Achieving SDG Results in Development Co-operation

SUMMARY FOR POLICY MAKERS



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Foreword

Achieving sustainable, equitable and resilient societies is humankind's challenge for the 21st century. In pursuit of this ambition, the international development community needs a shared universal framework for working more closely together. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are the obvious answer, but technical, political and organisational challenges prevent development co-operation providers from using the SDGs as their common results framework.

This policy report builds on seven comparative case studies conducted in Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Kenya, Myanmar, Peru, Samoa and Uganda. The case studies explore whether the SDG framework, with its 169 targets and 232 indicators, can be used as a shared framework for results in development co-operation at country level. Each case study is published under an individual country report that analyses how partner country governments and development partners align their strategic plans to the SDGs, set up monitoring approaches that support SDG measurement, and use the SDGs as a shared framework for results at country level. Each report provides technical suggestions for partner country governments and development partners to overcome bottlenecks and tap into the potential of the SDGs as a common framework for results and impact. In addition, a comparative report highlights the commonalities and differences of engaging in different country contexts: in least developed countries, middle-income countries, fragile contexts and small island developing states.

The key messages and suggested strategic actions presented in this summary report are directed to heads of development co-operation ministries and agencies.

Chapter 1 presents the benefits that stakeholders would gain from realigning development co-operation to SDG results at country level. It notes that reaping those benefits and efficiencies requires that most partners first align to the SDGs, and it takes stock of where partner country governments and development partners stand in this regard. Chapter 2 explores the bottlenecks that are hampering SDG adoption at country level. It outlines insights and lessons learnt from the practice of development co-operation providers, and presents practical strategies to enhance the focus on SDG results. Chapter 3 focuses on the role of leadership. It presents six strategic actions that can transform development co-operation for the SDG era in support of equitable and sustainable development.

Acknowledgements

This work responds to a request by the Results Community of the OECD's Development Assistance Committee for better guidance to improve the effective use of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in development co-operation. The report contributes to broader efforts by the OECD Development Co-operation Directorate to improve the alignment and contribution of development co-operation to the SDGs.

Under the responsibility of Jorge Moreira Da Silva, Director of the OECD Development Co-operation Directorate, Rahul Malhotra, Head of the Reviews, Results, Evaluation and Development Innovation Division and Chantal Verger, Head of the Results Team, provided strategic guidance and oversight. Alejandro Guerrero-Ruiz led the extensive research behind this summary report and is the main author. The research was conducted by a team comprised of Paige Kirby, Kadambote Sachin, Julia Schnatz and Rosie Zwart. Special thanks go to Ola Kasneci, Mary Bortin and Jennifer Allain for their editorial review, and to Lushomo studio for the visualisations included in this report.

The authors are deeply grateful to the governments of Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Kenya, Myanmar, Peru, Samoa and Uganda for hosting and supporting the underlying study on the use of the SDGs in development co-operation at country level. They would like also to thank Australia, the European Commission, Finland, Ireland, New Zealand, Spain and Switzerland for their role as peer learners and in facilitating the country case studies. This research would not have been possible without the engagement, candour and generosity of many senior officials and technical staff from the above-mentioned seven governments and from more than 65 bilateral and multilateral development partners who participated in in-depth interviews, surveys, data sharing, focus group discussions and validation workshops.

Editorial

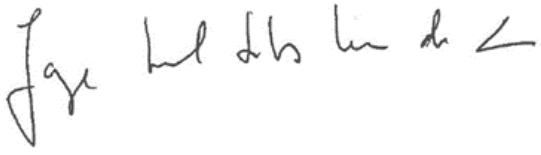
The international community is not on track to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which were unanimously adopted by all countries six years ago as the most tangible part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Global challenges are on the rise, frustrating progress, and threatening the lives and well-being of millions of people.

Leaders of international development agencies, including OECD ministries, agencies and development finance institutions, have a critical role to play to reverse that trend. Both bilateral and multilateral actions are needed.

As they strive to co-ordinate more effectively and efficiently across institutions, borders and sectors in support of partner countries' efforts, this report is a timely reminder that the SDGs are more than an ambition: they provide all development partners with a universal road map for collaborative and comprehensive approaches in development co-operation.

However, the report also points to a number of largely internal technical, organisational and political obstacles standing in the way. Leaders of international development agencies have the power to remove them. Further, the COVID-19 crisis has revealed the ability of their institutions to innovate, reform their management and procurement systems, enhance their partnerships, and scale up action.

Based on a wealth of good practice examples, this report recommends specific policy actions, calling on leaders and decision makers to renew their approach to partnerships, and improve their delivery and systems. Now is the time to redouble our efforts and deliver on the letter and spirit of the 2030 Agenda. The OECD is here to help.



Jorge Moreira da Silva

Director of the Development Co-operation Directorate

OECD

Table of contents

Foreword 3

Acknowledgements 4

Editorial 5

Executive summary 7

1 Aligning development co-operation to sustainable development: Can we step up action? 8
- Global challenges call for urgent collective action 8
- The SDG framework offers many co-benefits 8
- SDG integration by partner countries is a work in progress 10
- SDG integration by development partners is mainly at the policy level 12
- Business as usual is no longer an option 14

2 Understanding and overcoming bottlenecks in SDG alignment 15
- Delivering on the SDGs involves three key factors 17
- Practical steps can enhance SDG alignment at country level 19

3 How to support an inclusive and sustainable recovery and work towards the SDGs together 21
- The pandemic creates an opportunity for organisational transformation 21
- Country leadership in SDG alignment remains a critical enabler 21
- Achieving SDG results requires better partnerships 22

FIGURE

Figure 1.1. Pathways of alignment of development co-operation to SDG results 12

INFOGRAPHICS

Infographic 1.1. Benefits of the SDG framework 9
Infographic 1.2. Partner countries: Progress in aligning to the SDGs 11
Infographic 1.3. Development partners: Progress in aligning to SDG results 13
Infographic 2.1. Why SDG adoption in development co-operation has been difficult 16
Infographic 2.2. Good donorship principles to maximise SDG adoption 18
Infographic 2.3. Evidence from seven country case studies 20

Executive summary

Achieving sustainable and resilient societies everywhere is humankind's collective test for the 21st century. Development challenges have become increasingly complex, intertwined and unpredictable. The framework of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) offers a shared blueprint to navigate the uncertainty and interdependence that characterise our era. And realigning development co-operation to focus fully on pursuing SDG results is a precondition to bolster its collective impact.

Focusing development co-operation on SDG results is worth the effort

Using the SDG framework in development co-operation offers many co-benefits, including the ability to navigate complex multidimensional challenges using the same language and data, building partnerships around a consensus agenda, and maximising the impact and value for money of every investment. But as of 2021, these benefits remain unrealised, as most partners have yet to reorient development co-operation towards SDG results as political, technical and organisational challenges have delayed these processes.

Accelerating the slow alignment to SDG results is possible

This series of studies suggests that a successful alignment of development co-operation to SDG results is built on three broad foundations. First, successful "SDG adopters" promote the achievement of SDG results from the top and invest in systems and management practices to support the alignment process. Second, SDG adopters respect and invest in partner country ownership, synchronising and adapting their development co-operation processes with their partner countries while supporting their own SDG transition. Finally, understanding that no country, ministry or agency can deliver on the SDGs alone, successful SDG adopters proactively partner with other country-level institutions and peers around specific SDG results. The pandemic can be used to trigger the organisational transformation that the SDGs require.

How to support a fair and sustainable recovery on the road to 2030

This report describes six strategic actions that would help development co-operation leaders, managers and policy makers manage this transition successfully. In brief:

- **Action 1:** Promote the achievement of SDG results from the top.
- **Action 2:** Invest in organisational transformation needed for the SDGs.
- **Action 3:** Adapt SDG alignment strategies to each country context.
- **Action 4:** Support countries in SDG mainstreaming efforts.
- **Action 5:** Invest in country-led SDG data to jointly monitor progress towards the SDGs.
- **Action 6:** Build partnerships with others around specific SDG results.

1 Aligning development co-operation to sustainable development: Can we step up action?

Global challenges call for urgent collective action

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was endorsed six years ago, and global challenges hindering its achievement keep growing. On top of challenges such as climate change, lack of security and inequality, the global pandemic has severely impacted economies, societies and the environment. In 2019, most Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) related to these challenges were already off track, partly due to limited international co-operation. Since then, the COVID-19 pandemic has reversed years or even decades of progress in many parts of the world.

The pandemic dramatically illustrates our global interdependency and the importance of multilateralism, international co-operation and strategic partnerships for addressing global and local challenges. Policy makers worldwide recognise the urgent need for timely data and policy responses that address all three dimensions of sustainable development: economic, social and environmental.

While the need to mobilise more international and domestic resources is clear, we must do so in a way that ensures that no country or individual is left behind, and that every cent counts. The economic recovery should serve as an opportunity to address the climate crisis and other systemic issues. These systemic crises highlight the need to work towards common goals, understand synergies and spillovers of policies and investments, and build long-term capacity and resilience in all dimensions of sustainable development.

The SDG framework offers many co-benefits

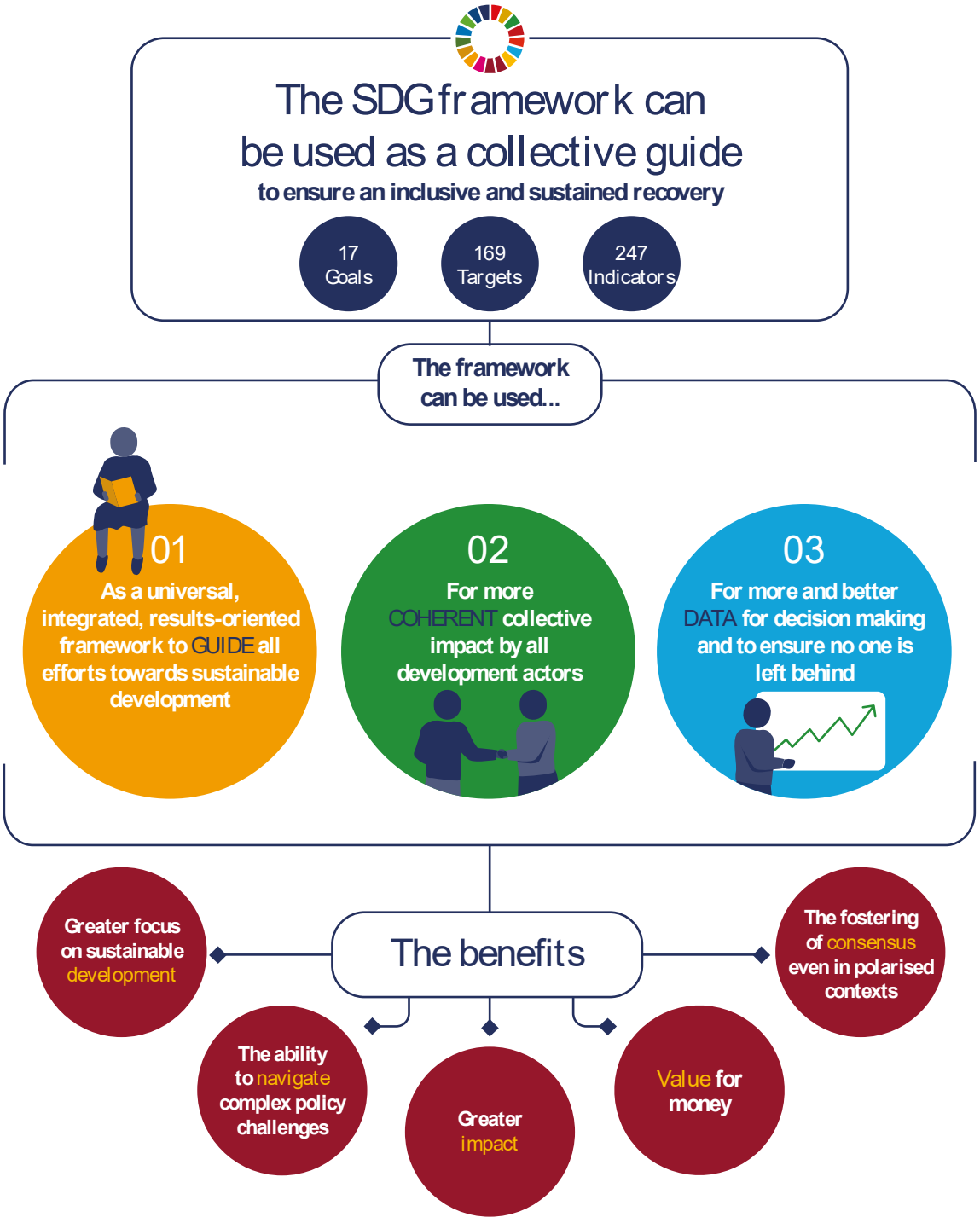
As a universally agreed agenda for sustainable development, the SDGs offer a holistic framework that has the potential to guide our collective action towards an equitable and sustainable planet.

The Sustainable Development Goals serve as a common standard to co-ordinate efforts by governments, development partners, the private sector and other development actors. As a common framework, the 17 SDGs, along with their targets and indicators, can help to overcome the current fragmentation and lack of co-ordination at country level, building synergies and maximising collective impact (Infographic 1.1).

The broad use of SDG indicators in development co-operation can help generate more and better development data and evidence everywhere. We all know the importance of timely and reliable data for decision making in an increasingly volatile world. Using the SDG framework will lead to joint efforts to

strengthen the availability of (and capacity to analyse) development data for informed decision making. It will also help decision makers learn where we stand on the way to achieve the Goals and whether their actions are making a positive impact.

Infographic 1.1. Benefits of the SDG framework



The SDGs help ensure that individual and collective efforts are coherent. Their targets and indicators push development actors to tackle all three dimensions of development. Pursuit of the goals encourages evaluating how individual actions interact with other efforts and policies. The SDGs also help in identifying how domestic policies affect other countries. This is an essential factor for ensuring that all domestic and development co-operation policies remain coherent with the global Goals, and that they support partner countries in delivering results on the ground.

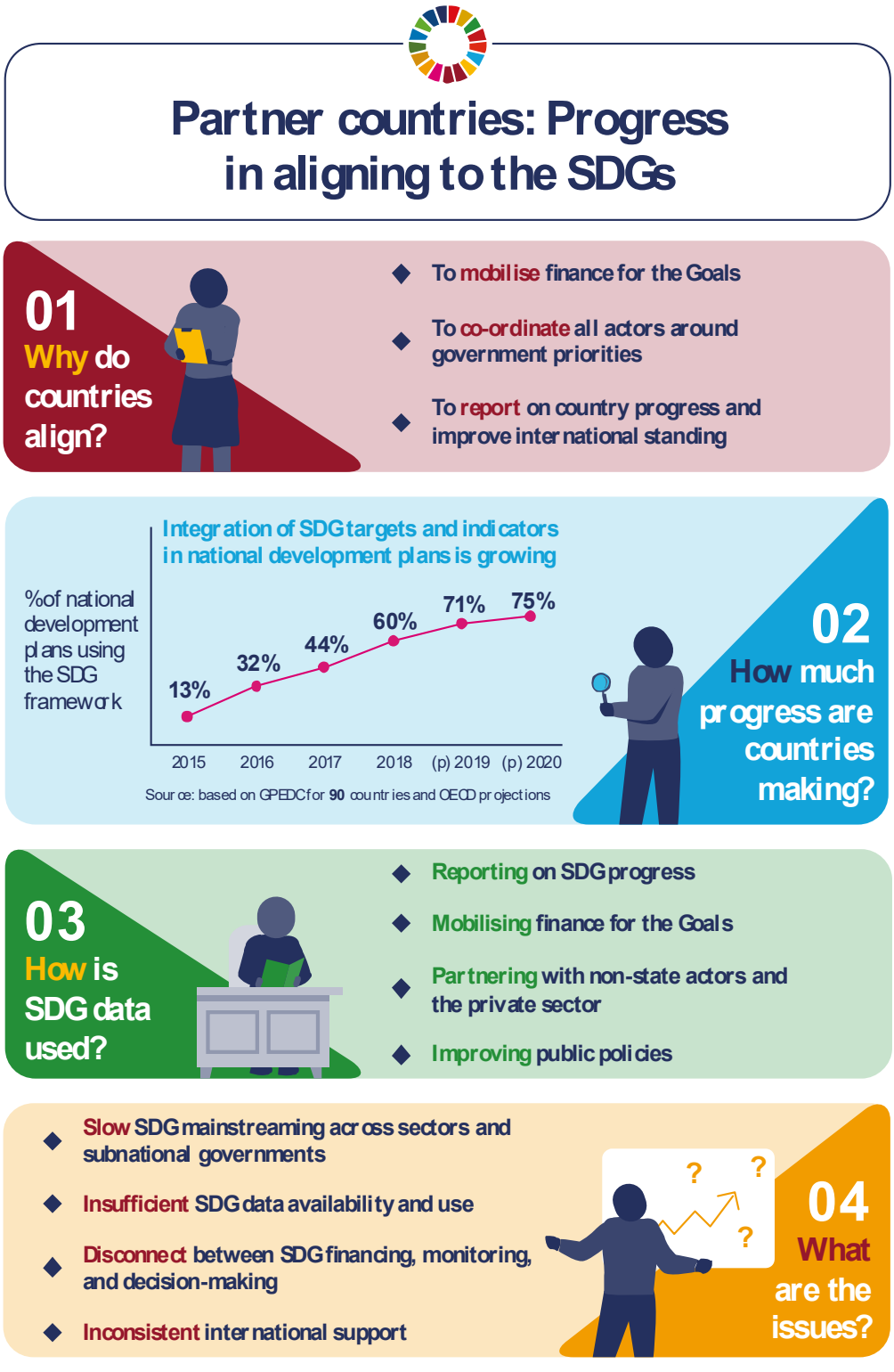
Given the breadth of the challenges ahead, the SDG framework has the potential to serve as a road map for collective action. But ensuring that the Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development functions as both a goal and a means for action requires sustained leadership. Partner countries and development partners are taking steps in this direction. The need for a strong impulse is more urgent than ever as many countries are lagging or backsliding on the SDGs.

SDG integration by partner countries is a work in progress

Governments in partner countries are actively integrating the SDGs into national planning and policy making, budgets, and monitoring systems. The SDGs offer countries a shared agenda to mobilise finance, actors and attention around national development strategies and government priorities. SDG monitoring is improving as countries use their SDG progress reports to catalyse efforts across government to identify, collect and monitor SDG data – with notable progress up to 2020. To date, a total of 205 voluntary national reviews on SDG progress have been presented to the United Nations, covering almost every country.

But alignment of national policy making to the SDGs remains incomplete. In 175 countries, governments have initiated the creation of institutional set-ups for promoting SDG-oriented planning, monitoring and partnerships. However, alignment to the SDG framework remains partial due to delays caused by planning cycles, pending work to mainstream the SDGs across government, weak links between SDG plans and budget decisions, and a lack of SDG data. And international support to countries for SDG mainstreaming and data gathering has been insufficient in scale and fragmented in delivery.

Infographic 1.2. Partner countries: Progress in aligning to the SDGs



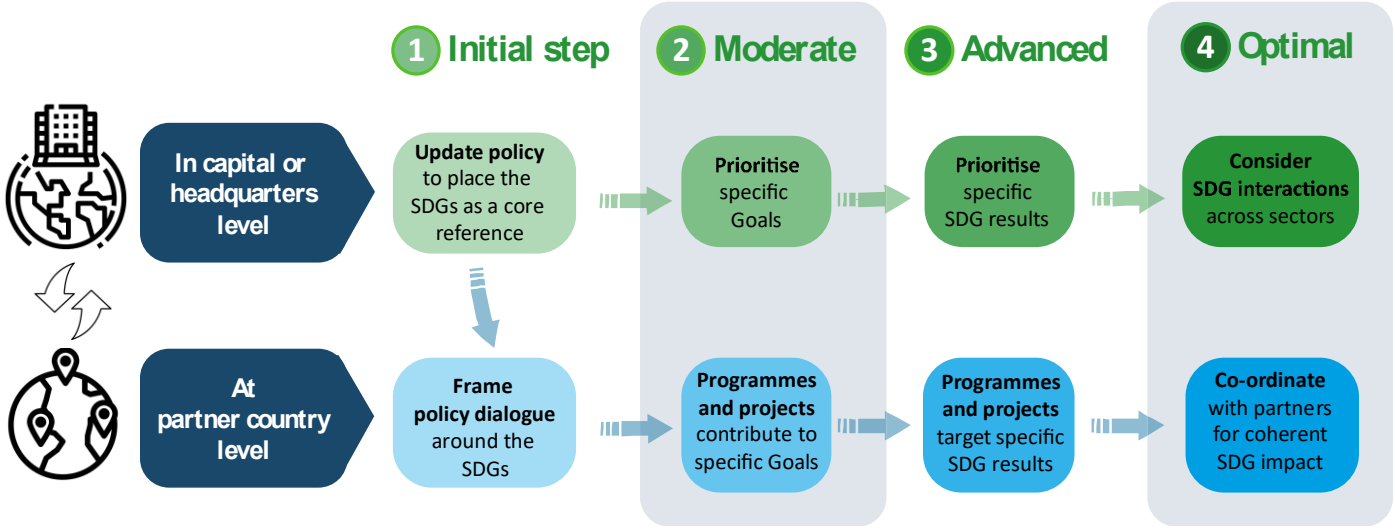
Source: Authors' elaboration based on seven country case studies and data from dashboard.effectivecooperation.org.

SDG integration by development partners is mainly at the policy level

Many development partners use the SDGs to frame their co-operation policies, and almost all refer to the SDGs in their development co-operation policies and strategies. In turn, their SDG priorities are progressively being reflected in the corporate results frameworks used to report on their overall contribution to global development. Still, only 55% of development partners have a corporate results framework that fully or partially aims to achieve SDG results.

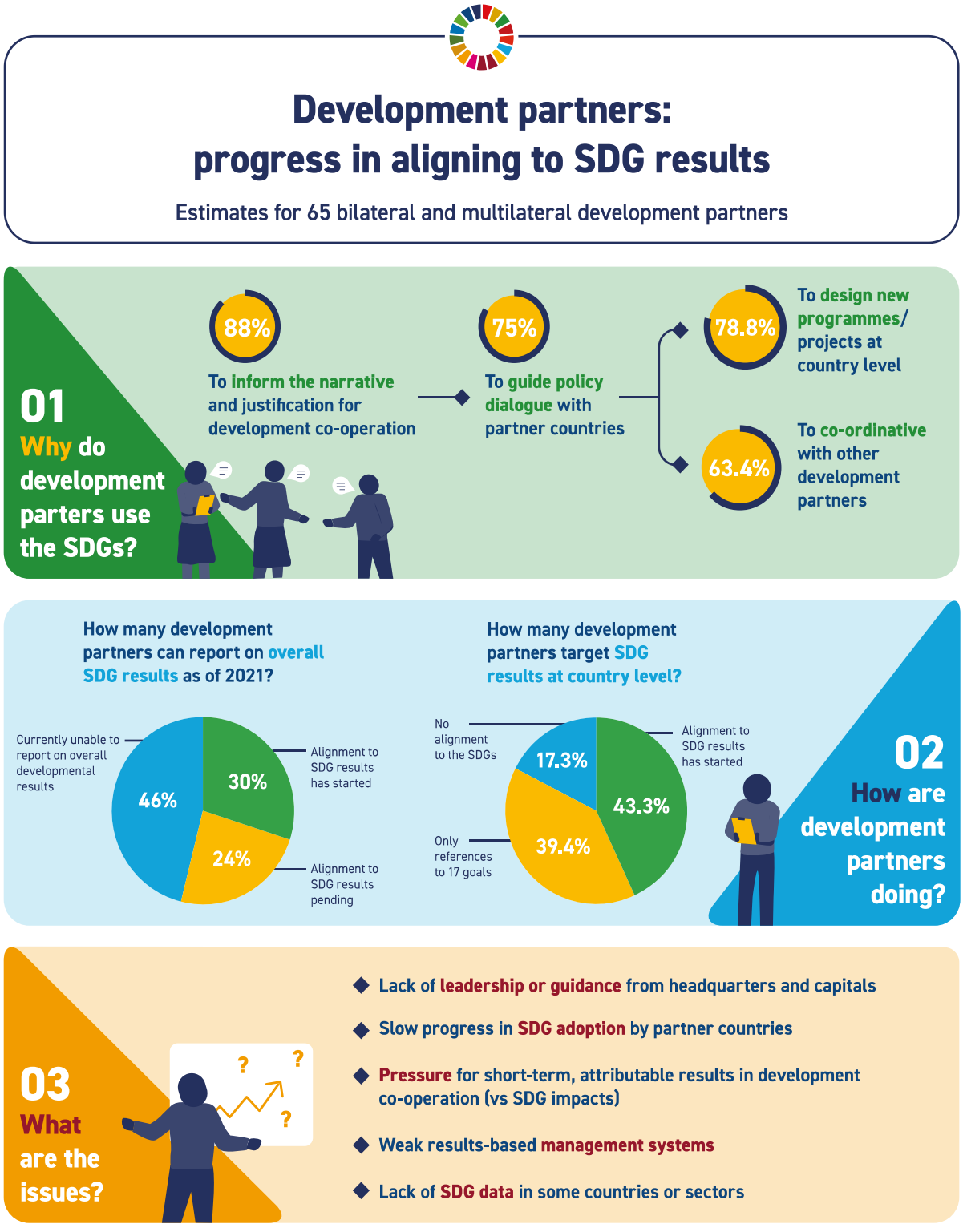
Efforts to align results frameworks to the SDGs are slowly trickling down to country-level development work, although SDG uptake is even softer there. Most development partners are mapping their country-level contribution to the 17 SDGs and are using them to frame their policy dialogue, co-ordination mechanisms and partnerships. This is particularly the case for those partners that have updated their institutional mandate and frameworks to align with the SDGs. Yet, use of the SDG framework for planning and measuring results is limited: only one-third of development partners are systematically or frequently using SDG indicators in their results frameworks at country level. For instance, only half of the development partners in Uganda are explicitly using SDG targets and indicators to measure outcomes. This proportion drops to one-quarter in Peru. However, once headquarters and capitals trigger those processes, development organisations tend to follow similar – albeit slow – SDG adoption paths (Figure 1.1).

Figure 1.1. Pathways of alignment of development co-operation to SDG results



Source: Authors' elaboration based on seven country case studies.

Infographic 1.3. Development partners: Progress in aligning to SDG results



Source: Authors' elaboration based on seven country case studies and a baseline survey.

Business as usual is no longer an option

Inertia on embracing the SDGs is too high and progress too slow for their use as a holistic guide to consistent and efficient collective action towards sustainable development. Given the increasing number of development actors, the tendency towards fragmented, uncoordinated action will worsen if steps are not taken. Inefficiencies will increase, and the lack of reliable data will make it impossible to measure progress, learn what works and what does not, and take informed decisions. There is already a proliferation of indicators. In Ethiopia, for example, we found that development partners were using 40 different indicators to measure SDG 7.1.1 on access to electricity. This made their data unharmonised, prevented further co-operation and left the Ethiopian government without a clear picture of how many households had access to electricity across the country.

The setback caused by the pandemic should be used as a unique opportunity to recalibrate how development co-operation is delivered and how partnerships are implemented. National development plans and the strategies of development co-operation providers need to be rethought in light of new realities. The crisis should be seen as an opportunity to unlock institutional bottlenecks, adapt norms and processes, and adopt bolder approaches to the scale of the current development challenge.

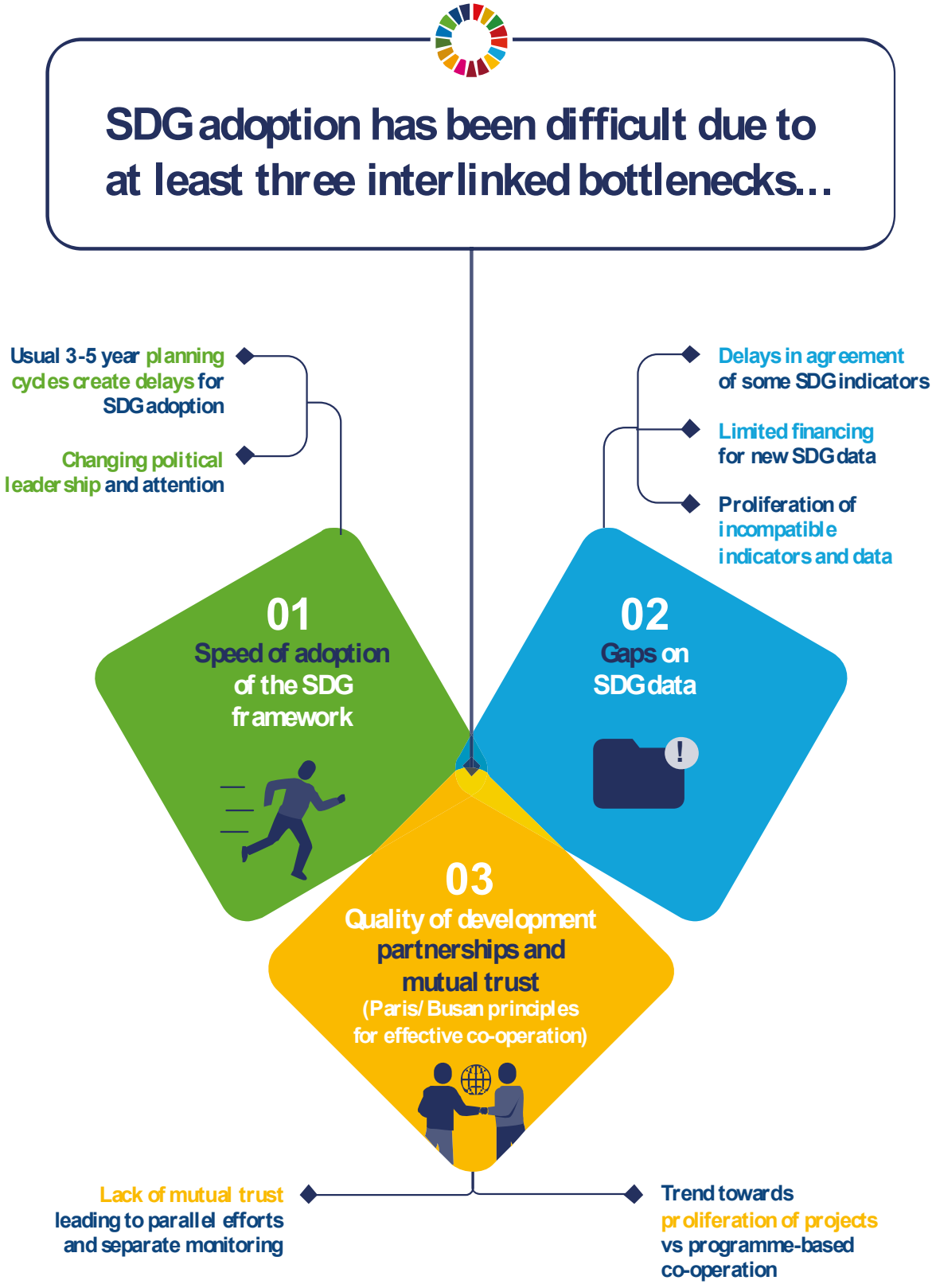
Consistent and informed leadership is needed to reverse the trend. Managing change requires both political will and strong leadership. It also requires an understanding of the barriers that have prevented further uptake of the SDGs. Leaders should also consider the opportunities that exist to strengthen the quality of development policies and programme delivery.

2 Understanding and overcoming bottlenecks in SDG alignment

Adopting a global standard is always challenging, and this is the case as governments and development partners around the world attempt to integrate the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) framework into their policies and development programmes. Most have had to learn by doing as they conduct one of the most demanding transformations in two decades. We consider the SDG indicator framework, which was completed in its final form in 2020, to be a much better road map than anything adopted before for managing the global challenges of the current era.

Our research compares the experiences of seven countries – Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Kenya, Myanmar, Peru, Samoa and Uganda – and more than 65 development co-operation ministries and agencies. It has revealed various strategies to accelerate the integration of the SDG framework into international co-operation practices.

Infographic 2.1. Why SDG adoption in development co-operation has been difficult



Source: Authors' elaboration based on seven country case studies.

Delivering on the SDGs involves three key factors

Sustained political leadership is essential

Integrating the SDG framework into development co-operation policies, budgets and monitoring systems requires sustained political leadership. Mainstreaming the SDGs adequately and comprehensively is a complicated task both technically and organisationally. It involves redefining objectives in line with the SDGs; establishing clear methodologies to achieve them; promoting cross-sector approaches with appropriate structures, systems, guidance and capacities; and strengthening monitoring systems. This transformation involves managing trade-offs with internal institutional dynamics, and requires a sound and coherent change management process. To overcome these obstacles over time, leadership must champion the transformation. Here are two positive examples:

> *All development partners in **Bangladesh** have followed the country's leadership in SDG alignment globally. The country's national plan and policies place the SDGs front and centre, driving line ministers and development partners to adopt them and guide policy and action with SDG results in focus.*
>
> *The **European Commission** has made the SDGs a core focus of development co-operation. Planning and monitoring of results are progressively focusing on SDGs in partner country programmes.*

Collective efforts facilitate SDG alignment at country level

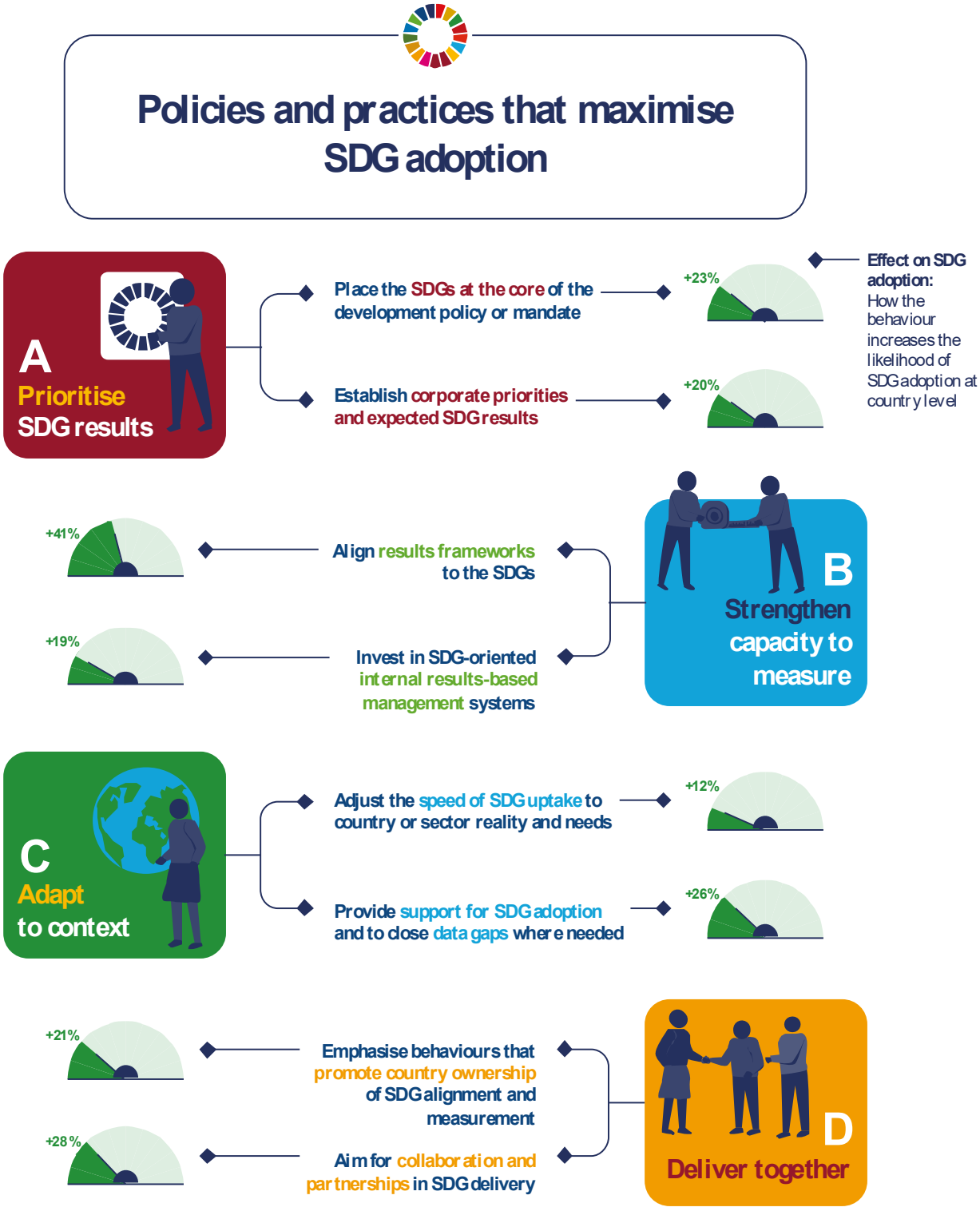
Many development organisations have adopted development co-operation practices that emphasise their own performance. Such practices, which result from both internal needs and external pressures, may lead organisations to focus on short-term deliverables and become risk averse. They also discourage the type of joint investment, collaboration across partners and joint monitoring that are essential for achieving long-lasting SDG results. This phenomenon is true in all countries, but particularly in conflict-affected or fragile situations. In contrast, organisations that follow SDG alignment strategies and prioritise country ownership, partnerships, transparency and collective accountability around development results tend to maximise synergies, data availability and the impact of SDG-oriented investments. Two contrasting examples:

> *In **Kenya**, many development partners working in the energy sector pooled their investments to accelerate electrification across the country. The government and its partners relied on joint monitoring practices by using similar SDG indicators. SDG data now show that electricity access in Kenya surged from 18% to 75% in barely seven years.*
>
> *In **Uganda**, public institutions and several development partners are stepping up co-ordination, data pooling and support to improve the availability, credibility and frequency of SDG data on governance matters associated with SDG 16. For example, administrative capacity to register newborns or to monitor service delivery quality are growing hand-in-hand with joint investments in SDG 16 data.*

Results-based management systems enable SDG alignment

Many development partners are in the process of strengthening their results-based management. This change needs to be sustained, as a robust system is an essential enabler for SDG alignment and carries many benefits for both the organisation and its partners. Development partners with a well-established system and robust methodologies tend to be better aligned with the SDGs, and in a position to promote cross-sector approaches. They are also decentralised enough to allow for more flexible, context-sensitive approaches and adaptive management systems. This helps them support countries in SDG mainstreaming, maximise the work with other partners, and tailor their own policies and processes to rapid change and a diversity of country contexts.

Infographic 2.2. Good donorship principles to maximise SDG adoption



Source: Authors' elaboration based on a comparative analysis of 50 development partners and seven country case studies.

Practical steps can enhance SDG alignment at country level

Corporate requirements act as a powerful driver in the use of SDG targets and indicators at the country level. Corporate results frameworks that integrate the SDGs also tend to provide guidance, which helps staff understand how to use the SDG framework. Examples show that the corporate requirement to report on SDG contributions can also be a lever to manage for SDG impact at country level – supporting and using country-owned SDG data and thereby facilitating partner country alignment to the SDGs. In any case, it is crucial to ensure that information on SDG results is incorporated into decision making at all levels.

> ***Switzerland**'s International Co-operation Strategy 2021-24 includes objectives and a menu of standard indicators aligned to the SDGs. Guidance helps field staff to align results frameworks with the strategy and the SDGs while adjusting to each context.*

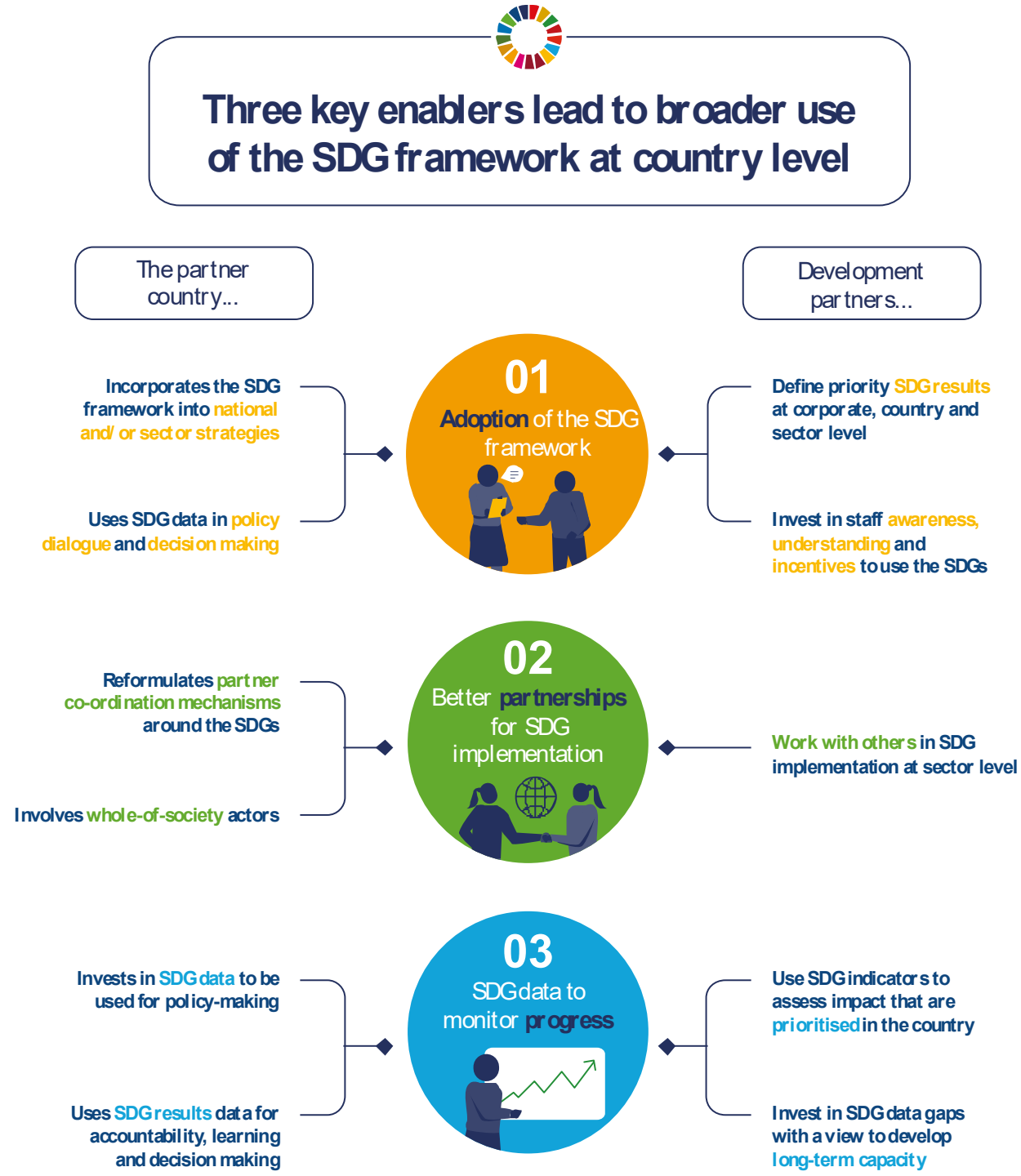
Adaptive management can foster SDG adoption. Adaptive practices allow development programmes to remain flexible during implementation, while keeping the focus on longer term SDG outcomes. Adaptive management also promotes iterative approaches that are well suited to address the complexity inherent to the SDGs and the three dimensions of sustainable development. In partner countries, managers have the authority and flexibility to tailor the management approach depending on the local context and adapt to evolving situations. They adjust the speed of SDG uptake to each reality and provide support for SDG adoption where needed.

> *In **Peru**, development partners that rely on adaptive management approaches tend to use the SDG framework more strategically. This results from lesser emphasis on short-term attributable results and a greater focus on policy influence and capacity building.*

Synchronising planning with government cycles helps to mainstream the SDGs into national processes and reviews. Most development partners attempt to match project objectives with government policies and strategies. Several partners go beyond this step and synchronise the life cycle of their country strategy with the partner country's government planning cycle. Practices for planning and monitoring can therefore be rooted in national systems and cycles. In addition to fostering SDG uptake, such alignment allows for more synergies at the budgetary and sectoral level. These partners engage more often in collaborative approaches to design, implement and monitor programmes at country level. Country planning synchronisation not only promotes local ownership, it also allows development partners to follow country efforts to use the SDG framework more closely and identify data gaps.

> *In **Uganda**, development partners that synchronise their strategies with the government planning cycle are particularly oriented towards maximising the use of official statistics and government data to report on development results, which creates a virtuous circle for investing in SDG monitoring capacity.*

Infographic 2.3. Evidence from seven country case studies



Source: Authors' elaboration based on a comparative analysis of seven country case studies.

3 How to support an inclusive and sustainable recovery and work towards the SDGs together

These are times of crises that cross borders at a pace rarely seen before. Tackling these crises at home and abroad will require stronger leadership that rises to the sheer size of the challenges ahead. Leaders in development co-operation ministries and agencies have a pivotal role to play in managing the organisational transformation needed to be fit for the occasion.

This report concludes with six strategic actions that would help development co-operation leaders and policy makers manage this transition successfully.

The pandemic creates an opportunity for organisational transformation

COVID-19 triggered one of the most significant development crises in recent times. It forced governments and development partners to reset their long-term strategies and review their policies and internal systems. This situation offers ideal conditions to push for an institutional transformation that uses the SDG framework as a common reference point in planning a more sustainable recovery on the road to 2030.

- **Action 1: Promote the achievement of SDG results from the top.** Leadership widely communicates the purpose and benefits of SDG alignment. Management sets clear SDG results for the organisation and uses the SDG results information to improve strategic management at all levels. The SDGs are not only part of the narrative and justification for development co-operation, but they steer action too.
- **Action 2: Invest in organisational transformation needed for the SDGs.** Leadership provides guidance, incentives and resources to support changes in management processes and systems that will allow using the SDGs to their full potential, and as a road map for an inclusive and sustainable recovery. These investments will increase the organisation's managerial focus on long-term outcomes and its capacity to work across sector silos – essential for addressing the complex development challenges ahead.

Country leadership in SDG alignment remains a critical enabler

Country leadership continues to be essential. However, most development organisations tend to define their SDG alignment strategies individually, which leads to fragmented or incoherent support for SDG achievement in partner countries. Partner country governments can create an enabling environment for a more harmonised SDG alignment across development partners, chiefly by realigning their policies, budgets and programmes to target SDG results.

- **Action 3: Adapt SDG alignment strategies to each country context.** Recognising that partner countries should lead the alignment to SDG results at country level, be selective in sequencing the alignment of development co-operation programmes to SDG results on a case-by-case basis. As a general rule, synchronise your alignment process with country-led initiatives at national, sector or subnational levels. Avoid going solo.

Realigning national policy making towards SDG results requires time and effort, and no country has completed that process. In many cases, partner country capacity to steer and monitor SDG progress is limited. International support can play an essential role in accelerating country-driven processes and strengthening capacity – particularly in lower income countries and fragile situations. The seven country case studies show that when partners encourage and support SDG mainstreaming, countries accelerate their alignment to the SDGs. And SDG data also become more available and used for policy making. But the case studies also find that only parts of the United Nations system and some other development partners have systematically done so to date.

- **Action 4: Support countries in SDG mainstreaming.** Wherever relevant, join forces with partner governments in realigning national or sector policies, financing and monitoring systems around SDG results. To ensure broad ownership and sustainability, help promote inclusive and participatory approaches around these processes.
- **Action 5: Invest in country-led SDG data to monitor progress towards the SDGs.** Use the country-led data for joint monitoring of progress. Avoid collecting SDG data that only meet internal domestic reporting and accountability needs.

Achieving SDG results requires better partnerships

In many country contexts, the proliferation of development partners and a decline in mutual trust weaken the principles of harmonisation and country ownership. They also inhibit cross-donor co-ordination around a transformational agenda. However, the case studies show that the SDG framework, as an agenda for consensus, often acts as a catalyst for better partnerships and greater co-ordination (at sector level). Such partnerships are more capable of tackling complex development challenges and achieving very tangible results.

- **Action 6: Build partnerships with others around specific SDG results.** The scale of the issues reflected in the SDGs surpasses the capacity of any individual partner to deliver. Join with others in co-designing, co-financing, analysing, monitoring, implementing and evaluating development programmes in support of specific SDG results.

Further reading

Overview of guidance and findings:

- *Managing for Sustainable Development Results: Guiding Principles*, OECD Publishing, Paris, 2019, https://doi.org/10.1787/d571f17c-en
- *"*Aligning to SDG Results in Development Co-operation: A Comparative Study", *OECD Development Co-operation Policy Papers,* OECD Publishing, Paris, forthcoming.
- "A baseline survey of the guiding principles on managing for sustainable development results", *OECD Development Co-operation Working Papers*, No. 93, OECD Publishing, Paris, 2021, https://doi.org/10.1787/f8974d89-en
- "The path to policy coherence: How OECD members (could) use the SDGs at home and abroad to better support developing countries", Chapter 3 in OECD/EC-JRC, *Understanding the Spillovers and Transboundary Impacts of Public Policies: Implementing the 2030 Agenda for More Resilient Societies*, OECD Publishing, Paris, 2021, https://doi.org/10.1787/862c0db7-en

Case studies:

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Achieving SDG Results in Development Co-operation

SUMMARY FOR POLICY MAKERS

Achieving sustainable, equitable and resilient societies is humankind's challenge for the 21st century. In pursuit of this ambition, the international development community needs a shared, universal framework, within which to work more closely together. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are the obvious answer, but a number of technical, political and organisational challenges prevent development co-operation providers from using them as their common results framework. Based on seven case studies, this publication identifies two critical factors and one game changer that can help overcome those challenges. First, country leadership needs to be supported by the international community. Second, development partners need to change their set-ups in order to deliver on the SDGs. Finally, by forcing governments and development partners to reset their long-term strategies and rethink their internal systems, the COVID-19 pandemic provides them with a rare opportunity to use the SDG framework collectively as a roadmap to recovery: this can be a game changer.

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