

Assessment and conditions for success of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

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The world is not on track to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Four years after the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the results are insufficient in terms of implementation, and in some cases alarming: in a number of areas, including inequalities, climate change and biodiversity, the world is even regressing. The 2030 Agenda nevertheless remains a reference framework that appears to be appropriate for achieving a sustainable development that also benefits the most vulnerable people. How can the delay in implementation be explained? What answers can be found? New solutions will be needed to address these alarming trends consistently.

The 2030 Agenda promised integrated solutions and contributions from all countries and the different actors. Thanks to its specific objectives and indicators, it also promised to make the abstract concept of sustainable development more operational. By presenting today's many challenges in an integrated manner and by introducing transformative goals such as the one on sustainable production and consumption patterns, it promised a project for structural change. It is an ambitious and necessary programme. But is it changing the practices of different actors? Are their implementation approaches pertinent? What have the SDGs brought to policy debates and policy-making at the country and international community levels? And what are the potential tools to accelerate the implementation of the 2030 Agenda?

KEY MESSAGES

More and more references are being made to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, but they rarely question practices, nor do they initiate a transformative project. By 2030, the countries in particular need to accelerate, as do companies. Some interesting experiments exist, especially to integrate SDGs into budgetary processes.

It is essential to restore the backbone of the 2030 Agenda, to develop a clear vision of what does or does not contribute to the SDGs, and to prevent the SDGs from falling victim to an overly vague game of interpretation that everyone can join without questioning the real impact of their actions on the Agenda as a whole.

As highlighted by the *Global Sustainable Development Report*, emphasis must be placed on the co-benefits, but also the complex trade-offs between goals. These interactions are still insufficiently integrated into SDG implementation strategies.

To ensure the 2030 Agenda becomes a true global roadmap, it is time to move away from a form of "weak consensus" and to make this programme central to debates, particularly when they are complex. It should facilitate discussions on sectoral policies, especially trade policies, by questioning their impacts on and contribution to the six transformations proposed by the *Global Sustainable Development Report*. The 2030 Agenda should assist decision-making and inform the approaches and trade-offs needed to develop sustainable development pathways and to encourage actors to question whether they can do things differently and better.

1. WHAT IS THE SITUATION?

In his progress report (Secretary-General of the United Nations, 2019), the UN Secretary-General's message is clear: the world is not on track to achieve the SDGs. Some SDGs that were showing positive long-term developments are currently regressing. For the third consecutive year, hunger in the world is on the rise. The *Global Sustainable Development Report* (Independent Group of Scientists – GSDR, 2019), written by 15 independent scientists appointed in 2016, also sounds the alarm about the "limited success" in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. It identifies four particularly alarming trends: rising inequalities, climate change, biodiversity loss and the increasing amounts of waste from human activities. Not only do these challenges represent trends that are difficult to reverse, but they also make it more difficult to achieve other goals and targets, sometimes in a way that impacts the whole of the 2030 Agenda.

2. UNDERSTANDING THE PROMISE OF THE 2030 AGENDA

The 2030 Agenda and the SDGs have often been presented as a "paradigm shift", welcomed by numerous academics and NGOs, who highlight its potential and its promise, even if other researchers (and sometimes the same ones) also emphasise its possible risks.

A transformative agenda?

The SDGs are thus presented as a "transformative project", leading ideally to a "systemic change". Since 2016, some analyses (Koehler, 2016) have shown that the SDGs could be used more "subversively" to steer discussions and practices if enough actors highlight their transformative content rather than their content that reinforces business-as-usual. At the same time, several authors acknowledge that some SDGs are more consistent with the transformation agenda than others (for example, the SDGs on gender, reducing inequalities, and transforming production and consumption patterns).

The SDGs were not designed as targets to be met independently, but as a mutually supportive package (Korosi, 2015) consistent with several major transformations (Independent Group of Scientists – GSDR, 2019). In this context, achieving the 2030 Agenda as a whole does not mean being satisfied with the "soft" multilateralism resulting from Rio+20, which avoids contentious subjects and commitments. This is the dilemma of the SDGs, rejected by some for breaking too radically from previous approaches and by others for not yet breaking sufficiently from the predominant development model.

A holistic agenda?

The indivisibility of the SDGs is described as the most "visible" innovation of the 2030 Agenda, and is an opportunity to create more synergies between social and environmental policies, thereby increasing the weight of these two dimensions

of sustainability compared to the economic dimension. The SDGs can provide a new reference framework for governments to enable them to monitor and assess public policies, especially budget policies. However, this theoretical integration comes up against the reality of national governance systems, which are struggling to operationalise this kind of cross-cutting, systemic approach. In fact, although the indivisibility of challenges is underlined in the unanimously adopted official documents, the 17 SDGs can be easily cherry picked and tackled in silos.

Everyone's agenda, no one's agenda?

One of the innovations of the SDGs in relation to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs, 2000-2015 period) is that they apply to all countries, in both the North and the South, whether developed, developing or least-advanced. Moreover, they favour a bottom-up approach, which gives the countries the flexibility to define their implementation approach and which, in order to function, should not be seen as an invitation to interpret the promises of the 2030 Agenda so as to make them consistent with existing practices, without questioning these practices. The SDGs should instead encourage each country to define its own pathway of change.

However, the lack of "instructions" does not facilitate implementation. The idea was to protect the sovereignty of countries, to avoid being prescriptive on the means, and to stick to the results while leaving each country to follow its own path. But, in practice, obstacles and lock-ins are emerging, with similarities in all national situations, which the GSDR summarises in six transformations (Independent Group of Scientists, 2019): human well-being and capabilities; sustainable and just economies; food systems and nutrition; energy decarbonisation and access; urban and peri-urban development; global environmental commons).

The 2030 Agenda calls on all stakeholders to contribute, but does not specify who commits to what. It defines targets and indicators without assigning responsibility. Was the adoption of this ambitious agenda only possible because it does not commit anyone or demand concessions from anyone in particular? Another question omitted from the 2030 Agenda is that of the winners and losers of achieving the SDGs.

What theory of change for the SDGs? A combination of several visions and instruments

The SDGs establish 17 goals, 169 targets and a battery of about 230 indicators. "Governance by goal-setting" aims to steer collective action, in the context of a medium- or long-term vision, through the definition of priorities, the mobilisation of actors capable of addressing these priorities in the long-term, and the formulation of targets and measures of progress (Young, 2017). While this framework can be seen as an attempt to address some of the limitations of the MDGs, by avoiding an overly simplistic approach and measures that do not take sufficient account of the diversity of contexts and starting points, the high number of goals and indicators and the often vague definition of targets have attracted criticism.

Although the 2030 Agenda is not formally binding for governments, its monitoring by the United Nations, other governments and civil society may encourage a state to make changes and to support new public strategies, as its performance can be evaluated and compared to other states. This “peer pressure” can prove effective if it is accompanied by a common performance assessment framework, based on measurable targets and indicators, and by a “place” for assessment. The High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) is the place for this assessment, but to be effective and credible, the independence of progress evaluation must be guaranteed; yet in the official HLPF framework, this evaluation is carried out by the countries themselves. The use of the statistical framework means the SDGs are subject to a reporting exercise by each country to a UN body, with little impact in terms of domestic policy. However, the SDG monitoring mechanisms could give them a real political existence and make them an opportunity to transform development pathways. Options for using the SDGs (Voituriez, 2013) should thus serve as a basis for the construction of compromises and policy trade-offs within countries, rejecting the overly simplistic idea of “win-win” solutions, and should facilitate the emergence of a multi-actor experimentation regime encouraging, stimulating and evaluating the reorientation of public and private investment policies.

3. WHAT ASSESSMENT OF SDG USES?¹

What the 2030 Agenda has achieved

The SDGs have enabled the revival of development planning, participation and sustainable development strategies. This trend can be interesting if it is accompanied by discussions on the long-term transformation of the development pathway to achieve the promise of the SDGs.

The SDGs have also become a reference against which the international organisations, countries and more and more companies are positioning themselves. Examples exist of specific uses of the SDGs in policy processes, and several countries (Finland, Mexico and Slovenia) are beginning to use them, for example, as a tool to evaluate their national budget. In more than 20 countries, the Courts of Auditors are examining SDG implementation, which could contribute to increasing SDG integration in the policy agenda.

The limitations of current approaches

However, the SDGs rarely question the practices of the actors that use them. Too often, SDG use is still limited to a simple reference without action or to a mapping exercise of existing initiatives in relation to the SDGs: numerous SDG strategies (public and private) serve partly to rationalise existing initiatives. The same can be said at the corporate level. The 2030 Agenda,

which remains a framework that is difficult to operationalise according to many countries and non-state actors, has not yet succeeded in transforming the concept of sustainable development into a framework for action. Its main added value remains political/symbolic, but at present, there is not just one, but several concurrent and contradictory narratives on the SDGs in international monitoring forums; one narrative worth taking up is that of a fair and sustainable globalisation that challenges business as usual.

4. HOW TO BUILD MOMENTUM BY 2030

Seeking real leadership

The 2030 Agenda currently lacks a figurehead to embody it and to drive the mobilisation of all actors. One or two “champions” should emerge from the actively engaged countries and could serve as an example. The European Union could be this champion if the new Commission truly takes up the SDGs in order to support sustainability issues at the highest political level, to make them the guiding EU strategy and to strengthen EU external action and its alignment with the SDGs. Leadership also means identifying illustrations and examples of good practice in which different actors have taken ownership of the 2030 Agenda to build their own sustainable development strategy.

Restoring the backbone of the 2030 Agenda

Paradoxically, the 2030 Agenda suffers from the ambition of its promises. These may sometimes seem unrealistic or unachievable to many actors, and are thus often overlooked or poorly understood. The risk is then that actors will focus only on this list of goals and adopt a selective approach, claiming they contribute to the 2030 Agenda if they have had any kind of impact on just one of the 169 targets.

To ensure the 2030 Agenda does not lose credibility, the SDGs must be prevented from falling victim to an overly vague game of interpretation that everyone can join without questioning the real impact of their actions on the agenda as a whole. Contributing to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda means actors must question their modes of intervention and ask whether they can do better or differently in order to maximise the impact of their action on the 2030 Agenda, even when the action in question is aimed at just one of the targets. This approach is indispensable, but not without methodological difficulties for the different actors, who tend to position themselves in terms of an SDG “discourse” rather than in terms of real action towards their implementation.

However, the challenge of the SDGs is to strike a balance between their promise of flexibility and that of a truly transformative project and to avoid any “SDG washing”. To ensure the 2030 Agenda truly becomes a global roadmap, it is important to clarify the paths that can be taken and the obstacles that must be avoided. The six transformations proposed by the GSDR and the “planetary boundaries” (Steffen *et al.*, 2015) are approaches that

¹ For more examples, see the study: <https://www.iddri.org/en/publications-and-events/study/2030-agenda-sustainable-development-first-assessment-and-conditions>

can help to identify these potential risks. This will also require the development of standards and the monitoring of voluntary commitments made by states and companies. These standards must ensure compliance with a certain level of ambition and, at the least, prevent negative impacts on the particularly high-risk targets identified by the GSDR. Ignoring these objectives in any commitment on the SDGs will make it difficult to achieve the 2030 Agenda.

The United Nations has a fundamental role to play in structuring the backbone the 2030 Agenda needs and to help the countries and actors to determine the actions that contribute to, and especially those that undermine the delivery of the 2030 Agenda.

Moving away from the UN framework

Finally, in order to be truly transformative and effective, the 2030 Agenda must be specifically immersed in the decision-making processes that have an impact on the SDGs, including beyond the UN framework. It must provide a sort of collective intelligence to inform decisions and clarify the orientations and trade-offs needed for the formulation of public and private strategies. It should be a structural reference framework. The trade agreements recently negotiated or still under negotiation can provide a useful illustration of this: based for several decades on the goal of increasing trade, they have now come up against the need to align with the Sustainable Development Goals (2030 Agenda, Paris Climate Agreement) and are revealing diplomatic tensions (see EU-Mercosur agreement) that reflect the countries' conflicting visions of development. The question now should be: how can trade become a tool for the SDGs, for all countries?

5. CONCLUSION

As a sustainable social project for the world of tomorrow, the 2030 Agenda is accepted by all, but cannot be limited to this shallow consensus when what it actually implies is a massive transformation of development models at the global level. The time for superficial words is over, and the transformations required must now be operationalised. The 2030 Agenda must become a global roadmap, used by all actors, in all fields of development. As a tool for decision support to question the co-benefits and negative impacts of sectoral policies, especially trade policies, it must contribute in all areas to the definition and implementation of pathways towards sustainable development.

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