

The Sustainable Development Goals

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are a vital outcome for the United Nations in pursuing equitable socioeconomic development. The SDGs are at the core of the 2030 Agenda that world leaders agreed on in 2015. There are 17 SDGs grouped under the five areas of People, Planet, Prosperity, Peace and Partnership. To measure progress towards the SDGs, Member States agreed to a total of 231 separate indicators. Tracking progress for all indicators in all countries is a substantial task.

The Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN), founded by Prof. Jeffrey Sachs, has developed a methodology to analyze existing data to provide a comprehensive overview of progress towards the SDGs. On 14 June 2021¹, SDSN published its latest progress rankings towards the SDGs in its Sustainable Development Report 2021. The top-ranking countries are all found among developed countries, with Finland taking over from Sweden as the top-ranked country, having reached around 86% of SDG achievement. At the bottom, the Central African Republic is only about 38% of the way there.

While internationally comparable data is becoming slowly available, the 2021 report already shows a reversion of previously-achieved progress due to COVID-19. This reversal on development progress is occurring for the first time and is particularly noticeable in lower-middle-income countries.

Are the SDGs relevant to development in current circumstances?

First, the JEP panelists gave their views on the usefulness of the SDGs as an objective before the 2030 deadline. The overwhelming majority of respondents (88%) was optimistic about the SDGs as an instrument, even if many of those who responded positively believed that pursuing the complete achievement of the SDGs may not be realistic. For example, **Keenan Falconer**, Research Economist, points out:

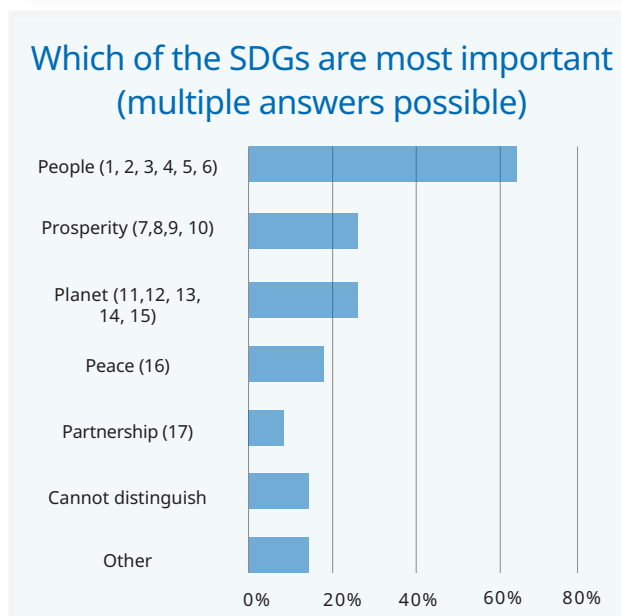
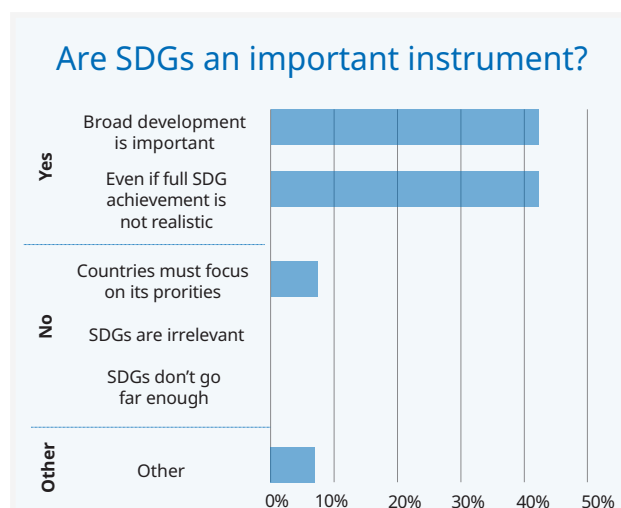
“ [Not all] SDGs may be achieved in the current timeline, especially with the COVID-19 pandemic hindering progress, but I believe they are still worthwhile targets to spend the next decade trying to achieve to the best extent possible. Perhaps the focus could shift, on an individual country level, to the goals which currently have the least progress, to bring them up to a more acceptable benchmark, rather than trying to meet all targets by 2030.

– **Keenan Falconer**
Research Economist

With the SDGs divided across five key pillars, the panelists voiced which pillars they found most important for achieving long-term sustainable development. Most respondents considered the People-centered SDGs to be critical priorities. These SDGs aim to reduce poverty, eliminate hunger, improve access to health and education, pursue gender equality and guarantee access to safe sanitation. A substantial share of the respondents considered the areas of Prosperity and Planet to be essential. **Abdullahi Abdulkadri**, SDG Focal Point of the ECLAC Subregional Headquarters for the Caribbean, takes a slightly different view:

“ The SDGs are inter-related and cross-cutting. Although in the post-COVID environment special focus should be placed on the People pillar to ensure that no one is left behind, the attainment of the goals under the other 4P’s reinforces the goals under the People pillar. Therefore, as a country pursues its goal of long-term sustainable development, a holistic approach to implementing the SDGs that capitalizes on the multiplier effect of one goal on the others and that addresses the inherent trade-off among goals should be pursued.

– **Abdullahi Abdulkadri**
SDG Focal Point, ECLAC Subregional
Headquarters, Caribbean



¹<https://www.sdqindex.org/reports/sustainable-development-report-2021>

Financial resources and COVID-19 are impeding achievement of 2030 Agenda

Finally, the panelists responded to a question about the primary impediments to realizing the 2030 Agenda. Nearly all respondents believe that a lack of fiscal space is the main constricting factor for achieving the SDGs before 2030. In concert with the fiscal-space constraint, many panelists believe the obstacles imposed by COVID-19, which has affected economic growth and financial resources for many governments, are also an impediment to attaining the 2030 Agenda.

Dr. Patrice Whitely, Lecturer at the University of the West Indies (UWI), Mona argues that COVID-19 may have affected the timeline. Still, it has also increased the urgency of the 2030 Agenda:

“ COVID-related health and economic challenges make the timeline unrealistic at this point. However, we should still work towards the goals, even if the timeline needs extending. COVID-19 has made issues such as poverty, hunger, health, and equality, more urgent than ever.

– **Dr. Patrice Whitely**,
Lecturer, UWI, Mona

Several panelists pointed out that the COVID-19 impact has (necessarily) affected priorities for many governments, especially those with limited fiscal space. Unfortunately, it has been necessary to make hard choices; consequently, some governments do not always prioritize SDG investments. **Dr. Andre Haughton**, Senior Lecturer at UWI, Mona, put forward a noteworthy viewpoint:

“ There is not a lack of will, but rather a lack of know-how. Small countries face productivity challenges, which is a private-sector resource allocation issue, in which governments have to play a role.

– **Dr. Andre Haughton**,
Senior Lecturer, UWI, Mona

What are the impediments to achieving the 2030 Agenda (multiple answers possible)

