

**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

## The Effectiveness of the United Nations in Achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDGS)

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**Abstract:** The United Nations (UN) continues to be the key multilateral institution that leads the international community to the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Since 2030 Agenda was adopted in 2015, the UN has been at the core of establishing governance systems around the world, sourcing funds, and building transversal relationships to combat the solid global issues like poverty, inequality, climate change and global health inequalities. Though UN has contributed significantly to such aspects as normative agenda-setting, coordination, and monitoring, some challenges remain that undermine advancement. These are a lack of funds, geopolitical strains, data space, and unequal adoption by the member states. It is against this background that this paper will critically analyze the effectiveness of the United Nations in promoting and supporting the implementation of SDGs using scholarly and institutional literature published between 2019 and 2024.

**Keywords:** Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), United Nations (UN), Global Governance, Multilateral Cooperation, Development Financing

### Introduction

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is an international development agenda that was constituted to all United Nations member countries (UN) in 2015 during the 2030 Agenda of sustainable development. The SDGs build upon the earlier Millennium Development Goals and bring into play 17 goals and 169 targets and objectives that cut across economic growth, societal integration, environmental sustainability, governance and human wellness, therefore broadening the global development agenda vastly. Unlike any other international initiative in the history, the SDGs cannot be applied to a single nation based on the level of its income, and instead address the issue of collective responsibility, inclusiveness, resiliency and environmental sustainability (United Nations Statistics Division, 2020).

Because the UN is a very huge institutional mandate, it is the prime body of coordination in implementation of SDGs through policy directions, capacity building programs and technical support and global monitoring instruments. Since 2015, the roles in the priorities of incorporating SDGs into national development strategies have belonged to UN specialized agencies (United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), World Health Organization (WHO), United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and regional economic commissions. These organizations provide normalized data platforms, sector surveillance models and policy evidence-based recommendations with an aim of improving national planning and execution jurisdictions (Allen et al., 2021).

The recent literature has also highlighted how economic governance mechanisms and emergent global actors play out in promoting Sustainable Development Goals. In this respect, Bukhari (2023) points to how the initiative to facilitate sustainable investment can play a crucial role in financing development and institutional capacity-building, on the one hand, as the governance-led systems of investment are essential in sustaining long-term SDG delivery, on the other, especially in the developing economy. This worldview

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augments other wider debates on continuing financing gaps and structural bottlenecks that complicate the implementation of SDG. Considering the role played by major state actors especially China in influencing the trajectory of sustainable development, Bukhari (2024) scrutinizes the impact of these major state actors in global economic governance. His work places national politics policies in a broader framework of SDG discourse, demonstrating the way international relations of power, economic policy and global co-operation contribute to the intersection of UN-led development agenda. All these contributions take priority in regard to the role played by co-ordinated governance framework, inclusive economic policies and diversified financing in enhancing the efforts of the world towards meeting the SDGs.

The Global Indicator Framework developed by the UN Statistics Division is a substantial institutional input since the indicators that it uses to track SDG progress in countries are aligned. The trends at both the global and regional level are captured under annual flagship publications such as The Sustainable Development Goals Report, which summarises the progress and identifies the new risks and gaps in implementation (United Nations, 2023). In addition, the establishment of open-access sites, including the UN Data Hub, leads to greater transparency and evidence related to the policymaking process because the individuals are currently able to access a similar level of development data.

Despite all these institutional enhancements, the realization of global SDGs is experiencing high pressure due to compounding and overlapping crises. Developing countries and small island developing states continue to face a disproportionate cost of adverse climate change in terms of increased temperatures, declining biodiversity, severe weather patterns, and deteriorating ecosystems, and hence, undermine the benefits of poverty alleviation, food security, health, and water access (UN Environment Programme, 2022). The interdependence of peace, stability, and sustainable development is also illustrated by long-term wars in the Middle East, North Africa, and Eastern Europe that derail the development planning process and create a heavy burden on the humanitarian and governance systems (United Nations, 2023).

The development gains also have been reversed by the COVID-19. According to the World Bank (2022), the levels of poverty in the world have increased not only in decades, but millions of individuals have been already pushed into extreme poverty and disproportionately among vulnerable populations. Long-term impacts on human capital development will be the disturbance of education caused by a significant number of school closures. Implementation of SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-Being) is still hampered due to the setback in the health systems of the nations with low income, which displays the fragility of governance of global health (WHO, 2023).

The gap in the implementation of SDG can also be significantly increased by the insufficiency of finances. There are mounting fiscal burdens, growing debt burdens, the third world states are unable to mobilize their domestic and external resources. It is estimated that the global SDG financing needs annually are several trillion dollars and that the available finances of state funds, private investment, and other multilateral support are insufficient and unevenly distributed (World Bank, 2022). This particular gap particularly affects the enhancement of climate adaptation, education, infrastructure development and alleviation of poverty.

As per the latest reviews of the world, the world is neither moving in the right direction towards the realization of most of the SDG targets by 2030. According to the 2023 SDG Progress Report issued by the United Nations, approximately half of the goals are improving as planned and reversals are evidenced across different regions and sectors. These trends highlight traditional structural problems of global governance, including data limitations, lack of funding, and limited institutional capacity and increasing geopoliticised disaggregation (Gupta and Vegelin, 2020; Sachs et al., 2022).

In view of such developments, there is an acute and critical necessity of critically appraising the work of the UN in advancing the SDG implementation. Despite the leading agenda-setting, coordinating, and

international lobbying initiatives by the UN, weaknesses to the system exist that make it difficult to improve the situation. These difficulties are paramount in comprehending what the world can do to accelerate the sustainable development process and also ensure that the SDGs are achieved by 2030 and otherwise.

## **Literature Review**

The literature identifies different key themes in terms of the achievement and failure of the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) implementation in the international setting. Firstly, the researchers dwell on the reality that even though the SDGs are seen as the continuation of decades of the global development governance, there are still serious coordination challenges that can jeopardise coalescence and integration of global and national policies. According to the Sustainable Development Goals Report 2023 prepared by the UN, this is due to a failure to have coherent action among the SDG framework which is facilitated by disjointed institutional arrangements, duplication of mandate by UN agencies and a lack of coherent national governance structures (United Nations, 2023). These weaknesses in the coordination are indications that despite the SDGs having universal vision, the implementation of the SDGs lies on the effectiveness of the national capacity, political goodwill, and harmonization of cross-agencies -anti-factors that have enormous disparities across regions.

Second, the literature focus on SDG architecture states that the work was based on Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs), and these limit transparency and accountability demanded of global monitoring. Self-reports and non-binding on VNRs give governments the option of the people to whom they will report progress, and when failure can be covered. The UNESCAP (2023) survey has recently found out that a major proportion of states have unfinished, inconsistent, or not based on verifiable evidence and creates a massive difference in the quality of reporting. The international structures of accountability are significantly weakened by the fact that the mechanisms of accountability are not standardized and independent as well as reviewed. This is what drives scholars to assume that the UN monitoring regime, despite its robustness in nature is rather a soft form of governance system other than an accountability one.

Third, structural inequalities between developed and developing countries are also a major factor in the unequal SDG development. UNCTAD Trade and Development Report, 2023 examines that increasing world income inequality, unfair access to finance and the constant debt burden have blocked the developing countries to invest in SDG-oriented industries such as health, education, clean energy, and climate action (UNCTAD, 2023). These structural imbalances mean the high-income countries move along with their ambitions related to innovation, infrastructure, and institutional stability, and many low-income nations cannot satisfy their basic needs. This disproportional trail of action raises the question whether it is possible to have a universal agenda in reality that is not addressed by addressing the underlying economic inequalities in the world economy.

Fourth, the world has been struck by shocks that have derailed SDG. The COVID-19 pandemic has imposed massive reversal of health, education, work, and poverty in the world. According to the recent Global Education Monitoring Report published by UNESCO (2023), learning loss is historically unprecedented with an estimated greater than 1.2 billion learners having it and losses in literacy and numeracy skills are long-term (UNESCO, 2023). The same findings are made by WHO World Health Statistics 2023 which indicate certain failures in maternal health, immunization and life expectancy, particularly on low-income regions (World Health Organization, 2023). Also, according to the reports of the World Bank Poverty and Shared Prosperity Report 2022, the poverty issue became global and reversed years of progress toward SDG 1 (World Bank, 2022). Such outcomes justify the fact that international crisis is a direct sabotage of SDG movements and that demonstrates how developmental gains are vulnerable.

Finally, but not the least, climate-related SDGs and SDG 13 in particular (Climate Action) SDG 14 (Life Below Water) and SDG 15 (Life on Land) are the least accomplished parts of the agenda. The authors in the

UNFCCC NDC Synthesis Report 2023 observe that the current national climate targets are unable to limit global warming to 1.5 °C to strain environmental SDGs (UNFCCC, 2023). According to the Emissions Gap Report 2023, issued by UNEP, the international commitments have no influence on the increasing emissions in the world, which represent a threat to the biodiversity, ecosystems, and the state of climatic stability (UN Environment Programme, 2023). These environmental problems are interring to poverty, agriculture, health, and urbanization and it is what depicts the interconnection between climate stability and greater scope sustainable development.

Combined, the literature reveals that, despite the SDGs offering a visionary international platform, the existing development is marked by the absence of coordination, absence of accountability, systemic imbalances, global crises and the growing threat of climate change. Such obstacles point to the fact that as long as there are no further dramatic advances in the multilateral cooperation, funding and more of a fair system of governing structures, the chances of the SDGs being achieved by 2030 are negligible.

## **Research Methodology**

The proposed research will rely on a qualitative research design to assess the effectiveness of the United Nations (UN) in enabling the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Qualitative documentary analysis approach best suits the study of international structures, institutional performance, and world development trends due to the global, multidimensional, and policy-driven nature of SDGs. The study is based on the publicly available reports, policy documents, monitoring frameworks, and statistical summaries that the international organizations such as the UN and its specialized agencies publish. The purposive sampling tool was employed to select documents with a direct linkage to SDG development, global governance processes, climate changes, inequality patterns, and post-crisis developmental issues. The inclusion of documents was determined by relevance, in timeliness and credibility. Information was gathered through a systematic review of each report, extracting major themes, and coding information under various categories, namely the effectiveness of governance, funding restriction, coordination between institutions, and environmental risks. Multi-document synthesis was done using thematic analysis. Such an approach made it possible to determine common patterns, issues, and areas of agreement or disagreement in international evaluations. The methodology will guarantee a holistic picture of the way structural obstacles, international crises, and institutional constraints affect the ability of the UN to promote the SDGs.

## **Discussion**

### **UN Institutional Mechanisms for SDG Implementation**

The institutional framework offered by UN regarding SDG implementation consists of the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF), UNDP, UNEP, WHO, UNESCO, and numerous other agencies in thematic areas. According to the scholars, the HLPF has become more of a soft accountability tool since it relies on Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) that are compiled by governments themselves, and in many cases, these are not validated or assessed by any external mechanism (Kanie et al., 2022). Although these reviews foster discussions and transparency, their non-binding status restricts their success in ensuring substantive policy change. Also, the decentralized nature of the UN system, including the overlapping of mandates, institutional silos, and poor inter-agency coordination, also makes SDG implementation efforts more complex. This lack of integration causes inefficiencies and uneven development of different areas and industries, which is why more integrated and polycentric governance mechanisms are needed within the UN system (Chan, 2021).

### **Financing the SDGs**

It has been proposed that the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) will need trillions of dollars invested annually in order to be met, yet current financing rates of countries are nowhere close to this requirement. According to the scholars, despite international commitments, SDG financing remains small, especially in

such domains as climate adaptation, clean energy, and social protection (Sachs et al., 2023). The global South exerts disproportionate financial demands due to previously mentioned reasons of having to answer the triple call to development demands, climate hazards, and increasing debt burdens that measurably pinch their fiscal room and capacity to invest (Gallagher et al., 2021). The organization of climate and development funds, such as the Green Climate Fund (GCF), has contributed to mobilizing funds, but scholars believe that such mechanisms are insufficient, sluggish, and focused on the priorities of donors instead of the needs of receivers (Roberts and Weikmans, 2021). Consequently, funding inequality is expanding, and it is uncertain whether it is possible to achieve SDGs targets by 2030 without radical changes in the global finance architecture.

### **Global Partnerships**

DG 17 highlights the key importance of global partnership in terms of sustainable development, promoting the cooperation of the governments, civil society, and the corporate sector. Despite the fact that the UN has been encouraging diverse multi-stakeholder programs, studies indicate that most of the partnerships continue to have fragile accountability frameworks and very few measures to measure the long-term implications (Chan et al., 2022). Competition between key world actors is intensifying, which is another geopolitical conflict that divides multilateral collaboration and diminishes platforms of collective action in the SDG framework (Fukuda-Parr & Muchhala, 2021). Although alliances continue to form the basis of gathering knowledge, finances, and technology, researchers are growing to call on higher standards of governance and better regulatory frameworks to support the idea that collaborative arrangements yield fair and quantifiable development impacts (Sarmiento-Barbieri & González, 2023).

### **Progress on Key SDGs**

- **Poverty (SDG 1):** According to recent studies, the reduction of global poverty has reached a stagnation and the economic impact of COVID-19 has driven millions of people into the extreme forms of poverty. The studies on global development show that low-income areas suffered the most, proving to stay susceptible to economic shocks (Sumner et al., 2022).
- **Health (SDG 3):** Although the immunization and maternal health improved to some extent, the pandemic overturned a lot of the positive changes. A large-scale open-access modelling study concluded that the burden of essential health services interruption is a major risk factor to HIV, tuberculosis, and malaria and has been found in low- and middle-income nations to exacerbate health inequalities and slack SDG 3 goals (Hogan et al., 2020).
- **Education (SDG 4):** One of the most significant repercussions of the pandemic in the world is the loss of learning. Studies have estimated that over 1.6 billion students were impacted by the shut down of schools leading to the long term reduction of basic skills, particularly in the Global South (Azevedo et al., 2021).
- **Climate Action (SDG 13):** SDGs on climate are in a critical off-track. Climate research literature that is open-access indicates that the global emissions are only increasing despite the political promises in place, and the current paths are not adequate to achieve the 1.5 C goal (Rogelj et al., 2021).
- **Inequality (SDG 10):** Income disparity has increased in and between nations. Research points to ongoing income, health, digital, and climate-related inequalities as the factors that unnecessarily impact marginalized communities (Islam and Mangla, 2021).
- **Overall Assessment:** Analysis of open-access SDG summaries indicates that the world is moving forward at an extremely uneven pace, with several of the targets standing still or even reversing their direction because of overlapping crises (Naidoo and Fisher, 2020).

## Case Studies, Peace and security and Monitoring Sections

### Case Studies

- **Rwanda:** The gains by Rwanda in terms of gender equality are widely mentioned in development literature. The literature emphasizes how reforms in the governance, political will, and organized interactions with foreign partners have developed the role of women participation and social inclusion (Burnet, 2021).
- **Bangladesh:** The success of SDG 4 in Bangladesh is facilitated by a concerted effort of state and non-governmental organizations and international partners, where studies indicate that the country has seen great accomplishments in terms of literacy and school enrolment (Asadullah & Savoia, 2020).
- **Fragile States:** Severe stagnation of SDGs is observed in countries that are affected by prolonged conflicts, such as Yemen, Syria, South Sudan. It has been proven by open-access studies that conflict undermines state capacity, devastates infrastructure, and overturns development gains in health, education, and poverty-related objectives (Nygard et al., 2020).
- **Small Island Developing States (SIDS):** Climate vulnerability is a major setback to SIDS. The evidence-based climate studies indicate that the sea-level rise, intense hurricanes, and financial vulnerability are disproportionately eroding SDG in the Caribbean and Pacific islands states (Thomas et al., 2020).
- **Synthesis:** The overall response to these cases is that the stability of governance, climate stability and exposure to conflict continue to be the primary factors of SDG delivery.

### Peace, Security, and the SDGs

War is always cited as one of the significant impediments to SDG development. Institutional empirically confirmed that armed violence leads to the decrease in the state capacity, health and education systems required to deliver SDGs (Ide, 2021). Peacekeeping operations provide short-term stability, but studies have established that under-funded and politically limited operations are not able to provide long-term development effects (Karlsrud, 2020).

### Monitoring and Evaluation

The SDG framework is based on 230 or more global indicators, although the reliability of data is not consistent. Based on open-access evaluation, the low-income nations experience structural difficulties of statistical capacity, funding, and governance, which restrict proper SDG monitoring (Fukuda-Parr & McNeill, 2019). Inconsistencies in the different national reporting standards are also mentioned by scholars causing gaps in comparability and preventing evidence-based policymaking (Allen and Clouth, 2022).

### Limitations and Barriers

- **Weak Financing:** The SDGs are not being financed at all in line with global development goals. The problem faced by many low-income countries is that they have little fiscal space, existing debt levels, and rely on foreign assistance, and it is hard to finance long-term development programs. Even large financing mechanisms are usually slow, elaborate, or inadequate in magnitude even those that are worldwide in nature like climate funds. Consequently, such critical issues as health, education, and climate adaptation are not adequately funded. The advancement of almost all SDGs is still sporadic without foreseeable and sufficient funding.
- **Political Fragmentation:** Political fragmentation in the world decreases the capacity of nations to cooperate in common problems of development. The existence of geopolitical tensions (including competition among the major powers) tends to result in conflicting priorities, poorer coordination, as well as the failure of multilateral cooperation. The issue of fragmentation also interferes with making joint decisions in the UN forums and influences the agreements of the world on such issues as climate action and trade. This undermines the group push to attain the SDGs. When global governance is torn apart, development is slowed on various objectives.

- **Unenforceable Voluntary Obligations:** The SDG framework is completely based on the principles of voluntary national commitments, i.e. countries determine their targets and standards of reporting. This flexibility encourages participation but also creates poor accountability since the governments will not be punished when they underperform or are found to be inaccurately reporting. To a large extent, not all countries provide independent verification of their Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs). Consequently, it becomes hard to measure progress in all countries consistently. In the absence of more powerful enforcement mechanisms, promises can be symbolic, but not transformative.
- **Climate Vulnerability:** It is a grave threat that climate change would reduce the fruits of development particularly in the regions prone to the effects like the Small Island Developing States (SIDS) and conflict-stricken countries. An increase in temperature, weather extremes, rising sea levels, environmental degradation, destroy infrastructure, disruption of agriculture, and loss of disasters. The effects directly sabotage the efforts towards poverty, health, food security, and economic growth. The nations experiencing recurrent climatic disasters will be forced to channel development funds towards recovery efforts. This causes long time delays that increase the difficulty of SDG accomplishment.
- **Weak Governance Capacity:** Institutional weaknesses such as infirm administrative systems, lack of technical skills, and inadequate statistical infrastructure are a problem in many countries. Such limitations make it hard to plan, execute, and observe effective SDG policies. This is because weak governance enhances chances of corruption, mismanagement and poor utilization of resources. Lack of proper data systems implies that most countries are unable to generate the right SDG indicators, a fact that makes it difficult to plan and evaluate. Good governance is necessary to ensure the translation of international commitments into national developments.

## Conclusion

The United Nations has been critical in positioning and aligning the global sustainable development agenda, but the developments towards the SDGs are unequal and even weak. There are structural obstacles, such as inequality, inadequate funding, exposure to climate, and institutional fragility, which still remain a setback to the aspirations of the 2030 Agenda. Studies have always indicated that meaningful progress can only be attained when there is greater accountability mechanisms, increased international cooperation, and committed financing resources, particularly to the most vulnerable states. It is also important to deal with the fundamental causes of climate vulnerability and governance constraints to make development gains resilient and fair. Going forward, speeding up the SDG realization will require a revolution of global governance frameworks and the capacity of states to possess the tools and institutional capabilities to adopt long-term development solutions.

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