Executive Summary

Since 2016, the global edition of the Sustainable Development Report (SDR) has provided the most up-to-date data to track and rank the performance of all UN member states on the SDGs. This year’s edition was written by a group of independent experts at the SDG Transformation Center, an initiative of the SDSN. It focuses on the UN Summit of the Future, with an opening chapter endorsed by 100+ global scientists and practitioners. The report also includes two thematic chapters, related to SDG 17 (Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development) and SDG 2 (End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture).

This year’s SDR highlights five key findings:

1. On average, only 16 percent of the SDG targets are on track to be met globally by 2030, with the remaining 84 percent showing limited progress or a reversal of progress. At the global level, SDG progress has been stagnant since 2020, with SDG 2 (Zero Hunger), SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), SDG 14 (Life Below Water), SDG 15 (Life on Land) and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions) particularly off track. The five SDG targets on which the highest proportion of countries show a reversal of progress since 2015 are: obesity rate (under SDG 2), press freedom (under SDG 16), the Red List Index (under SDG 15), sustainable nitrogen management (under SDG 2), and – due in large part to the COVID-19 pandemic, along with other factors that vary across countries – life expectancy at birth (under SDG 3). Goals and targets related to basic access to infrastructure and services, including SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure), show slightly more positive trends, although progress remains too slow and uneven across countries.

2. The pace of SDG progress varies significantly across country groups. Nordic countries continue to lead on SDG achievement, with the BRICS countries making significant progress while poor and vulnerable nations lag far behind. As in previous years, European countries – notably the Nordic countries – top the 2024 SDG Index. Finland is ranked first, followed by Sweden (#2), Denmark (#3), Germany (#4), and France (#5). Yet even these countries face significant challenges in meeting several SDGs. Since 2015, average SDG progress in the BRICS (Brazil, the Russian Federation, India, China, and South Africa) and BRICS+ countries (Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates) has outpaced the world average, while East and South Asia has emerged as the region that has made the greatest progress toward the SDGs. In contrast, the gap between the world’s average SDG performance and the performance of the poorest and most vulnerable countries, including the Small Island Developing States (SIDS), has widened since 2015.

3. Sustainable development remains a long-term investment challenge. Reforming the global financial architecture is more urgent than ever. The world requires many essential public goods that far transcend the nation-state. Low-income countries (LICs) and lower-middle-income countries (LMICs) urgently need to gain access to affordable long-term capital so that they can invest at scale to achieve their sustainable development objectives. Mobilizing the necessary levels of finance will require new institutions, new forms of global financing (including global taxation), and new priorities for global financing (such as investing in quality education for all). The report outlines five complementary strategies to reform the global financial architecture.
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4. Global challenges require global cooperation. Barbados ranks the highest in its commitment to UN-based multilateralism; the United States ranks last. As with meeting the challenge of the SDGs, strengthening multilateralism requires metrics and monitoring. The report’s new Index of support to UN-based multilateralism (UN-Mi) ranks countries based on their engagement with the UN system – including treaty ratification, votes at the UN General Assembly, membership in UN organizations, participation in conflicts and militarization, use of unilateral sanctions, and financial contributions to the United Nations. The five countries most committed to UN-based multilateralism are: Barbados (#1), Antigua and Barbuda (#2), Uruguay (#3), Mauritius (#4), and the Maldives (#5). By contrast, the United States (#193), Somalia (#192), South Sudan (#191), Israel (#190), and the Democratic Republic of Korea (#189) rank the lowest on the UN-Mi.

5. The SDG targets related to food and land systems are particularly off-track. The SDR evaluates three possible pathways towards achieving sustainable food and land systems. Globally, 600 million people will still suffer from hunger by 2030; obesity is increasing; and greenhouse gas emissions from agriculture, forestry, and other land use (AFOLU) account for almost a quarter of total annual global GHG emissions. The Food, Agriculture, Biodiversity, Land-Use, and Energy (FABLE) Consortium brought together more than 80 researchers from 22 countries to evaluate combinations of scenarios at the national level to assess how 16 targets related to food security, climate mitigation, biodiversity conservation and water quality could be achieved by 2030 and 2050. They found that the continuation of current trends would widen the gap between countries on targets related to climate mitigation, biodiversity, and water quality. While pursuing existing national commitments would improve the situation to some extent, these remain largely insufficient. FABLE’s “global sustainability” pathway, however, showed that significant progress is possible, but will require several dramatic changes: 1) Avoid overconsumption and limit animal-based protein consumption through dietary shifts that are compatible with cultural preferences; 2) Invest to foster productivity, particularly for products and areas with high demand growth; and 3) Implement inclusive, robust, and transparent monitoring systems to halt deforestation. This pathway would avoid up to 100 million hectares of deforestation by 2030 and 100 gigatons of CO$_2$ emissions by 2050. Additional measures would be needed to avoid trade-offs with on-farm employment and water pollution caused by excessive fertilizer application, and to ensure that no one is left behind, particularly in the fight to end hunger.

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