



POSITION PAPER

AT HOME, ABROAD AND AHEAD

A new phase for the SDGs after 2030

Building Change, which consists of FMS, Partos, and Woord en Daad:



Introduction

In 2015, the member states of the United Nations adopted the 2030 Agenda, with the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) serving as a compass for sustainable development worldwide. Ten years on, the situation is worrying. According to The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2025, only 35 per cent of the SDG targets are on track or making moderate progress. Almost half are progressing too slowly, and 18 per cent have even fallen below 2015 levels (Figure 1).¹ The UN now refers to this as a “global development emergency”.²

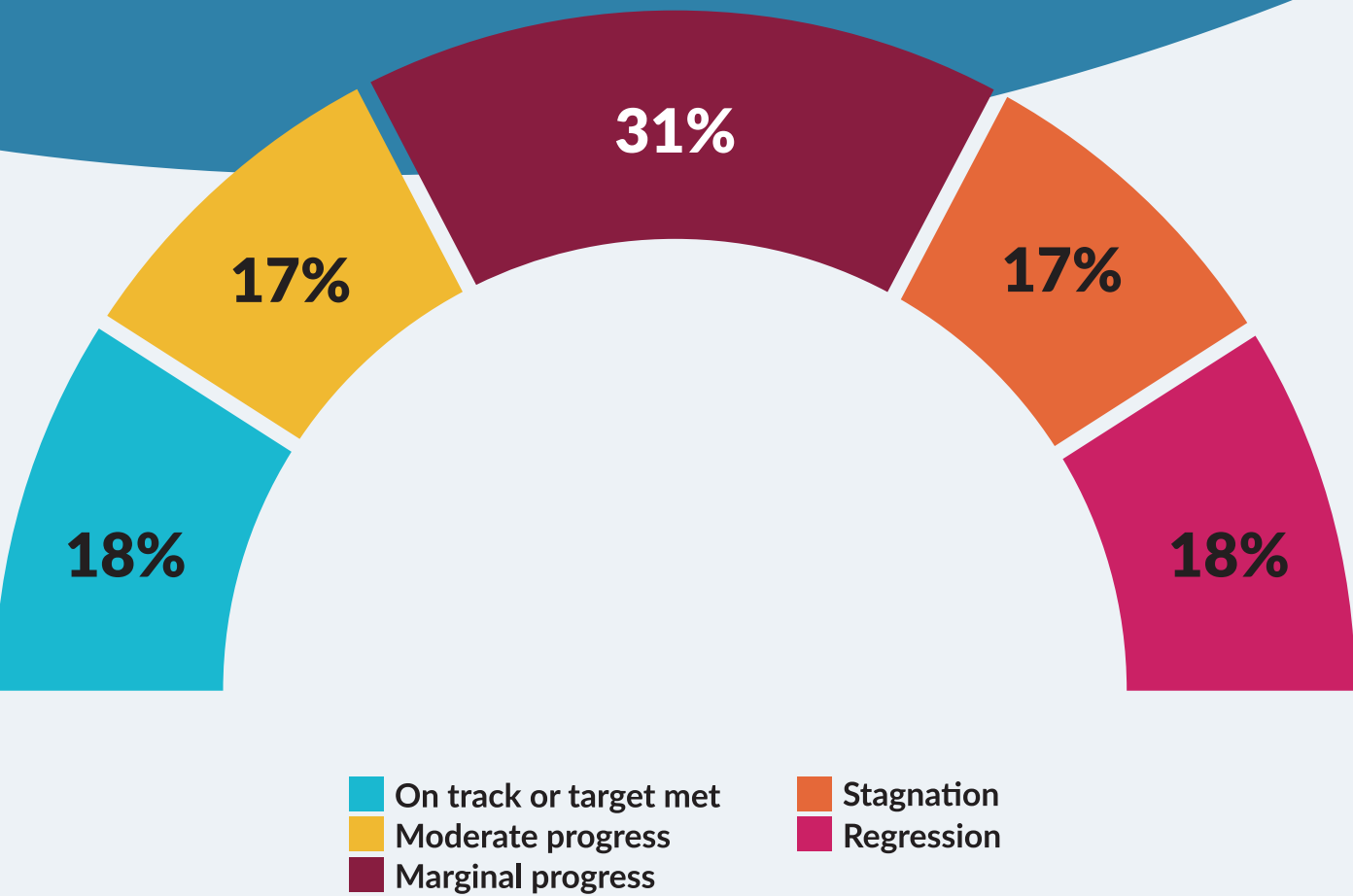


Figure 1 Global progress on the Sustainable Development Goals between 2015 and 2025.

Source: UNDESA (2025) The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2025

1 Sachs, J.D., Lafortune, G., Fuller, G., Iablonski, G. Financing Sustainable Development to 2030 and Mid-Century. Sustainable Development Report 2025 (Dublin: Dublin University Press, 2025, 4.
2 Ibid., 2.

Behind this diagnosis lie human and ecological realities. More than 800 million people still live in extreme poverty and without a significant acceleration around one in ten people worldwide will still be living below the international poverty line in 2030.³ Hunger and food insecurity are above pre-COVID-19 pandemic levels. The debt burden of low- and middle-income countries reached a record \$1.4 trillion in debt servicing in 2024, leaving fewer resources for education, healthcare and climate action. At the same time, in 2025 heat records are broken once again and the climate and biodiversity crisis are accelerating.

Yet the same UN report also tells a story of resilience. Since 2015, millions of people have gained access to basic services, more than half the world's population receives at least one form of social protection, and internet access has increased by around 70 per cent. Successes have been achieved in various countries in the fields of healthcare, education and nature restoration. This makes it clear that where political will, funding and sound policy come together, acceleration is indeed possible.⁴

For a country like the Netherlands, this global progress report is not a distant statistic, but a direct context for its own policy. The Advisory Council on International Affairs emphasised that developments 'abroad' and wellbeing economy 'at home' are closely intertwined: a failed harvest or destroyed infrastructure far away affects households in the Netherlands too, via trade, prices and migration. In a world that fails, the Netherlands cannot succeed.⁵

Bearing this context in mind, Building Change – the partnership between FMS, Partos and Woord en Daad – has reflected on what a global development agenda beyond 2030 should look like. This position paper builds on international research into global trends and the status of the SDGs, as well as input from discussions with stakeholders from various sectors and key partners from the Global South.

3 Ibid., 8.

4 Ibid., 2-5.

5 Adviesraad Internationale Vraagstukken, *Onlosmakelijk verbonden: SDG's in Nederland en de rest van de wereld* (Den Haag: AIV, 2024), 1-3.

Global trends impacting the SDGs

2.1 Accelerating planetary crisis undermines progress

The first trend is the accelerating planetary crisis. Climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution reinforce one another and increase the vulnerability of people and ecosystems. Various analyses identify this triple planetary crisis as decisive for the remaining SDG years and for the period thereafter. The aforementioned Sustainable Development Goals Report 2025 shows that the world is clearly not on track and that it is precisely the goals relating to climate, biodiversity and resources that are lagging far behind. Progress on many goals is stagnating or even regressing, while time is rapidly running out as we approach 2030. The UN emphasises that we must view the SDGs in the context of a 'polycrisis' in which climate impact, poverty and inequality reinforce one another (Figure 2).⁶



Figure 2 The polycrisis, in which climate impact, poverty and inequality reinforce one another

The Advisory Council on International Affairs (AIV) also emphasises that climate change and biodiversity loss are no longer isolated issues, but set the context for virtually all other goals. A failed harvest or destroyed infrastructure on another continent, caused by climate change or conflict, directly affects households and businesses in the Netherlands through higher prices, disruptions in supply chains and migration flows. Development 'abroad' and broad prosperity 'at home' are therefore inextricably linked.⁷

Building Change's partners recognise this picture. In the survey of Southern partner organisations, it is repeatedly noted how climate change, drought, security situations and humanitarian crises are hampering progress on poverty reduction, basic services and the reduction of inequality. In Burkina Faso, for example, limited progress on the SDGs is mentioned in the same breath as external factors such as security crises and an unfavourable geopolitical context. The planetary crisis is therefore not an abstract environmental problem, but a daily reality that reduces the likelihood of countries being able to achieve the SDGs at all.

⁶ The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2025, 5. See also: H.H. Dang, S. Hallegatte, M.C. Nguyen et al., "Impacts of global warming on subnational poverty and inequality", in: *Nature Climate Change*, February 2026, no. 16, 207–213.

⁷ AIV, *Onlosmakelijk verbonden*, 2–4.

At the same time, there is a growing recognition that policy always affects multiple objectives simultaneously. The AIV refers to the interplay of economic, ecological and social factors, in which synergies and trade-offs between objectives arise.⁸ The scientific literature on SDG interactions also shows that, for example, climate policy can have major positive effects on health and energy security, but can also cause negative trade-offs if inequality or the rights of local communities are not sufficiently taken into account.⁹ The planetary crisis is therefore also a governance crisis: without integrated choices, climate action becomes a source of new inequality rather than a just transition.

2.2 Persistent inequality, debt and a skewed global financial system

A second trend is the combination of persistent inequality, rising debt burdens and a global financial system that is insufficiently geared towards sustainable development. According to the AIV, the world as a whole is not on track to achieve the SDGs; since 2018, the proportion of people living in extreme poverty has barely decreased, whilst malnutrition has actually increased.¹⁰ At the same time, the SDG Index shows that rich countries score relatively well on domestic indicators, but often perform poorly on so-called spillovers: the negative effects that their consumption and trade patterns have on countries abroad.¹¹

The AIV also highlights the enormous global financing gap for the SDGs, estimated at around 4 trillion dollars per year. This gap is greatest in low- and middle-income countries and requires both reform of international financial institutions and additional public funds and private capital.¹² The Inter-Agency Task Force on Financing for Development notes that the current system does not sufficiently prioritise public goods such as climate, health and social protection. The debt burden is a key factor in this regard. In 2023, the combined debt of low- and middle-income countries stood at 1.4 trillion dollars, which severely limits the policy space for social and green investments.¹³ For instance, the number of developing countries spending more public funds on debt repayment than on education or healthcare has risen in recent years (Figure 3).

The Building Change survey confirms that this financing gap is not an abstract macroeconomic concept, but a daily constraint at the local level. Several partners refer to a “huge financing gap” and describe how fragmented and risk-averse financing makes it difficult for grassroots organisations to work in a structural and strategic manner. Access to funding is often temporary, project-based and donor-driven, whilst long-term investment in institutions, data capacity and local infrastructure lags behind. Furthermore, there is a lack of good, local data to make inequality and exclusion more visible. The UN report describes data infrastructure as a crucial but underfunded prerequisite. Without reliable statistical systems, governments cannot identify problems in a timely manner, make targeted decisions, or ensure transparent accountability.¹⁴ Building Change partners highlight

8 AIV, *Onlosmakelijk verbonden*, 3.

9 International Council for Science, *A Guide to SDG Underfunded Actions: From Science to Implementation* (Paris: ICS, 2017), 7–8, 21.

10 AIV, *Onlosmakelijk verbonden*, 3–4.

11 *The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2025*, 21.

12 AIV, *Onlosmakelijk verbonden*, 13.

13 *Sustainable Development Goals Report 2025*, 4.

14 *Ibid.*, 7.

similar problems: a lack of local data and statistical capacity makes it difficult to demonstrate progress and to target policies at the most vulnerable groups.

In short, inequality is not only found within countries, but also between countries and in the way global financial and trade flows are structured. This has direct consequences for the feasibility and credibility of a new global goals agenda beyond 2030.

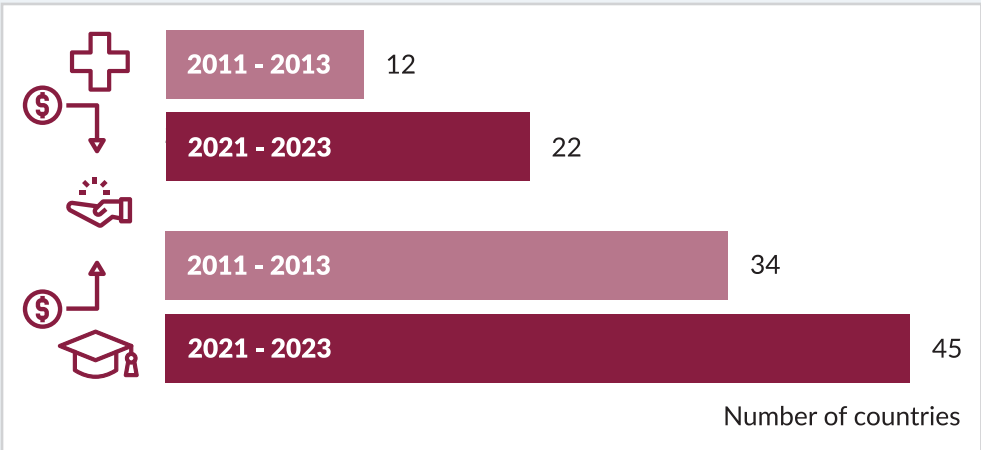


Figure 3: The number of developing countries spending more public funds on debt repayment than on education and healthcare.

Source: own illustration based on UNCTAD (2025) *A world of debt* (p.20)

2.3 Geopolitical fragmentation and conflict

A third influential trend is the rise in geopolitical tensions, conflict and authoritarian tendencies. This trend not only puts pressure on the space for civil society actors (see 2.4), but also hinders SDG progress within countries. The AIV emphasises that conflicts in regions such as the Middle East and the Sahel show that a lack of stability elsewhere ultimately affects the Netherlands as well.¹⁵ The UN's SDG report echoes this and shows that SDG 16 (peace, justice and strong institutions) is among the goals where progress is seriously lagging behind globally, partly due to ongoing and new armed conflicts and increasing insecurity.¹⁶

The Reliance Foundation outlines how the post-2030 agenda will unfold in a world of overlapping crises: geopolitical rivalry, wars, pandemics and climate shocks create a permanent sense of uncertainty. This makes international cooperation both more urgent and more difficult: multilateral institutions are under pressure, whilst the need for coordinated solutions is actually increasing.¹⁷

At the same time, the geopolitical playing field is changing. The AIV notes that, through the Global Development Initiative, China is increasingly positioning itself as a provider of development opportunities, with a narrative that is credible in large parts of the Global South due to its success in poverty reduction, but which pays little attention to inclusion, biodiversity and political freedoms.¹⁸

15 AIV, *Onlosmakelijk verbonden*, 3.

16 *Sustainable Development Goals 2025*, 7.

17 Nilanjan Gosh and Vanita Sharma (eds.), *The Next Frontier: Charting the Contours of the Post-2030 Development Agenda* (Mumbai: Reliance Foundation, 2024), 13–14.

18 AIV, *Onlosmakelijk verbonden*, 12.

Moreover, it tends to foster a relationship of dependency on a donor country rather than strengthening a country's own development. This raises the question of how a post-2030 agenda can be both attractive and normatively robust, and how the SDGs can be better anchored within a human rights framework.

With the US withdrawing from multilateral institutions and the erosion of international law, it is of great importance that the values of sustainable development are embedded in a global agenda. The changing world order offers an opportunity for both Europe and the Global South to forge equal partnerships. By actively supporting Southern ambitions for industrialisation and local resource processing, Europe can simultaneously reduce its dependence on China and build sustainable, mutually beneficial relationships. A shared agenda is the common thread in this regard.

2.4 Shrinking Civil Society Space

Geopolitical changes and the sharp rise in authoritarian regimes have also resulted in civil society space coming under severe pressure worldwide. Civil society comprises a diverse group of organisations, each representing a different constituency. Through their expertise and analysis, they contribute to better decision-making, but also give a voice to groups that are under-represented in the political arena. The German umbrella organisation for development organisations, VENRO, describes how human rights defenders, journalists and NGOs are increasingly facing restrictive legislation, intimidation and criminalisation, with direct consequences for the implementation and monitoring of the SDGs.¹⁹ This affects not only the feasibility of the SDGs, but also core rights such as freedom of association, freedom of expression and participation, which form an intrinsic part of sustainable development.

The Building Change consultations also show that partners are keenly aware of this trend. Respondents from South America, for example, highlight how excessive government control, bureaucracy and corruption hinder innovation and efficiency. African partners highlight the importance of reliable governments, better enforcement mechanisms and serious follow-up by the UN to ensure commitment to the SDGs. This shrinking civic space is not merely an abstract problem abroad; organisations in the Netherlands are also experiencing a shrinking civic space.

The study 'Tegenmacht onder druk' by the Dutch Human Rights Commission (CRM) shows that organisations across civil society are experiencing shrinking civil space. Stigmatisation and the polarised political debate, but also limited opportunities for participation in decision-making processes. What the CRM emphasises is that it is not a single measure or ruling that restricts this space, but rather a process of accumulating developments that are progressively limiting the scope for action across the entire spectrum of civil society.

¹⁹ Karoline Krähling and Anke Kurat (eds.), *Stay Strong! Global Goals need civil society* (Berlin: Association of German Development and Humanitarian Aid NGOs (VENRO), 2025), 23–24.

2.5 Far-reaching transitions: digitalisation, demographics and urbanisation

The fifth trend is the far-reaching transformation driven by digitalisation, demographic changes and rapid urbanisation. These developments create new opportunities to accelerate progress towards the SDGs, but also widen existing gaps. The Reliance Foundation emphasises that the world beyond 2030 will be increasingly shaped by digitalisation, data-driven decision-making and emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence. At the same time, the report warns of a digital divide, whereby countries and groups without access to infrastructure, skills and regulation will fall further behind.²⁰

The UN report shows that data availability has improved significantly for some goals, but that major data gaps remain, particularly for SDGs 11 (sustainable cities), 13 (climate action) and 16 (peace and strong institutions).²¹ This means that the places where transitions are happening fastest (fast-growing cities, vulnerable regions and fragile states) are often precisely the places where we know the least about who is actually being reached and who is being left behind. The survey of Building Change's Southern partners highlights this tension: respondents cite the need for more streamlined, open data and key indicators, in close collaboration with national statistical offices and with the involvement of civil society, so that accountability improves and the reporting burden on local organisations is reduced.

Furthermore, the centre of gravity of the global economy and the world's population is shifting towards the Global South, with young, rapidly growing, predominantly urban populations. These demographic and urban dynamics present both a risk and an opportunity: without jobs, basic services and political space, a youth bulge can lead to frustration and instability, but with the right investments, it is a driver of innovation and sustainable development.²² For the Netherlands, this means that digital transition, knowledge exchange and urban innovations must be explicitly placed within a global context. The AIV highlights the need to better understand how digital and economic developments at home affect rights, opportunities and environmental pressures elsewhere, and to assess policy against this through a strengthened approach to spillovers.²³

Taken together, these five trends show that the world in which the SDGs are to be realised is fundamentally different from that of 2015. This makes it all the more urgent to take a critical look in the next chapter at both the strengths and limitations of the current SDG agenda as a basis for a post-2030 framework.

20 Gosh and Sharma, *The Next Frontier*, 20–22.

21 *Sustainable Development Goals 2025*, 7.

22 Gosh and Sharma, *The Next Frontier*, 12–15.

23 AIV, *Onlosmakelijk verbonden*, 10, 15.

Evaluation of the current SDGs

3.1 The strengths of the SDG agenda

Despite all their shortcomings, the SDGs have had a number of undeniable merits over the past ten years. First and foremost, they provided, for the first time, a single universal and integrated framework for sustainable development: a single set of goals for all countries in which economic, social and environmental dimensions are explicitly interwoven (Figure 4). The International Council for Science (ICSU) therefore describes the 2030 Agenda as an “integrated, indivisible and universal” whole, in which human dignity and prosperity are linked to respect for ecological constraints.²⁴

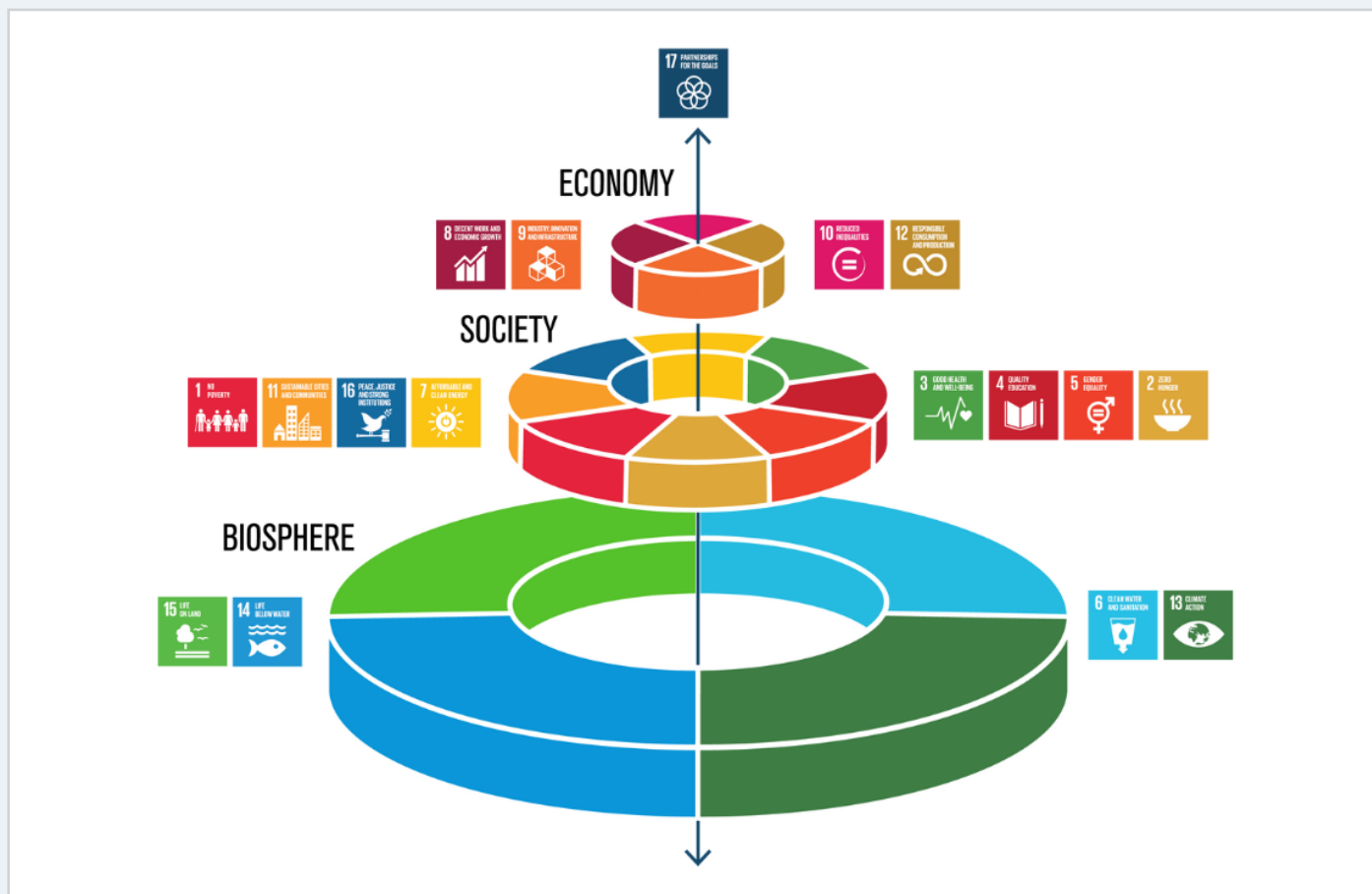


Figure 4 The 17 Sustainable Development Goals and their interrelationships interconnections

Source: Stockholm Resilience Centre

Secondly, the SDGs have created a shared language and a common framework. The VENRO report cited earlier shows how network organisations in countries such as India, Ethiopia, Brazil and Germany are using the SDGs to link their work to global processes and to speak with one voice at UN forums and other platforms.²⁵ In short, the SDGs have not provided the world with a straight path to 2030, but they have provided a shared compass, a measurable framework and a widely recognisable narrative about global interconnectedness and shared responsibility. The SDGs have become a point of reference and a mobilising symbol for many governments, cities, businesses and civil society organisations.

²⁴ ICSU, *A Guide to SDG Interactions*, 20–21.

²⁵ Krähling and Kurat, *Stay Strong!*, 16, 21–23.

Progress has also been made in the field of data and monitoring. Whereas in 2016 there were still no agreements on definitions and data collection for a large proportion of the indicators, by 2025 methodologies have been established for all 231 unique SDG indicators, and nearly 70 per cent have sufficient data to track trends.²⁶ This enables systematic policy-making and international comparison. The Advisory Council on International Affairs (AIV) emphasises that this makes the SDGs ‘usable’ for monitoring results and comparing countries with one another.²⁷ That there is still a long way to go is demonstrated later in this paper.

3.2 Limitations and challenges of the current goals

However, there are also limitations and challenges associated with the SDGs. First and foremost, the agenda is exceptionally complex. The 17 goals, 169 targets and over 230 indicators make the SDGs, on the one hand, rich and comprehensive, but for many stakeholders also difficult to manage. The AIV points out that the abundance of sub-goals can lead to ‘not being able to see the wood for the trees’ and that the emphasis on measurable indicators risks depoliticising the agenda.²⁸ The ICSU emphasises that the true value of the SDGs lies precisely in their interrelationships: many goals reinforce one another, but there are also clear trade-offs that must be actively managed.²⁹ Without conscious political trade-offs, focusing on one goal can undermine progress on others.

A second limitation concerns governance and the degree of non-binding nature. The SDGs are politically, but not legally, binding. This is logical, as it was the only way to get such a wide variety of countries to support the goals in the first place. Nevertheless, the OECD raises a critical point here. It notes that policy coherence for sustainable development is recognised as key to addressing fragmentation and negative cross-border effects (spillovers), but that there remain “significant gaps” in countries’ capacity to systematically measure and reduce these SDG spillovers.³⁰ The Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) are useful as a learning tool, but do not entail sanctions for underperformance. This creates free-rider behaviour among states that are not intrinsically motivated to make efforts towards the SDGs.

Furthermore, despite the broad political consensus on the 17 goals themselves, the implementation of certain themes is highly polarised. This applies in particular to gender equality and sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR). This polarisation reflects tensions between internationally established human rights obligations and national political or religious resistance to a particular interpretation and/or implementation thereof.

In UN negotiations and national policy contexts, some states and civil society organisations argue that concepts such as ‘gender’ and ‘sexual and reproductive rights’ do not reflect universal human rights, but are context-specific or ideological concepts. For instance, in its statements at UN conferences, the Vatican consistently emphasises the “right to life from conception” and opposes

²⁶ Ibid., 5–7.

²⁷ AIV, *Onlosmakelijk verbonden*, 3.

²⁸ AIV, *Onlosmakelijk verbonden*, 3.

²⁹ ICSU, *A Guide to SDG Interactions*, 7–8, 21.

³⁰ OECD, *Unleashing Policy Coherence to achieve the SDGs. An assessment of Governance Mechanisms* (Paris: OECD, 2024), 4–6.

language that might present abortion as part of reproductive rights.³¹ It further asserts that gender must remain anchored in the biological dichotomy of male/female. Islamic voices, many Southern countries and organisations are aligned on this point. This stance clashes with the liberal Western interpretation of the SDGs, which specifically promotes reproductive autonomy. In practice, therefore, it appears that the SDGs lack sufficient (normative) clarity to prevent this clash of values and the resulting differing interpretations of the SDGs.

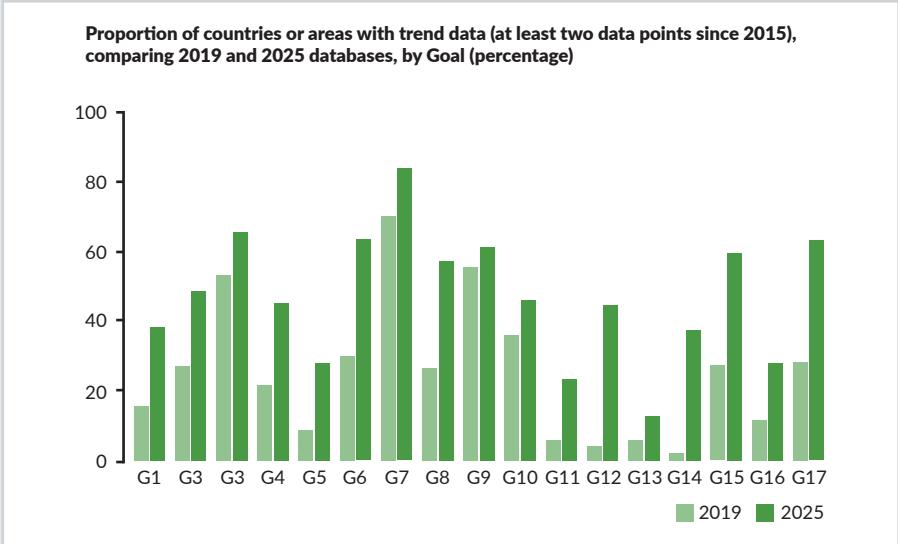


Figure 5 Availability of data for the SDGs

Source: UNDESA (2025) *The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2025*

This exposes a fundamental vulnerability of the current goals: where political consensus is lacking or comes under pressure, core rights in practice depend on voluntary compliance and national interpretation. Consequently, the universal human rights basis of the SDGs risks being eroded in implementation, without the framework offering any effective counterbalance.

A fourth limitation is the lack of power symmetry in implementation. In addition to resistance from conservative actors, there is also fundamental criticism of the current SDG agenda from progressive, often feminist voices in the Global South.³² They point out that, despite the universal nature of the SDGs, power relations in financing, policy-making and accountability have remained largely unchanged. Priorities, indicators and boundaries are largely determined by actors in the Global North, whilst Southern governments and civil society organisations often operate within frameworks and conditionalities set by donors. As a result, in their implementation, the SDGs partly reproduce neo-colonial dynamics, even when they are formally based on equality and partnership.

So although the SDGs were an important step forward in the joint formulation of a global development agenda for the North and South (in contrast to the Millennium Development Goals), the SDGs do not provide sufficient counterbalance to structural power asymmetries in decision-

31 See, for example, H.E. Archbishop Bernadito Auza, *Note of the Holy See on the First Anniversary of the Adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals* (Vatican City, 2016).
32 Suzie Lane, Sonja Ayeb-Karlsson and Arianne Shahvisi, "Impacts of the Global Gag Rule on sexual and reproductive health and rights in the Global South: A scoping review" in *Global Public Health*, November 2020, no. 16, 1–12.

making and implementation. The risk is that universal goals will, in practice, be perceived as externally imposed. This undermines local ownership and local/regional adaptation, and erodes the legitimacy of the agenda, particularly among the actors who are crucial for genuine change.

Finally, there are persistent data issues. Despite clear progress in indicator development, the proportion of indicators with sufficient and consistent trend data for goals such as gender equality (SDG 5), sustainable cities (SDG 11), climate action (SDG 13) and strong institutions (SDG 16) remains below 30 per cent (Figure 5).³³

According to the OECD, these data gaps are not a temporary problem, but the result of structural weaknesses in national statistical systems, particularly in low- and middle-income countries³⁴. These systems are chronically underfunded, organised in a fragmented manner and heavily dependent on external projects and donor funds. As a result, available data often fails to adequately address national policy questions, and important dimensions of inequality, exclusion and the informal economy remain out of sight.

This has direct consequences for the core promise of the SDGs. It is precisely those groups that are already marginalised, such as women, young people, people in informal urban settlements or fragile states, who are least visible in existing datasets. At the same time, countries with greater resources have access to better data and stronger reporting capacity, which skews international comparisons and accountability. In this way, data problems reinforce existing power asymmetries and limit the SDG agenda's ability to genuinely steer towards the principle of 'leave no one behind'.

In short: the SDGs offer a valuable integrated agenda, but the combination of insufficient progress, high complexity, non-binding governance and the data gap means that, for the time being, practice lags behind the ambitions.

3.3 The Dutch context as a mirror

In the Netherlands too, the SDGs function as a compass but also as a mirror. In line with the concept of a wellbeing economy, the goals are increasingly being used to assess policy across the dimensions of 'at home and now', 'ahead' and 'abroad'. The SDGs help to break down sectoral boundaries and highlight the interconnections between social, economic and environmental policy. At the same time, international comparisons show that the Netherlands is by no means a clear frontrunner. Although the Netherlands scores relatively well in terms of achieving the SDGs at national level, when it comes to spillovers, our country ranks among the worst-performing nations in the world (Figure 6).³⁵ This means that good scores within our national borders are overshadowed by the significant negative impacts of our trade, climate, agricultural and tax policies on people and nature abroad.

³³ Sustainable Development Goals 2025, 5–7.

³⁴ OECD (2025), "Mind the SDG data gaps: Insights from the OECD SDGs Hub", OECD Policy Insights on Well-being, Inclusion and Equal Opportunity, No. 20, OECD Publishing, Paris.

³⁵ Sustainable Development Goals 2025, 12, 36 and 310–311.

This is an important observation for the assessment of the current SDGs. The agenda is indeed used in the Netherlands, in reports, policy papers and local initiatives, but the underlying principles of policy coherence and global justice are still insufficiently embedded in political and administrative practice. In this sense, the Netherlands is a case in point of the broader problem with the SDGs: an agenda that is formally embraced, but whose implications for financial flows, trade relations and domestic policy are only partially translated into action. A credible role for the Netherlands in the discussion on the post-2030 goals therefore requires more than fine words about ambition: it requires a willingness to reduce its own negative spillovers and to firmly embed policy coherence in law and institutions.

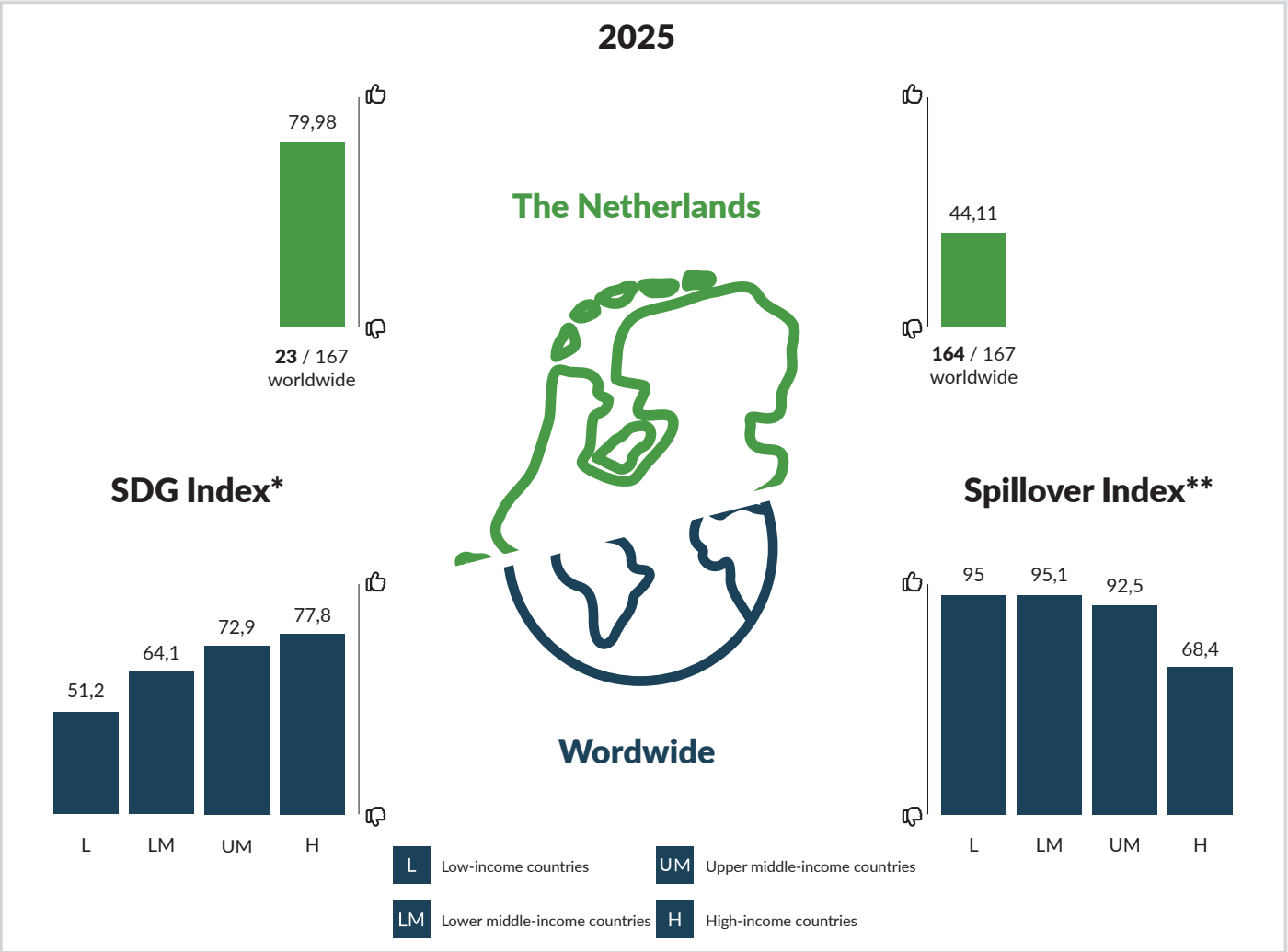


Figure 6 The Dutch context as a mirror: SDG scores and spillovers

**The SDG Index measures progress towards achieving the SDGs. A score of 100 means that all SDGs have been achieved.*
***The Spillover Index uses various indicators across three dimensions to measure whether a country positively or negatively influences other countries' ability to achieve the SDGs through spillovers. A higher score means that a country causes more positive and fewer negative spillovers.*

Source: Own illustration based on <https://dashboards.sdindex.org>

3.4 *Why a global agenda needs a fresh start with a strengthened architecture*

The Dutch mirror shows that even a relatively wealthy and well-organised country such as the Netherlands cannot automatically fully operationalise the SDG targets. Domestic performance may be good, but a lack of policy coherence and negative spillovers limit the agenda's effectiveness internationally. In a world of geopolitical fragmentation, power asymmetry and crumbling normative consensus, it is therefore unrealistic to expect that a rigorous restructuring of the global development framework can succeed. We advocate a fresh start, in which the core principles of the SDGs are retained and the architecture is strengthened to be more effective, manageable and politically resilient.

In the international literature on the future of the SDGs, we broadly distinguish between two schools of thought. A first school advocates fundamental reform of global institutions and governance, as described in, among others, Nature Sustainability and studies on political economy and urban governance.³⁶ According to these analyses, the SDGs are embedded in power structures that reproduce existing inequalities and systemic risks; they argue that a profound restructuring of financial institutions, power relations and ownership structures is necessary.³⁷

The second school acknowledges these structural shortcomings but emphasises political feasibility.³⁸ Fundamental reforms are seen as having little chance of success in a context of rivalry between major powers, weakened multilateralism and limited consensus.³⁹ From this perspective, the focus lies on strengthening existing structures: improving coherence, accountability, financing and the participation of the Global South within the existing framework. Although we morally support the systemic critique of the first school, a strategy that focuses on a complete renegotiation of global relations runs the risk of becoming bogged down in paralysis. A fresh start with an improved architecture, by contrast, builds on existing legitimacy, preserves the normative core of universal sustainable development, and focuses on the concrete strengthening of governance, coherence and financing. Political feasibility therefore does not require less ambition, but a strategy that links high ambitions to institutional and geopolitical reality.

3.5 *Political resilience in an era of crumbling normative consensus*

A post-2030 agenda faces a twofold challenge: not only in terms of substance, but above all politically. Normative consensus on sustainable development is waning, multilateral institutions are under pressure, and rivalry between major powers is hampering collective action. In this context, political resilience is crucial: the agenda must effectively guide behaviour, even when countries or regions have divergent interests.

36 Author unknown, A post-2030 vision. Nature Sustainability 8, 849–850 (2025).

37 Koch, F., Beyer, S., Krellenberg, K., & Wesely, J. (2025). *Future Urban Sustainability: Lessons Learnt From the SDGs and Perspectives for a Post-2030 Agenda*. Urban Planning, 10, Article 11526.; Arora, P., Fatima, T. & Arora, N.K. SDGs beyond 2030: shaping the future with lessons from the past. Environmental Sustainability 8, 389–394 (2025).

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid.

Political resilience means that a global agenda not only promotes universal values, but also includes instruments and mechanisms that deliver results regardless of geopolitical circumstances. This requires four key shifts:

1

From voluntarism to accountability and incentives: alongside voluntary commitments, coherence requirements, monitoring of spillovers and linking to funding must ensure a concrete behavioural impact. This also requires investment in the global data architecture. Gaps in (trend) data, uneven measurement capacity and limited transparency undermine not only understanding but also political credibility. Reliable, comparable and publicly accessible data limit the scope for opportunistic interpretation of targets and strengthen mutual accountability.

2

From uniform rhetoric to differentiated coalitions: In a multipolar world, not every country will move at the same pace or with the same ambition. Political sustainability therefore requires creating scope for coalitions of willing countries and regions, such as middle powers or regional partnerships, which make progress within the universal framework. Meaningful engagement of countries from the Global South and the protection of civic space are essential to maintaining legitimacy. Without inclusive decision-making, a post-2030 agenda loses its global support and becomes vulnerable to accusations of selective or geopolitically driven standard-setting. Differentiation must not weaken the normative foundation, but it can create flexibility in a fragmented geopolitical context.

3

From isolated goals to an integrated approach: The next agenda must deal more explicitly with coherence, synergies and trade-offs between climate, social justice and economic stability. An integrated approach prevents goals from being played off against one another in times of crisis and enhances the political sustainability of choices.⁴⁰

4

From exclusively international agreements to national embedding: Global goals only gain political durability when they are embedded in national institutions and budgetary cycles. Approaches such as the wellbeing economy approach can explicitly link global responsibility to domestic policy, thereby translating international obligations into national legitimacy.

⁴⁰ A post-2030 vision. Nature Sustainability 8, 849–850 (2025).; Koch, F., Beyer, S., Krellenberg, K., & Wesely, J. (2025). Future Urban Sustainability: Lessons Learned From the SDGs and Perspectives for a Post-2030 Agenda. Urban Planning, 10, Article 11526.

A functioning and politically resilient post-2030 agenda therefore combines normative consistency with institutional resilience, driven by a 'critical mass' of ambitious countries. It must be able to withstand geopolitical shocks and political polarisation, function amidst rivalry, and allow for differentiation without normalising fragmentation and incoherence.



The core challenge is therefore not to save multilateralism as an ideal, but to make multilateral cooperation operational in a multipolar world of complex power relations. A relaunch of the SDG agenda with a strengthened architecture offers a realistic route to this end: maintaining shared goals, but with sharper instruments, better institutional embedding and explicit attention to the political economy of implementation.



Recommendations for the post-2030 SDG agenda

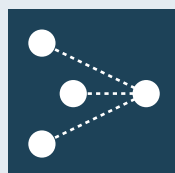
The analysis of global trends and the evaluation of the current SDGs show that the 2030 Agenda is both valuable and vulnerable. The goals have provided a shared language and an integrated framework, but are stalling due to power dynamics, financing, data capacity and political polarisation. Building Change therefore formulates five recommendations for shaping the global development agenda beyond 2030. They are intended as building blocks for the UN debate, but also as a guiding framework for the Netherlands' engagement.



4.1 Principles: Preserve and deepen core values

The greatest strength of the current SDGs lies not only in the set of 17 goals, but in the underlying principles. The agenda is universal: it applies to all countries and permanently links poverty reduction and social development with climate, biodiversity and a just economy. It presupposes interdependence: what happens at home has consequences abroad, and vice versa. And it is designed as a 'project for everyone': sustainable development is not just a task for governments, but for society as a whole.

In a post-2030 agenda, these principles must be explicitly upheld and deepened. This means: continuing to think in terms of a shared global destiny rather than charity. Goals for all countries, not just for the Global South. And structural space for the input and ownership of local authorities, businesses, knowledge institutions and civil society organisations. For the Netherlands, this means a commitment based on the concept of wellbeing economy: at home, abroad and ahead are interconnected, and we bear responsibility for this both nationally and internationally. This allows us to emphasise that we are a reliable international partner.

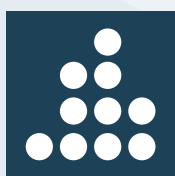


4.2 Participants: global convergence and regional diversity

The 2030 Agenda has shown that global goals can help to sharpen ambitions and encourage countries to benchmark themselves against one another. At the same time, many partners in the Global South, as well as a specific target group such as 'young people', perceive the current SDGs as far removed from their daily reality. They endorse the goals, but experience structural inequality in the decision-making, financing and monitoring of the goals. The agenda therefore risks becoming something imposed on them 'from the outside', rather than something they help to shape.

A post-2030 framework should therefore combine global convergence on outcomes with regional and national diversity in pathways. This diversity concerns the choice of policy pathways and instruments, not the validity of the established Universal Human Rights, which serve as a minimum standard for all countries. Global goals – concerning, for example, poverty, inequality, climate, health, nature and institutions – are agreed jointly, but countries and regions are given more scope to determine for themselves how these are translated into policy and timelines. A prerequisite, however, is that governments and civil society organisations from the

Global South participate fully in the design, governance and monitoring of the new agenda from the outset. For the Netherlands, this means that, rather than merely 'having a say' in New York, it must actively invest in regional consultations, capacity building and political space for Southern partners to contribute their own priorities and expertise.



4.3 Framework: manageable and quantifiable

The current SDG architecture is rich, but also complex and difficult for many countries to manage. A post-2030 framework must build on the integrated approach, but make the goals and indicators sharper, clearer and better substantiated. This starts with explicitly incorporating scientific insights on synergies and trade-offs: which goals reinforce each other, which clash, and what does that mean for sequencing and prioritisation?

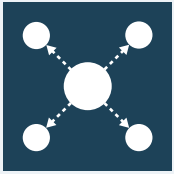
One option is to work with a limited number of 'key goals', for example relating to living within planetary boundaries, inclusive societies and resilient economies, within which the full breadth of the current agenda is reflected in more specific targets and indicators. In this way, the agenda remains integrated, but becomes manageable and easier to translate into national and local strategies. For the Netherlands, this presents an opportunity to utilise its strong knowledge infrastructure (planning agencies, universities, research institutes) to develop its own, scientifically underpinned post-2030 framework, based on broad prosperity.



4.4 Prerequisites: fair finance, protection of civil society and adequate data infrastructure

Without a fair and adequate financial system, global goals will remain mere paper ambitions. The current situation – an annual global financing gap of trillions of euros, record-high debt levels in low- and middle-income countries, and heavy reliance on short-term, project-based financing – is unsustainable. A post-2030 agenda must therefore be explicitly linked to agreements on financing and institutional reform.

This means, among other things: closing the financing gap through public funds, climate finance instruments, debt relief and the mobilisation of responsible private capital. International financial institutions and tax rules must be reformed to better safeguard the interests of low- and middle-income countries. Structural investments are also needed in national statistical systems and open data, so that countries can measure their own progress as well as the effects of others' policies. It is also crucial to protect the space for civil society: without independent organisations, media and social movements, there are no watchdogs to hold governments to their promises, precisely because the SDGs are not legally but only politically binding. For the Netherlands, this means that development and climate finance must improve not only in volume but also in quality: more predictable, more focused on public goods and institutional strengthening, and thus explicitly linked to the protection of civil society.



4.5 And the Netherlands? Coherence and spillovers

The current SDGs mention policy coherence and 'leave no one behind', but do not yet sufficiently highlight how policies in rich countries influence other countries' ability to achieve their goals. A credible post-2030 agenda must focus much more explicitly on reducing negative spillovers: the effects of trade, agricultural, climate, fiscal and security policies on people and nature abroad and ahead. In this regard, the Netherlands literally has a world to win.

This requires indicators and reporting mechanisms that capture these spillovers, the institutional embedding of policy coherence for sustainable development, and a link to wellbeing economy thinking: whereby policy is assessed on its impact at home and now, abroad and ahead. For the Netherlands, this means in concrete terms that the successor to the SDGs belongs not only in the development cooperation policy document, but across the entire government policy spectrum: from budgetary policy and the tax regime to trade, migration, energy and agriculture. Legislation and instruments such as the Beleidscompas and the Brede-welvaartstoets can play an important role in this, provided they are explicitly equipped to take international impacts into account.







Conclusion:

retain principles, reform architecture

Ten years after the launch of Agenda 2030, the picture is two-sided. The world is not on track to meet the SDGs, and the UN speaks of a global development crisis: poverty, inequality and the planetary crisis are on the rise in many places. At the same time, examples from various countries show that acceleration is indeed possible where political will, funding and sound policy converge. The SDGs have proven their worth as a universal compass and shared language, but are being held back by unequal power dynamics, an unfair financial system, underfunded data systems and political polarisation around sensitive issues.

Input from partners in the Global South makes it clear that the crux of the problem lies not with the goals themselves, but with ownership and the rules of the game. They endorse the agenda, but feel they have too little say in its formulation, funding and monitoring. Their message is clear: a post-2030 framework must view them not merely as implementers, but as co-designers, with fair financing, scope for regional diversity and a serious redistribution of power in global decision-making.

For the Netherlands, too, the SDG picture is two-sided. Within our national borders, we score reasonably well on many indicators, but through our trade, climate, agricultural and fiscal structures, we cause significant negative impacts abroad. This is at odds with our own thinking on a wellbeing economy, in which 'at home', 'abroad' and 'ahead' are inextricably linked. A credible Dutch commitment to the post-2030 agenda therefore means: reducing our own footprint, structurally ensuring policy coherence, and viewing the SDG successor not merely as a theme of development cooperation, but of overall government policy.

With this position paper, Building Change advocates for a next phase in thinking about global development. A phase in which the core principles of the SDGs – global interconnectedness, shared responsibility and integrated development – are upheld, but the architecture surrounding them is made fairer and more effective: with a strong voice for the Global South, a just financial and institutional system, protection of civil space and data capacity, and serious attention to spillovers. We call on politicians, civil society organisations, knowledge institutions and businesses in the Netherlands to act on this now, so that the post-2030 agenda becomes more than just a new list of goals: an instrument for changing systems and promoting just, sustainable and inclusive prosperity – at home, abroad and ahead.



