Stockholm Environment Institute

Behind "Time to Lead – science to accelerate the Global Goals"

Supporting information for the #TimeToLead campaign

SEI brief
September 2023

Nina Weitz
Henrik Carlsen
Therese Bennich

The "Time to Lead – science to accelerate the Global Goals" campaign was developed by researchers at Stockholm Environment Institute in collaboration with the International Science Council, researchers at Linköping University, and design practice Studio Benedetta Crippa AB, as part of a communications project funded by Formas, a Swedish research council for sustainable development.

This brief presents supporting information, methods, references and the scientific recommendations to accelerate the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), as featured in the science communications campaign "Time to Lead – science to accelerate the Global Goals".

The campaign, launched before the SDG Summit in September 2023, is backed by the recommendations described here. This brief lays out how they were derived from key synthesis reports to support decisionmakers in making sense of scientific insights and in making science-based decisions for action.

Science to correct our course

Much work remains to achieve the SDGs by 2030. Progress reports and the state of our world make it clear: we must correct our course (Independent Group of Scientists/ UN, 2023; UN, 2023). The 2023 SDG Summit can mark the start of a new phase of implementation and provide high-level political guidance on accelerated actions to 2030.

At the same time, the effectiveness of governing by broad global goals is uncertain (Biermann et al., 2022). The course taken from now on will determine whether the SDGs can break the international community's historically poor track record on environmental and development targets (SEI & CEEW, 2022). A successful redirection will set an example of how international agendas and global goals could lead to a more sustainable future, and how leaders should be held accountable for their pledges. Every bit of progress will matter.

In correcting the course, decisionmakers should draw on insights from the first phase of implementation, the knowledge accumulated and the best available science. Scientific research can provide objective and evidence-based input for political action, help build trust in uncertain times, depoliticize challenging decisions, and counteract mis- and disinformation. The research community has important roles to play for action on the SDGs. Activities that strengthen science-policy engagement help leverage that potential.

For action on the SDGs to bring feasible and sustainable solutions, decisionmakers must make sense of relevant science and what is possible with today's and tomorrow's knowledge and technology. To support such sense-making, researchers at Stockholm Environment Institute, together with partners at the International Science Council and Linköping University, have selected relevant literature on SDG acceleration, synthesized insights and recommendations, and communicated these in language and

GRAPHICS: Studio Benedetta Crippa AB

in visual ways that are not typical for formal scientific discourse but instead are more accessible and expressive for policymakers and the interested public.

The recommendations presented in this brief stem from a selection of material that in turn builds on a large scientific foundation. Decisionmakers can use these recommendations as guidance for a science-based acceleration of the SDGs: it is time to lead with the support of the relevant science.

Methods

The synthesis presented here distils scientific material on SDG acceleration, selected based on five criteria. First, the material is considered to be key inputs to the SDG Summit that address the question of how to progress on the SDGs, written for high-level decisionmakers. Second, the material builds on relevant and extensive literature to provide a synthesis or state of the art. As such, the recommendations presented are a synthesis of syntheses. Third, with the objective to amplify scientific insights, only peer-reviewed material from research organizations or scientific publishers were included in the selection. Fourth, for timeliness and because of their stock-taking nature, the publication date of material considered is no earlier than 2022. The final cutoff date was set by the release of a public draft of the 2023 Global Sustainable Development Report, in early June 2023. We acknowledge that additional contributions are continually published and recommendations evolving.

The fifth and last criteria applies to the full sample: as a collection it should broadly capture what the scientific community currently says about SDG acceleration. A total of 174 authors have contributed to the following sources, on which our synthesis rests:

- ***The Global Sustainable Development Report (GSDR) 2023*** (Independent Group of Scientists/UN, 2023; version 14 June 2023), to be launched at the SDG Summit in September 2023, is described as "meant to advance implementation of the SDGs and to serve as a major input to Member States' follow up and review of the 2030 Agenda". This report is considered "state of the art" when it comes to SDG research. It covers both the most recent updates on progress on the SDGs, as well as timely recommendations for moving forward.

- ***The Climate Change 2023 Synthesis Report Summary for Policymakers*** (IPCC, 2023) summarizes the state of knowledge of climate change, its widespread impacts and risks, and climate change mitigation and adaptation. The motivation for including it here is that the climate change research community increasingly recognizes the close interdependence between climate change and sustainable development more generally.

- ***The Political Impact of the Sustainable Development Goals: Transforming Governance through Global Goals?*** (Biermann et al., 2022) is a comprehensive global assessment of the political impact of the SDGs. Conclusions and recommendations rest on analysis of over 3000 scientific studies on the SDGs. This assessment brings a complementary perspective to other material included in our selection, by questioning the very foundation of the 2030 Agenda – the effectiveness of governing by setting broad global goals.

- ***The 2022 Sustainable Development Report: From Crisis to Sustainable Development: the SDGs as Roadmap to 2030 and Beyond*** (Sachs et al., 2022) reviews progress made each year on the SDGs since their adoption in 2015. The report combines data and analyses produced by international organizations, civil society organizations, and research institutions. The 2022 edition underscores that cascading and interlinked crises are putting the 2030 Agenda "in grave danger". The 2023 edition of this report has been released since the cutoff date for this campaign.

- ***Stockholm+50: Unlocking a Better Future*** (SEI & CEEW, 2022) is an independent scientific report produced for the UN high-level meeting Stockholm+50. The report makes recommendations for improving the conditions for change through improved policy coherence, strengthened accountability, and renewed multilateralism. The report does not explicitly address the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs, but instead how to govern the intertwined human and environmental crisis. Our screening of this report focused on capturing recommendations with SDG relevance.

In synthesizing the material, we conducted an initial screening of the key insights and recommendations highlighted by each document. In total, 80 insights or recommendations were identified. We coded these and could organize the material under 14 headings. Further clustering to merge redundant or overlapping recommendations brought these headings down to 10.

These 10 areas of scientific insights and recommendations for accelerating the SDGs are introduced below.

Insights across 10 areas

The Goals give us common ground as the most ambitious and comprehensive multilateral effort for sustainable development to date. The 17 SDGs and their 169 targets are indivisible – tied together as a framework by their universal scope and integration of social, environmental and economic dimensions. Their impacts in practice, on institutions, policy and politics, vary across countries but generally have been limited (Biermann et al., 2022) and progress on the Goals is languishing (UN, 2023). Halfway through their implementation period, it is time to reflect on what has worked well and not, and correct course based on best available knowledge.

Achievement of the SDGs currently has a similar outlook as other environment and development goals set at the global level in the past 50 years; only about 10% have seen significant progress (SEI & CEEW, 2022; UN, 2023). More effective multilateralism and engagement across all governance levels will be needed to better that proportion. The growing and often pioneering role of actors other than national governments, including subnational authorities and non-state actors, suggests that an emerging multifaceted and multi-layered approach to implementing the 2030 Agenda can be a way forward (Biermann et al., 2022). Entry points for transformation include human wellbeing and capabilities, just and sustainable economies and sustainable food systems, energy decarbonization and universal access to energy, sustainable urban and peri-urban development, and our global environmental commons (Independent Group of Scientists/UN, 2023). Other fundamental conditions must also be secured if the world is to progress on the SDGs, including: international cooperation and peace, reliable financial support, technology transformation, gender equality, and a focus on marginalized groups (Independent Group of Scientists/UN, 2023; IPCC, 2023; Sachs et al., 2022).

While the SDGs have not yet become a game-changer in global governance (Biermann et al., 2022), bold and science-based decisions can accelerate progress on the SDGs. **The window is still open** to act. Member states need to raise ambition on all three dimensions of sustainable development – social, economic and environmental – and act boldly in line with the drastic changes that are needed (IPCC, 2023). The choices decisionmakers make today will have impact for decades to come (IPCC, 2023); systemic and integrated approaches with a long-term perspective must guide them.

A stronger culture of meaningful accountability must be ensured for leaders to **keep promises made**. Mechanisms for meaningful accountability would recognize high achievers for their effective actions, high ambitions or progress in relation to starting points, and would inspire and incentivize accelerated action and implementation (SEI & CEEW, 2022). The High Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development, the main body for reporting and follow-up on the SDGs, has not become the hoped for "orchestrator" of global governance, and there is no evidence that the peer-learning and voluntary reporting it has offered has steered governments and other actors towards sustainable development (Biermann et al., 2022). To build trust that the multilateral system can deliver on global challenges, the persistent funding gap for the SDGs must be closed and high-income countries must deliver on their financial promises. Decisionmakers should also work to **realign financial systems,** making them work for sustainable development (SEI & CEEW, 2022).

Science that is relevant for society and openly available is a key enabler to steering action towards achieving the SDGs and ensuring decisions rest on the knowledge accumulated so far: what we have learned about what works and alternative ways forward. Science-based and inclusive decision-making help to build confidence in action. The scientific community, decisionmakers and policymakers, and other actors need to work in close collaboration to build and use **our collective knowledge.** For decisionmakers to be able to **gather the evidence to act** and leverage the contribution that science and technological innovations can make to accelerate progress on the SDGs, prolonged investments in capacities to monitor and use data, research and development, and education and skills are needed (Independent Group of Scientists/ UN, 2023). To be able to monitor impacts when the pace of global change increases, new ways of data collection are also needed, including engaging with broader society. Data gaps and unequal coverage of the SDGs today limit options for monitoring and effective follow-up.

Despite their universal scope and pledge to **leave no one behind**, there is no evidence that the SDGs have advanced the political or economic position of the world's poorest countries in global governance (Biermann et al., 2022). Lack of progress disproportionately affects the vulnerable communities that have historically contributed the least to current global environmental change, including biodiversity loss and climate change. Inclusive growth and redistribution measures are needed to ensure lasting prosperity for all.

Ensuring prosperity that lasts for all requires placing stronger emphasis on human well-being and needs, at the same time that we humans shift our relationship with the planet **from extraction to care**.

As an indivisible set of goals, decisionmakers must also recognize that **no goal is an island**, but that SDGs are interconnected, with each other and across sectors and places. Progress – or lack thereof – in one goal influences others. These impacts must be better mapped, analysed and addressed to avoid goal conflicts and unintended impacts, as well as to enhance collaboration within and between countries (SEI & CEEW, 2022). The variability of SDG interactions across regions,

income groups, and population groups calls for context-specific analysis; the methods and tools that have been developed by the scientific community need to become more widely accessible and used. Systemic and integrated policymaking approaches with wide system boundaries and extended timescales to include future generations are key to deliver on the SDGs' universal scope and on the pledge to leave no one behind, as well as for international cooperation on the global commons (Independent Group of Scientists/UN, 2023).

National statistics that are used for monitoring progress and impact, and the indicators agreed for measuring progress on each of the SDGs, do not consider interactions between the goals and do not reveal whether we are moving towards a more sustainable future or the pace of change (SEI & CEEW, 2022). Decisionmakers need to **rethink measures of progress** so that they consider interlinkages across the Goals and the pace of transformation. This will include recognizing the need to redefine prosperity and moving beyond GDP as a measure of progress; adopting consumption-based and life-cycle accounting; and extending timescales.

Finding ways to make these sometimes conflicting and difficult shifts requires guidance from scientifically sound sources, made readily available to those who are capable of taking action to correct the course to achieving the SDGs.

The #TimeToLead campaign

We present here the recommendations as featured in the campaign, for decisionmakers and policymakers, as well as interested stakeholders across society. To read more about each recommendation, go to the original source, as cited by each recommendation.

Our collective knowledge

Political and institutional change towards achieving the Global Goals needs to be built on knowledge underpinned by science. Make room for science-based and inclusive decisions that build confidence in action.

- Ensure science for the Goals is relevant for society. Initiate and produce more research outside of high-income countries. Support the participation of low-income countries, and citizens, in science initiatives (Biermann et al., 2022; Independent Group of Scientists/UN, 2023).
- To deepen trust in science and public information, intensify and tighten engagement in science–policy–society interactions (Biermann et al., 2022; Independent Group of Scientists/UN, 2023).
- Increase public research and development funding to missions that have been jointly defined by civil society, local communities, industry and academia (SEI & CEEW, 2022).
- Keep scientific results open to all and enable knowledge-sharing. Provide public interest groups, policymakers, industry leaders and teachers with free access to relevant publications, data and software (Independent Group of Scientists/UN, 2023).

The Goals give us common ground

Embrace multilateralism and engage all levels of society in the transformations to sustainability. Entry points for such transformations are known and universal. High-income countries must keep their promises to ensure effective global cooperation.

- Strengthen multilateralism by rebuilding trust through meaningful commitments, monitoring and accountability on progress with transparency, and fulfilling financial promises by high-income countries. Use the norm-setting powers of multilateral institutions to make sustainability an easy choice (IPCC, 2023; SEI & CEEW, 2022).
- Implement interventions across entry points for transformations: human well-being and capabilities, sustainable and just economies, sustainable food systems, energy decarbonization and universal access, urban and peri-urban development, and the global environmental commons (Independent Group of Scientists/UN, 2023).
- Agree on a framework for transformations that can bridge local action with international cooperation, so that solutions reflect our diverse contexts. Develop science-based national plans to implement the framework and engage the public (Independent Group of Scientists/UN, 2023).
- Strengthen capacities for transformations at individual and institutional levels, including foresight capacity, public engagement, effective knowledge production, and stronger science–policy–society collaboration (Independent Group of Scientists/UN, 2023).

The window is still open

For action on the Goals to lead to sustainable outcomes, leadership is needed that takes a long-term perspective and considers future generations. Act boldly. Choices made today will have impact now and for centuries to come.

- Bold, science-based decisions can speed up progress towards the Global Goals. Compressed timescales and extended time horizons in decision-making are needed to avoid lock-in and intergenerational discrimination (SEI & CEEW, 2022).
- Deep, rapid and sustained climate mitigation actions are needed now to minimize projected losses and damages for humans and ecosystems. For many systems and regions, feasible and cost-effective mitigation options are available (IPCC, 2023).
- Progress on the Goals have more synergies than trade-offs with long-term strategies for climate mitigation and adaptation (IPCC, 2023).
- Consider integration of the Goals in environmental law and impact assessment procedures (Independent Group of Scientists/UN, 2023).
- Make a sustainable lifestyle an easy choice for individuals and communities. Reduce footprints of high-income people and nations (Independent Group of Scientists/UN, 2023; SEI & CEEW, 2022).

4 Rethink measures of progress

The ways in which we track progress on the Global Goals need to mirror the inseparable threads between society, economy and environment. The time has come to move beyond GDP as the measure of prosperity.

- Recognize the need to redefine prosperity through alternative indicators, and generate buy-in across society through consultative approaches, including with subnational governments (Independent Group of Scientists/UN, 2023; SEI & CEEW, 2022).
- Ensure that national statistics offices routinely adopt consumption-based and life-cycle accounting. Set goals and strategies for reducing footprints, giving special attention to institutions with low capacity (Independent Group of Scientists/UN, 2023; SEI & CEEW, 2022).
- Develop indicators for measuring the pace of transformations towards the Goals, recognizing near-term action that deliver on long-term visions (SEI & CEEW, 2022).
- Transform science on sustainable development by designing new performance indicators and invest more in empirical research on implementation of the Goals, including their interlinkages (Independent Group of Scientists/UN, 2023).

Gather the evidence to act

Make it easier to lead with science. Track, expect and recognize progress and embrace new ways of collecting data.

- Invest in data, science-based tools, evaluation methodology and policy learning to improve planning and follow-up of progress on the Goals (Independent Group of Scientists/UN, 2023; Sachs et al., 2022; SEI & CEEW, 2022).
- Build a community of practice, to strengthen ability to track progress. Engage a diversity of actors who can contribute to collective knowledge, including national statistics offices, academia, civil society and philanthropic organizations (Sachs et al., 2022; SEI & CEEW, 2022).

6 Keep promises made

While promises made have languished, time still remains to achieve the Goals. Build trust in action through better transparency and participation. Act on commitments made.

- Improve accountability of governments and other stakeholders on implementing the Goals at international, regional, national and subnational levels (Independent Group of Scientists/UN, 2023; SEI & CEEW, 2022).
- Enable multiple perspectives in resolving goal conflicts, by enforcing higher standards for transparency and public participation in the procedures for policymaking. Involve young people in decision-making and take future generations into account (SEI & CEEW, 2022).
- Start major meetings convened by the UN, such as the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development and SDG Summit, with an accountability forum to give a dedicated and high-status platform for follow-up. Review performance to date before announcing new pledges and commitments (SEI & CEEW, 2022).
- Systematically track action and progress on as many stakeholder pledges and by as many countries as possible, drawing on both official data from national reporting and other data sources (Sachs et al., 2022; SEI & CEEW, 2022).

7 Leave no one behind

The Goals are for everyone. Advancing the political and economic position of the world's poorest countries is essential for making lasting prosperity for all.

- Encourage inclusive growth centred on those living in poverty, together with progressive redistribution measures. Financing can come from reformed tax-based and domestic carbon-pricing revenues, and from the wealthiest countries committed to financing global poverty reduction (Independent Group of Scientists/UN, 2023).
- Clearly link reduced inequalities to environmental benefits, to show that it is possible to address inequality without exacerbating climate change or further degrading ecosystems (IPCC, 2023).

8 From extraction to care

Our relationship to the planet needs to deepen. Let Indigenous expertise serve as an essential source of knowledge. Consider the legal rights of nature.

- Expand and invest in nature-based education. Methods and experiences of Indigenous cultures can serve as references and sources of knowledge (Independent Group of Scientists/UN, 2023; SEI & CEEW, 2022).
- National legislative bodies should consider whether establishing rights of nature is effective for protecting its integrity (SEI & CEEW, 2022).

No Goal is an island

To progress on the universal Global Goals and leave no one behind, we must recognize how they are interconnected. Visualize and leverage these relationships to collaborate within and between countries.

- Use systemic and integrated approaches to policymaking, with tools that analyse synergies and trade-offs between the Goals (Independent Group of Scientists/UN, 2023; SEI & CEEW, 2022).
- Apply step-wise and timely decision-making, with wider system boundaries and extended timescales that account for future generations (SEI & CEEW, 2022).
- Consider geographical spillovers — synergies and trade-offs emerging from implementation of the Goals in one place with effects in another (Independent Group of Scientists/UN, 2023; Sachs et al., 2022).

Realign financial systems

Address the funding gap for the Global Goals. Make sustainability standard practice in private finance and ensure long-term stable investment conditions.

- Make the global financial system work for sustainable development. Provide an international and national policy environment with long-term goals in key areas, that lowers risk, increases incentives and makes sustainability the norm for investments (Independent Group of Scientists/UN, 2023; SEI & CEEW, 2022).
- Coordinate governments to harmonize financial regulation frameworks and remove barriers to mobilizing international investments (SEI & CEEW, 2022).
- Develop multilateral and national mechanisms for targeting international finance to low- and middle-income countries, to support sustainable fossil-free economies (SEI & CEEW, 2022).
- Integrate the Goals in the codes of conduct for business strategies. Invest in technology innovation systems that accelerate widespread adoption of sustainable technologies and practices (Independent Group of Scientists/UN, 2023; Sachs et al., 2022; SEI & CEEW, 2022).

Published by
Stockholm Environment Institute
Linnégatan 87D, Box 24218
104 51 Stockholm, Sweden
Tel: +46 8 30 80 44

DOI:
https://doi.org/10.51414/sei2023.044

Author contact
nina.weitz@sei.org

Media contact
maria.cole@sei.org

Visit us: sei.org
Twitter: @SEIresearch
@SEIclimate

Editor: Naomi Lubick
Layout: Richard Clay

References

Biermann, F., Hickmann, T., & Sénit, C.-A. (Eds.). (2022). *The Political Impact of the Sustainable Development Goals: Transforming Governance Through Global Goals?* Cambridge University Press. https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/political-impact-of-the-sustainable-development-goals/3EA0D6589094B68A527FCB05C895F73E

Independent Group of Scientists appointed by the Secretary-General (2023). *Global Sustainable Development Report 2023, Advance Unedited Version*. Downloaded 14 June 2023. New York: United Nations. https://sdgs.un.org/gsdr/gsdr2023

IPCC. (2023). *Summary for Policymakers*. In Core Writing Team, H. Lee and J. Romero (eds.): *Climate Change 2023: Synthesis Report. Contribution of Working Groups I, II and III to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*, pp. 1–34. Geneva: IPCC. DOI: 10.59327/IPCC/AR6-9789291691647.001; https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/syr/downloads/report/IPCC_AR6_SYR_SPM.pdf

Sachs, J., Lafortune, G., Kroll, C., Fuller, G., & Woelm, F. (2022). *From Crisis to Sustainable Development: The SDGs as Roadmap to 2030 and Beyond*. Sustainable Development Report 2022. Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009210058

SEI & CEEW. (2022). *Stockholm+50: Unlocking a Better Future*. Stockholm Environment Institute. https://doi.org/10.51414/sei2022.011

UN. (2023). *The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2023: Special edition. Towards a Rescue Plan for People and Planet*. https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2023/The-Sustainable-Development-Goals-Report-2023.pdf