

Chapter 4

Preparing for the SDG Summit

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Let me start by stating, in my view, what the SDG Summit should not do. It should not reopen the 2030 Agenda or try to renegotiate it. It should not just reaffirm or repeat what we have been saying since 2015. It should not be just another meeting during the High-Level week in September 2023 that will produce yet another outcome document that will not be relevant beyond the walls of the United Nations conference rooms where it will be negotiated using language from previously agreed documents, thus showing that no new agreements could be reached to make needed transformations. It should also not be doom and gloom despite difficult geopolitical situations with many interlinked crises.

Now let me underscore what the SDG Summit should do. It should re-create the sense of ownership, hope, and enthusiasm that characterized the evolution and adoption of the 2030 Agenda. We have heard that we live in a difficult world, so this kind of hope and enthusiasm is badly needed. It should be characterized by optimism, but also realism. We should be optimistic that we have in the 2030 Agenda a blueprint for recovering from multiple crises that we have been facing in the past few years.

At the same time, we need to be realistic. The pandemic and multiple crises of food and energy, economic and social shifts, dangerous planetary changes and complex geopolitical situation have had a profound effect on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs.

For the first time in the 32 years that the United Nations Development Programme has been calculating it, the Human Development Index (HDI) has declined globally for 2 years in a row showing that human development has fallen back to its 2016 levels. Even countries with the high level of HDI have experienced a 33.3% decline while those with low and medium HDI have experienced a 59.2% decline.¹ This is unprecedented and has reversed much of the progress made toward the SDGs. The latest UN Secretary-General's progress report on SDGs informs us that a preliminary assessment of the roughly 140 targets with data shows only about 12% are on track. More than half, though showing progress, are moderately or severely off track; and, some 30% have either seen no movement or regressed below the 2015 baseline. Under current trends, 575 million people will still be living in extreme poverty in 2030 - and only about one third of countries will meet the target to halve national poverty levels. Food crisis has also increased hunger levels not seen since 2005 and food prices remain higher in more countries than in the period from 2015-2019. The way things are going, it will take 286 years to close gender gaps in legal protection and remove discriminatory laws.²

¹ UNDP (United Nations Development Programme). 2022, [Human Development Report 2021-22](#).

² [Progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals: Towards a Rescue Plan for People and Planet](#), Report of the Secretary-General (Special edition), 2023.

Nevertheless, advances have been made in several areas, even during the pandemic. Thus, for example, the global under-5 mortality rate fell by 12% between 2015 and 2021. HIV infections decreased, particularly in the highest-burdened regions: the estimated 1.5 million new HIV infections in 2021 was almost one-third fewer than in 2010. Between 2015 and 2021, the school completion rate increased from 85% to 87% in primary, from 74% to 77% in lower secondary and from 53% in 2015 to 58% in upper secondary education. Water use efficiency increased by 9% between 2015 and 2020. The global population with access to electricity has increased from 87% in 2015 to 91% in 2021. Labour activity rose by 2.4% in 2021 after COVID. Between 2019 and 2022, 485 policy instruments supporting the shift to sustainable consumption and production were reported by 62 countries and the European Union, increasing linkages with global environmental commitments on climate, biodiversity, pollution and waste.³

We need to build on those and accelerate action for those lagging behind. The SDG Summit is the de facto midpoint review of the 2030 Agenda. If we are to achieve significant progress, we need to correct our course now.

But, before going any further, let me dwell on one important point. We are all calling the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development under the auspices of General Assembly – a mouthful to say – an SDG Summit for ease of reference. However, despite its shortness, the title is not complete as it excludes the rest of the 2030 Agenda. This has led to a discourse where many are forgetting that SDGs are an important part of the 2030 Agenda, but that the 2030 Agenda is much broader. It would be, therefore, very important that we do not forget principles of the 2030 Agenda and that they are also brought to the fore and implemented and reviewed. One principle, at least, has gained a lot of traction, especially in Voluntary National Reviews on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. However, the 2030 Agenda has also other important principles. These are human-rights-based and people-centered approaches which take into account all three dimensions of sustainable development.

This last point is very important if we are serious about combating climate change and keeping the temperature increase at 1.5 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels. Unfortunately, due to the pandemic and the crises, many have been returning to patterns of economic growth that are to the detriment of social and environmental dimensions.

There are still quite a lot of those who believe that protection of the environment, including preserving biodiversity and combating climate change, are “nice-to-haves”. This way of thinking can only lead to more catastrophes that we are experiencing today with extreme weather events. The number of persons affected by disasters per 100,000 people rose from 1,198 during 2005-2015 to 2,113 during 2012-2021, leading to more suffering and destruction particularly for the most vulnerable countries and people.⁴ Thus, the Summit needs to reconfirm the importance, based on evidence, of taking action in all three dimensions of sustainable development.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

There are two more issues that I believe need to be prominent at the Summit, and those are interlinkages and trade-offs among the goals and accelerated actions to achieve the SDGs. Linkages are defined and set up in such a way as to maximize benefits of one goal as well as other goals. This cannot be done randomly, but rather systematically, in order to minimize trade-offs. For this, we need strong science policy interface – policies and strategies that are grounded in science but at the same time are implementable. The scientific community needs to better communicate its findings and make them useful to decision-makers showing benefits but also consequences, while decision-makers have to make more effort to take into account scientific evidence when defining their policies and strategies.

We also need to break silos and make integrated and holistic decisions across sectors and different levels of government including by defining an SDG implementation roadmap and linking implementation to budget processes. Social protection policies to mitigate negative effects would be essential to put in place as distributional and social impacts of policy reforms have to be assessed on various social groups before, during, and after implementation of policies. Actions need to prioritise equity, social justice, climate justice, rights-based approaches, and inclusivity, lead to more sustainable outcomes, reduce trade-offs, support transformative change and advance climate resilient development. Redistributive policies across sectors and regions that shield the poor and vulnerable, social safety nets, equity, inclusion and just transitions – at all scales – can enable deeper societal ambitions and resolve trade-offs when implementing SDGs. For example, in regions with high dependency on fossil fuels for revenue and employment generation, mitigating risk for sustainable development requires policies that promote economic and energy sector diversification and considerations of just transitions principles, processes and practices. It is also important to evaluate and minimise trade-offs by giving emphasis to capacity building, finance, governance, technology transfer, investments, development, context specific gender-based and other social equity considerations with meaningful participation of vulnerable populations.

We need accelerated actions that will lead to speeding implementation. I fully agree that we cannot be ambitious enough if we want to really move forward, but these actions cannot be limited to small projects. We need to create a critical mass of a large number of actions to be commensurate with the task at hand, and we should stop talking about how projects need to be scaled up and just scale them up. Incremental changes will no longer be enough. We need truly transformational shifts. Attention to equity and broad and meaningful participation of all relevant actors in decision-making at all scales can build social trust which builds on equitable sharing of benefits and burdens that deepen and widen support for transformative changes. The whole-of-government and, even more so, the whole-of-society approach is essential for that. The involvement and active participation of civil society in the monitoring and implementation of the SDGs is crucial for the success of the 2030 Agenda. In particular, young people should be genuinely engaged in all policies, not just on climate, and throughout the whole policy cycle: development, implementation and evaluation. It is also necessary to involve social partners and ensure social dialogue as transformations might have different impacts on social groups.

For this, partnerships are very important to leverage the positive effects, minimize the negative effects and build human capacities to be able to deal with transformative changes to accelerate SDGs locally, nationally, regionally and globally. They can help to address governance gaps and trust deficits that undermine the acceleration and to scale civil society and business engagement in sustainable development. Partnerships can also serve as a platform for convening and coordinating diverse actions of numerous actors and for building mutually reinforcing linkages between different sectors and sustainable development goals. The private sector plays an important role in partnerships. Individual companies are increasingly part of an ecosystem of sustainable development partnerships, some led by business, others by governments or civil society. Spatial and location-specific coalitions that bring together companies, investors, governments, civil society and citizens to agree on shared priorities and develop common plans for action offer high potential to achieve scale and systemic impact.

The SDG Summit will be taking place at a pivotal moment where we have all these working streams in motion, stemming from the Secretary General's report – *Our Common Agenda*, the UN Water Conference, the midpoint review of the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction and the HLPF in July.

All these important events will precede the SDG Summit and will define the Summit. If strong and action-oriented outcomes are the result, they will strengthen action and implementation at the SDG Summit. If they are not, the Summit might end on a low note. The outcome of SDG Summit itself – the Political Declaration – is important because it needs to give political guidance for the next four years until the next summit. It is especially important this year when we are at the midpoint in the implementation among so many interlinked crises and extremely challenging geopolitical situations. It should not be just another UN document that will not be understandable or of any value outside the UN corridors. It should really be a call for action with concrete commitments by heads of state and governments to accelerate the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and its SDGs both nationally and globally. It should also give a clear message that all stakeholders need to be engaged if we are to achieve transformative changes in our societies. Business as usual is not an option. We have been repeating this for a number of years, but now the clock is ticking, and we are closer and closer to the point of no return.

The two milestones that will happen after the 2023 SDG Summit are UNFCCC COP 28 and the Summit of the Future. These are the two opportunities that we should not miss to reinforce the commitments and boosts for more targeted action that will hopefully come out of the SDG Summit.

COP 28 will take place in November in Dubai and is extremely important as it marks the end of the first global period of assessment or “stock taking” which began at COP 26. The Paris Agreement established the Global Goal on Adaptation (GGA) with the aim of driving collective action on climate adaptation, while at COP 27 countries decided to establish a framework for achieving the GGA. The framework will be discussed during workshops in the lead-up to COP 28 and should be considered and adopted at COP 28. This and operationalization of a loss and damage fund can enhance action in other SDGs as climate is an enabler for all SDGs. The latest IPCC Synthesis report from March 2023 tells us that climate change has caused widespread

adverse impacts and related losses and damages to nature and people that are unequally distributed across systems, regions and sectors. Economic damages from climate change have been detected in climate-exposed sectors, such as agriculture, forestry, fishery, energy and tourism. Individual livelihoods have been affected through, for example, the destruction of homes and infrastructure and the loss of property and income, human health and food security, with adverse effects on gender and social equity.⁵ This proves that policymakers – when implementing the SDGs – need to take a climate responsive lens to successfully achieve the goals. It also shows the intrinsic interlinkage of all the SDGs with climate. Implementation needs not only to consider impacts of climate change, but also the measures needed to implement the SDGs addressing climate change. Even though UNFCCC is the primary mechanism through which agreements about climate are negotiated, it should not be considered as a separate track from the SDG implementation. Rather, there should be complementarity of policies and actions. This means that in governments and in societies there should not be a divide between those who are engaged in climate action and those who are doing SDG implementation because they are two sides of the same coin. We cannot achieve the SDGs if we don't deal with climate and vice-versa. The IPCC Synthesis report rightly points out that multiple climatic and non-climatic risk drivers interact, resulting in compounding overall risk and risks cascading across sectors and regions. For example, climate-driven food insecurity and supply instability are projected to increase with increasing global warming, interacting with non-climatic risk drivers such as competition for land between urban expansion and food production, pandemics and conflict.⁶

The Summit of the Future was proposed in the UN Secretary-General's report *Our Common Agenda* "to forge a new global consensus on what our future should look like, and what we can do today to secure it."⁷ It will take place in September 2024, while a preparatory ministerial meeting will take place in September this year. The report puts a lot of emphasis on the Summit as an opportunity to advance ideas for governance arrangements in the areas of international concern and proposes to cover the following areas: advancing governance for global public goods and other areas; anticipating sustainable development and climate action beyond 2030; peace and security, for the new agenda for peace; digital technology for the Global Digital Compact; agreement on the sustainable and peaceful use of outer space; major risks and agreement on an Emergency Platform; and succeeding generations, for a possible agreement on a Declaration on Future Generations.⁸ This has met with mixed reactions. Developed countries were largely quite happy with the proposal, developing countries criticized its lack of focus on poverty eradication and means of implementation while civil society is holding its breath hoping that countries will reach an agreement that improves governance of public goods and finds truly transformative actions for our future. Subsequently, the two co-facilitators appointed by the President of the UN General Assembly (Germany and Namibia) have been tasked to facilitate agreement on the scope of the Summit. This has not yet been agreed, but they are proposing to focus on sustainable development and financing, peace and security, digital cooperation, and

⁵ [IPCC 6th Synthesis report](#), March 2023

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Secretary-General's report [Our Common Agenda](#), 2021

⁸ Ibid.

transforming global governance for the future. The months ahead will clarify what will be decided, since the preparatory ministerial meeting for the Summit of the Future will take place in September 2023. At the moment, there are those who are in favour of adopting the scope before the preparatory ministerial meeting and those who want to have the ministers first speak about the scope and then make a decision. Either way, the hope is that there will be more emphasis on three dimensions of SDGs, as the environment is currently missing, as well as climate and good governance and rule of law. The criterion that should be used for the scope should be viewed through a lens of acceleration of implementing the SDGs and achieving agreements and targets from the Paris Agreement on climate.

In conclusion, if we are to achieve the SDGs, we need transformative changes, and these can be only done if things are not undertaken in silos and through a top-down, heavy-handed government approach in a business-as-usual way. We believe that only through multi-stakeholder partnerships, looking at innovative ways to engage stakeholders from all spheres of our lives, public and private, from the global to the community level, will we be able to achieve the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs.

This is why we at the Stakeholder Forum for a Sustainable Future are holding monthly webinars⁹ where we look at the SDG implementation, focusing on interlinkages, trade-offs, implementation and engagement of all stakeholders. These webinars will contribute to the SDG Summit and will serve as a base for developing communities of practice for the implementation of SDGs to proactively enhance collaboration among experts and practitioners. We hope you can join us and support us on the path to the SDG implementation through holistic and interlinked, science- and evidence-based action.

⁹ SF webinars can be accessed through this [link](#).