

Geography 171 Essay Two: The Sustainable Development Goals

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The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) represent an ambitious global agenda adopted by world leaders in 2015 to address pressing social, economic, and environmental challenges by 2030. Building on the progress made under the previous Millennium Development Goals, the 17 SDGs and their 169 associated targets aim to end poverty, protect the planet, and ensure prosperity for all (United Nations, 2015). Despite making the efforts to accomplish the goal for a period of 15 years that we are already in the middle of, the progress has been slow in numerous areas. However, not all targets have registered increased movement towards achievement, as some remain stagnant, or worse, deteriorating, regarding the attainability of this revolutionary narrative of development in the remaining decade. An assessment of the state of the current status of the SDGs, what factors are preventing progress from accelerating, and the controversies surrounding the use and relevance of SDGs is relevant to finding a way forward.

Comparing the current state of the development of the world after millennium development goals and in the perspective of the early years of SDG execution, several significant successes and ongoing problems can be indicated. World poverty remains on the same downtrend; now it has reduced to 8.6 percent of the world's population in 2018 as compared to 15.7 percent in 2010 and 10.1 percent in 2015. Nevertheless, poverty reduction has decelerated over the past years, and the COVID-19 pandemic is expected to undo development gains and contribute to 70 million plus new extreme poor in 2020 (United Nations, 2024). The achievement of some health-related targets has been impressive but not all over - though it is true the child and maternal mortality of under-5 year old children has reduced since year 2000, these remain unacceptably high in the worst performing regions. Again, as many as 5, 173, 000 children under the age of five years die yearly with regional and within-country variability (World Health Organization, 2023). Over the past couple of decades, enrolment has greatly increased, however, learning achievement and its quality has

emerged as a critical issue with millions of children now either out of school or in school but unable to read or write simple text or do simple calculations. The trends of gender disparities remain unabated in diverse areas though there has been some reform when it comes to girls schooling and women political participation. Environmental challenges persist as greenhouse gas emissions increase, species loss becomes faster, and unsustainable production and consumption challenge development progress (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2022).

The challenges impeding faster progress on the SDGs are multifaceted and interconnected. Insufficient financing remains a critical obstacle, with an estimated annual funding gap of \$2.5-3 trillion for developing countries to achieve the goals. While official development assistance reached a record high of \$152.8 billion in 2019, it falls far short of what is needed and has been outpaced by private financial flows that are not always aligned with sustainable development priorities (United Nations, 2024). Lastly, weak governance reduces institutional capability, and policy incoherence in many countries affects SDG execution as well as monitoring. This arises from issues of data gaps and poor disaggregation because it remains a challenge to track any progress for these concerns to apply to marginalized groups and ensure no one is left behind. Disagreements, political turbulence and wars disrupt development plans, and the struggle for resources or power results in human suffering. Arguably though, the most significant is that these goals are linked implying that failure in one could reverse gains made in the others. That is, for example, the case with climate change where neglecting actions to address it poses risks of erasing hard-won development successes and deepening inequalities (Sachs et al., 2021).

COVID-19 has added another layer to the achievement of the SDGs diminishing the implementation processes and revealing the vulnerability of progress in regards to most of the goals. Healthcare has been under immense pressure, education affected disrupting the

learning year for millions of learners, and economic stresses have raised poverty and food insecurity. The pandemic crisis has not created inequality but revealed and often worsened existing intercountry and cross-country disparities. At the same time, the crisis has revealed how important structure of SDG framework is in responding to the existing weaknesses and building the resilience. The promise to 'leave no one behind' which forms the sustainable development goal agenda has come under increasing pressure as individuals at the bottom of the social scale have borne the brunt. Sustainable development goals integrated into recovery processes provide a window of opportunity to 'build back better, 'better' in terms of social, economic and environmental sustainability towards the realization of the United Nations' Agenda 2030.

Two SDG goals that face particularly acute challenges are SDG 13 on Climate Action and SDG 10 on Reduced Inequalities. Despite the Paris Agreement and growing awareness of the climate crisis, global greenhouse gas emissions continue to rise, reaching a record high of 59 gigatons of CO₂ equivalent in 2019. The past five years have been the warmest on record, and climate-related disasters are increasing in frequency and intensity (United Nations, 2024). Current national commitments fall far short of what is needed to limit warming to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels and avert catastrophic impacts. Mobilizing sufficient climate finance, particularly for adaptation in vulnerable developing countries, remains an ongoing challenge. The structural drivers of inequality also remain deeply entrenched in many societies. While some countries have made progress in reducing income inequality, in others it continues to rise. Wealth is increasingly concentrated among a small elite, with the richest 1% of the global population now owning 44% of the world's wealth (United Nations, 2024). Inequalities based on gender, ethnicity, disability status and other factors intersect to create compounded disadvantages for marginalized groups.

The COVID-19 pandemic and other recent crises have further highlighted and often exacerbated these challenges related to climate action and inequality. The temporary emissions reductions seen during pandemic lockdowns quickly rebounded, underscoring the need for systemic changes to decarbonize economies. Economic impacts have fallen most heavily on low-wage workers, women, and other vulnerable groups, threatening to widen existing inequalities. At the same time, the massive government interventions and stimulus measures deployed in response to the pandemic demonstrate that ambitious action is possible when there is sufficient political will. The crisis has created openings to accelerate transitions to low-carbon development and strengthen social protection systems in ways that could advance both climate and equity goals (United Nations, 2024).

Despite the importance of the SDGs in focusing global attention on key development priorities, the goals and the broader sustainable development agenda have faced criticism from various quarters. Some argue that the SDGs are overly ambitious and unrealistic, setting targets that are impossible to achieve within the 15-year timeframe. The expansion from 8 Millennium Development Goals to 17 SDGs with 169 targets has been criticized as unwieldy and difficult for countries to effectively implement and monitor. Others contend that the goals fail to adequately address the structural drivers of poverty and inequality, focusing on symptoms rather than root causes. The voluntary nature of the SDG commitments and lack of accountability mechanisms have also drawn skepticism about their ability to drive transformative change.

A more fundamental critique questions whether the SDGs' vision of sustainable development premised on continued economic growth is inherently contradictory and ecologically unsustainable. As Jason Hickel argues, "There is nothing sustainable about the consumption levels of rich nations...If everyone on the planet were to consume as Sweden does, global resource use would exceed 230 billion tons of stuff per year" (Hickel, 2020, p. 1).

He contends that the SDG Index, which ranks countries' progress towards the goals, creates "the illusion that rich countries have high levels of sustainability when in fact they do not" by failing to adequately account for countries' ecological footprints and offshoring of environmental impacts through trade (Hickel, 2020, p. 1). From this perspective, truly sustainable development may require more radical reimagining of economic systems and consumption patterns in wealthy nations.

Others have suggested that the SDGs may need to be suspended or refocused given the urgency of addressing immediate crises. As Jon Lidén argues, "The sustainability goals have become a distraction, hindering a focus on what really matters. The world is currently in the midst of a set of existential, interconnected crises" related to climate change, biodiversity loss, food security, and the dysfunction of global governance systems (Lidén, 2024, p. 2). He proposes temporarily suspending the SDGs to allow countries and the UN to concentrate efforts on climate action, biodiversity conservation, and reforming the international financial system. This would "provide a moral imperative to fix the international financial system" and free up resources currently spent on SDG planning and reporting (Lidén, 2024, p. 2).

Considering these critiques and challenges, it is clear that achieving the SDGs by 2030 will require a dramatic acceleration of efforts and potentially a reimagining of approaches. Mobilizing adequate financing remains critical, including through innovative mechanisms to leverage private investment for sustainable development. Strengthening data systems and statistical capacity is essential for evidence-based policymaking and ensuring no one is left behind. Greater policy coherence is needed to address trade-offs and harness synergies between goals. Perhaps most importantly, realizing the transformative vision of the SDGs demands political will and a recommitment to multilateralism and global cooperation in an increasingly fractured world (Guterres, 2023).

In conclusion, the Sustainable Development Goals provide a crucial framework for addressing global challenges, but progress has been insufficient to meet many 2030 targets. While the SDGs face legitimate criticisms, they continue to offer a valuable shared vision for sustainable development. Moving forward, accelerating progress will require mobilizing more resources, enhancing policy coherence, and fostering greater global cooperation. Adapting the SDG framework to address shortcomings and evolving realities will be essential for creating a more just, resilient, and sustainable world for all.

References

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