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2030 Agenda for sustainable development: a rescue plan is needed

Auteur

Damien Barchiche

Director, Sustainable Development Governance programme

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8 years after their adoption and 7 years before their deadline, the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the 2030 Agenda 2030 as a whole are in jeopardy, their implementation considerably slowed down by the superposition, throughout the world, of environmental, economic and geopolitical crises and their impacts on societies. Against this backdrop, the need for structural change, already present in 2015, is even greater today. With just a few weeks to go before the "SDG Summit" to be held at the United Nations in New York, this blog post examines the possible avenues for improvement, both in terms of the organisation of policies and their financing.

An alarming mid-term review

The [UN Secretary-General's report](#) published in May 2023 clearly highlights the deterioration in progress towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly in developing countries, for many targets, such as poverty, food security, ending the malaria epidemic, vaccination coverage and employment. At issue are the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic, climate change and armed conflicts around the world. Compared to 2015, these recent cascading crises, linked to multiple environmental, economic and social factors, each fuelling the intensity of the others, have amplified the challenges to be met in order to achieve the SDGs. Yet taking account of interconnections was the starting point when drawing up the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

The 2023 edition of the [Global Sustainability Report \(GSDR\)](#) attempts to summarise the failures in implementing the SDGs and what can be done to save them, stressing in particular the need for transformational change to put the world on a sustainable path. Particularly in developing countries, the 2030 Agenda faces two related challenges: initiating the necessary transformations and financing them now and over the long term. The GSDR's findings are clear: if nothing is done to reverse the trend, the SDGs will remain out of reach by 2030, or even 2050. Progress would certainly be made in key areas, notably the reduction of extreme poverty and the convergence of global and national incomes, but it would be minimal in terms of malnutrition and governance; and the world would even be regressing in terms of air pollution and its effects on health, the use of water for agricultural purposes, relative poverty rates, food waste, greenhouse gas emissions and biodiversity.

Reinforcing capacities for transformation

The need for urgent, strengthened and coordinated action by all countries and stakeholders is essential to accelerate the implementation of the SDGs. The [summit](#) to be held on September 18-19 at the United Nations in New York is all about putting the necessary transformations back at the heart of discussions and action. In this respect, the GSDR takes up the framework of the six "entry points" developed for the 2019 edition of the report: human well-being and capabilities; sustainable and fair economies; sustainable food systems and healthy nutrition; energy decarbonisation with universal access; urban and peri-urban development; and global environmental commons. It stresses the need to strengthen "transformative capacities" at individual, institutional and network levels, in order to develop strategies, innovate, manage conflicts, identify and overcome obstacles, and cope with crises and risks.

But while transformation is inevitable, its course, direction and speed are not. To be effective, change can and must be steered in positive directions by political determination. This requires a certain radicalism and determination on the part of the players involved. It is also a question of policy coherence, particularly between domestic policies and their impact on the achievement of the SDGs by other countries, which is still far from being effective even though many players (for example, France in its [programming law on inclusive development and the fight against global inequalities](#)) refer to it. In that respect, the 2030 Agenda working group of the French National Council for Development and International Solidarity (CNDIS) recommends that ["the process of policy coherence for sustainable development be integrated throughout the political decision-making cycle, from planning to the evaluation of public policies"](#).

The GSDR authors further propose that UN Member States develop a common framework for transforming the SDGs comprising six elements: (i) national action plans to counter negative trends or stagnation in the implementation of the SDGs; (ii) specific local and sectoral planning to feed into national plans; (iii) initiatives in particular under the [Addis Ababa Action Agenda](#) to increase fiscal space, including tax reforms, debt restructuring and relief, and increased engagement of the international financial institutions in the implementation of the SDGs ; (iv) investment in SDG-related data, scientific tools and policy learning; (v) partnerships to strengthen the science-policy-society interface; and, (vi) measures to improve the accountability of governments and other stakeholders.

The challenge is to ensure coherence and equity, and that progress in human well-being is not achieved at the expense of the climate, biodiversity and ecosystems. The road to sustainability lies in abolishing unsustainable practices, while taking account of the economic and social suffering that this can cause. The GSDR places particular emphasis on what needs to be done, on the "how".

Scaling up financing

But these transformations will be costly: they will require additional annual public and private investment of up to 2,500 billion dollars. While the current discussions on a new global financial pact are [a step in the right direction](#), it will be essential to ensure that the increased room for manoeuvre of the multilateral development banks and the expansion of their mission to provide global public goods do not come at the expense of the SDGs and the most vulnerable countries ([OECD-SDSN](#)). The international financial system will therefore have to be adapted, particularly to the need to secure long-term financing.

However, as the OECD and the SDSN point out, there is a mismatch between the long-term objectives of developing countries and the quest by creditors for short-term financial returns. Creditors generally offer loans with short-term repayments and high interest rates, which hampers long-term investment and increases the risk of liquidity shortages. Current rating agency methodologies prevent developing economies from obtaining the level of long-term lending required to finance large-scale sectoral transformations. For the OECD and SDSN, it is important to explore options to improve these methodologies, in particular to make them more aligned with the sustainable development ambitions of developing countries.

It is [clear](#) that the current international architecture is failing to fulfil its essential missions and to support stable long-term financing for the SDGs. With the New York summit only a few weeks away, the current momentum is not enough. The 2030 Agenda will never be achieved without raising the awareness of the players and radically changing the approach, to both support and finance the transformations inherent in achieving the SDGs.

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