COMMENTARY | GLOBAL DEVELOPMENT

Not SDGs 2.0

Building a Delivery Architecture for After 2030

The world does not need SDGs 2.0. It needs a system that turns political ambition into financed, measurable, and accountable delivery.

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18 November 2026

As 2030 approaches, the international community faces an uncomfortable question. Not whether the Sustainable Development Goals mattered. They did. Nor whether their ambitions still matter. They do. The 17 Goals gave the world a common language linking poverty, health, education, and economic opportunity with inequality, climate, biodiversity, institutions, and peace. They made one point clear: sustainable development is universal, not an environmental niche or a problem for poorer countries.

The harder question is whether the answer to 2030 is another set of goals. The pressure will be strong. Governments will debate whether to retain, reduce, or reorganize the 17. AI, demographic change, geopolitical fragmentation, and other emerging challenges will demand attention. But the debate starts in the wrong place.

The weakness of the present system is not a lack of ambition. It is the lack of a delivery architecture to match it. Governments have accepted commitments without always identifying the resources to meet them. International organizations coordinate and report but are not always tested against their own delivery. Development banks finance SDG-related projects while sitting largely outside the accountability system. Companies increasingly speak the language of sustainability, while the line between alignment, spending, and measurable impact remains blurred.

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The result is familiar: everyone supports sustainable development, but when delivery fails, responsibility becomes hard to find. That should be the starting point after 2030. The world does not need SDGs 2.0. It needs a system that turns political ambition into financed, measurable, and accountable delivery.

From Ambition to Execution

It would be wrong to dismiss the SDGs because many targets will be missed. Wars, pandemics, debt distress, climate shocks, and economic disruption have changed the

landscape since 2015. Any serious assessment must recognize that. But external shocks cannot explain every failure. The deeper problem is institutional.

The framework is precise about what the world wants to achieve. It is far less precise about who must deliver, who must pay, what falls to national governments and what falls to international institutions, how impact will be measured, or what happens when an explicit undertaking is repeatedly ignored. Recognizing that weakness does not diminish the SDGs. It shows what the next generation must add. The successor should look less like another declaration and more like a Global Sustainable Development Delivery Compact. The principle is simple: every significant commitment should have an owner, a delivery plan, a financing proposition, measurable milestones, and credible evidence of performance.

THE DELIVERY COMPACT: FIVE TESTS FOR EVERY SIGNIFICANT COMMITMENT

1. An owner
2. A delivery plan
3. A financing proposition
4. Measurable milestones
5. Credible evidence of performance

This is not about turning development into a rigid contract. Governments differ in capacity, politics, and economic conditions. Crises happen. Policies fail. Finance arrives late or not at all. But flexibility is not the same as ambiguity. If nobody can say who owned a commitment, how it would be financed, or what was due by when, there was never a meaningful delivery system.

Put Accountability Where the Power Lies

Shared responsibility too easily becomes diluted responsibility. Take a major infrastructure project. A government may own regulatory reform. A development bank may finance it. An international institution may provide technical assistance. A company may build and operate the asset. A local authority may oversee delivery on the ground. If the project fails, each actor can point to another. The answer is not to pretend that one institution controls everything. It does not. The answer is differentiated responsibility.

“Shared responsibility too easily becomes diluted responsibility.”

Governments should answer for the policies, budgets, and reforms they control. International institutions should answer for the assistance and coordination they promise. Development banks should answer for financing commitments and the outcomes associated with their capital. Companies should answer for contracted investment and operations. Local governments should answer where delivery is genuinely local. Tougher, yes—but also fairer.

Developing countries should not carry the blame for outcomes that depended on international finance that was promised but never arrived. Equally, international institutions should not be blamed when governments refuse agreed domestic reforms. Accountability has to run both ways.

No Exemptions for Multilateral Institutions

No institution should be inside the system when credit is being claimed and outside it when responsibility is assigned. That includes the United Nations. The UN should remain custodian of the universal framework and an indispensable convener. Supporting multilateralism does not mean exempting multilateral institutions from showing what they delivered.

Countries are repeatedly asked what they have delivered. The UN system should be ready to answer the same question. What assistance was promised? What arrived? What resources were mobilized? Where did agencies overlap? Where was support late? What measurable result can reasonably be linked to the intervention? Accountability would strengthen institutional legitimacy, not weaken it.

If It Is a Priority, Fund It

Finance is where the argument becomes harder. The international community has become used to agreeing on ambitions first and asking who will pay later. If sustainable development is genuinely a national priority, that commitment must show up in the budget. This is not an argument for a single spending target across countries. Fiscal capacity, debt, demographics, and development needs differ enormously. Nor should every school, hospital, or road suddenly be relabeled as SDG spending. The principle is simpler: there should be no national sustainable development commitment without an identifiable national financial commitment.

Governments already work this way in other areas of strategic policy. When an objective is fundamental to national security or economic stability, requirements are assessed, institutions are assigned responsibility, and spending is programmed over several years. Development and defence are not equivalent. But strategic priorities require strategic resources. A government signing an international commitment on poverty, education, infrastructure, or resilience should be able to say what it will spend to deliver it.

That puts finance ministries at the centre of the post-2030 system. Too often, sustainability sits mainly with planning, development, or environment ministries, while finance ministries control the decisions that determine whether implementation happens. A National Sustainable Development Delivery Plan should therefore come with a budget statement.

What outcome is being pursued? What will it cost? What will be financed domestically? What external support is required? What private investment can realistically be mobilized? What gap remains? Those questions would turn a general appeal for more development finance into an identifiable financing proposition. Here is what we intend to achieve. Here is the cost. Here is what we will fund ourselves. Here is what we need from partners. Here is

the gap. That is far more useful than discovering years later that the resources never matched the ambition.

Development Banks Must Sit at the Centre

The same logic applies to the multilateral development banks. A global development agenda without an integrated financing system is a statement of intent, not an implementation strategy. The World Bank Group, the regional development banks, and other development finance institutions have the capital, expertise, and risk-management capability to sit at the centre of the next framework. For major priorities, financing propositions should be built at the start—not after the commitments have been agreed.

Sometimes that will mean direct lending. Elsewhere, guarantees, concessional resources, blended finance, or project preparation will matter more. The distinction matters because the problem is not always a shortage of capital. Pension funds, insurers, sovereign wealth funds, companies, and asset managers control vast resources. The problem is often that development needs have not been turned into investable projects at an acceptable level of risk.

A country can need billions of dollars of water, transport, or energy investment without having billions of dollars of projects ready for an investor to finance. Project preparation matters as much as capital mobilization. So do guarantees. Currency, political, and regulatory risks can make an economically useful project commercially unattractive. Public institutions do not always need to finance the whole asset; sometimes their highest-value role is to absorb specific risks and unlock much larger pools of private capital. Development banks should then be judged on the development generated by the capital they deploy.

Business Cannot Remain at the Margins

The private sector also needs a serious place in the post-2030 architecture. This is not about transferring public responsibilities to business or allowing commercial incentives to set development priorities. It is about recognizing that companies hold much of the capital, technology, infrastructure, logistics, employment, and management capability needed to implement policy. The question to business should no longer be mainly “How much will you donate?” It should be “Which development outcomes can you deliver profitably, responsibly, and at scale?”

Mineral development in Africa shows the commercial logic. Environmental damage, poor labor practices, corruption, and community conflict are not only ethical failures; they create operational, regulatory, financial, and reputational risk. Credible environmental, social, and governance (ESG) standards can improve access to finance and markets and protect the social license on which major projects depend.

A lead investor should therefore expect joint-venture partners to meet measurable sustainability standards. Whether the partner is Chinese, Indian, European, or African is beside the point. Nationality is not the test. Governance is. The tools are familiar: contractual obligations, performance indicators, independent audit, environmental management, anti-

corruption standards, community engagement, and clear remedies for breach. The principle extends well beyond mining.

Corporate claims should likewise be tied to demonstrable outcomes, not broad statements of SDG alignment. Governments, for their part, have to make participation commercially possible: clearer regulation, credible project pipelines, workable procurement, and sensible risk-sharing. Private capital will not move at scale simply because it is asked to be responsible. It needs something credible to invest in.

A stronger role for business also requires proportionality. Micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises are central to jobs, production, and local value chains across much of the world. They cannot absorb reporting systems designed for multinationals. A badly designed sustainability regime risks producing the opposite of inclusion: large companies become ever better at compliance, while smaller firms face higher barriers to finance, procurement, and global supply chains. Smaller firms need simpler reporting, digital tools, affordable certification, and help entering sustainable supply chains. Larger companies have obligations too. They should not meet their own ESG commitments by pushing cost and risk down the chain. Anchor companies should help suppliers acquire technology, finance, and transition capacity. Sustainable supply chains should be partnerships, not compliance cascades.

Measure What Changed, Not What Happened

The next system must confront another weakness: international development is still better at recording activity than proving effectiveness. Money spent is not an outcome. A conference is not an outcome. A published strategy is not an outcome. Even a completed project does not prove that the intended development result was achieved.

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The questions should be harder. What changed? Why? Who benefited, and who did not? What did it cost? What would have happened anyway? Will the result last? Did success in one area create unacceptable damage elsewhere? If employment rises after a program begins, policymakers should at least try to establish how much of that increase can reasonably be attributed to the program. The same standard should apply to companies. Putting an SDG logo on an investment does not prove that it created additional public value.

Measurement has to move from association to evidence. That shift costs money. Statistical systems, digital infrastructure, evaluation, independent audit, and project preparation are not free. International institutions cannot demand ever more sophisticated evidence from countries without helping to finance the systems that produce it. Measurement should be budgeted alongside delivery.

Accountability Should Correct Failure

Any delivery system eventually reaches the question of consequences. Accountability without consequences can become reporting with a sharper name. But crude penalties for countries that miss development targets would be wrong. Governments do not control every external shock. Citizens should not lose essential support because a war disrupted trade, a pandemic overwhelmed health services, or promised international finance failed to arrive.

The key distinction is between failing to achieve an outcome and failing to honour a specific commitment within an actor's reasonable control. If a government repeatedly refuses an agreed reform, it should answer for that. If a development bank promises finance once agreed conditions are met and then fails to provide it, the bank should answer for that. If a company receives a public guarantee or procurement advantage in return for measurable outcomes and knowingly fails to deliver, contractual consequences may be appropriate.

When implementation slips, the first response should be diagnosis. Was the program badly designed? Was funding inadequate? Did capacity fail? Did a partner not deliver? Did circumstances change? The sequence should be: diagnose, correct, support, reassess. Stronger consequences should be reserved for repeated, attributable, and unjustified failure. That is more defensible than fining countries for missing the SDGs.

Make Accountability Local

Sustainable development also needs to be visible to the people it is meant to serve. International debate happens at the level of governments and global institutions. Development happens somewhere: in a school, a hospital, an industrial district, a city, a village, a transport system, or a river basin. National averages can hide serious local failure.

A country can improve access to clean water while particular communities remain excluded. Employment can rise nationally while one region experiences prolonged decline. The accountability chain should therefore run from global objectives to national programs, and from national programs to local outcomes. That matters politically as well as administratively. Citizens should be able to ask why a particular authority failed to deliver clean water, reliable transport, waste collection, or adequate housing. Local accountability makes sustainable development democratic, not merely diplomatic.

A Permanent System Must Be Able to Adapt

The period since 2015 has shown how quickly the world can change. A pandemic, geopolitical conflict, debt pressure, artificial intelligence, and accelerating climate impacts have transformed the conditions in which the SDGs are pursued. The next framework should not lock itself into another 15- or 20-year implementation plan on the assumption that conditions will remain broadly stable. Keep the long-term objectives. Make the route adaptable.

Five-year delivery cycles could provide that flexibility. Governments and international institutions would periodically reassess evidence, financing conditions, technology, performance, and emerging risks. Strategies could change without abandoning the

destination. The destination stays; the route evolves. International reviews should change with it. The current system has created valuable opportunities for countries to present progress. Its successor should focus more sharply on delivery: What was promised? What resources were allocated? What happened? What did not? Why? What changes now? Review should be part of an implementation cycle, not an event that ends when the meeting does.

"The destination stays; the route evolves."

Start Before 2030

There is no reason to wait for the present framework to expire. Governments can test national delivery contracts. Development banks can pilot mission-financing agreements. Cities can build local delivery arrangements. Companies can test contribution plans. Statistical agencies can experiment with better ways to evaluate outcomes.

The UN could also test a system-wide account of what international institutions promised and what they delivered. The sequencing matters. The conventional model is to negotiate a framework, launch it, and discover during implementation what does not work. A better sequence is to experiment, measure, refine, negotiate, and then institutionalize. That would let the next global agreement draw on institutional experience rather than on diplomatic theory alone.

The international community should not reach 2030 and conclude that the SDGs were a mistake. They were not. Their achievement was to create a common global understanding of sustainable development and to make it politically harder to argue that prosperity can be separated indefinitely from social inclusion, institutional quality, and environmental sustainability. But the next generation has to go further.

The first era established the destination. The next must build the machinery to reach it:

- Budgets behind commitments
- Finance ministries alongside sustainability ministries
- International institutions accountable for what they promise
- Development banks judged by the development their capital generates
- Business treated as an accountable economic partner, not mainly a philanthropic supporter
- Smaller firms protected from disproportionate burdens
- Outcomes measured instead of activity celebrated

QUESTIONS FOR THE POST-2030 NEGOTIATIONS

Post-2030 negotiations should begin with different questions.

1. Who is responsible?

2. What must be delivered?
3. What will it cost?
4. What will the national government provide?
5. What will international institutions provide?
6. Where can private capital participate?
7. What should have changed within five years?
8. How will we know?
9. And if it has not changed, what happens next?

If those questions cannot be answered, we have not built a delivery architecture. We have written another declaration. The SDGs told the world where it should go. The harder task after 2030 is to establish who will take it there, who will finance the journey, how progress will be judged, and who will answer when commitments are not honoured.

The credibility of the next settlement will not depend on the elegance of its language. It will depend on whether governments fund it, institutions deliver it, capital backs it, and people's lives improve as a result. The world does not need another promise to the future. It needs a credible way to deliver the promises already made.