

Challenges & Risks to Achievement of United Nations SDGs

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Kazakhstan has been ahead in global terms on the broad principal of recognising the importance of the SDGs, with Local content activities evidencing that. The Aktau Declaration of Joint Actions took a year to negotiate a 2-page document. It was established to coordinate the local content activities of the foreign oil and gas operators. The purpose was to strengthen the professional skills and Industrial Base of Kazakhstan, and to coordinate the activities of companies and citizens of Kazakhstan so that they can benefit from oil and gas projects as a strategy to develop indigenous capability in the sector. This included the attraction of joint ventures with technology transfer as being a key objective.

Whilst today is about a Eurasian regional set of needs, the visions advanced are global. Some takeaways that have resonated have included that the United Nations principal contribution should not be more than that of an agenda-setting body, and then to generally step aside and play a role more that of an observer than that of being a manager of the process. It has also been noted that whilst practical implementation is key, more emphasis should include success stories than is currently the case.

Another observation noted is that we are headed towards being an ageing society. Whilst this is correct, it itself misses an additional challenge. What we have is an adverse situation; that of youth unemployment worldwide. Skills training is an example of part of the solution, but it has to be broadcast loud and clear that youth unemployment globally on the scale it is is a disaster in the making and be of major concern.

Contributors have expressed the concern that there are too many Sustainable Development Goals, and achieving more with less is the solution. Should that indeed be the case, would not a solution be to have individual countries select which of the SDGs they wish to focus attention as being their core focus, and then to be judged on the performance of achieving those goals rather than being judged on the overall current package of 17 SDGs?

Devised in 2015, urgent consideration for a post-2030 strategy is a must, The challenge is not whether the Sustainable Development Goals remain relevant, but whether the international community is willing to match ambition with measurable action. Today we are where we are, so whilst establishing a course for the future must always be in our sights, delivery on what we have today must be an imperative target.

Genuine progress requires moving beyond declarations and toward practical implementation: investing in infrastructure, healthcare, education, agriculture, climate resilience, digital connectivity, and gender equality, while holding institutions accountable for real-world results. Only through measurable outputs, transparent governance, and sustained collaboration can the SDGs fulfil their promise of creating a fairer, more resilient, and more sustainable global order.

Ultimately, the SDGs remain both necessary and achievable, but they require urgent acceleration, with stronger leadership and measurable accountability. Their value lies not simply in setting ambitious goals, but in creating a framework through which governments, businesses, and communities can align with practical outcomes. Their future effectiveness will depend on whether implementation focuses on transparent metrics and long-term resilience, with locally driven partnerships capable of delivering measurable improvements in livelihoods, governance, equality, sustainability, and economic opportunity.

SDG-aligned programmes must be tangible with data-driven results that demonstrate real improvements in people's lives. One of the greatest strengths of SDGs is their ability to integrate public, private, and civil-society actors around shared objectives. Effective stakeholder engagement requires continuous dialogue, participatory evaluation, grievance mechanisms, and public reporting frameworks. Communities particularly must be treated not as passive beneficiaries, but as active partners whose feedback directly shapes implementation.

The guiding themes at the heart of improving the effectiveness of SDGs is the essential need for investors, whether corporate, multilateral or governmental to embrace and insist upon social responsibility programmes be built into every form of investment. Plainly put, corporate investors need to move from "We encourage sustainability" to "Capital is conditional on SDG- aligned performance." Ditto for governments; make it mandatory that any award goes hand in hand with SDG / Corporate Responsibility adoption.

Community participation is central to this process. Local participation ensuring communities have a direct role in shaping projects that affect their future should also be prudent. Development initiatives are most effective when they reflect local priorities and involve citizens directly in decision-making. So underlying every aspect is stakeholder engagement.

I have been asked to address the risks and challenges to the SDGs. The risk is not the implementing of SDG delivery; the challenge is how to successfully deliver. The SDG agenda suffers from policy overload and fragmentation. 17 goals and 169 targets dilute prioritisation. Governments and donors cherry-pick easier or more measurable targets while underinvesting in politically difficult ones such as inequality, institutional reform, environmental regulation and so on. The SDGs were designed to end poverty, protect the environment, and improve wellbeing by 2030. In practice, progress has been uneven and many targets are off track. The reasons are structural rather than simply technical.

The massive financing gap of delivery, especially in low-income and fragile states, requires trillions of dollars annually. Domestic revenue mobilisation in many states is weak, while external finance has not scaled to match ambition. Debt burdens in parts of Africa and the Global South are a further constrain forcing governments to prioritise short-term stability over long-term development investment.

Weak enforcement and voluntary commitment not locking the SDGs into legally binding should be of prime consideration leading up to 2030. Individual states own their agenda which encourages broad participation, but means there are no penalties for underperformance. Everyone agrees with the goals, but incentives to deliver them are uneven and often subordinated to national political scenarios.

Conflict and fragility are a major constraint. A significant share of extreme poverty is now concentrated in fragile or conflict-affected settings. In such contexts, SDG delivery is often impossible to implement because basic governance, security, and infrastructure are absent. Development programming becomes reactive and humanitarian rather than transformational. Governance and capacity constraints, with many states lacking the administrative systems, statistical capacity, or implementation machinery to translate SDG commitments into effective programmes must be factored in. Weak data systems make it difficult to track progress accurately, especially in rural or informal economies. I know this only too well as I am in the midst of concluding a programme for a central African state which has all the hallmarks of a state in real need across the board.

Finally, there is a deeper issue of global political economy and uneven incentives. Trade systems, investment flows, and intellectual property regimes do not always align with SDG priorities. Private capital tends to opt for lower-risk, higher-return environments, leaving the most development needy for regions underinvested.

In short, the SDGs have not failed in design, but they are being implemented in a world shaped by fiscal constraints, geopolitical fragmentation, conflict, climate stress, and weak enforcement mechanisms. The gap between ambition and delivery is largely a reflection of these structural realities rather than a lack of consensus on the goals themselves.

Addressing the risk component, delivering on the SDGs is not just a question of scaling up effort; it also creates a set of political, economic, and institutional risks. Many of these risks come from trade-offs between speed, equity, feasibility, with the local context.

Fiscal stress and debt accumulation is a major risk. Many SDG-aligned investments, health systems, infrastructure, energy transition, all require large upfront capital. In low and middle-income countries, this often translates into borrowing. If growth returns are slower than expected, countries can end up in debt distress, reducing long-term development capacity and increasing reliance on external creditors or conditional financing.

There is also the risk of misallocation and inefficient spending. Because the SDGs are broad and numerous, governments and donors spread resources too thinly or prioritise easily measurable targets over high impact but complex reforms such as focusing on school enrolment rather than education quality.

Already touched upon, but a related issue is governance strain and institutional overload. Implementing SDG programmes requires coordination across ministries, levels of government, and often international partners. In weak administrative systems, this can overwhelm capacity, increase duplication, and weaken accountability, especially where statistical systems are limited and monitoring is weak.

Political economy backlash is another key risk. Some SDG-related policies, such as subsidy reform, land-use regulation, taxation changes, or climate policies, create clear winners and losers. If costs are concentrated, governments can face resistance or policy reversal. There are also measurement and accountability risks. The SDGs rely heavily on indicators, but data gaps can lead to distorted policy decisions.

Another risk is aid and with the resulting regrettable dependency. Heavy reliance on external financing and technical assistance can undermine domestic policy ownership or create

parallel systems that bypass state institutions. Over time, this can weaken institutional development rather than strengthen it.

Finally, there is the risk of exacerbating inequality or exclusion if poorly implemented. Broad development programmes can unintentionally favour urban areas, politically connected groups, or regions with better administrative capacity, leaving marginalised or remote populations further behind. In essence, SDG delivery is not only a technical scaling challenge but a high-stakes transformation process. The risks arise because achieving the goals requires altering fiscal systems, energy structures, land use, labour markets, and governance arrangements simultaneously, often in already constrained or fragile contexts.

Far be it for me to suggest how governments or corporates manage their affairs, but to implement their programmes effectively I would urge the establishment of a dedicated team within their respective organizations, to comprise individuals with expertise in community engagement, project management, and relevant sector knowledge, and to create an advisory board made up of local community representatives, experts, and stakeholders to provide insights and guidance on project implementation and community needs.

Initiating pilot projects to test ideas and approaches before full-scale implementation and focus on capacity building & empowering local communities by providing training and resources that will build skills and capacity for sustainable development. And with reporting and transparency, create transparent reporting mechanisms to communicate outcomes, challenges, and financial expenditures to stakeholders, involve the community in the evaluation process and report-back findings with their input as to how shaping of the programme has advanced.

Ultimately, delivering the SDGs requires stronger cooperation and political leadership. The goals were never simply a development agenda; they are a test of responsibility and collective action. Success depends on being able to address one core question: Have people's lives improved? To what extent has poverty, climate change, conflict and inequality, with each being interconnected challenges requiring integrated solutions succeeded? Answer that and then we can say we have advanced.

I urge the international community to take note, intensify, and renew commitment to implementation efforts of the Sustainable Development Goals. I echo the astute remarks of Ghana's Foreign Minister, "A country's future cannot be built abroad; it must begin at home." So it is to the practical delivery of SDGs that we must focus.