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"Undo the status quo" to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals

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The High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) was held July 5-15, 2022 in New York City. Marked by a context of multiple global and interconnected crises, this meeting of the UN's central platform for the follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) at the global level highlighted the delay in achieving the ambition adopted in October 2015 to ["Transform our world"](#). Largely ignored in political and media debates, except for experts and insiders, these discussions are nevertheless a key issue in the conflicting relations between countries of the South and the North, and therefore in global geopolitics.

The 2030 Agenda at the heart of North-South relations

Initiated by a proposal from countries in the South (Colombia, Guatemala), the 2030 Agenda is a complex political object that many countries in the North have had difficulty grasping for their own national policies, but it still has a very strong political legitimacy for many countries in the South, and China is not mistaken when it refers to it systematically. As a conceptually just and systemic framework for thinking about the social and environmental transformation of our societies, it is also a political priority for a majority of countries (which see the Paris Climate Agreement as integrated into the 2030 Agenda, and therefore the SDGs as the major framework). Its complexity and the difficulties encountered in its operationalization have, however, pushed it to the background for many European (except for development aid) and North American policymakers.

It would be very risky for the 2030 Agenda to disappear from the radar, and for at least two major reasons: (1) in terms of substance, it is essential to achieve the SDGs together, as they embody the structural transformation of our societies that is indispensable in social and environmental matters; (2) in terms of political risk, the 2030 Agenda and its financial counterpart, the Addis Ababa Agenda for Action, constituted one of the elements of the deal made by the countries of the South in order to take part in the Paris Agreement: the South's growing distrust of the North's financial promises (climate finance and adaptation, biodiversity financing, access to vaccines, etc.) is likely to culminate in the mid-term review of the 2030 Agenda next year, which is the milestone of a high-risk sequence.

2023, a key milestone in the implementation of the SDGs

In September 2023, the Heads of State and Government will be mobilized to take stock of the progress made midway through the SDGs period at the SDGs Summit. With one year to go before this key deadline, the situation is not one of euphoria, on the contrary. The difficulties related to inequalities in access to vaccines, the worsening climate crisis, the food crisis, the setback in development¹ and human rights, the loss of biodiversity and the debt issue have been particularly highlighted by Member States². And while the Addis Ababa Agenda does not contain quantified financial commitments, it serves as a strategy for North-South development cooperation, and the amounts mobilized will necessarily seem too small given the scale of the challenges.

In order for the 2023 Summit not to be a crisis summit, but a useful opportunity to accelerate the implementation of the transformation that the SDGs embody, it is necessary to be much more demanding in the implementation of the commitments made in 2015. Countries and other actors will have to both demonstrate what they have changed in their practices (for example, in terms of development financing anchored in the needs of countries to achieve the SDGs, even if the transformation is far from complete) and show what they are willing to do to considerably accelerate action in the second half of the SDG period.

Mobilization and alignment in favor of the SDGs

Recent published scientific works are very clear: the political impact of the 2030 Agenda has so far been essentially discursive, rarely normative, and far too little transformative³. How many stakeholders, different actors, donors, international organizations and States have really changed their practices and policies since the adoption of the 2030 Agenda? Examples exist, but are still too few. The truly transformative potential of the 2030 Agenda lies in its integrated and indivisible nature, its emphasis on taking a long-term view, its focus on systemic change, and its commitment to improving the lives of the poorest and most marginalized people while achieving sustainable development.

In order to be effective, the achievement of the SDGs requires a general mobilization of all actors, in particular States and financial institutions. The question of financing is indeed central: because the needs are still present (and even increased following the succession of health, economic and war-related crises) and the objectives, but also the

promises of financing, have not been reached, because many countries in the South feel that they are not receiving enough, and because donor countries are looking for ways to mobilize alternative sources of financing to fund the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

The problem is that, as Paula Caballero, the Colombian negotiator behind the SDGs, pointed out at the last HLPF, "we are trapped in a silo mentality that has brought us to where we are today. To remedy this, it is necessary to be much more disruptive and to "undo the status quo". The 2030 Agenda, rather than a distant ideal or aspirational horizon, should thus be seen as an opportunity, a call to transform, to act on the links, synergies and frictions to avoid the blockages that characterize the actions, policies and investments made today. Since this is a transformation agenda, it obviously faces resistance and blocking effects, which we must be able to face.

Now, rather than rhetoric, it is actions that must be aligned with the 2030 Agenda: environmental and socio-economic policies, and financing, in order to foster a fundamental transformation of society and the economy, so as to make a positive contribution to sustainable development and do no harm to the SDGs as a whole.

Despite the delay in achieving the SDGs, the coming year offers opportunities to act and to finally change the paradigm.

The role of the European Union

In line with this, UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres has called for a New Global Deal to rebalance the sharing of power and financial resources and to enable all developing countries to invest in the SDGs⁴. This would include: an operational framework for debt relief and restructuring; reduced borrowing costs for developing countries; and investment in long-term resilience rather than short-term profit.

One of the difficulties encountered by the 2030 Agenda is the lack of a figurehead, a "champion", to embody it and to mobilize all the actors, particularly at the international level. In 2023, the HLPF should be the occasion for the presentation of voluntary reviews by France, the last one dating from 2016⁵, and especially for the first time by the European Union. The latter could fill the missing leadership if it really took hold of the SDGs to make them an important axis of its external action. While "geopolitics is progressively structured around a competition between the United States and China"⁶, Europe, including in a "Team Europe" dynamic⁷, would benefit from mobilizing to make the 2030 Agenda the effective compass of the international community in favor of "a green recovery that leaves no one behind".

The issue here is not to use this deadline to simply remind the international community of what Europe is already doing for the 2030 Agenda by relying on the Green Deal or the Global Gateway⁸. We already know that this is not enough in the face of the challenges⁹, and even less so to involve other regions of the planet, and to assume a global leadership in favor of sustainable development.

Europe can go further, and this requires in particular the implementation of the European Parliament's proposals¹⁰, but also, in terms of financing, a reinforced European mobilization, including in the framework of the G7¹¹ and G20, in favor of profound changes in financial institutions, including European ones, and multilateral development banks, in order to increase the size and scale of operations, a reform of governance based on results and, most likely, a restructuring of the economic model of these institutions so as to better contribute to the realization of the SDGs.

The coming year and the prospect of the 2023 Summit must generate a real dynamic among peers, including among financial institutions, capable of inspiring and mobilizing through concrete examples demonstrating and illustrating how to operationalize alignment with the SDGs.

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- [1 https://www.undp.org/press-releases/multiple-crises-halt-progress-9-out-10-countries-fall-backwards-human-development-undp-report-warns](https://www.undp.org/press-releases/multiple-crises-halt-progress-9-out-10-countries-fall-backwards-human-development-undp-report-warns)
 - [2 https://enb.iisd.org/high-level-political-forum-hlpf-2022-summary#brief-analysis-2022-hlpf](https://enb.iisd.org/high-level-political-forum-hlpf-2022-summary#brief-analysis-2022-hlpf)
 - [3 https://www.nature.com/articles/s41893-022-00909-5](https://www.nature.com/articles/s41893-022-00909-5)
 - [4 https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/speeches/2022-07-13/secretary-generals-remarks-the-opening-of-the-2022-high-level-segment-of-ecosoc-ministerial-segment-of-high-level-political-forum](https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/speeches/2022-07-13/secretary-generals-remarks-the-opening-of-the-2022-high-level-segment-of-ecosoc-ministerial-segment-of-high-level-political-forum)
 - [5 https://hlpf.un.org/countries/france](https://hlpf.un.org/countries/france)
 - [6 https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2022/09/01/discours-du-president-emmanuel-macron-a-loccasion-de-la-conference-des-ambassadrices-et-des-ambassadeurs](https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2022/09/01/discours-du-president-emmanuel-macron-a-loccasion-de-la-conference-des-ambassadrices-et-des-ambassadeurs)
 - 7 The objective of the "Team Europe" approach is to combine the resources of the EU, its Member States and financial institutions, in particular the European Investment Bank and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development.
 - [8 https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/stronger-europe-world/global-gateway_fr](https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/stronger-europe-world/global-gateway_fr)
 - [9 https://ettg.eu/institute/die/mind-the-gap-sketching-the-relevance-of-the-2030-agenda-for-the-green-deal-and-other-key-eu-policies-in-the-context-of-the-covid-19-crisis/](https://ettg.eu/institute/die/mind-the-gap-sketching-the-relevance-of-the-2030-agenda-for-the-green-deal-and-other-key-eu-policies-in-the-context-of-the-covid-19-crisis/)
 - [10 https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2022-0263_FR.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2022-0263_FR.html)
 - [11 https://www.think7.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Issue-Paper_International-Cooperation_Christian-Kastrop_John-McArthur_Sebastien-Treyer-2.pdf](https://www.think7.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Issue-Paper_International-Cooperation_Christian-Kastrop_John-McArthur_Sebastien-Treyer-2.pdf)

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