



FROM GOALS TO ACTION

Implementing the Sustainable Development Goals

SEMINAR BACKGROUND NOTE

INTRODUCTION

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were adopted at the end of 2015 after extensive consultations among government, civil society, business, and development partners to agree on a new and aspirational agenda for development. They link people, the planet, and prosperity, and provide a framework for all countries, developed and developing alike, to pursue better paths to development. This note reflects on progress in

implementing the SDGs, with a focus on Asia and the Pacific. It is intended to frame discussions at the upcoming seminar From Goals to Action at the 50th Annual General Meetings of the Asian Development Bank (ADB) in Yokohama.

THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS: CREATING NEW OPPORTUNITIES

The SDGs pick up where the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) left off when they expired in 2015. The MDGs represented a relatively narrow agenda focused on eight goals intended to rally official development assistance and domestic policy focus on extreme poverty and health issues. The SDGs seek

to “complete what [the MDGs] did not achieve, particularly in reaching the most vulnerable.”¹ They also take on the complexity of development in changing times, addressing issues such as natural capital, climate change, resilience, peace and security, equality, and decent work and economic growth. Better infrastructure and complementary services are widely recognized as the “backbone” for achieving the SDGs.² How governments choose to bridge the infrastructure gap will have profound implications for their people and for the entire planet, including for climate change responses.

It can be challenging to anchor the ambitious aspirations of global policy in concrete decision-making processes within countries. With



It has been more than a year since the Sustainable Development Goals were adopted, and institutions including ADB are grappling with the demands of delivering on this ambitious new agenda.

17 goals, 169 agreed targets, and 232 officially negotiated indicators, the SDGs can sometimes look unwieldy. Nevertheless, their promise has been recognized by a wide range of actors. A group of 35 chief executive officers and civil society leaders constituting the Business Commission on Sustainable Development, for example, estimated that achieving the goals could open up \$12 trillion of market opportunities in economic systems, including food and agriculture, cities, energy and materials, and health and well-being. Across the world, governments are starting the process of aligning their development and planning processes with the goals, and grappling with the ensuing implications.

REALIZING THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS IN A DYNAMIC ASIA

The 2030 agenda is particularly relevant in the Asia and Pacific region, where impressive progress has been made in reducing extreme poverty, but 330 million people in ADB developing member countries still live on less than \$1.90 a day.³ 844 million people live very close to the poverty line, highly vulnerable to falling back below it, and rising inequality is a major issue. Nearly 1.5 billion people still lack access to basic sanitation. Maternal and child mortality rates have not yet fallen to reach MDG targets, while new health and well-being challenges (including noncommunicable diseases) are becoming more urgent. Moreover, the region is dealing with

the environmental stresses driven by rapid economic growth, while vulnerability to climate change is increasingly evident.

A changing development context

While progress has been made in extending access to electricity and roads, much remains to be done. Digital connectivity has increased dramatically in the region, opening up new opportunities to provide education, healthcare, and support business development, but access to information technology in the region remains uneven. The region is undergoing rapid urbanization, and by 2018 more than half of its population will live in urban areas. Effective management of rural–urban transitions will be essential, recognizing that extreme poverty is often more concentrated in rural areas. Greenhouse gas emissions have also grown significantly, although per capita emission growth is now plateauing. Countries in Asia and the Pacific are highly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. Many countries have also been leaders of an ongoing clean technology revolution, helping to drive the costs of clean energy technologies down, and innovating to improve their viability.⁴ Increasing demand for natural resources in the region has also created environmental pressures, particularly on water, and there is an urgent need to invest in natural capital and strengthen environmental management.

An integrated approach

The SDGs provide a framework that captures all of these pressing issues. The connections between the SDGs and their associated targets are also vital: the transformational potential of the 2030 agenda is linked to progress on all 17 goals. Most global and national institutions are set up to work in more narrow ways, however, looking at individual sectors, issues or jurisdictions. Delivering on the SDGs on the other hand requires working across sectors. It may also require working across countries, given that many issues are transboundary or global in scope. At the same time, these issues will need to find traction in local priorities, and the role of local institutions in implementation is increasingly recognized. Institutions at all levels will need to evolve to capture these linkages, and better modalities of coordination will be essential. Creative new partnerships are needed involving governments, businesses, civil society, and knowledge institutions. This is much easier said than done, and improving coordination across sectors and institutions is an age-old problem.

From goals to action

Across Asia and the Pacific stakeholders are acting on the SDGs.⁵ This section briefly highlights some key elements of emerging responses. These include planning for implementation and associated institutional arrangements; developing financing strategies for implementation, forging new



partnerships; and generating the data necessary to track progress. Many of these insights emerge from ADB's efforts to take stock of its member countries' responses to the SDGs, and opportunities to strengthen its operational response to the agenda. These efforts included in-depth engagement with stakeholders in Bangladesh, Indonesia, Kazakhstan, Nepal and Timor-Leste.⁶

Planning

Many countries in the region, from the poorest to the strongest, have begun the process of analyzing how their development plans and associated targets align with SDG targets and indicators. This is widely recognized as a fundamental building block for implementation. The Bangladesh Planning Commission, for example, has prepared a national action plan for the SDGs, taking a "whole government" approach, with all ministries required to identify specific SDGs that will be their responsibility across the country's

64 districts. Implementation of the plan is already underway. Indonesia was a leading advocate in the global negotiation of the SDGs; it has been similarly proactive in following up on implementation. The Indonesian National Development Planning Agency, BAPPENAS, has published a detailed mapping of SDGs for its current National Development Plan (2015–2019), as well as draft technical guidelines for preparation of a Sustainable Development Action Plan. In Nepal, an initial review of the implications of the SDGs has been completed, and alignment of the 15th National Development Plan with SDG indicators and targets is planned. India's National Institution for Transforming India (NITI Aayog) has matched key national programs with the SDGs, and specified priority goals and programs in the context of the 2030 agenda. In Timor-Leste efforts are underway to lay out a framework and process for incorporating the SDGs into the national planning system in advance of elections, in an

effort to inform the steps to be taken by a new incoming government. The impacts of these efforts remain to be seen.

Institutional coordination

Similarly, countries are experimenting with different types of institutional arrangements and mechanisms for coordination in implementation. In Bangladesh a senior official in the Prime Minister's Office has been designated as the SDG coordinator, and senior focal points for the SDGs have been appointed in relevant ministries. In Indonesia a national coordination team within BAPPENAS has been established to coordinate implementation across ministries. A presidential decree on SDG implementation is still under consideration, and is expected to set out a more formal institutional arrangement. Nepal has established two high level committees in the National Planning Commission, a National Coordinating Committee led by the Prime Minister, and



a Program Implementation and Monitoring Committee, to support SDG implementation. Ensuring these emerging arrangements are effective in harnessing stakeholders to deliver the goals, and maximize linkages across goals and targets, will take innovation and commitment. High level political leadership must be sustained. Deeper partnerships with Ministry of Finance will also be necessary if plans are to be reflected in national budgets and financing strategies.

Regional institutions are also starting to pick up the agenda, and explore how regional cooperation might support progress toward the goals. Discussions are underway, for example, about how the Central Asian Regional Economic Cooperation Forum might support regional collaboration in pursuit of the SDGs. The Association of South East Asian Nations is also exploring how to align its 2025 Blue Prints with the SDGs. But more will need to be done to address transboundary aspects of SDG implementation, building on and

linking with the national-level efforts that have begun.

Financing strategies

Where there was a strong focus on the role of official development assistance in achieving the MDGs, there is broad recognition that all possible sources of finance will need to be harnessed and maximized in order to achieve the SDGs in all countries. The need to strengthen domestic resource mobilization and management, and work with private sector actors, including as investors, is well appreciated.

In this context there is clear interest in developing financing strategies for SDG implementation. The need for more systematic costing efforts to support prioritization has also been raised. In Bangladesh, efforts are under way to align the medium-term budget of Seventh Five-Year Plan with the SDGs, and sector ministries have been directed to conduct SDG costing exercises. A number of countries in the region are undertaking development finance assessments

that help governments consider domestic and international sources of public and private finance that could be channeled to help them pursue sustainable development objectives.⁷

A complementary aspect of these efforts is the need for a strategy for the evolution of the broader domestic and regional financial system to be aligned to the needs of sustainable development. Savings in the region have grown and assets under management are increasing, although there are substantial variations between countries. There are deepening and increasingly diverse pools of public and private capital that could potentially be tapped to help deliver the SDGs in the region. There are more than 100 national-level development finance institutions in the region, which can also play an important role in directing investment flows toward initiatives that will contribute to the SDGs.

International financial institutions (both public and private) also play an important role in steering finance

The 2030 agenda is particularly relevant in the Asia and Pacific region, where extreme poverty has decreased, but more needs to be done to achieve prosperity and environmental sustainability.

toward sustainable development. Multilateral development banks have recognized that this will require making the best possible use of each dollar from every source, noting that “achieving the SDGs will require moving from billions to trillions in resource flows. Such a paradigm shift calls for a wide-ranging financing framework capable of channeling resources and investments of all kinds—public and private, national and global.”⁸ Multilateral development banks need to continue to find innovative financing and policy solutions customized to partner country needs, share lessons on good practices, and collaborate to measure and improve effectiveness.

Innovations in the context of the SDGs have begun. The World Bank, for example, recently raised €163 million for bonds that link returns to the performance of companies advancing global development priorities set out in the SDGs, including gender equality, health and sustainable infrastructure.⁹ While the level of finance is small when compared with the scale of the challenge and potential opportunity, it is an encouraging step.

Infrastructure finance

Given the close linkages between infrastructure and the SDGs, strategies for bridging infrastructure financing gaps in the region are inextricable from SDG financing strategies and ADB’s role in supporting the SDGs. In this context, support for the preparation of viable projects and

programs that can achieve diverse sustainable development objectives will be necessary. Project preparation facilities with a focus on investments that will accelerate the delivery of the SDGs can help bridge the gap between aspiration and results. Tailored approaches will be needed to encourage inclusive infrastructure and address the unmet needs of poor or remote people. Measures will also be needed to address the environmental impact of mainstream infrastructure and enhance resilience, particularly in the energy and transport sectors where there is an urgent need to decarbonize. There has been strong interest in encouraging institutional investors to take on a bigger role in infrastructure finance, in part because of their appetite for longer-term investments. At present, however, few infrastructure investments have been structured to meet their financial requirements. New business models as well as new approaches to attract financing from a wider range of investors will be necessary. Access to concessional and risk-tolerant finance can facilitate these efforts. New skills and expertise will also need to be developed in companies and institutions across these processes, so that more innovative and effective approaches to delivering environmentally sustainable and socially inclusive infrastructure can be deployed.

Partnerships

A wide array of partnerships aimed at helping realize the SDGs have emerged. Global SDG policy

processes were expressly designed to foster partnerships that would support implementation; many governments are now building partnerships into national implementation strategies.

Civil society partners are bringing vital and often challenging development issues into policy debates, and providing new analysis and insight on progress. They are also implementing creative programs, often in the hardest to reach places that address the SDGs. For example, nongovernment organizations across Asia are helping remote communities gain access to renewable energy technologies to meet their needs for electricity, helping improve sanitation services, and helping deliver vital health care services as well.

Universities and other knowledge institutions, both individual and networked, provide a source of expertise and knowledge in support of problem solving. One example is the Sustainable Development Solutions Network, an independent global network of research centers, universities, and technical institutions working to help find solutions for some of the world’s most pressing environmental, social, and economic problems. The network was launched in 2012 with the support of then-UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon. In Kazakhstan, for example, Nazarbayev University, a regional node for the network, is establishing a coordinating unit on the SDGs to support government implementation of the goals.



Enlightened international business leaders are recognizing that “business really needs the Global Goals: they offer a compelling growth strategy for individual businesses, for business generally and for the world economy.”¹⁰ Global private sector initiatives aimed at advancing the SDGs are only part of the story, however. Within developing member countries in Asia and the Pacific, private sector associations are starting to recognize the promise of the SDGs and to explore business opportunities in this context. For example business associations in Indonesia have actively engaged with national SDG efforts and are undertaking their own analysis of opportunities that they can pursue to support implementation.

Development partners are also seeking to work more closely

together, generating joint knowledge on the challenges and opportunities that countries in Asia and the Pacific will confront in implementing the SDGs. ADB’s partnership with the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific and the United Nations Development Programme to track progress in Asia and the Pacific on the SDGs is an important effort in this context.

Data

A final issue that has received substantial attention is the need to strengthen monitoring capacity and access to data on the SDGs. Relevant, reliable, and timely data informs program planning and implementation, and budget allocation, while encouraging public accountability of those responsible for SDG implementation. A total of 232 indicators for tracking the SDGs were agreed by the UN Statistical Commission’s Interagency and Expert Group on SDG Indicators.

Of these, 81 (or 35%) indicators are fully defined with available data (classified as Tier I). The remaining indicators will require more frequent data collection (Tier II), or further refinement and methodological development (Tier III). Measurement and monitoring of environmental sustainability indicators are among the weakest. There is broad recognition of the need to strengthen national statistical systems to report on the SDGs and encourage innovations in data collection to simplify the

tasks at hand. Countries will need to focus on the indicators that are most meaningful for their implementation priorities, and all 232 will not be relevant in all cases. For example, countries in the Pacific have worked together to identify 113 priority indicators, including 8 proxy Pacific Indicators. The process was facilitated by the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, and is helping countries tailor the monitoring framework to their needs and give it regional resonance.

For their part, national statistical offices in Asia and the Pacific are getting on with the task of responding to the new data agenda. One substantial challenge, however, is that monitoring is often driven by the availability of data rather than its relevance for national priorities. Partnerships with knowledge institutions may help to balance this to some extent, as can methodological and technological innovations in an age of big data. Information from electronic identification and cell phone-based surveys, for example, may substantially reduce the burdens of data collection. In this context partnerships with private sector actors that may be able to access and provide insights on key indicators are attracting growing attention. The Philippines Statistics Authority, for example, has been working with local telecommunications companies to explore possibilities in this context. New initiatives and partnerships to support such efforts have also been launched, such as the Data4SDGs Toolbox and the Global Partnership for Sustainable Data.

International financial institutions play an important role in steering finance toward sustainable development. Multilateral development banks have recognized that this will require making the best possible use of each dollar from every source.



THE ROAD AHEAD

There is broad consensus on the need to accelerate implementation of the SDGs. The preceding discussion suggests the following questions for further reflection:

- **Finding traction.** What lessons can be drawn from the MDGs to inform more effective implementation of the SDGs agenda? What critical factors will enable countries to make accelerated progress toward the SDGs? What is needed to support effective priority setting in the face of urgent and competing needs?
- **Rising to the challenge of an integrated agenda.** How are we addressing the links between goals and targets, and cross-cutting issues? How can institutions evolve or be re-engineered to better deliver a more integrated development agenda? How do we build the necessary institutional capacity and create new incentives for coordination at multiple levels? What are the implications of the universality of the SDGs and the fact that they apply to both developed and developing countries?
- **Partnering for solutions.** How do civil society and government partners work together to deliver on this agenda? Where are the opportunities for the private sector and how do we seize them? How can universities and knowledge institutions support innovation and application of science and technologies to support implementation of the SDGs? How do we forge and sustain effective new partnerships to foster collaboration?
- **Unlocking finance for sustainable development.** How do we mobilize a full range of potential sources of finance to help achieve the 2030 agenda? Where are the greatest opportunities? How can development finance institutions such as the ADB make the most difference? What more can we do to move from the volume of finance for the SDGs from billions to trillions?

Endnotes

- ¹ United Nations. Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/70/1&Lang=E (Accessed 10 April 2017).
- ² In addition to a goal on resilient infrastructure (goal 9) which stresses the need to support connectivity through transport and information communication technology, there are SDGs focused on extending access to water and sanitation services (goal 6), and access to affordable clean energy (goal 7). Goals related to urbanization (goal 11), consumption and production (goal 12), and climate change (goal 13), among others, are also closely linked to infrastructure provision.
- ³ The international poverty line was set at \$1.90 per day by the World Bank in 2015. It is based on 2011 purchasing power parity. It replaced the \$1.25 per day poverty line, based on 2005 purchasing power parity. The international poverty line reflects the average national poverty lines of the 15 poorest developing countries. It represents a very low standard of living threshold that is believed

to correspond to the minimum cost of basic needs. For more details, see World Bank.

2015. *Global Monitoring Report 2015/2016: Development Goals in an Era of Demographic Change*. Washington, DC.

- ⁴ This discussion draws heavily from United Nations, Asian Development Bank, and United Nations Development Programme. 2017. *Eradicating Poverty and Promoting Prosperity in a Changing Asia-Pacific*. Bangkok. <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/235276/eradicating-poverty-asia-pacific.pdf>.
- ⁵ Asia and the Pacific countries have also been proactive in engaging in international policy processes to monitor progress: five countries from the region (the People's Republic of China, Georgia, the Philippines, the Republic of Korea, and Samoa) participated in the voluntary review at the 2016 High Level Political Forum. Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, the Maldives, Nepal, Tajikistan, and Thailand will report in 2017.
- ⁶ This exercise is underway in partnership with the Sustainable Development Solutions Network and Columbia University.
- ⁷ Bangladesh, Cambodia, Fiji, the Lao People's Democratic Republic, the Marshall Islands, Mongolia, Myanmar, Nepal, Papua New Guinea, the Philippines, Timor-Leste, and Viet Nam are among the countries that are participating in these efforts with support from UNDP. The ADB has also supported this work stream.
- ⁸ African Development Bank, ADB, European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, European Investment Bank, Inter-American Development Bank Group, and the World Bank Group, together known as multilateral development banks, and the International Monetary Fund. ADB. 2015. From Billions to Trillions—Transforming Development Finance. 17 April. <https://www.adb.org/news/billions-trillions-transforming-development-finance>.
- ⁹ The bond was arranged by BNP Paribas under its SDGs Everyone Initiative. Investors in the bond include AGPM VIE, AREAS VIE, BNP Paribas CARDIF France, BNP Paribas CARDIF Italy, Fideuram Asset Management Ireland, Generali France, MGEN, Prevoir VIE, Sella Gestioni SGR, and Suravenir.
- ¹⁰ Business and Sustainable Development Commission. 2017. *Executive Summary: Better Business, Better World*. <http://report.businesscommission.org/uploads/Executive-Summary.pdf>.



About the Asian Development Bank

ADB's vision is an Asia and Pacific region free of poverty. Its mission is to help its developing member countries reduce poverty and improve the quality of life of their people. Despite the region's many successes, it remains home to a large share of the world's poor. ADB is committed to reducing poverty through inclusive economic growth, environmentally sustainable growth, and regional integration.

Based in Manila, ADB is owned by 67 members, including 48 from the region. Its main instruments for helping its developing member countries are policy dialogue, loans, equity investments, guarantees, grants, and technical assistance.

All photos are from ADB.

The United Nations commissioned the seventeen icons and the SDG logo to graphically promote awareness of the Sustainable Development Goals adopted by the Member States of the United Nations by resolution A/RES/70/1 of the General Assembly of 25 September 2015.



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