



The Short and Winding Road to 2030: Measuring Distance to the SDG Targets

September 2022

- The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development includes an ambitious set of 17 goals and 169 targets, and since its adoption, through its [Action Plan on SDGs](#), the OECD has committed to being the United Nations' "best supporting actor" in promoting the achievement of the goals.
- With less than 10 years to go, strong policy actions are needed to fulfil the entire 2030 Agenda. So far, the OECD area as a whole has met or is close to meeting one quarter of the targets for which performance can be gauged.
- OECD countries have been slowly progressing towards achieving many SDG targets. OECD countries should foster inclusion, reverse the long-term decrease in people's trust in institutions and address rising environmental pressures in order to make further progress.
- Progress towards the targets of the 2030 Agenda has been significantly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic directly affected the health of millions of people, but also had an indirect effect on many other dimensions of health and revealed and amplified vulnerabilities in health-care systems. Besides the large number of deaths, the economic crisis induced by the pandemic was significant and its consequences on job prospects, education and living standards will be felt for a long time. The pandemic also challenged institutions and put all sources of public financing under pressure.
- The pandemic highlighted the impact of human interference on the environment. The reduction in economic activity due to efforts to combat the COVID-19 pandemic led to a temporary improvement of environmental conditions.
- Further, it allowed policy makers to revisit the role of macro-economic policies. Having learned lessons from the 2008 global financial crisis – where, in many countries, fiscal stimulus was too limited and turned contractionary too early – the speed and scale of the fiscal response to the COVID-19 crisis was unprecedented.
- Still, the momentum from the strong rebound after reopening the economy slowed in many countries amidst persisting supply bottlenecks, rising input costs and the long-term effects of the pandemic.
- The COVID-19 pandemic has not been the only disruption to lives and livelihoods in recent times. Climate change represents an existential threat. More recently, Russia's war against Ukraine has devastated the lives of those directly affected and raised fundamental questions about democracy, global security and the reliability of global food and energy supplies.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development sets out an ambitious set of 17 goals and 169 targets that all United Nations (UN) Member States adopted at the UN General Assembly in September 2015. It is a call to action for a better and more sustainable future for all and highlights that development goals are relevant for all countries, regardless of their income level or their level of “development”. In this respect, the OECD, through its expertise on policy and data, is assisting its Member countries in their efforts to implement the SDGs.

The OECD has committed to being the UN’s “best supporting actor” in promoting and supporting the Agenda. In 2016, the OECD Council formally endorsed an Action Plan (OECD, 2016^[1]) for the OECD to mobilise its knowledge, experience and tools to promote the Agenda and achievement of its goals. Much of the OECD’s work is relevant to the SDGs in some way, and the OECD has long recognised the multi-dimensional nature of people’s well-being and of its determinants over time (see the [OECD well-being framework](#)).

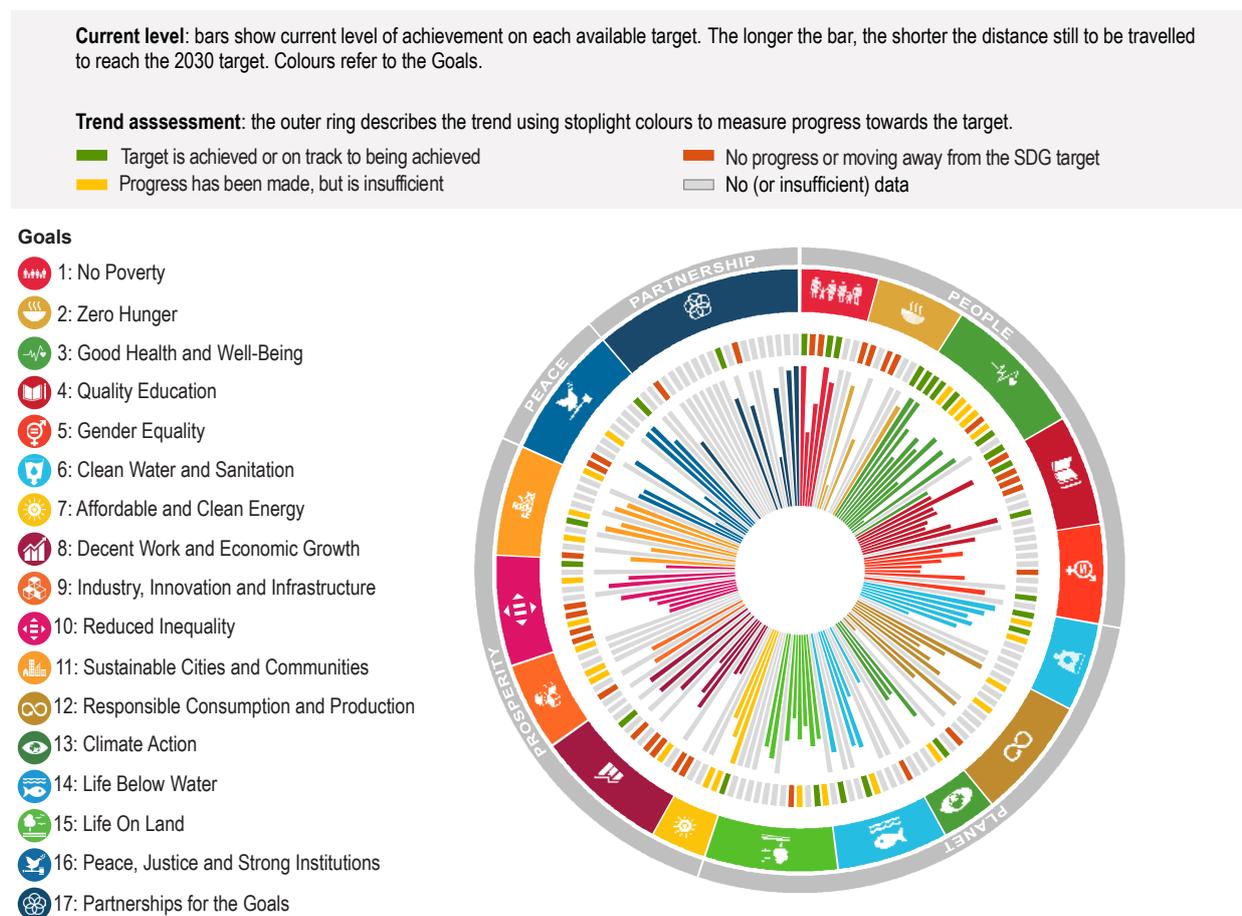
The OECD is also directly contributing to the global monitoring of the SDGs. First, it is an observer of the Inter-Agency and Expert Group on SDG Indicators (IAEG-SDGs), which developed the indicator framework supporting the global monitoring of the 2030 Agenda. The OECD is also supplying data to the SDG Global Database as the custodian or partner agency on a number of the indicators. This includes data on official development assistance (ODA) and other international flows; on gender-based legal discrimination (leveraging the OECD Development Centre’s work on the Social Institutions and Gender Index (OECD, 2019^[2])); as well as on access to civil justice (OECD, 2021^[3]); and on policy instruments for biodiversity (Karousakis, 2018^[4]).

Finally, as the 2030 Agenda is global in nature, the OECD supports its Members beyond their borders. In a long-term perspective, looking even beyond 2030, all countries need to take active steps to handle some of the most crucial challenges that humanity faces: climate change, biodiversity loss, but also demographic changes, digital transformation and other societal challenges. In this sense, the 2030 Agenda urges governments, international and non-governmental organisations, the private sector and civil society to team up to implement the SDG goals and targets. It stresses the need to unlock the necessary financial resources, share technologies and create national capacities to progress towards targets. In this regard, the OECD helps set international principles and standards for development co-operation and helps monitor donors’ delivery on their commitments. The OECD thus plays a key role in mobilising such resources and goes beyond monitoring ODA. For instance, the [multi-stakeholder Task Force on Tax and Development](#) takes actions to improve tax collection in non-OECD countries and helps make revenue statistics available and comparable.

OECD COUNTRIES HAVE BEEN SLOWLY PROGRESSING TOWARDS ACHIEVING MANY SDG TARGETS

With less than 10 years to go, strong policy actions are needed to fulfil the 2030 Agenda. On the bright side, so far, the OECD area *as a whole* has met or is close to meeting 28 of the 112 targets for which performance can be gauged. These achievements relate to securing basic needs and implementing policy tools and frameworks for the SDGs. The latter shows a significant commitment by OECD countries to mainstream SDGs in their policies. However, the outcomes of such approaches are yet to be fully seen, as shown by the insufficient progress made on ensuring no one is left behind, restoring trust in institutions and limiting pressures on the natural environment (OECD, 2022^[5]).

Figure 1. OECD average distance from achieving SDG targets



Note: The OECD average is measured as the simple average across OECD countries with available data.
 Source: All data are taken and adapted from (UNDESA, 2021^[6]), *SDG Global Database*, <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/unsdg> and (OECD, 2021^[7]), *OECD.Stat*, <https://stats.oecd.org/> (accessed on 19 August 2022).

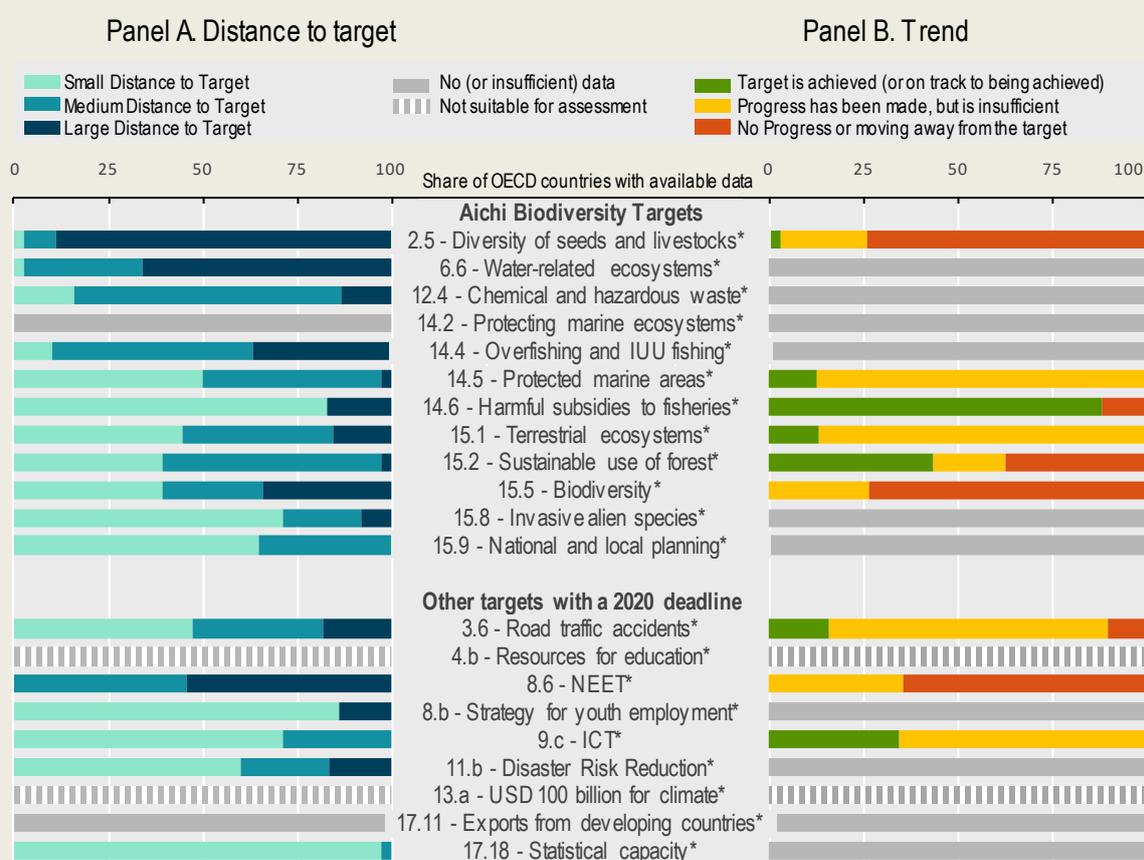
OECD countries should foster inclusion. The latest available data show that more than one in nine OECD residents is considered income-poor and, that over the past decades, most OECD countries have not made sufficient progress towards poverty reduction. Furthermore, despite some progress, many population groups including women, young adults and migrants are facing additional challenges. In addition, unhealthy behaviours such as malnutrition and tobacco consumption, which is more common among low socio-economic status groups (Murtin et al., 2017^[8]; Placzek, 2021^[9]), as well as educational disparities compound challenges for the most disadvantaged.

Available data show a long-term decrease in people’s trust in institutions in developed countries. Trust between citizens and their governments is crucial for the legitimacy and functioning of democracies (OECD, 2021^[10]). Still, the 2030 Agenda does not include any direct measure of trust in institutions. Rather, it touches upon many areas that the OECD has identified as driving trust in government institutions – including responsiveness of services, reliability of policies, openness, integrity, and fairness. For instance, Target 16.6 aims to “develop effective, accountable and transparent institutions at all levels”, and Target 16.7 urges countries to “ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels”. Recent OECD work shows that OECD countries are not making enough progress in these critical areas (OECD, 2022^[11]).

Box 1. Targets with a 2020 deadline

The 2030 Agenda set an earlier deadline of 2020 for a group of 21 targets. Overall, available data reveal a lack of progress on many of these targets. Of these 21 targets, 12 are linked to the [United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity's Aichi Biodiversity Targets \(ABT\)](#), which target the protection and conservation of biodiversity. **According to available data, none of the ABT had been met by all OECD countries by the end of 2020**, although results vary significantly among countries and targets (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Distance to targets and trends over time across OECD countries, targets with a 2020 deadline



Notes: Given the lag in available data, “current” distances to target may not reflect actual achievements by 2020. Panel A shows the distribution of OECD countries in terms of the distance that they need to travel to reach each SDG target. Distances are measured in standardised units (s.u.), reflecting the dispersion in countries’ achievements in the most recent available year. Countries’ distances are grouped into three clusters: small distances (less than 0.5 s.u.), shown in light green; medium distances (from 0.5 s.u. to 1.5 s.u.), shown in medium green; and large distances (more than 1.5 s.u.), shown in dark green. Panel B shows the distribution of OECD countries in terms of their recent changes in the indicators for each target. Countries’ progress, based on changes in the indicators over recent years, are grouped into three clusters: i) those whose recent pace of progress should be sufficient to meet the target by 2020, shown in yellow; ii) those whose recent progress would be insufficient to meet the target by 2020, shown in orange; and iii) countries whose recent performance has been stagnating or moving further away from the 2020 target, shown in brown. The figure also shows countries with no data to assess either their current distance or their pace of progress (shown in white). Time series are considered as missing where there are fewer than three data points for each country; indicators are considered as missing when they are available for fewer than 20 OECD countries.

Source: All data are taken and adapted from (UNDESA, 2021^[6]), *SDG Global Database*, <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/unsdg> and (OECD, 2021^[7]), *OECD.Stat*, <https://stats.oecd.org/> (accessed on 19 August 2022).

OECD countries show positive results on many “process indicators” tracking the implementation of SDG frameworks and policies, which ought to be implemented by 2020. For instance, virtually all OECD countries have already implemented international instruments aiming to combat illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing (Target 14.6) and most of them adopted national legislation to prevent and control invasive alien species (Target 15.8). On the measurement side, all OECD countries have taken steps to integrate biodiversity values into national accounting and reporting systems (Target 15.9). Yet, the uptake of policy tools and frameworks is not comprehensive. For instance, large disparities across OECD countries remain in the implementation of international agreements on the management of hazardous waste and other chemicals (Target 12.4).

Targets relating to the protection of ecosystems with a 2020 deadline show good results. Figure 2 shows that all OECD countries expanded their protected areas over the past two decades. By 2020, 27 OECD countries met Target 15.1 (and ABT 11) to protect at least 17% of their land area by 2020, while 20 of them met SDG Target 14.5 (and ABT 11) to protect at least 10% of coastal and marine areas. Still, results are mixed when it comes to the protection of “key biodiversity areas”.¹

Yet, outcome measures confirm that trends in biodiversity continue to decline. Since 1970, one-tenth of the world’s terrestrial biodiversity and one third of freshwater biodiversity have been lost and, according to (OECD, 2018^[12]), we are on course to lose another 10% of terrestrial species by 2050. Data underpinning Target 15.5 show that biodiversity is losing ground in more than two out of three OECD countries. On Target 2.5, focusing on local breeds and livestock, available data suggest that a very high share of local livestock breeds is at risk of extinction, with very few OECD countries making progress.

Beyond ABT, a broad range of targets related to issues ranging from road traffic accidents (Target 3.6) to youth employment (Targets 8.6 and 8.b), access to ICT (Target 9.c) and North-South co-operation (Targets 4.b, 13.a, 17.11 and 17.18) had their target date in 2020. Figure 2 shows that, for those targets whose performance can be monitored over time, progress has been achieved, but OECD countries remain, on average, far from having achieved all of their 2020 commitments. Most notably, with around one in eight 15–29-year-olds not in education, employment or training (NEET), the proportion of NEET (Target 8.6) is among the furthest away from its target level. Still, after stagnating at around 16% between 2009 and 2013, the proportion of NEET had been constantly declining since then (besides a small increase in 2020).

Notes: 1. Key Biodiversity Areas encompass: i) sites contributing significantly to the global persistence of biodiversity; ii) sites holding effectively the entire population of at least one species assessed as critically endangered or endangered on the International Union for Conservation of Nature Red List of Threatened Species; and iii) areas identified under an earlier version of the Key Biodiversity Area criteria. These three sub-sets are reassessed using the Global Standard, which unifies these approaches along with other mechanisms for identifying important sites for other species and ecosystems. See the SDG indicators metadata repository for further details at: <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/metadata/>.

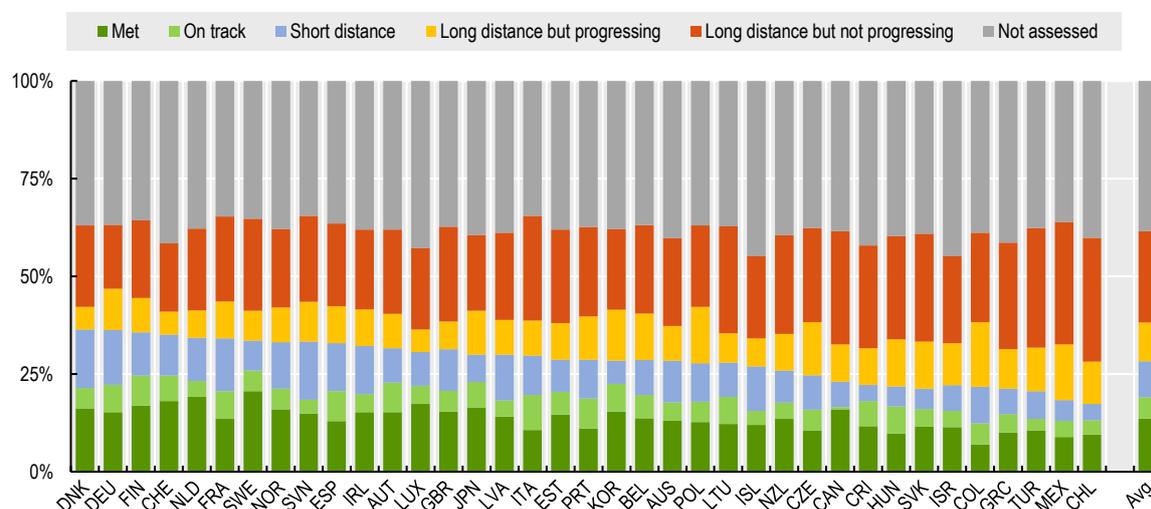
In OECD countries, environmental pressures are rising but progress has been made on some fronts, including energy intensity, water use and municipal waste management. While some of these positive developments are attributable to policy action and technical advances, the displacement of resource- and pollution-intensive production to non-OECD countries also explains part of this trend. Still, the use of material resources to support economic growth remains high, and many valuable materials continue to be disposed of as waste. More generally, despite some progress on the climate and biodiversity front, greenhouse gas emissions are hardly declining, threats to terrestrial and marine biodiversity are

rising and none of the 21 Aichi Biodiversity Targets that should have been fulfilled by 2020 have been met by all OECD countries (see Box 1).

OECD countries share some common patterns in their 2030 Agenda journey, but distance to targets and trends over time can differ significantly. Figure 3 below shows:

- **On average, OECD countries’ performance is satisfactory for more than one quarter of the 169 targets.** On the one hand, eleven OECD countries (mainly from northern and western Europe) are considered to be at or close to meeting more than one third of the SDG targets (dark green, light green and blue). On the other hand, three OECD countries including Chile, Mexico and Türkiye are below 20%.
- **On average, there is still significant distance to travel for around one third of the SDG targets; within that group of targets, OECD countries are not making any progress on two thirds of them.** On average, OECD countries still have a long distance to travel on around 35% of the 169 targets. This share ranges from below 30% in Nordic countries, Germany, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Switzerland to more than 40% in Chile, Mexico and Türkiye. More worryingly, for the majority of these “distant” targets, OECD countries are not on a positive trend.
- **To date, performance cannot yet be assessed on a comparative basis for around 40% of the 169 targets.** In some cases, country data are missing; in others, the indicators themselves lack a clear normative direction (i.e. to judge what is good performance and what is bad). As a result, in some OECD countries (including Finland, France, Italy, Mexico, Slovenia and Sweden), around one third of the SDG targets cannot be properly gauged, while this share goes up to more than 40% in six OECD countries (Costa Rica, Greece, Iceland, Israel, Luxembourg and Switzerland).

Figure 3. Distance to SDG targets and trends over time in OECD countries



Notes: Countries’ distances (based on the level of the indicators in the most recent available observation) and trends have been grouped into six clusters. “Met” refers to targets that have been met. “On track” refers to targets that will be met by 2030 if countries are to keep travelling at the same pace they achieved over the past decade. “Short distance” refers to targets that are considered to be close to be achieved (i.e. the standardised distance to target is less than 0.5 OECD standard deviation away from the target). “Long distance but progressing” refers to targets that are not considered close to achievement but where the trend assessment suggests a significant positive trend. “Long distance but not progressing” refers to targets that are not considered close to achievement and where the trend assessment does not suggest a significant positive trend. Not assessed refers to targets that cannot be covered by the assessment due to lack of adequate data. Avg stands for the unweighted average. While the database supporting this chart is the same as in (OECD, 2022^[5]), the approach adopted here to track progress is different. Therefore, any direct comparison is not possible.

Source: All data are taken and adapted from (UNDESA, 2021^[6]), *SDG Global Database*, <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/unsdg> and (OECD, 2021^[7]), *OECD.Stat*, <https://stats.oecd.org/> (accessed on 19 August 2022).

THE ROAD TO 2030 IS WINDING

OECD countries' progress towards the 2030 Agenda has been significantly affected by the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. Beyond its impact on health and staggering death toll (the increase in total deaths compared to what was usually observed before the pandemic reached almost 4 million over the span of two years), the crisis induced by the pandemic is unprecedented in many ways. The strong measures taken to combat the COVID-19 crisis triggered the most severe – yet shortest – recession since World War II. While OECD countries have responded to the crisis at the necessary scale and speed, most governments were unprepared to confront this crisis. The pandemic has also exacerbated some long-standing structural weaknesses of OECD countries, challenged institutions and put sources of public financing under pressure.

Momentum from the strong rebound after economic reopening eased rapidly in many countries amidst persisting supply bottlenecks, rising input costs and the continued ramifications of the pandemic. Stronger and longer-lasting inflation pressures emerged in parallel to the recovery in all economies, and labour shortages appeared even though employment and hours worked were yet to fully recover. Food and energy costs have risen sharply, with the strongest impacts on low-income households, and supply bottlenecks have also pushed up the prices of durable goods (OECD, 2021^[12]).

The COVID-19 crisis also put historic pressure on the financing for sustainable development landscape, spanning all sources of financing. In many middle- and low-income countries, the consequences of the pandemic have been devastating. Partnerships with developing countries and development co-operation remain key to address the debt legacy of the crisis. More than ever, it is key that developed countries fully implement their official development assistance commitments as called by the 2030 Agenda. Today, total official assistance provided by the donor countries of the Development Assistance Committee remains less than half of the intended target of 0.7 percent of gross national income. Beyond the financing front, while the COVID-19 crisis has spurred new practices in scientific communication as rapid sharing of data and scientific discoveries worldwide has become essential, stronger international efforts are needed to provide low-income countries with the resources needed to vaccinate their populations for their own and the world's benefit. The pandemic has stressed even further how global co-operation and co-ordination remain essential.

The pandemic also highlighted the impact of human interference on the environment. The reduction in economic activity due to efforts to combat the COVID-19 pandemic led to a temporary improvement of environmental conditions. In 2020 energy-related emissions declined by 7%, agriculture-related environmental pressures by around 2% and the reduction in the use of non-metallic minerals, including construction materials, reached double digits (Dellink et al., 2021^[13]). Yet, while some advanced economies have emphasised decarbonisation measures in their recovery packages, the global economic recovery from the COVID-19 crisis has not been the sustainable recovery that many had called for at the onset of the pandemic. In 2021, global CO₂ emissions from energy combustion and industrial processes rebounded to reach their highest-ever annual level.

The dramatic impact of the crisis allowed policy makers to revisit the role of macro-economic policies. Having learned from the 2008 global financial crisis – where in many countries fiscal stimulus was too limited and turned contractionary too early – the speed and scale of the fiscal response to the COVID-19 crisis was unprecedented. Governments revisited long-held assumptions about the role of macro-economic policies, leading to fiscal responses on a scale not observed over the past 50 years. The good news may be that recovery packages deployed by most OECD governments may provide an opportunity to “build back better” and strengthen systemic resilience to cope with future shocks. Still, despite the increase in environmentally positive recovery spending, key environmental dimensions beyond climate change and air pollution are sometimes neglected (OECD, 2022^[14]).

The COVID-19 pandemic has not been the only disruption affecting our lives in recent times. In recent years, there have been huge wildfires (e.g. in Mediterranean countries in 2019, in Australia in 2019 and 2020 or in California in 2020), unprecedented heatwaves and droughts (such as in western North America in 2021 or in Europe in 2022), extreme cold weather events and destructive floods (including in Germany, Belgium and western Canada in 2021). All have caused thousands of fatalities, major destruction of property and disruption of economic activity. Such storms, along with other weather-related disasters, have become more frequent and severe due to rising sea and air temperatures (OECD, 2021^[12]; IPCC, 2021^[15]; World Meteorological Organisation, 2021^[16]).

The existential threat of climate change, and the interlinked biodiversity crisis will have multiple impacts far beyond the frequency and severity of extreme climate events. For instance, while the origin of the pandemic is still to be understood, deforestation, natural habitat degradation and fragmentation, agricultural intensification, wildlife trade and climate change are all playing a role in the development of zoonotic diseases and many deadly pathogens in recent memory – Ebola, HIV, dengue, SARS, MERS, Zika, West Nile – have made this interspecies leap (OECD, 2020^[18]).

At the start of 2022, war broke out in Europe. The large-scale aggression by Russia against Ukraine constitutes a direct threat to peace and stability on the continent and puts the most elementary human rights at risk. Beyond the humanitarian crisis that the war brought about, this conflict also casts a dark cloud over the economic and social outlook far beyond the European continent. In addition, the war imperils the world's economic recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic: inflation, food security, energy security and further supply-chain pressures have emerged in connection with, or have been exacerbated by, the war. As Russia and Ukraine are large-commodity exporters, the war has sent energy and food prices soaring, making life much harder for many people across the world. In addition, the extent to which growth will be lower and inflation higher will depend partly on how the war evolves, but it is clear that the poorest will be hit hardest (OECD, 2022^[17]).

Unchecked, any major future challenges, including climate change and biodiversity loss but also population ageing, the digital transformation and widening income inequality, **could have social and economic impacts far greater than those caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.** The massive public investment plans that have been rolled out since the onset of the crisis are therefore key to upgrading critical infrastructure, making progress towards the green transition, bridging the digital divides and avoiding and mitigating future shocks. In the EU, for instance, the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) includes commitments to invest in a wide range of topics covering many different areas that lie at the heart of the 2030 Agenda, including on green and digital transitions but also inclusive growth or social cohesion (see [Recovery and Resilience Facility](#) for details). For all countries, the challenge ahead will be to tailor short-term objectives on the strength of the recovery following the shocks of the pandemic and Russia's war against Ukraine to the medium- and long-term objectives of the SDGs, so as to make the recovery green, inclusive and resilient.

THE ROAD TO 2030 IS SHORT AND THERE IS REDUCED VISIBILITY

While the findings mentioned above clearly point to the need for stronger action in the eight years leading to 2030, blind spots remain in our understanding of where countries stand on SDGs. Despite the significant statistical and measurement efforts by national and international agencies, gaps within the SDG global measurement framework are significant even for OECD countries, whose statistical systems are among the most developed in the world. Overall, available data on the levels of the various indicators make it possible to cover 136 of the 169 global targets underpinning the 17 SDGs, but there are large disparities between the 17 goals. For instance, at least 20% of the targets for the goals relating to Food and hunger (Goal 2), Gender equality (Goal 5), Life below water (Goal 14), Sustainable cities (Goal 11),

Peace, justice and institutions (Goal 16) and Partnerships for the goals (Goal 17) cannot be monitored properly.

Data gaps become even starker when focusing on indicators measuring performance over time. Hence, data are lacking to track progress on at least 60% of the targets under 7 of the 17 goals. Four of these goals are in the Planet category – Responsible consumption and production (Goal 12), Climate action (Goal 13), Life below water (Goal 14) and Life on land (Goal 15) – the others are Gender Inequality (Goal 5), Sustainable cities (Goal 11) and Partnerships for the goals (Goal 17).

Beyond pure data availability, many other statistical gaps influence the understanding of progress toward the 2030 Agenda. Data availability is one of the most salient challenges standing in the way of a more robust assessment of the progress made by countries in meeting their commitments under the 2030 Agenda. Yet, other statistical gaps such as timeliness or granularity also weigh heavily on this assessment. For instance, given the lag in available data, the effects of the pandemic on current distances and trajectories are not fully reflected yet in available estimates.

Ensuring that all countries have the capacity to track progress towards the SDGs is critical for the overall success of the 2030 Agenda. Data gaps influence our understanding of progress toward the 2030 Agenda – not carefully understood, they may lead to biased conclusions. If the SDG reporting framework is incomplete, not up to date, or misses important segments of the population, any inference about what the good policies are risks being flawed. The same is true if diagnostic tools cannot provide a comprehensive assessment of the most recent trends – especially in the times of uncertainty we are facing. In addition, preliminary research – which tends to confirm previous work focusing on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (Jacob, 2017^[18]) – suggests that countries' performance on measuring progress is positively associated with actual progress toward the goals (see Box 2).

Box 2. Preliminary analysis of the relationship between SDG data coverage and overall performance

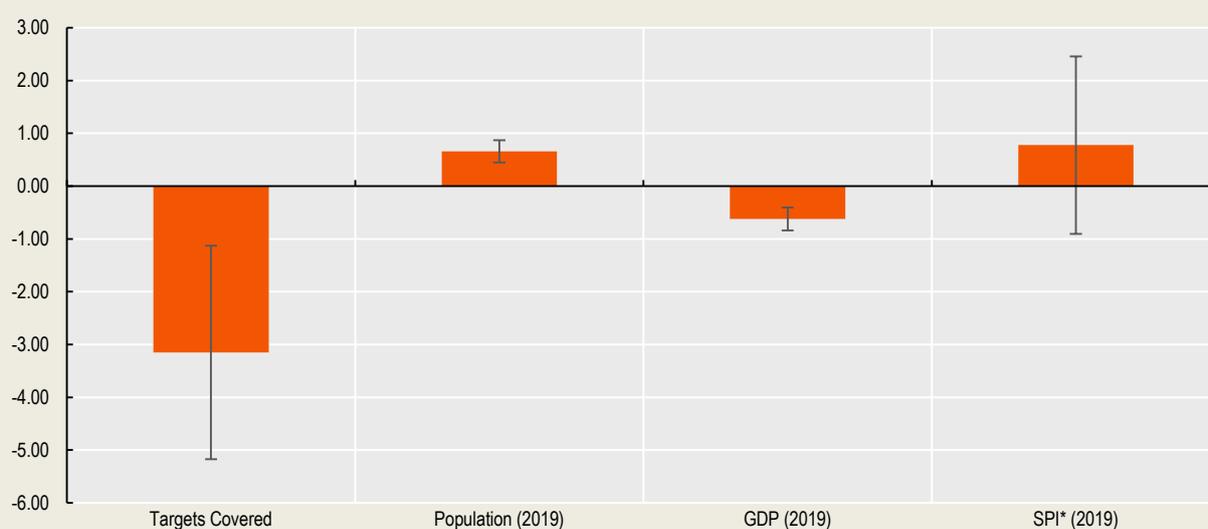
In order to illustrate the relationship between SDG data coverage and performance on SDGs, a simple analysis is performed where the median distance to SDGs is regressed on data coverage, GDP, population and an index of statistical capacity:

$$\ln \tilde{D} = \alpha_1 \ln C + \alpha_2 \ln Pop + \alpha_3 \ln GDP + \alpha_4 \ln SPI^* + \varepsilon$$

Where \tilde{D} represents the median distance to target, C is the number of targets covered with data, Pop the population and SPI^* the statistical performance index produced by the World Bank (excluding Pillar 3: Data Product monitoring the availability of SDG indicators).

Figure 4 shows that an increase in GDP is associated with a small increase in overall performance (if GDP increases by 1% then the median distance to target decreases by 0.7%) while an increase in population is associated with a small decrease (if the population decreases by 1%, then the median distance to target decreases by 0.6%). The effect of data coverage also appears to be significant and is associated with an increase in overall performance (if target coverage increases by 1%, then the median distance to target decreases by 3.2%), while the effect of statistical capacity intrinsically does not appear to be significant.

While care needs to be taken in the interpretation of such results (since the relationship existing between data coverage and performance may come from multiple channels), These results suggest that countries that are better at measuring their performance are also performing better on the 2030 Agenda.

Figure 4. Empirical estimation of elasticities of distance to target with respect to data coverage

Note: SPI stands for Statistical Performance Index (World Bank) and excludes Pillar 3.

Source: All data are taken and adapted from (UNDESA, 2021^[6]), *SDG Global Database*, <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/unsdg> and (OECD, 2021^[7]), *OECD.Stat*, <https://stats.oecd.org/> (accessed on 19 August 2022).

Beyond measurement and monitoring challenges, deeper reflection is needed on how to capture the interconnectedness between different goals, targets and indicators and their overall coherence. Most of the goals have economic, social and environmental aspects, yet the targets and indicators often offer a partial perspective on them. An example is the lack of a gender focus under the Planet SDGs and their related targets and indicators. Only 5% of the Planet indicators are identified in the framework as gender relevant (OECD, 2021^[19]). While data availability is clearly a major limitation to broadening the scope of some indicators, the framework itself should capture the possible interlinkages between the many goals.

Another methodological aspect that will require further consideration is how to better distinguish between measures of policy instruments and measures of ultimate outcomes. Separate reporting of the two types of measures will be essential to assess the extent to which the short-term recovery plans deployed by countries in the aftermath of the COVID-19 crisis are coherent with the long-term goals of the 2030 Agenda. The SDG framework recognises that progress should be considered in a holistic manner to account for the inevitable trade-offs, spill-overs and unintended consequences of policy and investment decisions. Yet, the 17 SDGs (both in their general formulation and in their specification into detailed targets) cover a mixture of aspects along the causal chain of policies from inputs to processes, outputs and outcomes. The large number of goals and targets, spread out along the input-output-outcome chain, raises obvious challenges for evaluation and assessment of policy.

As the 2030 deadline for the SDGs approaches, the United Nations and the international community at large need to start working on a new framework for global policy action. With eight years to go to meet the SDGs, and despite progress in some areas, improvements are uneven across goals, countries and regions. In order to sustain the momentum generated by progress thus far towards the SDGs, it is key to develop a successor framework after 2030, one that will build on the strength of the 2030 Agenda while also addressing the shortcomings of the existing Agenda.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Tracking SDG performance requires high-quality data and a comprehensive monitoring framework.** Implementing and monitoring progress towards the SDGs is challenging. The targets are universal – applicable to all countries – and they focus on more than problems related to development. Many of them are complex, interlinked and multifaceted, requiring new concepts and measures. Reliable and comparative data remain central to achieving the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda. Better policy making requires better data and better monitoring frameworks in order to make informed decisions about what is working and what is not. Better data also allow progress to be gauged and to know more about the issues that still need to be addressed.
- **While the road to 2030 is short and winding, policy packages should be targeted to mitigate possible regressive impacts of shocks, such as the pandemic, but also ensure coherence between the different goals and targets.** Implementing the SDGs as an integrated and coherent set represents a major challenge for all countries. Addressing interactions between economic, social and environmental goals in a balanced manner, while avoiding negative effects on the well-being of people here and now, elsewhere and later, is among the most significant challenges to implementing the SDGs.
- **A strong multilateral system remains key to addressing today’s most critical challenges.** The world is more interconnected than ever due to increasing globalisation and enhanced technological progress. As a consequence, most, if not all, of the recent disruptions that profoundly affected our lives and jobs – the pandemic, the many impacts of climate change, the war in Ukraine – have had global ramifications and call for global responses. With such growing interconnectedness and spill-over effects of domestic policies in other countries, increasing and improving multilateral co-operation across the board will be crucial to ensure that all countries can address the inherently cross-border and interconnected challenges that define our times.
- **Measuring what matters should not stop at national borders.** When it comes to measuring global phenomena such as world distribution of income or global CO₂ emissions, comparable statistics can be considered a global public good, and the international community should commit resources in order to allow their production everywhere (Kanbur, Patel and Stiglitz, 2018^[20]). As such, enhancing the financial support to monitor the SDGs in low- and middle-income countries is key to addressing the existing gaps in the global SDG reporting framework.

Further reading

- Dellink, R. et al. (2021), “The long-term implications of the COVID-19 pandemic and recovery measures on environmental pressures: A quantitative exploration”, *OECD Environment Working Papers*, No. 176, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/123dfd4f-en>. [14]
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Resources

OECD Measuring Distance to the SDG Targets work: <https://www.oecd.org/wise/measuring-distance-to-the-sdgs-targets.htm>.

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