ideal for ensuring a stable future and wellbeing for all, the focus on sustaining, persevering, and continuing contact zones, transformative encounters, or multispecies relatedness has been largely ignored. I argue that such negation has roots in a generalized construction of sustainability that, particularly after the mid-2010s, has emerged as a global development model to achieve social, economic, and environmental benefits through a focus on infrastructural development while selectively neglecting the existence of multispecies connectedness. This anthropocentric

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construction of sustainability may promise the continuation of life, but it ignores affective entanglements between humans and more-than-human beings through contact zones.

My companions in this chapter are donkeys—animals whose economic viability, environmental value, strategic significance, and social status have changed greatly in the last few centuries. In the Global North, donkeys as beasts of burden and animals who supported the colonial settler project (Celermajer and Wallach 2019), lost their usefulness with the invention and adaptation of the internal combustion engine. In the Global South, however, donkeys remain close companions of humans and shape the lives and livelihoods of millions of people on a daily basis. With the recent surge in demand from China for donkey hide to prepare the traditional Chinese medicine *ejiao*, the donkey in most developing countries is not only in danger of losing their contact zone with human companions but also faces a looming existential threat (Donkey Sanctuary 2017). In Pakistan, for example, donkey farms are being developed in three cities—Mansehra, Dera Ismail Khan, and Okara—to collect, cull, and transport the skins of thousands of donkeys to China through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a mega infrastructural project that forms part of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). As larger numbers of donkeys travel to China from Pakistan, the price of donkeys in Pakistan not only increases, the connectedness that humans and donkeys have created over centuries is also unsettled. In such a situation, how can sustainability emerge as an inclusive concept to ensure a safe future and well-being for humans, donkeys, and the human–donkey relationship?

In precarious times, when more-than-human worlds are intertwined, sustainability as a policy concept and a practice apparatus must promise to preserve, maintain, and continue "assemblages" and "transformative encounters" (Tsing 2015). As a relational and ethical concept, and as a developmental tool, sustainability can help preserve multispecies encounters and reinforce how wellbeing is achieved—not only at the point of living but also at the point of dying with the critters we value most (Rose 2011; Van Dooren 2019). Building on such promises and expectations, I explore the conceptual underpinning of the term "sustainability" and examine how an entwinement between SDGs and the BRI has substantially reshaped the core pillars of this concept. I show how the donkey skin trade via the CPEC challenges the conceptual construction of sustainability. This guides me towards a call for a focus on a multispecies relational approach, a reinterpretation that could help reknit and become-with Others in the face of an uncertain future.

## Sustainability and the SDGs–BRI Synergy

In the 1980s and 1990s, theoretical and empirical debates intensified among social, management, and natural scientists to discover a sustainable solution for the world's existing and future issues (Redclift 2005). These debates challenged human-centred development models that disassociated the ecosystem

from economic prosperity and social wellbeing. Sustainability emerged as an idea that promised an improved world through the conservation of nature and the promotion of culture (Rolston 1994, 18); reconsidered values of human development and their interdependence on ecological security (Clark 1991, 2); and unravelled mismatches of scales amongst human responsibility and natural interactions (Lee 1993, 560). Sustainable development became a policy tool and a model for "green" progress that promised to meet the needs of the present generation without compromising the capability of future generations to accomplish their own particular environmental, economic, and social needs (Barbier 1987, 103; Hawken 1993, 139); aimed to improve the quality of life (The World Conservation Union 1991, 10); promote flourishing human civilizations (Costanza et al. 1991, 8; Gore 1992, 10–15); and guide humans to make prudent use of all resources (Ludwig et al. 1993, 548).

From the outset, sustainable development as a paradigm faced significant resistance from other existing logics: "the pro-growth approach," which focuses on expanding profitability by exploiting natural resources, maintaining human superiority by objectifying nature, and seeking smooth exponential growth (see Bailey 1993; Ray 1993); and "the deep ecology approach," which urges ontological integration with life-giving nature, conservation ethics, and non-interference with fragile natural systems (see Devall and Sessions 1985; Daly 1992; Swimme and Berry 1992). Backed by the UN, sustainable development challenged these contrasting logics, suggesting a middle path that aimed at stewardship of nature, conservation, and managing resources according to scientific principles to ensure humanity's survival and welfare in a rapidly changing world. In reconsidering the balance between culture and nature, human and animal, morality and ethics, embracing and protecting, and pastoral care and responsibility, sustainable development nonetheless advocated preserving and maintaining human supremacy.

The SDGs were devised by a formal UN working group in 2013 with the aim of achieving sustainable development. However, the SDGs soon faced multiple challenges; they were "fuzzy, ambitious, often unimplementable and contradictory" (Sultana 2018, 187), and needed external support. Conflicts within multiple SDGs also emerged (see, for example, Zhang et al. 2019, 483), while alternative conceptual and theoretical frameworks, such as degrowth, appeared to question the logic of economic growth championed by the SDGs (Banerjee 2003; Robra and Heikkurinen 2019).

The financial potential of China's BRI, which Chinese President Xi Jinping unveiled on a visit to several Southeast and Central Asian countries in 2013, promised an opportunity for the SDGs to realize most of their sustainability targets. On 26 April 2019, at the opening of the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation in Beijing, the UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres acknowledged that the world is only "halfway towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals by the target date of 2030"; the major reason he gave for this underachievement was a lack of financial resources. Recognizing China "for its central role as a pillar of international

cooperation and multilateralism," he remarked that "the world will benefit from a Belt and Road Initiative that accelerates efforts to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals." He went on to explain how the BRI's five pillars are "intrinsically linked" to the 17 SDGs and that an alignment between the two will ensure "maximum sustainable development dividends" (UN Press Release 2019).

This alignment sharpened as the SDGs and the BRI focused on achieving similar targets: poverty alleviation, better health conditions, economic well-being, education, renewable energy production, and green development (Feng et al. 2019; Hong 2017). Later, the BRI ensured acceleration of the SDGs by providing financial support, mobilizing resources, and developing much-needed infrastructure (Horvath 2016), while the SDGs legitimized the BRI's development agenda by countering geopolitical antagonism (Lewis et al. 2021).[1]

The underlying concept that tethered the SDGs to the BRI was *sustainability*, which itself was transformed through the association of these two projects. For instance, sustainability as an overarching developmental agenda was mostly depicted through its tripartite definition, as "three intersecting circles of society, environment, and economy, with sustainability being placed at the intersection" (Purvis et al. 2019, 681). These three pillars continued to influence almost all discussions on global development, including the17 SDGs that were adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2015 as a 15-year global development agenda. According to the UN, these SDGs sought to integrate and "balance the three dimensions of sustainable development: the economic, social and environmental" (The United Nations 2015, 1). The BRI added "infrastructural development" to these three pillars by focusing on connecting countries through roads, railways, and ports (Figure 2.1).

Among its eight priority areas for development, the BRI's investment in infrastructure remains paramount. In many developing countries where the BRI is operational, poor infrastructure has been described as the obvious reason for underdevelopment. China, with its recent history of achieving the highest index of infrastructure development, is well placed to engage in bilateral infrastructural cooperation to achieve sustainable development. The BRI continues to fund projects in power and energy infrastructure, transportation, telecommunications and IT networks, climate change, and health and education (Lewis et al. 2021, 59). The underlying idea is that by improving infrastructure, "quality of life" can be enhanced and general wellbeing can be achieved (Xiao et al. 2018, 12).[2] Infrastructural investment now promises a sustainable future (Xiao et al. 2018; Yin 2019), promoting regional connectivity, integration, and sustainable growth that influences the targets of almost all SDGs (Bhattacharya et al. 2015; Casier 2015).

However, most BRI infrastructural development projects have been criticized for being unsustainable. For example, studies examining the debt vulnerability index of BRI recipient countries demonstrate that more than 50 percent of these countries are likely to be burdened by debt following

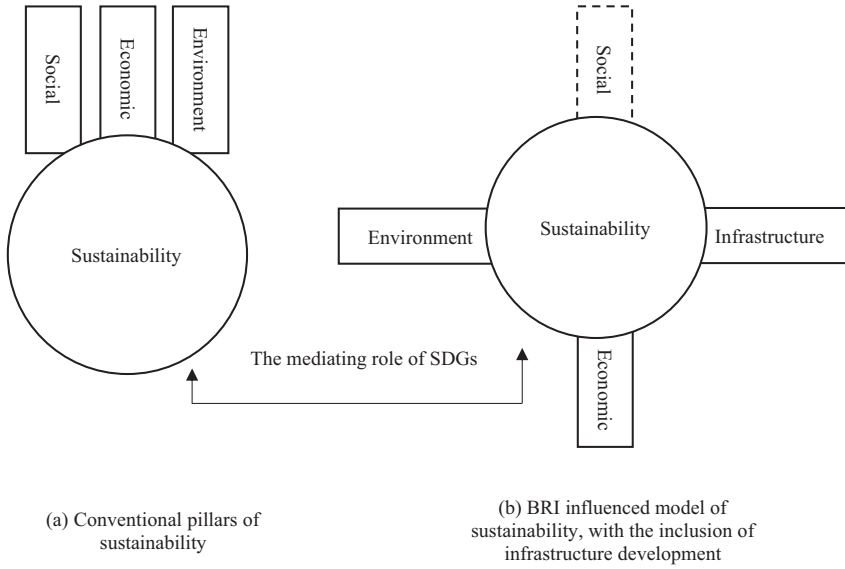


*Figure 2.1* The synergy between the SDGs and the BRI.

completion of proposed infrastructure projects (Bandiera and Tsiropoulos 2020). Debt crises worsen when the economies of many developing countries seek support from International Monetary Fund bailout packages. Moreover, infrastructural development through international partnerships is sometimes conceived of as a geopolitical and geoeconomic threat. For example, Chinese infrastructural initiatives in the Indian Ocean have been interpreted as a geopositional balancing strategy to "encircle" China's major regional rival, India, for strategic advantages (Garlick 2018; Hussain 2019; Sharma 2019). This has led to the formation of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (or the Quad) by the United States, Australia, Japan, and India, which considers the BRI as a geo-political threat rather than a sustainable development scheme (Gale and Shearer 2018). In 2017, India and Japan unveiled plans for an Asia-Africa Growth Corridor, a "calculated effort" to counterbalance the BRI's powerful, and geopolitically instrumental presence in Africa and the Indian Ocean (Panda 2017, 1-11). And, the trilateral security partnership, announced in September 2021, between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States (Aukus) to develop nuclear-powered submarines for Australia, has been described as a multi-national strategy to counter geo-political challenges posed by BRI-related infrastructural development.

The BRI's emphasis on infrastructure development could be equally unsustainable, particularly when the project emphasizes some aspects of sustainability and overlooks others. For example, although most of the BRI's major infrastructure projects promise to bring economic development and some environmental benefits (such as green energy production), they largely ignore

the social component. In other words, instead of approaching development from the bottom-up, the infrastructural approach supports development from the top-down, often ignoring grounded relationalities. In such a situation, when infrastructure development emerges as potentially unsustainable, how can sustainability be achieved?

Using the donkey skin trade between Pakistan and China through the CPEC as a case study, I show how the emphasis on infrastructure remains in tension with relationality aspect of sustainability, and how a general understanding of sustainability is narrowed by its focus on infrastructural progress. This enables me to argue that sustainability as a concept should involve preserving, maintaining, and continuing knots of relatedness that structure worlds of humans and more-than-human Others.

## The CPEC and the Donkey Skin Trade

Strategically located, Pakistan is an emerging partner in China's ambitious BRI and, in Chinese President Xi Jinping's words, an "Iron Brother" who will strengthen China's political and strategic positioning not only in South Asia but in the Middle East (Fels 2017). Through the CPEC, a $62 billion project that was launched in 2015 as part of China's BRI, the two "all-weather friends" envision economic cooperation and strengthening their political and strategic relationship (Khan et al. 2020). The CPEC aims to revitalize the earlier Silk Road and serve as a strategic platform to connect billions of people in South Asia, the Middle East, Central Asia, and Africa. In doing so, it promises to bring economic development through the creation of thousands of jobs for Pakistani people and ensure sustainability through green development and renewable energy projects. Largely, the project's economic and environmental progress is measured through its promise of rapid infrastructural development. However, the impact of this massive infrastructural economic corridor on Pakistan's society, culture, and people remains uncertain. How will the CPEC impact the social fabric of Pakistani society? How will it bring social well-being to marginalized segments? And how will it affect rural people's long-standing tradition of developing personalized relationships with other-than-human communities? The questions, the latter in particular, are often not addressed in the CPEC's policy documents or within the larger narrative of BRI, the SDGs, or in accepted definitions of sustainability.

To tackle such questions and infer wider theoretical implications, I critically assess the case of the human–donkey relationship in rural Pakistan, its historical and social significances, and its key role in assessing the social impacts of the CPEC. The donkey, as it was in the old Silk Road, has become an important partner in the new Silk Road. Archaeological records dating back 4,000 years suggest that the donkey's impressive stamina and low-water needs meant that it became an important factor in the trade between

Indus Valley Civilization and Mesopotamia (Ratnagar 2004, 237). Donkeys traversed the hilly terrains of the Silk Road and assisted merchants from China, Central Asia, Afghanistan, and Antioch in Southeastern Turkey to trade silk as well as musk, pepper, camphor, brass, turmeric, copper, and medicines (Goesch and Stearns 2007: 68). In the 7th century, merchants from Sogdia (modern-day Uzbekistan/Tajikistan), who worked as middlemen between China and lands to its west, relied heavily on donkeys in their trading business (Skaff 2003, 510–12). Although the camel famously carried greater loads and were in Chinese historical art, donkeys and mules were the major beasts of burden as they sometimes travelled more than 2,500 kilometres carrying goods and other heavy loads (Mitchell 2018, 180; see also Hansen 2012, 79). During the Tang dynasty, when Silk Road commerce was in its golden age, the demand for donkeys as a means of transport and trade increased significantly in China as well as in other parts of Central Asia and South Asia (Han et al. 2014).

Over the last 200 years, donkeys as animals of trade significantly lost their importance in South Asia, and during the colonial period, they were largely used as draft animals. After Partition in 1947, the donkey population steadily grew and the animal became invaluable work companions for rural people belonging to lower caste and class groups, helping them to carry fresh water for household consumption and fodder for livestock. In the Baluchistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and Sindh provinces, donkeys are regularly used by daily wage labourers to facilitate the mining of coal, copper, and minerals, and in the northern areas of Gilgit-Baltistan, they continue to serve as trusted travel companions on harsh hilly terrain. In urban centres of Punjab and Sindh, such as Karachi, Lahore, and Rawalpindi, donkeys are employed by waste workers, particularly, tribal immigrants and marginalized groups, to dispose of thousands of tons of waste every day (Shah et al. 2019). Through these and many other ways, donkeys continue to be indispensable in the lives and livelihoods of people belonging to the economically impoverished classes in Pakistan.

In the new Silk Road, however, donkeys are no longer *animals of trade carrying commodities*; instead, they are *animals being traded as a commodity*. Through the CPEC, the new Silk Road's key project, Pakistan is exporting about 80,000 donkeys via "The Khyber Pakhtunkhwa-China Sustainable Donkey Development Program" and many more through a recently developed donkey breeding farm in Okara, Punjab. In 2014, Pakistan exported almost 60,000 donkey hides to China, and the figure reached approximately 130,000 in 2015 (Rana 2015). Anticipating that the disappearance of donkeys could result in a considerable increase in the animal's price in Pakistan and could affect the lives of the lower classes who rely on donkeys to fetch firewood, bring freshwater, and carry fodder for cattle, the then government of Pakistan decided to impose a temporary ban on donkey export. This ban, however, was lifted in 2019 (Tariq 2019).

The reason for the importation of donkeys into China lies in the gelatine that is extracted from the animal's hide to develop a traditional Chinese medicine known as *ejiao*—a medicine that is believed to cure low immunity, ageing, and impotence (Köhle 2018). *Ejiao* has now become a desirable commodity for the country's burgeoning middle class (Bennett and Pfuderer 2020), and its development has caused a significant decline in the Chinese donkey population which, according to estimates, fell from 11 million in 1990 to 3 million in 2017 (Donkey Sanctuary 2017). After an initial ban imposed by Pakistan in September 2015, China sourced donkey hides from Africa (Uganda, Tanzania, Botswana, Niger, Burkina Faso, Mali, Senegal, Nigeria, and Kenya), South America (Brazil), and Central Asia (Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan). As *ejiao* production requires about 4–10 million donkeys per year, this led to a rapid worldwide decline in the donkey population (Binda 2019; Lesté-Lasserre 2019), leading many countries to impose a donkey trade embargo with China. Moreover, many non-government organizations have declared *ejiao* an existential threat to the animal. By supplicating empirical evidence from some donkey-exporting countries, they show how the disappearance of donkeys seriously impacts the lives and livelihoods of the poorest (Under the Skin 2019).

Notwithstanding, the Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa governments in Pakistan have recently reinstated plans to export thousands of donkeys to China, Pakistan's geo-political and geo-economic partner, through the CPEC (Ansari 2021). To ensure "sustainability," the state has proposed that only donkeys bred in farms in Okara, Dera Ismail Khan, and Mansehra will be exported. However, minimal transparency, a weak corruption management system, and low accountability suggest that once the trade commences, donkeys from all over Pakistan will travel to local abattoirs to have their skin transported (Tariq 2019).

Even if we accept the state's narrative, farming 80,000 donkeys over three years is a mammoth task. In a hypothetical scenario where barriers to infrastructure, trading routes, animal welfare, and cultural and governance issues are removed, a model developed by Bennett and Pfuderer (2020) suggests that, millions of donkeys would be required for 50 years to sustainably produce a few hundred-thousand donkey hides. Problems such as a long gestation period (a foal is born every 17 months), two years required for the foal to mature and have its skin ready for *ejiao* production, and mortality through disease are some of the issues that strongly question the "sustainability" of donkey farming. Thus, donkey farming in Pakistan will most likely utilize the existing donkey population, which is mostly kept by marginalized segments of society.

Donkeys and people from the poorer classes in Pakistan have a contact zone that involves multispecies sociality based on companionship and affective labour. For people like Qasim and Naveed whom I met during a field trip in rural South Punjab in 2014–15, donkeys are persons and able to communicate their needs and demands, and generate a multitude of feelings. Earning about USD 2.50 per day, Qasim mostly used his donkey to transport goods,

including ice blocks, burnt bricks, and sacks of fertilizer or fodder to and from town. Naveed, in addition to using his donkey for various economic reasons, also used the donkey cart as a means of family transportation—to drop his young son at school, fetch household items, or even visit the medical clinic in a nearby town. His wife would also use the donkey cart to wash clothes at a nearby tube well and fetch fodder for cattle. Both Qasim and Naveed told me that their companion donkeys were intelligent animals who even knew how to find their way home: "returning home on wintery nights, I would clad a blanket and sleep on the cart and my donkey would bring me home, safe and sound," Naveed said. The relationship of trust and labour was mutual; in return for their labour, Qasim and Naveed affectionately cared for their donkeys, bathed them in summer, took them to the local veterinarian when they were sick, and regularly cleaned their hooves. Despite the entrenched poverty of their keepers, the animals had a good diet (Figures 2.2 and 2.3).

The state narrative in Pakistan is that the CPEC is a sustainable way to reduce poverty and improve the livelihoods of the country's lower classes. However, as the above discussion suggests, the CPEC can also have adverse effects. Keeping donkeys, affectionately petting them or using the donkey cart for livelihood activities is omnipresent among poorer people in Pakistani townscapes. The skin trade, however, results in a substantial increase in the price of donkeys, and for many small donkey keepers like Qasim and Naveed, there is an added challenge to replace their companion animal. The short-term profit that the provincial governments are able to earn through this trade transforms into a long-term loss for marginalized communities.

For many poor donkey keepers residing in all four provinces of Pakistan, the donkey is an extremely valuable companion who supports their livelihood,

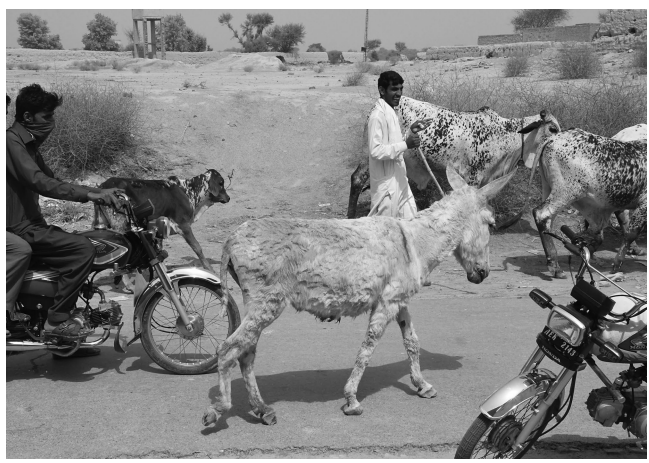

*Figure 2.2* Donkeys support herders by not only protecting the cattle from feral dogs but also develop an intimate bond with cows and buffalos

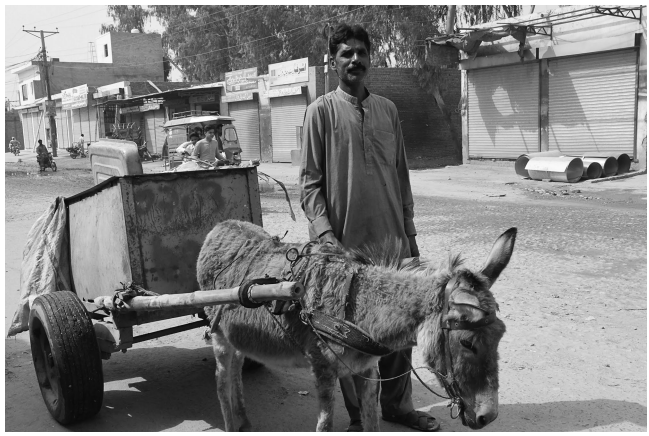

*Figure 2.3* Donkeys working as garbage collectors to keep the city clean

transports their goods, serves as a co-worker in mines and forests, and assists as a trusted ride on hilly terrain where other means of transport are inefficient. As knotted companionship between donkeys and people develops more-than-human emotional communities (Webb et al. 2020), they are tied through fundamental assumptions, values, goals, and accepted modes of expression, to explore inter-species dependency. Inter-species dependency develops through contact zones, which Donna Haraway describes as a type of meaningful entanglement that forms assemblages between species "outside their comfort zones" (2008, 217). Contact zones, she suggests, are mutual processes that "change the subject—all the subjects—in surprising ways" (2008, 219). Such contact zones are also evident in Anna Tsing's inspiring ethnography where mushrooms, humans, trees, and rocks all collectively emerge through encounters and flourish. "We are contaminated by our encounters; they change who we are," Tsing (2015, 27) suggests, showing that transformative encounters mostly lead to the emergence of mutual worlds. The mutual worlds of Pakistani donkeys and their keepers are also the product of these encounters, contaminated through contact zones, leading them to explore the possibilities of shared relatedness. As these encounters shape their understanding of being in a relationship with more-than-human Others, they strive to maintain and continue these relationships amidst the workings of larger infrastructural projects like the CPEC. The sustainability of contact zones for these poor donkey keepers holds higher meaning, and unfortunately, these meaningful assemblages are unintelligible for development practitioners pursuing sustainability through the rapid completion of infrastructural projects.

## Conclusion: A Prospect for Relational Sustainability

Since the mid-2010s, the synergy between the SDGs and the BRI has allowed the latter to propose "infrastructure development" as the fourth pillar of

sustainability. In this chapter, I suggest that instead of measuring sustainability through the completion of infrastructural projects, we must utilize non-traditional parameters, such as the value of a given project towards the maintenance of knots of relatedness between human and more-than-human communities. Building on the case of the donkey skin trade through the CPEC, I critically evaluate the conceptual construction of sustainability and call for a focus on sustainability's relational and ethical possibilities. When donkeys move from Pakistan to China, the cultural meaning of work and (co-)worker is altered, forcing many disadvantaged donkey keepers like Qasim and Naveed to not only find alternative forms of livelihood but also to witness a vanishing relationship that once was meaningful. As the emerging demand for *ejiao* changes the role of donkeys from a valuable resource for poor families to an exploitable commodity in a globalized world, we end up witnessing not only the looming possibility of yet another species extinction in the Anthropocene (Rose, van Dooren, Chrulew 2017) but a rupture of contact zones. While the production of *ejiao* may appear to be the main cause of the rupture of the human–donkey relationship, I contend that it is in fact the fraught conceptualization of sustainability, which disregards any possibility of preserving, sustaining, and continuing multispecies relationalities.[3]

In this chapter, donkeys help me argue that sustainability as a concept, from its development in the 1980s and 1990s to its adaptation as a global developmental agenda in the mid-2010s, misses the key emphasis on preserving, appreciating, and sustaining the contact zones, affective entanglements, transformative encounters, and intimate relatedness between beings, species, and living selves. This point coincides with the recently emerging relational sustainability approach which, as an ontological paradigm, seeks to understand how beings are primarily constituted into relationships of different kinds (West et al. 2020). Developing a synthesis of many philosophies and critical scholarship from in science and technology, the environmental humanities, and the posthumanities, the relational sustainability approach suggests finding an ontological, epistemological, and ethical ground that provides a mechanism for a relational understanding of sustainability (Walsh et al. 2021). However, the meaning of "relationality" as an overarching concept in conjunction with sustainability remains unclear.

Instead of indulging in the debate around agency as relational or consciously intentional, I adopt what Haraway (2016) calls "speculative fabulation," (SF) as a mode of attention to understand how a generalization of broader concepts, such as sustainability, lead us to stay blind to the significance of encounters and contact zones that relationships often produce. Speculative fabulation (SF), Haraway (2016) suggests, needs science facts (SF) to untangle knots of string figures (SF), to understand how making kin is a process of making oddkin, of living and dying with one another in troubled times. Artist Karin Bolender in her *The Unnaming of Aliass* (2020), carefully shows how weaving speculative fabulation with science facts unravels entangled stories. On the road with her donkey companion, Bolender pursues

complex relationalities by prioritizing other-than-human "ways of knowing and narrating, thereby vanquishing prospects for more inclusive worldings in the stories we make and pass on" (2020, 37). Stories of marginalized donkeys and their poor-human keepers in Pakistan require them to become-with, live and die, and flourish, and their string figures are not only entwined through fabulations but also facts (Van Dooren 2014). However, the very concept of sustainability, which should protect the intertwined relationship between these oddkin, this game of string figures that form myriad contact zones, is breaking apart those connections that matter. To stay with the trouble in serious multispecies worlds, Haraway argues, "It matters what matters we use to think other matters with; it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with; it matters what knots knot knots, …what ties tie ties" (2016, 12). These are the knots, ties, or encounters and contact zones that matter for donkeys and humans, and it matters how these knots form, shape, and influence other knots, stories, ties, lifeworlds, and ways of being with others.

In the Anthropocene, when more-than-human worlds are conjoined in politically and ethically complex ways, seeking collaborative survival through assemblages is crucial for multispecies flourishing (Fijn and Kavesh 2021, 3). These assemblages and kinship should not be explored in abstract forms but through "embodied and impassioned rhetorical styles" (Mathur 2021, 11), by using empirical evidence to support and lead our analysis, and by acknowledging grounded realities in the pursuit of justice. Justice is not anthropocentric as human beings are not isolated actors or unattached to the more-than-human world. We need a multispecies justice that is ontologically relational and "can recognise the multiplicity of different types of being, in their own terms and their involvement in thick relational webs" (Celermajer et al. 2021, 120; see also Chao et al. 2022). The relational webs between humans and donkeys in the context of Pakistan demand justice that promises the preservation and continuity of entangled and embodied contact zones.

Sustainability, as an overarching idea for global development, can be inclusive by fostering collective futures in the Anthropocene and by paying serious attention to transformative encounters that make us who we are in relation *to* and *with* others. This means that beyond the act of *killing*, the moods and modes of making beings *killable* remain crucial (Singh and Dave 2015, 233–36). To exist in a multispecies world sustainably, we can start by preserving the entangled knots of relatedness among present generations and develop a mechanism to sustain it for future generations to engage in meaningful ways with Others. This leads to an interpretation of sustainability that seeks not only to improve the quality of life but focuses on improving the quality of relatedness between different beings by developing frameworks that are inclusive and heterogeneous in structure. Therefore, in these precarious times, despite the fear of global climatic destruction, we can reknit and become-with Others to face our uncertain future, and make and experience stories of life and death together.

## Notes

1 In April 2016, China signed an agreement with the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific to promote BRI's interconnectivity. By November 2016, the UN General Assembly recognized China's BRI as part of its resolution. In 2020, the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs initiated a multi-country project "Jointly Building Belt and Road towards SDGs."
2 The Asian Development Bank considers infrastructure to be a major pillar of sustainable growth, and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (established by China) has prioritized investment for sustainable infrastructure.
3 The case of feral donkeys in Australia offers a good comparison, where the world's finest donkey breeds were once imported by the colonial settlers to "terraform the land" through agriculture and mining (Celermajer and Wallach 2019, 230). However, in the first half of the 20th century, most were allowed to go feral in the wild. In the 1970s, the Australian Government started to aerially "cull hunt" thousands of donkeys to ensure environmental sustainability. Such eradication programs were also supported through an ill-perceived idea that as a non-native species, their killing did not add to the suffering of Indigenous communities (Rose 2008; Vaarzon-Morel 2021). Like Pakistan, Australia in the recent past has made plans to send their donkeys to China for the production of *ejiao*.

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