



UNITED NATIONS  
SUSTAINABLE  
DEVELOPMENT  
GROUP



# PRIMER ON THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

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A BASIC GUIDE  
TO THE 2030 AGENDA  
AND THE SDGs

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# COMPONENTS OF THE SDG PRIMER

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“Our task is immense, yet many of the pathways to change are in plain sight. But a transformation of our societies and the economies is required to pursue them. We need global action, local action and people action.”

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**AMINA J. MOHAMMED**

UNITED NATIONS DEPUTY SECRETARY-GENERAL

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## PLANNING FOR THE SDGs

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### ENTRY POINTS AS COUNTRIES SEEK SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT PATHWAYS:

- Assessing and aligning plans and budgets
- Localizing the 2030 Agenda to connect knowledge, resources and networks
  - Harnessing the data revolution and technologies
- Supporting accountable, inclusive, agile and responsive public institutions

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## BRINGING IT ALL TOGETHER

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### EXPLORING INTERCONNECTED CHALLENGES AND THEIR SOLUTIONS:

- Links across the SDGs and across economies, societies and the environment
- Broadening planning and budgeting horizons, involving everyone in the country
  - Building peaceful societies and resilience to crisis

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## FINANCING THE SDGs

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### TAPPING MULTIPLE RESOURCES – PRIVATE AND PUBLIC, DOMESTIC AND INTERNATIONAL:

- A common approach to development financing
- Raising domestic revenues and aligning expenditures
- Incentivising and harnessing private finance
- Building more effective international cooperation

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## COLLABORATING ON THE SDGs

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### MOBILIZING BROADER AND AMBITIOUS COALITIONS FOR DECISIVE ACTION, INCLUDING:

- All parts of government
- Private sector partners
- Science, research and academic communities
- Civil society, social movements and public engagement
- Parliaments, human rights institutions and audit bodies

Development is faltering all over the world. The gaps leave many people struggling to make enough income. To secure quality health care and education. To protect themselves when a crisis strikes. Life becomes ever more precarious as forests fall and land degraded by drought no longer yields enough food.

Economies and institutions have in many respects failed to deliver. Not only do they make life worse for many people, but they have put all of us on course to destroy our planet. Our only hope is to change, dramatically.

That's the commitment of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. It links all of the issues of paramount concern today. And it calls on all of us to do our part.

This primer shows what you can do—starting now.

Based on the Foundational Primer prepared by the United Nations, this booklet presents ideas to inspire the work of all parts of governments and societies in the quest for inclusive and sustainable development.

## AN AGENDA FOR THE ENTIRE WORLD

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“This is an Agenda of unprecedented scope and significance. It is accepted by all countries and is applicable to all, taking into account different national realities, capacities and levels of development and respecting national policies and priorities. These are universal goals and targets which involve the entire world, developed and developing countries alike. They are integrated and indivisible and balance the three dimensions of sustainable development.”

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**2030 AGENDA FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT, PARA. 5.**



# 1

## WHY ACT NOW?

Multilateralism and globalization have accelerated economic development, achieving advances unprecedented in human history. Yet extreme inequalities and poverty persist. The climate is in crisis. Economic growth has delivered, but not enough, and not for everyone.

We need solutions that go beyond short-term economic growth, especially at a time when escalating threats erode hard-won development gains—and even imperil our planet’s future. We have to **rethink how we can achieve and sustain progress over time**. Much depends on transforming how countries’ progress on their chosen paths to prosperity to be both economically and socially fair and environmentally responsible.

Sustainable progress must:

- Be inclusive and just for all people.
- Be sustained across generations.
- Protect our planet.

**To address this, all world leaders adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in 2015.** It was a bold commitment by every country, without exception, to embrace sustainable development and **transform current economic models of production and consumption.**

The 2030 Agenda is:

- **Universal:** meant for all people in all countries.
- **Integrated:** all of the **SDGs are interconnected**, reflecting the complex reality of development.
- **Committed to leaving no one behind:** reaching all people, whoever and wherever they are.

To achieve that vision requires reaching the Agenda’s 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which lay out interlinked economic, social and environmental objectives.

Done right, achieving the SDGs will be more than a series of individual results. Collectively, they are a force to accelerate progress across all aspects of our lives. But we must act now, because with the 2030 finish line, we have **only a decade to go**.

### UNDERSTAND MEGATRENDS SUCH AS:

- Poverty and income inequality
- Demographic and social change
- Technological change
- Climate change
- Unsustainable production and consumption
- Increasing uncertainty, shocks and crises

### WE HAVE COMMITTED TO HUMAN RIGHTS...

Commitments to human rights and tackling inequality run through the 2030 Agenda. That means we need to get granular about measures to help countries leave no one behind. Let’s use the wealth of international human rights instruments and expertise to help ask and answer questions like:

- Who has been left out of development progress?
- Which barriers keep people beyond the reach of infrastructure, employment, services and jobs?
- How can vulnerable and isolated communities build resilience to shocks and crises?
- How can those who are excluded, marginalized and vulnerable participate in public life, and hold their leaders to account?

### ...AND GENDER EQUALITY

We have a dedicated goal – SDG 5 – on gender equality and women’s empowerment. Not only is gender equality a fundamental human right but it is also a foundation for all the SDGs. So if we want real, sustainable progress leading to a peaceful, prosperous world, gender equality can’t wait. We must use broad paths that lead forward in every country:

- Uphold all of the rights of women and girls, in law and practice.
- Achieve women’s equal representation in all forms of public and private decision-making.
- Back the commitment to equality with the right resources.

## A NEW WAY OF WORKING

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Right now, political, security, humanitarian and development actors typically operate in separate domains. But what happens when they work together? They can simultaneously reduce risk, cut conflict drivers and up the pace of poverty eradication. In a crisis, meeting people's most urgent needs can accompany longer term steps such as the restoration of essential services, and the promotion of peaceful and inclusive communities.

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Merenda Escolar, Brasília, DF  
Credit: FAO/Ubirajara Machado



# 2

## BRINGING IT ALL TOGETHER

The SDGs reflect **the complex interplay among social, environmental and economic systems**. Progress on one dimension can result in multiple, ripple effects on another, some positive, some negative.

Instinctively, we know the linkages. Climate change poses obvious threats to social well being and the economy. For example, when hurricanes, cyclones and typhoons hit, countries rely on loans to recover, leaving them little fiscal space to address the needs of those who are hardest hit. At the same time, poverty also hinders the ability to be better prepared when natural disasters strike, and for public spending in key areas such as health. Meanwhile, a highly unequal society that does not guarantee decent work and quality services for all threatens the social fabric. Gender discrimination prevents half the world's population from lives of dignity as full members of their community and country.

But not all linkages are obvious, and our challenge is to define how to act on them and address unintended consequences, say of manufacturing and energy investment decisions alongside environmental protection objectives, for example. The related technical and political difficulties explain a long history of doing development issue by issue, institution by institution.

But as the real costs of traditional economic policies become evident, we know we are in an era where the default, well-established ways of doing development – business as usual – cannot continue. **If we don't act** on the understanding that climate change has environmental, social and economic consequences and vice versa, to take just one example, **our future is in peril**.

### IT'S ABOUT INTERCONNECTED SYSTEMS

The SDGs call on the world to prosper faster and farther but in ways that guarantee the well-being of our planet and of all people so no one is left behind. The only way towards that vision is to:

- **First, understand the connections** across goals and dimensions

of development, institutions and levels of governance, and over time, and

- **Then take strategic actions** that are coherent and collaborative across these connections.

This includes governments working with longer and broader planning and budgeting horizons, and involving all parts of society. It will also mean applying more sophisticated data and techniques to understand how these connections change and influence each other.

As these relationships become more fully understood, we are in a better position to manage potential trade-offs and identify elements that can spark deeper and broader progress. An investment today in health care for all might mean tomorrow's more productive workforce and steady jobs for a new generation even larger than the last. Investment in simple high-efficiency cookstoves for poor communities could mean the start of a long-term transition to reliable greener energy while immediately improving food, air and water quality and helping small businesses.

### INTEGRATION: WHERE DO WE BEGIN?

New resources are becoming available to countries to think and plan in more integrated ways. For instance, the United Nations is expanding the ways it brings experts from across its global system together to understand and address country-specific and complex challenges. There are many tools available to better model and predict the interactions across different sectors. There is huge potential from better use of new data and digital technologies. Partnerships with a broad range of public and private institutions and networks can help apply more of these new and emerging approaches to supporting countries with integrated pathways to sustainable development.

### FUNDAMENTAL LINKS: PEACE AND PREVENTION

The 2030 Agenda recognizes that progress can only be sustained if development is linked with human rights, peace and security. This means that investments to prevent conflict, build peace and improve resilience to crisis should all be critical considerations in national development strategies.

Working seamlessly across sectors, institutions and time horizons is essential for aligning peace, security and development efforts so that they are all squarely aimed at prevention. What's more: integrating action on the SDGs and stressing resilience and sustaining peace can help countries accelerate progress and protect gains, including through better results in preventing, mitigating and preparing for risks.

# 3

## PLANNING FOR THE SDGs

Each country must find its own path to sustainable development, suited to their specific context. Given complex challenges and equally complex demands from the SDGs, governments have to find improved ways to operate.

That means identifying and choosing key entry points to accelerate pathways to sustainable development, instituting policies that bridge economic, social and environmental concerns. Or ministries regularly working closely together instead of mostly on their own. And strengthening ties between local and central governments, with better alignment of their planning cycles over time, with an eye to the well-being of future generations.

### WHERE DO WE GO AS A NATION?

The SDGs and their targets are global and aspirational. But their achievement needs countries to define how to incorporate them in their national development plans and budgets.

Starting with a clear understanding of where countries want to be by 2030 and working backwards to identify how to reach that vision, across each sector, region and population group, can help define a sustainable development path.

### WHERE TO BEGIN?

**First: assess.** Use the systems approach to explore often-competing priorities, and the potential sequencing of various investments and interventions.

**Then: align** plans and budgets, such as by:

- Strengthening or establishing **coordination and engagement mechanisms** for different sectors, levels of government and stakeholders.
- Establishing common **SDG baselines** to track progress across the government.
- Bringing different actors together around **key priorities** that require coherent and joined-up leadership, investment and action.

- Creating common **resource estimates, financing strategies and monitoring and evaluation strategies.**

### LOCALIZING THE 2030 AGENDA

Achieving the SDGs will largely depend on making them a reality at the local level—in communities, cities and regions. Localizing the 2030 Agenda means **convening** local people and institutions with central roles in responding to pressing local issues. Local government authorities will likely be involved, but so might local businesses, community groups and civil society organizations, among many others.

They all bring **knowledge, resources and networks** to influence change. By joining forces, they can accelerate a process of defining and implementing the most meaningful local solutions and monitoring progress. Capacity-building will be crucial, including to manage broader participation and partnerships.

**Linking** local and national SDG action can speed the pace of progress for the entire country—plus help ensure that no one is left behind. A few ideas:

- Aligning national and local plans.
- Better use of disaggregated data.
- Connecting measures of local and national progress.
- Establishing local-national forums for dialogue, knowledge exchange and joint action.
- Designing explicit measures to leave no group or locality behind.
- Ensuring that localities have sufficient resources, including from public financing, to meet their responsibilities.

All of these processes can build trust and relationships, revving up the whole-of-government and whole-of-society momentum required by the SDGs.

### HARNESSING DATA

Quality data, indicators and statistics will drive the 2030 Agenda, underpinning progressively better policymaking that is firmly grounded in evidence. Yet current statistical capacities in many countries lag behind. From satellites to mobile phones to artificial intelligence, technology and the 4th industrial revolution are opening many new possibilities to close the gaps. Some countries are already leading the way. Others require targeted support to catch up.

Here are just a few examples of the **data revolution**:

- Spending patterns on mobile phone services can provide proxy indicators of income levels.
- Sensors connected to water pumps can track access to clean water.
- Speech-to-text analytics on local radio content can reveal concerns about discrimination and support policy responses.
- Combining satellite imagery, crowd-sourced witness accounts and open data can help track deforestation.
- Sentiment analysis of social media can reveal public opinion on effective governance, public service delivery or human rights.





## KEEP THE DIGITAL DIVIDE IN MIND

The digital divide means some populations cannot effectively access the online world, and their perspectives are excluded from digital realms. The UN system and entire development community must apply core principles to uphold equity and inclusion. They must also uphold the highest standards of data governance, protection, privacy and security. Want to know more? Read the [UN's guidance on data privacy, ethics, and protection](#)

UN DEVELOPMENT GROUP 2017

All of these tools and more will be needed to match the requirements of the SDGs, with their ambitious list of 169 targets and 232 indicators. National statistical offices, which have primary responsibility for SDG-related data, will have to assume a new role. Right now, they are primarily collectors and managers of data. Looking forward, they need to become **custodians of a wider data ecosystem**. This will enable linkages across:

- New and existing data sources.
- Social, economic and environmental issues.
- Both the public and private sectors.

### PREPARING PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS

Effective, efficient and accountable public institutions will shoulder many of the tasks defining the success of the 2030 Agenda. SDG 16 captures commitments to their vital role. But major capacity and resource constraints persist. Further, many public institutions are still used to working sector by sector. To enable development policies that manage cross-sectoral trade-offs and synergies to unblock progress on fundamental challenges such as inequalities and overconsumption, they will need to recalibrate.

Key public institutions include planning ministries, finance ministries, sectoral ministries, audit institutions, local authorities, security sectors, the judiciary and legislative bodies. How do they become **more agile and responsive, accountable and inclusive**, in other words, fit for the purpose of the 2030 Agenda?

Here are a few starting points:

- Invest in new capabilities and support for public servants, including new skills to anticipate problems, to adapt quickly and to mitigate risks.
- Institute public financial management systems that prioritize SDG implementation to drive political will and institutional capacity.
- Boost transparency and oversight through results-based management.
- Innovate in service delivery to improve quality and reach, and build trust in the State.
- Develop participatory decision-making mechanisms bolstering broad ownership of the SDGs.
- Pursue effective decentralization so local authorities can do their part in delivering on the goals.

# 4

## FINANCING THE SDGs

Achieving the SDGs won't be cheap. Financing them will dwarf traditional development flows. But in a world of enormous wealth, the problem is not having too little money. It is how the money – across many different sources – is spent.

With only 10 years left to achieve the goals, **multiple streams of resources need to be combined** and channelled to the SDGs, at a greater scale and speed than ever before. Further, public and private incentives need to be better aligned to minimize any further financing of unsustainable patterns of production and consumption.

### GLOBAL AGREEMENT ON FINANCING

Adopted the same year as the 2030 Agenda, the Addis Ababa Action Agenda is the key global agreement on financing the SDGs. It links public, private, domestic and international sources of finance, and sets forth an **integrated financing framework** connecting all financing sources, as well as non-financial means of implementation. The framework allows governments to look at their overall financing mix and understand the varying profiles and strengths of different financing instruments.

Check out this report from the Brookings Institute: [Building the SDG economy: Needs, spending, and financing for universal achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals](#)

BROOKINGS 2019

### THE GLOBAL PARTNERSHIP FOR EFFECTIVE DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION

Some broad financing trends for different goals include:

- SDGs 1 through 5, 10, 14, 15 and 16: largely public financing.
- SDG 13: global economic governance, trade and international tax decisions, blended public-private financing.
- SDGs 6-9 and 11-12: private financing.
- Countries facing the largest SDG challenges: international development cooperation.

At the country level, governments are increasingly using these frameworks to:

- Manage a complex financing landscape.
- Align financing with long-term priorities.
- Overcome silos and strengthen coherence among financing policies.
- Translate priorities into strategic action.

### RAISING DOMESTIC REVENUES AND ALIGNING EXPENDITURES

National budgets are by far **the largest and most important source** of finance for public services and goods, infrastructure and institutions. This means that governments need to prioritize domestic revenue mobilization and alignment for the SDGs, including through explicit targets to raise revenues. It also means moving beyond short-term perspectives sector-specific policies.

Taxes typically contribute a significant share of public revenues. Innovations like tax lotteries and simplified forms have helped boost tax compliance, while investments in revenue collection typically pay off rapidly. If progressively designed, taxes are tangible expressions of a country's social contract and the citizen-state relationship. They can also be used to "nudge" behaviour towards more sustainable patterns, such as through taxes on plastic bags and pollution.

Raising domestic revenues for the SDGs can entail new resource mobilization but they can also come from:

- Minimizing expenditures that are not SDG-aligned (by reducing subsidies, for instance).
- Realigning current expenditures with the SDGs.
- Using financial resources more effectively.

## A COMMON INTEREST

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Meeting all the SDGs by 2030 could stimulate US \$12 trillion in market opportunities and create 380 million new jobs. Public and private actors stand to benefit.

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UNDP 2017

International development finance institutions are vital for a mix of countries with limited access to funds. These institutions provide policy, capacity and regulatory assistance alongside financial support through grants and concessional loans. Some have particular areas of focus, like infrastructure and agriculture, or practise specific types of financing, such as Islamic finance.

Where loans and debt are involved, governments need to be able to assess sustainability, account for the impacts, and manage costs and risks. Countries can work together to design customized loans, arrange debt swaps and develop other innovative debt instruments. More can be done to ensure that creditors uphold their responsibilities, and that debt crisis resolution is fairer and more effective.

## INCENTIVISING AND HARNESSING PRIVATE FINANCE

The scale of financing required for the SDGs will require national and international private investment. Many governments offer incentives, like tax breaks and subsidies, to attract private investors. These can be powerful ways to promote **more sustainable, inclusive investments**—for example, to create jobs in vulnerable and economically deprived communities.

Strengthened financial regulatory systems can help countries attract private investment that is aligned with sustainable development. For example, in a highly interconnected world, regulations that incentivize more sustainable and longer-term investments, and balance the demand for credit with financial stability, can help tap these resources while preventing and containing financial crises. More financial institutions are issuing thematic bonds aligned to key aspects of the 2030 Agenda, particularly green bonds and in sectors such as transport, energy, and water and sanitation. Countries are also increasingly exploring catalytic blended financing – using public or philanthropic capital sources to catalyse private sector investment - to demonstrate results and de-risk further private financing.

## THE GLOBAL PARTNERSHIP FOR EFFECTIVE

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Development Cooperation brings together national and local governments, civil society, the private sector, trade unions, parliaments and philanthropies. By emphasizing effectiveness over narrow aid transfers, and a concerted focus on results, inclusive partnerships, transparency and accountability, it helps build national ownership of development programmes.

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## FROM INTERNATIONAL AID TO COOPERATION

Official development assistance will continue **playing a strategic and catalytic role** in the SDGs, especially in least developed countries and those with special circumstances such as the small island developing states. It can help meet immediate pressing needs and leverage additional financing, such as through investing in innovative development solutions with strong potential for scaling up.

But a growing trend is of international cooperation among developing countries through “South-South” modes. Triangular cooperation, involving donor and developing countries, is also on the rise, spurred in part by a new set of donors from emerging economies.

Timor-Leste  
Credit: ILO/F. Lim (2016)



# 5

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## COLLABORATING ON THE SDGs

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“Development” used to be mainly a concern for governments. Partnerships used to be about coming together for specific tasks yielding incremental progress. But to meet the needs of entire societies and our shared planet, the 2030 Agenda has upended these conventional notions.

Much **broader and more ambitious coalitions** must take shape around a shared commitment to mutual gains. They are vital to bring together all requisite people, funds, know-how and technology to tackle new challenges and pursue new solutions.

All action, by any individual anywhere in the world, can make a difference to the SDGs, for better or worse. The ways we eat, dress, power our homes, plant crops, move around, manage businesses—it all adds up.

So for the kind of transformation that needs to happen, especially with just 10 years left to achieve the goals, **entire societies must mobilize**. Witness the powerful momentum of the climate marches spanning the globe—just one example of many possibilities.

Who are some priority partners and how is collaboration evolving? Check this brief summary:

**Private sector partners:** Advocacy, policies and incentives are needed to involve markets and enterprises much more systematically in making direct contributions to public goods integral to sustainable development, such as through gender parity in workforces, affordable and accessible vaccines, reduced pollution and enforcement of safety standards. Possibilities for unlocking and leveraging new private sector funding comprise public-private partnerships, philanthropic and corporate social responsibility initiatives, and collaborations to incentivize socially productive investments. Much more can be done to mobilize media, of all forms, to sway the weight of public opinion behind sustainable development.

**Science, research and academic** communities test new ideas that can accelerate development transformation. Advances in science, research and technology in every country will need to be leveraged to enable evidence-based implementation of the SDGs.

**Civil society, social movements and public engagement** catalyse debate, ensuring a voice for all in helping reshape the development discourse and provide services to key populations beyond the reach of the State. The proliferation of digital communications has spurred citizen action, amplifying ideas, demands and innovations, effectively reshaping platforms for public policy.

**Parliaments, human rights institutions and audit bodies** serve as bridges between people and their government, representing diverse concerns. They can build consensus on and propel momentum behind new development plans, and help keep SDG implementation fair and inclusive.

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# ONLY 10 MORE YEARS!

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That's a short period of time left to achieve the 2030 Agenda. And no country is yet on track to meet all the SDGs.

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**We must be ambitious.  
We must act now.**

**We must:**

- Step up international cooperation and leadership to mobilize resources and design integrated solutions that make strides across all of the SDGs

- Break away from the model of grow first, clean up later—in every country. Revitalizing multilateralism means no country needs to go it alone

- Galvanize the global public, civil society, business, unions, the media, academia, youth and communities to champion and practise sustainable development



Parade of Nations  
Credit: UN Photo/Cia Pak



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