



HLPF EDITION

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A large photograph of a beach at sunset. In the foreground, a boy in blue shorts is jumping high in the air. To his left, a girl in a red shirt and colorful shorts stands with her hands on her hips. Other children are visible in the background, some standing and some swimming in the water. The beach is lined with large, light-colored sandbags or dune covers. The sky is filled with soft, orange and yellow clouds, and the water reflects the warm light of the setting sun.

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Older, not wiser

The last nine years have seen seismic societal, economic, and political shifts around the world – meaningful progress on the SDGs isn't among them. We know what needs fixing and in many cases how – the legacy of this generation of leaders will be whether it had the courage and wisdom to act

By [Fred Carver](#), Consulting Editor,
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It may not have felt like it at the time – and there are obvious exceptions – but globally, on average, the first few years of the life cycle of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were the good times.

Read through the 2020 SDGs report, and the progress from 2015 to 2019 is clear:

- a quarter of the world's poor escaped poverty
- the number of people with the internet on their mobile phone increased from one in two to four in five

- while deforestation continued at an alarming rate, that rate went down by a fifth

Progress toward achieving the SDGs was slow – in many cases too slow – but it was steady.

That brings us to the moment when the “Decade of Action” was supposed to start. Instead, Coronavirus happened and Russia invaded Ukraine. The long-term consequences of the short-term decisions of politicians lucky enough to hold office in more straightforward times started to manifest. We began to feel the consequences of climate change. Supply chains strained and at times collapsed. The world was already

a precarious place, and these events – not bolts from the blue but rather the results of that very precarity – sent us over a tipping point. This challenged us to survive as best we could through a series of interrelated crises. Governments – at best – scrambled to respond to what was urgent and had no time to consider what was merely important.

Progress toward the SDGs then slid backwards. Global poverty rose for the first time since 1998, wiping out four years of gains in a single year. Progress on most other indicators flatlined and in many cases reversed. The end result is that 83% of the targets contained within the SDGs are not on track to be

◀ **Vassily Nebenzia, Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation to the UN, in discussion with delegates ahead of the Security Council meeting, at which a resolution was adopted demanding an immediate ceasefire in Gaza during Ramadan**

met by 2030. Broadly speaking we are back to where we started in 2015. Only now, we are nearly ten years older and have burned through two-thirds of the time we had given ourselves to create a safer, fairer, more sustainable world.

Meanwhile the vulnerability created by the absence of such a world grows more obvious by the day. Significant numbers of people are rejecting not only the institutions that have let them down but also the idea of progress itself. If preventing climate catastrophe or increasing international cooperation cannot be guaranteed not to interfere with individual interests, then election-tipping numbers of people are voting instead to live on a more dangerous, more polluted planet.

I should tell you something you don't already know.

The way ahead

This latest publication from SDG Action does just that, and reminds us of things it is too easy to forget. Namely, that comprehensive analysis of the problems exists, and in many cases the solutions are known and viable.

Thus, we have Li Junhua on how actualizing the Addis Ababa Action Agenda will fund the Goals. Paul Akiwumi explores how being a landlocked least developed country can be made into a blessing rather than a curse if borders can be transformed from barriers into points of connection. Meanwhile, by applying the framework of gender, we can uncover critical insights into the international financial system, the links between conflict and hunger, and acute crises such as Gaza.

But if the analysis is in place and the solutions are known, why is there no action?

In most instances, the solutions are not one-size-fits-all, but take different

forms in different places. This does not fit comfortably with the prevailing forms of mass communication that favor simple ideas that are then branded as unequivocally good or evil by competing political tribes.

Nor are there any silver bullets, even the most promising proposals come with caveats, as we explore. Carlos Maria Correa explains the potential of the Global Digital Compact to reduce inequalities between countries, and to improve education, health, and agriculture in particular. Paul Jasper identifies ways that artificial intelligence can further accelerate SDG progress. However, these solutions bring risks and can potentially have the opposite impact. The rush to digital solutions needs to be tempered with measures to protect against digital colonialism, which raises the question of digital sovereignty. In turn, as Arindrajit Basu sets out, this sovereignty can be a powerful tool to either promote or suppress human rights. These technologies, which create trillions of dollars in value, are entirely reliant upon rare-earth metals from some of the world's poorest states. Sara Nicoletti explores how rooting out corruption and the exploitation it enables can allow that value to unlock those countries' potential.

In terms of understanding how action can be motivated, again, the gender lens is useful – as Lopa Banerjee explains, much of the world's power is vested in “imperfect, shambolic democracies” where the many can, on occasion, pool their influence to overrule the mighty. This pressure is becoming ever more essential – as only when elites are compelled to will they look beyond their own self-interest (or indeed give any thought whatsoever to the legacy they leave to future generations.)

For all their flaws, international institutions enable that process. They provide a more level playing field upon which it is harder – though never impossible – for the world's most powerful states to either shirk responsibility to their own citizens or

ignore the express wishes of global majorities.

Beyond the talking shops

Recent years have seen a proliferation of processes to debate development in international institutions. We have the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development, the SDGs Summit, and the Bridgetown Initiative. Increasingly, we have the G7 and G20. And we have the UN's Summit of the Future – itself merely the latest iteration of the Secretary-General's strategy of perpetuating repeated cycles of reports, consultations, and summits in the hope that this may eventually spark genuine action.

There has been some fretting that these processes are rivals to one another, and that the more pro forma ones may draw much needed attention and political capital away from those more likely to have an impact. I feel these worries are overstated. Each of the processes consists of more or less the same people (and always the same interests) having more or less the same conversations in slightly different rooms. It would be naïve therefore to expect any of the mechanisms themselves to be transformative.

But what each of them does is provide a venue at which transformative change can be achieved if sufficient power can be concentrated with sufficient focus. That could happen at any of them, or in a rolling cascade through all of them – it scarcely matters which slogan is written on the roller banner at the entrance to the room.

The last few years have seen a sharp uptick in what the feminist scholar Sara Ahmad calls “nonperformative speech”: conversations convened because rehashing the conversation is an alternative to actually doing something about the issue. Any (and all) of the mechanisms we have discussed are at high risk of proving nonperformative, but none of them have to be. We already have our agenda: the SDGs. We also know how to achieve it, as you will read in this collection of articles. Now, it is time to perform. ■



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Financing for development: at a crossroads

The Addis Ababa Action Agenda set out a vision for how the Goals would be financed. A decade on, the numbers remain woefully short of requirements. Next year's follow-up conference must enable rapid acceleration of development finance if the 2030 Agenda is to retain any hope of success

By [Li Junhua](#), Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs, UN

The challenge of finance is at the heart of the current sustainable development crisis. Yet financing also holds the key to turn our fortunes around. Only with a sustained investment push in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and ambitious reform of the international financial architecture can we hope to achieve the Global Goals by 2030. That is why the Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development (FfD4), to be held in Spain in June 2025, is such a big opportunity, and one that we cannot afford to waste.

Only 15% of assessable SDG targets are on track – and more than a third are either stagnant or going in reverse. Among those off-track are core commitments to poverty eradication and climate action. Current projections estimate that almost 600 million people will continue to live in extreme poverty

◀ **Children play on a sandbag staircase that is part of the Tuvalu Coastal Adaptation Project. The project, financed by the Green Climate Fund, is designed to protect against rising sea levels and extreme weather events**

in 2030, more than half of them women. Progress is woefully inadequate on climate action, with global greenhouse gas emissions still rising when rapid and deep reductions are needed.

Achieving the economic transitions needed to reach the SDGs will require investments at unprecedented scale. Unmet financing needs for SDG and climate action in developing countries are estimated to be in the trillions of dollars annually. Instead of closing these gaps, we see them widening amid a series of shocks and crises.

The 2024 Financing for Sustainable Development Report estimates that financing gaps have grown from around USD 2.5 trillion before the COVID-19 pandemic to around USD 4 trillion now. The numbers are daunting – but the costs of inaction, both economic and social, are much larger.

Progress since Addis Ababa

Nine years on from the SDGs' adoption, financing needs remain particularly acute in many developing countries, which face higher costs of capital and significantly worse terms of access to financing. Poor countries pay twice as much in interest on their total debt stock as developed countries, despite having access to concessional

// If the conference delivers on closing financing and architecture gaps, it can also help close credibility gaps and rebuild trust in global partnership and multilateralism at large

financing facilities. Due to misaligned incentives, both public and private actors still invest in environmentally harmful activities and have not yet fully aligned their decision-making and financing with the SDGs.

At the same time there has been real progress across the financing agenda since 2015. Countries have strengthened their capacities to mobilize public resources domestically, concessional financing has increased alongside multilateral development bank reforms and updates to policies, and there is a clear uptake in private sector sustainable investing. But it is equally clear that these steps have not been enough to keep pace with rising needs amid a changing and less benign global environment.

Systemic risks, especially climate and disaster-related risks, have risen since 2015 – in many cases dramatically. There has been a sea-change in global macroeconomic and macro-financial conditions, with GDP growth rates in developing countries falling to just over 4% annually on average between 2021 and 2025, down from around 6% before the 2009 global financial crisis. Income, wealth, gender, and other forms of inequality, which are often perpetuated by financing policies, have become entrenched. Enormous technological change, digitalization in particular, is affecting all financing areas. And there are growing risks of fragmentation in the global economy. While some of these trends have created opportunities for development and financing progress, in totality they have put national financing frameworks and the international financial architecture under severe stress.

Today, many countries are faced with tight fiscal constraints and high risks of debt distress, with the

median debt service burden for least developed countries almost quadrupling from 3.1% of revenue in 2010 to 12% in 2023 – the highest level since 2000. Private sector activity, a key driver of sustainable growth and development, has stalled in recent years as investment growth, trade, and technology diffusion has slowed. Structural changes pose new challenges for countries' productive integration into the world economy, necessitating a search for new growth and development strategies. And while financial inclusion is a bright spot, financial and capital markets remain underdeveloped in many developing countries, with financial volatility contributing to a dearth of long-term investment.

An action plan for Spain

The window to rescue the SDGs and prevent a climate catastrophe is still open – but closing rapidly. United Nations Member States have given FfD4 an ambitious mandate to address financing challenges “in the context of the urgent need to accelerate the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the achievement of the SDGs and to support reform of the international financial architecture.” To live up to this mandate and meet the challenge of the moment, the 2024 Financing for Sustainable Development Report has put forward four sets of overarching questions that need to be answered in Spain in 2025.

First, FfD4 must find ways to close large financing and investment gaps, at scale and with urgency. Building on the Secretary-General's call for an SDG Stimulus, the conference should adopt a package of reforms that can help deliver the rapid scaling up of public and private investments in the SDGs.

These reforms should contain actions across:

- tax
- private investment and blended finance
- concessional financing and development bank reform
- innovative financing instruments

Second, FfD4 provides a once-in-a-generation opportunity to support reform of the international financial architecture and support international rules for trade, investment, and finance that are fit for today's challenges. The current architecture, despite efforts for reform, has not been able to sufficiently enhance countries' resilience in a more crisis-prone world or enable access to financing on the right terms and conditions. The international community must also find ways to fully align trade, investment, and technology agreements and rules with sustainable development, so that countries can integrate productively in the global economy.

Third, the conference must help countries formulate and finance new development pathways to deliver the SDGs. There is an ongoing rethinking of economic development paradigms, not least the relationship between states and markets in achieving sustainable transformations. In a digitalizing global economy at risk of fragmentation, old models are no longer working. FfD4 should inform new national and international financing policy frameworks for sustainable development.

Finally, if the conference delivers on closing financing and architecture gaps, it can also help close credibility gaps and rebuild trust in global partnership and multilateralism at large. Public and private actors must move from rhetoric to action. The international community must meet commitments it has made on concessional financing and global governance reform, and must fully align domestic and international policy frameworks and investment allocations with commitments to the SDGs. ■



Good intentions aren't enough

SDG-related initiatives are increasingly under attack from the more right-wing, populist parts of the political spectrum, who portray the Goals as misguided, wasteful, vain, and coercive. How can cities and local governments enhance their policymaking and implementation, and – crucially – secure buy-in to ensure initiatives achieve their intended outcomes?

By [Stefano Marta](#), Head, Smart and Sustainable Cities, Centre for Entrepreneurship, SMEs, Regions and Cities, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)

With the mid-point toward 2030 now behind us, significant delays persist in meeting the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Only 15% of the Goals are considered

to be on track to be met by the deadline. The UN's 2023 SDG Report shows that progress toward 48% of the SDG targets is currently insufficient, and 37% are either stagnating or regressing, notably in terms of poverty, hunger, and climate action. According to the OECD, more than 80% of regions in OECD countries have not achieved any of the 17 Goals, while 70% of cities have not achieved more than two.

▲ Oslo, Norway, is consistently ranked as a leader in sustainability and the country performs well in global indices on SDG progress, human development, and happiness

Key challenges for effective local SDG implementation

Cities and regions are working hard to implement the SDGs. For example, many have created specific strategies,

// The SDGs financing gap increased by more than 50% in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, reaching USD 3.9 trillion in developing countries alone

put in place institutional frameworks, and run awareness-raising campaigns.

According to an OECD, Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) and European Committee of the Regions (CoR) joint survey conducted in 2023, about 39% of local and regional governments were already using the SDGs before the pandemic and continued to use them for COVID-19 recovery efforts.

Another 25% of respondents said they hadn't used the SDGs for COVID-19 recovery yet but planned to start doing so. From 2018 to 2024, subnational governments developed more than 260 voluntary local reviews

(VLRs) to track and report on SDG progress. (UN Habitat, 2024).

Why haven't those efforts translated into greater progress on the SDGs at the local level? Cities and regions still face many barriers to a more effective implementation of the 2030 Agenda, as shown in Figure 1 (below).

The lack of financial resources is the main obstacle for 64% of the OECD-SDSN-CoR survey respondents. The SDGs financing gap increased by more than 50% in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, reaching USD 3.9 trillion in developing countries alone.

A second major challenge is shifting political priorities – for example, after

local or regional elections – as indicated by 52% of subnational governments.

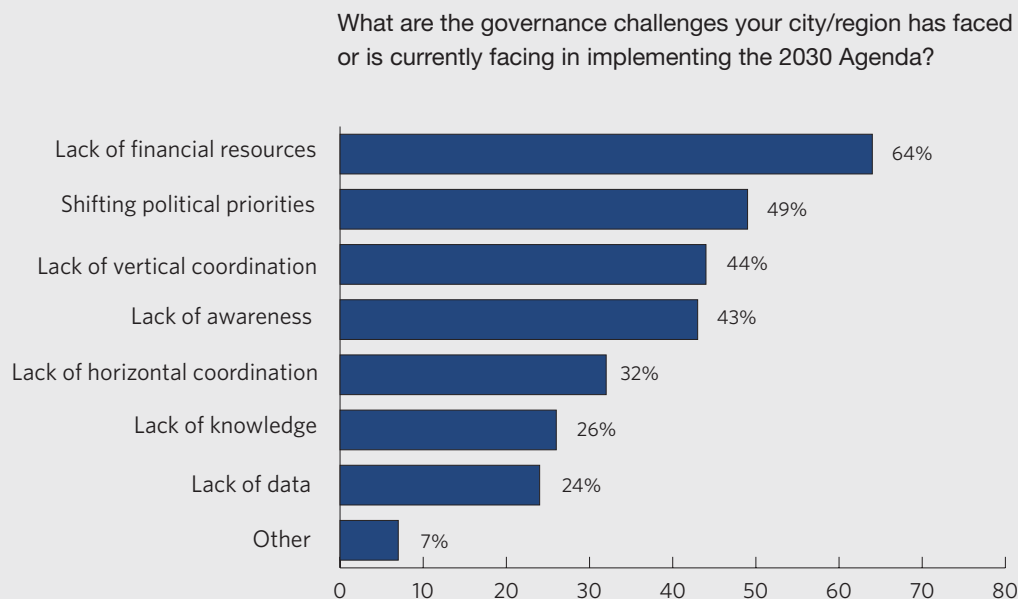
Next comes insufficient vertical co-ordination between local and national governments, highlighted by 44% of respondents – despite efforts to engage subnational actors in voluntary national reviews (VNRs) (OECD, SDSN, 2024).

5 solutions to accelerate SDG progress from the ground up

How can we improve and measure the impact of SDG initiatives and expand public buy-in for the 2030 Agenda? Five solutions can guide governments at all levels, building on the OECD Checklist for Public Action to localize the SDGs:

- mobilizing financing and budgeting for the SDGs
- mainstreaming the SDGs in cities' and regions' policies and strategies
- strengthening multi-level governance
- measuring cities' and regions' SDG progress
- engaging public and private territorial stakeholders

FIGURE 1: Governance challenges facing cities or regions in implementing the 2030 Agenda



Source: (OECD, 2024)
Note: share of respondents selecting the respective options. Multiple responses are possible.
The survey was conducted from 22 February 2023 to 9 June 2023.

1. Mobilizing financing and budgeting for the SDGs

To mobilize specific financing for the SDGs, many options exist, including earmarked taxes, land-value capture instruments, and revenues from assets. As an innovative mechanism for SDGs funding, the city of Kitakyushu, Japan has established the Kitakyushu SDG Future Bonds, a program specifically aimed at financing SDG initiatives.

Other cities such as Rotterdam in the Netherlands are also experimenting with local investment crowdfunding platforms to finance the SDGs.

Strengthening the alignment of local financing with the SDGs in budgeting processes can help to ensure that adequate resources are allocated to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. For example, Strasbourg in France, Mannheim in Germany and the Basque Country in Spain have developed SDGs budgeting.

2. Mainstreaming the SDGs in cities' and regions' policies and strategies

Cities and regions should use the SDGs to adopt a holistic approach to address concrete local challenges more effectively. The SDGs provide a framework to identify interlinkages and possible tensions between key policy objectives.

For example, reducing air pollution and transitioning to low-carbon transport (SDG 9) is critical to build sustainable cities, but requires managing trade-offs between efforts to improve air quality (SDG 13), promote sustainable mobility (SDG 11), and strive to reduce inequalities (SDG 10).

Documenting and communicating the relevance of the SDGs as a guide to advance local priorities and address people's daily problems rather than as additional burden will help boost political leadership for the 2030 Agenda and reduce the risk of shifting political priorities after local or regional elections.

3. Strengthening multi-level governance

Using the SDGs as a framework can help align policy objectives, priorities, and incentives across national, regional, and local governments. Some national governments such as Germany and Japan provide technical and financial support to municipalities to implement the SDGs through a conducive, multi-level governance framework.

Engaging regions and cities in the process of VNRs – as done, for example, by Norway and Italy – contributes to strengthening vertical co-ordination and facilitating multi-level dialogue. VLRs, meanwhile, offer a great opportunity to shed light on local initiatives, engage national governments, and promote peer-to-peer learning among subnational governments.

4. Measuring cities' and regions' SDG progress

Data and localized indicator systems are essential to measure the impact of SDG initiatives and guide policies toward better lives for people. Subnational governments need to know where they stand regarding their distance to the SDGs to redefine priorities, budget the necessary

resources, and course-correct where needed.

With its 135 indicators, the OECD localized indicator framework and its online tool to measure the distance to the SDGs in cities and regions cover at least one aspect of each of the 17 SDGs for regions and cities.

In addition to using quantitative indicators, local and regional governments should also showcase their success and positive stories in implementing the SDGs to inspire similar actions by their peers.

Finally, user-friendly, open data portals can help increase the transparency of actions taken toward the SDGs, as in the case of Córdoba in Argentina or Los Angeles in the US.

5. Engaging public and private territorial stakeholders

Engaging all territorial stakeholders – including civil society, citizens at large, and specific groups such as youth, academia, and private companies – in the policymaking process for the SDGs can help enhance accountability and transparency and reinforce buy-in for the SDGs.

In particular, civil society organizations play an important role in driving progress toward the SDGs and in holding governments at all levels accountable for their commitments to the 2030 Agenda. They raise awareness about the 2030 Agenda, allowing informed citizens to change their daily habits. For example, the Kitakyushu SDGs Club aims to raise awareness about the 2030 Agenda by promoting SDG activities and collaboration among members. In 2022, the club counted almost 1,800 actors, including 878 companies, 245 schools, 233 organizations, as well as individual citizens.

Conclusion

Those five solutions addressed to policymakers at all levels of government will increase the effective implementation, impact, and monitoring of SDG initiatives to improve people's lives. ■

Engaging all territorial stakeholders in the policymaking process for the SDGs – including civil society, citizens at large, youth, academia, and private companies – can help enhance accountability and transparency and reinforce buy-in for the SDGs



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Advancing gender equality

As populism, nationalism, and authoritarianism gain traction globally, we must redouble efforts on gender equality or risk rolling back on hard-fought gains

By **Lopa Banerjee**, Director, Civil Society Division, UN Women

We are living today with the consequences of imperfect, shambolic democracies.

Over the last decades, governments in many countries of the world have failed to deliver social services and public goods to their citizens. Today, 1 in 10 women are living in extreme poverty. If current trends continue, the gender-poverty gap is projected to persist through mid-century.

As communities have been impoverished – by global pandemics, climate catastrophes, austerity measures, volatile and insecure economies, and more – trust in public institutions and democratic systems has atrophied. Citizens, disillusioned with the inability of institutions and

governments to address systemic issues and compounding global crises, have disengaged themselves from the pursuit of a shared social contract, creating a vacuum that has been effectively occupied by undemocratic actors.

The shift in the nature and complexity of conflict and war, including proliferation and entrenchment of armed conflicts, has undermined notions of the common good, social justice, and human solidarity. Societies have ruptured along fault lines of identity, ethnicity, and race. People, seeking comfort in tribes rather than in communities, have allowed the legitimization of discrimination and prejudice, and a subversion of the ideals of democracy: from solidarity, diversity, and pluralism to brutal majoritarianism (the idea that the numerical majority of

a population should have the final say in decision-making).

This has set the stage for the renaissance of illiberalism, and the rise of an insular, muscular nationalism that rejects institutions of global cooperation and solidarity as effete and ineffective. This worldview instead promotes binary perspectives, where national sovereignty, culture, and interests are pitted in confrontation with international norms and institutions of human rights, justice, progress, and well-being.

Fight – and pushback

Astonishingly, through all of this, the fight for gender equality and women's rights has remained unflagging. Not only is it the most enduring movement for substantive equality but feminist mobilizing is adaptive, inclusive, and intersectional, and

◀ **The grassroots feminist movement Ni Una Menos, (Not One Woman Less) protesting against femicide and gender-based violence in Buenos Aires, Argentina. The country's president, Javier Milei, has disbanded the ministry of women, gender and diversity, and is seen as a threat to women's rights**

creates alliances and coalitions with other movements involved in the safeguarding of democracy and rights. What is significant is that it challenges – on behalf of everyone – the implicit hierarchies of power for a few.

Notions of individual and collective agency, solidarity, equity, access, autonomy, and accountability are cornerstones of feminist mobilizing. The idea of gender equality interrogates entitlements and privileges that foster multiple inequalities. It also shines the light on individual, community, societal, and institutional norms, practices, and stereotypes that limit opportunities for people and marginalize them in private and public spheres.

As such, gender equality aligns with the broader goals of strengthening democracies. And in doing so, it faces ferocious pushback from populist and authoritarian forces, whose agenda is to separate people from their histories and contexts and coalesce them around simplistic, unidimensional identities. Illiberal and populist ideologies often seek support at the expense of marginalized groups and view the plural, inclusive feminist agenda as an existential threat.

The achievement of gender equality has long been hampered by sluggish political will, insufficient investment, restricted civic space, and compounding global crises. At this moment, the critical midpoint of the deadline for completing the SDGs, no goal indicators for gender equality are at “target met or almost met.” Today less than 1% of women and girls live in a country with high women's empowerment and a small gender gap, according to UN Women and UNDP's latest joint report, *The paths to equal*. Notwithstanding, in the current climate

of democratic erosion and authoritarian resurgence, the pushback against gender equality has become global, political, and institutional.

Coordinated and well-resourced state and non-state actors are normalizing traditional, patriarchal, binary constructs of men's and women's roles in society and polity and promoting public legitimacy of these ideas through political processes and rhetoric.

Where women are exerting their rights and voices as citizens and where that expression is against the dominant political agenda, they are targeted as anti-national. In contexts where opposition and dissent are criminalized, dissenting feminist activists and their claims of gender equality are pronounced as being against the national character.

Global and local action toward gender equality

In countless communities in countries across the world, activists, advocates, and indefatigable actors for gender equality are holding the line and working in steady solidarity and alliances across sectors, to push forward for gender equality. Drawing upon their work, as both bulwark and rudder, here is a landscape for concerted global and local action:

- Governments and their institutions must uphold and realize their commitments to human rights and substantive gender equality, recognizing the comprehensiveness of the rights spectrum.
- Institutions tasked with promoting gender equality must be fortified to withstand political pressures and ensure the enforcement of laws and policies that protect women's rights, across and irrespective of changing political administrations and governments. This includes bolstering the mandate and resources of gender equality institutions, feminist civil society, and other relevant organizations and bodies to address systemic inequalities.
- Governments, working with

stakeholders across sectors, must prioritize inclusive policies that address the intersecting forms of discrimination faced by women, including race, class, sexual orientation and gender identity, and disability. This requires a holistic approach that addresses economic empowerment, access to healthcare and education, and protection from violence and discrimination.

- Civil society plays a crucial role in holding governments accountable and amplifying the voices of marginalized groups, including women and girls in all their diversity. Strengthening civil society organizations and promoting grassroots activism empowers women to advocate for their rights and shape policy agendas.
- Addressing the root causes of gender inequality requires challenging patriarchal norms and attitudes that perpetuate discrimination and violence against women. This necessitates comprehensive education and awareness-raising and working with men and boys to promote gender equity.
- Solidarity among women's rights activists, human rights defenders, and allies across social movements is essential for countering efforts to disempower women. By amplifying marginalized voices and advocating for collective, intersectional, intergenerational action, solidarity can strengthen resistance to regressive policies and promote transformative change.

Gender equality is the most enduring, deep, and expansive fight for substantial equality for all. It enjoins all of society's actors and institutions to act in concert, for shared and common freedoms, for the greater good. Turning our faces up to the sun and pushing forward for gender equality, so that the vision of the SDGs for people, planet, and prosperity is achieved, is always the better story – and never more so than now. ■



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Closing the loop on waste

Transitioning from linear to circular models of production and consumption remains a significant challenge. How can we transform deeply ingrained practices, attitudes, and incentives across both supply and demand chains to facilitate this shift?



◀ Clearing discarded rubbish from creeks in Manila, Philippines

of choices. These choices produce over 2.3 billion tonnes of municipal solid waste annually (according to the Global Waste Management Outlook 2024).

Waste is an indicator of how well we are doing, not just in terms of general economic efficiency but also in terms of our impact on the Earth. Unfortunately, our supply (production) and demand (consumption) practices are highly inefficient. The waste we generate could rise by more than 77% by the end of 2050. By the same year, we could also expect to find more plastic in the oceans than fish. These trends show an alarming crisis with clear negative impact on our own health, local ecosystems, and the wider Earth system.

In 2015, with the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the global community formally recognized the need for resource efficiency and to reduce our waste footprint by the year 2030. This was done through the inclusion of indicators explicitly related to waste management into three of the Global Goals:

- SDG 11 (sustainable cities and communities)
- SDG 12 (responsible production and consumption)
- SDG 14 (life below water)

But waste management is actually linked to all 17 SDGs, signaling an urgent need to move to an economic model that considers the entire lifecycle of a product, from design to end-of-life.

But who is responsible and who can make the changes needed now?

A wasteful system

Our economic systems are not resource efficient and we are all responsible. On the production side, natural resource depletion is well documented, with trends showing that recycling can play a role, and that the

annual consumption curve of virgin materials is also critical.

Unfortunately, consumption is central to the GDP formula and our need for quarterly and annual economic growth. Final consumption expenditure is over 70% of annual GDP in some countries (Figure 1, p16). Currently, we do not have data to measure if this is “green” (that is, consumption that safeguards the environment.)

Our economies track consumer spending based on a “take-make-waste” linear model. Today’s consumer culture proliferates this model. Marketing strategies try to convince us that we need new products, often delivered to our homes, to be trendy, healthy, and (ultimately) “happy.” This fuels a never-ending resource consumption curve servicing economic data and GDP growth. In line with this, many producers have business models that depend on limited lifespans or “planned obsolescence.” Fast fashion, electronics, and single-use plastics are prime examples.

However, as pollution increases, our distaste for consumption can also be limited. It is evident that there are confines to growth within the current linear model. In fact, today we have gone beyond the safe perimeters for six out of nine key Earth system processes, putting the Earth’s ability to support human life at risk.

To put the right solutions into action, we must first understand our current progress.

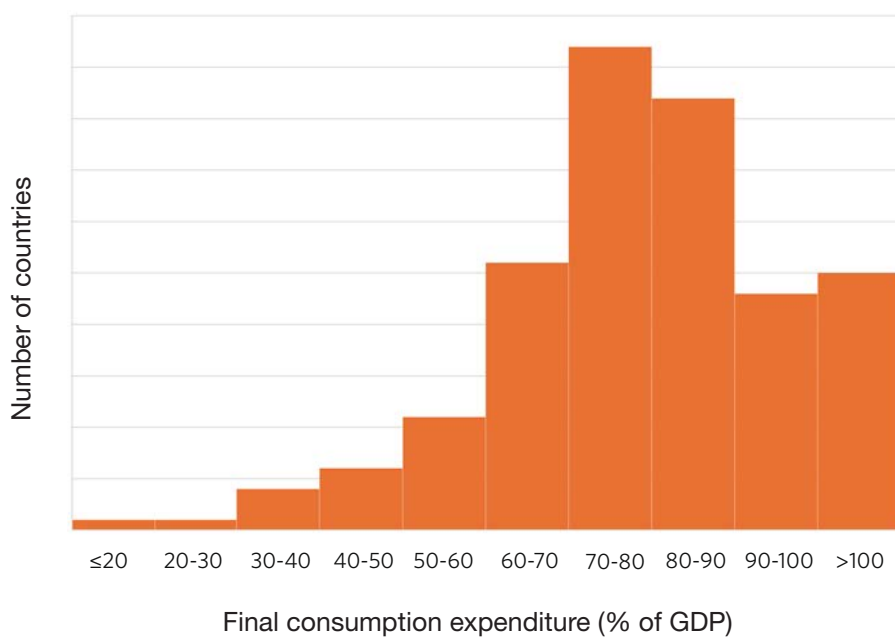
But how can we measure whether our global value-chains, economies, and systems are approaching circularity?

Measuring progress toward circularity

The indicators set out in the SDGs – such as municipal solid waste collections (SDG 11.6.1), food loss and waste indices (SDG 12.3.1), national recycling rate (SDG 12.5.1), or marine plastic density (SDG 14.1.1) – have the potential to show us if things are improving. However, data is limited, as demonstrated in Figure 2 for SDG indicator 12.5.1 (p17).

By [Chun Kyoo Park](#), Head, UN Office for Sustainable Development (UNOSD); [Sara Castro de Hallgren](#), Sustainable Development Officer, UNOSD; and [Emily Carroll](#), Policy Development and Coordination Expert, UNOSD

Our planet is literally drowning in the amount of waste we are generating. With over eight billion humans on the planet and counting, we as consumers and producers make millions if not billions

FIGURE 1: Distribution of countries by final consumption expenditure (% of GDP)

Source: author's elaboration based on latest year of available data from World Bank (2022)

The estimates we do have show that only 62% of municipal solid waste is managed in controlled facilities across the globe (see the Global Waste Management Outlook 2024), and approximately 90% of waste in low-income countries is discarded in unregulated dumps.

Developed countries are generally leading when it comes to sustainable waste management practices. But if we look at data on waste exports, this may not fully be the case. For example, Ghana receives over 30 million second-hand garments every two weeks – to put this into perspective, the population of the entire country is just over 30 million. While the second-hand clothes trade is an important livelihood for many, up to 100 tonnes of textiles a day are classified as waste, most of which is openly burnt or dumped in rivers and the sea.

Exporting waste to developing countries also means that the

vulnerable groups, often women and children working informally, end up being exposed to toxic chemicals. There are an estimated 20 million people employed globally through the informal economy of waste pickers.

A holistic approach: moving to a circular system

1. Choosing uncomfortable policies

Fully closing the loop in our economies means we must look at oftentimes uncomfortable policies like full-cost accounting and full-cost pricing, that account for all the negative externalities in our goods and services. The problem also lies in the way products are designed, manufactured, and packaged.

2. The polluter pays

True circularity of goods and services relies on effective market-based instruments based on the cornerstone of environmental justice – the polluter

pays principle. This goes hand in hand with preventive measures like designing out waste in the first place and product stewardship policies that ensure all stakeholders involved in a product are responsible for its proper management throughout the lifecycle. This includes the manufacturer and the consumer, but also governments to ensure recycling is possible and that value chains work to transform waste into resources at the scale we need.

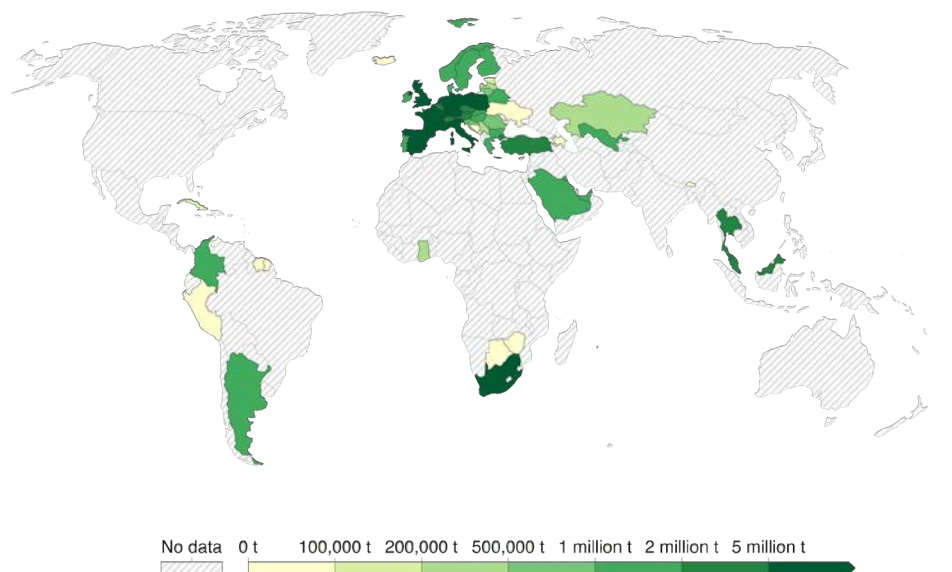
Extended producer responsibility (EPR) schemes in developed countries have had successful outcomes:

- shifting end-of-life costs from the public sector to producers and consumers
- improving recycling behaviors
- increasing material recovery rates – this is closing the loop in practice.

Countries such as the Republic of Korea have 28 items under the EPR

FIGURE 2: Data availability for SDG indicator 12.5.1**Municipal waste recycled, 2021**

Municipal waste is waste from households and businesses that would be collected by local authorities



Data source: UN Statistics Division/Our World In Data

system (four packaging materials and 24 specific items under nine different product lines). However, many developing countries are just at the start of considering EPR and require investment to transform their waste management infrastructure and capacity.

Nevertheless, as we learn of the true environmental cost of our production and consumption practices – such as the leakage of microplastics and nanoplastics into our bodies and the environment – it is clear that policies like EPR are not enough to clean up the scale of the pollution crisis. They are needed as part of a broader package of instruments.

3. Data and governance

We need more data on how circular our economies are, with global governance needed to measure the circularity of these economies – a circular economy index measuring each country.

The increased trade of goods is also contributing through the lack of standardization on the labeling of packaging materials, and uneven technological capabilities for recycling across countries.

We do not have globally comparable data and our economies do not uniformly measure what products are considered sustainable or “green” consumption. In the last decade, World Trade Organization member countries have attempted negotiations to better classify what products are “green” – but these have not succeeded.

4. Improving impacts

We need global governance to truly improve the social and environmental impacts of consumption and production trends. Global governance and multilateral environmental agreements can make change happen, as they provide frameworks to address the challenges through a unified approach

on circularity.

The SDGs, the high seas treaty, and the ongoing negotiations for a global plastics treaty are all examples of progress. The annual observation of days such as the UN’s International Day of Zero Waste also raises awareness to share experiences. But we need to ensure future global agendas adopt a holistic approach and integrate the complex interaction between our production and consumption trends. These must also close the data gaps to better measure progress, as well as tackle the most harmful producer practices and consumer habits and social norms.

Conclusion

If we ensure global agreement and action on the ground, we can close the loop and lead the market transformation pathways to preserve our Earth system for generations to come. ■



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From landlocked to land-linked

Landlocked developing countries face unique development challenges, from high trade transportation costs to reliance on neighbors' infrastructure. A new cooperation strategy implemented in four West African countries could serve as a development blueprint for other regions

By [Paul Akiwumi](#), Director, Division for Africa, Least Developed Countries and Special Programmes (ALDC), UNCTAD

In 2014, the global community recognized the unique development needs of landlocked developing countries (LLDCs) by adopting the Vienna Programme of Action (VPoA), a 10-year plan to promote their sustainable development. The VPoA has been an essential part of the 2030

Agenda, supporting LLDCs in reaching inclusive and sustainable growth while eradicating poverty. Cooperation and collaboration between development partners, transit countries, and LLDCs are key to delivering the VPoA and achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.

The 2019 High-level Midterm Review of the VPoA Implementation raised a call for action to accelerate its implementation in light of the persistent

shortcomings and difficulties LLDCs face. It also urged LLDCs and transit countries to:

- consider promoting a corridor approach to improve trade and transit transport
- make additional efforts to reduce travel time along the corridors
- adopt an integrated and sustainable approach to the management of international transport corridors to avoid duplication of effort.

◀ **The port of Lomé, Togo. A development cooperation project in West Africa has opened up access to the LLDCs of Burkina Faso and Niger by creating transit corridors to the ports of Lomé in Togo and Cotonou in Benin**

This is essential to support work to promote regional connectivity and maximize the associated economic opportunities.

The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) has been at the forefront of advocating for a new generation of policies and comprehensive approaches to achieve inclusive growth and sustainable development in LLDCs. Such policies are urgently needed because past and present “commodity-driven growth models” have failed to deliver promises of decent jobs and poverty reduction

in these countries. Drawing inspiration from global frameworks in support of LLDCs, including the VPoA, UNCTAD support translates these goals into targeted technical assistance with a tangible impact at country and regional levels.

Closing key development gaps in West African LLDCs

A recent important example of innovative development cooperation for landlocked countries is the implementation of a sub-regional project on the facilitation of transit transport and trade in West Africa for better value chain participation.

This approach brought together four least developed countries (LDCs, of which two are LLDCs and two are transit neighboring countries) to implement a corridor approach to improve trade and transit transport

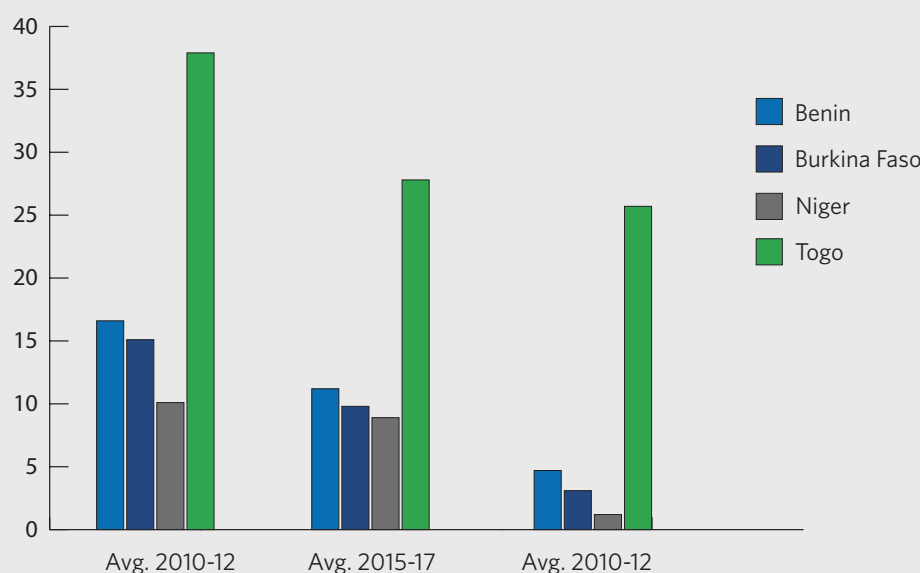
in the region. The road corridors connecting the seaports of Lomé (Togo) and Cotonou (Benin) are essential for reaching the inland countries of Burkina Faso and Niger.

These four LDCs have long faced similar trade and development obstacles to their economic growth, including transit, transport, and trade facilitation bottlenecks along key road corridors. This has been influenced by a lack of domestic, economy-wide productive capacities. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the LLDCs’ performance on the Productive Capacities Index (PCI) is among the lowest overall. Indeed, the average score of LLDCs as a group is far below that of other developing countries in all categories, except natural capital. In part, this reflects their continuing dependence on commodities. Of particular importance has been the decline in transit-related

FIGURE 1:

Transport-related productive capacities have declined in West African least developed countries

Performance on the Productive Capacities Index, Transport component



Note: PCI scores range from 0 to 100 inclusive.
Further information and methodological details can be found at <https://pci.unctad.org>

Source: UNCTAD

productive capacities in the four countries (see Figure 1).

Typically, LLDCs' challenges are exacerbated by their reliance on other nations for international trade and transit. They must comply with decisions made by transit nations regarding the cost of crossing borders and utilizing their port or road infrastructure. These challenges pose considerable obstacles to creating prosperity through trade and integrating them into global value chains. Yet, despite the challenges, landlocked nations, when guided by targeted

as weak institutional and regulatory frameworks. These costs are among the key binding constraints to the competitiveness of firms, particularly small and medium-sized enterprises. Solutions, therefore, must go beyond single-country policies in favor of coordinated, multi-stakeholder, cooperative agreements.

Addressing transit-transport issues from a new angle

While the very building blocks of transit and transportation are corridors such as roads, UNCTAD's recent approach to

actions plans for a more seamless and efficient border-crossing, contributing to economic resilience. Moreover, international cooperation in implementing the World Trade Organization's Trade Facilitation Agreement has been strengthened.

The agreement seeks to improve legislation and regulatory practices, harmonizing steps and reducing operational and logistics costs while aligning with international standards. With an emphasis on capacity-building to enhance local stakeholders' skills, knowledge, and institutional capacities, transit and transport working groups were established within the four countries' National Trade Facilitation Committees, enabling them to take ownership of development processes and drive change.

An eye toward future development in LLDCs

Due to their specific features and situations, effective and enhanced partnership is a key solution to addressing the challenges of LLDCs. In this sense, the unique approach to development cooperation as applied in West Africa can serve as a model for others. There is a shared responsibility for this partnership among the three key stakeholders: LLDCs, transit neighbors, and the international community, including the United Nations system.

Specifically, there is a need for LLDCs to formulate and implement holistic programs and build productive capacities. Such programs should aim at building economy-wide, national productive capacities, accelerating economic and export diversification and advancing structural transformation. This will help to achieve the objectives of national and global targets to ensure inclusive and sustainable development.

UNCTAD hopes that the Third UN Conference on LLDCs, hopefully to take place in late 2024, will provide unique opportunities to reverse LLDCs' continued marginalization in global trade, investment, and output. ■

Programs should aim at building economy-wide, national productive capacities, accelerating economic and export diversification and advancing structural transformation

strategies and regulations, have huge potential to leverage their connectivity. In this regard, regional or cross border infrastructure can play an important part in facilitating their beneficial integration into regional and global value chains in sectors where they have comparative advantages.

LLDCs also rely heavily on multimodal transport linkages, which can be costly and time-consuming. Goods arriving at seaports in transit countries must reach their landlocked destinations via inland, often road, corridors. Moreover, weak transit-transport infrastructure and inefficient customs processes add time and costs for traders. Landlocked nations face three important transit-transport delays:

- longer wait times in ports
- corridor delays
- increased dwell time inland

Indeed, landlocked nations must pay high import and export costs, owing to heavy administrative burdens, as well

smoothing development challenges has taken a novel approach. Leveraging the signature of a quadrilateral declaration by the ministers of commerce and transport of the four West African nations mentioned above, we have established a roadmap for realizing their shared vision of converging the regulatory framework for road transport and transit.

Operationalizing this shared vision will require reinforced trade integration at the sub-regional level. Therefore, UNCTAD's program has focused on building institutional capacity and regulatory cooperation to address these complex challenges.

This approach has helped to foster an enabling environment to simplify customs and border regulations along the Lomé-Ouagadougou and Cotonou-Niamey corridors and improve competitiveness. It has also heightened the coordination of cross-border land transport, transit, and trade facilitation operations. It has identified bottlenecks and proposed



The knowledge to avert crises

For decades, vulnerable nations have sought a more accurate and impactful means to evaluate their need for global assistance. Can the new Multidimensional Vulnerability Index (MVI) live up to its promise and more effectively help these countries prepare for risks and threats?

By [Patrick Guillaumont](#), President, Foundation for studies and Research on International Development (FERDI)

It is widely agreed that countries most in need of concessional resources (i.e. finance provided below the market rate) cannot be identified only by gross national income (GNI) per capita. Vulnerable countries often face contractions in national wealth due to economic and environmental shocks, particularly natural hazards. As the frequency and severity of such shocks increases, vulnerable countries also require a broader and sustained allocation of resources.

“Vulnerability” is the risk of a country being durably affected by shocks, whether economic, social, or environmental. It depends on the likely magnitude of the shocks, the country’s exposure to them, and its ability to cope with them (its “resilience”).

If vulnerability is to be used to guide allocation of resources, a quantitative and appropriate index is needed. The search for such an index within the United Nations began three decades ago, driven by small island developing states who sought recognition of their extreme vulnerability, particularly with respect to climate change. Meanwhile, since 2000 the Committee for Development Policy (CDP – a subsidiary body of the UN’s Economic and Social Council) has recognized and measured vulnerability to identify least developed countries. This process saw:

- the adoption of several resolutions calling for the vulnerability of countries to be taken into account (such as resolution 75/215 in December 2020 and resolution 76/203 in December 2021)
- the publication of a UN technical report in 2021 on the possibilities of such an index

▲ Madagascar, a boy takes shelter from the “Tioka” wind. The impetus to create a vulnerability index has been driven by the SIDS to recognise their extreme exposure to risks, especially climate change

- a high-level panel and political consultation in 2022/23 leading to a report in February 2024 proposing a Multidimensional Vulnerability Index (MVI)

After weeks of discussion following the latest report, a consensus recently appeared for a resolution on the MVI to be presented at the UN General Assembly in September.

However, the conceptual framework and principles underpinning the MVI have barely been applied in the various vulnerability indices developed to date, with the exception of CDP’s Economic and Environmental Vulnerability Index

and the Commonwealth Secretariat's Universal Vulnerability Index. FERDI has contributed to the various steps of this evolution by many works reflected in this article, including:

- The Multidimensional Vulnerability Index under the lights: for what purpose? (2024)
- Towards a Multidimensional Vulnerability Index: Six supporting notes (2023)
- How to Take in Account Vulnerability in Aid Allocation and Lack of Human Capital as Well: Improving the Performance Based Allocation (2017)
- An Economic Vulnerability Index: Its Design and Use for International Development Policy (2009)

The MVI conceptual framework

It is important to distinguish between “structural” and “general” vulnerability.

Structural vulnerability includes only those factors that do not depend on a country's current policies, and are entirely determined by external conditions. Only structural vulnerability is relevant for guiding resource allocation. For this reason, the MVI established by the high-level panel is an index of structural vulnerability.

General vulnerability results not only from exogeneous or structural factors, but also from non-structural factors, notably those resulting from current country policy. The high-level panel report proposed to supplement the MVI with a tool called the Vulnerability-Resilience Country Profile (VRCP). The VRCP can take various kinds of vulnerability into account and provide a better characterization of the factors specific to each country.

In addition to the criteria that any composite indicator needs to meet (availability, statistical reliability, and transparency of its components), three distinctive conditions are required to design the vulnerability index. It should be:

- multidimensional, covering the three main dimensions of vulnerability: economic, environmental (mainly climatic), and societal

- universal: applicable to all developing countries, not just a particular category of country
- able to separate structural factors from those dependent on current country policy

This third feature is crucial for the index to be considered as a possible criterion of aid allocation, as it avoids or minimizes “moral hazard” (that is, countries setting policies that do not reduce vulnerability and are likely to lead to them receiving more aid).

The chief arguments for using such a structural vulnerability index as a main criteria for aid allocation are:

- international justice (as a response to structural handicaps)
- effectiveness (as aid is marginally more effective in countries facing shocks)
- transparency (by avoiding multiple discretionary exemptions and specific funding mechanisms to address particular needs linked to vulnerabilities)

Can the MVI live up to its promise?

The MVI is currently based on two pillars: structural vulnerability and lack of structural resilience. Each pillar is made up of 13 indicators covering the three main dimensions mentioned above.

As far as structural vulnerability is concerned, the principles of universality and multidimensionality have been relatively well respected in the MVI. The criterion of exogeneity (structural factors) is naturally the most difficult to meet. This is because the distinction between what comes from current policies and what is inherited (and therefore constitutes a structural factor) can sometimes be blurred. However, this criterion has also been respected, despite a few debatable components (see The Multidimensional Vulnerability Index under the lights: for what purpose?).

The treatment of “resilience” is more questionable. One reason lies in the artificial symmetry the MVI report

has introduced between the three dimensions of structural vulnerability and those signifying lack of structural resilience. In fact, the main structural factors of resilience (infrastructure and human capital) are essentially the same whatever the category of shock. The distribution of components between the three supposed dimensions of resilience does not rely on a clear rationale.

These choices, added to some other debatable technical points in the aggregation of the resilience index, explain some of the anomalies in the final country rankings. Nepal, for instance, is judged to be less vulnerable than India. These anomalies have drawn the attention of several countries. However, the relative position of the country groups does not seem to have raised strong criticisms.

There are many avenues for improvement. Indeed, the MVI is now presented as a “living tool.” The UN must be able to iterate the MVI, considering the scientific criticisms that it will possibly generate. At the same time, it must keep and promote the principles on which the MVI was initially expected to rely (universality, multidimensionality, and exogeneity). This is essential if financial institutions are to seriously consider this type of index as a criterion for allocating resources.

The MVI will not replace GNI per capita in the resource allocation formula – the latter will remain an important criterion. But income will be combined with vulnerability, so that the impact of vulnerability on concessional resource allocation should be stronger for poorer countries.

The MVI is not perfect, and it is open to debate whether it will achieve its intended objective. But it can be easily improved, notably in the choice of indicators and more importantly in the treatment of the structural resilience pillar. It then could be a useful tool to advance to a more preventive – rather than curative – treatment of vulnerability. ■



An international financial system to empower women

The international financial system faces complex challenges in advancing women's well-being and opportunities in low-income countries. What is the World Bank doing to help empower women?

By [Hana Brixi](#), Global Director, Gender, World Bank; and [Ana Maria Munoz Boudet](#), Lead Economist, Gender Group, World Bank

Over a decade ago, the 2012 World Development Report Gender Equality and Development brought women's empowerment into the spotlight of

international development. It solidified gender equality as a core goal for the World Bank Group (WBG) and set the stage for investments that continue to shape our institutional investments in this area.

Data and knowledge for impact

Since then, WBG has invested in generating, distributing, and using data

▲ The World Bank's International Development Association (IDA) is prioritizing gender equality, working with a large network of partners to reach the poorest. Pictured above, women beneficiaries of IDA-funded social protection and nutrition programs in Madagascar

and knowledge to build the evidence base for effective policy design.

One example is the World Bank's Women, Business and the Law (WBL) database, documenting and tracking laws and regulations that affect women's economic participation across 190 countries. It's a key resource for monitoring progress toward Sustainable Development Goal indicator 5.1.1: "Whether or not legal frameworks are in place to promote, enforce and monitor equality and non-discrimination on the basis of sex." The database highlights over 2,000 legal reforms implemented across the world since 1970.

The 2024 edition of the WBL report expands this work toward assessing policy instruments supporting implementation of legal reforms and expanding its coverage to review countries' laws on safeguarding women from violence.

Other efforts such as the Global Findex Database have shone a spotlight on women's financial inclusion, revealing gender gaps in the access and use of bank accounts. It also illustrates successes – for example, how innovations such as mobile money have empowered sub-Saharan African women.

The Gender Data Portal, housing over a thousand indicators disaggregated by sex, also attests to WBG's commitment to provide high-quality data as a global public good, readily accessible to policymakers worldwide. Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, the World Bank deployed innovative methodologies such as high-frequency phone surveys to monitor gender-specific impacts in the labor market and childcare.

Partnering to inform action

World Bank partnerships like the multi-donor Umbrella Facility for Gender Equality (UFGE) further underscore our commitment to generating and translating knowledge into action.

Since its inception in 2012, UFGE has been supporting countries to:

- generate, analyze, and use sex-disaggregated data

- learn from rigorous impact evaluations
- test, adapt, and scale successful programs toward gender equality

UFGE has informed the design and implementation of over 300 WBG projects, policy actions in 105 countries, and innovative approaches in more than 80 private sector companies.

The six Regional Gender Innovation Labs, supported by UFGE, further contribute valuable insights into advancing women's economic opportunities. For example, the labs' Breaking Barriers report, on how occupational segregation contributes to gender gaps and the policies that work best to address it, has shaped over USD 600 million in development spending across 12 countries.

Actions for gender equality

WBG has delivered tangible actions to empower women and girls in client countries. The share of the World Bank's operations that include evidence-based interventions to reduce gender gaps has soared from 50% in fiscal year 2017 to 95% in 2023. Notably, projects addressing gender-based violence have increased from 38 in 2012 to 390 in 2022.

In fiscal year 2022 alone, the International Finance Corporation (IFC), a member of WBG focused on the private sector in developing countries, allocated USD 3.8 billion to investments that incorporate a gender lens in developing countries. In 2023, WBG's Multilateral Investment Guarantee Agency (MIGA) secured over USD 1.2 billion in client lending commitments to women and women-owned businesses.

Simultaneously, the World Bank's International Development Association (IDA) has taken significant strides in prioritizing gender equality, working with a large network of partners to reach the poorest people. In the first 18 months of the current cycle, IDA has supported over 150 country-led actions in key areas such as expanding girls' education

and women's access to skills, childcare, and economic opportunities, and fostering economic and digital inclusion. IDA projects also address gender-based violence, and work toward narrowing gender gaps through fiscal policy and budget systems.

For example, with IDA support, Bangladesh has nearly doubled secondary enrolment for girls, and uplifted one million poor women in rural areas through skills development, livelihood support, safe mobility, and agricultural services. Such investments have contributed to an 80% increase in household incomes. They have also helped over 650,000 entrepreneurs gain access to technical and leadership skills, technology, finance, and markets, and have helped develop frameworks to regulate childcare services and maternity leave and invested in safe mobility for women.

The Sahel Women's Empowerment and Economic Dividend (SWEDD) project series, spanning across the Sahel, is testing, adapting, and scaling innovations with the support of IDA and UFGE. It is addressing the root causes of child marriage, teenage pregnancy, and early school drop-out among adolescent girls, and promoting young women's economic empowerment.

With the involvement of governments, civil society organizations, and international partners such as the United Nations Population Fund, SWEDD mobilizes a wide range of allies, including teachers, religious and community leaders, husbands, and fathers, to facilitate change on the ground. It deploys a comprehensive set of activities, such as 'safe space' clubs and reproductive health services for girls, community schools for husbands, and vocational training for women to enter male-dominated jobs.

Leading by example

We are 'walking the talk' inside WBG by actively promoting gender equality. Women account for 54% of our workforce and 44% of management. We have made significant, externally

recognized strides toward gender equality. In 2022, we earned the Equity, Diversity, and Gender Equality (EDGE) Move certification.

Also in 2022, WBG was recognized as a Platinum Top Global Supplier Diversity and Inclusion (SD&I) Champion by WEConnect International, which recognized our “commitment to global inclusive procurement.” In 2023, WBG exceeded an ambitious target to double its annual corporate procurement from women-owned businesses to 7.4% (from 3.1% in 2018).

Way forward

The path to gender equality is challenging. Obstacles include inadequate services and infrastructure, bias in laws and policies, and entrenched norms and mindsets that influence gender inequality in public and private sector activities as well as personal lives.

Climate change combined with fragility and crises as well as the recent slowdown in economic growth make achieving gender equality more difficult but also more urgent. This is not only because women are disproportionately affected by these adverse developments, but also because women are vital contributors to solving them. There is no way to end poverty on a livable planet without women’s full participation.

We have learned over the past decade that achieving gender equality requires a broad-based concerted effort. Results improve when approaches are comprehensive – for example, complementing reforms and investments with behavioral and norm-changing interventions – and when they are supported by collective action.

In this context, WBG will invest in strengthening global knowledge in newer areas such as social norms and women’s leadership, as well as

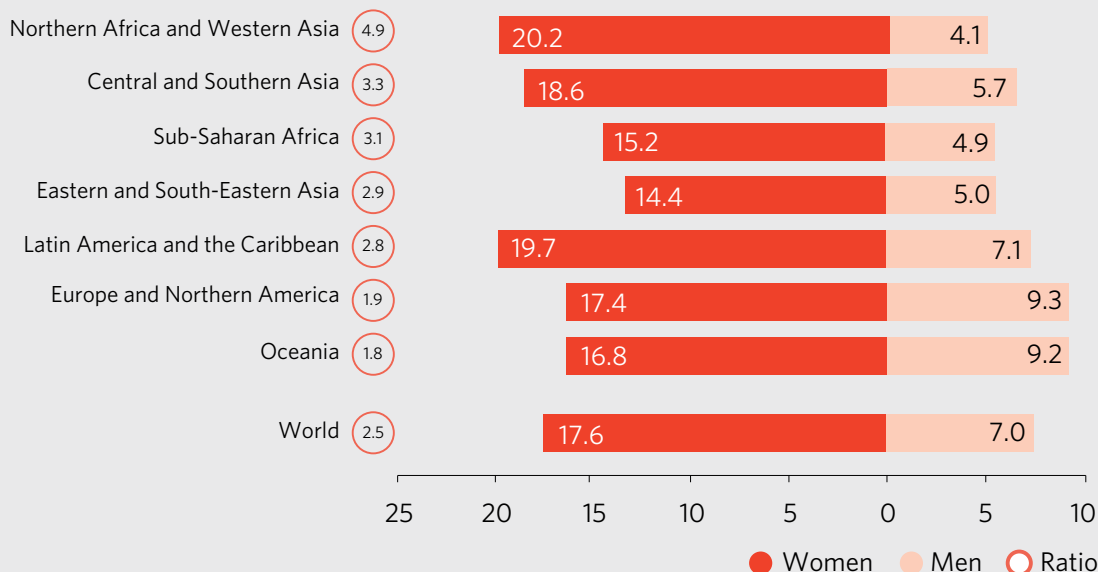
in expanding technical capacity and partnerships to accelerate gender equality for all. WBG is also working to strengthen accountability for gender equality outcomes in its operations and country engagement.

The proposed WBG Gender Strategy for 2024 to 2030 sets three ambitious goals:

- end gender-based violence and elevate human capital
- expand and enable economic opportunities for women
- engage more women as leaders.

We seek to meet these objectives through an ‘all hands on deck’ approach. We will work collectively – across all of WBG, with our partners and all key stakeholders – leveraging knowledge and innovations for action, and mobilizing financing to address both immediate and larger institutional, policy based, and normative barriers to gender equality. ■

FIGURE 1: Proportion of time spent on unpaid domestic and care work by sex (%age) and ratio between women and men (bubbles), 200-2022



Source: Sustainable Development Goals Report 2024, UNDESA



Advancing the Global Agenda through adopting Circular Economy

Circular economy principles are a driving force behind Dubai Electricity and Water Authority (DEWA)'s ongoing commitment to sustainability. The power of the circular economy to revolutionize how we produce, consume, and manage resources is a critical tool in achieving the UN's Agenda 2030

According to the World Economic Forum's [Global Risks Report 2024](#), environmental risks will continue to dominate over the coming decades. Extreme weather events are the top four global risks in terms of severity over the long term, followed by critical changes to Earth systems, biodiversity loss and ecosystem collapse, and natural resource shortages. Pollution is also a major risk, ranked 10th. The circular economy has the potential to help mitigate these risks by applying its principles.

At its core, the circular economy represents a shift in economic thinking by designing out waste and pollution, promoting product and material reuse, and regenerating natural systems. By adhering to these principles, the circular economy not only mitigates environmental degradation but also drives economic growth, social

inclusion, and innovation. Moreover, harnessing circular economy principles will advance achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and targets set under the UN's 2030 agenda.

DEWA's circular economy model

In line with the vision and directives of the wise leadership to foster a sustainable and prosperous future, Dubai Electricity and Water Authority (DEWA) prioritizes sustainable business practices and operations, which have served as a strategic driver behind DEWA's successful sustainable journey.

DEWA's Circular Economy Strategy supports the UAE Circular Economy Policy by focusing on optimizing resource use and enhancing social, economic, and environmental value. This is achieved by encouraging sustainable practices, including recycling resources and reducing waste. Building on the momentum of its circular activities, DEWA continues to move along its sustainable pathway by adopting a clear circular economy model within its strategy. The model is designed to drive the business across the entire value chain and slowly shift away from the traditional linear business model towards a circular one.

DEWA's circular economy model includes five focus pillars that serve as a basis for circularity across the business:

The first is the circular design and use of circular material. This pillar integrates circularity through designing systems to incorporate principles such as circular inflow, recoverability, reusability, refurbishment, and recycling at the end of the product's lifespan.

The second pillar, optimizing asset management, promotes circularity by using predictive maintenance, repairing, and refurbishing instead of replacing.

The third pillar, value retention and end-of-life treatment, aims to retain as much value of assets and products as possible, by reusing materials internally, reselling externally, repairing or refurbishing, and only recycling where no other higher value retention processes are possible.

To improve circular processes, the fourth focus pillar is developing strategic collaboration and circular partnerships in the value chain with material suppliers, end-of-life treatment partners, and customers.

The fifth and final pillar encapsulates DEWA's core business: expanding clean and renewable energy capacity and improving energy and water efficiency across its operations.

DEWA is advancing these five circular priorities and further collaborating with stakeholders in the value chain. By focusing on Smart Users, it is actively supporting its customers in optimising energy consumption and lowering resource usage through use of real-time data and offering Smart Use solutions. It is engaging with suppliers to jointly contribute to the transition towards a circular economy and ensure full value chain collaboration on the use

of circular material and the re-use of assets. Lastly, DEWA sets circular procurement criteria for its assets and equipment to ensure circular procurement is embedded throughout the value chain.

Implementing circular economy solutions

The transformative power of circular economy principles is evident in many of DEWA's flagship operations, which directly contribute to achieve the SDGs. Leading projects include the Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum Solar Park, the largest single-site solar park in the world based on the independent power producer (IPP) model.

By 2030, the solar park will have a production capacity of more than 5,000 megawatts (MW) and will avoid annual carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions of more

DEWA's circular economy model



than 6.5 million tonnes. The solar park supports SDG 7 (Affordable and Clean Energy), contributing to increasing the share of renewables in the energy mix and providing access to affordable, reliable, and modern energy services.

Another important project is DEWA's pumped-storage hydroelectric power plant in Hatta, the first of its kind in the region. With a planned production capacity of 250 MW, a storage capacity of 1,500 MWh, and a life span of up to 80 years, the hydroelectric power station will utilize water from the Hatta Dam and an upper reservoir built in the mountain. This project contributes to several SDGs including SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), as it is expected to provide around 2,000 job opportunities.

In addition to these leading projects, DEWA's existing power generation facilities have embedded sustainability and circular economy practices for many years. For instance, DEWA's thermodynamic digital twin gas turbine intelligent controller – the first of its kind in the world – has achieved substantial results. It has improved gas turbine efficiency by 0.2% to 0.3% per unit and reduced carbon dioxide emissions from nine units by a total of 90,000 tonnes. Improving supply side efficiency is part of DEWA's commitment to the SDGs, directly contributing to the third target of SDG 7.

All these projects align with DEWA's circular economy focus pillars and contribute to achieving the SDGs. They also demonstrate DEWA's commitment to sustainability and environmental conservation across its divisions and departments.

Circular economy and the SDGs

DEWA's circular economy strategy contains a particular mandate to contribute toward many of the strategies and objectives set at global, federal, and local levels, including the SDGs. Since 2016, DEWA has made a decisive effort to systematically explore how it can increase its alignment with the SDGs and be better positioned to

contribute to their effective and efficient delivery. DEWA has aligned its strategies and operations with the SDGs by acknowledging and affirming the Global Goals' importance. It has identified the SDGs of greatest relevance, built capacity, and embedded them in its decision-making processes.

DEWA's efforts in implementing circular economy principles contribute to achieving several SDG targets, most notably SDG 12 (responsible consumption and production). Goal 12 is a keystone for circular economy applications because it promotes sustainable consumption and production patterns, reduces waste generation, and optimizes resource use.

SDG 9 (industry, innovation, and infrastructure) highlights the importance of innovation in product design and manufacturing to eliminate waste and pollution. By keeping products and materials in use, circular economy principles support SDG 11 (sustainable cities and communities) by cutting waste, improving resource efficiency, and enhancing urban resilience.

The circular economy also advocates transitioning from fossil fuels to renewable energy to mitigate environmental impacts and reduce greenhouse gases. This supports the targets set under SDG 7 (affordable and clean energy), SDG 13 (climate action), and SDG 6 (clean water and sanitation). Finally, the circular economy contributes to SDG 17 (partnerships for the goals), as it emphasizes the importance of collaboration, cooperation, and multi-stakeholder partnerships to advance applications of circular economy principles. By driving innovation, creating new job opportunities, and stimulating economic growth, the circular economy plays a pivotal role in advancing the global agenda for generations to come.

In pursuing the SDGs, DEWA's integration of circular economy principles represents a contribution to a transformative pathway toward resilience, prosperity, and equity for current and future generations. ■

About Dubai Electricity and Water Authority PJSC

DEWA was established in 1992 as a result of the merger of the Dubai Electricity Company and the Dubai Water Department. DEWA is the exclusive electricity and water utility provider in Dubai. DEWA listed on the Dubai Financial Market in April, 2022.

DEWA's attractive business profile as viewed by investors has led to the historic success of this public listing that attracted US\$ 85 billion demand and 37 times oversubscription. The Group generates, transmits and distributes electricity and potable water to end users throughout Dubai. DEWA owns 56% of Empower, currently the world's largest district cooling services provider by connected capacity, and owns, manages, operates and maintains district cooling plants and affiliated distribution networks across Dubai.

The Group also comprises a number of other businesses including Mai Dubai, a manufacturer and distributor of bottled water, Digital DEWA, a digital business solutions company, and Etihad ESCO, a company focused on the development and implementation of energy efficient solutions.

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Beyond 0.7%: measuring ODA effectiveness

Figures on official development assistance volumes are silent about ODA results. To support progress on the SDGs, we urgently need new data and holistic evaluation methods to assess the effectiveness of ODA

By [Daniele Guariso](#), Senior Research Associate, The Alan Turing Institute; and [Omar Guerrero](#), Head of Computational Social Science Research, The Alan Turing Institute

A recent Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) press release stated that the organization's

Development Assistance Committee (DAC) substantially increased official development assistance (ODA) in 2023. ODA grew by 1.8% in real terms from 2022, reaching a new record of USD 223.7 billion. This new level of ODA in part reflects donors' support to Ukraine, Gaza, and the West Bank during their respective humanitarian crises.

▲ A school in Kamianske, eastern Ukraine, reopened with EU funding. A deduplication system developed in Ukraine has increased aid impact by improving donor coordination

Despite these efforts, only five DAC members (Denmark, Germany, Luxembourg, Norway, and Sweden) spent at least 0.7% of their gross national income (GNI) on ODA – a goal set by the UN General Assembly since 1970. Collectively, DAC countries' contributions to ODA amounted to just 0.37% of GNI in 2023.

Agenda for Sustainable Development, the challenges involving ODA impact evaluation multiplied. When assessing aid effectiveness through the lens of the SDGs, one needs to quantify impact across multiple, interconnected domains. A high interdependency between the different facets of development is a fundamental feature

the complex interdependencies across SDGs are accounted for, the impact of ODA on development outcomes becomes highly nuanced, heterogeneous across SDG indicators and countries, and far from unequivocal (see Guerrero et al., 2023, Aid effectiveness in sustainable development: A multidimensional approach).

This research shows that while a greater share of aid to government expenditures tends to lead to positive effects on various development indicators, a large share is not a necessary condition for successful outcomes. It suggests that by focusing only on the volume of ODA provided, aid donors may be engaging in misguided efforts.

In addition, this study identifies specific development outcomes in individual countries that exhibit no significant impact from ODA, despite exhibiting overall positive effects in aggregate, highlighting the need for frameworks that allow the performance of country-specific assessments. (Note: a common practice consists of collating cross-national datasets and estimating the average (aggregate) impact for an “average country” that is representative of the sample. Hence, the conclusions following such analyses cannot be specific to any individual country in the sample.)

Country-specific and indicator-specific findings on the effectiveness of ODA have substantial implications for how it is administered. It can inform the international community on the best ways to restructure the global aid architecture according to the 2030 Agenda, and place effectiveness as a leading principle guiding ODA allocation.

From an operational perspective, a true focus on results requires a comprehensive understanding of the heterogeneous impact of aid, which requires greater coordination across donors and recipients in terms of development priorities and targets. This, of course, brings a set of new challenges to the table; challenges that

// The need for a more coherent and integrated approach across ODA flows is exacerbated by the reinforcement of new trends shaping the global landscape of international assistance

The challenges of assessing aid effectiveness under the SDG perspective

While contributions to ODA are indicative of donor countries' commitment to sustaining international assistance, their impact (if any) is consistently missing from headlines about aid flows on recipient countries. A focus on results constitutes one of the four core principles for effective development cooperation, originally established through a series of High Level Fora held by the OECD between 2003 and 2011. (The other principles include country ownership, inclusive partnerships, and transparency and mutual accountability.)

Despite their implementation challenges, the effectiveness agenda and its principles are considered best practices in development engagement among officials who manage ODA (see Calleja and Cichocka's 2022 working paper for the United Nations University World Institute for Development).

Focusing on results implies leveraging quantifiable outcomes to guide development cooperation. Quantifying aid outcomes involves measurement and data challenges that researchers, analysts, and consultants have dealt with for a long time.

However, with the advent of the 2030

of the 2030 Agenda, as indicated in its founding document:

“The interlinkages and integrated nature of the Sustainable Development Goals are of crucial importance in ensuring that the purpose of the new Agenda is realized.”

Unfortunately, empirical research on aid effectiveness has not fully addressed the complex and interdependent structure of the SDGs. Typically, aid effectiveness assessments focus on a limited number of development outcomes, chiefly GDP growth, or specific sectors (for example, water and sanitation, educational services, public health).

While crucial in providing insights into individual policy domains, domain-specific analyses are unable to shed light on the systemic outcomes of ODA – in other words, ODA's scope of impact on multiple and interdependent development dimensions.

New data and methods can help address SDGs' complexity

New aid data mapped into the SDGs (such as the AidData project) and artificial intelligence/computational frameworks (such as Policy Priority Inference) enable systemic impact evaluation. A recent paper using these novel tools shows that when

will need to be tackled sooner or later anyway.

Aid fragmentation and proliferation calls for increased coordination

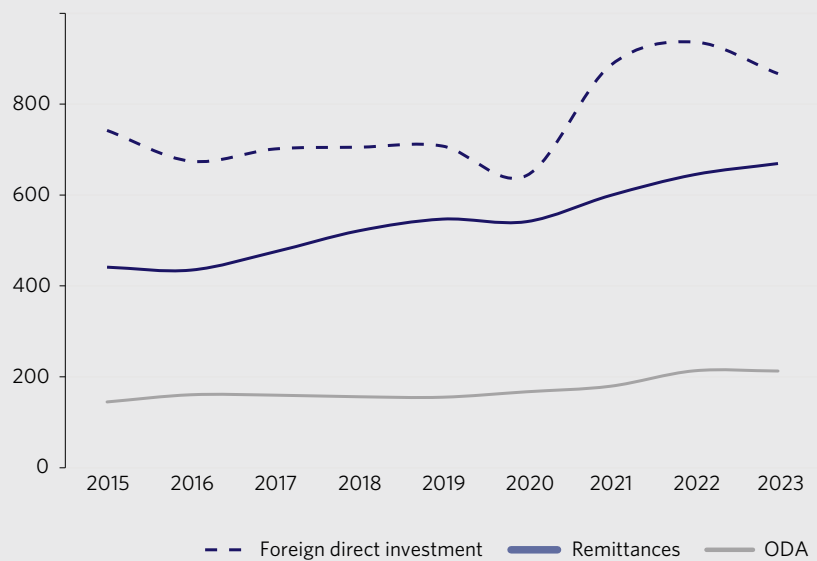
The need for a more coherent and integrated approach across ODA flows is exacerbated by the reinforcement of new trends shaping the global landscape of international assistance. In particular, the proliferation of non-traditional donors and the increasing fragmentation of donor projects adds complexity (see the World Bank's 2024 report *Financing the Future*)

Between 2002 and 2021, the number of providers of official finance has risen from 62 to 112, while the number of donor agencies has more than doubled from 215 to 565 (including both new bilateral and multilateral entities). Consequently, recipient countries have to deal with an increased set of actors, each one with specific goals and requirements. This added complexity could lead to incoherent policy prioritization and additional, often unnecessary, burdens on public servants.

ODA fragmentation is further magnified by an increased fragmentation of the financial assistance provided by donors. For example, between 2000 and 2021, the average size of ODA grants shrank from USD 1.7 million to USD 0.76 million, a reduction of 230%. A larger number of smaller aid projects magnify the transaction and coordination costs of recipient countries, which disproportionately affect developing countries with lower income levels and weak institutional capacity.

Donor coordination (that is, harmonization) has been a key issue in international cooperation since the 2005 Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness. Nonetheless, the risk of aid redundancy still plagues development assistance, even at the level of individual donors (see, for example, the debate around overlapping food assistance in the US).

FIGURE 1: Remittances, foreign direct investment and ODA flows to developing countries, (billions of dollars)



Source: Sustainable Development Goals Report 2024, UNDESA

New digital platforms that identify target populations already covered by humanitarian assistance are a promising venue to avoid the overlap of financial support by multiple agencies (see, for instance, the case of the deduplication system developed in Ukraine with the support of the United Nations Development Programme). However, more efforts are needed to determine which programs are redundant and which ones are the most effective across both the donor community and the whole development spectrum.

Aid coordination requires measuring systemic effectiveness

To reduce the inefficiencies associated with the excessive fragmentation of international assistance, and to avoid redundant projects, traditional and non-traditional donors should work toward improved coordination of aid delivery. Transparent information

sharing and the identification of common development targets are a good starting point, but data and methodological innovations in measuring systemic effectiveness may also be necessary.

The SDGs provide a solid framework around which to orient these efforts. However, the alignment of aid priorities to the 2030 Agenda will only be possible through a better understanding of the impact of different projects on the whole development spectrum, which is hardly informed by siloed analyses.

Assessing the role of international aid in promoting the 2030 Agenda requires new data and methods to measure its effectiveness across multiple development dimensions. Only holistic approaches can increase coordination across donors, recipients, and projects, and help develop coherent aid prioritization strategies to navigate an increasingly complex aid architecture. ■



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Redefining the UN's prime purpose

Events in Ukraine, Gaza, and Haiti have vividly exposed the UN's inability to avert and resolve conflict. The UN apparatus must become more proactive and effective in resolving disputes and bringing peace

By **Richard Gowan**, UN Director, International Crisis Group

Diplomats and international officials in New York sometimes complain that the United Nations is turning into a “big non-governmental organization.” By this they mean that the UN no longer seems to play a significant role in international peace and security – and is increasingly focused on global cooperation in other fields, such as development and humanitarian assistance.

Watching the Security Council divide and argue over Russia's war in Ukraine and Israel's operation in Gaza, many observers predict that the world organization's peacemaking and peacekeeping functions will contract further, even if it remains active on other problems such as climate change.

Some of this pessimism is overstated. While the UN has struggled to deal with many recent crises, it still

oversees more than 60,000 troops and police officers worldwide. That is down from over 100,000 a decade ago, but still a significant total by historical standards. UN mediators and political missions continue to nudge peace processes forward in places like Colombia and Yemen.

When states want to voice their views on a major global crisis, their first ports of call are still the Security Council and General Assembly. And UN aid agencies offer rare – often the only – sources of assistance to suffering civilians in countries like Afghanistan. For a body that is supposedly in decline, the UN is busy.

Yet debates about what the UN's overall priorities should be in an age of rising international competition are mounting. Even some of the organization's leaders appear to think that the UN may be wise to take a lower profile on security concerns and focus its energies elsewhere.

Diplomatic efforts

Secretary-General António Guterres came to office in 2017 promising a “surge of diplomacy” in response to conflicts. He has had a few diplomatic successes, such as helping mediate the Black Sea Grain Initiative between Russia and Ukraine in 2022.

Nonetheless, Guterres has gained a reputation for caution in other crises, and seemed keen to explore what the UN can do on other topics. In 2021, he published a report on the future of multilateralism entitled *Our Common Agenda* that contained bold ideas about the need for states to establish new mechanisms to handle pandemics, regulate artificial intelligence (AI), and govern outer space. Its section on issues like conflict prevention and disarmament was brief and lacked a comparable sense of ambition.

In 2023, Guterres released a fuller *New Agenda for Peace*. This contained a frank assessment of the poor state

◀ Displaced families head from Gaza City to the south of Gaza

of international relations, and urged states to reinvest in diplomacy. It included interesting passages on the security challenges posed by AI, new biotechnologies, and other scientific advances. Yet the document struck a humble note, emphasizing that the UN's ability to address many conflicts is limited and that international interventions often backfire. Instead, one of its themes is that states should invest more in their domestic conflict prevention efforts.

The Common Agenda and New Agenda for Peace were both designed to set the stage for the Summit of the Future, a leaders-level meeting initiated by Guterres that will take place in New York this September. In line with the Common Agenda, the Secretary-General has portrayed the summit as an opportunity for presidents and prime ministers to launch new ideas about global governance. Diplomatic discussions about the summit – and a Pact for the Future that is meant to come out of it – have further highlighted the difficulties of talking about security at the UN.

Many UN members from the so-called Global South have made it clear that the summit and pact should focus on the economic problems that they face today. Scores of developing countries are now carrying unsupportable debt burdens, and want the summit to help them unlock affordable financing. They also see this as an opportunity to push for reforms to the governance of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund to give non-Western states a greater say in their decision-making. While US and European officials say that they cannot give developing countries all that they want, they acknowledge that these economic and financial issues will be crucial to the September summit.

Finding common ground on hard security issues in September also looks difficult. While Austria and Kuwait organized an energetic set of debates

on Security Council reform in the first half of 2024 to feed into the summit, it is clear that agreement on a real Council overhaul is far off. Russia has firmly opposed calls by many UN members for the pact to endorse a drive for nuclear disarmament (other nuclear powers such as the US quietly support Russia on this).

The pact may still include a few ideas about how the UN handles conflicts, such as a call for a new review of the strengths and weaknesses of blue helmet operations. It will also likely endorse efforts to strengthen the UN's Peacebuilding Commission, which works collaboratively with countries to reduce conflict. But while small initiatives like this are useful, they do not seem equal to a moment in which overall levels of conflict are rising and a major power war is now a widely discussed threat.

Finding a new vision

The process leading up to the Summit of the Future does therefore point to a diminishing of the UN's role on security issues. On the one hand, tensions between major powers place hard limits on the UN's peacemaking role. On the other, many members want the UN to prioritize other issues anyway.

It is of course important to recognize that there is no hard and fast distinction between security and non-security issues. The UN has released a long series of reports attempting to widen states' thinking on "human security" and related themes since the end of the Cold War. For the citizens of poor states, economic pressures risk creating political instability. Representatives from small island developing states point out that their countries face existential threats from sea-level rise tied to climate change. Even if the UN's narrowly defined security role is shrinking, multilateral cooperation is still essential to addressing the security of states and individuals in a wider sense.

So it is possible that the UN will see its traditional mediation and peacekeeping roles shrink, while still contributing to making the world a safer place through other strands of work. Diplomats may

fulminate in the Security Council, advocates of a less security-focused UN argue, but international experts can still get on with technical work on development, disease, and so forth. On the ground, UN agencies like the World Food Programme and UNHCR will continue to assist the suffering.

Yet if wars and international tensions continue to mount, all the good work UN staffers do on other issues may count for nought. As the food and energy price shocks associated with Russia's all-out assault on Ukraine showed – and maritime trade disruption following Yemeni attacks on ships in the Red Sea in support of Hamas confirmed – hard security problems can have major economic consequences. As my colleagues at the International Crisis Group have shown, states experiencing conflict also struggle to advance on adapting to the effects of climate change. And in a world where major power tensions could spike unpredictably, the UN may be needed to help freeze and ease conflicts that could otherwise escalate, as it did fairly frequently during the Cold War.

Rather than tiptoe away from addressing peace and security issues, therefore, advocates of multilateral cooperation should continue to focus on what the organization can do to tamp down local wars, ease regional conflicts, and avoid confrontation between the major powers. There is no easy set of recommendations as to how to achieve these goals. António Guterres and the potential candidates to replace him as Secretary-General in 2027 should be talking and listening closely to governments, large and small, about how the UN can play a bigger role in addressing international tensions. Diplomats and UN officials should also make the most of the few hooks that the Pact for the Future will offer on peace and security, such as its calls for a peacekeeping review.

The Summit of the Future is very unlikely to deliver a clear vision of what the UN can do to promote international stability. But the challenge cannot be wished away. ■



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Behind the resource curse

The shift toward cleaner energy requires high volumes of raw materials such as cobalt, copper, and lithium. These critical resources are often extracted from countries with poor governance structures and alarming rates of poverty. To achieve a just transition, we must confront and combat corruption in these resource-rich countries head on

By [Sara Nicoletti](#), Anti-Corruption Coordinator, Resource Matters

As I look out of the window of my apartment, a teenage boy is unlocking an electric scooter through the app on his smartphone. A few meters away, a woman is connecting her electric car to the newly installed charging station. The scooter, the boy's phone, the woman's car, and even the laptop I am writing on all have one thing in common. They all contain a mix of ingredients that allow their batteries to function: lithium, nickel, copper, cobalt... These materials have become critical for our economy. They

power our devices and sustain our lifestyle, with the promise that they will drive us away from fossil fuels, and thus from the threat of climate change.

It is no wonder that demand for these materials has surged in recent years. According to recent statistics, demand for cobalt almost doubled between 2010 and 2017, from 71,000 tons to 136,000 tons. By 2025, it is expected to reach 222,000 tons.

The vast majority of cobalt (around 70%) is extracted in one single country: the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). This concentration puts the country at the heart of the global economy, and at the heart of the fight

against climate change. Despite its potential, the story of Congolese cobalt has been, at least for now, tainted by widespread corruption and missed opportunities to generate wealth for the Congolese population.

The DRC ranks 162nd out of 180 countries in Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index. This has a significantly negative impact on the fight against poverty in the country, where around 60 million people live with less than USD 2.15 per day, according to the World Bank. Corruption cannot be considered the only factor exacerbating poverty, but it causes money that should be destined

◀ Over 8,000 displaced families currently reside in Minova and Bweremana, South Kivu province, DRC. Despite the country's wealth in minerals essential for the green economy, almost 75% of the population live on less than \$2.15 a day and around 17% live in extreme poverty

for public education, health, and infrastructure to end up in the pockets of a few rich individuals.

The mechanics of corruption

How does that work in practice? The system in place is the result of the interaction of three main actors.

First, there are the big multinational mining companies, sometimes backed by the geopolitical interests of foreign states. These business giants set up operations in resource-rich countries with the objective of extracting minerals like cobalt to then export abroad – where they will be refined and enter the batteries that will later power our phones and cars.

Second, on the other side, there are local political elites, who have the power to allocate mining permits and collect taxes. When companies need to obtain a permit fast, or want to get rid of competition, or obtain benefits such as discounts or tax exemptions, the most easily available option is to bribe the political elite.

Usually, companies would not risk getting their hands dirty in a direct way. So it is in these situations that the third category of actors makes its appearance: the intermediaries. These are individuals who have strong connections with all the actors involved, and negotiate with the politicians to get advantages for the companies, finding ways to get some profit for themselves in the process. They manage to do this through bribes and an intricate net of offshore entities that makes it very difficult to trace the money. Those involved in these schemes can earn USD 250,000 a day for their business, the equivalent of what would be needed to build two schools in the DRC. Meanwhile, the population continues

to struggle with poverty (as shown by the Congo Is Not for Sale coalition in a report published in 2021).

Combating corruption: mixed success

Some efforts have been made to hold these actors accountable through judicial means, but the results have not been completely satisfactory. In particular, the US (through its Foreign Corrupt Practices Act) and the UK (through its Bribery Act) have managed to some extent to investigate these corrupt schemes and reach settlements with some of the companies involved.

In 2022 one of the biggest mining companies in the world, the Anglo-Swiss firm Glencore, pleaded guilty to corrupt practices in several countries, and received a fine of more than USD 1 billion, in the context of a settlement with the US, UK, and Brazil. While these initiatives by the judiciary are to be welcomed, they do not always produce an actual change in behavior.

Another option in the US is to sanction individuals under the Global Magnitsky Act for corrupt behavior. US authorities used these powers in 2017 against one of the main intermediaries operating in the Congolese mining sector, preventing him access to the US market. Sanctions are potent measures, and we need to see more jurisdictions adopting them so as to enhance their efficacy, starting with the European Union.

Unfortunately, current geopolitical considerations and the necessity to secure supply of raw materials seem to prevail over concerns of corruption risks in mineral supply chains. Western powers on the one hand and China on the other seem to have started a new scramble for African resources. This risks fueling a race to the bottom when it comes to addressing environmental, human rights, and corruption issues.

The US is considering a sanctions relief on the previously mentioned intermediary, while the UK Serious Fraud Office has dropped a 10-year-long case against another mining company operating in the DRC, the

Kazakh firm ENRC (now ERG). The general sentiment seems to be a willingness to soften anti-corruption measures in exchange for access to critical resources.

We must all do more

However, the fight against corruption is critical to achieving many of the UN Sustainable Development Goals – above all the elimination of poverty. Different actors have different roles to play:

- Lawmakers globally can and should strengthen measures like anti-corruption sanctions, as well as adopt more stringent obligations for companies to conduct due diligence along their supply chains, which would oblige them to identify and mitigate corruption risks.
- Downstream companies (such as phone and car companies), incentivized by legal obligations, should clearly assess corruption risks in their supply chain and put pressure on upstream suppliers to comply with national and international laws.
- Investigative and judicial authorities around the world should increase their efforts to hold companies and individuals to account, using the tools at their disposal.

Lastly, the international community has a fundamental role to play in protecting civil society actors, especially from sourcing countries, who are fighting a battle against the unfair exploitation of their resources, sometimes risking their life and security. Guaranteeing the civic space for people to denounce the fallacies of the system is a non-negotiable requirement to get any results, locally and internationally.

We will only achieve a just transition if it is just for everyone. This will only happen if the fight against corruption is a high priority on the global agenda, and if the people powering this transition can benefit from the mineral richness that is giving the planet a lifeline. ■



Tackling fraud and corruption during crises

The pandemic revealed how rapid crisis spending creates profiteering opportunities for exploitative and corrupt actors. Strengthening anti-corruption measures is urgently needed to ensure that the anticipated investment surge toward achieving Agenda 2030 truly benefits the planet's most vulnerable



◀ **Members of the West Virginia National Guard testing for COVID-19 during the early stages of the pandemic. The global surge in demand for personal protective equipment (PPE) led to widespread claims of profiteering or price-gouging, corrupt acquisition processes and fraudulent supply of faulty goods**

And, of course, elite or less elevated criminal interests can promote or stand in the way of changes, depending on how they affect personal and institutional interests.

Some criminologists have argued that “opportunity makes the thief.” But, while stimulating and provocative, this tells us only part of the story. Opportunity is a necessary but certainly not a sufficient condition for crime. In the case of COVID-19 and other pandemics, the creation of artificial opportunities is a good place to begin our understanding.

There are always “natural” opportunities, and some creative offenders can make use of them, provided they have the networks that are necessary to complete the criminal tasks successfully. These can include negligent or corrupt public officials, auditors, bankers, and customs or law enforcement, some of whom may instigate the corrupt transactions.

But there are also artificial opportunities created (often unintentionally) by some governments and other bodies. These include business and individual support loans (many of which turned out to be grants!) that were made available variably in Global North countries during COVID-19 in ways never before seen, except locally in the aftermath of declared major disasters. Understandably, reviews of these expenditures are conducted nationally, and relate to the programs funded. But there have been some reviews of foreign aid related to COVID-19.

The International Monetary Fund, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, and the World Bank, plus non-governmental

organizations such as Transparency International all issued anti-corruption guides before the pandemic was at its height, but it is uncertain what notice anyone in the Global North or South took of them. There is no international and only little national data, even about prosecutions in the aftermath, nor many evaluations of the processes or impacts of prevention efforts, except by some audit bodies such as the US General Accounting Office and the UK National Audit Office.

Fraud and corruption are not the only reasons for the frustration of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). But they can be significant impairments because of what they reveal (or are believed or claimed to reveal) about the societies and “control systems” in which they occur. SDG 3 on health and wellbeing is at risk if corruption in public health institutions is allowed to thrive, and SDG 16 on justice, peace, and integrity is also imperilled by this and many other factors.

Public health profiteering through the ages

Let us begin with some history. In his book *Death in Hamburg*, Richard Evans asks why nearly 10,000 people were killed in six weeks in Hamburg following the 1892 cholera outbreak, while most of Europe was left almost unscathed. He attributes these excess deaths to:

- Hamburg’s “free city” status
- a laissez-faire neglect of public-health policy
- adoption of medical theories with a weak evidence base
- the miserable living conditions of the poor

However, Evans notes (personal communication) that there was little evidence of corruption in the public administration in Hamburg at that time.

Wartime exploitation by some businesspeople – if and when exposed – led to public reaction in legislation against profiteering in the UK and “price gouging” in the US (federally). A range of natural and corporate-

By **Michael Levi**, Professor of Criminology, Cardiff University

C OVID-19 was the first pandemic of the cyber era. But it is far from being the first epidemic or pandemic (or other natural and/or human-made disaster) that has had a connection to fraud or corruption. Nineteenth-century epidemics generated opportunities for fraudulent (and for scientifically mistaken) medicines and for corrupt public works – provided that governments were persuaded that illnesses could and should be reduced by new public works and awarded insiders the contracts.

aggravated disasters in the Global North and South have prompted similar responses (as I and Russell Smith note in *Fraud and its relationship to pandemics and economic crises: From Spanish flu to COVID-19*). However, the price mechanism also works to equate demand and supply. The surge in demand for scarce goods like personal protective equipment during COVID led to price rises to ensure ‘better’ supplies in the Global North (even if some of them turned out not to work).

Crimes against public and government

There are two kinds of circumstances under which fraud and corruption flourish during pandemics (and will do so in the future): public-facing and government-facing crimes. Much effort and resource went into combating public-facing frauds in the UK during COVID-19, reflecting law enforcement and bankers’ assessments of extra risks. There are many important lessons here for SDG 16, SDG 3 (in the case of health scams), and emerging crime threats to other SDGs. For reasons of space, I will focus here on government-facing fraud and corruption threats that also harm the public.

Past health emergencies and natural disasters have been plagued by corruption challenges. In the United States, which tends to prosecute aggressively, the aftermath of Hurricanes Katrina, Rita, and Wilma saw numerous cases of corruption, with over 1,439 people charged by 2011 for crimes including:

- fraudulent charities
- government and private-sector benefit fraud
- identity theft
- government contract and procurement fraud
- public corruption

When Ebola caused a crisis in west Africa, corruption led to the diversion of funds and supplies and compromised containment measures, due to citizen bribery to evade restrictions on their movement. In several African, Asian,

and Latin American countries, senior public officials were charged with corruption during COVID-19 (see U4’s article *COVID-19 and corruption* and Transparency International’s report *The Ignored Pandemic*).

In many such countries, corruption in service delivery inhibited access to healthcare for the most vulnerable groups, though vaccine hoarding (and the inability to distribute deteriorating vaccines) also imperiled SDG 3. SDGs 6 (clean water and sanitation), 7 (affordable and clean energy) and 13 (climate action) also generate risks: longstanding carbon credit frauds against government and investors also affect the environment when they are not real, and can even undermine public confidence in investment media.

As Malcolm Sparrow argues in his book *The Character of Harms*, it makes a difference to our conception of harm and threat whether people are “conscious opponents” and, by extension, what sort of conscious opponents they are. Those collecting evidence for the links with the SDGs should be neutral as to whether the misconduct is called “fraud” or “corruption” and whether it is handled through the criminal or regulatory process. The key thing is the harm that undermines the progress toward the SDGs, and how we can mitigate it: just because offenders don’t deal drugs or look like gangsters does not mean they should not be characterized as “organised criminals.”

Control measures

Below I outline some suggested measures to minimize fraud and corruption in future pandemics:

- Mainstream anti-corruption into the pandemic preparedness and response plan.
- Pre-assess fraud and corruption risks in government and private sector schemes.
- Support a wide range of civil society participants in their fraud and corruption prevention efforts.
- Commit to transparency in loans and other government funding,

and conduct link analysis into the relationships between ‘borrowers’ using criminal and commercial intelligence databases. Then, act on that intelligence to close down the operations, whether or not accompanied by criminal sanctions. The earlier this is done, the more money is saved, which is cheaper than chasing the money afterwards.

- Commit to transparent and accountable procurement, with less overriding of controls than was noted in COVID-19 procurement, and early follow-up by auditors for links between contractors and suppliers waived through normal procurement rules.
- Use money laundering and counter-fraud controls more proactively. Often a long time elapses between the commission of fraud and its detection by the victim or a public or private sector third party. Law enforcement resources are also a major constraint (even if the “case” reaches that stage); slack record keeping and a need for international cooperation may make conviction impossible. In larger cases, professional intermediaries and bank accounts are necessary components in presenting a plausible front and in obtaining and laundering the funds, and sending them to foreign locations from which asset recovery is difficult.
- Invest in monitoring and evaluation to learn critical lessons. Maintain that institutional learning when staff leave.

Zero fraud and corruption are not plausible objectives. But keeping them to a low level, and realistic planning for future pandemics and climate change emergencies should be routine for all countries in the Global North and South. Even without corruption, there remain huge challenges in attaining any or all of the SDGs. But the level of allegations about corrupt insider benefits during COVID-19 de-legitimizes governments and international bodies ■

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How conflict drives hunger for women and girls

Women around the world face the brunt of severe hunger, with conflicts exacerbating the inequality. Ending this discrimination requires empowering more women and girls to lead on building peace and food security for all

By [Jemimah Njuki](#), Chief, Economic Empowerment, UN Women; and [Carla Kraft](#), Policy Specialist, Sustainable Development, UN Women

Hunger is both a cause and result of conflict. And for the over 614 million women and girls living in conflict-affected places, hunger is a reality. In countries facing conflict and hunger, women often eat last and least – sacrificing for their families.

Conflict can cause food shortages and the severe disruption of economic activities, threatening the means of survival of entire populations. Additionally, wars commonly trigger the displacement of huge numbers of people, most of them women and

girls, cutting them off from their food supplies and livelihoods. Conflict reduces the amount of food available, and people's ability to access food, food markets, and healthcare. Conflict and displacement have also forced women to abandon their jobs or miss planting seasons.

Of the 345 million people who are severely hungry in the world right now, nearly 60% are women and girls. The proportion is higher in countries suffering from conflict, where women are trapped in a cycle of disadvantage, poverty, and displacement. In countries and regions including Afghanistan, Ukraine, Gaza, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Myanmar, Africa's Sahel region, South Sudan, Syria, and Yemen, women

and girls are facing hunger crises due to conflict and fragility.

In Syria, the war has pushed more women to become the main breadwinners, many having to work for the first time with few skills to secure a decent job and fair pay. What little they make barely covers their families' expenses. According to an Oxfam study, women-headed households are among the hardest hit by hunger, reporting a significant decline in their food consumption, and having to skip meals.

At the height of the crisis in Ukraine, assessments showed food security and mental health were bigger worries for women than men, with 52% of Ukrainian women surveyed saying food security was one of their biggest

◀ **Ola al-Aghbary has been an activist in Yemen since 2011, focusing on youth and women empowerment to foster positive change. Yemen has been torn apart by civil war for a decade**

concerns, compared with just 29% of men. A UN Women report shows that war-induced food price hikes and shortages have widened the global gender gap in food insecurity, as women reduce their own food intake to give it to other household members. Women-headed households in Ukraine were already more food insecure prior to the war, with 37.5% of them experiencing moderate or severe levels of food insecurity compared with 20.5% of male-headed households. Rural women in the territories occupied by the Russian military were increasingly unable to perform agricultural work due to high insecurity and lack of resources.

And the entire population of 2.3 million people in Gaza are facing acute levels of food insecurity, with women finding it harder than men to access food. A report by the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) found that more than half of all Palestinians in Gaza – 1.1 million people – have completely exhausted their food supplies and are facing catastrophic hunger. And with most of Gaza's fertile farmland having been destroyed and almost all agricultural, livestock, and fishing production halted, this is likely to worsen. The most affected are women, especially mothers and those breastfeeding, and children.

Beyond food insecurity

There are many interconnected reasons that conflict causes disproportionate increases in hunger among women and girls, but they boil down to social and economic roles that have been shaped by pervasive gender discrimination. Women are the family caregivers, assuming sole or primary responsibility for taking care of children, elders, and family members who are ill.

This disproportionate impact on women and girls has further

consequences. To cope, some families have resorted to early and forced marriage for girls to sustain themselves. Food-related livelihood activities such as tending fields, foraging for food, or fetching water make women and girls vulnerable to conflict-related sexual violence where conflict parties use such violence.

The scarcity of food during conflict forces women and girls to travel further from their villages in search of nourishment, increasing the likelihood of their encountering armed groups who may use sexual violence. Both the threat and actual experience of conflict-related sexual violence impact the well-being of women and girls (as well as their wider families) and affect their ability to provide food and care for their families.

Women and girls taking action...

Women have also, however, risen to the challenge of feeding their families and communities during conflict. Experience and evidence show that women are more likely to spend their incomes on food, healthcare, and education. Hence, their engagement and leadership are critical for post-conflict recovery. Targeting women as the first beneficiaries of food aid and social protection, as well as helping them and their communities to complete harvests, can contribute significantly to improving household resilience and to peacebuilding.

... but the international community must act too

While the connections between conflict and food insecurity are complex, and better information is needed on the issue, including how conflict aggravates the political and structural violence that contributes to food insecurity, there are several actions that the international community can prioritize.

First is strengthening women's and girls' voice, agency, participation, and leadership in conflict response, recovery, and peacebuilding. Research has shown that a higher presence of female signatories in peace processes decreases the likelihood of food

insecurity in post-conflict societies.

Second is promoting and protecting the right to food by targeting the specific nutrition needs of women and girls, and accelerating the transformation toward more equitable, gender-responsive, and sustainable food systems, as well as equitable access to inputs, technologies, and markets by women.

Third is enhancing gender statistics and sex-disaggregated data to build the evidence base for gender-responsive policy, planning, and reconstruction measures, and to track and monitor the gender-related impacts of food insecurity and energy poverty on women and girls.

Fourth is including food security interventions in peace processes. Sustaining peace encompasses activities aimed at preventing the outbreak, escalation, continuation, and recurrence of conflict, including addressing root causes and moving toward recovery, reconstruction, and development. Opportunities exist for interventions supporting food and nutrition security and agricultural livelihoods to contribute to conflict prevention and sustaining peace and gender equality – so that not only the symptoms but also the root causes of conflicts are addressed.

In 2018, the United Nations Security Council passed a historic resolution recognizing that hunger drives forced displacement – and, conversely, that forced displacement can have a devastating impact on agricultural production. Hunger will never be eliminated without global peace. This resolution called on all parties to armed conflict to comply fully with international humanitarian law and to protect civilian infrastructure critical for the proper functioning of food production and supply systems. International humanitarian law sets out measures to mitigate the impact of armed conflict on civilians.

What is without doubt is that empowering women and girls can end hunger for good and transform whole communities in the process. ■

Supporting women caught in the Palestine conflict

While the war on Gaza devastates all its inhabitants as neighborhoods turn to rubble, the toll on Gazan women is particularly shocking. The world must act now to stop the immediate suffering – and then commit to the harder work of helping women rebuild their lives in a peaceful future

By **Amani Mustafa**, Country Director for Women for Women International, Palestine

At the heart of one of the world's most protracted conflicts lies a group whose voices often go unheard amid the clamor of geopolitical tensions and military posturing: Palestinian women. Caught in the crossfire of a decades-long struggle for self-determination, these women endure unimaginable hardships, yet their resilience and determination remain an inspiration to us all.

As the international community grapples with finding a lasting solution to the Palestine-Israel conflict, it is imperative that we prioritize the needs and rights of Palestinian women, who bear the brunt of the conflict's impact on their daily lives.

From Gaza to the West Bank, Palestinian women face myriad challenges that threaten their safety, well-being, and dignity. The ongoing blockade of Gaza, now in its 15th year, has led to severe shortages of essential goods and services, leaving women and their families struggling to access adequate healthcare, education, and employment opportunities.

The relentless cycle of violence and insecurity in the region further exacerbates their plight, with women and children often bearing the heaviest burden of conflict-related trauma and displacement.

Amid the rubble and ruins of Gaza, women endure the main impact of a

conflict that spares no one. As the war on Gaza enters its fifth month (at the time of writing), the toll on women is staggering. According to UN Women data, an estimated 9,000 women have been killed by Israeli forces in Gaza since the onset of the conflict. Shockingly, this figure is likely an underestimate, as many more women are believed to have perished under the rubble of bombed-out buildings. Each day the conflict persists, an average of 63 women continue to lose their lives, leaving behind shattered families and communities. The toll on mothers is especially heart-wrenching, with an estimated 37 mothers losing their lives every day, robbing their children of crucial protection and support.

The impact of the conflict on women extends far beyond the loss of life. As the violence persists, access to essential resources such as food has become increasingly scarce. Reports indicate that more than 80% of women in Gaza report a significant reduction in family meals since the conflict began. The looming threat of famine further exacerbates this crisis, with limited access to food and humanitarian aid due to restricted border crossings.

Before the escalation of hostilities, around 500 commercial and aid trucks entered Gaza daily. Now, only two border crossings are available, severely limiting the flow of essential supplies. The World Food Programme has warned that it can only meet 20% of its monthly targets, leaving thousands of

families at risk of starvation.

Beyond the visible horrors of death and hunger, women in Gaza grapple with less apparent struggles that exacerbate their daily suffering. Access to menstrual hygiene products is severely limited, forcing many women to resort to makeshift alternatives like tent fabric. This lack of access not only compromises their dignity but also poses significant health risks. Inadequate sanitation facilities further compound women's discomfort, with pregnant women particularly vulnerable to unsanitary conditions. The dire situation underscores the urgent need for humanitarian intervention to address women's unique vulnerabilities and uphold their basic rights and dignity.

Symptom of a wider problem

The plight of women in Gaza is a microcosm of broader systemic challenges that hinder progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Access to adequate healthcare services, including reproductive and maternal healthcare, is critical to addressing women's health challenges and aligning with SDG 3 (good health and well-being). Likewise, improving access to clean water and sanitation facilities is essential for promoting women's health and dignity, aligning with SDG 6 (clean water and sanitation).

Tragically, some women have lost their families or husbands in the conflict, leaving them without vital support networks. Their voices

must be heard in decision-making processes and peacebuilding efforts to achieve lasting peace and sustainable development, aligning with SDG 16 (peace, justice, and strong institutions).

Toward peace, equity, and prosperity

As we strive toward the SDGs by 2030, prioritizing the needs and rights of Palestinian women is paramount. By empowering women, addressing systemic inequalities, and promoting inclusive opportunities, we can create a more sustainable and prosperous future for all Palestinians. Immediate humanitarian action is needed to prevent further loss of life and alleviate suffering in Gaza. The cessation of violence and the swift delivery of humanitarian aid are imperative to save lives and pave the way for a brighter

future. We must stand in solidarity with Palestinian women and work toward a future where peace, justice, and gender equality prevail.

One crucial aspect of supporting Palestinian women in conflict-affected areas is addressing the root causes of the Palestine-Israel conflict for achieving lasting peace and security in the region. This requires genuine political will and commitment from all parties involved to engage in meaningful dialogue and negotiations aimed at finding a just and equitable solution to the conflict. Women must be included as equal partners in these peace processes, as their perspectives and experiences are essential for building sustainable peace.

In conclusion, immediate measures are imperative to tackle the humanitarian crisis in Gaza. This entails removing barriers and constraints on aid distribution and reinstating commercial traffic to effectively address the escalating hunger crisis.

A humanitarian ceasefire is essential to facilitate a comprehensive, collaborative intervention aimed at averting further anguish and loss of life.

Crucially, efforts must focus on bolstering and sustaining humanitarian access to vital resources such as fuel, water, food, and medications, alongside expanding safe passages for aid delivery within Gaza. Ensuring unhindered medical evacuations and actively safeguarding civilians and healthcare infrastructure are also paramount to uphold the functionality of remaining medical facilities.

Lastly, establishing and reinforcing a standardized protocol for evacuating patients requiring medical attention, irrespective of their gender, age, disability, or other characteristic, is of utmost importance.

These initiatives resonate with the SDGs and are pivotal in mitigating the plight of Gazans while fostering a trajectory toward peace, equity, and prosperity. ■

▼ A 12-year-old girl holds her sister in the ruins of their home in Rafah, the Gaza Strip



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Digital: the great global leveler?

Deep-rooted digital divides within and between countries are currently increasing inequalities, with huge disparities in access to technology, infrastructure, and digital literacy. How can the proposed Global Digital Compact create a more inclusive and equitable digital landscape?

By [Carlos Maria Correa](#), Executive Director, The South Centre

As noted in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, “The spread of information and communications technology and global interconnectedness has great potential to accelerate human progress, to bridge the digital divide and to develop knowledge societies.”

However, the digital divide, one of the stark manifestations of the current asymmetries internationally and at the national level, deprives many developing countries of the potential benefits of such technology. About 2.7 billion people are still digitally unconnected. The problem is that, “as technology develops faster, it also becomes essential for more aspects of daily life, including school and

healthcare. As a result, the digital divide is worsening as those with technology get ahead faster, and those without technology are left behind.”

The cost of internet connection in developing countries, which is often higher than in developed countries, creates an additional obstacle. The digital divide has clear gender and income dimensions, as it disproportionately affects women, people with lower income, and marginalized communities.

The digital divide has tangible socio-economic impacts, notably in terms of access to education and health, and in determining the productive profile of a country and the competitiveness of different sectors. Some of these impacts are briefly mentioned below based on findings in South Centre’s research and publications.

Education

Digital tools have a great potential to improve education in developing countries but, as is the case in other areas, their impact will be limited by the major asymmetries in access to infrastructure and digital tools.

As noted by Kishore Singh, in *Harnessing Digital Technologies for Education in Developing Countries: Need for a Judicious Approach*: “The costs of digital devices and tools and services such as computers, tablets,

◀ Members of the Nepalese NGO Women Group Coordination Committee receiving training on the GeoKrishi app. The app provides agricultural content and small-business advice for women farmers



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and smartphones, and broadband services, required for access to digitally supported education, are exorbitant for nearly one-third of the world population, victims of poverty. In a large number of developing countries, especially in the least developed countries, those who are marginalized cannot afford to buy these digital devices. Impediments in access to them must also be seen in terms of the rural-urban divide as people in remote areas are disadvantaged or cut off.”

However, digital technologies under all circumstances “must be treated as only supportive means and complementary tools and should not be allowed to supplant the education system. The usages of digital technologies in education must be allowed so long as the virtual does not become vicious. Public policies should ensure that digital devices as tools remain subservient to the humanistic mission of education.”

Digital health

Digital health is a tool that can “ameliorate efficiency and effectiveness of healthcare systems. Growing penetration of the internet, vast coverage of mobile networks, better digital literacy of the young population, and exponential growth of projects targeting digital healthcare over the last two or so decades are an opportunity for the developing countries to adopt appropriate use of digital technologies for more efficacious health systems which are at par with the developed world” (see Digital Health Challenges in the South: Towards Better Integration of Digital Health Practices).

However, there is still an absence of an institutionalized approach in developing countries to integrate digital health in mainstream healthcare systems: “Countries of the South in general face fragmentation between relevant government entities like those working in information technology, planning, and healthcare that are usually found working in silos.” In addition, implementing digital health requires investment in infrastructure,

acquiring adequate skills and ensuring the connectivity of potential users, especially in rural areas. This is often beyond the reach of many developing countries.

Agriculture

Most developing countries heavily depend on agriculture. Digital technologies can help to increase productivity, but their impact may differ significantly depending on the specific context where they apply. Thus (as noted in Unveiling the Controversies: ICTs in Agriculture and the Challenges for Africa): “In West African countries where agriculture is the backbone of livelihoods, the adoption of ICTs [information and communication technologies] has profound implications for job security and social dynamics that may not be consistent with the effects observed in more economically diversified regions.” Moreover, there is “a growing concern that reliance on ICTs may lead to the erosion of indigenous farming knowledge and practices in Africa. This dependence could make farmers vulnerable to technological disruptions and reduce their self-sufficiency, undermining long-standing agricultural traditions. There is a danger of losing indigenous knowledge and cultural practices to the introduction of smart agriculture practices.”

No one-size-fits-all

These three examples show the complexity of dealing with the digital transformation. The dissemination of digital solutions appears, in principle, highly desirable but may require investments and skills that are not available in developing countries, while in other cases the disruptive effects of digital technologies need to be considered and appropriately managed.

These facts and the extremely wide spectrum of application of such technologies make it particularly difficult to develop an international framework and governance equally suitable to all countries.

This is one of the challenges that the international community will face

in adopting the proposed Global Digital Compact (GDC) in the context of the Summit of the Future. This challenge is compounded by the great fragmentation currently existing in the governance of the digital space.

The proposals made in the UN Secretary-General’s Policy Brief presented some “gaps and shortcomings from the perspective of developing countries’ interests in this area. For example, although the very idea of regulation is acknowledged in the policy brief, it does not envisage a broader role for the UN and multilateral processes to regulate core areas of the digital governance, such as big tech platforms and [artificial intelligence] (AI) development and use” (see The Global Digital Compact: opportunities and challenges for developing countries in a fragmented digital space). It will also be essential that the GDC be conceived as a states-led mechanism (rather than a multistakeholder one that could lead to tech corporations participating in decision-making on the same footing as states.)

It will be essential that the GDC contributes to building a multilateral system that “delivers for everyone, everywhere” with concrete actions toward ensuring a better future for “all of humanity” along the three pillars of the UN system: development, peace and security, and human rights, as already mentioned in the zero draft under negotiation.

However, some key elements are missing in the draft, such as:

- how to deal with the concentration of power by dominant digital companies
- corporate accountability
- decolonization of the data economy
- AI governance
- improvement of digital infrastructure in and transfer of technology to developing countries

Only if these and other development-related issues (such as finance) are properly addressed will the GDC contribute to a digital transformation that really benefits all. ■



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Digital sovereignty can further human rights

In a global digital age, is protecting national sovereignty compatible with upholding human rights? How can the international community protect vulnerable populations from the external forces seeking to use digital infrastructure to control them?

By [Arindrajit Basu](#), PHD Candidate,
Leiden University Faculty of Global
Governance and Affairs

Given sovereignty's origins in authoritarian settings, sovereignty in cyberspace has been criticized as a cover for digital rights violations by states. However, the recent reclaiming of the concept suggests that it can be deployed legally,

morally, and politically as a tool to challenge rather than entrench existing power asymmetries and further human rights.

Sovereignty itself is an amorphous concept that has been developed and utilized to further a range of interests and perspectives. First coined by European colonizers to appropriate land from indigenous communities in the 17th and 18th centuries, the term was

reclaimed by newly independent states in the decolonization era of the 1960s to stake claims over natural resources and forge a more equitable international economic order. Digital sovereignty is a similarly amorphous concept that has been used in a variety of contexts.

In this article, I demonstrate (with the help of examples) how digital sovereignty can both enable and undermine human rights. This depends

◀ **Anti-extradition bill protests in Hong Kong.** The concept of digital sovereignty is a balancing act that can protect or suppress human rights. China's 'Great Firewall' attempts to eliminate online criticism of the government

on whether the concept is used in contexts that entrench the relative power of a dominant entity or in those that challenge extant power and its abuse. This combination of digital sovereignty and human rights is crucial for promoting digital transformation across the world and for attaining the Sustainable Development Goals.

Safeguarding citizens

The first instance is a state utilizing its sovereignty to safeguard the rights of its own citizens against either the private sector or other states. An important example of this is the European Court of Justice (ECJ) invalidating data transfers to United States territory due to the unbridled surveillance conducted by US intelligence agencies on the data of foreigners, including European citizens. The ECJ judgment held that these practices did not comply with the privacy protection and grievance redressal standards in the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights.

The European Court's action furthers a rich legislative and judicial tradition across the European Union that places individual rights at the center of policymaking. Legislation including the Digital Services Act, Digital Markets Act, and the General Data Protection Regulation also assert jurisdictional control over technology companies to protect individual rights and constrain the market power of individual firms.

Clearly, sovereignty is being used on behalf of citizens to challenge the asymmetric surveillance capabilities of the US and the power of large technology companies. Consequently, these are positive examples of "digital sovereignty" discourse and practice.

Resisting international rules

The second case is that of a state

resisting internationally imposed rules that constrain domestic regulatory autonomy.

For two decades, the developing world has objected to internationally binding rules on digital trade. Binding digital trade measures would restrict domestic authority to, among other things:

- compel source code disclosure for purposes such as algorithmic auditing
- impose customs duties on electronic transmissions
- cultivate regulations that aid local businesses and their broader developmental interests

To counter these rules, the developing world has defended its "policy space," understood as the autonomy to create rules without external interference. The autonomy created through policy space is intrinsic to non-interference and state sovereignty.

These narratives have been strongly contested by the developed world since 1998 when e-commerce discussions at the World Trade Organization commenced.

However, in an interesting U-turn, this reasoning was also used by the US trade representative to turn its back on digital trade rules that would hamper its own regulatory autonomy and sovereignty. After a period of sustained campaigning by workers' rights activists and progressive lawmakers, the US too sought its "policy space" to regulate Big Tech and protect its citizens from external security threats posed by geopolitical adversaries. The concept of "policy space" or decision-making autonomy that aids a state's developmental interests and furthers worker rights certainly helps challenge asymmetries.

Communities taking back control

These two instances of positive digital sovereignty involve states using the concept on behalf of their citizens. While sovereignty is generally associated with the rights of states (due to the historic origins of the term),

the same concept has been used by indigenous communities to assert control over resources and heritage that they argue should rightfully belong to them.

Likewise, digital sovereignty has also been used by indigenous communities to voice their interests. The Māori community in New Zealand have reasserted rights over their data, which forms an inviolable part of their cultural heritage. The extraction and exploitation of this data without consent reeks of "digital colonialism." Asserting "sovereignty" over data enables the Māori community to signal their autonomy and take back control. They have channelized this concept into legal processes through which they ensure that the collection and storage of their health data is done in accordance with Māori values.

... but still a shield for states

To be sure, these positive use cases of digital sovereignty need to be contrasted with instances where it serves as a shield for state impunity. Authoritarian states often misuse the concept of digital sovereignty to justify state-backed internet shutdowns or online content restrictions – as with China's Great Firewall. Such measures privilege the state at the expense of individuals. In these cases, it is used by the powerful to entrench power and undermine the rights and interests of the relatively powerless. The application of international human rights law online is therefore necessary, especially in such instances, to hold states accountable.

Human rights discourse is an important tool for empowering individuals and communities. On their own, however, human rights are not enough to challenge power asymmetries and concentration, which create an uneven playing field that stifles the equitable assertion and enforcement of human rights. With the right checks and balances, digital sovereignty and human rights can coexist – to create a more empowering digital ecosystem for individuals and groups alike. ■



Is clean technology transfer an empty promise?

Technology transfer is fundamental in developing countries' aspirations to decarbonize, yet the flow of green tech from developed nations is far below what's needed. How can we shift investment and political incentives to truly enable the proliferation of sustainable technology worldwide?



◀ **A ministerial mission from Laos on a fact-finding tour of the National Renewable Energy Laboratory, USA**

will enable them to decarbonize.

Many countries aim to receive enough technology to “leapfrog” to cleaner energy systems, fulfilling Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 7 of sustainable energy for all. At the same time, there is also the hope that technology transfer will enable green industrialization, as countries can also manufacture and invent clean technologies. This can also contribute to SDG 9 of sustainable and inclusive industrialization and innovation.

may be more difficult to replicate for most other countries, given China’s vast industrial capacity and long-term green industrial policy. Most other countries will be less able to push green industrialization without devoted public resources to support firms and research. Other countries that have tried to build large-scale capacity in clean energy technology manufacturing using policies like local content requirements have struggled to replicate China’s success.

Arguments over intellectual property

A central reason that knowledge is not shared freely is because it is a source of

China’s success in gaining the technological know-how to decarbonize its industry may be more difficult to replicate for most other countries, given China’s vast industrial capacity and long-term green industrial policy

Emulating China?

The experience of China in manufacturing clean technologies – from solar panels to electric vehicles – is seen as a pathway for green development that could be replicated by other countries. Alongside China’s sizeable local innovative capacities, critical to this success was technology transfer: the knowledge-sharing that enabled recipients to adapt, integrate, or improve technologies. This goes beyond technology “diffusion” (when renewable energy tech is used in a new location.)

China was able to push foreign firms to transfer technologies by using local content requirements and joint ventures. In addition, China has a large internal market for clean technologies which incentivized firms to engage in technology transfer. Yet China’s success in gaining the technological know-how to decarbonize its industry

competitive advantage for companies that develop technologies – and the countries where these companies are based. Some developing nations have therefore argued that for technology transfer to occur, there should be exemptions from intellectual property rights (IPRs) protections. IPRs grant technology holders a temporary monopoly on their inventions, and therefore prevent others from being able to reproduce or innovate on them.

Some have also pushed for the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) technology transfer mechanism to include funding and support to purchase technologies for developing countries. In this way, developing countries hope to build their own local green industries.

Others, however, take the position that exemptions to IPRs will prevent technology diffusion. This is for two

By **Silvia Weko**, Postdoctoral researcher, Friedrich-Alexander University Erlangen-Nürnberg

While countries have pledged to reduce their carbon emissions under the Paris Agreement, many developing nations have argued that they will need support from the international community – and especially richer countries – to do so.

Developing countries’ climate commitments are conditional on them receiving not only funding but also the technology from those richer states that

main reasons. First, some argue that IPRs promote innovation: innovators will only be motivated to create further if they have the certainty from IPRs that their technologies will not be imitated and that they can continue to profit from their inventions.

Second, the certainty that these technologies will not be imitated, combined with lower trade barriers, should further enable the spread of these technologies around the world through international trade.

This has led mainly Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries and especially the US and EU to oppose calls for IPR exemptions, and to push for the UN's technology transfer mechanism to focus on policy support and enabling conditions rather than technologies per se.

However, so far these assumptions are contradicted by China's success in building a clean tech industry – which is instead attributed to its industrial

Mechanism (CDM) was a market-based carbon offsetting scheme where countries could fund projects in developing nations that would count toward the funding countries' emissions reductions.

Therefore, states looked for projects which would get the most “bang for their buck.” Studies on the CDM show that projects that were supposed to transfer technology were more often focused on diffusion, and that most funding went to more attractive markets like China, with only around 5% going to African countries.

Clearly, it's vital that large nations like China decarbonize – but it's also important to ensure that other countries where populations are growing rapidly have access to sustainable energy and the industrialization and innovation advantages these technologies can bring.

These countries are at risk of falling behind due to the widening green

low-carbon technologies in countries with lower rates of energy access, thereby targeting SDG 7.

While these efforts are important, they do not always include a knowledge-sharing component that would help to encourage technology transfer. In addition, they are simply too few and far between to cover the low-carbon technology gap.

Promoting tech transfer going forward

There are some promising mechanisms that, if expanded, could encourage further technology transfer. One is linking the international climate and trade regimes. Already, the Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) stipulates that developed countries “shall provide incentives to enterprises and institutions in their territories for the purpose of promoting and encouraging technology transfer to least-developed country members.”

So far, the reports that developed countries produce about their technology transfer efforts reveal the shortcomings of this approach. However, there is a clear signal from the UNFCCC about which technology is needed, in the form of national technology needs assessments (TNAs). By linking the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the UN, the needs stated in TNAs could be responded to by developed country members of the WTO.

The UN's technology transfer mechanism offers a second promotional route – more specifically the Climate Technology Centre and Network (CTCN). This body already provides policy and technical support for developing countries, but is limited in its scope and budget (in that it does not provide funding for large-scale projects).

Making this a one-stop shop for tech transfer could help to push forward both technology diffusion and transfer, helping countries to achieve their climate targets and contributing to the SDGs. ■

// There are some promising mechanisms that, if expanded, could encourage further technology transfer. One is linking the international climate and trade regimes

policy, innovative capacities, and attractive and large internal market.

The limitations of markets for tech transfer

This points to a larger problem with the expectation that markets alone will enable technology transfer to developing countries. Currently, technology transfer and diffusion are largely left up to market mechanisms and foreign direct investment. However, this means that technology will only flow to larger and more attractive markets.

This is even the case for UN market-based mechanisms that aim to transfer technology while lowering emissions. The UNFCCC's Clean Development

technology gap. There is therefore a need to look beyond markets alone, at initiatives that can help transfer technology to locations that may be less attractive for private finance.

Technology transfer initiatives

Despite the international community's commitments to transfer technology, this is not often a priority compared to technology diffusion. There are currently a patchwork of initiatives that aim to transfer technology, but the resources these initiatives can offer to developing countries are insufficient compared to the support requested. These are largely development projects and public-private partnerships that focus on increasing the installations of



Science for climate policy

The **Global Climate Hub (GCH)** provides science-based solutions for combating the climate crisis. As an offshoot of the UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network, it harnesses a global network of experts.

The GCH works with all relevant stakeholders to design country-specific action plans. It functions in 9 interlinked units that reflect the stages a country will transition through until it achieves climate neutrality and resilience.

- Climate data platforms & digital applications
- Atmospheric physics & climatology
- Energy & transport modelling
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- Climate & health
- Innovation acceleration for climate neutrality & resilience
- Socioeconomic narrative & labor market
- Transformative & participatory approaches
- Education, training, upskilling & reskilling

Located at the ReSEES Laboratory of AUEB and SDU of ATHENA Information Technologies Research Center, the GCH is supported by the Atmospheric Physics Department of the Academy of Athens. The organization is chaired by the world-renowned natural resource economist, Professor Phoebe Koundouri.

Learn more: unsdsn.globalclimatehub.org





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Can AI help us achieve the SDGs?

As momentum on the SDGs stalls, AI's promise of exponential growth could offer much-needed rapid acceleration across the 2030 Agenda. To harness AI effectively, we must ensure it serves those most in need, and that all countries – not just those in the Global North – can tap into its development benefits

By [Paul Jasper](#), Data Innovation Lead, Oxford Policy Management

The whirlwind of artificial intelligence (AI) continues to sweep across headlines, promising revolutionary advancements in everything from self-driving cars to personalized medicine. But amid the hype lies a crucial question: can AI become a powerful tool for tackling some of the world's most pressing development challenges?

The answer is yes – potentially. Used well, AI could significantly accelerate progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These 17 ambitious goals, set by the United Nations, range from eradicating poverty to combating climate change, and aim to achieve a more sustainable future for all.

Let's delve deeper into how AI might be harnessed to make a difference.

Combating climate change (SDG 13)

The fight against climate change could receive a critical boost from AI. Climate modeling is one obvious area where AI is already making rapid advancements possible. Complex climate modeling

◀ [Satellite image of a Mediterranean hurricane approaching Greece. The European Space Agency is using AI in its Destination Earth project, which models the planet's climate system](#)

initiatives like Destination Earth (DestinE), led by the European Space Agency, are providing a deeper understanding of our planetary climate system. AI-powered tools like FireAid, developed by the World Economic Forum, are helping predict wildfires and enabling more effective responses. By analyzing vast amounts of data and identifying trends, AI could empower researchers and policymakers to develop effective solutions in both climate mitigation and adaptation.

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Transforming healthcare and education (SDGs 3 and 4)

The field of education is witnessing a surge in the use of AI-powered tools for personalized learning. These intelligent systems can act as virtual tutors, assisting educators and pupils alike by tailoring learning experiences to individual student needs. This not only caters to different learning styles but could also lead to improved student engagement and outcomes. This approach to learning could become especially important in resource-restrained areas in lower-income

countries and help halt the growing “postcode lottery” of education on a local, national, and international scale.

Similarly, in healthcare, AI is revolutionizing diagnostics through image recognition for diseases like cancer. AI can manage vast amounts of patient data and enable faster and more accurate diagnoses. Additionally, AI-powered “wearables” and personalized medical devices could potentially lead to better health management and improved patient wellbeing.

Eradicating poverty (SDG 1)

AI is offering innovative ways to measure poverty more effectively. New technologies are capable of analyzing huge amounts of data from diverse sources – satellites, mobile phones, and digital finance records, for example – to identify poverty pockets with greater precision.

This, together with AI systems to predict the socio-economic status of potentially vulnerable populations, allows for better targeting of social protection programs to reach those most in need of support.

A joined-up approach: unveiling connections and monitoring progress

AI's potential extends beyond tackling individual goals. It can also help us identify crucial links between seemingly disparate issues and, in turn, inform more effective policymaking.

For example, machine learning techniques have helped make it possible to map household wealth estimates onto daily temperature variations across more than 130 low and middle-income countries. This has established a significant relationship between the two variables: that higher temperature variability results in greater poverty.

This opens up a whole area of policymaking around climate risk insurance for those most vulnerable to temperature variability and other climatic shocks – something that may have been overlooked if AI hadn't enabled the connection between these variables to be made. It also places greater urgency on addressing climate change at an international level as a way of tackling global poverty.

AI is also supporting advanced statistical modeling techniques like “small area estimation.” This allows the generation of granular estimates for measures like poverty at a much lower cost and with greater frequency than traditional methods. It means policymakers can track progress toward specific goals with greater precision and make data-driven decisions.

No silver bullet

While AI presents immense potential, it's important to acknowledge the challenges associated with its implementation. There are several issues which could slow – and in the worst cases negate – progress toward achieving the SDGs.

There are general risks associated with modeling that may be amplified by the use of AI technologies. For example, a concentration of funding and infrastructure in wealthier countries may mean models (such as those predicting climate) and their outputs are skewed toward the biases and aims of institutions in the Global North.

may be unavailable in lower-income countries. In this way, it may act to widen disparities, introducing a two-tier system in which only pupils in richer countries benefit from personalized learning underpinned by AI.

Ethical considerations regarding data privacy and security are also paramount, especially when dealing with sensitive personal information – in the field of healthcare, for example. Policies and regulations need to be established to ensure data is collected, stored, and used responsibly. Importantly, these regulations need to be consistent in scope across country boundaries.

Finally, ensuring transparency in decision-making becomes arguably more crucial in a world where policies are potentially underpinned by AI-assisted evidence. When it comes to targeting social protection, for example, the use of AI (to model poverty levels, perhaps) could be particularly problematic. We may begin to see a “black box” effect where households who don't get selected for social protection support are not able to find out why.

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As well as accelerating progress toward the goals, AI can also play a vital role in monitoring progress, helping inform policy decisions much closer to real time. For example, techniques like remote sensing, which involves analyzing data collected by satellites and other airborne platforms, can be coupled with AI to pinpoint deforestation, gather data on buildings, and assess damage after disasters. This allows for a more comprehensive and timely understanding of progress toward environmental goals.

What's more, regardless of the balance of power in terms of technology and research, there remains the need to understand bias in pre-trained models – as well as the need for more “real world” data to train models in the first place.

We also need to consider the huge levels of energy consumption associated with large AI models and modern technology stacks (such as blockchain). Unless mitigated in some way, this will lend an irony to the use of AI in tackling climate change. Likewise, for education purposes, AI relies on technology which

The road ahead: navigate wisely

The role of policymakers and funders is critical in harnessing the power of AI for the world's good. They need to direct investments toward areas with the most potential impact. At the same time, they must use their power and influence to address issues like “northern bias” and “algorithmic colonialism” to ensure that progress is meaningful. Civil society also has a role to play in advocating for international collaboration, responsible AI development, and equitable access to technology.

In conclusion, AI holds immense potential for accelerating progress toward a more sustainable future. By addressing the challenges, investing wisely, and ensuring ethical considerations are at the forefront of any implementation, we can harness the power of AI to bridge huge development gaps and create a more sustainable future. ■



SDG Action was launched in 2021 by the UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) to support the UN's Decade of Action.

A resource for sustainability practitioners in all sectors, it brings timely analysis of the most pressing challenges. Its emphasis is on identifying opportunities and providing tangible ways to accelerate progress.

The website (www.sdg-action.org) features articles from world-leading experts on all aspects of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and climate action.

Two print editions are released annually, to coincide with major global diplomacy events. These editions provide a framework to understand the complex interdependencies between the SDGs, highlight priorities and dilemmas, and suggest ways to make the greatest impact, fast. The print editions are carbon-neutral and sustainably produced. The carbon emissions generated in manufacturing the paper, and printing and distributing the publications are offset. The paper used is PEFC certified from sustainable sources.

Please contact us at info@sdg-action.org if you would like to share feedback and ideas or would like to be involved.



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