

Where We Actually Stand at Halftime: An Independent SDG Midpoint Accountability Report

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Published: August 15, 2023

ABSTRACT

Advocacy Unified Network (AUN) | Opus Publica

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An Independent SDG Midpoint Accountability Report

Abstract

Historical Note: This paper was prepared in August 2023 as an assessment of global progress at the halfway point of the 2030 Agenda and in advance of the SDG Summit held on 18–19 September 2023. The analysis reflects evidence publicly available up to the stated analytical cut-off of 31 August 2023. The paper is published as a historical research assessment and does not retrospectively incorporate subsequent developments into its contemporaneous findings.

As the international community approaches the midpoint of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, this independent assessment provides a comprehensive, evidence-based analysis of global progress across all seventeen Sustainable Development Goals. Drawing on data available as of 31 August 2023 from the United Nations Statistical System, the Sustainable Development Solutions Network, the World Bank, and other authoritative sources, this report presents a goal-by-goal evaluation of where the world stands at the halfway mark. The analysis reveals a sobering picture: among the globally assessable SDG targets with sufficient trend data, approximately 15 percent are on track or have met their targets, approximately 48 percent are moderately or severely off track, and approximately 37 percent are stagnating or regressing. The cascading impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, rising inflation, and the climate crisis have undermined advances across virtually every Goal. This report was prepared by the Advocacy Unified Network (AUN) through the Opus Publica academic publishing platform in the period preceding the 2023 SDG Summit, with the intention of informing the Political Declaration and the deliberations of Heads of State and Government during UNGA High-Level Week. The SDG Impact Mapper, developed by AUN Digital, was used as a visualisation and synthesis tool in preparing this assessment.

Keywords: Sustainable Development Goals; midpoint accountability; SDG Summit 2023; independent assessment; 2030 Agenda; global monitoring

1. Introduction

In September 2015, all 193 United Nations Member States adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, committing to seventeen interconnected Sustainable Development Goals that seek to end poverty, protect the planet, and ensure prosperity for all by 2030[1]. Eight years on, the world arrives at a critical juncture: the midpoint of the implementation timeline. This moment demands not celebration but candour. The purpose of this report is to provide an independent, evidence-based assessment of global progress toward the SDGs at this halfway mark—a clear-eyed account of where the international community actually stands. This paper provides an independent civil-society assessment drawing primarily on publicly available evidence from international organisations, supplemented by the authors' analytical interpretation.

This assessment is particularly timely. On 18–19 September 2023, Heads of State and Government will convene at United Nations Headquarters in New York for the second SDG Summit, held under the auspices of the 78th session of the United Nations General Assembly[2]. The Summit will adopt a Political Declaration intended to reinvigorate global commitment to the Goals. Yet the quality of that Declaration, and the ambition of the commitments it contains, will depend critically on the quality of information available to delegates and their advisors as they negotiate its text. The official UN assessment, *The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2023: Special Edition*, released in July 2023, provides an essential foundation[3]. However, a robust accountability architecture requires multiple, independent assessments that can challenge, complement, and enrich the official picture. This report is intended to serve precisely that function.

Published by the Advocacy Unified Network (AUN) through the Opus Publica academic publishing platform, this report is prepared in the period preceding the 2023 SDG Summit. The SDG Impact Mapper, a data visualisation and synthesis tool developed by AUN Digital, was used to integrate and visualise SDG indicator data from multiple sources in preparing this assessment[4]. This report proceeds as follows: Section 2 establishes the methodological framework; Section 3 presents goal-by-goal findings; Section 4 analyses cross-cutting themes; Section 5 addresses limitations; and Section 6 offers conclusions and recommendations.

This paper contributes to the SDG accountability literature in several respects. Existing midpoint assessments, most notably the UN DESA Sustainable Development Goals Report 2023: Special Edition[3] and the Sustainable Development Solutions Network's Sustainable Development Report 2023[10], provide essential official and semi-official baselines for evaluating target-level trends. Independent civil society monitoring, such as the SDG16 Data Initiative[53] and the TAP Network's Halfway to 2030 report[56], offers valuable complementary assessment but has typically been confined to individual Goals or thematic clusters. The analysis in this paper adds a cross-SDG synthesis that integrates goal-level quantitative trend data with qualitative evidence on implementation environments, accountability mechanisms, and financing constraints. By systematically connecting the empirical evidence on each Goal to the broader structural factors, including the cascading crisis effects of 2020–2023, the persistent financing deficit, and the limitations of the global accountability architecture, this assessment seeks to provide an integrated analytical framework that is not available in single-Goal or institutionally siloed assessments. The paper complements existing monitoring by offering an independent, cross-goal synthesis grounded entirely in evidence available within the defined analytical period.

2. Methodological Framework and Data Sources

2.1 Analytical Approach

This report employs a mixed-methods analytical framework that combines quantitative indicator analysis with qualitative assessment of policy environments and implementation challenges. The quantitative component draws on the global SDG indicator framework, which comprises 231 unique indicators across the 17 Goals

and their 169 targets[5]. For each Goal, we assess progress drawing on the trend-based methodology employed by the UN Statistical System. The 2023 SDG Progress Chart classifies target-level trends into four broad categories: on track or target met; progress evident but acceleration required; stagnation or regression since 2015; and insufficient data for trend assessment. This classification is based on trend data between the 2015 baseline year and the most recent available data point, which in most cases corresponds to 2021 or 2022[6]. Where the authors' assessment differs from the UN classification—for example, in distinguishing stagnation from active regression—this is explicitly noted and attributed to the authors' interpretation of the underlying evidence. The unit of analysis is the global SDG target, assessed where data permit; regional and national variations are noted where relevant but do not constitute the primary level of analysis.

The qualitative component integrates findings from Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) submitted by Member States to the High-Level Political Forum, thematic assessments produced by civil society organisations, and peer-reviewed academic literature. The VNR process, while voluntary and self-reported, provides granular national-level insights into implementation challenges, policy innovations, and stakeholder engagement practices that aggregate-level data alone cannot capture[7]. By triangulating quantitative trend data with qualitative evidence from national reporting and independent research, this assessment seeks to provide a more nuanced and textured account of SDG progress than either data source could yield independently.

To ensure analytical consistency and reproducibility, the following decision rules guided the assessment. First, evidence was selected and prioritised according to source authority: official UN statistical publications and data from specialised agencies were treated as primary sources; data from accredited research institutions and peer-reviewed literature served as supplementary evidence; and civil society reports were used where they provided the only available evidence on a particular indicator or where they offered essential qualitative context. Second, the classification of progress for each Goal draws directly on the UN SDG Progress Chart 2023[6] for target-level trend categorisations. Where the authors' assessment diverges from the Progress Chart classification, for example, in distinguishing active regression from stagnation, or in interpreting the significance of data gaps, this is explicitly noted and attributed to the authors' interpretation. Third, where quantitative evidence from different sources yields conflicting figures (for example, differences between the JMP and the SDG Indicators database on baseline water access figures), both figures are reported with an explanatory note identifying the source of the discrepancy. Fourth, the analysis distinguishes three layers of assessment: (a) official classifications, reported using language such as 'according to the UN's 2023 assessment' or 'the Progress Chart classifies'; (b) evidence synthesis, reported using language such as 'the available evidence indicates' or 'the data synthesised in this analysis suggests'; and (c) the authors' analytical interpretation, reported using language such as 'in the authors' assessment' or 'the authors interpret this pattern as.' This three-layer distinction is maintained throughout the paper to enable readers to evaluate the evidential basis for each claim.

2.2 The SDG Impact Mapper

A distinguishing feature of this report is its use of the SDG Impact Mapper, a data visualisation and analysis tool developed by AUN Digital. The SDG Impact Mapper is designed to integrate SDG indicator data from multiple sources, apply trend analysis, and generate interactive visualisations that reveal patterns, interlinkages, and gaps across the full spectrum of the 17 Goals[8]. Within AUN's broader digital ecosystem, the Mapper functions as the measurement endpoint of an integrated advocacy cycle: PolicyPulse AI feeds legislative intelligence, AdvocacyOS structures campaign responses, and the SDG Impact Mapper measures and visualises the outcomes of policy actions on SDG-related indicators[9]. For this report, the SDG Impact Mapper was used as a visualisation and analytical synthesis tool. The underlying trend classifications and quantitative evidence presented in this paper are derived primarily from the cited international and

institutional sources. The Mapper assisted in organising and visualising these data to reveal patterns and interlinkages across the 17 Goals.

2.3 Data Sources and Limitations

The primary data sources for this assessment include: The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2023: Special Edition prepared by UN DESA[3]; the Sustainable Development Report 2023 published by the UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN)[10]; the World Bank's SDG Atlas[11]; the Tracking SDG7: The Energy Progress Report 2023 jointly published by IEA, IRENA, UNSD, World Bank, and WHO[12]; and the 2023 Voluntary National Reports submitted to the HLPF[13]. Supplementary data has been drawn from UN specialised agencies, including the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the World Health Organization (WHO), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), and the International Labour Organization (ILO).

Several data limitations should be acknowledged at the outset. First, of the 169 SDG targets, approximately 138 have sufficient data for trend assessment in the 2023 Progress Chart, with approximately 31 targets lacking sufficient data[3,6]. Second, the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted data collection in many countries, meaning that the most recent available data for some indicators predates 2020. Third, aggregate global data can mask significant within-country and between-country disparities; where possible, this report draws attention to these disparities, but the scope of the analysis necessarily prioritises global-level trends. Fourth, the SDG Impact Mapper's visualisations are constrained by the availability and quality of underlying data; where data gaps exist, the Mapper's outputs reflect these limitations rather than resolving them.

3. Goal-by-Goal Assessment of Midpoint Progress

3.1 SDG 1: No Poverty — Set Back by Crises

The eradication of extreme poverty (Target 1.1) was one of the most celebrated success stories of the pre-2020 era. Between 1990 and 2019, the number of people living in extreme poverty fell from nearly 2 billion to approximately 700 million[14]. The COVID-19 pandemic reversed an estimated three to four years of progress. According to the UN's 2023 assessment, if current trends continue, approximately 575 million people will still be living in extreme poverty in 2030, and only about one-third of countries will meet the target of halving national poverty levels by that year[15]. The expansion of social protection during the pandemic was unprecedented, yet over 4 billion people remain entirely without social protection coverage, leaving them exposed to future shocks[16]. Developing countries, particularly least developed countries (LDCs) and small island developing states (SIDS), have been disproportionately affected, with government spending on essential services such as education, health, and social protection significantly lower than in advanced economies. The data suggests that, without a fundamental acceleration in poverty reduction efforts—including substantially expanded social protection floors and targeted investments in vulnerable regions—the world will fall far short of the commitment to end poverty in all its forms by 2030.

3.2 SDG 2: Zero Hunger — A Regressing Goal

Progress on SDG 2 has not merely stalled but has gone into reverse. The prevalence of undernourishment increased from approximately 8.0 percent in 2015 to approximately 9.2 percent in 2022, affecting an estimated 735 million people—a rise of approximately 122 million compared to the 2019 baseline[17]. The number of people facing moderate to severe food insecurity escalated dramatically, reaching an estimated 2.4 billion in 2022, an increase of nearly 400 million compared to 2019[17]. These figures represent a substantial reversal: according to the evidence synthesised in this analysis, the world has been pushed back roughly 15 years in its fight against hunger. The drivers are multiple and interconnected: the COVID-19

pandemic disrupted food supply chains and erased livelihoods; the war in Ukraine disrupted global grain and fertiliser markets, driving up food prices; and climate-related extreme weather events have devastated agricultural production in vulnerable regions. Available data on food security trends reveal a pattern of particular concern: while some regions, notably East and South-East Asia, have maintained progress, Sub-Saharan Africa and parts of South Asia have experienced significant deterioration, widening the gap between regions and undermining the principle of leaving no one behind.

3.3 SDG 3: Good Health and Well-Being — Mixed Progress

Health-related indicators present a mixed picture. Maternal mortality has declined in most regions, although progress remains insufficient to meet the 2030 target of reducing the global maternal mortality ratio to below 70 per 100,000 live births[18]. Child mortality has continued its downward trajectory, with under-five mortality falling from 43 deaths per 1,000 live births in 2015 to approximately 38 in 2021, yet this rate of decline remains inadequate to achieve the target of 25 per 1,000 by 2030[19]. The pandemic exposed and exacerbated weaknesses in health systems worldwide, particularly in low-income countries. While global COVID-19 vaccination coverage reached approximately 70 percent of the population with at least one dose by early 2023, stark disparities persist: as of mid-2023, only about 30 percent of people in low-income countries had received at least one dose, compared to over 75 percent in high-income countries[20]. Non-communicable diseases (NCDs) continue to be the leading cause of death globally, accounting for 74 percent of all deaths annually based on pre-pandemic data[3], and mental health conditions have worsened significantly since 2020. The pandemic's disruption of essential health services—including routine childhood immunisation, tuberculosis treatment, and maternal health services—has created secondary crises that will take years to address.

3.4 SDG 4: Quality Education — A Deepening Learning Crisis

The global learning crisis has intensified. According to UNESCO data published in 2023, approximately 244 million children and youth between the ages of 6 and 18 were out of school globally as of 2021—a figure that had risen by 6 million compared to 2019 estimates[21]. The increase is attributable in part to the exclusion of girls from education in Afghanistan, but also reflects broader disruptions caused by the pandemic, economic distress, and humanitarian crises. Perhaps more troubling than the access gap is the learning gap: even among children who remain in school, learning outcomes have deteriorated significantly. UNESCO estimates that the pandemic generated learning losses equivalent to over a decade of progress in reading proficiency in some low- and middle-income countries[22]. The digital divide has compounded these inequalities: while remote learning technologies provided a lifeline during school closures, an estimated 1.3 billion children lacked access to reliable internet at home, and at least 463 million had no access to any remote learning at all during the pandemic peak[23]. Available data indicate that the education crisis is most acute in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, where infrastructure deficits, teacher shortages, and funding gaps are most severe.

3.5 SDG 5: Gender Equality — Stubborn Gaps Persist

Progress toward gender equality remains unacceptably slow across virtually all indicators. Based on 2018 prevalence data, an estimated 245 million women and girls aged 15 and above experienced physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence in the past year, a figure that has remained essentially unchanged since 2015[24]. Women continue to be underrepresented in political life: as of 2023, women held approximately 26.5 percent of parliamentary seats worldwide, up from 22.3 percent in 2015, but at the observed rate of progress, gender parity in national parliaments will not be achieved for another 130 years[25]. The economic gender gap persists, with women earning approximately 77 cents for every dollar earned by men globally

according to UN Women estimates, and this gap widens significantly for women of colour, women with disabilities, and women in informal employment[26]. The COVID-19 pandemic disproportionately affected women, who experienced greater job losses, increased unpaid care work burdens, and reduced access to sexual and reproductive health services. While some countries have enacted progressive legislation—including measures to address gender-based violence and promote women’s economic participation—implementation gaps remain wide, and funding for gender equality programmes remains a fraction of what is needed.

3.6 SDG 6: Clean Water and Sanitation — Off Track

Access to safely managed drinking water has improved, with the global population using safely managed drinking water services increasing from 70 percent in 2015 to approximately 73 percent in 2022[27]. Note: The UN SDG Indicators platform reports 69 percent for the 2015 baseline; the 1 percentage point difference reflects divergent population data revisions between the JMP and the SDG Indicators database. Both figures are derived from the same underlying household survey data. However, this aggregate figure conceals enormous disparities: 2.2 billion people still lacked safely managed drinking water services in 2022[27], and 3.5 billion people lacked safely managed sanitation services[27]. Open defecation, while declining, remains practised by an estimated 419 million people, predominantly in rural Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. The rate of progress on wastewater treatment is particularly concerning: only an estimated 56 percent of household wastewater is treated safely, and in LDCs, this figure drops to as low as 11 percent[28]. Water stress is increasing due to population growth, urbanisation, and climate change, with an estimated 2.4 billion people living in water-stressed countries in 2020[3]. The financing gap for achieving SDG 6 is estimated at USD 114 billion per year for universal access to safe drinking water, sanitation, and hygiene, yet investment levels fell dramatically short of this target.

3.7 SDG 7: Affordable and Clean Energy — Progress But Not Enough

The Tracking SDG7: The Energy Progress Report 2023, published in June 2023, provides the most comprehensive assessment of energy-related progress. The world is not on track to achieve SDG 7 by 2030. In 2021, approximately 675 million people still lacked access to electricity, and 2.3 billion people continued to rely on polluting fuels and technologies for cooking[12]. While the global population with access to electricity increased from 84 percent in 2010 to approximately 91 percent in 2021, progress has slowed significantly since 2020, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa, where 567 million people in 2021 remained without electricity[29]. On the positive side, renewable energy has continued its strong expansion, accounting for 28.2 percent of global electricity consumption in 2020, and the share of renewables in total final energy consumption has been rising steadily. However, the pace of transition remains far below what is required to meet the 2030 targets. International public financial flows to developing countries in support of clean energy remain insufficient, totalling approximately USD 10.8 billion in 2021, against estimated investment needs of USD 1.4–1.7 trillion between 2022 and 2030 for renewable electricity generation and related infrastructure. Available data on energy access trends reveal a stark divide: while most regions are approaching universal electricity access, Sub-Saharan Africa’s electrification rate must triple to meet the 2030 target.

3.8 SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth — Post-Pandemic Fragility

Global economic growth has been sluggish in the post-pandemic period, undermining progress on decent work. After a modest recovery in 2021, global real GDP growth slowed significantly in 2022 and 2023, weighed down by the war in Ukraine, rising inflation, monetary tightening, and persistent supply chain disruptions[30,58]. Global unemployment was projected at approximately 5.3 percent in 2023[32], still above pre-pandemic levels in many regions, with youth unemployment rates more than double the adult rate in

most countries[31]. Perhaps most critically, informal employment—which affects an estimated 2 billion workers globally—remains pervasive, particularly in developing countries, where the majority of workers lack social protection, decent working conditions, and legal protections[32]. The gender pay gap persists across all regions, and women remain overrepresented in vulnerable and informal employment. The pandemic accelerated automation and digitalisation trends that are reshaping labour markets, creating both opportunities and displacement risks that existing policy frameworks are inadequately prepared to address.

3.9 SDG 9: Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure — Uneven Advances

Progress on industry, innovation, and infrastructure has been uneven across and within regions. Global manufacturing value added as a share of GDP has remained relatively stable at approximately 17 percent since 2015, but manufacturing employment has declined in many middle-income countries due to automation and global value chain disruptions[33]. Mobile broadband access has expanded significantly, with global Internet penetration reaching approximately 66 percent in 2022, up from 49 percent in 2015[34]. However, the digital divide remains profound: an estimated 2.7 billion people—disproportionately in LDCs, landlocked developing countries, and SIDS—still lack Internet access. Research and development (R&D) expenditure as a share of GDP has stagnated globally, and in many developing countries remains below 0.5 percent, far short of the levels needed to drive innovation-led industrial transformation. The pandemic underscored the critical importance of resilient infrastructure and supply chains, yet investment in infrastructure in developing countries continues to lag significantly behind estimated needs.

3.10 SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities — Deepening Divides

Inequality has widened both within and between countries since 2015. The ratio of the average income of the richest 10 percent to the poorest 10 percent of the population stood at approximately 9.3 to 1 across OECD countries in the late 2010s, according to OECD data[35], and is substantially higher in many developing economies. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated income inequality, as the poorest and most vulnerable populations were hit hardest by both the health and economic impacts of the crisis. Between-country inequality, measured by the gap in per capita income between developed and developing countries, has also widened, driven in part by divergent recovery trajectories. Remittance flows to low- and middle-income countries, which serve as a vital lifeline for millions of households, recovered to pre-pandemic levels by 2022, reaching an estimated USD 626 billion, but remain subject to significant volatility and transaction cost barriers[36]. The representation of developing countries in global economic governance institutions remains disproportionately low, limiting their ability to influence the rules and policies that shape global economic outcomes. These diverging trajectories highlight the degree to which the “leaving no one behind” principle remains unfulfilled.

3.11 SDG 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities — Urbanisation Outpacing Planning

The world’s urban population continues to grow, with approximately 57 percent of the global population living in urban areas as of 2023, a figure projected to reach 68 percent by 2050[37]. This rapid urbanisation is outpacing the capacity of cities to provide adequate housing, transport, and basic services. An estimated 1.1 billion people were living in slums or slum-like conditions as of 2020, and this number has been growing rather than declining in many regions, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia[38]. Air quality in cities remains a major concern, with 99 percent of the global urban population breathing air that exceeds WHO guideline limits for particulate matter. While many cities have made progress on public transport and green space provision, these gains are unevenly distributed and often concentrated in wealthier

neighbourhoods and higher-income countries. Municipal solid waste generation continues to increase, outpacing the development of waste management infrastructure in most developing regions.

3.12 SDG 12: Responsible Consumption and Production — Fundamental Imbalance

The world's material footprint—the total amount of raw materials extracted to meet consumption demands—continues to grow, reaching an estimated 95.9 billion tonnes in 2019, the most recent year for which comprehensive global data were available at the time of this assessment[39], up from approximately 85 billion tonnes in 2015[3]. Global material use per capita remains approximately twice the sustainable level, indicating a fundamental imbalance between consumption patterns and planetary boundaries. The volume of electronic waste generated globally has continued to grow, with the Global E-waste Monitor reporting 53.6 million tonnes generated in 2019, of which less than 20 percent was documented as formally recycled[40]. While some countries have made progress on circular economy policies and sustainable public procurement, these advances remain the exception rather than the norm. Food loss and waste continue at significant levels: approximately 13 percent of food produced globally is lost between the farm and the retail level[41], and a further 17 percent is wasted at the retail and consumer level[59]. Fossil fuel subsidies, which incentivise unsustainable production and consumption, remain substantial at an estimated USD 5.9 trillion in 2020 when accounting for explicit and implicit subsidies, according to IMF analysis[60].

3.13 SDG 13: Climate Action — A Defining Challenge

Climate change represents both the most urgent threat to sustainable development and the Goal on which progress is most critically insufficient. Global mean surface temperature in 2022 was approximately 1.15°C above pre-industrial levels, bringing the world approaching the 1.5°C threshold identified by the IPCC as the upper limit for avoiding the most catastrophic climate impacts[42]. Greenhouse gas emissions reached approximately 52.8 gigatonnes of CO₂ equivalent in 2021, driven primarily by fossil fuel combustion in the energy, industry, and transport sectors[43]. While renewable energy deployment has accelerated, the pace of the energy transition remains far below what is required to limit warming to 1.5°C. Climate-related extreme weather events—including record-breaking heatwaves, widespread flooding, severe droughts, and intensifying cyclones—have increased in frequency and intensity, disproportionately affecting the most vulnerable populations and countries. Adaptation finance for developing countries remains a fraction of estimated needs: the UNEP Adaptation Gap Report estimates that adaptation costs in developing countries are USD 160–340 billion per year by 2030, yet adaptation finance flows were estimated at approximately USD 29 billion in 2020[44]. Note: This estimate reflects the methodology employed in the UNEP Adaptation Gap Report 2022. Subsequent editions have applied revised estimation methods that yield different figures for the same period; the figure cited here is consistent with the AGR 2022 as referenced.

3.14 SDG 14: Life Below Water — Oceans Under Siege

The world's oceans are under unprecedented pressure from pollution, overfishing, acidification, and warming. Ocean acidification has increased by approximately 26 percent since pre-industrial times, threatening marine ecosystems, particularly coral reefs, which support approximately 25 percent of all marine species[45]. Plastic pollution in the oceans has reached significant proportions, with an estimated 11 million tonnes of plastic entering aquatic ecosystems in 2016, a figure projected to nearly triple by 2040 without decisive action[46]. Overfishing continues to deplete fish stocks, with the proportion of fish stocks within biologically sustainable levels declining from 90 percent in 1974 to approximately 65 percent in 2019, the most recent year for which comprehensive data is available[47]. Marine protected areas have expanded, covering approximately 8.2 percent of the global ocean as of 2023[3], but progress toward the target of 10 percent by 2020 has been

missed, and the quality and effectiveness of these protections vary widely. These converging pressures illustrate the degree to which ocean ecosystems are approaching tipping points.

3.15 SDG 15: Life on Land — Biodiversity in Decline

Terrestrial biodiversity continues to decline at a concerning rate. The Living Planet Index, maintained by WWF and the Zoological Society of London, indicates an average decline of 69 percent in monitored wildlife populations between 1970 and 2018, with the steepest declines occurring in Latin America and the Caribbean (94 percent) and in freshwater ecosystems (83 percent)[48]. Forest loss continues, although the annual rate of net forest loss has slowed compared to previous decades, declining from approximately 7.8 million hectares per year in the 1990s to approximately 4.7 million hectares per year from 2010 to 2020[49]. Land degradation affects an estimated 2 billion hectares of land globally, equivalent to approximately 40 percent of the world's total land area[61]. The Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, adopted in December 2022, represents a significant political commitment to halt and reverse biodiversity loss by 2030, but its implementation will require substantially increased financing and strengthened governance mechanisms.

3.16 SDG 16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions — Eroding Foundations

The global landscape of peace, justice, and strong institutions has deteriorated since 2015. The global homicide rate declined modestly from approximately 5.9 per 100,000 people in 2015 to approximately 5.8 in 2021[3], yet this aggregate figure masks significant regional variation, with homicide rates in Latin America and the Caribbean remaining several times the global average[50]. The number of people displaced by conflict and persecution reached a record 108.4 million by the end of 2022, more than double the figure of 2015, driven by protracted conflicts in Syria, Ukraine, Ethiopia, Myanmar, and elsewhere[51]. Corruption remains pervasive, with Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index indicating that most countries score below 50 on a scale of 0 (highly corrupt) to 100 (very clean)[52]. Access to justice remains limited for billions of people, particularly the poor, women, and marginalised groups. Civic space has contracted in many countries, with restrictions on freedom of expression, assembly, and association increasing since 2020, often justified by public health or national security concerns related to the pandemic. The SDG16 Data Initiative, a collaborative civil society monitoring effort, has documented these trends in detail and provides an essential complement to official data[53].

3.17 SDG 17: Partnerships for the Goals — The Financing Deficit

The financing gap for achieving the SDGs in developing countries has widened dramatically. Pre-pandemic estimates placed the annual SDG financing gap at approximately USD 2.5 trillion; post-pandemic assessments suggest the gap has grown to between USD 3.9 and 4.3 trillion annually[54]. Official Development Assistance (ODA) reached a record USD 206 billion in 2022, yet this represents less than 5 percent of the estimated financing need. External debt servicing costs for developing countries have risen to levels not seen in decades, crowding out social spending and SDG-related investments. Many developing countries face debt distress, with more than half of the world's poorest countries either at high risk of or already in debt distress, and approximately one in four middle-income countries facing high risk of fiscal crisis[3]. The pandemic triggered the largest drop in remittances to developing countries in recent history, and while flows have recovered, the structural fragility of remittance-dependent economies persists. Technology transfer and capacity-building support from developed to developing countries remains inadequate, and international trade tensions continue to impede the flow of goods, services, and knowledge needed to accelerate SDG implementation.

4. Cross-Cutting Analysis

4.1 The Stoplight Assessment: A Synthesis

The UN's 2023 Progress Chart, which uses a stoplight colour framework to assess target-level trends, provides the most comprehensive synthesis of global SDG progress. Of the targets for which trend data was available in the 2023 assessment, approximately 15 percent are on track or have met their targets, approximately 48 percent are moderately or severely off track, and approximately 37 percent are stagnating or regressing[3,6]. Aggregation of these assessments, in the authors' analysis, reveals several patterns. First, no Goal is on track across all of its targets; even Goals that exhibit progress in some areas show stagnation or regression in others. Second, the Goals most closely linked to basic needs—poverty (SDG 1), hunger (SDG 2), and health (SDG 3)—have been most severely affected by the cascading crises of 2020–2023. Third, Goals that require systemic transformation—climate action (SDG 13), biodiversity (SDG 15), and inequality (SDG 10)—show the least progress, reflecting the deep structural barriers to transformative change. Fourth, Goals with stronger existing institutional frameworks and data systems—energy (SDG 7) and education (SDG 4)—tend to show more measurable, if still insufficient, progress.

4.2 The Crisis Cascade: COVID-19, Conflict, and Climate

Three interconnected crises have dominated the first half of the SDG implementation period and fundamentally altered the trajectory of global progress. The COVID-19 pandemic, which claimed millions of lives and triggered the deepest global recession since the Second World War, set back progress across virtually every Goal. Its impacts were not distributed equally: the poorest, most vulnerable, and most marginalised populations—those whom the 2030 Agenda pledged to leave behind—bore the heaviest burden. The war in Ukraine, which began in February 2022, disrupted global food, energy, and fertiliser markets, driving up prices and exacerbating food insecurity, energy poverty, and inflationary pressures worldwide. Climate change, the third crisis, acts as a threat multiplier: rising temperatures, changing precipitation patterns, and increasing frequency of extreme weather events undermine agricultural production, water availability, public health, and economic stability, with the most severe consequences falling on countries and communities that have contributed least to global greenhouse gas emissions. The evidence synthesised in this analysis suggests potential interconnections among progress across different Sustainable Development Goals, consistent with the broader literature on SDG interlinkages. These crises do not operate in isolation but interact in compounding ways: a climate-related drought reduces agricultural output (SDG 2), which increases poverty (SDG 1), which reduces access to education (SDG 4) and health services (SDG 3), which in turn undermines the capacity of institutions to respond (SDG 16).

4.3 The Accountability Architecture: Strengths and Gaps

The global SDG accountability architecture, anchored by the High-Level Political Forum and the Voluntary National Review process, has established important norms and practices for monitoring progress. As of the 2023 HLPF, 189 VNRs have been presented by 155 countries, creating a substantial body of national-level data and analysis[55]. However, the accountability architecture has significant weaknesses. First, VNRs are self-reported and voluntary, creating inherent biases toward presenting progress in favourable terms. Second, the HLPF's review capacity is limited: the in-depth review of SDGs at the annual HLPF has covered only a subset of Goals each year, and the review process lacks enforcement mechanisms. Third, the data infrastructure for SDG monitoring was inadequate, with approximately 31 of 169 targets lacking sufficient data for trend assessment. Fourth, independent civil society monitoring—essential for a robust accountability system—remains fragmented, underfunded, and often excluded from formal review processes. The Halfway to 2030 Report on SDG16+, published by the TAP Network in May 2023, and the SDG16 Data Initiative's

annual report represent valuable models of independent civil society assessment. Such assessments complement official reporting[56][57].

4.4 The Financing Imperative

In the authors' assessment, the most critical enabler of SDG acceleration is finance. The widening SDG financing gap—estimated at USD 3.9 to 4.3 trillion annually for developing countries—represented the binding constraint on progress across virtually all Goals[54]. ODA stood at USD 206 billion in 2022, addressing only a fraction of this gap. Domestic resource mobilisation, while essential, is constrained by debt servicing burdens, limited fiscal space, and, in some cases, governance challenges. Private sector investment, including blended finance instruments and impact investment, has grown but remains concentrated in a relatively small number of countries and sectors. International financial institution lending has increased, but the conditionality and terms of such lending have been criticised for exacerbating debt distress in borrowing countries. The 2023 SDG Summit represents a pivotal opportunity to address the financing gap through concrete commitments, including reforms to the international financial architecture, increased ODA, innovative financing mechanisms such as SDG bonds, and debt relief for the most vulnerable countries.

5. Limitations and Methodological Caveats

This assessment is subject to several limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings. First, the temporal lag in SDG data means that the most recent available data for many indicators corresponds to 2021 or 2022, precluding a real-time assessment of 2023 conditions. The world continues to evolve rapidly, and data collected two or more years ago may not fully reflect conditions as of mid-2023, particularly in conflict-affected regions and countries experiencing acute economic or humanitarian crises. Second, as noted in Section 2.3, approximately 31 of the 169 SDG targets lack sufficient data for trend assessment in the 2023 Progress Chart, creating analytical blind spots that may affect the overall picture of progress. These data gaps are not randomly distributed but tend to concentrate in areas—such as governance, violence, and inequality—where measurement is inherently challenging or politically sensitive.

Third, the aggregate global-level analysis presented in this report necessarily obscures within-country disparities. Progress (or regression) at the global average can mask significant differences between regions, income groups, gender groups, and other dimensions of inequality. Where possible, this report has drawn attention to these disparities, but a comprehensive disaggregated analysis would require a level of granularity that exceeds the scope of this assessment. Fourth, the SDG Impact Mapper's visualisations are constrained by the quality and availability of underlying data; the tool can reveal patterns within the data but cannot compensate for gaps or errors in the data itself. Fifth, this report is published by the Advocacy Unified Network, an organisation with an explicit mandate to advocate for the SDGs. While the analysis is grounded in publicly available data from authoritative sources, readers should be aware of the institutional context in which this assessment is produced, as disclosed below. Finally, the forward-looking elements of this analysis—including recommendations for the second half of the implementation period—are inherently speculative and depend on assumptions about political will, economic conditions, and international cooperation that may not materialise.

Disclosure and Acknowledgements: The SDG Impact Mapper, a data visualisation tool used in preparing this assessment, was developed by AUN Digital, a division of the Advocacy Unified Network (AUN). The SDG Impact Mapper integrates publicly available SDG indicator data; it does not independently generate authoritative global SDG classifications. This assessment was published by AUN through the Opus Publica academic publishing platform. The analysis and recommendations presented herein represent the authors' interpretation of publicly available evidence and do not necessarily reflect the views of the United Nations,

AUN, or any other institution cited in this report. This assessment was not externally commissioned and has not undergone independent peer review.

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

6.1 The Halftime Verdict

The evidence considered in this analysis indicates: at the midpoint of the 2030 Agenda, the world is far from achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. With approximately 15 percent of assessable targets on track, approximately 48 percent moderately or severely off track, and approximately 37 percent stagnating or regressing, the trajectory is not merely inadequate but, in several critical areas, deteriorating. The cascading crises of 2020–2023—the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, and escalating climate impacts—have compounded pre-existing implementation challenges and widened inequalities within and between countries. The principle of leaving no one behind, the animating commitment of the 2030 Agenda, remains unfulfilled: the most vulnerable populations have been hit hardest by the multiple crises and have benefited least from the recovery. The financing gap has widened to levels that render existing approaches to SDG implementation unsustainable. The evidence underscores the interconnected nature of these challenges and the need for integrated, systemic responses.

6.2 Recommendations for the SDG Summit and Beyond

As Heads of State and Government convene for the SDG Summit on 18–19 September 2023, this report offers the following recommendations for the Political Declaration and for the second half of the SDG implementation period. First, the Political Declaration should include specific, measurable, time-bound commitments for priority areas of acceleration, with a focus on the Goals where regression is most severe—notably poverty (SDG 1), hunger (SDG 2), climate action (SDG 13), and peace and institutions (SDG 16). Generic pledges of renewed commitment are insufficient; the Declaration must signal a qualitative shift in ambition. Second, the international community should commit to closing the SDG financing gap through a comprehensive package of measures, including increased ODA, debt relief for distressed developing countries, innovative financing instruments, and reforms to the international financial architecture that give developing countries a greater voice in decision-making[57].

Third, data systems for SDG monitoring must be strengthened as a matter of urgency. The 31 targets that lacked sufficient data for trend assessment at the time of the August 2023 evaluation must be addressed through increased investment in national statistical capacity, improved data collection methodologies, and the strategic use of new technologies, including satellite imagery, mobile data, and artificial intelligence, to fill gaps in real time. Fourth, independent civil society monitoring must be formally integrated into the global accountability architecture, with dedicated resources, access to data, and formal channels for presenting findings to the HLPF and the SDG Summit. Independent assessments published through academic channels should become a standard feature of the SDG accountability ecosystem, providing a citable record of analysis that complements and challenges official narratives. Fifth, the interlinkages between Goals must be more explicitly recognised in implementation strategies; available evidence on SDG interlinkages indicates that progress in one area can support or undermine progress in others, and integrated approaches are essential for maximising co-benefits and managing trade-offs.

6.3 A Final Note on Timing

This report was prepared in advance of the 2023 SDG Summit with the purpose of ensuring that independent, evidence-based analysis of SDG progress is available to delegates and their advisors preparing

for the Summit and UNGA High-Level Week (18–22 September 2023). The 2030 Agenda remains the world's shared roadmap for a better future. But at the halfway mark, it is clear that a fundamental course correction is needed. The decisions made at the SDG Summit—and in the critical months that follow—will determine whether the promise of the Goals is fulfilled or broken.

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