

SWP Research Paper

Marianne Beisheim (ed.)

Country-level Politics around the SDGs

Analysing political will as a critical element of the
Mid-Term Review of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs



Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik
German Institute for
International and Security Affairs

SWP Research Paper 7
July 2023, Berlin

- The SDG Summit will take place on 18 – 19 September 2023 in New York. UN Secretary-General António Guterres has called it the “centrepiece” of the UN’s work this year.
- Numerous reports for this year’s mid-term review of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs will lament the “lack of political will” to implement the SDGs.
- This research paper addresses the lack of analysis of country-level politics around the SDGs by assessing the political priorities of local elites in eleven countries.
- Alongside the specific findings for these countries, we present overarching conclusions on the significance of country-level politics for SDG implementation.
- Analysing political will and considering country-level constraints should be part of the mid-term review and inform the outcome of the summit.

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SWP Research Paper 7
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Stiftung Wissenschaft und
Politik
German Institute
for International
and Security Affairs

Ludwigkirchplatz 3–4
10719 Berlin
Germany
Phone +49 30 880 07-0
Fax +49 30 880 07-200
www.swp-berlin.org
swp@swp-berlin.org

ISSN (Print) 2747-5123
ISSN (Online) 1863-1053
DOI: 10.18449/2023RP07

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“The SDG Summit in September will be the centrepiece of our work this year and must mark significant progress. Member States must come with a clear commitment to rescue the SDGs – setting out their national vision for transformation, grounded in concrete plans, benchmarks and commitments.

An ambitious Political Declaration must recognize the far-reaching changes needed at both national and global levels. It must prioritize and mobilize investment and action across the core transitions required to achieve the Goals. The SDG Summit must make our commitment to leaving no one behind a reality in law and policy.”

UNSG António Guterres

“Secretary-General’s Remarks to the General Assembly Consultation on our Common Agenda/Summit of the Future”, New York, 13 February 2023

Country-level Politics around the SDGs. Analysing political will as a critical element of the Mid-Term Review of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs

The 2023 *SDG Summit* will be held on September 18/19, as part of the opening week of the UN General Assembly. It will operate at the highest political level, with primarily heads of state and government speaking. UN Secretary-General António Guterres called it the “centre-piece” of the UN’s work this year.

In the run-up to the meeting, there is no shortage of *reports* on the status of implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The UN Statistical Commission will provide the official data for the mid-term review of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs. Already in May, the UN Secretary-General published a special edition of the SDG progress report with a discussion of trends. The report finds that many of the SDGs are off track, some severely. The Secretary-General appeals to member states to agree a “rescue plan for people and planet”. NGOs provide their own assessments, and advocate accordingly. Experts in the sustainability community tend to focus on thematic analyses in individual policy areas, such as poverty reduction and development financing, climate policy and biodiversity policy. Finally, the Global Sustainable Development Report (GSDR), published every four years, as an independent report, draws together all the scattered information from existing research and serves as input for the Summit.

But there is more to SDG implementation. While studies and commentaries often bemoan the *lack of political will* to “transform our world”, there is little analysis of *country-level politics around the SDGs*. This research paper aims to fill that crucial gap. The authors assess the priorities and political interests of governments and local elites, as well as societal interests and related conflicts around the SDGs in eleven countries. The aim is to better understand what the heads of state and government, the representatives of different ministries, and social or economic actors in each country want to achieve through the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs.

The countries covered in the study are Belarus, Brazil, China, Egypt, India, Kenya, Republic of Korea, Russian Federation, South Africa, State of Palestine

and Sudan. While not intended as a representative sample of all member states, they do include significant variation in terms of industrialized and emerging economies, middle-income countries and least-developed countries, democracies and authoritarian regimes, conflict-affected and fragile countries. Each country study emphasizes different aspects but all share one common focus, namely, analysing the *politics* around the SDGs.

As well as the eleven country studies, we present eight overarching findings and conclusions on the significance of country-level politics for SDG implementation:

1. We observe an *emphasis on pre-existing, top-priority political programmes*. Governments try to make the 2030 Agenda and SDGs serve their domestic, regional and global political objectives, while *leveraging them for greater legitimacy*;
2. The *added value* of the SDGs in most policy areas remains unclear and we see a significant *gap between talk and action*;
3. We identify a clear *focus on elites' interests* in implementation and less focus on the needs of marginalized groups (failure to fulfil the promise of “leaving no one behind”);
4. Governments use the SDGs and VNRs to *signal to donors* their needs, interests and demands;
5. We suggest that *fundamental changes in the political domain* are needed to enable transformative sustainable development;
6. The national SDG *architecture*, while politically peripheral, has created spaces for *civil society participation*, but often in a selective and state-controlled manner;
7. We find instances where SDG failures are blamed solely on *external* factors, such as sanctions, the pandemic, or lack of fiscal space or access to technology, while ignoring relevant *internal* problems;
8. The *geopolitics* of (sustainable) development is changing, with China offering different forms of development cooperation to partner countries, also through the UN system.

Our cross-cutting analysis leads to several *recommendations*, some of which we highlight here. In the run-up to the SDG Summit, all stakeholders should pay more attention to, or at least be aware of, the politics surrounding the SDGs at the country level and how this affects negotiations at UN level. The Political Declaration – the negotiated official outcome document to be adopted at the SDG Summit – provides several

points of reference. Its draft “Call to action” asks countries to develop national plans for transformative and accelerated action, combined with national planning and monitoring mechanisms. On the basis of our analysis, we argue for a robust follow-up to this commitment, and also for capacity development. We will not see transformative change unless we encourage governments to review and revise their existing implementation strategies. Independent civil society participation is essential in this process.

Similarly, we recommend that donors and investors ensure that their support for SDG implementation does not reinforce corrupt and exploitative political and military systems that primarily serve vested interests. The international community also needs to find new ways of dealing with conflicts and changing domestic priorities after political power shifts. At the 2023 SDG Summit heads of state and government will reaffirm their commitment to implementing the indivisible and interlinked 2030 Agenda in an integrated manner and upholding all principles enshrined in it. Pointing this out makes it possible to criticize cherry-picking and recall the importance of pro-poor, rights-based approaches. Beyond aid, donor agencies and other stakeholders should explore innovative levers and incentives for a transformation towards sustainable development. This is particularly relevant for cooperation with middle-income and BRICS countries. Investment and other support for transformative SDG action need to be accompanied by an attractive, coherent and compelling narrative, to build mutual understanding and trust.

Last but not least, the UN Summit of the Future, scheduled for September 2024, offers an opportunity for member states to complement the revised national SDG plans with an enabling multilateral framework that incentivizes political will at the national level. The “twin summits”, as UN Secretary-General António Guterres has called the Summit of the Future and the SDG Summit, are all about creating favourable conditions for member states to change course.

Analysing political will and taking country-level constraints into account should definitely be part of the 2023 mid-term review in preparation for the SDG Summit in September. These factors are highly relevant for the implementation of the SDGs – but they are often little-known or largely disregarded in the sustainability community, and therefore need to be brought into focus.

Marianne Beisheim

Politics Matters! Expert Assessments of the SDG's Political Significance in Selected Countries

In 2015, the UN member states agreed the 2030 Agenda and the seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Although some of the goals are extremely ambitious, they were adopted by consensus. Closing the deal required a degree of ambiguous language and typical flexibility clauses like “respecting national policies and priorities”.¹ UN member states tend to reject any foreign intervention in their political or economic priorities and national development strategies. These priorities and strategies are, however, an important factor behind the highly divergent patterns of SDG implementation. Scrutinizing them should be an important part of the mid-term review of the SDGs’ implementation this year.

It is seen as a success that the member states decided to install a *follow-up and review* process for the 2030 Agenda and SDGs from the outset. The quality of this mechanism is contested but has been improving over time.² Member states and many other actors

discuss progress towards the goals every year in July at the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) in New York. These reviews have been held every year since 2016, their scope encompassing achievements, challenges and trends. There are two central instruments for SDG follow-up and review at global and national level. Firstly, a framework of 231 indicators – on which the Secretary-General and the UN Statistical Commission publish annual reports – builds the basis for the *SDG reviews*.³ Secondly, all countries are invited to report on what they are doing at national level to achieve the SDGs. These *voluntary national reviews* (VNRs) are presented and discussed in the ministerial segment of the July meeting of the HLPF.

So far, 188 countries have conducted VNRs and 341 VNRs are available online.⁴ The relevant UN resolutions indicate that the presentation of the report at the UN HLPF should be preceded by a review process at the national level. While reporting is voluntary, several *principles* have been formulated to shape the reporting process. The global and national review processes should be inclusive, participatory and transparent, involve the whole of government and society, and be based on sound data-based analysis.⁵ The reports should pay special attention to those marginalized groups that have benefited least from devel-

1 United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), *Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, A/RES/70/1 (New York, October 2015). This particular phrase can be found in paragraphs 5, 21, 55.

2 Marianne Beisheim, *UN Reforms for the 2030 Agenda: Are the HLPF's Working Methods and Practices “Fit for Purpose”?* SWP Research Paper 9/2018 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, October 2018), <https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/un-reforms-for-the-2030-agenda> (accessed 23 May 2023); Magdalena Bexell and Kristina Jönsson, “Country Reporting on the Sustainable Development Goals: The Politics of Performance Review at the Global-national Nexus”, *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities* 20, no. 4 (2019): 403 – 17; Nathan Cooper and Duncan French, “SDG 17: Partnerships for the Goals – Cooperation within the Context of a Voluntarist Framework”, in *Sustainable Development Goals: Law, Theory and Implementation*, ed. Duncan French and Louis J. Kotzé (Cheltenham, 2018), 271 – 304; Marianne Beisheim, Steven Bernstein et al., “Global Governance and Sustainable

Development Goals”, in *The Political Impact of the Sustainable Development Goals: Transforming Governance Through Global Goals?* ed. Frank Biermann, Thomas Hickmann and Carole-Anne Senit (Cambridge, UK, 2022), 22 – 58.

3 See United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA), “SDG Indicators Database”, 2023, <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/dataportal> (accessed 23 May 2023).

4 “Countries Who Have Presented Their Voluntary National Reviews”, May 2023, <https://hlpf.un.org/countries> (accessed 23 May 2023).

5 UNGA, *Transforming Our World* (see note 1), para. 72 – 79

opment successes in the past (*leaving no one behind*). For this purpose, data should be disaggregated by income, gender and other criteria, depending on the country. Reports should also place special emphasis on relevant linkages between different sectors, corresponding synergies and conflicts of objectives. The UN Secretary-General has developed voluntary guidelines for reporting and the secretariat of the HLPF (UNDESA) has compiled a handbook.⁶ While the guidelines recommend a structure for the reports as well as various process steps and components, the handbook also presents examples from previous VNRs. DESA has examined the reports with a view to the reporting itself and highlighted good practices.⁷ Moreover, good practices for SDG implementation are distilled from the reports and presented in a database and in reports.⁸ The Secretariat has to be cautious when evaluating the VNRs as many member states insist on a state-led process and reject external standards for reporting as too “prescriptive”. This is part of the global and national-level politics around SDG implementation and reporting. Civil society groups publish their own assessments of the VNRs.⁹

Every four years, the annual stocktaking at the July HLPF is complemented by a summit at the level of

6 UN DESA, *Handbook for the Preparation of Voluntary National Reviews* (New York, October 2022), <https://hlpf.un.org/sites/default/files/vnrs/hand-book/VNR%20Handbook%202022%20English.pdf> (accessed 23 May 2023).

7 “Good Practices and Lessons Learned in VNR Reporting”, 2021, <https://hlpf.un.org/lessons-learned-and-best-practices>; <https://hlpf.un.org/sites/default/files/2022-06/Repository%20of%20Good%20Practices.pdf> (accessed 23 May 2023). See also Javier Surasky, *Repository of Good Practices in Voluntary National Review (VNR) Reporting* (New York, UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2022), <https://hlpf.un.org/sites/default/files/2022-05/Repository%20of%20Good%20Practices%20in%20VNR%20Reporting.pdf>.

8 This includes examples ranging in scope from a “beach clean-up” to a multi-million-dollar investment programme. UN DESA, “SDG Good Practices”, 2022, <https://sdgs.un.org/sdg-good-practices> (accessed 23 May 2023); UN DESA, *SDG Good Practices: A Compilation of Success Stories and Lessons Learned in SDG Implementation* (New York: United Nations, January 2022), <https://sdgs.un.org/sites/default/files/2022-03/SDGs%20Good%20Practices%20-%20second%20edition%20-%20FINAL%20FEB092022.pdf> (accessed 23 May 2023).

9 See, for example, the annual “Progressing National SDGs Implementation” reports, <https://www.progressingsdgs.org/>, or the “Spotlight Reports”, <https://www.2030spotlight.org/en>, both assembled by a coalition of civil society organizations (accessed 3 July 2023).

heads of state and government, which takes place at the beginning of the opening week of the UN General Assembly in September. The task of this quadrennial *SDG Summit* is to provide “political leadership, guidance and recommendations for the further implementation of the SDGs”.¹⁰ The main instrument for this is a *Political Declaration* that member states negotiate in advance.¹¹ Again, there is a lot of politics at play before the heads of the national delegations formally adopt the document at the summit.

Our focus: “It’s politics, stupid!”¹²

In discussions around the national implementation of the SDGs, the term *political will* — or rather, the complaint that it is lacking — comes up time and again. But the debate often stops there, when the analysis should go further and deeper, asking who is committed to doing what, where the political will is lacking, and why. This is where our study comes in: We want to unpack “political will” and shed light on the underlying motives, incentive structures and other causes — in other words the *politics*.

For the purposes of this study, we have reviewed the academic literature for thoughts around political will and politics. While we did not endeavour to develop our own definition, we found the following thoughts helpful. Derick W. Brinkerhoff defines *political will*¹³ as “the commitment of actors to undertake actions to achieve a set of objectives ... and to sustain the costs of those actions over time”.¹⁴ He also

10 UNGA, *Format and Organizational Aspects of the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (A/RES/67/290)* (New York: UN, August 2013).

11 At the time of writing, we only had access to the zero draft of the 2023 Political Declaration: UNGA, *Zero Draft Political Declaration to be adopted at the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF), under the auspices of the General Assembly in September 2023* (New York, 8 May 2023), <https://hlpf.un.org/sites/default/files/2023-05/Zero%20Final%20SDG%20PD%208%20May%202023.pdf> (accessed 23 May 2023).

12 Fabian Gunzinger and Jan-Egbert Sturm, “It’s Politics, Stupid! Political Constraints Determine Governments’ Reactions to the Great Recession”, *KYKLOS – International Review for Social Sciences* 69, no. 4 (November 2016): 584–603.

13 For a discussion of various definitions see Lori Ann Post, Amber N. W. Raile and Eric D. Raile, “Defining Political Will”, *Politics & Policy* 38, no. 4 (August 2010): 653–76.

14 Derick W. Brinkerhoff, *Unpacking the Concept of Political Will to Confront Corruption*, U4 Policy Brief (Bergen: CMI —

points out that political will and (lack of) capacity are often closely connected. While that is normally true, it is not necessarily always a given, as Shalini Randeria describes in her concept of the “cunning state” that “pretends to lack capacities and capitalises on its perceived weakness in order to render itself unaccountable to its citizens”.¹⁵ Drawing on a number of country studies, Stefan Dercon, in his much-debated *Gambling on Development*, points out that what matters for development is domestic leadership and politics. He identifies a specific “development bargain” involving domestic elites with power or influence in politics, in which growth and development play a central role.¹⁶

A shorthand definition of *politics*¹⁷ would be “domestic decision-making and structure of domestic (policy) preferences”.¹⁸ Domestic politics also impacts foreign policy decisions, which can be interpreted as “a competitive game, where multiple players holding different policy preferences struggle, compete, and bargain over the substance and conduct of policy”, hoping to “advance his [or her] conception of national, organizational, group, and personal inter-

ests”.¹⁹ Brinkerhoff notes that external actors often shy from dealing with country-level politics as this requires confrontation with powerful and competing interests.

Moreover, beyond the diverging political interests of governments, the international order itself is politicized and politicizing. In his theory of global governance, Michael Zürn sees an emerging “global politics paradigm” as world politics becomes more “embedded in a normative and institutional structure that contains hierarchies and power inequalities and thus endogenously produces contestation, resistance, and distributional struggles”.²⁰ That is very true for global sustainable development politics.

Our research question: How do political will and politics impact SDG implementation at country level?

These thoughts informed our analysis. Examining country-level politics we ask: What do the country’s (political) elites want and why are they (not) pushing for SDG implementation? What agendas are ministerial bureaucracies pursuing? What consequences have elections, new majorities and changes in government had? What regional or global ambitions and rivalries played a role? What external factors have had relevant impacts in the shifting geopolitical context since 2015 (for example the pandemic, conflicts and crises, economic developments, donor policies)? Which social interests are important, what frictions exist?

Empirical foundation

As indicated above, all the contributions in this research paper focus on the country-level politics around the SDGs. They do *not* seek to provide a comprehensive assessment of the implementation of all 17 SDGs, 169 targets and 231 indicators in the respective country (which would anyway have been far beyond the scope of the present publication). Rather,

Chr. Michelsen Institute, 2010), 1, <https://www.u4.no/publications/unpacking-the-concept-of-political-will-to-confront-corruption.pdf> (accessed 23 May 2023).

15 Shalini Randeria, “Cunning States and Unaccountable International Institutions: Legal Plurality, Social Movements and Rights of Local Communities to Common Property Resources”, *European Journal of Sociology* 44, no. 1 (2003): 27–60.

16 Stefan Dercon, *Gambling on Development: Why Some Countries Win and Others Lose* (London: Hurst Publishers 2022), 4.

17 Some of the literature follows a broader approach to analysis of the politics of global governance processes, going further than the interests of political elites and institutions. Louis and Maertens, for example, “consider as part of politics the activities which eventually have an impact on the daily lives of a broader collectivity because they involve considerations on the legitimacy of detaining power, exercising authority and delivering adequate policies. Politics encompasses both specific sites and individuals revolving around the state, the government, political parties and elites in general but also includes ordinary, mundane, not conventional even informal dimensions.” Marieke Louis and Lucile Maertens, *Why International Organizations Hate Politics: Depoliticizing the World* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2021), 4f.

18 Bruce Bueno De Mesquita, “Domestic Politics and International Relations”, *International Studies Quarterly* 46, no. 1 (March 2002): 1–9, doi: 10.1111/1468-2478.00220; Helen Milner, *Interests, Institutions, and Information: Domestic Politics and International Relations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997).

19 Christopher M. Jones, *Bureaucratic Politics and Organizational Process Models* (Oxford: Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies, 2010), doi: 10.1093/acrefore/9780190846626.013.2.

20 Michael Zürn, *A Theory of Global Governance: Authority, Legitimacy, and Contestation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 3 and 257f.

each contribution focuses on *one or more* aspects of country politics that the author considers relevant in the context of the SDG debate. In light of their specific expertise, each author assesses the role of the 2030 Agenda and SDGs in the context of the country's domestic politics and foreign policy approach, and, if applicable, also analyses the main drivers of SDG successes and failures.

The voluntary national review (VNR) reports submitted by UN member states are one important starting point for our analyses. They represent a political narrative that the authors attempt to contextualize with their assessments of internal social and domestic developments and conflicts, including regional and geopolitical (foreign policy) considerations. In this context, what is *not* mentioned in the VNR reports can also be of interest. Some of the contributions discuss the extent to which the country reports show interesting and convincing successes and/or contain less credible assertions or relevant omissions.

The countries covered in the study are Belarus, Brazil, China, Egypt, India, Kenya, Republic of Korea, Russian Federation, South Africa, State of Palestine and Sudan. These are *individual case studies*; we did not attempt to produce a systematic comparison using pre-selected variables. Nor did we seek a representative sample of countries. While the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs represent a universal agenda, our study mainly addresses countries in the so-called Global South; it includes all the BRICS countries, but none from the EU or G7.²¹ With the exception of the Republic of Korea, all are non-OECD countries, many of which are seeking an alternative economic and political model to the West. Beyond this, there is considerable *diversity* in the sample, both in SDG-related aspects and others, such as national income and regime type. Accordingly, the countries rank very differently in indices and surveys (see Table 1 in the Annex, p. 72) – which are themselves often part of the global politics surrounding the SDGs.²² Despite all these limitations, we were able to derive a number of overarching insights.

²¹ There is certainly plenty of scope for critical analysis of the EU member states and G7 countries. In an attempt to redress that balance a little, we do cite literature on the politics around the SDGs in some of these countries.

²² Paul Jackson, “Magic Numbers? Why the Politics of Indices Are a Problem Rather Than a Solution”, SDG Knowledge Hub, 20 July 2022, <https://sdg.iisd.org/commentary/guest-articles/magic-numbers-why-the-politics-of-indices-are-a-problem-rather-than-a-solution/> (accessed 7 June 2023).

Country-specific results

The individual contributions to this study are instructive, in the first place, for their country-specific findings. The eleven country studies can be grouped according to three main motivations for and/or barriers to the implementation of the SDGs at the national level.

State capture, corruption, fragility and conflict impact SDG implementation.

In several cases, the authors identify *state capture, corruption, fragility and conflict* impacting on SDG implementation. *Sudan* faces some of the biggest challenges to implementation of the SDGs: political instability following decades of authoritarian rule, armed conflict, a skewed economy in deep macroeconomic crisis, and the impact of climate change. Gerrit Kurtz shows how Sudan's 2022 VNR serves to outline needs and highlight the leadership's supposedly popular credentials, while distracting from lack of legitimacy and pushing for debt relief and restoration of access to international financial support (which was suspended after the military coup in October 2021). Specifically, he finds that the VNR is designed to bolster the legitimacy of Geibril Ibrahim, the finance minister and leader of the Justice and Equality Movement (which was a signatory of the Juba Peace Agreement but has very little support even in its home base in Darfur). The VNR ignores the main cause of Sudan's lack of progress on the SDGs, which is the long dominance of the security sector in politics and the economy.

Egypt's SDG architecture appears good at first glance. However, Stephan Roll shows how closer examination reveals that the SDGs have been used as a cover to systematically favour the military, which forms the backbone of President Abdel Fatah El-Sisi's rule. He outlines how fundamental criticism is directed at the core element of President Sisi's development approach, namely, megaprojects like the new capital. Sisi is focusing on large-scale infrastructure projects, ostensibly to achieve several of the SDGs at once. In March 2022, Egypt had to seek support from the IMF for the fourth consecutive time to avoid an imminent default. The costly megaprojects have played a significant role in exacerbating this vulnerability. Devaluation of the Egyptian currency in the wake of the debt crisis and the sharp rise in inflation are likely to have

dramatically worsened the situation of the population in terms of SDG1 (no poverty).

Representatives of the *State of Palestine* have consistently pointed to the lack of sovereignty and the constraints imposed by Israel's fifty-five-year occupation regime and the blockade of the Gaza Strip as impediments to SDG progress. Muriel Asseburg argues that this has even led to partial de-development. However, the intra-Palestinian division, deteriorating governance, and the trend of reductions in donor funding and transfers through the Government of Israel have also contributed to a disabling environment. All involved, she finds, are largely pursuing self-serving goals (such as maintaining power or preserving the political status quo), rather than developmental ones. Taken together, the obstacles to sustainable development in Palestine are first and foremost political, so the answers need to be political too.

South Africa's commitment to the SDG process over the past years remains strong – in part because the SDGs align with promises made by the ANC. Melanie Müller finds, however, that there is a huge gap between these promises and their implementation, much of which is due to governance failures that have yet to be adequately addressed. The serious consequences of state capture can no longer be ignored, given their dramatic impact on a country where inequality is growing. She demonstrates how corrupt practices in tendering for major infrastructure projects have a direct negative impact on key sectors. At the same time, the South African case illustrates how external shocks, such as the pandemic and the global failure to address it equitably, continue to reverberate – now compounded by the economic impact of Russia's war against Ukraine.

In the *Russian Federation*, the gap between the government's declared support for the SDGs and their actual implementation has widened since 2015. Sabine Fischer notes that Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 marks a new low in this process, with Russia moving more and more towards dictatorship. There is an inherent contradiction between the development of the Russian regime and the goals and visions articulated under the 2030 Agenda. Fischer argues that this contradiction is unlikely to be resolved as long as the current political regime led by Vladimir Putin remains in power. The 2020 and 2022 civil society shadow reports reflect this development.

Nine Years after adoption of the SDGs political shifts at the national and international level affect SDG implementation.

Other country cases outline how *political shifts and changing ideological orientations* have impacted the approach towards SDG implementation. Astrid Sahn shows how the political situation in *Belarus* changed fundamentally between the country's 2017 and 2022 VNRs. In the context of the first VNR there was a high level of activity and hope that the SDGs could serve as a potential driver for reform. This changed after the political protests following the 2020 elections. Independent civil society actors were excluded from the various mechanisms of the national sustainability architecture, leading to a hollowing out of these formally inclusive institutions, which now follow a state-centric approach. Belarus used its second VNR mainly to blame and criticize sanctions – while the opposition emphasizes shortcomings relating to SDG 16 (peace, justice and strong institutions). The case of Belarus also demonstrates that the design of the 2030 Agenda allows even authoritarian states to shine on the international stage.

Changes of power and political shifts have strongly impacted *Brazil's* engagement with the SDGs. Claudia Zilla shows how the administration of Jair Bolsonaro disengaged from the international sustainable development agenda, while also dismantling domestic social and environmental governance structures. This led to disruptions in policies, actions and monitoring systems, reduced or exhausted budgets, shrinking spaces for civil society participation, and restrictions on public access to information. She advises assessing the prospects for future SDG implementation in light of Lula's priorities. He has promised to promote social policies and inclusion by expanding social programmes and increasing cash transfers. Lula is trying to position Brazil as an environmental and food-producing power. However, lower state revenues, the critical macroeconomic situation and the unfavourable global economic context severely limit the government's ability to act, especially as the coalition is made up of nine parties with different ideological orientations.

In *India*, the adoption of the SDGs in 2015 coincided with the landslide victory of Narendra Modi and his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in the 2014 elections. Modi's campaign promoted both development issues and his vision of a new India, as Christian Wagner

explains, with a stronger focus on the interests of the Hindu majority (Hindutva). In general, he argues, Hindutva views the SDGs positively, and supporters will use them to promote and legitimize their own agenda. There are, however, also instances where the SDGs become entangled in the larger political controversy over Hindutva. The first of these is SDG 16.9's target on the provision of legal identity and the political disputes over religion being used as a criterion for Indian citizenship. The second is the dispute over Centrally Sponsored Schemes (CSS). This is a very typical conflict in federal states: who benefits politically from welfare schemes, the central government or the state government?

Kenya aims to achieve the status of a middle-income country by 2030. Substantial progress in implementing the country's SDG agenda is key to achieving this. Karoline Eickhoff and Marcel Meyer show how the SDGs have been mainstreamed into government policies and programmes under President Uhuru Kenyatta. At the same time, however, despite Kenya's significant economic potential and role as a regional beacon, the effectiveness and inclusiveness of public spending on sustainable development has been constrained by successive governments' preference for large-scale infrastructure "legacy" projects with questionable economic viability, burgeoning borrowing from various lenders, including China, and incentive and opportunity structures in public procurement that have enabled rent-seeking by political and business elites. The current government under President William Ruto is gradually moving towards a new "bottom up" economic approach. But Eickhoff and Meyer still see shortcomings, especially with regard to the inclusiveness of the economic growth model (following the LNOB principle) and aspects of good governance (SDG 16).

SDGs may also serve to signal interest in global leadership.

Two contributions illustrate how governments utilize the SDGs as they *strive for global leadership in sustainable development*. China's 2021 VNR report is a good example. As Nadine Godehardt shows, the report contains a great deal of official terminology known as tifa (提法, lit. the way something is put). These "watchwords" are crucial to understanding Chinese politics, she explains, as they characterize China's goal of establishing a global Chinese discourse system. China sees the global discourse on

the SDGs as an opportunity to shape the meaning of "development" internationally, and to establish a strategic narrative for a Chinese-led club that promotes Chinese solutions and global development projects, while harmonizing parts of the 2030 Agenda with Chinese goals. She assesses this "strategic docking" as part of a changing logic in Chinese foreign politics under Xi Jinping.

The political leadership in the *Republic of Korea* (ROK, South Korea) shares a general consensus on the importance of implementing the SDGs that cuts across ideological and party-lines. Eric Ballbach explains how Seoul has developed a range of policies, measures and initiatives to integrate the SDGs directly and indirectly into its domestic and foreign policies as well as its international development cooperation strategies. He finds that South Korea is using the SDGs to promote its green credentials, as the government aims to make the country a leading exporter in the area of green research and technology. However, structural and institutional deficits prevent more rapid progress in the implementation of the SDGs at home and abroad.

Overarching conclusions: How politics matters

As mentioned in the beginning, the 2030 Agenda and SDGs are in certain respects quite ambiguous – and this is intentional, to create flexibility for implementation at country level. Member states insisted on their sovereignty in choosing "how" to implement the SDGs. As the country studies show, these processes of "SDG localization" have involved significant instances of re-interpretation and modification in line with "national priorities", as well as the usual minor fine-tuning. On the basis of our discussion of the eleven country studies, we arrived at the following eight overarching findings and conclusions concerning the importance of national politics.²³

1. The countries in our sample chose top-down, government-led approaches for localizing the SDGs, but placing emphasis on their – often pre-existing – *top-priority political programmes*. China, for example,

²³ This section builds heavily on discussions among the contributing authors. I would like to thank all of them for supporting the drafting of these findings and recommendations and for their feedback on various draft versions of the entire chapter.

actively reinterprets the 2030 Agenda and SDGs to suit Chinese interests. India attempts to fit the SDGs into the Modi government's Hindutva ideology. The Russian Federation's VNR focuses on the pre-existing twelve National Projects and reports only the absolute minimum on SDG targets where the government sees a conflict of values (for example SDG 5).²⁴ Outside our list of countries, the literature identifies this kind of value- or interest-driven "cherry-picking" in other contexts too. A study on Australia, for example, finds poor progress on goals relating to climate action and reducing inequalities.²⁵ The Republic of Korea represented an exception in our sample, adopting the SDGs with only minor changes and adding a positive "green growth" spin to them.

Many governments employ the SDGs to bolster the *legitimacy* of their policies, both internally and externally. Brazil under Bolsonaro was an outlier here, stopping all related programmes, ceasing all reference to the SDGs (which the previous governments had helped to create). In some cases, VNRs are also relevant for international status and recognition, as is the case for the State of Palestine as a non-member observer state to the UN.

2. Despite all the talk about the SDGs, the *added value* of the SDGs in most policy domains remains unclear as the principles of the 2030 Agenda hardly ever shape policies and measures, and therefore cannot contribute to making them more transformative and geared towards systemic change, integrated and coherent, inclusive and participatory, while leaving no one behind. Hence, in line with other assessments, we diagnose a significant *gap between talk and transformative action*.²⁶ At the same

²⁴ For example, the Russian Federation only reports on its "legal framework" to promote gender equality, as the official indicator requires, but does not discuss the actual achievement of SDG 5.1 "End all forms of discrimination against all women and girls everywhere". For a discussion of the politics of indicators in national contexts, see Robert Lepenies et al., "The Politics of National SDG Indicator Systems: A Comparison of Four European Countries", *Ambio* 52 (2023): 743–56, doi: 10.1007/s13280-022-01809-w.

²⁵ Cameron Allen et al., "Assessing National Progress and Priorities for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): Experience from Australia", *Sustainable Science* 15 (2020): 521–38.

²⁶ See also Frank Biermann, Thomas Hickmann and Carole-Anne S nit, eds., *The Political Impact of the Sustainable Development Goals: Transforming Governance through Global Goals?*

time, talk is a form of action, even interaction, and we use narratives to explain our actions — that should not be ignored as it signals discursive impact.

3. In most countries in our sample, we see a clear *elite focus* in implementation and less attention paid to the needs of marginalized groups, specifically the promise of "leaving no one behind". For example, certain countries place particular emphasis on large-scale *infrastructure* projects, for reasons of political legacy and/or to serve the economic interests of key players (clientelism). That is true of Egypt, Brazil (under Bolsonaro), Kenya, and likely others. In Africa, this state-led infrastructure development model is supported by China as a donor and investor, through the Belt and Road and now the Global Development Initiative.²⁷
4. The SDGs and VNRs are used to *signal to donors* needs, interests and demands, for access to financial support, debt relief, or economic cooperation. That is especially true for least-developed (Sudan) and heavily indebted countries (Egypt).
5. Questions of economic development and political governance are often so closely intertwined that *fundamental changes in the political domain* (end of military dominance in Sudan, end of occupation in Palestine) would be needed to spur transformative sustainable development. Some progress on SDGs is possible within the existing system, but only to a limited extent and at the risk of further entrenching the repressive and exploitative systems keeping the majority of the population poor (similar for Egypt, Belarus, Russian Federation). As discussed above, *changes in government* can lead to relevant changes in SDG implementation (as in Brazil,²⁸ also South Africa and likely Kenya), but

(Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2022); Frank Biermann et al., "Scientific Evidence on the Political Impact of the Sustainable Development Goals", *Nature Sustainability* 5 (2022): 795–800.

²⁷ Cliff Mboya, *China's Belt and Road Initiative in the East African Community: Shaping a China-Centric Regional Order*, Megatrends Afrika Policy Brief no. 12 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, February 2023), https://www.swp-berlin.org/assets/afrika/publications/policybrief/MTA_PB12_Mboya_Chinas_Belt_and_Road_Initiative_in_the_East_African_Community_Shaping_a_China_final.pdf (accessed 23 May 2023).

²⁸ See also this assessment of the lack of leadership during the Trump administration: Anthony Pipa, "The Sustainable Development Goals and the United States", *The Environmental Forum* (July/August 2023): 46–53.

sometimes we also see astonishing continuity (like in South Korea). We also see changes when the same government remains in power but the circumstances change (Belarus, Russian Federation). New coalition governments often have to find new compromises. In federal systems, the central government can use the process of SDG localization to influence political decision-making at the state level (as shown for India); sometimes we also see resistance to central government efforts (India and Brazil).

6. While the SDG *architecture* at the national level often looks impressive, its political relevance tends to be rather low. And, as other studies have found, even new national institutions set up for SDG implementation tend to “reproduce existing structures and priorities”.²⁹ But they do also create spaces for *civil society participation* – even if this is often selective and state-controlled.³⁰ The more autocratic the political system, the worse this is. NGOs and think tanks close to or created by the government take the lead, as can be seen in China, Russia and Belarus. And in Russia, the transition to a full dictatorship has completely closed the space for independent and critical civil society groups. But even in such cases the SDGs can remain a point of reference for independent civil society actors, whether still in the country or in exile.
7. Many reports and statements discuss SDG failures in the context of – no doubt relevant – *external* factors. Examples include the fall-out from the pandemic, the cost of living crisis in the wake of the war in Ukraine, sanctions, the debt crisis, lack of fiscal space or access to technology, as well as related global governance failures and donor

²⁹ Andrea Ordóñez Llanos, Rob Raven et al., “Implementation at Multiple Levels”, in *The Political Impact of the Sustainable Development Goals, Transforming Governance through Global Goals?* ed. Frank Biermann, Thomas Hickmann and Carole-Anne Sénit (Cambridge, UK, 2022), 81.

³⁰ Even democracies struggle: Germany’s 2021 VNR acknowledged that the text was only ready for comments shortly before finalization and civil society participation in the drafting process was therefore less intense and meaningful than planned. For criticism of this and other elements of the 2021 German VNR see: Marie-Luise Abshagen (German NGO Forum on Environment and Development), “Where Did the Ambition Go? Since Its Last VNR in 2016, Germany Has Lost Track of SDG Implementation”, <https://www.forumue.de/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/FUE-2pager-VNR-Germany-Annex.pdf> (accessed 23 May 2023).

agendas. Although significant, these challenges, should not distract governments from their share of responsibility for the SDGs at the country level. Another research paper that analyses and compares the institutional design for implementing the SDGs in 137 countries finds that nearly half of the governments perceive the 2030 Agenda primarily as an international agenda.³¹ They conclude that this raises concerns about a lack of domestic action and accountability.³²

This view of the SDGs sometimes coincides with an explicitly technocratic mode of reporting, focusing solely on indicators and data. This ostensibly creates objectivity, when in fact the validity and reliability of the data and the underlying developments often remain unclear.

Taken together, such an approach prevents a full and unbiased assessment of the relevant *internal* obstacles to full realization of the SDGs. All the more so when diplomatic considerations prevent an open and frank discussion at the UN.

8. In terms of the *geopolitics* of (sustainable) development, it is nothing new that China is offering different forms of development cooperation. However, doing so in the UN framework and including all interested parties (not only developing countries) underlines the new self-confidence under Xi Jinping. We are now witnessing how this changes the (sustainable) development ecosystem and global politics. For example, countries adopt Chinese language in their (UN) speeches and reports. Some of this is good for implementing the SDGs (access to finance, South-South cooperation), some is problematic (rising debt, entrenchment of corrupt political systems and elites, dominant focus on infrastructure).

³¹ Anita Breuer, Julia Leininger, Daniele Malerba, and Jale Tosun, “Integrated Policy-making: Institutional Designs for Implementing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)”, *World Development* 170 (2023): 106317.

³² For highly-industrialized countries a different phenomenon can be shown: While these countries tend to score relatively well on domestic action, there is less political will to address relevant spill-over effects of domestic action, such as environmental and social impacts embedded in trade (supply chains) or finance. For data on this see <https://dashboards.sdindex.org/map/spillovers> (accessed 3 July 2023).

How could actors build on these insights to accelerate SDG implementation?

The *recommendations* arising from this cross-cutting analysis are addressed to various actors:

Firstly, in the run-up to the SDG Summit, *UN officials in charge of preparations, leaders and all other participants* should pay more attention to the politics surrounding the SDGs at the country level. Analysis of the local interests and priorities of political actors and their different perspectives on the SDGs is relevant not only for correctly assessing and interpreting how the SDGs are used domestically and in foreign policy, but also for identifying policy options for third parties to effectively support SDG implementation. The UN could convene expert group meetings to this end, inviting independent experts, the so-called “focal points” who coordinated the voluntary national and local reviews, as well as representatives of UN country teams and independent civil society and other stakeholder groups. While diplomats may not want to get involved in country-level politics, they should at least be aware of it.

Obviously, the Political Declaration – the negotiated official outcome document that has to find consensus before being adopted at the SDG Summit – does not discuss such politically sensitive issues. But the 2023 zero draft does offer several starting points. In its third part, the “Call to action – turning our world towards 2030”, paragraph 41 concedes “Mid-way to 2030 we are considerably off-course for the world we want”, and proclaims “*but with political will, the promise of the Sustainable Development Goals remains attainable, and we resolve to fulfil it*”.³³ If meaningful progress is to be made in the second period (2023–2030), it will be crucial to *address that political will more directly*.

Our results demonstrate how essential it is that countries *review and revise their national strategies* in order to accelerate implementation. The zero draft of the Political Declaration touches on this in paragraph 36 (m): “We will strengthen the integration of the SDGs into our national policy frameworks and develop national plans for transformative and accelerated action. We will make achieving the SDGs a central focus in national planning and oversight mechanisms. We will further localize the SDGs and advance

integrated planning at local and sub-national levels.” That recommendation is taken from the 2023 GSDR, which is to be officially launched at the SDG Summit in September. The team of fifteen independent scientists responsible for that report, recommends that member states develop “national transformation frameworks for accelerated action” and present them at the 2024 July HLPF.³⁴ It would be useful to see member states commit to ensuring that this is followed up in a robust way. Unless we encourage governments to review and revise their existing implementation strategies, we will not see transformative change. At the same time, it is clear that maintaining the integrity of the SDG framework while respecting national priorities will remain a major balancing act.

Donors and investors need to ensure that their support for SDG implementation does not strengthen corrupt and exploitative political and/or military systems that largely serve vested interests while keeping many citizens poor. As noted in the debate around Stefan Dercon’s book: “When elites fail to reach a shared vision for growth and development – they may share other visions, for example, of power and self-enrichment – the role of development partners becomes more difficult.”³⁵ Consequently, external donors should humbly reflect their role in such contexts, while realizing that they are political actors. Continuous monitoring, evaluation and learning processes may help. Moreover, donors could seek to play a productive complementary role, supporting national efforts with aid and technical assistance and setting incentives for better elite bargains. Dercon himself mentions extensive trade preferences and working seriously to combat illicit finance. For countries lacking a development bargain, he suggests that donors should attempt to deter rogue elite bargains, prioritize the needs of the most deprived citizens, and work with those within political elites, business and civil society who desire change.

The jointly adopted SDG framework allows donors to counter accusations that they are patronizing or

³⁴ Independent Group of Scientists, *2023 Global Sustainable Development Report*, Advance Unedited Version (New York: United Nations, 28 March 2023), 120f., <https://sdgs.un.org/sites/default/files/2023-04/2023%20GSDR%20advance%20unedited%2028%20March%202023.pdf> (accessed 7 June 2023).

³⁵ Quoted from this discussion of Dercon’s book: Annalisa Prizzon and Steve Wiggins, eds., “What Role for Aid in Countries with and without a Development Bargain?” *Development Policy Review* 41 (May 2023): e12701, p. 2, doi: 10.1111/dpr.12701.

³³ UNGA, *Zero Draft Political Declaration*, para. 41 (emphasis added).

imposing “political conditionality”. The principles allow them to push for the *full* implementation of the integrated approach of the 2030 Agenda, including the environmental and social dimensions (leaving no one behind), with a human-rights-based approach and meaningful participation of civil society, as well as good governance and the fight against corruption. At the same time, countries of the Global South have the right to demand that donor countries fulfil their commitments under SDG 17.

Poverty levels naturally impact the way the SDGs are handled at country level. They also define the means that external actors possess to influence implementation strategies. While development cooperation can be important, there is a lack of *effective levers and incentives “beyond aid”* for middle-income and BRICS countries. New modes of international cooperation, like for example the Just Energy Transition Partnerships (JETPs) with South Africa, are promising – if well-developed and implemented. Technological cooperation is another area of great interest to emerging economies.

Listen and explain to generate mutual trust, build capacities for the transformation towards sustainable development, and combine this with a convincing narrative.

The 2023 GSDR highlights “capacity building for transformation” as a key lever, and identifies specific actions to develop the capacity of key stakeholders to drive and manage sustainability transitions, such as access to scientific knowledge, innovative solutions (including the digital transformation), foresight capacity, building resilience, and conflict resolution skills.³⁶ In general, geopolitical tensions may lead to further compartmentalization of foreign and development policy, and the question of what works with whom. All actors should engage in strategic discussion and continuous mutual learning on innovative means of implementation and cooperation.

As governments seek to shape the global debate by promoting their *narratives* on how best to implement the SDGs, Germany and Europe need to prepare for this (soft) power competition. This applies in particular to the further development and international communication of the European Green Deal and the

³⁶ Independent Group of Scientists, *Global Sustainable Development Report* (see note 34), 122f.

EU’s Global Gateway Initiative. The EU should see its Global Gateway initiative as an engagement with the Global South – and not merely a counterweight to China. Accordingly, the EU should focus Global Gateway more on addressing the concerns of the Global South – but with an explicit human-rights-based, pro-poor approach. “Listen, explain, weigh up” for “building trust; considering options; confronting dilemmas through dialogue”: that is how German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock defined the needs of twenty-first-century foreign policy, at the German ambassadors’ conference in early September 2022. Moreover, the feminist foreign and development policy approach, with its focus on marginalized groups, is in line with the 2030 Agenda’s principle of leaving no one behind. To this end, Germany and the EU should also seek more meaningful cooperation with sub-national actors (cities and regional governments, stakeholder groups).

As our analyses confirm, recurring *violent conflict* is a major impediment to SDG implementation. Donors, governments and implementers need to identify and address “collective outcomes” in acute armed conflicts more effectively, including humanitarian needs, development priorities and peacebuilding (the so-called HDP nexus).³⁷ There is also a (highly politicized) discussion about how even smart and targeted sanctions – which seek to selectively target those who commit crimes while preventing hardship among civilians – can still hinder sustainable development. More work is needed to minimize their adverse effects on SDG implementation.³⁸

The international community also has few tools at its disposal to deal with changing domestic priorities and strategies following changes in political power and ideological orientation. One first step would be to provide more explicit feedback on this during the VNR interactive dialogues or other sessions during the annual UN-HLPF. Supporting local governance and civil society actors (including those in exile) to

³⁷ See also the guidance provided by the UN’s Inter-Agency Standing Committee on how the HDP nexus is relevant for SDG implementation at national level, <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/77368> (accessed 23 May 2023).

³⁸ Sascha Lohmann and Judith Vorrath, *International Sanctions: Improving Implementation through Better Interface Management*, SWP Research Division International Security, Working Paper 1 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, August 2021), https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/arbeitspapiere/WP_International_Sanctions.pdf (accessed 23 May 2023).

act if the central government neglects its SDG commitments could be another option.

Outlook: The 2024 HLPF Review and the 2024 Summit of the Future

The next review of the format and the organizational aspects of the HLPF, including the follow-up and review of national-level implementation through the VNRs, is planned for early 2024. In his 2023 SDG Progress Report, the UN Secretary-General recommends an “attention shift from reporting national action to an international audience to strengthening national accountability for progress and transformation”.³⁹ He states that this “calls for a systematic inclusion of SDG implementation efforts in national oversight systems, for more independent evaluations of national implementation, for greater involvement of scientists in monitoring and review”. In this spirit, future VNRs could be mandated to also review the envisaged national plans for transformative and accelerated action for the next four-year cycle of annual HLPF meetings. That would not represent a “stick” but it would at least increase transparency. In the past, however, the G77 has rejected any “hardening” of the VNRs.⁴⁰

Revamped national-level commitment could be incentivized by creating an enabling international environment.

Complementing the national commitments coming out of the SDG Summit, the *Summit of the Future* planned for September 2024 offers an opportunity for member states to agree on a strengthened *multilateral* framework. It should be designed to support these national efforts, including incentives for policy-makers and their constituents. This year's UN deliberations on the Summit of the Future showed that it

is more important than ever to bring the SDG community together with those who have a broader interest in the future of multilateralism.⁴¹ This is imperative in light of multiple conflicts and deepening geopolitical divides.

The UN Secretary-General has consistently pointed out the links between the two summits. In his SDG Progress Report he outlines a series of urgent actions at the national and international level. He urges *national governments* “to strengthen national and sub-national capacity, accountability and public institutions to deliver accelerated SDG progress”.⁴² The report outlines how recommitting to the 2030 Agenda and SDGs at the 2023 SDG Summit implies action to “advance concrete, integrated and targeted policies and actions ... empowering the most vulnerable”.⁴³ The *international community* is encouraged to “mobilize the resources and investment needed for developing countries to achieve the SDGs” as well as to “facilitate the continued strengthening of the UN development system and to boost the capacity of the multilateral system to tackle emerging challenges and address SDG related gaps and weaknesses in the international architecture that have emerged since 2015”.⁴⁴ For the latter he refers explicitly to the 2024 Summit of the Future.

Such well-coordinated and complementary action plans could contribute to the success of the 2023 SDG Summit and the 2024 Summit of the Future. A meaningful package deal would need to address the factors relevant to SDG successes and the failures at the international level, and stimulate the political will to

³⁹ UNGA, *Progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals: Towards a Rescue Plan for People and Planet, Report of the Secretary-General (Special Edition)* (New York: United Nations, May 2023), https://hlpf.un.org/sites/default/files/2023-04/SDG%20Progress%20Report%20Special%20Edition_1.pdf (accessed 23 May 2023), para. 58.

⁴⁰ Marianne Beisheim, *Conflicts in UN Reform Negotiations. Insights into and from the Review of the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development*, SWP Research Paper 9/2021 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, December 2021), doi: 10.18449/2021RP09.

⁴¹ Marianne Beisheim and Silke Weinlich, *Germany and Namibia as Co-leads for the United Nations: Chances and Challenges on the Road to the 2024 UN Summit of the Future*, SWP Comment 3/2023 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, January 2023), doi: 10.18449/2023C03; Marianne Beisheim and Silke Weinlich, “Accelerating the SDGs through the 2024 Summit of the Future”, International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD) SDG Knowledge Hub, 1 February 2023, <http://sdg.iisd.org/commentary/guest-articles/accelerating-the-sdgs-through-the-2024-summit-of-the-future/> (accessed 23 May 2023); Richard Ponzio, *The SDG Summit and Summit of the Future: A Tale of Two Major Agendas*, Opinion, PassBlue, April 3, 2023, <https://www.passblue.com/2023/04/03/the-sdgs-summit-and-summit-of-the-future-a-tale-of-two-major-agendas/> (accessed 3 July 2023).

⁴² UNGA *Progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals* (see note 39), para. 16.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, para. 13.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, para. 18 and 21.

change course at the country level. Where there is no genuine national leadership interest in achieving the SDGs, the UN and its member states must invest in developing effective incentives that go beyond creating transparency through the VNRs. In general, member states' fundamental reservations over sovereignty form a major obstacle to deeper cooperation at the UN.⁴⁵ As a recent analysis of global governance failures laments: "In particular, the destructive forces in society are clinging to national sovereignty as their rampart against interference with their selfish ways."⁴⁶ Sovereignty bargains are difficult but possible, especially if additional resources can be made a part of the negotiation process.⁴⁷ The two summits offer a window of opportunity to put "political will" at the centre and strike a deal that truly "turbo-charges" implementation of the SDGs.

45 Beisheim, *Conflicts in UN Reform Negotiations* (see note 40), 26f.

46 Arthur Lyon Dahl, "Global Governance Failures: Warnings by the Secretary-General", *Global Governance Forum*, 21 February 2023, <https://globalgovernanceforum.org/global-governance-failures-warnings-by-the-secretary-general/> (accessed 7 June 2023).

47 Kathryn Hochstetler, Ann Marie Clark and Elisabeth J. Friedman, "Sovereignty in the Balance: Claims and Bargains at the UN Conferences on the Environment, Human Rights, and Women", *International Studies Quarterly* 44, no. 4 (December 2000): 591 – 614, doi: 10.1111/0020-8833.00173.

Astrid Sahn

Belarus and the 2030 Agenda: Foreign Policy Instrument and Failed Reform Driver

Belarus has submitted two VNRs to the HLPF, the first in 2017 and the second in 2022.¹ In the time between the two reviews the political situation in Belarus changed fundamentally: By the summer of 2020 the Belarusian leadership was pursuing a policy of rapprochement with the West that was mainly motivated by its interest in reducing its dependence on the Kremlin after the Russian annexation of the Crimea in 2014 and the violent establishment of separatist republics in the Donbas. Western countries recognized the role Belarus played as host of the negotiations leading to the Minsk Agreements. In February 2016, the EU decided not to extend its sanctions against representatives of the Belarusian leadership, which had been introduced in reaction to the detention of political opponents after the presidential elections in December 2010. However, confronted with the mass protests after the rigged presidential elections in August 2020, Belarus's long-serving ruler Aliaksandr Lukashenka again sought the Kremlin's support to ensure his political survival. In response, the EU and other Western countries returned to their previous sanction policy. The geopolitical confrontation intensified after the forced landing of a Ryanair plane in Minsk in May 2021 and due to Belarus's role as a co-aggressor in Russia's war against Ukraine since February 2022.²

institutional mechanisms adopted by the Belarusian leadership to promote the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and its SDGs. In the following years Belarus's sustainable development policy clearly aimed at improving the country's international reputation. This was backed up by the high rankings Belarus received in the annual international SDG index prepared by the Bertelsmann Foundation and the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN), starting with 23rd place in 2016. Despite the increasingly repressive character of the Lukashenka regime following the August 2020 presidential elections, Belarus maintained a high ranking with 34th position in 2022.³ In line with this positive assessment the 2022 national review asserted that Belarus had already implemented 80 percent of the seventeen SDGs. However, the second VNR also warned that "unprecedented illegal unilateral economic sanctions" imposed by Western countries "offset the results achieved in the implementation of the SDGs".⁴ This statement is part of a series of appeals that the Belarusian leadership has made to the United Nations over the past three years, urging the organization to classify Western sanctions as a violation of the UN Charter and international human rights norms.⁵

Reviews as mirror of policy shifts

The two national reviews reflect the different political contexts. The 2017 VNR proudly presented the new

1 Both reviews and other related documents are available at United Nations High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development website under "Belarus", 2023: <https://hlpf.un.org/countries/belarus> (accessed 19 April 2023).

2 Astrid Sahn, "Die Ohnmacht der EU", *Internationale Politik* 6 (November/December 2021): 61–65.

3 All Sustainable Development Reports are available on the Sustainable Development Report website under "Reports", 2023, <https://www.sdindex.org/reports> (accessed 19 April 2023).

4 United Nations, *The National Review of the Republic of Belarus of the Progress Achieved towards the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (New York, 2022), 3, 65, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3996693> (accessed 19 April 2023).

5 Astrid Sahn, "In der Sackgasse: Die Sanktionsspirale EU-Belarus", *Osteuropa* 10–12 (2021): 139–68.

Belarus and UN Development Policy

Belarus has always paid great attention to its participation in UN initiatives. In the 1990s it demonstrated strong commitment to the implementation of Agenda 21, adopted at the UN Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. Belarus was the first post-Soviet country to adopt its own national strategy on sustainable development in 1997 and published a National Progress Report on the eve of the World Summit on Sustainable Development in 2002. However, the Belarusian leadership's interest in Agenda 21 and its participatory approach declined noticeably in the 2000s. In 2009, the Belarusian government decided to abolish the responsible national commission and halted further work on the already drafted new national sustainability strategy.⁶ Instead, the government's attention focused on a state-driven approach towards achieving the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The second status report on achieving the MDGs, published in 2010, stated that "Belarus has generally met all of the MDGs".⁷

Belarus has always paid great attention to its participation in UN initiatives.

Following the decision of the 2012 (Rio+20) UN Conference on Sustainable Development to negotiate the SDGs, Belarus began to reactivate its sustainable development policy by elaborating a new national strategy for the period until 2030, which was approved in February 2015. Belarus also participated actively in the UN preparatory consultations for the 2030 Agenda. At the second session of the Open Working Group on SDGs the Belarusian representative emphasised that his country supported the introduction of periodic national reviews to assess progress toward achieving the SDGs "without prejudice to the choice and implementation of national development

⁶ Astrid Sahm, "Die Agenda 2030", *Belarus-Analysen*, no. 41 (30 January 2019), 2–6, https://laender-analysen.de/api-v2/belarus-analysen/41/BelarusAnalysen41-die_agenda_2030_in_belarus-sahm-2019.pdf (accessed 19 April 2023).

⁷ Institute of Economic Research under the Ministry of Economy of Belarus, *Status of Achieving the Millennium Development Goals: National Report of the Republic of Belarus* (Minsk, 2010), 5, https://planipolis.iiep.unesco.org/sites/default/files/ressources/belarus_mdg_2010-eng.pdf (accessed 19 April 2023).

strategies".⁸ This early statement already demonstrates Minsk's intention to prevent the 2030 Agenda from being used to criticize Belarus's authoritarian political structures and possible human rights violations.

SDGs as potential drivers of reforms

The active phase of implementing the 2030 Agenda began in May 2017, when a National Coordinator on achieving the SDGs was appointed by presidential decree and the Council for Sustainable Development was set up. The first task of the newly appointed coordinator was to present the first national review on SDG implementation at the 2017 HLPF. Given the short time for preparation, the 2017 VNR was mostly an announcement about the Belarusian leadership's commitment to implementing the 2030 Agenda. Besides highlighting institutional innovations, the report outlined plans to create a national system of indicators for monitoring the SDGs and declared the country's intention to incorporate them into national, sectoral and regional strategies, programmes and plans. Additionally, the review focused on concrete SDG clusters that are closely related to the previous MDGs, and relied largely on state documents and international ratings. Cooperation between state and civil society was rarely mentioned. In addition, only selected aspects of the addressed SDGs were highlighted. For instance, the section on SDG 17 focused solely on public-private partnerships in connection with SDG 9 on industry, innovation and infrastructure. Information for several SDGs was completely absent (7, 10–12 and 16). In fact, the lack of any information on progress towards SDG 16 is surprising, as Belarus had adopted its first National Human Rights Action Plan in October 2016. In December of the same year the Belarusian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the UN Office in Belarus organized a panel discussion on "The National Human Rights Action Plan: Human Rights and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development".⁹

⁸ Government of Belarus, "Statement by Mr. Yury Ambrazevich", New York, 17 April 2013, <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/3533belarus.pdf> (accessed 19 April 2023).

⁹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Belarus, "The Presentation of the Human Rights Action Plan", press release, Minsk, 9 December 2016, http://www.mfa.gov.by/en/press/news_mfa/e4d67633e1891aae.html (accessed 19 April 2023).

After the 2017 HLPF the National Coordinator initiated a wide range of ambitious activities, aimed at establishing Belarus as a regional leader in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. These activities included parliamentary hearings on SDGs in December 2017, a Regional SDG Coordination Leaders Forum in February 2018 attended by UN Deputy Secretary-General Amina J. Mohammed, and the first National Forum on Sustainable Development in January 2019.¹⁰ Most of the events were financed by a special UN Project titled “Support to the National Coordinator on Implementation of SDGs and Strengthening the Role of the Parliament in the Implementation of SDGs”.¹¹ The project title also implied an expectation that implementation of the 2030 Agenda would promote political reforms in Belarus. Indeed, between 2017 and 2019, the National Coordinator established a complex system of interagency and multi-stakeholder collaboration around the Council on Sustainable Development, including an open Partnership Group for all interested representatives from civil society, business, and international organizations.¹²

New strategy as turning point

The new national sustainability architecture clearly improved horizontal and vertical integration of sustainability aspects in Belarusian social, environmental and economic policy strategies. New approaches were particularly evident in the process of preparing the

“National Sustainability Strategy for the period up to 2035” (NSDS 2035), which integrated the SDGs for the first time. At the initiative of the responsible Ministry of Economy, several roundtables and workshops were held in 2018–2019 to discuss future visions and priorities with relevant stakeholders, including independent civil society actors.¹³ The strategy concept, prepared by the Ministry’s research institute with the active support of its Public Council for Sustainable Development Strategies Drafting and Evaluation, was published on the Ministry’s website for public consultations in December 2018.¹⁴

At the same time, the discussions surrounding the NSDS 2035 soon revealed the limitations of the 2030 Agenda as a driver of reform in Belarus. This became particularly evident in the handling of SDG 5. In the 2018 strategy concept, the Ministry of Economy’s research institute included a chapter on gender equality. However, this section was excluded from the strategy draft that the Ministry of Economy intended to submit to the government for endorsement in early 2020, without any open discussion. It was only thanks to objections of the UN Resident Coordinator in Belarus and the Partnership Group coordinators that the draft strategy was presented to the Public Council in February 2020 and public consultations organized in March 2020. As a result, certain gender-related aspects were reintegrated into the final draft version of the strategy, such as the establishment of mechanisms to combat domestic violence.¹⁵ However, the term “gender equality” was consistently avoided and the concepts of gender mainstreaming and gender scrutiny entirely omitted. Instead, only “equal rights and opportunities for men and women in all areas of

2023). For the background to the plan and the EU-Belarus Human Rights Dialogue being resumed in 2015 after a six-year hiatus, see Wolfgang Sender, *First National Human Rights Plan: A Breakthrough for Human Rights in Belarus?* KAS Country Report (Berlin: Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, December 2016), https://www.kas.de/c/document_library/get_file?uuid=662a64ec-a484-2666-f3be-d70323551f1b&type=application/pdf (accessed 19 April 2023).

10 For an overview of relevant events see Sustainable Development Goals in Belarus, “Events”, 2021, https://sdgs.by/en/news_events/events/ (accessed 19 April 2023).

11 The function of the national coordinator was exercised by the deputy chair of the upper chamber of the National Assembly. Astrid Sahn, “Die Agenda 2030” (see note 6). Activities related to the 2030 Agenda were also supported by other Western donors, including the GIZ.

12 A detailed description of the architecture for managing the process of achieving SDGs in the Republic of Belarus is available at Sustainable Development Goals in Belarus, “Management”, 2021, <https://sdgs.by/en/architecture/> (accessed 19 April 2023).

13 Information about important aspects of the elaboration process is still available on the website of the Ministry of Economy of Belarus, “Information on the Development of the Current NSDS 2035” (in Belarusian), 2020, https://economy.gov.by/ru/info_nsdr-ru/ (accessed 19 April 2023).

14 The strategy concept is still available at Ministry of Economy of Belarus, *National Strategy Concept for Sustainable Development of the Republic of Belarus for the period up to 2035* (in Belarusian) (Minsk, 2018), <https://economy.gov.by/uploads/files/ObsugdaemNPA/Kontseptsija-na-sajt.pdf> (accessed 19 April 2023).

15 The author received the first strategy draft from the UN Resident Coordinator in Belarus by e-mail, dated 31 January 2020.

life” were mentioned, while the focus remained on preserving traditional family values.¹⁶

Impact of political crisis

In retrospect, the setbacks civil society organisations faced during the finalization process of the NSDS 2035 seem like a harbinger of the political crisis that occurred after the presidential election in August 2020. In light of the crisis, the Partnership Group coordinators called on the National Coordinator to condemn the violence of the security forces against peaceful demonstrators and to engage in a genuine societal dialogue. However, these appeals remained unsuccessful. In summer of 2021, all NGOs led by the coordinators were closed down as part of a wave of prohibitions that affected several hundred organizations. Subsequently, the Partnership Group was re-organized by the National Coordinator and has since then played only a passive role. Likewise, the Parliamentary Group of the Council for Sustainable Development showed no further initiative. Nevertheless, the national sustainability architecture remained unchanged in formal terms and the Council continued to hold meetings at least twice a year.¹⁷

Despite the political turmoil Belarus presented its second voluntary national review at the 2022 HLPF. Although the review covered all the SDGs this time, it was still not systematic and focused only on individual aspects that did not allow for an overall assessment of successes and problems in achieving the SDGs. The 2022 VNR’s main objective was – besides criticizing Western economic sanctions – to highlight the comprehensive character of state actors’ efforts to implement the 2030 Agenda. According to the review 70 percent of Belarus’s total budgetary resources are used for SDG-related measures. The basis of this claim is that the SDGs are integrated into more than twenty-five state programmes, allowing specific budgetary expenditures to be allocated to each of the SDGs. While the report emphasizes the general importance of partnering with civil society, it does not name any specific

¹⁶ The strict avoidance of the term “gender equality” is surprising as Belarus does use it in its international reporting. It also has a National Council on Gender Equality and adopts National Action Plans for Gender Equality.

¹⁷ For information about the Council’s meetings see Sustainable Development Goals in Belarus, “The Meeting of the Council for Sustainable Development”, 2023, <https://sdgs.by/en/zasedanie/> (accessed 19 April 2023).

contributions by non-state actors. Thus, all achievements in implementing the 2030 Agenda are credited to the state.¹⁸

Alternative reports with focus on SDG 16

The office of Belarusian opposition leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, who ran as a presidential candidate in 2020, submitted an alternative report to the HLPF. For her team, which was supported by a group of civil society experts and activists, the forum provided an opportunity to draw attention to the massive political repression and human rights violations committed by the Lukashenka regime. Their report claims that, in view of this situation, “it is impossible to talk about achievements of the government of Alexander Lukashenko in implementing the SDGs”.¹⁹ By presenting its report, the Tsikhanouskaya’s office sought “to prevent the regime ... from receiving funding for the SDGs that would be used for strengthening the dictatorship”.²⁰

In that context, the alternative report placed special emphasis on SDG 16. While the VNR report only dealt with measures to prevent human trafficking and domestic and sexual violence, the alternative report put SDG 16 at the centre of its analysis, focusing on fundamental rights, judicial independence and corruption control. In addition, two separate sections address the right to receive information from state authorities, which was a particular issue during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the right to a healthy environment. Furthermore, the Belarusian Helsinki Committee prepared its own shadow report, in which all indicators of SDG 16 were systematically analysed.²¹ One central concern of both alternative

¹⁸ United Nations, *The National Review of the Republic of Belarus of the Progress Achieved* (see note 4), 7, 9, 21.

¹⁹ Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya’s Office and Friedrich Ebert Foundation, *Belarusian Civil Society Report on Sustainable Development Goals Implementation* (Vilnius: UN High-Level Political Forum, July 2022), 4, 9.

²⁰ Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya’s Office, “Presentation of the Alternative Report on Sustainable Development Goals Implementation in Belarus”, 12 July 2022, <https://tsikhanouskaya.org/en/events/news/cdccc5268bbf84e.html> (accessed 19 April 2023).

²¹ Belarusian Helsinki Committee, *Report on the Implementation of SDG 16 by the Republic of Belarus* (2022), https://belhelcom.org/sites/default/files/bhc_16_sdg_web_eng_2_version.pdf (accessed 19 April 2023).

reports was a general appeal to the UN and its members that compliance with the recommendations of UN human rights committees, which have been ignored by the Belarusian leadership for a long time, should be seen as a prerequisite for real progress in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

Prospects

In January 2023 Belarus notified the UN Economic and Social Council of its intention to present a third VNR at the 2025 HLPF. This announcement may be linked to Belarus's candidacy for a non-permanent seat on the UN Security Council for 2024 – 2025. In any case, the Belarusian leadership obviously sees the 2030 Agenda as an appropriate framework to present its achievements and to communicate concrete political messages at an international level, as was the case with the opening for limited reforms in 2017 or the criticism of Western sanctions in 2022.

Since the policy shift of August 2020, the UN's state-centred approach and support from other authoritarian states seem to be of great importance to the Belarusian leadership. The UN resident agencies in Belarus are obliged to involve state agencies in all their activities. In addition, Russia appears to be becoming the primary donor for UN projects in Belarus. In particular, in 2023 Russia started funding a project aimed at supporting the nationalization and localization of the SDGs.²² There is a high risk that these UN projects will only strengthen the existing Lukashenka regime.

The 2030 Agenda remains one of the few international processes that involve both Belarusian officials and their Western counterparts.

At the same time, the 2030 Agenda remains one of the few international processes that involve both Belarusian officials and their Western counterparts. While most Western organisations have had to stop their activities in Belarus since August 2020, UN agencies are currently the most important international

actors still working actively there. There is a small chance that the UN activities can (re)open new windows of opportunities for multi-stakeholder cooperation, and help to resolve the protracted political crisis in Belarus. But that is only realistic if the growing global geopolitical confrontation does not transform the 2030 Agenda into a political battlefield at the UN.

²² United Nations Belarus, "Council for Sustainable Development Focuses on Women's Rights", press release (Minsk, 21 February 2023), <https://belarus.un.org/en/220271-council-sustainable-development-focuses-women%E2%80%99s-rights> (accessed 19 April 2023).

Claudia Zilla

Brazil's 2030 Agenda: Drifting with Power Changes

Power changes and political shifts have strongly conditioned Brazil's engagement with the sustainable development agenda, both domestically and internationally. The SDGs were conceived at the 2012 UN Conference on Sustainable Development in Rio de Janeiro (Rio+20), and adopted by the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) in 2015. The Brazilian National Commission for the Sustainable Development Goals (NC-SDGs) was established in 2016, under the presidency of Dilma Rousseff (2011 – 2016). A year later, President Michel Temer (2016 – 2018) signed the introductory chapter to Brazil's first and, to date, only Voluntary National Review (VNR).¹ In 2019, President Jair Bolsonaro (2019 – 2022) abolished the NC-SDG. Under his administration, Brazil disengaged from the international sustainable development agenda, while domestic social and environmental governance structures were dismantled. Policies, actions and monitoring systems experienced disruption, budgets were reduced or exhausted, spaces for public participation shrunk, and restrictions were placed on public access to information.²

A history of changing political priorities

Under the first two presidencies of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (2003 – 2010) and the first presidency of Dilma Rousseff, Brazil made remarkable social achievements. Tailwinds from the global economy and domestic economic growth enabled not only dynamic increases in the minimum wage and pensions, but also compre-

hensive social programmes, mostly based on conditional cash transfers (CCTs).³ In addition, a series of executive decisions, congressional acts, and court rulings contributed to a progressive social and human rights agenda. The positive impact of these policies was felt by the vast majority of Brazilians, who elected a candidate from the Workers' Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores, PT) to the presidency four times in a row. In the context of an "active and assertive foreign policy",⁴ such social achievements at home served to raise the country's international profile as a global development power.⁵ Brazil engaged in development assistance in Latin America and Lusophone Africa, becoming an emerging donor.⁶

Things began to change under Rousseff's second presidency, which ended prematurely with her impeachment, and became even more different under the administrations of her former vice-president Michel Temer. A less favourable international and domestic economic environment, corruption scandals, serious political disputes and a rightward shift in the electorate contributed to the rejection of the governing party. Under President Bolsonaro, social

1 Brazilian Government, *Voluntary National Review on the Sustainable Development Goals* (Brasilia, 2017), https://hlpf.un.org/sites/default/files/vnrs/2021/15806Brazil_English.pdf (accessed 23 February 2023).

2 Claudia Zilla, "Brasiliens Umweltgovernance: Vom Paria zum Partner?", in *Zwischen Moskau, Peking und Washington: Lateinamerika in der Großmacht Konkurrenz*, ed. Günther Maihold and Hartmut Sangmeister (Baden-Baden, 2023), 151 – 58.

3 Claudia Zilla, "Soziale Ungleichheit und Sozialpolitik", in *Brasilien: Eine Einführung*, ed. Peter Birle (Frankfurt, 2013), 91 – 108.

4 Claudia Zilla, *Brazil's Foreign Policy under Lula*, SWP Research Paper 2/2017 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, March 2017), https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/research_papers/2017RP02_zll.pdf (accessed 23 February 2023).

5 Peter Dauvergne and Déborah Bl Farias, "The Rise of Brazil as a Global Development Power", *Third World Quarterly* 33, no. 5 (2012): 903 – 17.

6 Claudia Zilla and Christoph Harig, *Brasilien als "Emerging Donor": Politische Distanz und operative Nähe zu den traditionellen Gebern*, SWP Research Paper 7/2012 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, March 2012), https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/studien/2012_S07_zll_harig.pdf (accessed 23 February 2023).

policies became more conservative and economic policies more liberal. Environmental protection and indigenous rights were sidelined as obstacles to economic growth; civil society participation and global governance structures came to be regarded as domestic and foreign constraints on national state power. With these drastic changes, Brazil exemplifies the abandonment of public policies aligned with the SDGs, as well as the systematic weakening of governance structures and the dismantling of mechanisms for meaningful participation and dialogue.

Political change results in disengagement

Brazil's retreat from the sustainable development agenda under President Bolsonaro had several dimensions. Ideology was a key driver, and the effects were seen in institutional and policy changes. Civil society reports lamented the impact of these changes.

President Bolsonaro's *ideology* was shared by key ministers in his cabinet. He won the 2018 presidential election with far-right and populist rhetoric employing exclusionary narratives that remained unchanged throughout his administration. He championed a moralizing, socially conservative and religious agenda.⁷ He often expressed his doubts about the reality of climate change and his scepticism towards science and clearly prioritized economic goals over environmental and social ones.⁸

Institutionally, Brazil has also changed. The 2017 VNR was prepared at senior cabinet level.⁹ The NC-SDGs had been created in 2016, as a consultative body to internalize, disseminate and lend transparency to the process of implementing the 2030 Agenda in Brazil. Its composition was highly inclusive, with equal representation from national, regional and local governments, on the one side, and civil society, academia and the private sector, on the other. With the aim of developing a territorialized plan for the

2030 Agenda, certain federal states created committees to coordinate the implementation of the SDGs at the regional level, and some municipalities implemented projects related to the SDGs.¹⁰

Brazil abandoned many of its SDG commitments during the Bolsonaro presidency. In 2019, it withdrew from the list of countries reporting to the UN High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF); the SDGs ceased to be mentioned in the national development plans.¹¹ Brazil withdrew its offer to host the Conference of the Parties (COP 25) on climate change in 2019, abandoned most international cooperation on environmental protection, and left the UN Global Compact for Migration "in order to preserve national values", as the president put it. The NC-SDG was disbanded, alongside about five hundred other multi-stakeholder institutions in different policy areas, and replaced by an inter-ministerial and inter-institutional group created within the federal government in 2021, which excluded non-state stakeholders.¹²

Accordingly, *policies* also changed. The federal government's 2016–2019 multi-year plan (PPA) and the SDG Commission's 2017–2019 action plan (elaborated under the Temer administration) were in line with the SDGs. But this changed under Bolsonaro's presidency. Many of the new government's decisions impacted negatively on environmental protection (for example, renewed expansion of resource exploitation in the Amazon region), social policies (for example, severe cuts in health and education spending) and respect for human rights (for example, increasing violence against peasant organizations, indigenous and LGBTQIA+ communities).¹³ This trend can be

⁷ Claudia Zilla, *Foreign Policy Change in Brazil: Drivers and Implications*, SWP Research Paper 8/2022, (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, July 2022), <https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/foreign-policy-change-in-brazil> (accessed 23 February 2023).

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ United Cities and Local Governments, "Brazil", in *Country Profiles on SDG Localization: Local and Regional Governments Stepping forward for Achieving the 2030 Agenda* (Barcelona: United Cities and Local Governments, 2022), 368–72, https://gold.uclg.org/sites/default/files/country_profiles_on_sdg_localization_final_version.pdf (accessed 23 February 2023).

¹⁰ Programa Cidades Sustentáveis, "Agenda 2030" (online), 2023, <http://www.cidadessustentaveis.org.br/institucional/pagina/agenda2030> (accessed 23 February 2023).

¹¹ Oli Henman, *Enabling Transformation: The Role of UN Resident Coordinator Offices and Country Teams in Support of the Voluntary National Reviews on the 2030 Agenda* (New York: United Nations, April 2022), https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/29830Enabling_Transformation_UN_RCO_VNR.pdf (accessed 23 February 2023).

¹² Poder 360, "Bolsonaro extingue Conselho e outros 54 colegiados" [Bolsonaro Abolishes the Grand Council and 54 Other Collegiate Bodies], 9 May 2019, <https://www.poder360.com.br/governo/bolsonaro-extingue-conselhao-e-outros-54-colegiados/> (accessed 23 February 2023).

¹³ United Cities and Local Governments, "Brazil" (see note 9).

illustrated by the government's standpoint and (in)action in three critical areas.

Bolsonaro led a backlash in Brazil's domestic and foreign policy.

With policies based on traditional values and religious beliefs, seeking to combat “gender ideology” and protect the “traditional family”, Bolsonaro led a backlash in Brazil's domestic and foreign policy, putting pressure on the already fragile sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) situation.¹⁴ This affected SDG 3 (good health and well-being) and 5 (gender equality). In contrast to Brazil's historically quite progressive stance, Bolsonaro's government opposed the use of the term gender in documents, later also any mention of universal access to reproductive and sexual health services on the grounds that this could lead to the “promotion of abortion”.¹⁵

The Bolsonaro government pursued policies that harmed the protection of the Amazon: the (illegal) appropriation of public land and the indiscriminate granting of land titles, illegal mining in protected areas and indigenous territories, and slash-and-burn agriculture.¹⁶ These policies have also increased the vulnerability of indigenous communities living in these areas.¹⁷ This is in stark contrast to the 2030 Agenda's principle of “leaving no one behind”.

Bolsonaro played down the COVID-19 pandemic and opposed containment measures.¹⁸ As a result, Brazilian federal states and municipalities launched

their own initiatives (using their own resources) to mitigate the effects of the crisis.¹⁹ In contrast to the national level and the executive branch, subnational governments and the Federal Supreme Court (STF) remained in general much more committed to the 2030 Agenda.

Civil society assessments

The dismantling of governance structures in various policy areas has been accompanied by a decline in transparency. Limiting access to public information violates the commitments made in SDG 16.10. In this context, the role of Brazil's civil society, which is well organized and vibrant, in monitoring and evaluation becomes even more important. Several NGOs and networks are dedicated not only to assessing progress towards the SDGs, but also to providing guidance and technical support for the implementation of the SDGs by the private sector, local governments, universities and civil society organizations. The Spotlight Reports by the Civil Society Working Group on the 2030 Agenda (CSWG 2030A), published annually since 2017, provide their own assessment of the data. The sixth edition in 2022 criticizes that the Brazilian Indicators Panel for SDG lacks official data for 140 of the 245 indicators applicable to the national context, the data being mostly from 2017. It also states that Brazil was experiencing significant setbacks: “data regarding increased poverty and hunger, the loss of biodiversity, and an overall decline in the quality of life, irrefutably showcase a society afflicted by the devastating impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and rising inequality”.²⁰ It notes moreover, that 33 million people lacked access to food, and that Brazil, a global power in food production, had shamefully returned to the World Hunger Map, representing a major setback for SDG 2. The 2022 Report states that violence had increased, particularly against women and girls, quilombola

¹⁴ Aline Beatriz Coutinho and Kristina Hinz, “Back to the Past: Brazil's Backlash of Reproductive Justice in Its Domestic and Foreign Policy”, *Disrupted*, no. 4 (2020): 12–17, <https://bit.ly/3vdg47a> (accessed 23 February 2023).

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Mairon G. Bastos Lima and Karen Da Costa, “Quo vadis, Brazil? Environmental Malgovernance under Bolsonaro and the Ambiguous Role of the Sustainable Development Goals”, *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 41, no. 4 (2022): 508–24.

¹⁷ Leonardo Benassatto and Amanda Perobelli, “Dozens of Yanomami Children Hospitalized in Northern Brazil amid Health Crisis”, *Reuters*, 27 January 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/dozens-yanomami-children-hospitalized-northern-brazil-amid-health-crisis-2023-01-27/> (accessed 23 February 2023).

¹⁸ In 2021, a parliamentary commission of inquiry recommended that President Bolsonaro and seventy-seven others, including his three sons, be impeached for various crimes (including crimes against humanity). Zilla, *Foreign Policy Change in Brazil* (see note 7).

¹⁹ Claudia Zilla, *Corona Crisis and Political Confrontation in Brazil: The President, the People, and Democracy under Pressure*, SWP Comment 36/2020 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, July 2020), <https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/corona-crisis-and-political-confrontation-in-brazil> (accessed 23 February 2023).

²⁰ Civil Society Working Group for the 2030 Agenda (CSWG 2030A), *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, Spotlight Report, 2022 Brazil Synthesis* (2022), 4, https://brasilnaagenda2030.files.wordpress.com/2022/07/en_sr_2022_final_web-1.pdf (accessed 23 February 2023).

communities,²¹ indigenous peoples, LGBTQIAP+,²² black populations and human rights defenders, and that police violence had been almost completely normalized, in the sense that it was no longer addressed or adequately prosecuted. This development went hand in hand with the government's promotion of arms and the militarization of civic spaces. The Report also shows how a lack of effective regulation for holding industry accountable for harm to human health and the planet represents an obstacle to achieving the SDGs.²³

The way forward: Renewed commitments in a challenging context

Against the backdrop of Bolsonaro's presidency, there are high expectations (especially abroad) for Lula's third term. He is feeding these high hopes by telling the international community that his government will now take environmental and climate protection seriously and that Brazil will once again become a trustworthy partner in this field.²⁴ He has also pledged to rebuild governance and dialogue with civil society in Brazil. As evidence of this, after Lula's inauguration, Brazil submitted an official bid for the Amazon city of Belem to host COP30 in 2025,²⁵ and Lula announced the reinstatement of the Council for Economic and Social Development (CDES).²⁶

21 The *Quilombola* are descendants of escaped slaves, who seek recognition of their identity and economic autonomy for their communities. There are almost four thousand quilombola communities scattered throughout Brazil, fighting to realize the right to ownership of their lands, which has been enshrined in the Federal Constitution since 1988.

22 LGBTQIAP+ stands for lesbian, gay, transgender, queer/questioning, intersex, asexual, pansexual and others.

23 Civil Society Working Group for the 2030 Agenda (see note 20).

24 Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, "Confirma o discurso de Lula na COP 27, no Egito" [Check out Lula's speech at COP 27, in Egypt], *Rádio BandNews FM* (YouTube), 16 November 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OZoBe4TiBFo> (accessed 23 February 2022).

25 "Brazil Makes Official Bid for Amazonian City to Host UN Climate Conference in 2025", *Euronews*, 16 January 2023, <https://www.euronews.com/green/2023/01/16/brazil-makes-official-bid-for-amazonian-city-to-host-un-climate-conference-in-2025> (accessed 23 February 2023).

26 Economic and Social Development Council (CDES), <http://www.cdes.gov.br/en> (accessed 23 February 2023).

The prospects for future SDG implementation should be seen in light of Lula's priorities. He promised to promote social policies and inclusion by expanding social programmes and increasing cash transfers. Fighting hunger would again be a priority for his government, he said, both domestically and internationally. Lula is trying to position Brazil as an environmental and food production power, building "on the creativity of the bio-economy and the entrepreneurship of socio-biodiversity".²⁷ His government wants to initiate a green energy transition and to promote sustainable agriculture and mining.

So far, the reorganization of certain ministries and agencies and the new personnel choices seem to be in line with these promises and priorities. However, falling government revenues, the critical macroeconomic situation and the unfavourable global economic environment are severely constraining the government's actions. A consensus on sustainable development will not automatically emerge in the cabinet, especially as the coalition government is made up of nine parties with different ideological orientations. It also lacks a solid majority in parliament and among state governors.

An integrated sustainable development approach is needed.

High-level German visits, most notably by Chancellor Olaf Scholz in 2023, underline the great expectations for cooperation with the Lula government – seeking support for the ratification of the EU-Mercosur Association Agreement and new partners for sustainable and secure supply chains. The intensification of German and EU relations with Brazil should take into account Brazil's needs and interests and avoid exacerbating asymmetries and adopting patronising approaches. A frank discussion of divergent views on development and global governance is needed to strengthen coordination in multilateral organizations. Given Brazil's high poverty rate, a purely conservationist approach to environmental protection will never be enough. An integrated sustainable development approach is needed, one that also takes

27 Translation by the author of Lula's statement in Portuguese. Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, "Confirma o discurso de posse do presidente Lula no Congresso Nacional" [Watch President Lula's inauguration speech at the National Congress], *RECORD TV* (YouTube), 1 January 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1FQyIAhE20I> (accessed 23 February 2023).

the country's development needs into account.²⁸ Focussing on traditional commodities would reduce Brazil to the role of a raw material supplier, with fewer positive effects on job creation; resource partnerships should apply a broader approach. This requires technological cooperation, investment and the expansion of value-added opportunities in Brazil and/or within a regional framework. To achieve greater horizontality in cooperation, both partners should jointly explore options for regulatory convergence, overcoming the “rule makers vs. rule takers” approach. Accordingly, exchange and negotiation among parties should begin in the early stages of development of standards and regulations. In addition, Germany and the EU could offer support for the necessary adjustments in Brazil during the initial implementation phase of the standards.

28 Günther Maihold, Tania Muscio Blanco and Claudia Zilla, *From Common Values to Complementary Interests: For a New Conception of Germany's and the EU's relations with Latin America and the Caribbean*, SWP Comment 1/2023 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, January 2023), <https://www.swp-berlin.org/publikation/germanys-and-the-eus-relations-with-latin-america-and-the-caribbean> (accessed 23 February 2023).

Nadine Godehardt

China: Xi Jinping's Global Community of Development

China's 2021 VNR Report demonstrates very clearly how much the logic of Chinese foreign politics has changed under Xi Jinping. The report is peppered with official terminology usually known as "tifa" (lit. the way something is put). These often obscure "watchwords" are crucial to understanding the "topsy-turvy world of Chinese politics".¹ In the past, tifa were mostly used domestically, but under Xi Jinping's leadership they increasingly characterize China's foreign policy speech with the aim of establishing a global Chinese discourse system. In the VNR report, repeated references to building "a community with a shared future for mankind" (contrasting the more widely used "international community"), "a global health community", "a community of shared future and development without hunger", providing "Chinese solutions" to various global problems, or "building a beautiful China" and "a beautiful world" underscore the Communist Party of China's (CPC) goal of transforming the meaning and practices of global development by introducing their own development speech to the global community. Thus, the global discourse on "the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development" represents an opportunity for Beijing to promote China's development model to the world.

The 2030 Agenda and Chinese politics

The structure of the VNR report indicates China's ambition of becoming a leader in global development. It presents the country's achievements in specific SDGs (such as poverty reduction, food security, global health, climate, infrastructure connectivity), but more importantly goes on to present China's experience as

¹ Qian Gang, "Watchwords: The Life of the Party", *China Media Project*, 10 September 2012, <https://chinamediaproject.org/2012/09/10/watchwords-the-life-of-the-party/> (accessed 22 February 2023).

an opportunity to offer specific "Chinese solutions" to others. The notion of Chinese solution (Zhongguo fang'an) was introduced by Xi Jinping during the 95th anniversary of the founding of the CPC. Based on China's specific development path and its achievements in recent decades, "Chinese solution" marks the end of following Western countries' proposals. Instead, it emphasizes the leadership's readiness to put forward distinct Chinese knowledge and solutions to address global issues.² Mention of various Chinese global cooperation platforms, partnerships and funds in the VNR report is another indicator of this new self-understanding of China as a provider and reformer of global development.

China's domestic politics and the SDGs

The prioritization of specific SDGs (particularly SDG 1 and 2) is already obvious in China's first position paper on the 2030 Agenda published by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) in April 2016.³ It indicates firstly that the Chinese leadership looks at the SDGs through the lens of its domestic socio-economic development targets; secondly that China's global language on development is very much an extension of its internal policies. In this context, it is also crucial to analyze China's Five-Year Plans (FYP), in order to understand the extent to which global themes and domestic goals are connected. Although the 13th FYP (2016–2020) mentions only an abstract commitment to "actively implement the 2030 Agenda", it more importantly

² Cheng Meidong, "People's Daily Thoughts: Chinese Characteristics of the Chinese Solution" (in Chinese), *People's Daily*, 27 November 2017, <http://opinion.people.com.cn/n1/2017/1127/c1003-29668322.html> (accessed 24 February 2023).

³ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, *China's Position Paper on the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (Beijing, 22 April 2016), https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/2649_665393/201604/t20160422_679457.html (accessed 24 February 2023).

lays out the different layers and objectives of domestic development, which are in line with most of the achievements mentioned in the 2021 VNR report.⁴ This mainly refers to the objective of ending poverty, which has indeed been a long-term goal of the Chinese leadership. But Xi Jinping connected the fight against poverty closely with the fulfilment of the “China Dream”, or in other words the “rejuvenation of the Chinese nation”. Shortly after Xi took charge of the Communist Party and was named chairman of the Central Military Commission in 2012 he announced goals for the “two centenaries” to achieve the “China Dream”. The first centenary goal – to build a “moderately prosperous society in all respects” without absolute poverty and hunger – was supposed to be achieved by 2021 – one hundred years after the founding of the CPC in 1921. Ending absolute poverty was the precondition for the second centenary, to develop China into a modern, sustainable and beautiful socialist country by the one-hundredth anniversary of the People’s Republic in 2049.

The 14th FYP (2021 – 2025) therefore highlights the necessity to achieve a “new stage of development”, focussing on domestic innovation and technology-driven development, that is also more sustainable and green.⁵ China’s turn to “quality development” is also necessary to reduce dependency on foreign industry and technology.⁶ This shift of emphasis has also been

4 The VNR Report, like most official documents on global development between 2020 and 2022, also highlights China’s global contributions to fighting the COVID-19 pandemic. The VNR report also has a chapter on infrastructure connectivity and China’s global contributions. This includes most transportation infrastructure financed in the BRI framework, but also China’s efforts to promote digital, green and energy connectivity. It is striking, however, that after nearly a decade of promoting infrastructure connectivity through the BRI, this topic (which is linked to SDGs 7, 9, 11) is not more central in the 2021 VNR Report. This is most likely related to the global decline of BRI investment due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

5 The 14th FYP is regarded as the starting shot for developing an “ecological civilization”. In contrast to sustainable development this emphasizes the political and cultural factors necessary for China’s green transition.

6 This needs to be placed in the context of China’s new economic reorientation, the concept of “dual circulation” (which is also mentioned in the 14th FYP). Dual circulation divides Chinese economy into internal and external components. It prioritizes developing and strengthening China’s domestic market and demand while remaining open to ex-

reflected in China’s foreign policy since 2021, and can be tracked in important documents such as the 2021 *White Paper on China’s International Development in the New Era* or the 2023 *White Paper on Green Development*, and also in the announcement of new global initiatives like the 2021 Global Development Initiative (GDI).

In general, analysis of central domestic documents such as the FYPs helps us to differentiate China’s take on development from European stances.⁷ Without delving too far into the long history of the Chinese development model, the 13th and 14th FYPs both already underline central components of a Chinese concept of development built mainly around innovative, infrastructural, digital and technical solutions. It also endorses a state-led understanding of development which only includes outside agencies when they are needed to achieve a particular target.

China’s global discourse on development and the SDGs

Although China’s international statements on development cooperation and foreign aid have long been regarded as “externalization of China’s development agenda”⁸, the coherence of internal and external language has reached a new level under Xi. China’s external relations are increasingly viewed as an extension of domestic politics, which also means that style, language and instruments are increasingly aligned. Accordingly, the Chinese leadership has sought to advance the SDGs both domestically and within Chinese-led international cooperation mechanisms.

The Chinese leadership identifies the UN SDGs as anchor points for transforming the idea of global development in a Chinese way.

Since 2016, this has mainly happened through the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), where the Chinese tried to link up with relevant UN agencies. For instance, in April 2016 they signed a letter of intent with the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP) “to jointly plan con-

ternal investment (but only in specific sectors where China still depends on foreign countries).

7 Marina Rudyak, “Development”, *Decoding China Dictionary*, 2023, <https://decodingchina.eu/development/> (accessed 24 February 2023).

8 Ibid.

crete actions to promote both BRI interconnectivity and strategic policy docking” and a memorandum of understanding with the UN Development Program (UNDP) “on jointly promoting the construction of the Belt and Road”.⁹ As host of the 2016 G20 Summit, Xi Jinping promoted implementation of the SDGs by initiating a G20 Action Plan on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Other milestones are the two Belt and Road Forums (BRF, 2017/2019), which put forward plans on related topics such as energy cooperation (2017)¹⁰ and green development (for example establishing the BRI International Green Development Coalition in 2019). This culminated in the comment by UN Secretary-General António Guterres at the second BRF that “the United Nations is poised to support the alignment of the Belt and Road Initiative with the Sustainable Development Goals”.¹¹ Guterres’s speech represented a great political success for the Chinese government, especially regarding all the efforts that were made to globalize the scope of the BRI. These examples and the very detailed 2022 Progress Report of the Belt and Road Initiative in Support of the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development entitled “Partnering for a Brighter Shared Future” highlight the Chinese goal of making the SDGs compatible with the BRI.

Xi Jinping’s translation of the SDGs into a Chinese-style Global Community of Development

In Xi Jinping’s first address to the UNGA in September 2015 he introduced the (awkwardly-named) concept

of a “community with a shared future for mankind”. This phrase was written into the party constitution in 2017 and a year later into the state constitution. As the principal goal of China’s foreign policy to this day, it positions “China simultaneously as one among many developing countries, treating all as equals, and as a major world leader that exerts influence over other states and the international system”.¹² The attempt to establish this “global community” should not be mistaken for China trying to institute a parallel international system. Rather, it stands for another “Chinese solution” to transform and reform the existing order. It also highlights that China, as a country in the Global South, has gained enough power and knowledge to assert its own understanding of global governance in the world, mainly through its unique concept of global development.

China as a country of the Global South has gained enough power and knowledge to assert its own understanding of global governance to the world.

One of the major instruments used to build the Chinese-style global community has been the BRI, including attempts to connect UN agencies with the BRI, as in the case of the SDGs.¹³ Although the BRI still exists, it has lost momentum and financial backing due to the socio-economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁴ Moreover, all the different (but also not very sustainable) attempts to link the 2030 Agenda and the BRI listed in the above-mentioned 2022 Progress Report cannot hide the fact that BRI has not become established as a Chinese narrative (or *tifa*) for global development.

9 Donald J. Lewis, Xiaohua Yang, Diana Moise and Stephen John Roddy, “Dynamics synergies between China’s Belt and Road Initiative and the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals”, *Journal of International Business* 4 (2021): 58–79, esp. 62.

10 For an informative website see: Chinese Government, “Belt and Road Energy Cooperation”, 2023, <https://obor.nea.gov.cn/index.html?webSiteId=2> (accessed 24 February 2023). Chu Daye, “China speeds up new-energy cooperation with BRI partners amid push for green development”, *Global Times*, 18 October 2023, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202110/1236633.shtml> (accessed 24 February 2023).

11 United Nations Secretary General, “United Nations Poised to Support Alignment of China’s Belt and Road Initiative with Sustainable Development Goals, Secretary-General Says at Opening Ceremony”, press release (Beijing, 26 April 2019), <https://press.un.org/en/2019/sgsm19556.doc.htm> (accessed 24 February 2023).

12 Andrew J. Nathan and Boshuo Zhang, “A Shared Future for Mankind: Rhetoric and Reality in Chinese Foreign Policy under Xi Jinping”, *Journal of Contemporary China* 31, no. 133 (2022): 57–71, esp. 61.

13 For more information on strategic docking see: Nadine Godehardt, *Wie China Weltpolitik formt: Die Logik von Pekings Außenpolitik unter Xi Jinping*, SWP-Studie 19/2020 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, October 2020), doi: 10.18449/2020S19.

14 For more information see the BRI investment report: Christoph Nedopil Wang, “Brief: China Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) Investment Report H1 2022” (Shanghai: Green Finance & Development Center, 24 July 2022), <https://greenfdc.org/china-belt-and-road-initiative-bri-investment-report-h1-2022> (accessed 24 February 2023).

The Global Development Initiative

Xi announced the Global Development Initiative (GDI) at the General Debate of the 76th Session of the UNGA in September 2021, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the changing geopolitical environment. He highlights development as the key to “build a better world” and, consequently, the GDI as the key facilitator to achieve the SDGs. In contrast to the BRI, which essentially emerged from the regional to the global level and never defined a responsible agency, the GDI now represents the overarching global framework that is to integrate all other Chinese development-related mechanisms.

At the UN, China established the “Group of Friends of the Global Development Initiative” which seeks, as the Chinese side noted, “greater complementarity between the GDI and the 2030 Agenda”.¹⁵ The “Global Development Report” published by the Chinese Center for International Knowledge on Development (CIKD)¹⁶ in June 2022 highlights central challenges to global implementation of the SDGs, including extreme poverty, global food insecurity and the global digital divide (or the lack of digital connectivity). The report then presents the GDI as the Chinese proposal for dealing with these global problems, and indicates that the “GDI seeks synergy with existing mechanisms and calls on all parties to build a global community of development”.¹⁷ Most platforms mentioned in the report are regional or sub-regional organizations in Africa and Asia (such as AU, ASEAN), China+X mechanisms such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and BRICS, or multilateral mechanisms such as the UN, APEC and the G20.

¹⁵ Permanent Mission of the People’s Republic of China to the UN, “The Group of Friends of Global Development Initiative officially launched at the UN New York Headquarters”, press release (Beijing, 20 January 2022), http://un.china-mission.gov.cn/eng/chinaandun/economicdevelopment/202201/t20220121_10631405.htm (accessed 24 February 2023).

¹⁶ The CIKD was founded directly after the 2015 UN Summit on Sustainable Development. It is affiliated with the Development Research Center of the State Council in China and one example of the many GONGOs established to support global development and the UN 2030 Agenda.

¹⁷ Center for International Knowledge on Development, *Global Development Report* (Beijing: Center for International Knowledge on Development, June 2022), https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/topics_665678/2030kcxzfzyc/202206/P020220620444256180663.pdf (accessed 24 February 2023).

The Chinese leadership hopes that the GDI will establish the strategic (and global) narrative for a Chinese-led club promoting Chinese-style global development projects, while harmonizing parts of the 2030 Agenda with Chinese goals. The Chinese regard “development” as a key selling point to the world, and in particular to the Global South. This is deeply linked to China’s own experience as a developing country and its socio-economic successes. But it is also in line with China’s growing self-perception as a leading power in the Global South and the world more broadly. Xi reiterated this recently when he explained that “Chinese-style modernization breaks with the myth of ‘modernization=westernization’ ... [and] expands the choices for developing countries to modernize and offers a Chinese solution for a better social system for mankind”.¹⁸

Responding to Xi’s attempt to make development more Chinese

China under Xi Jinping represents a global power and a crucial part of the existing — fragile — international system. Understanding today’s China as Global China acknowledges the country’s increasingly global activities, linkages and world-wide presence, and highlights the Chinese leadership’s intention to transform global norms and rules.

With regard to the 2030 Agenda, China is actively working to enhance the compatibility of the SDGs with CPC targets because development is key to the Chinese path to modernization under Xi’s leadership. The recently announced GDI quite directly translates Chinese domestic development priorities for the global context. China is not only actively seeking to shape the meaning of global development, but also creating what I would call a “global development club” within the existing UN Development System. This approach of “strategic docking” has already been applied in the many BRI formats, where acceptance of the overall format (for instance by signing MoUs) has usually been the prerequisite for access to any BRI benefits (such as credits, loans, etc.). With the GDI the Chinese

¹⁸ Chinese Government, “Xi Jinping delivered an important speech at the opening ceremony of the study session on implementing the spirit of the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China” (in Chinese), press release (Beijing, 7 February 2023), http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2023-02/07/content_5740520.htm (accessed 24 February 2023).

leadership is now manifesting this practice in the UN system.

The analysis yields three conclusions for German and European policy-makers in their dealings with China, and in particular concerning China's take on global development. First, the competition over meanings and approaches to global development seems to culminate in a battle of narratives. Here China is again ahead of its liberal competitors in its use of what is referred to in Party-speak and scholarly publications as discourse power (*huayuquan*). Applying this sort of power involves playing a proactive and persistent role on the global stage with the long-term goal of gradually reshaping the language and structure of world politics. It is crucial for the German and European side to accept this strategic challenge without simply rejecting Chinese initiatives outright. Rather, German and European actors need to be very precise when discussing to global development, the SDGs or any other related European initiative (such as Global Gateway), in particular highlighting the human-rights-based approach and concepts like civic space and "leaving no one behind". This implies continuous training of German and European policymakers and administrative staff to boost strategic communication capacity especially – but not exclusively – towards China.

Second, if China is regarded as a crucial part of the existing and future international system, then part of the strategic reality of dealing with China is embracing contradictions. Consequently, while the Chinese GDI (which is accepted, if not welcomed by several UN agencies) might not be acceptable to European politicians, this should not preclude Chinese and European development actors working together on the ground. Europe also need to start formulating its own model for global development.

Third, enhancing global development and achieving the SDGs is very much about the so-called Global South and South-South Cooperation. China under Xi clearly sees itself as a leader and like-minded partner of these countries. The European Union must acquire a realistic understanding of how these countries see China and seek to better understand their agency in their relationship with China.

All three arguments imply that it is high time for Germany and the European Union to develop a successful political narrative for their sustainable development activities. Accordingly, the Global Gateway should not be presented simply as solving "our China problem" but rather as an opportunity to identify and

address development concerns of the Global South as common challenges. Referencing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the SDGs – as common goals and targets agreed by all UN member states – would provide a good starting point.

Stephan Roll

Egypt's SDG Policy: A Fig-leaf for Consolidation of Power

The Egyptian government appears to be maximally committed to achieving the SDGs, at least judging by the many policy documents published and institutions established in recent years. Right after the military seized power in Cairo in the summer of 2013, the new political leadership under (former defence minister) President Abdel Fatah al-Sisi began working on a national sustainable development strategy (SDS).¹ As a result, the country was well prepared when the UN General Assembly adopted the 2030 Agenda in 2015. Shortly thereafter, the government launched *Egypt Vision 2030*, which is supposed to be aligned with the SDGs and serves as a framework for their implementation.

The framework for implementing the SDS was successively expanded in the following years, with particular reference to the SDGs.² By the end of 2015, the National Committee for Monitoring the Implementation of the SDGs had been formed, sectoral strategies had been developed in individual ministries, and dedicated SDG units had been established. At the beginning of 2022, the Egyptian parliament established a Supreme Council for Planning and Sustainable Development,³ chaired by the President of the Republic, to develop sustainable development

policies at the highest state level and coordinate their implementation.

Above all, the political leadership in Cairo never tires of emphasizing its political will to implement the SDGs. Hala al-Said, the minister of planning and economic development, has been particularly prominent, and has generally become one of the key players within the government in recent years. She played a central role in the inter-ministerial coordination of the SDGs, and was also the minister in charge of preparing the Voluntary National Reports (VNRs).

In 2021, the Egyptian government published its third VNR report. In international comparison, Egypt thus appears particularly committed to voluntary SDG self-reporting. The validity of these reports, however, is more than doubtful, as will be shown. This raises questions about the motives behind Egypt's SDG policies.

SDG progress – mainly on paper

The Egyptian government sets high standards for its reporting, as outlined in the introduction of its latest VNR report. That document states that the VNR is a “country report and not a government report” and that employing a participatory approach and a thorough quantitative analysis “ensures an accurate and real portrayal of the SDGs situation”.⁴ Doubts have been raised about this. In her analysis of the 2018 VNR, the Egyptian professor of public administration Laila El Baradei concluded that “[a] lot of information is lacking and there is a clear interest in not reporting

1 Alamira Samah Saleh and Mahmoud Zaky, “Egyptian TV Coverage of the Sustainable Development Strategy (SDS): Egypt Vision 2030”, in *The Palgrave Handbook of International Communication and Sustainable Development*, ed. M. J. Yusha'u and J. Servaes (London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 430.

2 For an overview see Gamze Irgrioglu, Adam Ostry and Miriam Allam, *Integrated Governance for Coherent Implementation of the SDGs in Egypt*, OECD Working Papers on Public Governance 35, (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2020), 18, <https://bit.ly/43dEU4T> (accessed 27 April 2023).

3 Al-Shurukh, “The House of Representatives Approves the Establishment of the Supreme Council for Planning and Sustainable Development” (Arabic), *Shorouk News*, 5 May 2022, <https://bit.ly/46PBsR9> (accessed 27 April 2023).

4 Government of Egypt, Ministry of Planning and Economic Development, *Egypt's 2021 Voluntary National Review (VNR)* (Cairo, 2021), 16ff., https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/279512021_VNR_Report_Egypt.pdf (accessed 27 April 2023).

accurately, or at all”.⁵ Although Baradei’s remarks refer to reporting about SDG 16 (Peace, justice and strong institutions) her conclusions seem relevant to other SDGs as well.

One of Egypt’s policy priorities is poverty eradication (SDG1 “No Poverty”). The 2021 VNR highlights major achievements in this regard. It claims that the poverty rate, “which had been rising even during periods of high growth, has declined for the first time in 20 years in 2020 to 29.7% down from 32.5% in 2018”.⁶ Thanks to rapid response measures, even the COVID pandemic had not reversed this trend, it asserted. Closer scrutiny casts doubt over these assertions.

With regard to the official Egyptian poverty figures, the first question is whether the government statistics presented are reliable at all. The country’s data transparency is extremely poor,⁷ and the authoritarian, police-state environment significantly hinders independent data collection. In that context, it is telling that the VNR repeatedly refers to an external analysis by a US-based research institute – in an apparent attempt to lend more credibility to the figures cited in the VNR.⁸ In fact, the cited analysis is not publicly available, and the institute had previously published a flawed report on Egypt’s SDG performance, which gave the impression that it had been censored by the Egyptian government.⁹

Secondly, statements about changes in poverty over time, as made by the Egyptian government, are methodologically problematic to say the least. Since

the definition of the poverty rate changes, the official poverty figures are not comparable over time.¹⁰

Egypt’s VNR presents grossly misleading conclusions.

Moreover, it appears that the VNR deliberately presents grossly misleading conclusions. At several points, the report implies that the poverty rate declined despite the COVID-19 pandemic. The data, however, had been collected in 2019, before the start of the pandemic.¹¹ The report even concludes that the pandemic “is expected to slow down the progress in reducing poverty rates over the short term, although thankfully not causing a reversal”.¹² When the report was written, the Egyptian government was already aware of very different calculations. In May 2020 the Institute of National Planning, which is part of the Ministry of Planning and Economic Development, published three scenarios on the impact of the pandemic on the country’s poverty rate. Even the optimistic scenario projected an increase of more than 5.5 percentage points, with the worst-case scenario projecting a jump of more than 12.2 percentage points.¹³ Surveys by the national statistics agency CAPMAS told the same story. More than 70 percent of surveyed households expected their income to fall in the spring of 2020 as a result of the pandemic.¹⁴ This data exposes the conclusions in the 2021 VNR report as highly unlikely and thus misleading (if not outright deceptive).

Prioritizing mega-projects

As the above analysis indicates, the Egyptian government is telling a success story that has little to do

5 Laila al Baradei, “Politics of Evidence Based Policy Making: Reporting on SDG 16 in Egypt”, *International Journal of Public Administration* 43, no. 5 (2020): 425–40, esp. 434, doi: 10.1080/01900692.2019.1668414.

6 Ministry of Planning and Economic Development, VNR 2021 (see note 4), 13.

7 Open Data Watch (ODIN), “Country Profile Egypt”, 9 March 2023, <https://odin.opendatawatch.com/Report/countryProfileUpdated/EGY?year=2020> (accessed 27 April 2023).

8 The document from the Pardee Center for International Future Studies at Denver University supposedly shows that extreme poverty rates continued to fall despite the pandemic. See World Bank, *Egypt – Systematic Country Diagnostic Update: Unlocking Egypt’s Potential for Poverty Reduction and Inclusive Growth* (Washington D.C.: World Bank Group, 2021), <https://documents.worldbank.org/en/publication/documents-reports/documentdetail/407981634140851775/egypt-systematic-country-diagnostic-update-unlocking-egypt-potential-for-poverty-reduction-and-inclusive-growth> (accessed 27 April 2023).

9 Laila al Baradei, “Politics of Evidence” (see note 5), 430.

10 World Bank, *Unlocking Egypt’s Potential* (see note 8), 105. Similar methodological shortcomings are evident in the treatment of the unemployment rate.

11 World Bank, *Unlocking Egypt’s Potential* (see note 8), 104.

12 Ministry of Planning and Economic Development, VNR 2021 (see note 4), 26.

13 Institute of National Planning, *The Potential Repercussions of the Corona Crisis on Poverty in Egypt* (Arabic), May 2020, <https://www.inp.edu.eg/media/files/20200524022419-Ar.pdf> (accessed 27 April 2023).

14 UN Egypt, *Egypt COVID-19 Response and Recovery Interventions of the United Nations in Egypt*, September 2020, 1, https://www.unodc.org/documents/middleeastandnorthafrica/2020/COVID19/COVID_19_Egypt_Final.pdf (accessed 27 April 2023).

with reality. Yet, at the same time, it is obviously not seeking to deny development deficits altogether. Rather, the VNR's findings are intended to suggest that the country, and thus the political leadership, is well on its way to achieving the goals.

However, the choice of policies and instruments and their concrete implementation has been heavily criticised by civil society actors, journalists and researchers. Two types of criticism are salient. The first is implementation issues, as in the case of the Haya Karima-initiative, which is intended to improve the situation in rural parts of Egypt, or Takaful and Karama, a cash transfer programme intended to make the subsidy-based social support system more targeted. While these programmes are not questioned in principle, they are criticized for poor operationalisation and shortcomings in embedding them in a comprehensive social protection system.¹⁵

The second is more fundamental criticism directed at the core element of President Sisi's development approach: boosting megaprojects.¹⁶ Sisi's government is focusing on large-scale projects such as creating a new capital, constructing Egypt's first nuclear power plant, expanding the rail network, building social housing and developing the Suez Canal Corridor, ostensibly to achieve several of the SDGs at once.¹⁷ Egyptian officials describe the mega-projects as "blueprints for long-term growth"¹⁸, while the almost entirely state-controlled¹⁹ mainstream media refers to them as "the guaranteed path" to the future.²⁰

15 See for example Reem Abdelhaliem, *Egypt's Political Discourse and Changing Social Assistance Systems* (Paris: Arab Reform Initiative, 2023), <https://www.arab-reform.net/publication/egypts-political-discourse-and-changing-social-assistance-systems/> (accessed 27 April 2023).

16 Ministry of Planning and Economic Development, *VNR 2021* (see note 4), 50.

17 See for an overview Suzanna Elamssah, "Localization", in *Financing Sustainable Development in Egypt*, ed. M. Mohieldin (Cairo: League of Arab States, 2022), 268 – 301, <https://publications.unescwa.org/projects/fsde/sdgs/pdf/chapters/Chapter-11.pdf> (accessed 27 April 2023).

18 Embassy of Egypt in Washington, "Egypt's Mega Projects: Blueprints for Long-Term Growth", press release (Washington, D.C., September 2018), <https://www.egyptembassy.net/media/Egypt-Megaprojects-Factsheet-Sept.-2018.pdf> (accessed 27 April 2023).

19 Reporters without Borders, "Egypt", 2023, <https://rsf.org/en/country/egypt> (accessed 27 April 2023).

20 Saleh and Zaki, "Egyptian TV Coverage" (see note 1), 441.

Critics complain that completely misplaced political priorities have led to inordinate overspending. While reliable data on cost is lacking, the figure of US\$10.34 billion stated in the 2021 VNR appears unrealistic.²¹ Depending on which major projects are included, the costs are likely to be many times higher. Against the background of dramatically increasing national debt, these projects place an enormous burden on the public budget – which has been in difficulty for years due to the country's debt service costs. In 2021, around half of state revenues had to be spent on debt servicing.²² In that context, the lack of transparency and comprehensible cost-benefit analyses is very concerning.

The construction of Egypt's new administrative capital endangers several SDGs.

The example of President Sisi's flagship project, the construction of a new administrative capital to the east of Cairo, demonstrates the internal contradictions of this approach particularly well. While Sisi emphasizes its importance for Egypt's sustainable development, initial independent analyses come to exactly the opposite conclusion: the project is environmentally and socially problematic.²³ Instead of fostering the implementation of the SDGs, it endangers several of them. Apart from over-exploitation of scarce water resources and the lack of affordable housing, the immense cost of the project raises the question of whether this is the best investment for sustainable development – especially if the 2030 Agenda's principle of "leaving no one behind" is taken into account. Observers estimate that the cost could rise as high as \$59 billion.²⁴

21 Tellingly, this figure is also stated without any substantiation.

22 Stephan Roll, *Loans for the President: External Debt and Power Consolidation in Egypt*, SWP Research Paper 12/2022 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, December 2022), 25, doi: 10.18449/2022RP12.

23 Julian Bolleter and Robert Cameron, "A Critical Landscape and Urban Design Analysis of Egypt's New Administrative Capital City", *Journal of Landscape Architecture* 16, no. 1 (2021): 8 – 19, doi: 10.1080/18626033.2021.1948183.

24 Declan Walsh and Vivian Yee, "A New Capital Worthy of the Pharaohs Rises in Egypt, But at What Price?", *New York Times* (online), 8 October 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/10/08/world/middleeast/egypt-new-administrative-capital.html> (accessed 27 April 2023).

The project of the new administrative capital spotlights the question of who benefits most from such mega-projects. The big winner is not the private sector but the Egyptian military, which can use them to further expand its economic footprint. Traditionally, the military has always played a strong role in the Egyptian economy, and its economic activities have expanded further under President Sisi.²⁵ In the case of the new capital, the armed forces control the majority of the Administrative Capital Urban Development Company (ACUD), which controls the building land and acts as the general contractor. Through ACUD the military will be able to generate significant revenue even after the construction work has been completed, as it will be able to lease office space to government institutions. So while the benefits of the new capital for achieving the SDGs are more than questionable, the armed forces are likely to continue to benefit massively from the project.²⁶

Outlook

It is becoming increasingly difficult for the Egyptian leadership to persuade its own population or the external donor community that its commitment to the SDGs is credible. The narrative of positive development dynamics, created by demonstratively embedding the SDGs in the national development strategy and presenting supposed development achievements in the VNR, is increasingly unconvincing against the backdrop of the country's dramatic socioeconomic crisis.

In March 2022, Egypt had to request additional IMF support to prevent an imminent default. The country's significant borrowing in recent years has left it vulnerable to external shocks, such as the pandemic and the Russia-Ukraine war. The costly megaprojects have also played a significant role in exacerbating this vulnerability. Even the IMF, which had been extremely uncritical of Egypt's development model,²⁷ now says that "spending on public projects, including

national investment projects, has contributed to pressures on the current account".²⁸

The currency devaluation caused by the debt crisis and the sharp rise in inflation, which reached over 32 percent in March 2023, close to an all-time record, are likely to have dramatically worsened the situation concerning SDG1.²⁹ Nevertheless, a voluntary change of course by the Sisi government cannot be expected. The misguided state development planning is not an accident resulting from a lack of professional competence. Rather, it is the deliberate decision of a political leadership that prioritizes its own power interests over the benefit for society as a whole. Here, the government's proclaimed SDG orientation was helpful in distracting attention from the focus on mega-projects, which primarily benefited the military, as the backbone of President Sisi's rule.

For external actors such as Germany and its European partners, it is therefore important to understand that in an authoritarian state such as Egypt, declarations of intent and the establishment of institutions are by no means sufficient conditions for successful implementation of the SDGs. In such a political environment, the usefulness of "self-reporting" in the form of the VNRs must therefore also be questioned.

To ensure that Egyptian government spending is directed towards projects that align with the SDGs, the focus should be on securing binding commitments to SDG-compatible spending policies. Compliance should be regularly monitored as a prerequisite for receiving new financial assistance. Such monitoring must rely on independent analyses rather than those of the Egyptian government. The most crucial aspect, however, is to exert pressure for improvements in the political framework including a minimum of separation of powers, an independent civil society and freedom of the press. Successful implementation of the SDGs is unlikely in Egypt, as long as the country lacks any checks and balances in its political system.

28 International Monetary Fund (IMF), "Arab Republic of Egypt, Request for Extended Arrangement under the Extended Fund Facility – Press Release; and Staff Report; and Statement by the Executive Director for the Arab Republic of Egypt", IMF Country Report 23/2 (Washington, D.C., January 2023), 5, <https://www.imf.org/-/media/Files/Publications/CR/2023/English/1EGYEA2023001.ashx> (accessed 27 April 2023).

29 See for example Heba Saleh, "Egypt's Economic Woe Spreads across All Classes", *Financial Times (online)*, 16 February 2023, <https://www.ft.com/content/13286c00-e0ca-46d7-92d5-83319372cbde> (accessed 27 April 2023).

25 For a comprehensive analysis, see Yezid Sayigh, *Above the State: The Officers' Republic in Egypt* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, August 2012), https://carnegieendowment.org/files/officers_republic1.pdf (accessed 27 April 2023).

26 Walsh and Yee, "A New Capital" (see note 24).

27 Roll, *Loans for the President* (see note 22), 32.

Christian Wagner

India: SDGs between Nationalism and Development

The launch of the SDGs in 2015 came immediately after the landslide victory of Narendra Modi and his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in the 2014 elections. In his campaign Modi propagated development issues in conjunction with his vision of a new India prioritizing the interests of the Hindu majority (Hindutva). Modi's strategy of combining nationalism and development has been successful: he was re-elected in 2019 with an increased majority. Successful socio-economic development is a pre-requisite for Modi's larger political goal of making India into a developed nation by 2047, one hundred years after independence.¹

India's Hindu nationalism since 2014 embraces SDGs for its own agenda.

Accordingly, the SDG agenda was easily incorporated into the broader Hindutva narrative. Even if the SDGs seem to be absent from public discourse, they are omnipresent in the daily lives of large segments of the population in the form of welfare programmes such as Banking for All, Clean India, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act.²

But there are also structural impediments to the implementation of the SDGs, including a lack of resources and data. In a few instances SDG targets have become part of the larger political controversy over Hindutva. These include the question of citizenship and the dispute between the centre and the states over Centrally Sponsored Schemes (CSS).

1 PTI, "PM Modi Sets Sights on Developed India by 2047", *Outlook India*, 15 August 2022, <https://www.outlookindia.com/national/pm-modi-sets-sights-on-developed-india-by-2047-news-216500> (accessed 16 August 2022).

2 Government of India, Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, *Sustainable Development Goals – National Indicator Framework, Version 3.0 (as on 31.03.2021)* (New Delhi, 2021), <https://mospi.gov.in/sites/default/files/NIF.pdf> (accessed 5 July 2023).

Hindutva: A new India

Modi's new India builds on the concept of Hindutva (Hindu-ness). The idea of India as a Hindu nation (Hindu Rashtra) can be traced back to the writings of V. D. Savarkar and M. S. Golwalkar in the 1920s and 1930s. They were inspired by the Hindu traditions and the nationalist movements in Europe. Their goal was to revive the glorious Hindu Nation that had supposedly been destroyed by outside invaders, especially the Muslims and the British. Golwalkar described a Hindu nation unified by geography, race, culture, history and language.³ Hindutva has been characterized as a loose ideological construct based on "othering" outsiders and including forms of retribution for past injustices.⁴ Golwalkar's criteria contextualize some of the actions of the BJP after 2014, within the framework of Hindutva nation-building. The question of race or descent/ancestry surfaces in the controversies over the National Register of Citizens (NRC) and the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA). In the field of culture and history there have been attempts to treat mythologies like the Mahabharata and the Ramayana as historical events, to rewrite textbooks and to make Hindi the only language.

India and the Sustainable Development Goals

India supported the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) of 2000, and a period of strong economic

3 M. S. Golwalkar, *We – Or Our Nationhood Defined* (Nagpur, Bharat Publications, 1939), e-book published by Hindu E-Books, <http://hinduebooks.blogspot.com/> (accessed 4 February 2021).

4 Atul Mishra, "Locusts vs. the Gigantic Octopus: The Hindutva International and 'Akhand Bharat' in V. D. Savarkar's History of India", *India Review* 21, no. 4–5 (2022), 512–45.

growth in the 2000s resulted in a notable reduction in poverty. According to the UN, India lifted 271 million people out of poverty between 2006 and 2016.⁵

The United Progressive Alliance (UPA) under the leadership of the Congress Party negotiated the SDGs for India in 2014/15, but implementation coincided with the election of Narendra Modi as prime minister. The central organization for the SDG process is Niti Aayog, replacing the Planning Commission which was dissolved in 2014 after Modi took office. Implementation of the SDGs is monitored through the National Indicator Framework.⁶ The government has collaborated with a range of actors from international and civil society organizations (CSOs) “in articulating policies and methods of SDG implementation”.⁷ But the curtailment of CSO activities under the Modi government may also restrict their capacity to monitor the implementation of SDGs.⁸

The implementation of the SDGs has initiated a debate about successes, problems and challenges.⁹ Even official documents like the Voluntary National Review (VNR) mention challenges and shortcomings in the implementation of the programmes.¹⁰ India

has a long history of development programmes, which have suffered problems including lack of political will, inadequate funding, mismanagement, lack of proper data and policy coordination, and corruption. Then Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi declared in 1985 that only 15 paise of every rupee from development programmes reached the poor segments of society.¹¹

Recent innovations in governance have improved the delivery of social programmes. The introduction of the Aadhaar Card in 2009 allows direct transfers to eligible persons and has reduced the role of intermediaries in state transfers.¹² The Modi government has intensified efforts to establish e-governance. The trinity of a free bank account (Jan Dhan), a personal identification number (Aadhaar card) and a mobile phone,¹³ initiated in 2015, is often referred to as a major step towards improving the delivery of welfare programmes.¹⁴

Structural challenges: Funding and data

Implementation of the SDGs faces two main challenges: proper funding and the lack of reliable data. The first VNR in 2017 admitted that “India is unlikely to gather sufficient revenues for achieving the SDGs”.¹⁵ In 2019, a report by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP) stated that India would have to spend 10 percent of

5 PTI, “India Lifted 271 Million People out of Poverty in 10 Years: UN”, *The Hindu*, 12 July 2019, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-lifted-271-million-people-out-of-poverty-in-10-years-un/article28397694.ece> (accessed 12 July 2019).

6 Government of India, Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, *Sustainable Development Goals – National Indicator Framework, Version 3.0* (see note 2).

7 Southern Voice, *Global State of the SDGs: Three Layers of Critical Action: Report 2019* (Madrid, 2020), 50–51.

8 Pushparaj Deshpande, “The Future of India’s Civil Society Organisations”, *The Hindu*, 19 April 2023, <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/the-future-of-indias-civil-society-organisations/article66752527.ece> (accessed 19 April 2023).

9 See for instance Nirupam Bajpai and John Biberian, *India and the SDGs*, ICT India Working Paper 22 (New York: Columbia University, Center for Sustainable Development [CSD], 2020); Jitendra, “India Must Spend 10% of its GDP to Meet SDGs by 2030: Report”, *DownToEarth*, 4 April 2019, <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/news/economy/india-must-spend-10-of-its-gdp-to-meet-sdgs-by-2030-report-63838> (accessed 13 April 2023); Banjot Kaur, “Only 6 States in India Have 45 HCWs per 10,000 Population, Says Niti SDG Index”, *DownToEarth*, 4 June 2021, <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/news/health/only-6-states-in-india-have-45-hcws-per-10-000-population-says-niti-sdg-index-77291>.

10 NITI Aayog, Government of India, *Decade of Action: Taking SDGs from Global to Local: India Voluntary National Review 2020* (New Delhi, 2020), 19, 24, 25, 27, 63, 69 and others, <https://>

sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/26281_VNR_2020_India_Report.pdf (accessed 27 April 2023).

11 Press Trust of India, “Only 15 Paise Reaches the Needy”: SC Quotes Rajiv Gandhi in Its Aadhaar Verdict”, *Hindustan Times*, 11 June 2017, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/only-15-paise-reaches-the-needy-sc-quotes-rajiv-gandhi-in-its-aadhaar-verdict/story-I8dniDGXF6ksulggTDgb9L.html> (accessed 20 December 2022).

12 Bajpai and Biberian, *India and the SDGs* (see note 9), 36. The Aadhaar card is a 12-digit personal identification number.

13 Jan Dhan refers to the Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana (PMJDY) launched in 2015. It includes a free bank account for the poorer segments of society.

14 Reetika Khera, “Getting Cash Transfers out of a JAM”, *The Hindu*, 13 May 2020 <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/getting-cash-transfers-out-of-a-jam/article31568674.ece> (accessed 13 May 2020).

15 Government of India, *Voluntary National Review Report on Implementation of Sustainable Development Goals 2017* (New Delhi, 2017), 8.

its GDP to achieve the SDG goals by 2030.¹⁶ The economic setback of the pandemic has further constrained India's financial possibilities. The government has initiated various reforms to attract foreign direct investment for infrastructure as a prerequisite for the SDGs.

Progress of SDGs hampered by lack of funding and poor data.

In 2015 experts pointed out that India's data systems were not adequately equipped to deal with the requirements of the upcoming SDGs.¹⁷ Civil society groups have noted the lack of an accurate SDG tracker to monitor progress.¹⁸ India has improved its position in the SDG index 2020–21 but methodological changes such as dropping the Gini Index as an indicator of inequality have been viewed critically.¹⁹ The data problem has been further aggravated by the postponement of the 2021 census because of the pandemic. The census data is an important resource for many welfare programmes, such as the Public Distribution System (PDS) which covers 75 percent of the rural and 50 percent of the urban population.²⁰ The publication of other official data sets, for instance on health management and maternal mortality, has also been delayed.²¹ In the meantime, the question of the census has become politicized in connection with controversial issues like the National Register of Citizens which has sparked large scale protests

16 Jitendra, "India Must Spend 10% of Its GDP to Meet SDGs by 2030" (see note 9).

17 Vidya Venkat, "Gaping Holes in India's Social Sector Schemes", *The Hindu*, 16 September 2015, <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/gaping-holes-in-indias-social-sector-schemes/article7659204.ece> (accessed 27 April 2023).

18 Southern Voice, *Global State of the SDGs* (see note 7), 49.

19 "Two Cheers: On India's Sustainable Development Goals Index Score", *The Hindu*, 5 June, <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/editorial/two-cheers/article34731230.ece> (accessed 27 April 2023).

20 Indra Shekhar Singh, "Full Transcript: What Will Free Rations under NFSA Mean for the Poor, India's Food Stocks?", *The Wire*, 6 January 2023, <https://thewire.in/rights/full-transcript-nfsa-free-rations-pmgkay> (accessed 27 April 2023).

21 Prachi Salve, "India's Population, Poverty and Consumption Data Are Missing, Experts Say Political Manipulation", *Scroll.in*, 10 January 2023, <https://scroll.in/article/1041010/india-s-population-poverty-and-consumption-data-are-missing-experts-say-political-manipulation> (accessed 27 April 2023).

(see below). Political observers suggest that the government wants to avoid renewed nationwide protests and may postpone the census until after the national elections in 2024.²² But the lack of census data will also have far-reaching effects on social programmes and hence the SDGs.

SDGs and citizenship

Target 16.9 of India's National Indicator Framework calls for the provision of "legal identity for all, including birth registration".²³ In states like Bihar and Uttar Pradesh less than 70 percent of births are properly registered.²⁴ But "legal identity" can also touch on the question of citizenship, which became one of the most controversial issues after 2014.

The background to this controversy is the changes in India's citizenship law from the principle of place of birth (*jus solis*) to ancestry (*jus sanguinis*).²⁵ The BJP decided in 2003 to set up a National Register of Indian Citizens (NRC) based on a National Population Register (NPR). The debate escalated after 2014 after a 2013 ruling by the Supreme Court requiring an update of the National Register of Citizens (NRC) in the state of Assam. In 1985 the Congress state government had signed an accord to address the question of illegal immigration mostly from Bangladesh. The updated NRC for Assam published in August 2019 declared 1.9 million people stateless. The issue gained nationwide importance for several reasons. First, Home Minister Amit Shah encouraged other states to set up their own NRCs. He also called for a nationwide NRC. Second, because many of the stateless persons in Assam were Hindus, the BJP pushed through a controversial Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) in December 2019 which allowed easier naturalisation of persecuted religious minorities from neighbouring countries – including Hindus and Buddhists but excluding Muslims. The legislation triggered country-

22 Shoaib Daniyal, "The India Fix: Why Is India Suddenly Unable to Conduct Its Regular Census?", *Scroll.in*, 16 January 2023, <https://scroll.in/article/1041927/the-india-fix-why-is-india-suddenly-unable-to-conduct-its-regular-census> (accessed 27 April 2023).

23 Government of India, Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, *Sustainable Development Goals – National Indicator Framework, Version 3.0* (see note 2), 41.

24 Bajpai and Biberman, *India and the SDGs* (see note 9), 37.

25 Niraja Gopal Jayal, "Reconfiguring Citizenship in Contemporary India", *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 42, no. 1 (2019): 33–50.

wide protests. Muslims opposed the law because they felt (further) discriminated. Lower castes and tribal groups protested because they feared that they would not be able to supply the required documents for a proper registration. The protests were joined by liberal groups who saw the CAA as a violation of the constitution because religion was included as a criterion for citizenship. The outbreak of the pandemic in spring 2020 brought the protests to a halt but the issue lingers on.

Centre, states and social programmes

A second area in which SDGs clash with the Hindutva agenda is the controversy between the centre and the states over welfare programmes. The autocratic tendencies of Hindutva include a concentration of power at the centre. The government has made several moves that infringe on the constitutional competences of the states. These include the dissolution of the state of Jammu and Kashmir into two Union territories in 2019, the failed attempt to reform the farm laws in 2019/20, and disputes over the role and powers of the governors, who are nominated by the centre, vis-à-vis elected state governments.

Modi introduced the idea of a cooperative and competitive federalism to promote development and to tackle the imbalances between the states. The 14th Finance Commission gave the states 42 percent of the resources from the divisible pool.²⁶ But the 15th Finance Commission, set up in 2017, changed tack, tying financial transfers to the states to the implementation of national welfare programmes, the so-called Centrally Sponsored Schemes (CSS). These CSSs became the main bone of contention.²⁷ The political intention seems to have been to penalise state governments that operate their own welfare programmes.

The CSSs are planned by the centre without consulting the states. This “one size fits all” model has often been criticized, because state governments may have different priorities on welfare programmes.

²⁶ Anil Padmanabhan, “Finance Commission: NDA Resets the Federal Polity”, *Live Mint*, 12 March 2015, http://www.livemint.com/Opinion/hzak9GHb7RGqVy7IqiWb1l/Finance-Commission-report-NDA-resets-the-federal-polity.html?utm_source=copy (accessed 12 March 2015).

²⁷ For an overview of the CSS in 2014–15 see Niti Aayog, *Report of the Sub-Group of Chief Ministers on Rationalisation of Centrally Sponsored Schemes* (New Delhi, 2015), 103–107, <https://www.niti.gov.in/content/sub-group-chief-ministers-centrally-sponsored-schemes> (accessed 21 December 2022).

Moreover, CSSs are often directly monitored by the Union government.

The political implications are obvious, as both the centre and the states would like voters to give them credit for the benefits of welfare programmes. In the case of CSS, the benefits would be attributed directly to Prime Minister Modi. They include flagship welfare programs like the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) (SDG 1) and the Swachh Bharat Mission for better sanitation (SDG 6).²⁸ Studies have shown that people tended to give credit to the Union government for the CSSs, which therefore contributed to Modi’s re-election in 2019.²⁹

Prospects: Hindutva and the SDGs

The success of the SDGs at the global level will depend largely on the extent to which India, with one-sixth of the world’s population, is able to achieve its goals. The protagonists of Hindutva will also have an interest in implementing the SDGs, which will support their own agenda for development. At the same time, the political sensitivity of certain issues may delay progress on the respective SDG targets.

India’s overall success in achieving the SDGs will depend on the government’s ability to overcome structural constraints. Given the financial constraints, more reforms are needed in order to attract FDI and to increase economic growth as a prerequisite for better infrastructure. And in order to provide sound data on the progress of the SDGs, it may be necessary to depoliticize the census by separating it from other projects on the Hindutva agenda.

²⁸ NITI Aayog, Government of India, *Decade of Action: Taking SDGs from Global to Local: India Voluntary National Review 2020* (see note 10), 32ff. and 65ff.

²⁹ Jyoti Mishra and Vibha Attri, “Did Welfare Win Votes?”, *Seminar* 720 (August 2019), https://www.india-seminar.com/2019/720/720_jyoti_and_vibha.htm (accessed 20 December 2022); Yamini Aiyar, “Welfare Policy and Modi 2.0”, *The Indian Express*, 8 June 2019, <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/narendra-modi-2-0-modi-welfare-policies-bjp-government-5770220/> (accessed 8 June 2019); Ruhi Tewari, “Beyond Hindutva and Nationalism, One Element Drives Modi’s Success — Last-mile Delivery”, *The Print*, 24 February 2021, <https://theprint.in/opinion/politricks/beyond-hindutva-and-nationalism-one-element-behind-modis-success-last-mile-delivery/610560/> (accessed 24 February 2021).

Karoline Eickhoff and Marcel Meyer

Kenya's Infrastructure-driven Path to the SDGs. Game Changer or White Elephant?

Kenya aims to become a middle-income country by 2030. That will require significant economic development reflected in a stronger GDP growth, social development to improve quality of life for all citizens, and policy reforms to increase the effectiveness and accountability of government services.¹ As reflected in the country's Voluntary National Reviews, the country's SDG targets are aligned with these national development goals. However, despite Kenya's significant economic potential and regional importance, the effectiveness and inclusiveness of public development spending has been impaired by the preference of successive governments for prestige infrastructure projects and burgeoning borrowing, and the incentive and opportunity structures in public procurement.

SDGs in Kenya

In many ways, Kenya is a poster child for SDG implementation. Its former permanent representative to the UN co-chaired the working group that developed the SDGs, while the previous government channelled the SDGs into policies and strategies, implemented multi-stakeholder consultation and localization mechanisms, and created dedicated institutions for SDG coordination and liaison. Unlike many other countries, Kenya is well on track to meet its climate targets and is one of Africa's best performers in terms of data availability and reporting.² Kenya has also adopted an SDG acceleration strategy.³

1 Government of Kenya, "Kenya Vision 2030", <https://vision2030.go.ke/> (accessed 28 March 2023).

2 ETH Zurich, "SDG Data Availability Monitor", 19 December 2022, <https://sdg-monitor.ethz.ch/> (accessed 28 February 2023).

3 Republic of Kenya National Treasury and Planning, State Department for Planning, *SDGs Recovery and Acceleration Strategy (2022–2030)* (Nairobi, June 2022), [https://sdgs.planning.go.ke/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/18-11-22-Final-SDGs-](https://sdgs.planning.go.ke/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/18-11-22-Final-SDGs-Recovery-and-Acceleration-Strategy.pdf)

Nevertheless, the country faces major challenges in relation to SDGs that are critical to achieving the "leave no one behind" (LNOB) principle, namely ending poverty (SDG 1), eradicating hunger (SDG 2), providing basic health services (SDG 3), access to safe water and sanitation (SDG 6), and reducing inequalities (SDG 10).⁴ In this vein, one of the key challenges highlighted in the second Voluntary National Review in 2020 is the increase in the number of Kenyans living in poverty over the prior decade and the continuing lack of social and economic opportunities for large sections of the population.⁵ Recent World Bank figures support this assessment, showing that poverty and inequality remain among Kenya's key development challenges.

In addition to population growth, national stakeholders point to external factors such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine, the effects of climate change, and insufficient funding.⁶ However, the lack of economic and social benefits for the wider population also raises questions as to the inclusiveness of the longer-term economic growth model pursued by Kenyan governments over the last 15 years and the governance of public procurement. Accord-

Recovery-and-Acceleration-Strategy.pdf (accessed 13 April 2023).

4 Anthony Kitimo, "Half Way in Implementing SDGs, Kenya Is Still off the Track", *Nation*, 30 November 2022, <https://nation.africa/kenya/news/half-way-in-implementing-sdgs-kenya-is-still-off-the-track-4038858> (accessed 28 February 2023); Sustainable Development Report, "Kenya SDG Dashboards and Trends", 2022, <https://dashboards.sdginde.org/profiles/kenya> (accessed 15 February 2023).

5 Republic of Kenya, National Treasury and Planning, *Second Voluntary National Review on the Implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals* (Nairobi, June 2020), 10, https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/26360_VNR_2020_Kenya_Report.pdf (accessed 28 February 2023).

6 Anthony Kitimo, "Half Way in Implementing SDGs, Kenya Is Still off the Track" (see note 4).

ingly, Kenya has made very limited progress regarding SDG 16 (peace, justice and strong institutions), mainly due to the lack of enforcement of anti-corruption laws.⁷

Infrastructure-driven economic growth as “game changer”?

In 2008, President Mwai Kibaki launched “Kenya Vision 2030”, a development blueprint aimed at transforming the country into a newly-industrializing middle-income economy. While the vision has economic, political and social pillars, priority was given to economic growth, treating infrastructure development (SDG 9) as a key enabler with a multiplier effect on other sectors.⁸ High priority was given to the development of economic infrastructure along regional corridors: – roads, bridges, railways, fibre optic cables.

To speed up delivery, many of Kenya's Vision 2030 flagship infrastructure projects were implemented through external borrowing from various sources, such as sovereign Eurobonds,⁹ amid allegations of cronyism, corruption and mismanagement of public finances.¹⁰ In addition, the government's prioritization of infrastructure coincided with China's advance into Africa through the Belt and Road Initiative, under which various large-scale projects were financed and implemented. Examples include the Standard Gauge Railway (SGR), Kenya's most expensive infrastructure project, and the port of Lamu.¹¹ Other donors and development partners also prioritized infrastructure development to facilitate trade and transport. As a result, a disproportional 32 percent of official development assistance (ODA) to Kenya has been invested

in economic infrastructure and services.¹² The Kenyan government's focus on major infrastructure investment has contributed to the country's public debt rising to nearly 70 percent of GDP.¹³ Today, debt service obligations limit the government's discretion in setting funding priorities.¹⁴ At the same time, public investment in social sectors such as basic healthcare has declined and remains below international and regional recommendations for minimum levels of social expenditure.¹⁵

However, the benefits of economic infrastructure investments have not yet reached the general public, and especially not marginalized groups. The limited effectiveness of these investments is also reflected in the very moderate progress on SDG 9 (resilient infrastructure), where major challenges remain.¹⁶ Studies on the socio-economic impacts of infrastructure projects in Kenya have produced mixed results, highlighting modest increases in employment opportunities for residents living near infrastructure schemes on the one hand and crowding-out effects, especially of vulnerable groups, on the other.¹⁷ Recent government priority projects such as the Nairobi Expressway have been widely criticized for benefitting citizens in well-off neighbourhoods while largely failing to meet the mobility needs of low-income citizens.¹⁸ Similar dy-

¹² Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), “Aid at a Glance”, n. d., <https://www.oecd.org/dac/financing-sustainable-development/development-finance-data/aid-at-a-glance.htm> (accessed 15 February 2023).

¹³ Economist Intelligence, “Kenya Faces a Potential Debt Repayment Crunch in 2024”, *Economist Intelligence* (online), 28 March 2023, <https://www.eiu.com/n/kenya-faces-a-potential-debt-repayment-crunch-in-2024/> (accessed 17 April 2023).

¹⁴ Africa Confidential, “The Hustler Backs Austerity”, *Africa Confidential* 63, no. 21 (October 2022): 10.

¹⁵ Martin Mulwa, *Human rights-based analysis of Kenya's Budget 2022/2023* (Nairobi: United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, August 2022), <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/2022-09/Human-Rights-Based-Analysis-of-Kenya-Budget-2022-23.pdf> (accessed 28 February 2023).

¹⁶ Sustainable Development Report, “Kenya SDG Dashboards and Trends” (see note 4).

¹⁷ For example: Sarah Risper, Risper Khanani, Emmanuel Junior Adugbila and Javier A Martinez, “The Impact of Road Infrastructure Development Projects on Local Communities in Peri-Urban Areas: The Case of Kisumu, Kenya and Accra, Ghana”, *International Journal of Community Well-Being* 4, no. 1 (March 2021): 33–53.

¹⁸ Ed Ram, “How Nairobi's ‘road for the rich’ resulted in thousands of homes reduced to rubble”, *Guardian*, 8 Decem-

⁷ Republic of Kenya National Treasury and Planning, *SDGs Recovery and Acceleration Strategy* (see note 3), 36.

⁸ Republic of Kenya, *Second Voluntary National Review on the Implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals* (see note 5), 23.

⁹ International debt instrument issued in currency other than the one used by the issuer.

¹⁰ Lily Kuo, “Kenya's Ex-PM Accuses US Banks of Helping the Government Steal \$1 Billion from the Country's First Eurobond”, *Quartz*, 14 January 2016, <https://qz.com/africa/594324/kenyas-ex-pm-accuses-us-banks-of-helping-the-government-steal-1-billion-from-the-countrys-first-eurobond> (accessed 17 February 2023).

¹¹ Gong Seng, Melissa Leach and Jing Gu, “The Belt and Road Initiative and the SDGs: Towards Equitable, Sustainable Development”, *IDS Bulletin* 50, no. 4 (December 2019): 92.

namics can be observed in the wider region. Research on development corridors in East Africa has highlighted the risks of failing to deliver on the social dimension of the SDGs due to trade-offs between economic growth on the one hand and reducing inequality and poverty on the other.¹⁹

Rent-seeking by political and business elites continues to influence government decision-making on priority programmes.

In Kenya, doubts about the validity of the prevailing economic growth model are compounded by risks arising from the incentive and opportunity structure embedded in public procurement. Rent-seeking by political and business elites, including government contractors and international construction companies, continues to influence government decision-making on priority projects and programmes. Public procurement is particularly prone to misappropriation of funds: the Mombasa – Nairobi Standard Gauge Railway project is just one prominent example that has drawn widespread criticism from the public and the courts for opaque tendering, inflated costs, and alleged kickbacks for government officials, in which Chinese investors have also been implicated.²⁰ Although difficult to prove, it is estimated that around one third of Kenya’s annual budget is lost to graft.²¹ While Kenya’s score in Transparency International’s Corruption Perceptions Index has improved marginally over the past decade (ranked 123 out of 180 countries

ber 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2021/dec/08/how-nairobis-road-for-the-rich-resulted-in-thousands-of-homes-reduced-to-rubble> (accessed 28 February 2023).

19 Brock Bersaglio, Charis Enns, Ramson Karmushu, Masalu Luhula and Alex Awiti, “How Development Corridors Interact with the Sustainable Development Goals in East Africa”, *International Development Planning Review* 43, no. 2 (April 2021): 231 – 56.

20 Abdi L. Dahir, “Jewel in the Crown of Corruption’: The Troubles of Kenya’s China-Funded Train”, *New York Times* (online), 7 August 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/07/world/africa/kenya-election-train.html> (accessed 3 January 2022).

21 Constant Munda, “Sh394bn of China funded projects linked to graft”, *Business Daily*, 21 October 2021, <https://www.businessdailyafrica.com/bd/economy/sh394bn-of-china-funded-projects-linked-to-graft-3590450> (accessed 3 January 2022).

in 2022), the country still suffers serious levels of public sector corruption, with 45 percent of public service users reporting having paid a bribe during the previous year.²² The European Union recently raised concerns about the government’s limited efforts to tackle corruption, particularly in public procurement.²³ The dynamics suggest that the interests of the elites tend to prevail over the public interest in investment decisions, resulting in poor outcomes for the country’s LNOB agenda.

Ruto’s “hustler nation”: A new development paradigm?

William Ruto became president of Kenya in September 2022. His campaign targeted Kenya’s “hustlers”, the informal micro-businesses and small traders, as opposed to the “dynasties” of the country’s political elites. Amidst the rising cost of living, the growing fiscal burden of debt servicing and ongoing severe drought, Ruto signalled a turnaround on government spending, advocating a “bottom up” economic model that seeks fiscal consolidation while promoting economic growth.²⁴ His economic advisor David Ndii argues for a shift away from infrastructure-led development to focus on agricultural productivity instead, following the example of Latin American countries with vast land resources.²⁵

22 Transparency International, “Corruption Perceptions Index: Kenya”, 31 January 2023, <https://www.transparency.org/en/countries/kenya> (accessed 28 February 2023).

23 Luke Anami, “EU Warns Kenya on Graft, Money Laundering”, *The East African*, 4 February 2023, <https://www.theeastafrican.co.ke/tea/news/east-africa/eu-takes-swipe-at-kenya-over-corruption-4110944> (accessed 17 April 2023).

24 Parliament of Kenya, Parliamentary Budget Office, *Fiscal Consolidation in the Midst of a Global Recession, What Is the Magic? Budget Options for FY 2023/2024 and the Medium Term* (Nairobi, February 2023), <http://www.parliament.go.ke/sites/default/files/2023-02/Budget%20Options%20for%202023-24%20and%20the%20Medium%20Term.pdf> (accessed 13 February 2023); Kabui Mwangi, “Kenya’s Public Debt Growth Pace Slowest in Four Years”, *Business Daily*, 5 January 2023, <https://www.businessdailyafrica.com/bd/economy/kenya-s-public-debt-growth-pace-slowest-in-four-years--4075864> (accessed 9 January 2023).

25 David Ndii, *Africa’s Infrastructure-led Growth Experiment Is Faltering: It Is Time to Focus on Agriculture* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment, 20 December 2022), <https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/12/20/africa-s-infrastructure-led-growth->

As the government shifts its economic approach, pitfalls remain, in particular regarding the inclusivity of the growth model.

However, as the government gradually shifts its economic approach, pitfalls remain, in particular regarding the inclusivity of the growth model. First, while the government has started to scale back mega-projects planned by its predecessor, several central projects from Kenya Vision 2030 are likely to remain on the agenda. Questions of national prestige are therefore likely to remain important in spending decisions. Second, the government is increasingly turning to private-sector financing to drive economic growth. But private investors are unlikely to address the resource gap in the social sectors, as their investments are profit-driven. Third, to promote entrepreneurship and economic growth in the manufacturing sector, the government is, among other things, incentivizing citizens' access to credit (most notably through the so-called "Hustler fund", whose funding mechanisms remain ambiguous). Critics warn that this is simply another form of debt, shifting the risks to private individuals. In effect, people would "mortgage their future income"²⁶ to finance basic social services such as healthcare, while public development spending remains insufficient to meet basic needs. Last but not least, the credibility of the president's pro-poor campaigning has been questioned over his moves to raise payroll taxes and abolish fossil fuel and food subsidies during his first days in office, as well as proposals to reduce support for social protection programmes.²⁷ Overall, while the growth model is postulated as a "bottom up" approach, the impact of these measures on Kenya's LNOB progress is questionable, as indicated by continued public protests over the rising cost of living.

experiment-is-faltering.-it-is-time-to-focus-on-agriculture-pub-88662 (accessed 28 February 2023).

²⁶ Jacinta V. Muinde, "The 'Hustler' Fund: Kenya's Approach to National Transformation", *African Arguments*, 5 January 2023, <https://africanarguments.org/2023/01/the-hustler-fund-kenyas-approach-to-national-transformation> (accessed 7 January 2023).

²⁷ Faustine Ngila, "Kenya's 'Hustler' President Is Emptying the Pockets of the Poor", *Quartz Africa*, 1 November 2022, <https://qz.com/ruto-is-emptying-the-pockets-of-poor-kenyas-1849726707> (accessed 28 February 2023).

Outlook and recommendations

Kenya's development trajectory over the past decade shows that basic social services, including food security, healthcare and social housing, and the efficient use of public funds are the most promising "game changers" to improving overall development performance for all citizens – regardless of whether the government favours a "trickle down" or "bottom up" logic. As the new government shapes its economic transformation model, transparency and inclusiveness of investment decisions will be key to reaching wider segments of the population, for example in the digital space (in the context of the "Digital Super-highway"²⁸). At the same time, the prolonged drought exacerbates social and economic inequalities and may necessitate further rethinking of government priorities, particularly with regard to wealth distribution and regional disparities.

The European Union and its member states should prioritize government action to tackle poverty and inequality, especially in the area of infrastructure development, which is a priority of the EU's Global Gateway Initiative.²⁹ Infrastructure development is a sector where investors risk becoming embroiled in elite-driven "white elephant" projects.

As the most prominent external actor in infrastructure development, China's stance on these issues is likely to be crucial. Kenyans' views on the utility, transparency and economic viability of these investments are an important measure not only of their government's ability to deliver to its citizens but also of China's development promise to the region.

²⁸ Republic of Kenya, "Ruto: We Will Pursue Data Protection Regime That Is Pro-transformation", press release (Nairobi, 27 January 2023), <https://www.president.go.ke/ruto-we-will-pursue-data-protection-regime-that-is-pro-transformation/> (accessed 17 April 2023).

²⁹ European Commission, "EU-Africa: Global Gateway Investment Package – Infrastructure", press release (Brussels, November 2022), https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/api/files/attachment/874232/GG_Africa_Infrastructure.pdf (accessed 28 March 2023).

Eric J. Ballbach

Republic of Korea: Developing a Sustainable Foreign Policy and Implementing the SDGs

The Republic of Korea's (ROK, South Korea) established commitment to sustainable development forms an important foundation for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. This dates back to the country's democratization in 1988 and especially the Rio Summit in 1992. Crucially, there is an overall consensus on the significance of implementing the SDGs, spanning ideological and party lines, despite differences in specific approaches and policy priorities.¹ Alongside the required institutional infrastructure, Seoul has developed a series of policies, measures and initiatives to integrate the SDGs directly or indirectly into its domestic and foreign policies and international development cooperation strategies, using the SDGs to boost the country's green credentials as the government aims to make the country a leading exporter in the area of green research and technology. Yet substantial deficits in implementation of the SDGs remain. The Republic of Korea is among the largest emitters of CO₂, and the share of renewables in energy production remains low. Current policies are not sufficient to reach the legally mandated target of carbon neutrality by 2050. Moreover, structural and institutional deficits hamper progress in implementing the SDGs.

¹ For instance, differences on climate change are primarily about how climate targets should be achieved rather than what targets are necessary. See Theo Mendez, "Growing Green? South Korea's Approach to the COVID-19 Economic Recovery", *Melbourne Asia Review* 11 (Melbourne: University of Melbourne, 2022), <https://melbourneasiareview.edu.au/growing-green-south-koreas-approach-to-the-covid-19-economic-recovery/> (accessed 18 April 2023).

Integrating the SDGs into the national political agenda

The government of the Republic of Korea quickly began the process of integrating the SDGs into its national agenda, following their adoption in September 2015. One crucial step was the establishment of the Korean Sustainable Development Goals (K-SDGs) in 2018.² Although not without its critics, the establishment of the K-SDGs was a comparatively participatory and inclusive process, building in many ways on the country's successful Agenda 21 processes, which were characterized by broad local social engagement through civil society organizations (CSOs).³

² The K-SDGs include 5 strategies, 17 goals, 122 targets, and 214 indicators. They differ from the UN-SDGs mostly in that they take into account South Korea's particular circumstances, thus aiming for more context-specific and localized SDGs. For example, certain targets, such as 5.3 (eliminate all harmful practices such as child, early, and forced marriage and female genital mutilation), were omitted because they have little relevance to South Korea. On the other hand, new goals relating to pressing problems in South Korea were introduced; these include 3.8 (overcoming the low birth rate and preparing for an aging population). Ministry of Environment of the Republic of Korea, *A Report on Korean Sustainable Development Goals (K-SDGs) 2019* (Seoul, 2019), http://ncsd.go.kr/api/1572586270021_K-SDGs_report_eng.pdf (accessed 23 March 2023).

³ For a discussion of the local Agenda 21 process in South Korea and the role of civil organizations therein, see Myong-Jae Cha, "The Process of Local Agenda 21 Initiatives in Korea and the Role of NGOs", in *Learning from Each Other in North and South: Local Agenda 21 in Germany and the Republic of Korea*, ed. Petra Stephan, INEF Report 48/2000 (Duisburg, 2000), 62–75, <https://www.uni-due.de/imperia/md/content/inef/report48.pdf> (accessed 12 March 2023).

Key institutions, mechanisms and initiatives

At the national level, the Republic of Korea charged specific institutions and actors with implementing the SDGs. The government relied largely on an institutional and legal framework for implementing sustainable and development-related goals that had already been established before the adoption of the 2030 Agenda.

The key government institutions involved in implementing the SDGs and integrating them into national policy are; the Office for Government Policy Coordination (OGPC), the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), the Ministry of Environment (MOE), Statistics South Korea, the Committee for International Development Cooperation (CIDC), and the Korean International Cooperation Agency (KOICA). While the OGPC is tasked with ensuring that policies, laws, and regulations enacted at each ministerial level create a conducive environment for SDG implementation, Statistics South Korea's main task is to prepare an annual standardized SDG indicator assessment, which forms the basis for periodically assessing the relevance of national development frameworks to the SDGs. The CIDC is the main organization tasked with ensuring that the Republic of Korea's development assistance policies remain aligned with the SDGs. In addition, the National Assembly established the "UN-SDG Forum", a consultative group of leading parliamentarians seeking to promote the development of practical tools and initiatives to realize the SDGs within the Republic of Korea and abroad.

The National Strategy for Green Growth (2009 – 2050) and the Five-Year Plan (2009 – 2013) provided a first comprehensive policy framework for green growth covering both the short and long term. While the National Strategy aims to promote new eco-friendly growth engines, enhance quality of life and contribute to international efforts to fight climate change, the Five-Year Plan outlines government actions and detailed tasks for ministries and local government entities as well as specific budgets such as a US\$30.7 billion stimulus package to support the Republic of Korea's green ambitions.⁴ To facilitate realization of the Five-Year Plan, a Presidential Commission on

⁴ Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), "Green Growth in Action: Korea" (Paris, 2023), <https://www.oecd.org/korea/greengrowthinactionkorea.htm> (accessed 22 February 2023).

Green Growth was established in 2009 and a Framework Act on Low Carbon Green Growth enacted in 2010. These created a legislative framework for mid- and long-term emissions reduction targets, cap-and-trade, carbon tax, carbon labelling, carbon disclosure and the expansion of renewable energy.⁵

South Korea incorporated the SDGs into key domestic and foreign policy initiatives and its international development strategy.

More recently, the SDGs have been incorporated – mostly indirectly – into key government initiatives. The Korean New Deal, a US\$122 billion national development strategy (2020 – 2025) launched by the Moon Jae-in administration (2017 – 2022) in July 2020, has direct implications for SDG 13 (climate change) through its Green New Deal pillar, whereas the Digital New Deal and the Human New Deal have implications for the SDGs related to socio-economic development. Moreover, the Basic Plan for Sustainable Development, published every five years (and most recently revised in 2021), identifies detailed policy tasks for each goal, and thus also provides a central roadmap for integrating the SDGs into the Republic of Korea's national framework.

The emergence of a sustainable foreign policy in the Republic of Korea?

The Republic of Korea has taken successive steps in recent years to integrate the SDGs into the country's foreign and international development strategy and thus to promote the development of a sustainable foreign policy.

⁵ The Framework Act requires the government to establish and implement a national strategy, action plans, and detailed five-year plans dealing with various aspects of climate mitigation and adaptation. The framework defines the main principles of a green economy, including green growth via environmental technologies and industries. As a result, the Committee on Green Growth was established under the Prime Minister's office to deliberate on the state's major policies and plans related to green growth.

Integrating the SDGs in Regional Foreign Policy Initiatives

The SDGs have found expression – usually indirectly – in South Korean foreign policy, for example through the country’s regional strategies. Both the New Southern Policy formulated by the Moon administration and the Indo-Pacific strategy of the current Yoon administration strive to expand relations with countries in the region, placing special priority on sustainable development in the areas of economic growth, infrastructure development and education. One key component of these efforts is the promotion of “green diplomacy”, aiming to contribute to global efforts to protect the international environment, promote sustainability and unlock business opportunities in the field of green development. Seeking to lead global cooperation in the green sector, sustain the momentum for a green transition and boost international efforts, the ROK government has pledged US\$300 million for the Green Climate Fund (GCF) through 2027. Moreover, a Green New Deal Fund will support consulting and financing for green industry activities in developing countries in five major Green New Deal areas (energy, transportation, smart city, water management and sanitation, and agriculture) and expand cooperation with the Global Green Growth Institute (GGGI).⁶

Moreover, the above-mentioned New Deal also reflects the interplay between national initiatives and their immediate foreign policy implications. While the Korean New Deal involves an ambitious economic development plan, the success of which will ultimately depend on “the involvement and cooperation between Korean civil society, the private and the public sectors”, the government also aims to create a national base to make the country a global leader in green initiatives, for example in the energy sector. This requires both national efforts and contributions from and cooperation with global actors – and thus active South Korean participation in diplomatic affairs with developed and developing nations. For example, the green transition is a crucial topic between the EU and the Republic of Korea, with cooperation focusing on a clean energy transition and energy security, enhanc-

ing the emissions trading system, and promoting eco-friendly industries. The two sides are currently exploring the prospect of establishing an EU-ROK Green Partnership.

Integrating the SDGs into development cooperation policy

Joining the OECD in 1996 and its Development Assistance Committee (DAC) in 2010 were important steps in the Republic of Korea’s remarkable journey from recipient of post-war aid to global development cooperation partner. After joining the OECD DAC, the government enacted the Framework Law on International Development Cooperation to improve policy coherence and aid effectiveness. The Republic of Korea’s development cooperation focuses on least developed countries and low- to middle-income countries in Asia and Africa. The majority of its ODA is provided through bilateral cooperation, with government loans representing a significant share.

The Republic of Korea has recently made considerable efforts to reform its ODA policy in order to advance the implementation of the SDGs and SDG 17 in particular. One of the most important developments in this regard is strengthening the institutional framework to improve coordination among relevant ministries and agencies, most notably through the establishment of the Office of International Development Cooperation (in the Prime Minister’s Office), which has greater capacity to support the International Development Cooperation Committee overseeing the Republic of Korea’s development cooperation. Moreover, development assistance projects must now specifically state which SDGs their respective projects contribute to. The Republic of Korea also stepped up its monitoring of ODA programmes by the relevant national agencies for international development cooperation, to ensure that ODA projects are complementary and consistent with the SDGs. All national agencies in the Republic of Korea are now required to conduct biannual evaluations of their development projects and make efforts to strengthen their projects’ alignment with the SDGs.⁷ To increase the inclusive-

⁶ Yul Kwon, *Korea’s Green ODA: Performance and Challenges*, KIEP Opinions (Seoul: Korea Institute for International Economic Policy, 7 June 2022), https://www.kiep.go.kr/galleryDownload.es?bid=0008&list_no=10129&seq=1 (accessed 23 April 2023).

⁷ Government of the Republic of Korea, *2016 National Voluntary Review, Year One of Implementing the SDGs in the Republic of Korea* (Seoul, 2021), 13, [https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/10632National%20Voluntary%20Review%20Report%20\(rev_final\).pdf](https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/10632National%20Voluntary%20Review%20Report%20(rev_final).pdf) (accessed 12 February 2023).

ness of its ODA, the Republic of Korea has promoted the involvement of non-state actors in various ODA projects, for example through the Development Action Programme as a platform promoting public-private partnerships, and the Business Partnership Programme, in which private and public actors develop synergies, propose innovative solutions for development financing, and devise inclusive business models.

The Republic of Korea's ODA is also more directly linked to national initiatives. For instance, the CIDC announced a "Green New Deal official development assistance" strategy, which seeks to expand green ODA. It is planned to increase the proportion of ODA going to the green sector from 20 percent (2015–2019 average) to above the OECD average (28.1 percent) by 2025.⁸ In addition, the strategy also increases the Republic of Korea's contributions to relevant international institutions including the Green Climate Fund and the Global Green Growth Institute, whose main objectives are to share green growth experience with developing countries and to disseminate its green development model globally, expanding partnerships with UN agencies and multilateral development banks as well as with partner countries.⁹ However, while the increasing importance given to environmental issues in the Republic of Korea's ODA programme can help facilitate implementation of the SDGs in terms of international cooperation, the country still lacks overarching legislation and a comprehensive strategy for its ODA policy and for targeted implementation of the SDGs at home and abroad.

Conclusions

Early and proactive engagement by the government and civil society has created a favourable environment for implementing the SDGs in the Republic of Korea. The establishment and modification of the necessary institutional infrastructure, the adoption of key national initiatives and linking them to the country's central foreign policy initiatives and inter-

national development cooperation strategy are worthwhile achievements. Like virtually all OECD countries, the Republic of Korea has already achieved most of the SDGs related to securing basic needs and implementing the policy instruments and frameworks identified in the 2030 Agenda. It is considered to have achieved most progress in implementing Goals 1 (No Poverty), 3 (Health and Well-being), 4 (Quality Education), 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), 9 (Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure), and 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities).

Despite such progress, however, key challenges remain. Deficiencies are identified in particular in the context of promoting inclusion and reducing inequalities (within Goals 1, 5 and 10), in the implementation of Goal 14 (Life Underwater) and 15 (Life on Land), as well as SDGs 5 (Gender Equality), 13 (Climate Action) and 17 (Partnerships to Achieve Goals). The scope for improving environmental performance remains particularly large, notwithstanding intensified efforts. In contrast to its global image as a major player in fostering a green transition and a green innovator, the Republic of Korea remains among the largest emitters of CO₂ and the average exposure of the urban population to airborne particulates is almost three times the WHO target.¹⁰ Moreover, the share of renewables in energy production is the second-lowest in the OECD. While improved emissions targets include a 40 percent reduction below 2018 levels by 2030, with a legally mandated target of carbon neutrality by 2050, current policies are not deemed sufficient to achieve the targets. Against this backdrop, some observers attest the South Korean government only moderate commitment to achieving the SDGs.¹¹

In addition, severe structural problems persist. These range from insufficient long-term fiscal commitments, expressed most visibly by the fact that the SDGs are not mentioned in the national budget, to a lack of policy coherence and coordination. While progress has been made in strengthening the institutional structure to support the implementation of the SDGs, coordination deficits remain prevalent both

⁸ Kwon, *Korea's Green ODA* (see note 6).

⁹ Notably, the vision of the ROK as a global leader in the field of green diplomacy has been shared and developed through different administrations from both political camps – aiming to strengthen South Korea's status as a major player in global affairs by increasing the volume of ODA and using green policies as one of the pillars of the country's foreign relations.

¹⁰ Bertelsmann Stiftung, "Sustainable Governance Indicators, South Korea" (Gütersloh, 2022), https://www.sgi-network.org/2022/South_Korea/Key_Findings (accessed 11 April 2023).

¹¹ Jeffrey D. Sachs, Guillaume Lafortune, Christian Kroll, Grayson Fuller and Finn Woelm, *From Crisis to Sustainable Development: The SDGs as Roadmap to 2030 and Beyond: Sustainable Development Report 2022* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 48.

between ministries and governmental institutions and in particular regarding the involvement of civil society organizations in the processes of implementing the SDGs. Against this background, specific institutions such as the Committee for Sustainable Development should be strengthened, an integrated governance structure for the coordination of corresponding investments should be established, and the SDGs should be integrated even more directly into the implementation of key national policy initiatives. Also, the Republic of Korea's relatively low SDG 17 score, despite its active engagement in global development issues and institutions, is an indication that the country needs to adopt a more comprehensive approach to global partnerships and take adopt measures to further increase its contribution to effective multilateralism. Building new global energy governance structures at the multilateral level, for instance, offers a huge opportunity for both the Republic of Korea and the EU. Building on their common interests in energy security and carbon neutrality, the EU and the Republic of Korea can further deepen their cooperation on strengthening global energy and climate governance through the G20 and the UNFCCC processes. The EU-ROK Green Partnership currently under discussion could be an important step forward.

Sabine Fischer

Russian Federation: No Sustainable Development in Wartime

When the Russian Federation (Russia) declared its commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015, it was already evident that its domestic and foreign policy pointed in a very different direction. It was no surprise that Russia obstructed strong, clear formulations during the negotiations of the SDGs and 2030 Agenda, given its steady deterioration in respect for human rights and dignity, the rule of law, justice, equality and non-discrimination, diversity and equal opportunities there. Since 2015, the gap between Russia's declarative support and actual implementation of the SDGs has only widened. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 marks an all-time low in the process. There is an inherent contradiction between the development of the Russian state and the goals and visions formulated in the 2030 Agenda. It is unlikely that this contradiction can be resolved while the current political regime under the leadership of Vladimir Putin remains in power.

Russia has never launched its own national sustainable development strategy or agenda. Instead, Russian SDG implementation rests upon a range of strategic documents from different periods over the past thirty years. The only official document to explicitly address sustainable development is the Concept for the Transition of the Russian Federation to Sustainable Development, which dates from 1996.

When the UN resolution on the SDGs was adopted in 2015, Russian government structures were still working on implementation of the so-called May Decrees, signed by Vladimir Putin in 2012. These identified more than two hundred goals in areas such as quality of the public sector, social policies, investment climate and infrastructure, to be achieved by 2020.¹ When Putin was reelected in 2018, the May

Decrees were replaced by the so-called Twelve National Projects designed to bring about improvements in the areas of demography; healthcare; education; housing and urban environment; ecology; infrastructure and road safety; labour productivity and employment; science; digital economy; culture; small and medium sized enterprises and individual entrepreneurship; and international cooperation and export.² Their goals were ambitious: “to take Russia into the top five largest economies; ensure sustainable natural population growth; increase life expectancy from 72 to 78 years (in 2024, 80 years by 2030); ensure sustainable growth of real wages; cut poverty in half; improve housing conditions for at least 5 million households annually; and establish conditions and opportunities for the self-realization of each citizen.”³ In addition to these general development plans, there are a number of strategies for specific policy fields.

In a nutshell, the Russian government has produced a hotchpotch of official documents over the years that have later been linked to the SDG commitments – but the SDGs never really formed the basis for all these strategies. The result was a legislative vacuum and a lack of mechanisms to coordinate SDG-related activities by various state and non-state actors, or to nudge them towards more effective implementation.⁴ Add to this the poor implementa-

(Moscow, October 2021), <http://government.ru/orders/selection/406/> (accessed 15 April 2023).

² Government of Russia, “Natsionalnye proekty” [National projects], 2023, <http://government.ru/rugovclassifier/section/2641/> (accessed 15 April 2023).

³ Coalition for Sustainable Development in Russia, *2020–2030: Decade of Action in Russia: Challenges and Solutions* (Moscow, 2020), 8.

⁴ Natalya Paramonova, “Tseli mirovogo masshtaba: Kto i gde gotovit doklady grazhdanskogo obshchestva” [Goals of Global Scale: Who Prepares Civil Society Reports, and Where], *Ekologiya i pravo* [Ecology and Law] 79 (August 2020): 6–9.

¹ Government of Russia, “O khode vypolneniya ukazov Prezidenta Rossiyskoy Federatsii 7 maya 2012 goda No. 596-606” [On the Implementation of the Decrees of the President of the Russian Federation on 7 May 2012 No 596-606]

tion record of a Russian state that is struggling with serious governance problems. None of the government strategies mentioned above have ever been fully realized; many remained only on paper.⁵

Contrary perspectives on SDG implementation: Government and civil society

The Russian government delivered its first Voluntary National Review (VNR) on SDG implementation in 2020.⁶ The overall assessment of progress between 2015 and 2020 is optimistic: “Russia has demonstrated positive results in each SDG, most successful of them being SDG 1 ‘no poverty’, SDG 4 ‘Quality education’, SDG 8 ‘Decent work and economic growth’”.⁷ It concedes that a more active policy is required in other areas without, however, specifying which ones.

A shadow report presented at the 2020 HPLF by the Coalition for Sustainable Development in Russia, a group of independent civil society organizations and activists, comes to radically different conclusions.⁸ It points out that in the National Projects “a total of 131 goals and targets contain only 57 of the 169 SDG targets. Meanwhile, SDG 13 and SDG 14 were not included in the policy paper at all”.⁹ The civil society observers point to a lack of awareness at the state and non-state level of the existence of the SDGs and Russia’s obligations. They identify corruption, complicated bureaucratic procedures, underfunding and the degradation of the political climate and state-society-relations as major obstacles to the SDG agenda. Their overall diagnosis is that Russia lacks an “integrated approach ... that combines the three aspects of sustainable development: social, environmental and economic”.¹⁰ According to the shadow report, the SDGs have not taken root in Russian state policy and society. Nevertheless, in 2020 the authors of the civil society report

were still cautiously optimistic about state-society-cooperation: “Despite the fact that some civil society representatives are currently sceptical about the possibility of dialogue with the state on the implementation of SDGs in the country, we believe that this review can serve as a starting point for renewed cooperation.”¹¹ However, developments since then have crushed any hopes of the Russian state taking a more productive approach to SDG implementation in the future.

Domestic and foreign policy context of SDG implementation in Russia

The Russian political system has undergone a process of constant autocratization over the past twenty years.¹² Whilst authoritarian elements existed throughout the 2000s, the trend became more pronounced when Vladimir Putin returned to the Kremlin in 2012. It accelerated after the beginning of the war against Ukraine in 2014, and again from early 2020. It was this latest period in particular that closed the window of opportunity for constructive cooperation on SDG implementation at the national and international level. The reform of the Russian constitution in the first half of 2020 provided Vladimir Putin with the possibility to stay in power until 2036. It cements the vertical structure of the political system, thus further weakening all other state and non-state institutions and undermining the capacity of the Russian state to efficiently implement *any* reform policy or strategy. The new constitution also enshrines traditionalist values and reflects nationalistic attitudes, which have increasingly determined state policy over the past decade. Moreover, the Russian constitution now gives national legislation precedence over international law. All this speaks to a lack of political will on the part of the Russian political regime to implement the SDGs as the integrated package they were intended to be.

Political autocratization was accompanied by a degradation of state-society relations. The situation deteriorated throughout the 2010s, with more and more independent CSOs coming under pressure, being labelled foreign agents and persecuted for their

5 Vladimir Gel'man, *The Politics of Bad Governance in Contemporary Russia* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2022), 169.

6 Russian Federation, *Voluntary Review of the Progress Made in the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (Moscow, 2020), https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/26959VNR_2020_Russia_Report_English.pdf (accessed 5 January 2023).

7 Russian Federation, *Voluntary Review* (see note 6), 10.

8 Coalition for Sustainable Development in Russia, *2020–2030: Decade of Action in Russia* (see note 3).

9 *Ibid.*, 8.

10 *Ibid.*, 9.

11 *Ibid.*, 12.

12 Sabine Fischer, *Repression and Autocracy as Russia Heads into State Duma Elections*, SWP Comment 40/2021 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, June 2021), doi: 10.18449/2021C40.

activities. Until 2022 this trend affected CSOs in different ways: human rights, feminist and LGBTIQ* activists had been suffering harsh repression for years; people working on “less politicized” issues were less exposed – not least because the state relied on them to take over some of its tasks, for instance in the social policy area.¹³ In other words SDG-related activities took place in very different political contexts. But even in the less hostile environments the probability of a state-society partnership on SDG implementation was rapidly shrinking.

In Russia’s hyper-personalized political system political action depends almost exclusively on whether or not Vladimir Putin puts an issue on the political agenda.

Between 2015 and 2022 progress on SDG implementation varied across issues and areas. In Russia’s hyper-personalized political system political action depends almost exclusively on whether or not Vladimir Putin puts an issue on the political agenda. Past developments around SDG 13 “Climate action” and SDG 5 “Gender equality” illustrate how this plays out: While the first case provides an example of fleeting political momentum, even that was absent in the second case. Since February 2022, however, Russia’s full-scale war against Ukraine has destroyed even the modest progress that had been achieved in some SDG-related areas.

Russia’s action on SDG 13 “Climate action”

Russian policy on SDG 13 “Climate action” provides interesting insights into the workings of the Putin regime. For many years, climate change was completely off the political agenda in Russia. The country’s heavy dependence on fossil fuel exports and lack of economic modernization and diversification prevented a policy shift in this direction. Vladimir Putin questioned the anthropogenic origin of climate change on various occasions.¹⁴ Civil society actors in

the ecological field were more focused on local environmental issues like waste management.

The political context started to change towards the end of the 2010s: the European Union’s Green Deal 2019 brought it home to Moscow that the policy change in the European Union, the biggest customer of Russian energy exports, was real and would have serious economic repercussions. Moreover, summer heat waves, thawing permafrost and forest fires in Siberia made it more and more difficult to deny the existence of climate change.¹⁵ In the autumn of 2019, Vladimir Putin conceded for the first time that climate change was a man-made fact, and that Russia needed a political response to it (SDG 13.2). In September 2019, Russia joined the 2015 Paris Agreement. The government adopted the “National Action Plan for the First Phase of Adaptation to Climate Change for the period up to 2022” (SDG 13.1). A Special Presidential Envoy on Climate Issues (Ruslan Eldegeriev) was nominated in 2019, and in 2020 Anatoly Chubais was appointed Special Representative of the President for Relations with International Organizations to Achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. The Russian government set up an interministerial working group on questions of climate change and sustainable development. This relatively sudden policy change at the top opened a window of opportunity for climate-related activities in the state structures and civil society, as well as cooperation with international actors.¹⁶ In December 2020, the EU Delegation in Moscow and the Russian government held a conference on climate change and sustainability with high-level official participation from both sides.¹⁷

Times (online), 7 September 2021, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2021/07/01/skepticism-to-acceptance-how-putins-views-on-climate-change-evolved-over-the-years-a74391> (accessed 15 April 2023).

¹⁵ Coalition for Sustainable Development in Russia, *2020–2030: Decade of Action in Russia. Challenges and Solutions* (see note 3), 77.

¹⁶ Angelina Davydova, *Environmental Activism in Russia: Strategies and Prospects*, CSIS Commentary (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies [CSIS], March 2021), <https://www.csis.org/analysis/environmental-activism-russia-strategies-and-prospects> (accessed 15 April 2023).

¹⁷ Delegation of the European Union to the Russian Federation, “EU-Russia Climate Conference, 1–3 December 2020” (Moscow, December 2020); EU-Russia Climate Conference (1–3 December 2020), EEAS (europa.eu), <https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/russia/eu-russia-climate->

¹³ Sabine Fischer and Jens Siegert, “Überleben in der Autokratie: Russlands Zivilgesellschaft unter Druck”, *Osteuropa* 71, no. 8/9 (2021): 203–24.

¹⁴ Moscow Times, “Skepticism to Acceptance: How Putin’s Views on Climate Change Evolved over the Years”, *Moscow*

However, with geopolitical tensions on the rise throughout 2021 and autocratization accelerating at the domestic level, the window closed quickly. The follow-up to the EU-Russia conference on climate change envisaged for November/December 2021 never occurred. As a result of Western sanctions in reaction to Moscow's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Russia has lost access to important sources of technological innovation in the area of decarbonization. The Russian economy is entirely subordinated to the war effort. The war itself increases greenhouse gas emissions in many ways.

In the meantime, Russian delegates continue to take part in international climate events. They call for a "de-politicization of climate action" in the hope of preserving access to climate finance and technology and bypassing sanctions on low-carbon products. Russia's war of aggression has closed the green agenda, probably for as long as the current political regime is in power. And environmental CSOs have come under even more pressure.

Russia's non-action on SDG 5 "Gender Equality"

In 2017 the government adopted a National Strategy for Action in the Interest of Women 2017–2022. It outlines goals for improving the situation of women and realizing equal rights in all spheres of life. The Strategy refers to Russia's constitution as well as obligations under international law. The goals stipulated in the Strategy overlap with the targets of SDG 5, but there is no explicit reference to the Agenda 2030.

Data indicates that Russia has made little progress on implementing its own Strategy. Instead, the situation of women has deteriorated significantly over the past decade and a half. The shadow report by the Coalition for Sustainable Development points out that, in relation to SDG 5.1, "in 2006, the Global Gender Gap Index placed the country in the 49th position, in 2016 it was ranked 75th, and in 2020, 81th among 153 countries. Regarding SDG 5.5, Russia's positions have worsened in terms of 'Economic Participation and Opportunity (2nd in 2006 compared to 33rd in 2020) and 'Political Empowerment'

conference-1-3-december-2020_de?s=161 (accessed 12 May 2023).

(108th in 2006 compared to 122nd in 2020)."¹⁸ The gender pay gap and the pension gap between men and women have been widening. Women are under-represented in the political and economic sphere. They remain legally banned from one hundred occupations that the Russian state classes as too heavy for women.

Violence against women (SDG 5.2) is a particularly controversial topic in Russia. It emblemizes the general regression in the area of gender equality. Russia has not signed the Council of Europe's 2011 Istanbul Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence. In 2017 (the year of adoption of the National Strategy) the Russian State Duma adopted a law that changed the legal treatment of first instances of domestic violence from felony to misdemeanour. The perpetrators are almost never punished, the protection of victims is under-developed, and there is no systematic law enforcement or effective monitoring of violence against women. Concerning their physical security, women in Russia face a legal vacuum. Their protection and empowerment is not a priority for state policy. Interestingly, the regression of state policy had a mobilizing effect on Russian society. After 2017, domestic violence became a much-debated topic, often promoted by feminist activists and CSOs across the country. They did not have to wait long for the response. Feminist and LGBTQI* activists were targeted by repressive state policies and attacked by non-state actors. They are disproportionately affected by the foreign agent law.

Russia's war of aggression is having catastrophic effects on sustainable development in Ukraine, Russia and beyond.

As Russia's statements during the SDG negotiations demonstrate, SDG 5 clearly clashes with the so-called conservative family values and patriarchal attitudes promoted by the Russian regime and propaganda and enshrined in the 2020 Russian constitution. Aggressive hyper-masculinity has become an integral part of the Russian dictatorship's ideology and a key source of legitimacy of the Putin system.¹⁹ Russia's full-scale

¹⁸ Coalition for Sustainable Development in Russia, *2020–2030: Decade of Action in Russia* (see note 3), 32.

¹⁹ Valerie Sperling, *Sex, Politics and Putin: Political Legitimacy in Russia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

attack against Ukraine is aggravating the situation of women in all respects. Their economic situation is worsening. The positive influence of progressive foreign companies on the professional situation of women has waned as these companies ceased operating in Russia. The traumatizing effects of the war are likely to increase the level of violence and misogyny in Russian society for years, perhaps for generations to come.²⁰ The Russian government never embraced the spirit of SDG 5 and under current circumstances there is no chance of realizing gender equality.

No SDG implementation in wartime

Russia's war of aggression is having catastrophic effects on sustainable development in Ukraine, Russia and beyond. The costs in terms of human lives, traumatization of society, and economic and environmental destruction in Ukraine are as yet impossible to assess. The war also has a grave impact on global food security and has contributed to the current cost-of-living crisis that affects vulnerable populations worldwide. The war has accelerated defence spending across the world, while international arms control regimes continue to erode rapidly.

The Russian dictatorship is no longer interested in pursuing international cooperation on SDG implementation. It is significant that Anatoly Chubais was the only well-known Russian government official to resign his post and leave the country after February 2022. It is unlikely that he will be replaced any time soon.

The activists of the Coalition for Sustainable Development in Russia continue their work in exile. In 2023, they published a second shadow report on SDG implementation in Russia in light of the war. It is telling that they have only one recommendation to the Russian government: "the cessation of all military operations on the territory of Ukraine and the return of the Russian army to the territory of the Russian Federation within the 1991 borders. Only after that will it be possible to reestablish the dialogue with the Russian authorities on achieving the SDGs."²¹

²⁰ Coalition for Sustainable Development in Russia, *The Invasion of Ukraine: Implications for the SDGs in Russia* (Berlin, 2023), 70.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 16.

Melanie Müller

South Africa: Good Governance a Precondition for Progress on SDGs

South Africa's rhetorical commitment to the SDG process remains strong. It helps that the SDGs are aligned with promises made by the African National Congress (ANC) when democracy replaced the apartheid system. For example, some of the key aspects of the SDGs – such as the right to a healthy environment, health and clean water – are also incorporated into the South African constitution¹ as well as in South Africa's development agenda. Yet there is a huge gap between these goals and their implementation, much of which can be attributed to governance failures that have not been adequately addressed.

Many analyses of SDG implementation in South Africa – and the government's VNR from 2019 – concentrate on the implementation of individual SDG targets. While this is important for understanding progress in specific areas, it is also essential to investigate the interconnected structural challenges² that potentially prevent South Africa from advancing its SDG agenda.

The present assessment focuses on state capture and failures of governance as the core challenges. It concentrates in particular on the implementation of SDG 7 – access to affordable and clean energy – and recent developments in the electricity sector, where South Africa is currently facing a major crisis. To successfully achieve its SDG targets, South Africa will have to focus strongly on implementation of SDG 16 and “build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels”.

¹ Republic of South Africa, *Constitution of the Republic of South Africa – Chapter 2: Bill of Rights* (1996), <https://www.gov.za/documents/constitution/chapter-2-bill-rights> (accessed 26 April 2023).

² Tracey L. Cumming, Ross T. Shackleton, Johannes Forster, John Dini, Ahmed Khan, Mpho Gumula and Ida Kubiszewski, “Achieving the National Development Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) through Investment in Ecological Infrastructure: A Case Study of South Africa”, *Ecosystem Services* 27, Part B (2017): 253–60.

Systemic shocks: State capture and the pandemic

South Africa's 2019 SDG Report was published shortly after Cyril Ramaphosa took over the presidency from Jacob Zuma. At that time, the impact of state capture by Zuma and his network of supporters inside and outside the ANC was not yet visible to the extent that it is now, four years later. Today, the grave repercussions of this state capture and earlier governance challenges can no longer be ignored. According to reports by the Judicial Commission of Inquiry into State Capture, also known as Zondo Commission, corrupt practices in major infrastructure tendering had a direct negative impact on key sectors (including transport, energy, water).³ It must be assumed that some of the developments described in the 2019 report will show a negative trend in the next review.

The COVID-19 pandemic aggravated the country's socioeconomic situation. Economically, South Africa's tough lockdown was felt most severely by low-income and informally employed parts of the population who lacked savings. Government support programmes came late and were sometimes unable to reach the groups that most needed assistance.⁴ It is therefore unsurprising that key SDG indicators have deteriorated: according to Statistics South Africa, the unemployment rate was 30.1 percent in the first quarter of 2020 and increased to 32.7 percent in the last quarter of 2022. Youth unemployment grew from 59 percent in 2020 to 61 percent in 2022. In 2022, around 18.2

³ Judicial Commission of Inquiry into Allegations of State Capture, *Corruption and Fraud in the Public Sector including Organs of State* (Johannesburg, 24 June 2022), <https://www.statecapture.org.za/> (accessed 26 April 2023).

⁴ John C. Mubangizi, “Poor Lives Matter: Covid 19 and the Plight of Vulnerable Groups with Specific Reference to Poverty and Inequality in South Africa”, *Journal of African Law* 65, S2 (2021): 237–58.

million South Africans (out of 60 million) were living in extreme poverty, with less than US\$1.90 per day.⁵

The South African energy crisis

This tense socioeconomic situation encountered a severe home-made electricity crisis, which President Cyril Ramaphosa declared a “state of disaster” in February 2023. Although the ANC has succeeded in massively improving the energy infrastructure (SDG 7.1) since the end of apartheid, the government’s failure to implement reforms in the power utility Eskom led to targeted power cuts (“load shedding”) to prevent a nationwide blackout.⁶ Experts had already warned of an impending energy shortage in the early 2000s. According to Eskom management, 2007 marked a critical turning point. That was when the government decided to massively expand coal mining and coal-fired power generation. It chose to build two high-grade coal-fired power plants with elevated efficiency, “Kusile” and “Medupi”. The objective was for these facilities to cover the base load and provide enough electricity to take older coal-fired power stations off the grid, thus decreasing CO₂ emissions while creating energy security (SDGs 7.3 and 13.2).⁷

The German government’s decision to grant export credit guarantees for these power stations has proven to be fallacious. Firstly, construction of the power plants has further cemented South Africa’s fossil fuel path-dependency, despite the country’s commitment to reducing CO₂ emissions. Worse, corruption at Eskom, in national ministries and at the local level has prevented timely completion of the power plants, which are still not fully connected to the grid. As a consequence, older reactors have not yet been decommissioned. In addition, construction of the Kusile and

Medupi power stations and the expansion of coal mining have had direct negative impacts on affected communities as well as on the implementation of other SDGs (such as SDG 6.1 on access to clean water and SDG 11.6 on clean cities).⁸ As these are long-term infrastructure investments – both plants will have to run until 2050 to be profitable – path-dependent sustainability challenges arise.

JETPs to support implementation of SDG 7?

South Africa is paying for its failure to invest earlier in renewable energy – despite the positive prospects. Currently, coal accounts for around 70 percent of the energy supply.⁹ In a study from 2020, IRENA predicts that the country could “realistically and cost-effectively, supply 49% of its electricity from renewables by 2030, nearly a third higher than the share to be expected from current plans and policies”.¹⁰ Meanwhile, the electricity market in South Africa is seeing dynamic change. In 2021, the Department of Mineral and Energy Resources (DMRE) raised the threshold for Independent Power Producers (IPPs) from 1 MW to 100 MW, allowing them to feed more electricity into the grid without a licence. At the beginning of 2023, the South African removed the requirement to hold a licence completely. In the meantime, many companies and private households that can afford to do so are already converting to photovoltaic. The government has announced investment programmes to support this private transition. However, this will not help the majority of South Africans – especially the lower-income strata – who will not be able to cover the costs privately. They rely on the government to ensure a reliable (and sustainable) power supply.

In 2021, at COP26 in Glasgow, a consortium of multilateral donors (Germany, France, the United Kingdom, the European Union and the United States) pledged investment packages for South Africa’s energy transformation. The South African “Just Energy Transition Partnership” (JETP) is the first of its kind and is now being discussed as a model for other countries

5 Statistics South Africa, “Statistics South Africa”, 2022, <https://www.statssa.gov.za/> (accessed 27 April 2023).

6 Stephen Grootes, “12 Years of Load Shedding – Written, Starring and Directed by the ANC”, *Daily Maverick* (online), 9 December 2019, <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2019-12-09-twelve-years-of-load-shedding-written-starring-directed-by-the-anc/> (accessed 26 April 2023).

7 Melanie Müller and Armin Paasch, *When Only the Coal Counts: German Co-Responsibility for Human Rights in the South African Coal Sector* (Johannesburg: ActionAid South Africa, Misereor and MACUA, 2016), https://www.misereor.org/fileadmin/user_upload_misereor/publication/en/extractive_industries/study_when-only-the-coal-counts-south-african-coal-sector.pdf (accessed 26 April 2023).

8 Ibid.

9 International Energy Agency, “South Africa”, 2023, <https://www.iea.org/countries/south-africa> (accessed 26 April 2023).

10 International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA), *Renewable Energy Prospects: South Africa* (Abu Dhabi, 2020), <https://www.irena.org/Publications/2020/Jun/Renewable-Energy-Prospects-South-Africa> (accessed 26 April 2023).

such as Indonesia, Vietnam, Senegal and India.¹¹ The investment plan, which the South African government presented at COP27 a year later, sets three priorities for 2023–2027: firstly, the phase-down of coal-fired power generation in South Africa and the expansion of renewable energies; secondly, the expansion of the production of electric vehicles, initially for export and, in the future, also for domestic use; and thirdly, the expansion of hydrogen production.¹²

The dimension of social justice is a central element. The JETP investment plan recognizes “the direct and indirect impact that the energy transition has on livelihoods, workers and communities”.¹³ While South Africa’s investment plan has a very strong – and important – focus on job creation, it missed the opportunity to include the more holistic approach of the 2030 Agenda and SDGs, including “leaving no one behind”. It does include concrete plans to implement structural change in the coal-mining region of Mpumalanga – and thus to compensate for the job losses expected as coal is phased down. The chapters on electric vehicles (EVs) and hydrogen production also focus on job creation. However, the investment plan neglects other SDG targets. For example, the production of EVs focuses in particular on individual transport whereas SDG 11.2 calls for “access to safe, affordable, accessible and sustainable transport systems for all ... notably by expanding public transport, with special attention to the needs of those in vulnerable situations, women, children, persons with disabilities and older persons”.

State capture: Good governance as a pre-condition for success

Reforms of the state-owned enterprise Eskom are urgently needed and a central prerequisite for a sustainable energy supply. Here, the fight against corrup-

tion is fundamental, both in the relevant ministries and in Eskom itself, (SDG 16.5). This is in line with one of the proposed policy interventions in South Africa’s 2019 VNR report, to “decisively deal with the effect of state capture in the country’s vital public institutions”. The current government under Cyril Ramaphosa has taken certain steps to fight corruption in recent years. But progress on reforming Eskom in particular has been slow, as demonstrated by the resignation of Eskom CEO André de Ruyter (who had accused Eskom and government officials of corruption). He confirmed what South African newspapers had already pointed out repeatedly: corrupt structures within the ANC itself are a significant problem. A number of ANC politicians have been actively trying to prevent an energy transformation in recent years, partly because they have stakes in mining or the downstream industries.¹⁴

Great concern about job losses in the coal-mining regions makes it particularly easy to politicize the issue of energy transformation, abusing the legitimate concerns of the poor to protect the vested interests of major industries and the beneficiaries of South Africa’s so-called mineral energy complex.¹⁵ But the failure to implement major structural reforms risks increasing the social divide even further. The next national elections are scheduled for 2024, when it is likely that the ANC will lose its absolute majority for the first time since the end of apartheid. While the prospect of a coalition government offers an opportunity for healthy party competition and a more mature democratic system, this development is unlikely to improve political stability. The experience with coalition governments at the local level points to great instability and power struggles rather than cooperation and fair competition for meaningful political solutions.¹⁶

Such a development would be extremely dangerous, given that the energy sector is just one example of how state capture and corruption prevent compre-

11 Katrin Kramer, *Making the Leap: The Need for Just Energy Transition Partnerships to Support Leapfrogging Fossil Gas to a Clean Renewable Energy Future*, Policy Brief (Winnipeg: International Institute for Sustainable Development, November 2022), <https://www.iisd.org/system/files/2022-11/just-energy-transition-partnerships.pdf> (accessed 26 April 2023).

12 Presidency of the Republic of South Africa, *South Africa’s Just Energy Transition Investment Plan (JET IP) for the Initial Period 2023–2027* (Pretoria, November 2022), <https://www.thepresidency.gov.za/content/south-africa%27s-just-energy-transition-investment-plan-jet-ip-2023-2027> (accessed 26 April 2023).

13 Ibid., 1.

14 ETV, “My Guest Tonight with Annika Laarsen”, *YouTube*, 24 February 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6gF2dYQ-NdM> (accessed 26 April 2023).

15 Yinka Omorogbe and Ada Okoye Ordor, *Ending Africa’s Energy Deficit and the Law: Achieving Sustainable Energy for All in Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

16 “New Laws Proposed for Coalition Governments in South Africa”, *BusinessTech* (online), 29 March 2023, <https://businesstech.co.za/news/government/676125/new-laws-proposed-for-coalition-governments-in-south-africa/> (accessed 26 April 2023).

hensive SDG successes. The same problems can be seen in other sectors, such as water, transport and the health sector.¹⁷ Granting political priority to good governance would be a key requirement for building a reliable infrastructure that in turn forms the basis for successful implementation of the SDGs.

Conclusion

The South African case illustrates the importance of national and local governance issues for the successful implementation of the SDG agenda. At the same time, external shocks like the pandemic – or more precisely, the failure of global governance to manage the pandemic equitably – had negative impacts that continue to reverberate. This is the case not only for South Africa, but for many other African countries, which are still struggling with the aftermath of the pandemic¹⁸ – and are now additionally being hit by the economic impact of Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine. There is great concern in these countries that international donors’ attention will be primarily focused on the conflict in Europe in the coming years.

Even if donors avoid doing so, it is no easy task for external actors to directly influence good governance in partner countries. German development cooperation is already supporting South Africa’s National Anti-Corruption Strategy, which was adopted in 2020, and is also active in supporting the transparent and responsible use of public finances.¹⁹ Civil society organizations play an integral part in these arrangements and should also be supported.

¹⁷ Mike Muller, *Money Down the Drain: Corruption in South Africa’s Water Sector* (Johannesburg: Water Integrity Network and Corruption Watch, March 2020), https://www.corruptionwatch.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/water-report_2020-single-pages-Final.pdf (accessed 26 April 2023); Riann Rheder, “Corruption in the Public Health Sector in South Africa: A Global Bioethical Perspective”, *South African Journal of Bioethics and Law* 14, no. 3 (2021), doi: 10.7196/SAJBL.2021.v14i3.693.

¹⁸ United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), *Analyzing Long-Term Socio-Economic Impacts of COVID-19 in African Contexts* (New York: UNDP’s Regional Bureau for Africa, 2021), <https://www.undp.org/africa/long-term-socio-economic-impacts-covid-19-african-contexts> (accessed 26 April 2023).

¹⁹ Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), “South Africa”, 31 December 2022, <https://www.giz.de/en/worldwide/312.html> (accessed 26 April 2023).

In recent years, many civil society organizations and critical journalists have investigated corruption in South Africa, and have also contributed to a broader understanding of the lack of implementation of the SDG agenda in various sectors. While their role is crucial, they face a variety of challenges. A report of the South African civil society working group criticizes that “all levels of government lack awareness about how the right to information contributes to the implementation of the wider SDG agenda. Additionally, some departments regard access to information as a threat, not as an exercise of right”.²⁰ In order for civil society organizations to fulfil their watchdog function, these issues should be given special attention by international donors when supporting South African institutions.

Germany and other countries must take the Zondo Commission’s findings seriously and support prosecution in these cases.

With regard to the successful implementation of the JETP, the consortium of donors should focus on continuous monitoring and evaluation in order to ensure that funds are used adequately. Local government’s susceptibility to corruption should be given special attention. And, as in any SDG partnership, donors must also take a critical look at companies in their own countries. Investigations of state capture have shown that German and other international companies have also profited from corruption. Germany and other countries must take the Zondo Commission’s findings seriously and support prosecution in these cases. They must also draw lessons from these experiences and implement safeguards for future cooperation.

²⁰ Namhla Mniki, ed., *Citizens’ Report South Africa: Ensuring an Inclusive Reporting Process for HLPF 2019* (South African Civil Society Working Group on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, African Monitor, July 2019), 45, <https://action4sd.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/South-Africa-VNR-report-2019.pdf> (accessed 26 April 2023).

Muriel Asseburg

State of Palestine: No Sustainable Development in a Divided Polity under Occupation

The State of Palestine's engagement with the SDG process, including the VNR, illustrates the central dilemma facing the Palestinian leadership. While it seeks to join international conventions, organizations and processes in order to achieve recognition and showcase its statehood, its lack of sovereignty and control over territory, borders, and resources and its dependence on transfers and donor aid leave it struggling to live up to the ensuing commitments. Therefore, rather than underlining Palestinian statehood, the Palestinian leadership's approach to the SDG process highlights Palestinian ambitions and at the same time reveals the constraints to sustainable development that result, first and foremost, from the Israeli occupation regime.

While Palestine has registered some progress in improving development indicators, such as maternal and infant mortality rates, literacy, school enrolment (not to be confused with quality of education), vaccination rates, etc., it is by no means on a trajectory to sustainable development. In fact, in recent years, Palestinians have witnessed de-development in a number of crucial areas, particularly in the Gaza Strip. Palestinian officials have rightly pointed to the lack of sovereignty and the restrictions imposed by Israel's fifty-six-year occupation and the blockade of the Gaza Strip as obstacles to progress. Yet, the intra-Palestinian divisions, deteriorating governance and a trend of reducing donor funding and repeated withholding of transfers have also contributed to a disabling environment. It is absolutely clear that the hurdles to sustainable development in Palestine are first and foremost political. At the same time, all actors involved (above all, the Palestinian Authority, UN agencies and the donor community) have sought to stabilize the status quo rather than focusing on a transformative approach to development.

De-development rather than progress

The Palestinian leadership has faced significant challenges in making progress on basic SDG indicators. As the relevant documents show,¹ the Palestinian Authority (PA) has failed to reduce poverty, hunger and stark inequalities (in particular between the West Bank and Gaza),² boost economic growth and employment, provide adequate basic services such as energy and water, and build strong institutions and a peaceful environment. On the contrary, the relevant SDG indicators point to de-development rather than progress, especially in the Gaza Strip.³

1 State of Palestine, *Palestinian National Voluntary Review on the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda*, June 2018, <https://hlpf.un.org/sites/default/files/vnrs/2021/20024VNR2018PalestineNEWYORK.pdf> (accessed 12 April 2023); State of Palestine, Prime Minister's Office, *Palestinian National Voluntary Review on the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda in 2020: Summary Report*, September 2021, <https://www.palgov.ps/files/server/2022/SDGs%20Progress%20Report%202020%20-%20English.pdf> (accessed 12 April 2023); United Nations Country Team, *United Nations Common Country Analysis for the Occupied Palestinian Territory*, August 2022 (pre-publication draft), https://palestine.un.org/sites/default/files/2022-09/United%20Nations%20Common%20Country%20Analysis%20for%20the%20Occupied%20Palestinian%20Territory_16_August_2022.pdf (accessed 12 April 2023).

2 Such inequalities also exist within the West Bank. For vulnerable population groups, see United Nations Country Team, *United Nations Common Country Analysis* (see note 1), 70–92.

3 The COVID-19 pandemic had significant and direct negative effects across the first five SDGs (poverty, hunger, health, education and equality) and SDG 8 (economic growth and decent work). For details, see Palestine Economic Policy Research Institute (MAS) and United Nations Development Programme, *The Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on the Sustainable Development Goals in the State of Palestine* (2021), <https://>

To give just a few examples: Poverty (SDG 1) has risen,⁴ with food insecurity (SDG 2) increasing in parallel.⁵ Basic services, such as water and energy (SDGs 6 and 7), have not improved. Water is still scarce in parts of the West Bank. Worse still, some 96 percent of the water pumped from the Gaza aquifer is undrinkable⁶ and only 4 percent of Gaza's households have access to safe drinking water.⁷ While employment (SDG 8) has recovered somewhat since the pandemic, overall unemployment has not been reduced. This has particularly affected Palestine's large and growing young population.⁸ Palestinian women have one of the lowest labour force participation rates in the world⁹ despite having one of the highest primary and secondary enrolment rates in the MENA region. Due to the lack of sustainable growth, Palestinians remain highly dependent on international aid.¹⁰

mas.ps/en/publications/4509.html (accessed 12 April 2023). For a more general assessment of SDG progress see United Nations Country Team, *United Nations Common Country Analysis* (see note 1), 33–68.

4 From 2016 to 2020, poverty increased by 7 percentage points to almost 29 percent of the overall population. The armed confrontations in May 2021 led to a further rise of poverty in Gaza, pushing some 59 percent of Gazans under the poverty line (53 percent in 2017). *Ibid.*, 33.

5 In 2021, some 40 percent of the population (up from about one-third in 2016) and almost two-thirds of all Gazans were food insecure. *Ibid.*, 36.

6 *Ibid.*, 22.

7 Around a quarter of child deaths in the Gaza Strip, are caused by water-borne diseases. *Ibid.*, 59. Gaza lacks electrical power for up to 20 hours per day. *Ibid.*, 77.

8 In 2023, some two-thirds of Palestinians were under 30 years of age, and population growth was high at 2.4 percent per annum. Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, "Key Indicators", 2023, https://pcbs.gov.ps/site/lang_en/881/default.aspx#Population (accessed 12 April 2023). From 2015 to 2021 unemployment rose from some 23 percent to 26 percent; in the Gaza Strip, it rose from 35 percent to 47 percent. In 2021, the youth unemployment rate (age 15–24 years) reached almost 42 percent (69 percent in the Gaza Strip and 28 percent in the West Bank; 37 percent among young men and 65% among young women). Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, *Palestinian Labour Force Survey 2021* (April 2022), 50–54, <https://pcbs.gov.ps/Downloads/book2605.pdf> (accessed 12 April 2023).

9 The female labour force participation rate was 17.2 percent. Palestinian Central Bureau of Statics, *Key Indicators* (see note 8).

10 In 2022, some 63 percent of Gaza residents and 21 percent of West Bank residents were projected to require some

The worst developments have been in the field of peace, justice and strong institutions (SDG 16). Palestinians experience serious human rights violations by Israel, the PA and the de facto government in Gaza. Palestinian governance has deteriorated further in recent years due to presidential measures that have dismantled checks and balances on executive power and restricted the space for civil society engagement, democratic participation and dissent.¹¹ Increasing violence by Israeli settlers and the Israeli military has also hit the Palestinians hard. Neither the PA nor the de facto government in Gaza is able to protect Palestinians from these forms of violence and displacement. Also, the Palestinian security forces lost control of cities in the northern West Bank in 2022, as new armed groups emerged outside the established Palestinian factions.¹² 2021 saw renewed armed conflict in Gaza (as well as in Jerusalem and Israel's mixed cities); 2022 turned out to be the deadliest year in the West Bank since the end of the Second Intifada. Late 2022 ushered in an Israeli coalition government intent on asserting Jewish supremacy, long-term civilian control of the West Bank (annexation in all but name), and winning "the battle for Area C" (i.e. the 60 percent of the West Bank under direct Israeli control) by accelerating the settlement enterprise.¹³

form of humanitarian assistance. United Nations Country Team, *United Nations Common Country Analysis* (see note 1), 71.

11 For example, the Palestinian Legislative Council was dissolved in 2018, and in 2022 the president established a Supreme Council of Judicial Bodies and Authorities under his auspices. Long overdue elections for the Legislative Council, the presidency and the PLO were scheduled for 2021 but called off at the last minute.

12 See, for example, Dalia Hatuqa, "The New Palestinian Resistance", *Foreign Policy*, 29 March 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/03/29/palestine-israel-west-bank-armed-groups-huwara-lions-den-jenin-brigade/> (accessed 12 April 2023).

13 See Carrie Keller-Lynn/Michael Bachner, "Judicial Reform, Boosting Jewish Identity: The New Coalition's Policy Guidelines", *Times of Israel*, 28 December 2022, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/judicial-reform-boosting-jewish-identity-the-new-coalitions-policy-guidelines/> (accessed 12 April 2023); OFEK, The Israeli Center for Public Affairs et al., *Policy Paper: What Israel's 37th Government's Guiding Principles and Coalition Agreements Mean for the West Bank* (January 2023), <https://www.ofekcenter.org.il/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/what-israels-37th-governments-guiding-principles-and-coalition-agreements-mean-for-the-West-Bank-Jan-2023.pdf> (accessed 12 April 2023).

A disabling environment

The Palestinian leadership has emphasized that progress towards achieving the SDGs has been hampered primarily by the effects of the Israeli occupation regime and related policies. These include the fragmentation of Palestinian territory, the blockade of Gaza, the denial of access to resources in Area C, restrictions on movement and trade, construction of the separation barrier deep inside the West Bank, and Israel's demolitions (both war-related and punitive) of Palestinian infrastructure, housing and development projects.

Occupation policies are the main, but by no means the only, impediment to sustainable development in the Palestinian territories.

Indeed, a body of research shows that occupation policies are the main impediment to sustainable development in the occupied Palestinian territories. For example, a 2013 World Bank report projected Palestinian GDP to increase by as much as 35 percent, or US\$ 4.15 billion, if Palestinian businesses (particularly in agriculture, minerals, mining, construction, tourism and telecommunications) were allowed to develop in Area C.¹⁴ A study prepared by UNCTAD estimated the cost of closures and other Israeli occupation measures in the West Bank between 2000 and 2019 at \$58 billion.¹⁵ In the Gaza Strip, the Israeli closure regime has led to economic decline and de-industrialization, with recurring armed conflict causing additional direct damage and loss to the population and economy.¹⁶ International humanitarian

14 Orhan Niksic, Nur Nasser Eddin and Massimiliano Cali, *Area C and the Future of the Palestinian Economy*, World Bank Report (Washington D.C., July 2014), 1–7, <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/entities/publication/97d5c435-c663-598d-bf9d-c4d186cf3082> (accessed 12 April 2023).

15 UNCTAD, *The Economic Costs of the Israeli Occupation for the Palestinian People: Arrested Development and Poverty in the West Bank* (Geneva, 2021), 32, https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/gdsapp2021d2_en.pdf (accessed 12 April 2023).

16 For example, the May 2021 confrontations are estimated to have caused US\$75–90 million in damage to Gaza's productive economy (agriculture, industry, trade and services) and financial sector. Overall economic losses amounted to US\$105–190 million. United Nations Country Team, *United Nations Common Country Analysis* (see note 1), 51.

assistance, including through UNRWA, can temporarily alleviate the social impact of such losses, but cannot substitute for a robust and sustainable development path.

Palestinian reliance on transfers from Israel – which make up 65–75 percent of the Palestinian budget – and international aid has also constrained the PA's ability to spend on development.¹⁷ International donations have fallen significantly in recent years, and Israeli transfers have repeatedly been stopped or reduced to put pressure on the PA.¹⁸ The outcome is a fiscal crisis that has forced the PA to dramatically reduce (or partially withhold) public-sector salaries and cut development spending.¹⁹ UNRWA, which plays a crucial role in providing services and work opportunities for Palestinian refugees, has also had to cut salaries and assistance in the face of reduced funding.

The situation has been further exacerbated by the division of the Palestinian territories into two entities with different governments in the aftermath of the 2006 parliamentary elections and the ensuing infighting between the main factions, Fatah and Hamas. There are now two competing authoritarian governments in Ramallah (the Fatah-led PA) and Gaza City (the Hamas-led de facto government), both focused primarily on maintaining their own power rather than pursuing a sustainable development agenda or a needs-oriented approach. The combination of a lack of achievements (most notably an end to the occupation), increasingly repressive policies, and a percep-

17 The 1994 Paris Protocol established procedures for Israel to collect (and transfer) customs, VAT, and excise taxes on behalf of the PA. In 2021, some two-thirds of the PA's total revenues were such clearance revenues, only one-third were domestic revenues. Amal Ahmad, "The PA's Revenue Structure and Israel's Containment Strategy", *al-Shabaka*, 15 February 2023, <https://al-shabaka.org/commentaries/the-pas-revenue-structure-and-israels-containment-strategy/> (accessed 12 April 2023).

18 International aid to the PA budget stood at 5–10 percent in 2019–2021, down from around 30 percent in 1997–2017 and far short of covering the PA's deficit. *Ibid.*

19 United Nations Country Team, *United Nations Common Country Analysis* (see note 1), 17ff. In 2019/20, the transfer of clearance revenues became entangled in political disputes over issues such as PA payments to families of martyrs and to prisoners, with transfers suspended for many months in both years. In 2020/21, the EU withheld aid to the PA over allegations of incitement in Palestinian schoolbooks, further exacerbating the PA's financial crisis.

tion of pervasive corruption and cronyism has been devastating to the legitimacy of the Palestinian leadership. The social contract between the PA and the Palestinian population has steadily eroded as Palestinians who had hoped that the PA would form the nucleus of a Palestinian state now see it mainly as a tool to prevent Palestinian sovereignty. Polls show that Palestinians overwhelmingly perceive the PA as a subcontractor of the occupation regime rather than an entity that speaks for Palestinians and defends their rights.²⁰

A missed opportunity

Participants in the Palestinian national team established in 2016 to follow up on SDG progress for the VNR reports broadly agree that the body has clear terms of reference and a useful structure, including key ministries involved in SDG implementation as well as representatives of civil society and the private sector. In addition, a working group encompassing grassroots organizations was established for each of the SDGs. The SDG consultation mechanism could thus have served as a channel for devising inclusive, participatory and transformative policies and building a responsive institution.

However, cooperation has been hampered by a lack of trust between officials and civil society representatives as well as a lack of strategic and transformative development thinking on the part of all involved. The actors have all pursued their own agendas, which have been geared towards retaining power (PA) or preventing destabilization (UN agencies, donors) rather than focusing on transforming the disabling political context and the approach to development. Also, while the PA did integrate the SDGs into Palestine's 2017–2022 National Policy Agenda, it has lacked the level of disaggregated data required for strategic thinking and measuring progress. The VNR process has thus turned out to be a missed opportunity for an inclusive, participatory and results-oriented approach to policy-making and reporting.²¹

²⁰ Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, *Public Opinion Poll No. 87* (Ramallah, 14 March 2023), <https://www.pcpsr.org/en/node/938> (accessed 12 April 2023).

²¹ Officials accuse civil society representatives of focusing on criticizing the PA rather than contributing constructively to the official reports; civil society representatives accuse officials of not engaging seriously in dialogue and consulting with them only pro-forma. At the same time, and despite

Conclusions

As the 2022 UN Common Country Analysis emphasizes: “The most direct route to achieving the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs remains a negotiated solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the end to the Israeli occupation.”²² This route is today effectively blocked, firstly by an Israeli government that rejects a two-state settlement and has taken steps tantamount to annexing the West Bank,²³ and secondly by the persistence of intra-Palestinian divisions. Even limited progress towards sustainable development is unlikely in the current context of intensifying conflict dynamics and as long as the principal donors prioritize maintaining the status quo – a one-state reality with unequal rights²⁴ and the Gaza blockade – rather than addressing the key barriers to progress on the SDGs, which are occupation policies that violate international law and infringe on the Palestinians' right to development; the intra-Palestinian division; and the PA's increasingly autocratic rule. That also means that the PA will continue to lack the good governance, effective institutions and basic human rights guarantees required for successful implementation of the 17 SDGs.

Similarly, the US and European no-contact policy towards Hamas prevents it from contributing effectively to overcoming the intra-Palestinian divide and addressing the de-development of Gaza and governance issues there. As long as the international donor community continues to prioritize “returning an

training by UN agencies (ESCWA, UNDP), civil society representatives often lack awareness of the SDGs and the requirements of strategic policy planning. This also makes it difficult for them to publish shadow reports or to hold the PA, UN agencies and donors to account on SDG implementation. Author's online conversations with representatives of the PA and civil society involved in the SDG process, February/March 2023.

²² United Nations Country Team, *United Nations Common Country Analysis* (see note 1), 101.

²³ The Israeli Law Professors' Forum for Democracy, *Position Paper No 24: Implications of the Agreement Subordinating the Civil Administration to the Additional Minister in the Ministry of Defense* (5 March 2023), <https://www.lawprofsforum.org/post/implications-of-the-agreement-subordinating-the-civil-administration-to-the-additional-minister-24> (accessed 12 April 2023).

²⁴ Michael Barnett, Nathan J. Brown, Marc Lynch and Shibley Telhami, eds., *The One State Reality: What Is Israel/Palestine?* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2023).

internationally-recognized Palestinian government to the Gaza Strip”²⁵ instead of focusing on ending the collective punishment of Gaza’s population, not even modest progress should be expected there.

Progress can only be achieved if all actors involved focus on dismantling the political barriers to achieving the SDGs.

With key donors continuing to invest in the status quo, even increased funding will not enable the Palestinian leadership to embark on a path of sustainable development. The only approach that can possibly generate progress is one where all involved (from the Palestinian leadership to UN agencies to international donors) centre their approaches on transformational development and focus on dismantling the political barriers to achieving the SDGs.

²⁵ United Nations Country Team, *United Nations Common Country Analysis* (see note 1), 102.

Gerrit Kurtz

Sudan: The Legitimization Strategies of Violence Entrepreneurs

Sudan faces huge challenges to implementation of the SDGs: political instability following decades of authoritarian rule, armed conflict, a skewed economy in deep macroeconomic crisis, and the impacts of climate change. Consequently, Sudan is among states making the slowest progress towards the SDGs, with an SDG index ranking of 159 out of 163.¹

Sudan's VNR report from 2022 does not pretend anything different. It acknowledges the country's significant development shortcomings, the lack of sufficient current data and the state's very weak implementation capacity in virtually all relevant areas. This apparent honesty is both selective and strategic, however. It omits the single most important factor keeping the Sudanese poor, namely the dominance of the security sector in politics and the economy. Appearing to care for the civilian population is a deliberate legitimization strategy on the part of the authors of the report, which was compiled by the Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning (MoFEP). Its head, Sudan's Minister of Finance Geibril Ibrahim, is a former rebel, an Islamist and a supporter of the military coup of October 2021. Any international support for sustainable development in Sudan thus needs to adopt an adaptive approach that includes peacebuilding and diplomacy.

Political instability and Sudan's violent entrepreneurs

Pretending to promote broad-based development when actually engaging in politics that undermine it has a long tradition in Sudan, particularly among its

armed movements. Peace agreements are full of normative language, as are the pronouncements of elite negotiators purporting to serve the interests of marginalized populations in the periphery. Power- and rent-sharing arrangements are the core objectives of Sudan's violent entrepreneurs.² These include regular security forces, paramilitary forces, irregular militias and armed movements, who compete or cooperate on the basis of temporary shared interests.³

SDG implementation came to a halt in recent years as Sudan experienced considerable upheaval and lacked effective government. The breakdown culminated in military conflict in April 2023. Country-wide demonstrations in 2019, provided the motivation for a palace coup that ousted Omar al-Bashir after nearly thirty years in power. A civilian-military transitional government took the reins in August 2019, led by the former UN official Abdalla Hamdok. The military and security forces retained influence in the Sovereign Council (the collective presidency) and in security-related cabinet portfolios. In October 2020, the government signed the Juba Peace Agreement (JPA) with thirteen armed movements across the country. They joined the government in February 2021, and Geibril Ibrahim became minister of finance.

Having supported the military in sidelining civilians, he and fellow JPA signatories remained in office when security forces arrested Prime Minister Hamdok and some of his ministers on 25 October 2021.

Since the coup, Sudan has had no fully functioning government. The military did not replace civilian ministers who resigned, instead promoting undersecretaries to become acting ministers. General Fattah

1 Jeffrey D. Sachs, Guillaume Lafortune, Christian Kroll and Finn Woelm, *Sustainable Development Report 2022: From Crisis to Sustainable Development: The SDGs as Roadmap to 2030 and Beyond* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 15.

2 Alex de Waal, *The Real Politics of the Horn of Africa: Money, War and the Business of Power* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2015).

3 Gerrit Kurtz, *The Spoilers of Darfur*, SWP Comment 53/2022 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, September 2022), doi: 10.18449/2022C53.

Abdel al-Burhan, the head of the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and chair of the Sovereign Council, claimed that he had seized power only to “correct” the path of the popular revolution that started in December 2018.⁴ When the military realized they could not succeed, Burhan announced he would be ready to hand over power to a civilian government that was either elected or created by “consensus”.⁵ On 5 December 2022, after months of behind-the-scenes negotiations, a framework agreement was finalized between the military and a coalition of civilian groups. Geibril and his allies rejected the framework agreement because it included a review of the earlier peace agreement, which guaranteed them their positions.⁶ Negotiations on outstanding issues for a final agreement escalated into armed conflict between the SAF and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) shortly before a planned handover to a civilian government in April 2023.

The VNR’s selective treatment of development challenges

The preparation of Sudan’s second VNR fell in the period after the October 2021 coup.⁷ This put the drafters in the interesting position of describing the achievements of a transitional government for whose demise their military allies were responsible. The fact that Sudan decided nevertheless to submit the VNR in such a volatile situation points to the main purpose of the report: courting international favour for an illegitimate government. The government also wanted to restart international financial support and debt relief, as highlighted in the VNR’s opening statement and again in the conclusion.

4 Sami Abdelhalim Saeed, “Sudan’s Constitutional Crisis: Dissecting the Coup Declaration”, *Just Security* (Online Forum), 3 November 2021, <https://www.justsecurity.org/78848/sudans-constitutional-crisis-dissecting-the-coup-declaration/> (accessed 28 February 2023).

5 “Sudan’s Army Won’t Take Part in Political Talks, Leader Says”, *Reuters*, 5 July 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/sudans-burhan-says-army-withdraw-political-talks-2022-07-04/> (accessed 28 February 2023).

6 “‘Democratic Bloc’ Rejects Political Settlement Ending Sudan’s Crisis”, *Sudan Tribune*, 2 December 2022, <https://sudantribune.com/article267719/> (accessed 28 February 2023).

7 Sudan had announced that it would submit the report in September 2021.

The main purpose of the report lies in courting international favour for an illegitimate government.

The report includes an initially perhaps surprisingly open acknowledgement of Sudan’s development challenges. It describes Sudan’s three-digit inflation and negative economic growth and mentions the escalation of “tribal and intercommunal violence”.⁸ Given that the process was still ongoing when the report was submitted, it can only acknowledge that “consultations with assistance from the international and regional partners to resolve the political crises and continue the path towards peace and democratic transition” were taking place.⁹

The report’s description of Sudan’s (lack of) achievements in ending extreme poverty (SDG1) demonstrates important characteristics that apply across its treatment of the Agenda 2030. It acknowledges the dire situation, citing data where available. On poverty, the only source is a projection based on the government’s last national household budget and poverty survey from 2014/15, which was prepared in the context of the transitional government’s work with the IMF and the World Bank on a poverty reduction strategy paper. According to the VNR, poverty increased to 64.2 percent in 2020, up from 46.5 percent in 2009.¹⁰ Even that could be an undercount according to the director of the then new Social Security Commission in 2020, who spoke of 77 percent of the population living on less than US\$1.90 per day.¹¹

The disparities in the poverty count underline the lack of reliable current data. The VNR report acknowledges that gap and notes that the lack of disaggregated current socio-economic data makes it very difficult to identify those most affected by the lack of development and thus ensure that no one is left behind, a core objective of the Agenda 2030.¹²

The absence of regionally disaggregated economic data is not simply a consequence of the lack of state capacity, but is rooted in wilful government policy

8 Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning (Sudan), *Voluntary National Review for 2022* (Khartoum, 2 June 2022), 7.

9 *Ibid.*, 8.

10 *Ibid.*, 21.

11 “77 Per Cent of Sudanese Live in Poverty”, *Radio Dabanga*, 2021, <https://www.dabangasudan.org/en/all-news/article/77-per-cent-of-all-sudanese-live-in-poverty> (accessed 28 February 2023).

12 Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning, *Voluntary National Review for 2022* (see note 8), 16.

going back to colonial times. The British colonial administration wanted “to avoid publishing numbers about Sudan’s economy for fear of making regional inequities obvious to the public. Rather than buck this trend, subsequent post-independence regimes followed suit”, write Matthew Benson and Musan Alneel on the basis of their study of Sudan’s tax system.¹³

The transitional government had identified a strategy to reduce poverty, which the VNR presents as a response to the dire situation. The heart of that government’s development strategy – prepared in conjunction with its international partners – was abolition of the fuel subsidy and floating of the Sudanese currency. The short-term pain was to be alleviated by a broad cash-transfer programme funded by donors. The Sudan Family Support Programme or *Thamarat* was to provide up to 80 percent of the population with the equivalent of US\$5 per month. Its roll-out was delayed because the US government first needed to delist Sudan from its list of State Sponsors of Terrorism. Under enormous economic pressure, the Sudanese government cut the subsidies – resulting in huge price rises for transport and food. A pilot of the *Thamarat* project was launched in February 2021, but quickly stopped after the European Union, the United States, Germany and the World Bank halted their funding following the October coup, depriving 9.2 million registered beneficiaries of future assistance.¹⁴

As well as send a message to the coup leaders, donors wanted to prevent misuse of funds. International funding had flowed through a multi-donor trust fund into the coffers of the Sudanese Central Bank. The influx of foreign currency stabilized Sudan’s reserves, allowing the government to finance imports of food and other commodities, and thus stabilized the fragile transitional government. Aborting funding for the trust fund and thus for the *Thamarat* programme was intended to avoid propping up the coup authorities, whose ministry of finance also controlled the Central Bank.

¹³ Matthew Benson and Musan Alneel, *Supporting Sudan’s Democratic Transition Through Revenue Transparency* (Washington: The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy, 7 February 2023), <https://timep.org/2023/02/07/supporting-sudans-democratic-transition-through-revenue-transparency/> (accessed 28 February 2023).

¹⁴ UN Secretary-General, *Situation in the Sudan and the Activities of the United Nations Integrated Transition Assistance Mission in the Sudan*, Report of the Secretary-General S/2022/172 (1 March 2021), para. 23.

The government’s narrative ignores the most significant obstacle to inclusive and sustainable development: the dominance of the security sector.

In short, the VNR describes Sudan’s dire situation relatively accurately, in a way that serves the interests of the government and in particular the armed movement – led ministry of finance.¹⁵ The report locates the causes of the problems in the long rule of the former Bashir regime, against which the armed movement fought and which the coup government purported to overcome in accordance with the Sudanese revolution. The programmes and projects of the transitional government of 2019 to 2021 are presented as still providing a response to this legacy. This narrative might suggest that all that is needed is for Sudan’s international partners to resume their funding. That, however, would be to ignore the most significant obstacle to inclusive and sustainable development: the dominance of the security sector, and the political system it has created to serve its interests.

Conflict and military repression as central development challenges

Sudan has been ruled by authoritarian military leaders for most of its post-independence history. Successive governments created an exploitative system based on the extraction of resources from the peripheries for the benefit of urban elites in the centre.¹⁶ Where populations resisted such extraction, governments deployed significant force to maintain the system. Sudan has experienced armed conflict for most of its history, with fighting and violence against civilians located almost exclusively in the peripheries.¹⁷

The Sudanese Armed Forces and other security actors became strongly engaged in the economy. This impeded the development of the private sector, but allowed the military to control vast swathes of the country’s resources and productive economy. Key

¹⁵ Geibril Ibrahim is also the head of the Justice and Equality Movement, an armed movement originally from Darfur.

¹⁶ Alex de Waal, *The Real Politics of the Horn of Africa* (see note 2).

¹⁷ One notable exception was an attack by JEM on Omdurman, Khartoum’s sister city across the Nile, in 2008. The fundamental change came with the heavy fighting between SAF and RSF that began on 15 April 2023.

stakeholders were appointed to positions of authority in exchange for their loyalty.

One of the armed movements formed in response to state violence was the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM), led by Geibril Ibrahim from 2012. Once a considerable military force, JEM largely disintegrated over peace talks with the government and was defeated by government forces and expelled from Darfur in 2015. After that, it had only a few hundred troops in South Sudan and Libya.¹⁸ The JPA gave JEM and other signatories a new lease of life.

Against this background, Sudan's 2022 VNR report serves a clear purpose. Both the coup government and Geibril personally have an incentive to emphasize their supposedly popular credentials, while distracting from their lack of legitimacy. Indeed, Geibril's own support base is now so narrow that he travelled to Darfur in January 2023 "under heavy protection" for fear of attacks from his own Zaghawa tribe.¹⁹ Any international aid would allow him to bolster his leadership ambitions, both across Sudan and within Darfur.

Implications for donor governments

Ensuring effective international support for accelerated SDG implementation is immensely challenging in a situation of armed conflict and state capture by violence entrepreneurs. Donors need to ensure that their aid does not strengthen – even inadvertently or indirectly – the extremely exploitative and extractive system keeping most Sudanese poor. At the same time, a highly risk-averse approach would essentially shift the burden to humanitarian aid. Some communities, for example in IDP camps, have received food aid for decades, keeping whole generations aid dependent.

Since the October 2021 coup, international development partners have started to reorientate. International officials repeatedly warned the military government that time was running out to access the funds and programmes that had been granted to

the transitional government but were blocked after the coup.²⁰ Sudan's debt relief process under the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries Initiative (HIPC) was effectively halted, as was progress on Sudan's poverty reduction process agreed with the World Bank and IMF.²¹

Even if a civilian government is finally formed, its absorption and implementation capacity will remain very limited. In the past, donors found it difficult to get the detailed applications and reports needed to fulfil their funding requirements. As a result, it was easier to plan around the state structures. While such a procedure allows projects to proceed for the benefit of civilian populations, it undermines the government's ownership and capacities. Any new government would need to revise or at least update the existing development planning documents.

Finally, the security sector will remain a significant impediment to any civilian government and to international donors willing to fund implementation of the SDGs. Supporting basic service delivery removes the government from its responsibility in that core area to some extent, especially when projects are implemented beyond government structures. International funding of schools, hospitals and utilities allows the government to continue spending large amounts of its own budget on the security sector and to maintain fiscal practices benefitting military-owned companies. Moreover, it is likely that the military will resist giving up its control of a large section of state-owned companies to a new civilian government; this was already a major sticking point during the 2019–2021 transitional government. Companies, banks and other entities owned or controlled by the paramilitary RSF may be even harder to transfer to civilian control. There is no transparency about their budgets and profits. As an indication of their wealth, the IMF reported a "non-transparent contribution of \$2 billion from security sector owned companies" into the state budget in 2020.²²

18 Chairperson of the African Union Commission and Secretary-General of the United Nations, *Special report on the strategic review of the African Union–United Nations Hybrid Operation in Darfur*, Report S/2017/437 (18 May 2017), para. 5.

19 "History Won't Repeat Itself", *Africa Confidential*, 19 January 2023, https://www.africa-confidential.com/article/id/14270/History_won%27t_repeat_itself (accessed 28 February 2023).

20 Volker Perthes, "Remarks to the UN Security Council", Security Council Briefing (New York, 24 May 2022), <https://unitams.unmissions.org/en/unitams-srsg-mr-volker-perthes-remarks-security-council-24-may-2022> (accessed 28 February 2023).

21 UN Secretary-General, *Situation in the Sudan and the Activities of the United Nations* (see note 14), para. 23.

22 International Monetary Fund, *Sudan 2019: Article IV Consultation Staff Report*, Country Report no. 20/72 (March 2020), 15.

The 2030 Agenda recommends more integrated approaches to sustainable development. In Sudan this would be a development approach that includes peacebuilding and humanitarian concerns (the “triple nexus”) and is guided by an adaptive political strategy.²³ An adaptive approach acknowledges complexity and uncertainty and thus allows for continuous monitoring, evaluation and learning processes above and beyond conventional project-based programming cycles. It could include, for example, small pilot projects with state-level or local governments, which could quickly be expanded or adjusted if they prove successful.

Recent research calls for a more fundamental rethink of development cooperation in conflict settings in general. Specifically, donors should take the existing coping mechanisms, perceptions and relationships of local communities more seriously in their programming decisions.²⁴ Unpacking the political economy of conflict-affected countries’ SDG reporting should be part of such reflections.

23 Cedric de Coning, “Adaptive Peacebuilding”, *International Affairs* 94, no. 2 (2018): 301 – 17.

24 Mareike Schomerus, *Lives amid Violence: Transforming Development in the Wake of Conflict* (London, New York and Oxford: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023).

Annex

Table 1 – Countries covered in this research paper

Country	VNRs (year) ^a	SDG Index Ranking ^b		Statement on SDGs by head of state ^b		Percentage of adults “very/somewhat familiar” with the SDGs ^c	World Bank Income Group ^d	Varieties of Democracy ^e		Fragile States Index ^f	
		2022	2023	2021/22	2022/23			Regime Type 2021	Liberal Democracy Index (of 179)	Score (of 120)	Rank (of 179)
Belarus	2017, 2022 (2025)	34	34	–	–	–	UMIC	Electoral autocracy	175	69.9	84
Brazil	2017	53	50	no	yes	32 %	UMIC	Electoral democracy	59	74.5	71
China	2016, 2021	56	63	yes	yes	52 %	UMIC	Closed autocracy	172	65.1	101
Egypt	2016, 2020, 2021	87	81	no	yes	–	LMIC	Electoral autocracy–	144	81.6	50
India	2017, 2020	121	112	no	no	–	LMIC	Electoral autocracy	93	74.1	73
Kenya	2017, 2020	118	123	no	yes	–	LMIC	Electoral autocracy+	83	87.8	35
Republic of Korea	2016	27	31	yes	yes	19 %	HIC	Liberal democracy	17	31.5	159
Russian Federation	2020	45	49	no	no	–	UMIC	Electoral autocracy	151	80.7	53
South Africa	2019	108	110	yes	no	27 %	UMIC	Electoral democracy	49	72.0	78
State of Palestine	2018	–	–	–	–	–	–	Electoral autocracy	136	87.9	34
Sudan	2018, 2022	159	160	–	–	–	LIC	Closed autocracy	157	106.2	7

Sources:

a UN DESA, “Countries Who Have Presented Their Voluntary National Reviews”, 2023, <https://hlpf.un.org/countries> (accessed 21 June 2023).

b *Sustainable Development Report 2022*: Jeffrey D. Sachs, Christian Kroll, Guillaume Lafortune, Grayson Fuller and Finn Woelm, *Sustainable Development Report 2022* (Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press, 2022), doi: 10.1017/9781009210058. Please note that this index ranking is not based on the full set of official SDG indicators and has several methodological flaws. See also: Xin Zhou and Mustafa Moinuddin, *Review of the SDG Index and Dashboards: An Example of Japan's Global Ranking Results* (Kanagawa: Institute for Global Environmental Strategies, December 2016), <https://www.iges.or.jp/en/pub/review-sdg-index-and-dashboards-example-japan/en> (accessed 7 June 2023). The State of Palestine is not listed in the index ranking. For its annual report, the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) also conducts a study to determine whether the surveyed countries have reaffirmed their political leadership and commitment to the SDGs in an official speech or statement by the head of state (president or prime minister) in the past 12 months. While this is a rather weak proxy indicator, it still fits what we are trying to address.

Sustainable Development Report 2023: Jeffrey D. Sachs, Guillaume Lafortune, Grayson Fuller and Eamon Drumm, *Implementing the SDG Stimulus: Sustainable Development Report 2023*. Paris: SDSN (Dublin: Dublin University Press, 2023), doi: 10.25546/102924.

c *IPSOS Survey 2019*: Nicolas Boyon, “Awareness of United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals Is Highest in Emerging Countries”, *Ipsos*, 23 September 2019, <https://www.ipsos.com/en/awareness-united-nations-sustainable-development-goals-highest-emerging-countries> (accessed 7 June 2023).

d World Bank, “World Bank Country and Lending Groups”, 2023, <https://datahelpdesk.worldbank.org/knowledgebase/articles/906519-world-bank-country-and-lending-groups>, (accessed 22 June 2023).

e *Democracy Report 2022*: Vanessa A. Boese, Nazifa Alizada, Martin, Lundstedt, Kelly Morrison, Natalia Natsika, Yuko Sato, Hugo Tai and Staffan I. Lindberg, *Autocratization Changing Nature? Democracy Report 2022* (Gothenburg: Varieties of Democracy Institute, 2022), https://v-dem.net/media/publications/dr_2022.pdf (accessed 22 June 2023). A score of 1 on the Liberal Democracy Index signifies the highest level of protection of individual liberties, and checks and balances between institutions. The value shown for State of Palestine is for “Palestine / West Bank”.

f The Fund for Peace (FFP), *Fragile States Index, Fragility in the World 2023* (Washington D.C., 2023), <https://fragilestatesindex.org/> (accessed 22 June 2023). Somalia ranks first of 179 countries, with a score of 111.9 (of 120), indicating the highest level of fragility.

Abbreviations

ACUD	Administrative Capital Urban Development Company	LGBTIQ*	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans*, inter*, queer
ANC	African National Congress (South Africa)	LIC	Lowest income country
APEC	Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation	LMIC	Lower-middle income country
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations	LNOB	Leave no one behind
AU	African Union	MDGs	Millennium Development Goals
BJP	Bharatiya Janata Party (India)	MFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs (China)
BRF	Belt and Road Forum (China)	MGNREGA	Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (India)
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative (China)	MOE	Ministry of Environment (South Korea)
BRICS	Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa	MOFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs (South Korea)
CAA	Citizenship Amendment Act (India)	MoFEP	Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning (Sudan)
CAPMAS	Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics (Egypt)	MoU	Memorandum of understanding
CCTs	Conditional Cash Transfers	NC-SDGs	National Commission for the Sustainable Development Goals
CDES	Council for Economic and Social Development (Brazil)		
CIDC	Committee for International Development Cooperation (ROK)	NPR	National Population Register (India)
CIKD	Chinese Center for International Knowledge on Development	NRC	National Register of Citizens (India)
COP	Conference of the Parties (to the 1992 United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change)	NRIC	National Register of Indian Citizens
CPC	Communist Party of China	ODA	Official development assistance
CSO	Civil society organization	OECD	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
CSSs	Centrally Sponsored Schemes (India)	OGPC	Office for Government Policy Coordination (ROK)
CSWG	Civil Society Working Group on the 2030 Agenda	PA	Palestinian Authority
2030A		PDS	Public Distribution System
DAC	Development Assistance Committee (OECD)	PPA	Multiannual Participatory Plan (Brazil)
EVs	Electric vehicles	PT	Partido dos Trabalhadores, Workers' Party (Brazil)
FDI	Foreign direct investment	Rio+20	United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development
FYP	Five-Year Plan (China)	ROK	Republic of Korea (South Korea)
G20	Group of Twenty	RSF	Rapid Support Forces (Sudan)
GCF	Green Climate Fund	SAF	Sudanese Armed Forces
GDI	Global Development Initiative (China)	SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organization
GDP	Gross domestic product	SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
GGGI	Global Green Growth Institute	SDS	Sustainable Development Strategy
GSDR	Global Sustainable Development Report	SGR	Standard gauge railway
HDP Nexus	Humanitarian-development-peace nexus	SRHR	Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights
HIC	High income country	STF	Federal Supreme Court (Brazil)
HIPC	Heavily Indebted Poor Countries Initiative	UMIC	Upper-middle income country
HLPF	High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development	UN DESA	United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs
IDP	Internally displaced person	UNDP	United Nations Development Program
IMF	International Monetary Fund	UNESCAP	United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific
IRENA	International Renewable Energy Agency	UNFCCC	United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change
JEM	Justice and Equality Movement		
JETPs	Just Energy Transition Partnerships	UNGA	United Nations General Assembly
JPA	Juba Peace Agreement (Sudan)	UPA	United Progressive Alliance
K-SDGs	Korean Sustainable Development Goals	VNRs	Voluntary national reviews
KOICA	Korean International Cooperation Agency	WHO	World Health Organization
LDCs	Least-developed countries		
LDI	Liberal Democracy Index		

The Authors

Dr Muriel Asseburg

Senior Fellow in the Africa and Middle East Research Division

Dr Eric J. Ballbach

Associate, Visiting Fellow in the Asia Research Division

Dr Marianne Beisheim

Senior Associate in the Global Issues Research Division

Dr Karoline Eickhoff

Associate in the Africa and Middle East Research Division and Megatrends Afrika Associate

Dr Sabine Fischer

Senior Fellow in the Eastern Europe and Eurasia Research Division

Dr Nadine Godehardt

Senior Associate in the Asia Research Division

Dr Gerrit Kurtz

Associate in the Africa and Middle East Research Division

Dr Marcel Meyer

Seconded Civilian Expert in Kenya, ZIF – Centre for International Peace Operations

Dr Melanie Müller

Senior Associate in the Africa and Middle East Research Division

Dr Stephan Roll

Head of the Africa and Middle East Research Division

Dr Astrid Sahn

Visiting Fellow in the Eastern Europe and Eurasia Research Division

Dr Christian Wagner

Senior Fellow in the Asia Research Division

Dr Claudia Zilla

Senior Fellow in The Americas Research Division

