

2030 AGENDA FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Advancing the G20's Commitment to the 2030 Agenda

Homi Kharas, The Brookings Institution

Sebastian Strauss, The Brookings Institution

Guido Schmidt-Traub, Sustainable Development Solutions
Network

Rodrigo Rodriguez Tornquist, CARI

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Abstract

This policy brief proposes an approach for the G20 to commit meaningfully to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. It documents substantial shortcomings in G20 member countries' approaches to agenda setting, implementation, and monitoring. This applies both to domestic goals as well as to those that relate to collective action. The policy brief recommends a number of key actions G20 members could take to strengthen their strategies for (1) domestic implementation of the 2030 Agenda, and (2) collective action regarding management of the global commons.

Challenge

Countries around the world are grappling with common problems, even if specifics vary. First, overall economic growth needs to be re-invigorated and re-coupled with broad-based social gains. Citizens need to see a connection between climbing economic statistics and improved circumstances for their families. Related to this, no one—no countries and no groups within countries—should be left behind. Whether people are being marginalized due to their gender, religion, ethnicity, class, age, sexual orientation, geography, or anything else, minimum standards of human dignity and social inclusion need to be assured for all. Everyone must partake in progress. Second, societies need to de-couple economic progress from further damage to the environment. Economic engine rooms need to stop harming and start restoring natural resources and ecosystems. Trade-offs are involved: in recent decades, no country has succeeded in simultaneously achieving strong income growth, reducing inequality, and limiting carbon emissions.

Although the notion of global goals originally took hold around ambitions to support the poorest nations, today such goals offer a tool for all nations to do better on issues of common importance. Available analysis of SDG progress show that all G20 members, which comprise mostly large and/or advanced economies, are behind in achieving at least one or more SDGs¹. Significant segments of the population of G20 countries are experiencing severe economic and social dislocations. This diagnosis calls for more deliberate national action by G20 countries.

The 2030 Agenda also includes goals concerning the management of the global commons. As the largest economies in the world, G20 countries bear a special responsibility to ensure that critical global systems—specifically on energy, land-

¹ For example: Sachs, J.D., Schmidt-Traub, G., Kroll, C., Teksoz, K., Durand-Delacré, D. 2017. "SDG Index and Dashboards Report 2017. Global Responsibilities." Bertelsmann Stiftung and Sustainable Development Solutions Network. Gütersloh and New York.



use, urban, and circular economy systems—respond to the urgent need to reduce biodiversity loss, the pollution of oceans, land degradation, and carbon emissions within only a few decades.

In addressing these challenges, G20 members must reckon with rapidly changing technologies that are creating new growth and innovation possibilities, but also disrupting historical levels of inequality and generating tensions between competition and platforms benefiting from scale economies.

Proposals

1. Strengthening G20 country strategies for domestic implementation of the 2030 Agenda

Rationale. No G20 country appears to be on track to meet all of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The Bertelsmann Stiftung and the Sustainable Development Solutions Network’s annual SDG Index and Dashboards Report highlights the “distance to target” for G20 countries across a range of indicators. Assessments of individual countries showcase large gaps. For example, Biggs and McArthur (2018) identify several areas where Canada drastically needs to change trajectories to meet the goals. According to an audit conducted by Canada’s Office of the Auditor General, the country “has not done enough to prepare to implement the United Nations’ 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.”² Similarly, a report by the European Think Tanks Group concludes that the European Union “has made only limited progress in implementing the SDGs, and has invested more in ‘stock-taking’ than in transformative reforms.”³

Countries like Canada and those in the European Union are to be commended, not criticized, for their willingness to examine their national development plans (or lack thereof) critically. Other G20 members should follow suit in conducting audits of their national plans to implement the 2030 Agenda. Yet until 2018, almost one-third of the G20 membership—Australia, Canada, Russia, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, and the United States—had never conducted a comprehensive assessment (e.g., Voluntary National Review) of where they stand with regards to their distance to achieving the SDGs. This year, Australia, Canada, Mexico and Saudi Arabia will submit a VNR to the U.N. High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF), hopefully including such an

2 http://www.oag-bvg.gc.ca/internet/English/mr_20180424_e_43008.html.

3 Voituriez, T., Hege, E., Maci, G. Hackenesch, C. 2018. “Steering the EU towards a sustainability transformation.” European Think Tanks Group. Brussels.



assessment. By 2019, the U.S. and Russia will be the only G20 countries never to have submitted a VNR. What is more, only eight G20 members—Brazil, China, Germany, Italy, Japan, Mexico, the United Kingdom, and the European Union—have even adopted an action plan to implement the entirety of the 2030 Agenda. A first step towards doing so is for all countries to collect data on the status of official SDG indicators at an appropriate level of disaggregation. Currently, only seven G20 members—France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Mexico, South Africa, and the European Union—identify key official indicators to monitor the implementation of the SDGs.

It is time for the G20 to take the global goals seriously. G20 national governments should systematically and regularly diagnose the issues on which their countries are off track, either as a whole or in part—which outcomes, by how much, where, and among whom. Consolidated, cross-country comparable gap analyses of this sort will provide essential evidence about where improvement is needed, at what scale and at what pace. This information can then inform decision-making about where business-as-usual might suffice, and where new approaches are required.

Fundamentally, over one-quarter of G20 members—Australia, Canada, South Korea, Russia, Saudi Arabia, and the United States—have not yet identified key national priorities regarding the implementation of the SDGs. This is a critical shortcoming since the SDGs do not themselves offer a roadmap to sustainable development.⁴ Rather, stakeholders within each country—including civil society, business leaders, and financial regulators—convened by national governments, are supposed to formulate their own strategic priorities, national plans, and implementation strategies to attain the goals in accordance with their domestic contexts. Such strategies include development of mechanisms for mobilizing private sector investment and multi-stakeholder governance arrangements for monitoring progress. To this end, diagnoses of G20 members' SDG trajectories would provide a baseline for identifying, within countries, those issues most in need of better approaches in order to achieve pre-defined benchmarks of success. At a policy level, domestic decision-makers need to take responsibility for their respective pieces of the complete SDG puzzle, which often connect across jurisdictions. At the same time, government leaders have special responsibility to make choices about where needs are greatest and where there is the greatest call for public resources.

In this regard, SDG benchmarking can help inform domestic priorities for new approaches, not pitting goals against each other in terms of importance, but pitting current trajectories against each other to identify where new trajectories are most needed. Biggs and McArthur (2018), for example, provide a framework to help identify key priorities for the domestic implementation of the 2030 Agenda. It asks several

4 Ibid.



questions—such as where are breakthroughs needed, where will near-term decisions drive long-term outcomes, what actions could have big multiplier effects across issues, and where are current trajectories most at risk of disruption—that, applied to a quantitative assessment of SDG trajectories, can help G20 countries hone in on priorities for national change.

Key actions. We recommend that G20 countries:

- Mandate their National Statistical Institutes to identify key national indicators to monitor the implementation of and progress towards the SDGs;
- Establish a framework for systematic gap analysis and benchmarking of domestic trajectories against SDG outcome targets by the time of the U.N. HLPF Summit in 2019 at the latest;
- Submit a Voluntary National Review prior to the 2019 U.N. HLPF Summit;
- Submit a collective G20 report on the 2030 Agenda, or comparable comprehensive assessment, to the 2019 U.N. HLPF Ministerial or Summit in order to build momentum and demonstrate pursuit of the SDGs at scale; and
- Adopt an action plan that identifies key national priorities for new approaches to domestic implementation of the 2030 Agenda (and collective action, see below).

2. Strengthening G20 country strategies for collective action and burden-sharing of global public goods

Rationale. The 2030 Agenda includes goals concerning the management of the global commons, and the world is currently failing to make adequate progress towards them. In addition to tackling domestic SDG implementation gaps, G20 countries need to do their part to solve collective action problems and help the world's least advantaged people escape extreme forms of deprivation. However, in light of constraints in public resources and public attention, member countries must be selective in their provision of global public goods. To this end, countries should first identify where needs are greatest and how their resources and comparative advantages can be prioritized to best effect. Individual G20 members must develop a new approach to contributing to the world that specifies strategic priorities while making sure they carry their fair share of global burdens. An illustrative framework is that of Biggs and McArthur (2018), which offers guiding questions—such as where is progress lagging, where do national assets have comparative advantage, and where



do domestic actions (global outcomes) disproportionately affect global outcomes (domestic interests)—in order to help countries identify their strategic priorities and determine appropriate national contributions.

As the largest economies in the world, G20 countries bear a special responsibility to ensure that critical global systems are consistent with the global goals. There are a number of such systems, with a short-list including energy, urban, land-use and food systems, each of which is evolving in response to emerging digital, bio- and nano-technologies. Given that the Argentine Presidency has identified food security as one of three priorities for 2018, it should focus on identifying collective action for improving global land-use and food systems.

Land-use and food systems affect six critical areas of sustainable development: (i) human diets and health, (ii) greenhouse gas emissions and capture, (iii) biodiversity conservation, including forests, (iv) freshwater availability, (v) air and water pollution, and (vi) biofuel availability for decarbonizing energy systems. They are unsustainable in every G20 country, so under business-as-usual the corresponding SDGs cannot be met. Climate change, a rising world population, and growing per capita demand for agricultural products will further exacerbate the pressure on land-use and food systems across the G20.

We need sustainable land-use and food systems that take into account food provision, climate change mitigation, biodiversity loss, and an equitable distribution of the value of food production. Without robust long-term pathways that map out the transition from where we are today to a sustainable end-point, countries will lock themselves into policy dead-ends that will have severe unintended consequences and may put the long-term targets out of reach. For example, without considering long-term population growth, countries may convert too much agricultural land into urban settlements. Without taking into account long-term demand for water and agricultural products, they may similarly overinvest in a biofuel-based economy. Such national pathways are also needed to integrate national policies across a broad range of ministries, ensure policy coherence, identify critical technology gaps, and help ensure that the sum of G20 countries' actions is consistent with global objectives adopted under the 2030 Agenda.

Today, most G20 countries lack such robust, integrated pathways and are therefore flying blind in spite of growing pressures on their land-use and food systems. This situation is similar to the knowledge gaps G20 government faced on energy systems around 2013. At the time, hardly any governments had access to integrated national pathways for decarbonizing their energy systems. In response research teams from most G20 countries convened under the Deep Decarbonization Pathways Project



(DDPP)⁵ led by the UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) and IDDRI to develop national pathways towards decarbonizing energy systems. The teams tackled major analytical challenges, such as understanding the speed of adoption and cost of rapidly evolving technologies, and through iterations they arrived at national pathways that were collectively consistent with global climate policy objectives while remaining sensitive to differing domestic contexts and development priorities. The pathways demonstrate the feasibility of deep decarbonization in the presence of other policy objectives, such as energy access, and economic growth. They inform national debates on how to decarbonize energy systems, build international trust and collaboration, and promote greater investments in clean technologies.⁶⁷

New pathways towards sustainable land-use and food systems should be developed by research institutions in G20 countries working as part of a global knowledge network, drawing lessons from the experience of the DDPP. The International Resource Panel launched by UNEP in 2007 provides one such network. More recently, the SDSN and IIASA have launched the Food, Agriculture, Biodiversity, Land, and Energy (FABLE) Pathways Initiative launched under the Food and Land-use Coalition. FABLE comprises leading research institutions from G20 countries who jointly address the complex methodological issues involved in developing long-term, integrated, national pathways towards sustainable land-use and food systems. In particular, FABLE should flag areas where policy assumptions may be inconsistent across G20 countries and suggest options for greater alignment with the 2030 Agenda, including by embracing the concept of “leave no one behind” through the inclusion of voices from smallholder agriculturalists.

Key actions. We recommend that G20 countries:

- Identify strategic national priorities for collective action and burden-sharing of global public goods and report on these in the collective report to the U.N. HLPF mentioned above;
- Agree that sustainable land-use and food systems are central to the problems of freshwater supplies, biodiversity, nutrient overuse and land degradation:
- Endorse research on pathways towards sustainable food and land-use systems such as the FABLE Pathways Initiative and recommend to the 2019

5 www.deepdecarbonization.com

6 Sachs, J.D., Schmidt-Traub, G., Williams, J. 2016. “Pathways to Zero Emissions. Nature Geoscience.” 9: 799-801.

7 SDSN, and IDDRI (2015), “Pathways to Deep Decarbonization 2015 Report,” Sustainable Development Solutions Network, The Institute for Sustainable Development and International Relations, Paris and New York.



U.N. HLPF that it be adopted as a global initiative;

- Request national FABLE research teams to engage with government agencies to develop integrated long-term national pathways towards sustainable land-use and food systems consistent with global goals.



References

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