



MAY 2026



# The global sustainability agenda on the defensive

## Options for a Beyond 2030 Agenda

by Jens Martens

Ten years after being adopted, Agenda 2030, with its global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), is now only a shadow of itself. Public and political debates are dominated by the wars in Ukraine and the Middle East, the US President’s escapades and reactions to the swing to the right in society. Meanwhile, poverty, hunger and inequality have once again increased owing to the crises over the last few years, species extinction is progressing relentlessly, the climate crisis is leading to ever more devastating extreme weather events, and the number of violent conflicts has reached a record level. What would really be required now is an enormous joint effort on the part of the international community to get a little closer to achieving the SDGs by 2030. But the opposite is the case. In many places, political debate is shaped by rejection or at least ignorance when it comes to the sustainability agenda and a drifting apart of the development discourse between the Global North and South. But the consequence of this should not be to write off the SDGs. For the global problems will not disappear by being ignored. Against this background, the coming years at least offer the opportunity to analyse what has caused the lack of progress and sound options for an effective Beyond 2030 Agenda.

### A catastrophic interim result

“We are facing a global development emergency,” UN Secretary General António Guterres’ 2025 [Progress Report](#) on the implementation of the SDGs stated in no uncertain terms. Conflicts, the climate chaos, geopolitical tensions and economic shocks were continuing to prevent progress being made with the speed and volume required to achieve the 2030 goals. According to the UN, the countries are on track with a mere 18% of the SDG targets, while only minimum or moderate progress has been made with nearly half of them, and among more than a third of the targets, the UN has recorded stagnation or even regression.

Just to mention the most obvious example, the number of people living in extreme poverty, i.e. in accordance with the updated World Bank definition of less than 3 US dollars a day, is put at **808 million** for 2025. While this is 1.5 billion fewer people than in 1990, at the present rate, the goal

of fully eliminating poverty (SDG 1.1) could only be achieved in decades. Measured against the additional poverty threshold of 8.30 US dollars for middle-income countries, the World Bank even classifies 3.73 billion people as poor, and thus 45 % of the world population.

At the same time, according to statements of the [World Social Protection Report 2024–2026](#) the share of people safeguarded by at least one social security benefit has, for the first time, risen to more than half of the world population (52.4%). However, this means that 3.8 billion people continue to have to live without any social security. The ILO reckons that at the current rate of progress, it would still take until 2073 for everyone to be protected by at least one social security benefit.

On the other hand, there are also those who have benefited from crises. According to [Forbes Business News](#), the combined wealth of the world’s 3,428 billionaires grew by approximately 4 trillion

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US dollars in 2026 compared to the previous year, reaching 20.1 trillion US dollars. This is more than twenty times as much as the total of official development assistance in 2025 (174 billion US dollars). Alone the assets of Elon Musk, Mark Zuckerberg and Jeff Bezos grew more than threefold between 2020 and 2025 (from 192 to 773 billion US dollars). To put this into perspective, at 581 billion US dollars, capital gain among these three men is larger than the German Federal budget (2026: 524.5 billion euros).

The UN's latest SDG report does also point to some progress over the last ten years. For example, maternal mortality fell from 228 to 197 per 100,000 childbirths (SDG 3.1), mortality among children aged under five years dropped from 43 to 37 per 1,000 live births (SDG 3.2), the share of people with access to electric power supply rose from 87 to 92% (SDG 7.1), and that of the world population with access to the Internet grew from 40 to 68% (SDG 9.c). But even in these areas, the rate of progress is too low. Stagnation and regression shape the overall picture.

## Lost years ahead

In order to still achieve the SDGs, already in 2023, the [UN Secretary General](#) called for a “rescue plan for humanity and the planet”, which, among other items, provided for an SDG Stimulus of 500 billion US dollars a year. Since then, the trend has gone in the opposite direction. The US government under Donald Trump has gone into fundamental opposition to the sustainability agenda, stating in clear terms: “(...) globalist endeavors like Agenda 2030 and the SDGs lost at the ballot box. Therefore, the United States rejects and denounces the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals, and it will no longer reaffirm them as a matter of course” (Edward Heartney, Minister Counselor to ECOSOC, New York, on 4 March 2025).

In other countries, while not being openly rejected, Agenda 2030 and its goals have slipped towards the bottom of the list of political priorities – also in Germany. While the 2021 coalition agreement of the Social Democrats, the Liberals and the Green Party still referred to the SDGs as the “guiding concept for our policies”, the coalition agreement of the Christian Democrats and the Social Democrats of 2025 makes no mention whatsoever of Agenda 2030 and its goals.

In almost all Western countries, a downward trend can be observed regarding official development assistance (ODA) – and hence also of financing the SDGs. In 2025, ODA fell by 23.1% to 174.3 billion US dollars in [comparison to the previous year](#). For 2026, the OECD has forecast a drop of 5.8%. And in the following years, too, the downward trend is set to continue if no considerable political counter-measures are initiated. There is no sign of this in Germany, either. Instead, the government parties declared in the coalition agreement: “Owing to the need to consolidate the budget, an adequate lowering of the ODA rate has to be performed.” Thus the Federal Government has publicly reneged on its international commitment to achieve the 0.7% goal – sending a disastrous political signal to the countries of the Global South.

At the same time, an increasing “securitisation” of politics and a subordination of development cooperation under security policy goals can be observed. In the [presentation of her government programme](#) in the Federal Parliament, Federal Development Minister Reem Alabali-Radovan, too, spoke in favour of “spelling out development cooperation in harmony with foreign and defence policy as sustainable security policy”.

Already in 2024, military spending reached a record level of 2.7 trillion US dollars. According to the UN Secretary General, this is a disastrous trend, for rising military spending adds fuel to the arms race, deepens mistrust between countries, further destabilises international relations and undermines progress in achieving the SDGs. This is the core message of a [report](#) on the link between military spending and SDGs which the UN Secretary General presented in summer 2025. The report warns that, in the long run, diverting public finance to the military budgets of countries ties them to policies centred on the military sector in which defence spending takes priority over development progress, whereas even diverting part of global military spending would suffice to finance the SDGs.

According to the UN report, less than four per cent (or 93 billion US dollars) of the 2.7 trillion US dollars is needed annually to eliminate hunger by 2030. With slightly more than 10 per cent (285 billion US dollars), every child could be fully inoculated. Reinvesting 15 % (387 billion US dollars) of worldwide military spending would suffice to cover the annual costs of adapting to climate change in developing countries. If the current trend continues, worldwide military spending could instead reach the unprecedented level of up to 6.6

trillion US dollars by 2035 – almost five times the level at the end of the Cold War. The UN Secretary General’s report therefore calls for moving to a human-centred and multidimensional security approach in which diplomacy, international cooperation, sustainable development and disarmament take precedence over military armament.

### Options for the Beyond 2030 Agenda

Whereas the Agenda 2030 is stuck in a political defensive and governments are miles from achieving the SDGs, the debate has ensued over how the global sustainability agenda and its goals are to fare after 2030. So far, contributions have above all come from academia and civil society. But governments are also starting to address the topic. What is noteworthy is that while not committing to Agenda 2030 and the SDGs in its coalition agreement, the Federal Government does stress: “We support an ambitious Post-Agenda 2030 framework.”

Generally, the following four options for the future of Agenda 2030 and the SDGs can be distinguished (besides a fifth “Trump option”, that of simply cancelling the Agenda and its goals altogether):

**Option 1: Retaining the SDGs and extending their duration:** This minimum variant does not require the SDGs to be renegotiated. Rather, the 17 goals are retained, and their duration is extended, e.g. by a further 15 years up to 2045, the 100th anniversary of the United Nations. Only the targets reached by 2030 can be deleted from the updated list. In individual cases, the targets may be further specified (e.g. regarding the development of renewables). Where more ambitious targets have already been agreed, for example regarding marine conservation (SDG 14) and biodiversity (SDG 15), these can be integrated.

**Option 2: Extending the catalogue of goals (“SDG+”):** Over the last ten years, topics and challenges have emerged for which either no consensus was reached in the negotiations over the SDGs or which were not relevant at the time. These include, for instance, digitalisation, regulating artificial intelligence and the peaceful use of outer space. Proposals exist for these as well as a wide range of other issues which could additionally be adopted in the SDG catalogue. Examples here include the proposal for an **SDG 18 on the sustainable use of outer space** and **Initiative 18**, which campaigns for establishing “free, safe and sustainable media” as the 18th Sustainability Goal of the United Nations.

**Option 3: Moving the centre of gravity from the Goals to the Means of Implementation:** Agenda 2030 is not restricted to defining common goals but also describes the means required for their implementation. For this purpose, the SDG catalogue contains a Goal in its own right, Goal 17 (“Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development”), with its 19 targets. Moreover, each of the other 16 SDGs refers to more or less generally formulated measures required for implementing the respective Goal. However, the implementation targets in the SDG catalogue, which mainly define the responsibility of the rich countries, were watered down so much in the negotiating gamble that specified duties to act can hardly be deduced from them. Some regard this as the chief reason for the lack of progress in implementing the SDGs. For this reason, it is especially representatives of countries in the Global South who demand that merely paying lip service, for example with regard to the 0.7 per cent target, ought to be replaced by a higher degree of commitment. For instance, they demand that the **right to development** be enshrined in a binding convention in accordance with International Law which also comprises the “duty to cooperate”. Goals linked to this and concerning the *Means of Implementation* also ought to be an element of a “Beyond 2030 Agenda”.

**Option 4: Setting out from the narrative, putting the concept of development to the test:** The discussions over a global “Beyond 2030 Agenda” offer the opportunity to once again put the concepts, strategies, dimensions and policies to a thorough test. For the universal approach of Agenda 2030 and its central notion that given the need, for socio-ecological transformation, all the world’s countries are “developing countries” has been reflected neither in development cooperation nor in the development narrative. Already in the 1970s, pioneers like Julius Nyerere called for bidding farewell to the “concept of aid” in development cooperation. Wolfgang Sachs already stated in 1993: “One can refer to the last forty years as the age of development cooperation. But this epoch is drawing to a close, and it is time to formulate an obituary.” Surprisingly little has changed since then. Only recently, Austrian Social Democrats spoke in favour of dropping the term development cooperation and replacing it with “global sustainability policy”, giving the reason for this that “the concept of ‘development cooperation’ still implies thinking in terms of centres and peripheries, in top and bottom, in progress and backwardness, in surplus and shortage. However, these are not appropri-

ate attributes regarding the aspiration for achieving a sustainable future for all. Only through joint efforts can we realise a sustainable mode of life in this one world which encompasses modes of thought, changes, economic activities, consumption habits and lifestyles. Only through global cooperation at eye-level will a dignified life be possible for all, also for coming generations.”

## From development cooperation to global public investment

For some years, similar fundamental proposals for long-term development finance have come from advocates of the Global Public Investment (GPI) concept. They call for a completely new approach to development finance which does away with the classic donor-beneficiary relationship and the patronising terminology of ‘foreign aid’ by, on the one hand, having all countries contribute to financing while, on the other, all actors are involved on a par in decision-making, especially the countries of the Global South.

The GPI approach calls for a fundamental change in the development narrative which is summed up by the following **five aspects**:

- » From a narrow focus on reducing poverty to meeting broader challenges of inequality and sustainability

- » From seeing international public finance as a temporary last resort to valuing it as a permanent force for good
- » From one-directional North-South transfers to a universal effort, with all paying in and all benefitting
- » From outdated post-colonial institutions to representative decision-making
- » From the patronising language of ‘foreign aid’ to the empowering multilateralism of a common fiscal endeavour

The GPI approach is supported by renowned economists such as Jayati Ghosh, Mariana Mazzucato and Thomas Piketty, although implementing it also presents **operative and political challenges** as, for example, Stephan Klingebiel notes.

What will happen to the global sustainability agenda after 2030 is going to be the focal issue at the next UN SDG Summit, which takes place in September 2027. The next UN Global Sustainable Development Report, which provides the content frame for this summit, is also reckoned to deal with this topic. Politics and civil society would do well not to wait up to then but already become involved in considering options and conditions for an effective ‘Beyond 2030 Agenda’ at an early stage. Then, perhaps, the next five years will not be recorded by history as lost years in terms of global sustainability.

### Imprint

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Design: www.kalinski.media

Cologne, May 2026

This briefing is part of the project “The 2030 Agenda in the Second Half” by Global Policy Forum Europe, funded by the North Rhine-Westphalia Foundation for Environment and Development and by Engagement Global with funding from BMZ.



Global Policy Forum Europe e.V. is solely responsible for the content of this publication; the positions presented here do not reflect the views of Engagement Global gGmbH, BMZ, or the North Rhine-Westphalia Foundation for Environment and Development.

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