

The sustainable development goals: Past, present and future

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ABSTRACT

As we are now past the half way mark of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for 2015-2030, it is a prudent time to take stock and look forward, and I do so here from my perspective as founding Editor in Chief of the *European Journal of Sustainable Development Research*. The SDGs clearly have fostered a much research and numerous initiatives and implementations related to sustainable development, spanning all sectors of societies and their economies. Progress made towards sustainable development has reinforced that there are multiple approaches to sustainable development, varying from region to region and country to country. Despite these advances and successes, progress to date on the SDGs has been far from adequate if humanity and society are to shift towards sustainable development in a significant and meaningful way in the future. This relatively weak progress has stemmed from various factors, some unpredictable and others somewhat foreseeable. It is becoming increasingly evident that the progress on the SDGs by 2030 will not complete the quest for sustainable development. I consequently believe and contend that there clearly is a need to extend and double down on the SDGs for 2030-2045 and beyond.

Keywords: sustainable development, sustainable development goals, economic sustainability, environmental sustainability, social sustainability

As we are now past the half way mark of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for 2015-2030, it is a prudent time to take stock and look forward. Many have done so. In fact, in a recent editorial in the *European Journal of Sustainable Development Research* discussing advances from research in sustainable development over the journal's first seven years (Rosen, 2024), the present author wrote, "Although we remain a long way from achieving the 17 SDGs by 2030, it is very likely that increasing effort will be put forth on them up to 2030 and almost certainly beyond." Here, the past, present and future of the SDGs are considered from my perspective as founding Editor in Chief of the journal.

Sustainable development recognizes that growth and economic development must be socially acceptable and environmentally sound to reduce poverty and build prosperity for present populations while not detracting from the ability of future generations meet their needs, and this is reflected in the SDGs, which established targets and indicators that provide a framework for countries to develop policies, plans and initiatives in support of sustainable development. It was understood from the start that care and thoughtfulness would be needed the implementation of the SDGs, through tailoring them to local, regional and national needs and priorities while still adhering to the global intent and aims.

The SDGs replaced the Millennium Development Goals for the period 2000-2015, which commenced a worldwide effort to

address numerous development priorities, in particular the eradication of extreme poverty and hunger, the prevention of deadly diseases, and the expansion of primary education to all children. Furthermore, the SDGs and the Millennium Development Goals both are extensions and expansions of the first significant description of sustainable development, put forward in 1987 in the Brundtland Report, where sustainable development was defined as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."

Many other assessments of the state of and progress on the SDG agenda have been reported. The SDGs clearly have fostered a much research and numerous initiatives and implementations related to sustainable development, spanning all sectors of societies and their economies. Some examples: protecting the environment and its ecosystems, harvesting and protecting energy, water, material and other resources, enhancing infrastructure for urban and rural areas, enhancing public and private transportation systems and technology, and improving agriculture in terms of resilience, production capacity and impact on the environment. Other advances in sustainable development include enhancing efficiency, urban and rural planning and supply chains, land use patterns, food production, moving to sustainable energy, and protecting water supplies. Progress made towards sustainable development has reinforced that there are

multiple approaches to sustainable development, varying from region to region and country to country. Significant differences have been observed in the approaches of poor and wealthy countries.

During this process, lessons have been learned in terms of what to do, like not harming the environment and poorer communities when prodding economic growth to raise incomes and reduce poverty, accounting for the true costs of the utilization and depletion of natural resources, combating climate change and other environmental impacts, and reducing inequalities.

Despite these advances and successes, progress during the first half of the 15-year period for which the SDGs were developed, 2015-2030, has been far from adequate if humanity and society are to shift towards sustainable development in a significant and meaningful way in the future. This relatively weak progress has been noted to stem from various factors, some of which were unpredictable, while others were to some extent foreseeable. The factors include inadequate long-term funding for SDG measures, challenges in addressing the breadth of targets across all sectors of the economy, inadequate financing for low and middle-income countries to achieve the SDGs, and siloed and unaligned strategies and actions.

Descriptions and assessments of many sustainable development advances as well as challenges have been described in articles in journals like the *European Journal of Sustainable Development Research*.

It is becoming increasingly evident that the progress on the SDGs by 2030 will not complete the quest, and that it will be necessary to extend the SDGs for another 15-year period after 2030 and almost certainly further if broad and deep progress is to be made in the shift towards sustainable development. Others have proposed new or extended SDGs and/or actions for the future, or initiated discussions to determine them. Some specific proposals include bolstering the framework for the SDGs, ensuring a healthy planet with a physically stable environment, enhancing planning and cooperation by nations, protecting vulnerable countries, addressing finance needs, and fostering accountability and mission-based approaches.

In closing, I feel that although the SDGs have spurred sustainable development research and activity during the first half of the 15-year period for which they were developed starting in 2015, there has been inadequate progress if humanity and society are to shift towards sustainable development in the future. I consequently believe and contend that there clearly is a need to extend and double down on the SDGs for 2030-2045 and beyond.

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