



**GLOBALGOALS2024**

**The Future of the SDGs**

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# **Reinvigorating the Sustainable Development Goals: The Utrecht Roadmap**

**Statement of the International Research Conference  
“GLOBALGOALS2024—The Future of the SDGs”**

*Utrecht, The Netherlands, 30 August 2024*

In 2015, the United Nations adopted 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. However, extensive research and numerous policy reports suggest that these goals struggle to gain momentum, leading the UN Secretary-General to call for their urgent “rescue.” Several factors have been cited for the slow progress, including weakened multilateral cooperation, global crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic, and rising geopolitical tensions. Moreover, the design of the SDGs and their institutional framework have been criticized for contributing to the slow pace of progress. At the upcoming United Nations Summit of the Future on 22-23 September 2024, governments will adopt a new “Pact for the Future,” which promises numerous actions aimed at advancing global transformation. Yet, these measures may fall short of what is needed to strengthen global sustainability governance.

In this Statement, we—a group of over hundred researchers and practitioners from both the Global North and South—present a roadmap for sustainability governance until 2030 and beyond. This roadmap is designed to complement the Pact for the Future, offering additional strategies and actions crucial for revitalizing progress toward the SDGs. The roadmap was developed through a months-long iterative process as part of the international research conference GLOBALGOALS2024, held on 29-30 August 2024 in Utrecht, The Netherlands. The drafting process including a pre-conference survey, followed by in-depth discussions in online co-creation workshops and refined by detailed feedback from individual members. While most contributors are academics, the Statement integrates key insights from civil society as well.

Most of us are skeptical about the likelihood of fully achieving the SDGs by the 2030 deadline. Despite this skepticism, we broadly agree that the set of 17 global goals should not be abandoned but instead strengthened, as they remain a vital governance framework that is rooted in a comprehensive global consensus. To enhance and improve the SDGs, we suggest four avenues of reform, each accompanied by specific actions, to drive transformations in global sustainability governance until 2030 and beyond.

## 1. ADAPT THE ARCHITECTURE OF GLOBAL SUSTAINABILITY GOVERNANCE

First, we call for stronger monitoring and accountability frameworks for the global architecture of sustainability governance to ensure a more systematic, inclusive and transparent review of how governments and international institutions engage with the SDGs. We recommend five concrete actions:

**1.1 Reform the High-level Political Forum (HLPF).** We call upon governments to reform the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development by enhancing its analytical and critical functions in evaluating national SDG policies and the Voluntary National Reviews submitted by countries. To improve the effectiveness of these reviews, a more systematic approach and a stronger mandate for the HLPF is required. This could include the creation of a unified monitoring, reporting, and verification mechanism to streamline and reinforce the reporting process under the High-level Political Forum.

**1.2 Establish an independent expert-based assessment mechanism to monitor progress and strengthen the science-policy interface.** Several expert bodies support the evaluation of progress on the SDGs, including the Inter-agency Expert Group on SDG Indicators, which is mandated to develop and support goal indicators and monitoring frameworks; work under the World Data Forum; expert groups convened by the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs; and the Independent Group of Scientists preparing the Global Sustainable Development Report. To further strengthen independent scientific analysis, however, a stronger and broader assessment mechanism of independent scientists and other experts is needed to better monitor and review actual SDG implementation. This assessment mechanism could serve as a clearing house, collecting and processing expert-based assessments of progress on SDG targets and indicators, and offer independent expert-based assessments of the Voluntary National Reviews. Systematic assessment of sub-national reports, such as voluntary local reviews, could strengthen participatory and reflective processes at the local level.

**1.3 Integrate the SDGs into existing and new legal frameworks.** Although the SDGs themselves are not binding under international law, their impact will be strengthened if governments integrate some of the goals into existing legal frameworks or support them by creating new legal regimes. Within current legal structures, the SDGs can improve their coherence and integration. Supporting the SDGs by establishing new legal agreements would further strengthen their implementation. Certain SDGs and their targets have already been reinforced through multilateral agreements, such as the agreement on biodiversity beyond national jurisdiction, the agreement on fisheries subsidies, and negotiations on marine plastic pollution. Expanding such targeted, legally binding agreements could further advance the 2030 Agenda.

**1.4 Reform the global financial architecture for sustainable development.** There is broad agreement among us on the need to create fair and equitable financial systems to reduce global inequalities and support sustainability transitions. Reforming institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund is crucial; reforms should focus on providing debt relief to developing countries, prioritizing grants and loans for sustainable development, and establishing robust funding mechanisms for sustainability programs in the Global South. Governments should also set clear standards and regulations to ensure that private sector partnerships support the non-monetary benefits of the SDGs, including poverty reduction and biodiversity conservation, and recognize the role of local financial institutions, such as cooperatives.

**1.5 Enhance meaningful participation from civil society.** To achieve this global reform agenda, governments and international organizations must commit to greater and more meaningful participation from civil society, Indigenous Peoples and local communities in the implementation and monitoring of the SDGs.

## **2. FACILITATE NATIONAL AND SUBNATIONAL SDG COORDINATION AND GOVERNANCE**

The 17 SDGs and their 169 targets consistently struggle with low prioritization and institutional fragmentation within national and local governments. To address this, the following actions are needed:

**2.1 Enhance SDG coordination mechanisms.** Stronger national and subnational SDG coordination mechanisms are essential to improve effectiveness. This includes creating and empowering dedicated SDG units or multi-stakeholder platforms within national and local governments to facilitate collaboration across ministries, departments, agencies and non-state actors. These units should be established at all levels of governance and involve administrative officials, elected representatives and civil society actors.

**2.2 Develop national and subnational SDG acceleration plans.** Governments must effectively operationalize and integrate the SDGs into national and subnational development strategies, customizing them to align with local contexts and priorities as well as actually deliver on their implementation. This is a prerequisite for the credibility of the sustainability agenda and for continuing public support. This requires, among others, integrating a gender perspective into the preparation, design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies, as well as a stronger involvement and empowerment of governing bodies and elected officials at all levels to adapt the SDG framework to local needs and realities. Better integration of the SDGs will enhance their relevance and implementation, support the development of national and local strategies, improve data collection for monitoring and reporting, and help strengthen political and administrative accountability.

## **3. CONSOLIDATE CURRENT GOALS AND RECALIBRATE TARGETS AND INDICATORS**

Most of us expect that the current geopolitical dynamics would impede more ambitious outcomes if a new framework or set of goals were negotiated to replace the current SDGs. Rather, we recommend continuing with the implementation of the existing goals while adjusting targets. To address this, we propose adopting the following three measures:

**3.1 Catalyze synergies between goals and targets.** In implementing existing goals and targets, we call upon governments to more systematically identify and prioritize the most significant synergies and systemic barriers to achieving sustainable development. These synergies and systemic barriers may vary from country to country.

**3.2 Set new specific, adaptive and ambitious targets.** In responding to changing circumstances, technological advancements and evolving societal needs, governments should work towards setting new specific, adaptive, and increasingly ambitious targets to operationalize these universal goals. New targets might also be needed on issues such as artificial intelligence or the integration of the One Health approach. When localizing the SDGs, countries especially in the Global North should work towards more ambitious national targets to acknowledge common but differentiated responsibilities, accelerate overall progress, and prevent transnational spill-over effects.

**3.3 Enhance data collection, monitoring, and policy evaluation.** Governments and public agencies must strengthen data collection and monitoring systems to accurately track progress and identify potential gaps for informed policy decisions. Data gaps are particularly evident in areas such as gender equality (Goal 5), climate action (Goal 13) and peace, justice and strong institutions (Goal 16). This requires greater transparency and standardization in data procedures as well as collaboration with research centers, civil society and local governments. Improving tools and methodologies for comparative policy evaluation is essential to ensure the effectiveness of strategies and interventions.

#### 4. WORK TOWARDS A PARADIGM SHIFT IN ECONOMIC POLICY

We all broadly agree that the current emphasis on economic growth, as measured by Gross Domestic Product (GDP), is insufficient for addressing the global sustainability crisis. The narrow focus on GDP growth overlooks the complex and systemic nature of global challenges, such as staying within planetary boundaries. While the iterative, participatory process through which we developed this Statement did not yield a specific alternative economic model, many of us advocated for a shift towards more inclusive development strategies that would move away from GDP as the primary measure of progress, embrace circular economy and human well-being as core principles of national policies, and advance broader reforms in the global economic system to better support a just transition particularly in low-income countries.

In conclusion, these four avenues for change and their corresponding measures are needed to transform global sustainability governance through 2030 and beyond. This roadmap charts a constructive path forward for advancing the global sustainability agenda. To achieve meaningful progress, the SDGs must be placed at the core of global policymaking. Despite the challenges posed by the current geopolitical environment, centering the SDGs in policymaking is essential for advancing global sustainable development and meeting our collective aspirations.

This Conference Statement draws on the input of numerous participants of the GLOBALGOALS2024 conference, held 29-30 August 2024 in Utrecht, The Netherlands. The coordinating lead authors were Frank Biermann, Netherlands (chair); Dan Banik, Norway and India; Marianne Beisheim, Germany; Steven Bernstein, Canada; Pamela Chasek, USA; Ines Dombrowsky, Germany; Boniface Dulani, Malawi; Margarita Gómez, Mexico; Thomas Hickmann, Sweden; Anna-Katharina Hornidge, Germany; Louis J. Kotzé, South Africa; Shirin Malekpour, Australia; Åsa Persson, Sweden; Prajal Pradhan, Netherlands and Nepal; Guilherme de Queiroz Stein, Brazil; Johan Schot, Netherlands; Michelle Scobie, Trinidad and Tobago; Carole-Anne Sénit, Netherlands; Yixian Sun, United Kingdom and China; Mara Wendebourg, Netherlands; and Fronika de Wit, Netherlands. 75 experts shared comments and suggestions through an anonymous online survey, distributed in May 2024 to all conference participants. In four online co-creating workshops, the Conference Statement was in detail discussed by Aliya Assubayeva, Bhavya Batra, Marianne Beisheim, Elizabeth Bennett, Steven Bernstein, Juan Betancur, Massimo Calamassi, Alejandra Cortes, Mark Elder, Stefan Gevaert, Morgane Gonon, María-Ignacia González, Ting Guan, Zuhail Yesilyurt Gündüz, Yi Hyun Kang, Burcu San Karademir, Po-Hsun Lu, Paul Lucas, Daniela Maestre, Edward Torres Maia, Shirin Malekpour, Maria del Mar Montí, Manjul Panwar, Arohi Patil, Miroslav Polzer, Prajal Pradhan, Michele Joie Prawiromaruto, Laura Rahm, Julius Rathgens, Debdas Ray, Michael Sharp, Ekkardt Sonntag, Joanna Stanberry, Yixian Sun, Kumara Swamy T. R., Victória Vasconcellos Alonso, Maximilian Wanner, and Johandri Wright. Further detailed comments and suggestions were received by Dan Banik, Bladimir Basabe, Marianne Beisheim, Steven Bernstein, Massimo Calamassi, Pamela Chasek, Ines Dombrowsky, Mark Elder, S. Beth Fascitelli, Margarita Gómez, Anna-Katharina Hornidge, Thomas Hickmann, John Izuchukwu, Louis J. Kotzé, Shirin Malekpour, David Obura, Prajal Pradhan, Laura Rahm, Michelle Scobie, Carole-Anne Sénit, Muhammad Faisal Sharif, and Cleo Verkuijl. Frank Biermann, Guilherme de Queiroz Stein, Mara Wendebourg and Fronika de Wit have led the process and edited the final version of this Statement.

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