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HOW IS THE WORLD DOING ON THE SDGS?

FOUR TESTS AND EIGHT FINDINGS

HOMI KHARAS, JOHN W MCARTHUR, AND ODERA ONYECHI

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Executive summary

At last September's major U.N. SDG midpoint summit, a downcast narrative prevailed. Official statements stressed only 15% of the targets being on track, and many going in reverse.¹ The U.N. Secretary-General (2023) called for an SDG "rescue plan." *Nature*, the eminent scientific journal, asserted prior to the summit that the world's effort "to make humanity sustainable is failing."²

There is little argument that societies around the world are navigating many complicated economic, social, and environmental issues at once. The SDGs put a framework and metrics to many of these diverse problems. But the complexity of underlying trends does not lend itself to tidy simplifications. A more nuanced diagnosis of the dynamics is important to inform problem-solving over the SDG "second half" out to 2030. To this end, this paper offers an assessment of SDG-relevant empirical trends to date.

Four tests of progress

We identify four different standards to assess progress, each of which yields different interpretations of the data.

1. **Does the world look different today on SDG indicators than in 2015: Is the world getting better?** Are fewer people in poverty? Are more ecosystems protected? Given the volatile economic and geopolitical circumstances, material progress in some areas could still count as an important success.
2. **Have there been any shifts in underlying trends since 2015: Has the SDG period been a period of accelerated improvement or slowdowns in progress?** If the purpose of the SDGs was to quicken progress, this query could suggest that the SDGs may have had some discernible benefits, even if those benefits are not large enough to meet the stretch targets of the goals.
3. **Is the world on track to meet its agreed SDG ambitions by the 2030 deadline?** Beyond the simple yes/no answer, this standard allows us to quantify the consequences of falling short of the goals and to identify which countries are facing the largest challenges.
4. **Are there any threshold effects, beyond which changes are abrupt and difficult, if not impossible to reverse?** For many SDG indicators, a setback or delay can be reversed later on. But in some cases, there are tipping points beyond which it is impossible to recover. Like a car careening toward a cliff, changes in speed are less important than whether the driver stops in time to avoid falling over the edge. This applies especially to environmental indicators—such as when the planet's climate, biodiversity, and ecosystems are determined by cumulative effects—and also to mortality indicators since lives lost cannot later be restored.

¹ See, for example, U.N. (2023a).

² See *Nature* (2023).

The case of under-five child mortality illustrates the range of takeaways inspired by different tests. The world achieved a 20% decline in the number of deaths of children under 5 over the first seven years of the SDG era, from 6.1 million deaths in 2015 to 4.9 million in 2022. But over the same period, 42 low- and middle-income countries saw a significant slowdown in their rate of progress compared to pre-2015 trends, and only 20 saw a significant acceleration. Fully 132 countries are on track to meet the SDG mortality target by 2030, and 60 countries are on a path to falling short. However, from 2024 through 2030, the shortfalls add up to 10.5 million children's lives lost for good. So even though more than a million fewer children dying every year is a source of encouragement, more than 10 million deaths due to shortfalls over the next several years is a grave concern.

Eight findings

Our empirical strategy focuses on country-level trends across 24 SDG-related indicators with time-series data available for at least 100 countries since 2015. Although we would prefer to include a wider array of indicators, limited cross-country data availability impedes our ability to do so. By applying the various lenses for assessing SDG progress, we distill eight key findings:

1. In considering how the world looks today compared to 2015, things are better on most indicators, even if none are currently on track for their 2030 targets. However, on a handful of issues—including food insecurity, nutrition, malaria incidence, road deaths, and greenhouse gas emissions—things look worse.
2. In comparing pre- and post-2015 country rates of progress, three indicators—HIV incidence, access to antiretroviral treatment, and access to electricity—registered accelerated gains since 2015, while eight have seen no change, and nine have seen a slowdown in the rate of progress.
3. A longer-term assessment of trends shows that many shortfalls in the SDGs were apparent before the crises of the 2020s. Blame for limited progress cannot be attributed simply to COVID-19 and other unexpected shocks.
4. When looking at country-level accelerations and slowdowns across indicators, there is no single story on how individual countries are doing on the SDGs, and there is limited correlation between issues. Even the poorest countries are seeing accelerated rates of progress on some issues, while no countries are making accelerated progress on all issues.
5. When translating current trajectories for SDG shortfalls to absolute numbers of people affected, huge numbers of people will be left behind on specific issues like access to basic sanitation services (an estimated 1140 million people left behind), undernourishment (981 million), severe food insecurity (593 million), extreme poverty (570 million), access to electricity (540 million), access to safe drinking water (533 million), and access to affordable internet (376 million).
6. SDG shortfalls on mortality indicators add up to more than 34 million additional estimated lives lost from 2024 through 2030. This includes 18.8 million premature

deaths to noncommunicable disease, 10.5 million children under 5, 4.3 million traffic deaths, and 1.2 million maternal deaths.

7. The geographic concentration of people left behind differs by issue. For seven indicators, more than half the people left behind will be concentrated in just five countries.
8. Even where environmental progress since 2015 is clear, the pace may not be fast enough to avoid nature's potentially imminent tipping points.

As a general caveat, our aim is to distill key patterns amid global complexity, rather than to present precise point estimates. All forward-looking estimates should be interpreted with appropriate caution amid the inherent uncertainty and limitations embedded in such calculations.

Implications

Despite the world's deep and ongoing strains, the human condition has improved on several fronts since 2015. But many positive trends were already in motion prior to 2015 and improvement alone does not meet the higher normative standards established in the SDGs. Issue-specific progress assessments suggest issue-specific policy architectures still matter. At the same time, widespread gaps relative to the world's agreed ambitions for 2030 suggest the need for more systematic changes in approaches across SDGs. With only six years remaining to the deadline, there is tremendous value in the existence of time-bound international goals to inform substantive assessments on the nature of global sustainable development progress during a turbulent political era. A carefully nuanced approach to assessing absolute changes, rates of progress, and potential tipping points—country by country and target by target—remains crucial to identifying better pathways toward achieving the world's stated ambitions

Introduction

How is the world doing on the SDGs? At last September's major U.N. SDG midpoint summit, a downcast narrative prevailed. Official statements stressed only 15% of the targets being on track, and many going in reverse. Geopolitical conflicts, authoritarian trends, and lasting scars of a global pandemic have all been diverting leaders' attention, as has the unique multidimensional challenge of climate change. The U.N. Secretary-General (2023) went so far as to call for an SDG "rescue plan." *Nature*, arguably the world's leading scientific journal, asserted in the lead-up to the U.N. summit that the world's effort "to make humanity sustainable is failing."³

There is little argument that societies around the world are navigating many complicated economic, social, and environmental issues at once. The SDGs put a framework and metrics to many of these diverse problems. But the complexity of underlying trends does not lend itself to tidy simplifications. A wide-aperture lens is required to understand eight billion people's progress across diverse geographies on issues as varied as hunger, health, education, gender equality, jobs, infrastructure, biodiversity protection, ocean management, climate change, and so forth. A more nuanced diagnosis of the dynamics is important to inform problem-solving over the SDG "second half" out to 2030.

To this end, this paper offers an assessment of SDG-relevant empirical trends to date, using the latest available data at the time of writing in early 2024. It builds on a body of previous empirical work—including McArthur (2014), McArthur and Rasmussen (2018), McArthur, Rasmussen, and Yamey (2018), and Kharas, McArthur, and Rasmussen (2018)—all of which explored a variety of approaches to assessing progress and trajectories for both the SDGs and their predecessor Millennium Development Goals.

Four tests of progress

A central tenet of our empirical strategy is that there is no single correct approach for assessing SDG-relevant trends. A range of analytical lenses is required to understand the spectrum of issues. At least four different standards can be used to assess progress, each of which yields different interpretations of the data.

1. **Does the world look different today on SDG indicators than in 2015: Is the world getting better?** Are fewer people in poverty? Are more children surviving? Are more ecosystems protected? Given the breadth of the SDGs, the volatile geopolitical circumstances, and major challenges in the world economy, material progress in some areas could still count as an important success.
2. **Have there been any shifts in underlying trends since 2015: Has the SDG period been a period of accelerated improvement or slowdowns in progress?** If the purpose of the SDGs was to quicken progress, this query could suggest that the SDGs may have had some discernible benefits, even if those benefits are not large enough to meet the stretch targets of the goals.

³ See Nature (2023).

3. **Is the world on track to meet its agreed SDG ambitions by the 2030 deadline?** Beyond the simple yes/no answer, this standard allows us to quantify the consequences of falling short of the goals and to identify which countries are facing the largest challenges.
4. **Are there any threshold effects, beyond which changes are abrupt and difficult if not impossible to reverse?** For many SDG indicators, a setback or delay can be reversed later on. But in some cases, there are tipping points beyond which it is impossible to recover. Like a car careening toward a cliff, changes in speed are less important than whether the driver stops in time to avoid falling over the edge. This applies especially to environmental indicators—such as when the planet’s climate, biodiversity, and ecosystems are determined by cumulative effects—and also to mortality indicators, since lives lost cannot later be restored. One prominent study argues that Earth has already transgressed six of nine planetary boundaries (Richardson et al., 2023).

The case of under-5 child mortality illustrates the range of takeaways that different tests inspire:

- The world achieved a 20% decline in the number of deaths of children under 5 over the first seven years of the SDG era, from 6.1 million deaths in 2015 to 4.9 million in 2022.
- Over the same period, 42 low- and middle-income countries saw a significant slowdown in their rate of progress compared to pre-2015 trends, while only 20 saw a significant acceleration.
- Assessed against the SDG target for all countries to have no more than 25 under-5 deaths per 1,000 live births by 2030, fully 132 countries are on track, and 60 countries are on a path to fall short.
- From 2024 through 2030, the projected SDG shortfalls add up to 10.5 million children’s lives lost for good.

Simply summarized, even though more than a million fewer children dying every year is a source of encouragement, more than 10 million deaths due to shortfalls over the next several years is a source of grave concern. Neither perspective tells an adequate story on its own. Multiple empirical angles are important for understanding the nature of SDG progress and challenges.

We use trend data on 24 indicators with the range of tests in mind, for the most part relying on country-level time-series data. Recognizing that previous major reports (e.g., U.N. 2023) have provided comprehensive goal-by-goal assessments of progress, we focus our results on eight key findings that are relevant to ongoing policy debates. Some of the findings are motivated by more than one of the four empirical tests, so we present each finding as a freestanding assessment. As a general caveat, our aim is to distill patterns amid global complexity, rather than to present precise point estimates. All forward-looking estimates should be interpreted with appropriate caution amid the inherent uncertainty, data limitations, and methodological assumptions embedded in such calculations.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. The next section provides an overview of empirical methods, as also described in more detail in the appendix. The following section presents our eight key findings. A final section then presents a short conclusion and consideration of implications.

Data and methods

Our methods build upon, and in some cases update, those most recently presented in Kharas, McArthur, and Rasmussen (2018). Our dataset includes 24 indicators relevant to 11 different SDGs; these are described in Box 1. A primary constraint to building the data set is the need for adequate post-2015 country-level trend data. We restrict our sample to indicators where data are available for at least 100 countries. In some cases, this results in the use of indicators that tell only a very limited story relative to the broader ambitions of a goal or target. For SDG 5 on gender equality, for example, quantitative country-level time series data are extremely limited across indicators; we identify the proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments as a measure that meets our sample criteria. We were not able to identify suitable cross-country time series indicators relating to SDGs 8, 10, 11, 12, and 16, noting that Goal 17 on partnerships is of a different empirical nature.

As a further caveat in recognizing the centrality of the “leave no one behind” principle within the SDG framework, this paper’s distillation of trends across a limited group of indicators does not explore important and complementary underlying issues of demographic disaggregation within indicators. The official SDG indicator framework rightly calls for data to be “disaggregated, where relevant, by income, sex, age, race, ethnicity, migratory status, disability, and geographic location, or other characteristics, in accordance with the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics.”⁴ In related work, we have stressed the importance of understanding which specific people are facing which specific issues in which specific places (Kharas, McArthur, and Ohno eds., 2019). This paper presents only a topline global assessment for such questions that require deeper localized investigation.

⁴ See Annex of U.N. General Assembly Resolution 71/313.
<https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n17/207/63/pdf/n1720763.pdf?token=mMWIkMbdAns6bBst5H&fe=true>

Box 1. Indicators Assessed

SDG	Target	Indicator used
1	1.1 By 2030, eradicate extreme poverty for all people everywhere	1.1.1 Proportion of the population living below \$1.90/day (2011 PPP)
2	2.1 By 2030, end hunger and ensure access by all people, in particular the poor and people in vulnerable situations, including infants, to safe, nutritious and sufficient food all year round	2.1.1 Prevalence of undernourishment
		2.1.2 Prevalence of severe food insecurity in the population
	2.2 By 2030, end all forms of malnutrition, including achieving, by 2025, the internationally agreed targets on stunting and wasting in children under 5 years of age, and address the nutritional needs of adolescent girls, pregnant and lactating women and older persons	2.2.1 Prevalence of stunting among children under 5 years of age
		2.2.2 Prevalence of overweight among children under 5 years of age
3	3.1 By 2030, reduce the global maternal mortality ratio to less than 70 per 100,000 live births	3.1.1 Maternal mortality ratio
	3.2 By 2030, end preventable deaths of newborns and children under 5 years of age, with all countries aiming to reduce neonatal mortality to at least as low as 12 per 1,000 live births and under-5 mortality to at least as low as 25 per 1,000 live births	3.2.1 Under-5 mortality rate
		3.3 By 2030, end the epidemics of AIDS, tuberculosis, malaria and neglected tropical diseases and combat hepatitis, water-borne diseases and other communicable diseases
	* UN General Assembly Political Declaration on HIV and AIDS (June 2021): To achieve the 95–95–95 testing, treatment and viral suppression targets within all demographics and groups and geographic settings, including children and adolescents living with HIV, ensuring that, by 2025, at least 34 million people living with HIV have access to medicines, treatment and diagnostics.	3.3.2 Tuberculosis incidence per 100,000 population
		3.3.3 Malaria incidence per 1,000 population at risk
		3.3.1x* Proportion of people living with HIV who are receiving antiretroviral therapy
	3.4 By 2030, reduce by one third premature mortality from non-communicable diseases through prevention and treatment and promote mental health and well-being	3.4.1 Mortality rate attributed to cardiovascular disease, cancer, diabetes or chronic respiratory disease
3.6 By 2030, halve the number of global deaths and injuries from road traffic accidents	3.6.1 Death rate due to road traffic injuries	
3.7 By 2030, ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health-care services, including for family planning, information and education, and the integration of reproductive health into national strategies and programs	3.7.1 Proportion of women of reproductive age who have their need for family planning satisfied with modern methods	

4	4.1 By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes	4.1.2a Primary school completion rate
		4.1.2b Upper secondary school completion rate
5	5.5 Ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life	5.5.1 Proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments
6	6.1 By 2030, achieve universal and equitable access to safe and affordable drinking water for all	6.1.1 Proportion of population using at least basic drinking water services
	6.2 By 2030, achieve access to adequate and equitable sanitation and hygiene for all and end open defecation, paying special attention to the needs of women and girls and those in vulnerable situations	6.2.1 Proportion of population using at least basic sanitation services
7	7.1 By 2030, ensure universal access to affordable, reliable and modern energy services	7.1.1 Proportion of population with access to electricity
9	9.c Significantly increase access to information and communications technology and strive to provide universal and affordable access to the Internet in least developed countries by 2030	9.c.x* Proportion of population who can afford internet access
13	13.2 Integrate climate change measures into national policies, strategies and planning	13.2.2 Total greenhouse gas emissions per year
14	* Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF) Target 3: Ensure and enable that by 2030 at least 30 per cent of terrestrial and inland water areas, and of marine and coastal areas, especially areas of particular importance for biodiversity and ecosystem functions and services, are effectively conserved and managed through ecologically representative, well-connected and equitably governed systems of protected areas and other effective area-based conservation measures, recognizing indigenous and traditional territories, where applicable, and integrated into wider landscapes, seascapes and the ocean, while ensuring that any sustainable use, where appropriate in such areas, is fully consistent with conservation outcomes, recognizing and respecting the rights of indigenous peoples and local communities, including over their traditional territories	14.5.1 Coverage of protected areas in relation to marine areas
15		15.1.2 Proportion of important sites for terrestrial and freshwater biodiversity that are covered by protected areas

Note: An asterisk represents a target or indicator not included in the official SDG framework but included in our analysis.

Most of the targets we use are drawn directly from the SDG framework agreed in 2015. One exception is under target 3.3, where, for HIV/AIDS treatment, we draw from the more recent 95-95-95 targets that U.N. member states adopted in June 2021 with a 2025 deadline. For new HIV infections, we use the 90% reduction target articulated by the World Health Organization (2015, p. 32) in the context of SDG adoption in 2015. The other exceptions are for Goals 13, 14 and 15. In our analysis, we draw a clear link between the SDGs, the U.N. Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), and the U.N. Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD). Goal 13 of the SDG framework, established in September 2015, gives an explicit nod to the central role of the UNFCCC, which generated the seminal Paris Agreement in December 2015. Meanwhile, we interpret Goals 14 and 15 in line with the CBD's 2022 Kunming-Montreal biodiversity framework, which set a target to protect at least 30% of land and ocean areas by 2030 (noting that the U.S. was not among the 196 countries endorsing the framework). We treat these targets as minimum thresholds for avoiding environmental tipping points, in line with prominent arguments in the scientific literature.⁵

Twenty-one of the indicators focus on country-level time-series data relevant to the quality of people's lives, while three are country contributions to planetary issues. For our people-focused indicators, we draw from data previously published by the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO), International Energy Agency (IEA), Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), United Nations Inter-Agency Group for Child Mortality Estimation (UN-IGME), World Bank, World Data Lab (WDL), and the World Health Organization (WHO), as well as our in-house poverty estimates (Kharas and Dooley, 2021). For SDG target 9.c focused on access to information and communications technology in least developed countries, we use WDL's measure of internet poverty, which incorporates affordability issues.

To translate these indicators from population shares and coverage rates to headcounts, we use population estimates and projections from the U.N.'s 2022 World Population Prospects. We use country-level panel data from the WDL to analyze trends in greenhouse gas emissions. To assess progress on national marine and terrestrial protected areas, we use a global time series provided in the 2020 Protected Planet Report (UNEP-WCMC and IUCN, 2021).⁶ A full table of the data sources by indicator can be found in the appendix.

The basic empirical strategy is as follows. First, we calculate the average annual rate of progress for each indicator in each country. The years used for the rate of progress and forward-looking trajectory calculations vary by country and indicator, based on data availability. Indicator observations need to span at least a five-year interval to be included in the analysis, and growth rate calculations use all data available from 2015 onwards. We calculate rates of progress and forward-looking trajectories assuming either linear or compound growth rates, depending on the nature of the indicator. For some indicators,

⁵ See, for example, Dinerstein et al. (2019) and Sala et al. (2021).

⁶ While the WDI provides country-level estimates of the *share* of land and water protected, we were unable to find a benchmark to translate the percent ages to square kilometers. The 2020 Protected Planet report provides the estimates of protected areas in square kilometers.

we conduct linear regressions to estimate country-level trend lines. The appendix details the calculations performed for each indicator.

Next, we convert the indicator, wherever appropriate, to values measured in absolute human terms—such as the number of people living in hunger, or the number of people dying prematurely from noncommunicable disease. Country-level calculations and estimates for each indicator are then aggregated to the global level. This allows us to use country-level trend estimates to assess humanity-scale implications.

We then assess SDG progress relating to each of the four analytical standards described in the previous section:

1. To perform the straightforward before-and-after assessment of the world's status on the SDGs, we compare our bottom-up global estimates for 2023 to the reported values for 2015.
2. To test for changes in the rate of progress since 2015, we compare the average rate of progress from 2005 to 2015 with the rate of progress from 2015 to the most recent year with reported data. We perform Chow tests for structural breaks in each country's trend on each indicator and t-tests for differences in cross-country mean rates of progress, both by income group and across the full sample.
3. To assess the extent to which the world is on track to meet individual SDG targets, we extrapolate recent (mostly country-level) rates of progress out to 2030. We quantify the projected country-level shortfall on each indicator by comparing current trajectories with the rate of progress required to meet the relevant SDG targets. We aggregate the gains and shortfalls to estimate overall SDG progress and gaps at the global level, with emphasis on the implications for different demographic groups.
4. Due to the complex nature of environmental tipping points, we do not perform a direct empirical assessment of progress against that standard. Nonetheless, we discuss the recent trends in relation to broader scientific assessments of the need for progress. In terms of lives permanently lost, we also convert mortality-focused indicators into estimates of excess deaths relative to SDG pledges and the number and types of lives at stake across relevant demographic segments.

Eight findings

1. In considering how the world looks today compared to 2015, things are better on most indicators, even if none are currently on track for their 2030 targets. However, on a handful of issues—including food insecurity, nutrition, malaria, road deaths, and emissions indicators—things look worse.

In a before-and-after test, the bars in Figure 1 show our estimates of the world's performance on each indicator in 2023 relative to its status in 2015. For people-focused indicators, we use country-level data to estimate the total number of people falling short of the target in 2023 (see appendix for nowcasting methods for each target) and calculate the change since 2015. For environmental issues, we conduct an analogous process of adding up physical units (i.e., square kilometers for protected areas and tons of CO₂ equivalent for climate emissions) to assess total gains for the planet.

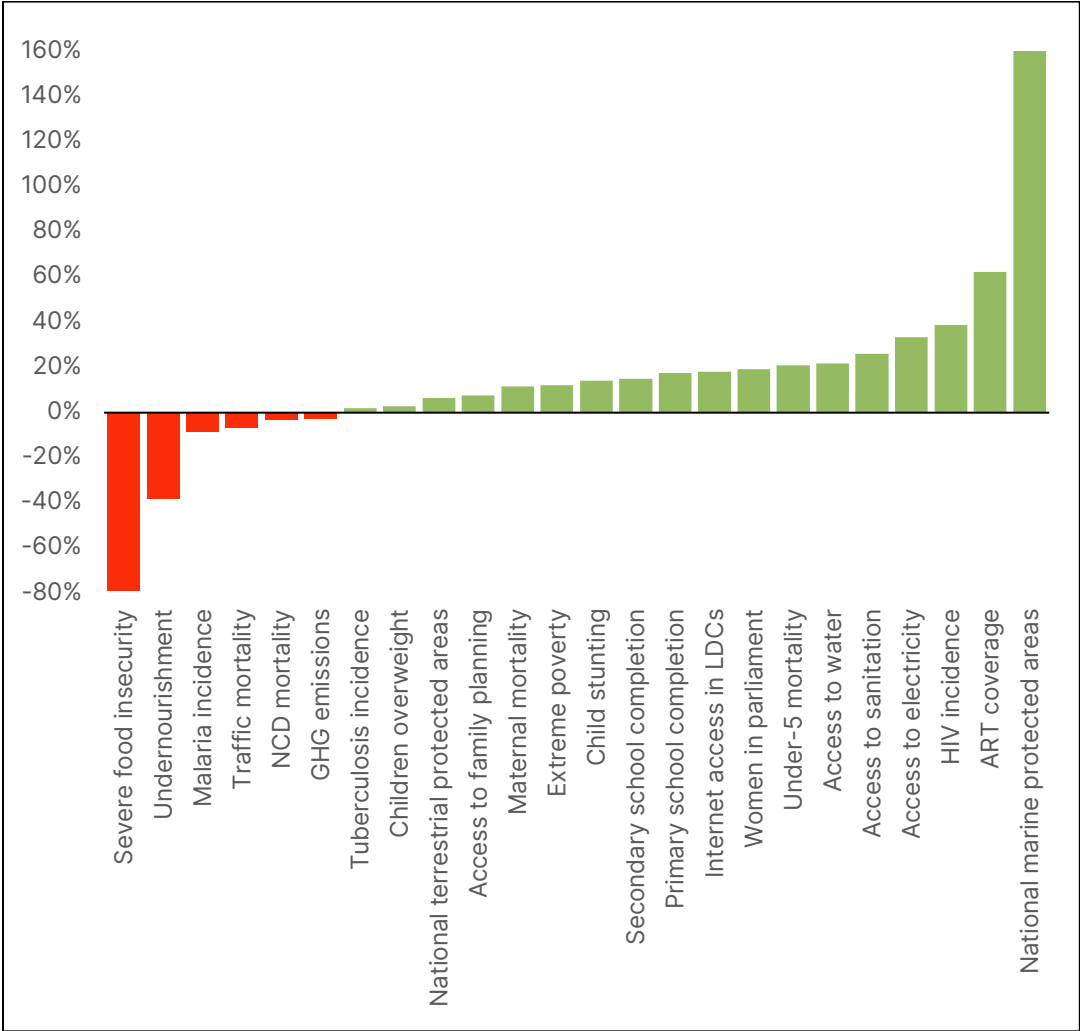
Most of the indicators in Figure 1 have shown some progress since 2015, as marked in green bars. Marine-protected areas saw the most progress, having increased by over 160% since 2015. The number of people receiving antiretroviral therapy (ART) increased by over 60%, and the number of annual new HIV infections fell by nearly 40%.⁷ We find that a million fewer children under 5 died, and that 36 thousand fewer mothers died during childbirth compared to levels that would have occurred had mortality rates remained at 2015 levels.

The red bars in Figure 1 indicate issues that have worsened since 2015. Food insecurity and undernourishment became more pervasive. The number of food-insecure people increased by nearly 80%, and the number who are undernourished rose by nearly 40%. Malaria incidence increased, as did road traffic deaths. Greenhouse gas emissions also increased slightly since the 2015 Paris Agreement.

In the context of this mixed picture of progress since 2015, when we assess the same 24 indicators against their corresponding SDG targets, only six are on track to cover more than half the distance to the target by the relevant deadline: ART coverage, HIV incidence, access to electricity, access to sanitation, access to water, and internet access in LDCs. Despite the major gains for marine protected areas, that indicator is on course to make less than half the gains needed to achieve the 30% protection target by 2030.

⁷ On a related note, these two HIV/AIDS-related indicators are closest in our sample to achieving their respective targets by their deadline.

Figure 1. SDG progress since 2015



Sources: Authors' calculations based on FAO (2024); IEA, IRENA, UNSD, World Bank, and WHO (2023); IHME (2022); Kharas and Dooley (2021); UNAIDS (2023); UN-DESA (2022); UNEP-WCMC, and IUCN (2021); UNESCO (2023); UNICEF (2023); UNICEF and WHO (2023); UNICEF, WHO, and World Bank (2023); UN-IGME (2024); WHO (2021a, 2023, 2024); World Bank (2023); WDL (2022, 2023a).

2. In comparing pre- and post-2015 country rates of progress, three indicators—HIV incidence, access to antiretroviral treatment, and access to electricity—registered accelerated gains since 2015, while eight have seen no change, and nine have seen a slowdown in the rate of progress.

Our second test considers rates of progress. When we look for statistical differences in average country rates of progress before and after 2015, we find acceleration on three indicators (ART coverage, HIV incidence, access to electricity), no change on eight indicators (children overweight, TB incidence, malaria incidence, noncommunicable disease mortality, family planning, women in parliament, access to safe water, and greenhouse gas emissions), and a deceleration of progress on nine indicators (extreme poverty, undernourishment, stunting, maternal mortality, child mortality, traffic deaths, primary school completion, secondary school completion and access to sanitation). There is insufficient country time-series data prior to 2015 to estimate changes on the other four indicators (severe food insecurity, internet access, and marine and terrestrial protected areas).

Amid the mixed overall picture on trends, it is informative to consider the small number of accelerating indicators. The rapid expansion of ART coverage is particularly notable in low-income countries (LICs) and builds on successes achieved during the MDG era from 2000-2015 (McArthur, 2013; McArthur and Rasmussen, 2018). Figure 2 shows the distribution curve for average annual country rates of progress across LICs pre- and post-2015. The dashed line shows annualized average country rates of progress from 2005 to 2015 and the solid line shows rates of progress from 2015 to 2022. The clear rightward shift of the curve indicates overall acceleration in the distribution. In the decade leading up to 2015, ART coverage in LICs expanded by an average cross-country rate of 3.5 percentage points per year, as a share of those living with HIV/AIDS. Then, over the seven years from 2015 to 2022, this accelerated to 4.8 percentage points per year.

Some of the specific country examples of acceleration are also noteworthy. They include a huge leap in challenging environments like Sierra Leone, where the average annual rate of treatment expansion was 2.0 percentage points from 2005-2015 and 7.5 percentage points from 2015-2022. The Democratic Republic of the Congo's corresponding figures jumped from 2.2 to 8.0 percentage points per year.⁸ Both countries are now among more than 50 that are on course to reach the 95% treatment coverage target for 2025. This post-2015 progress presents a stark contrast to the world's backward movement on, for example, food insecurity and undernourishment, as shown earlier in Figure 1.

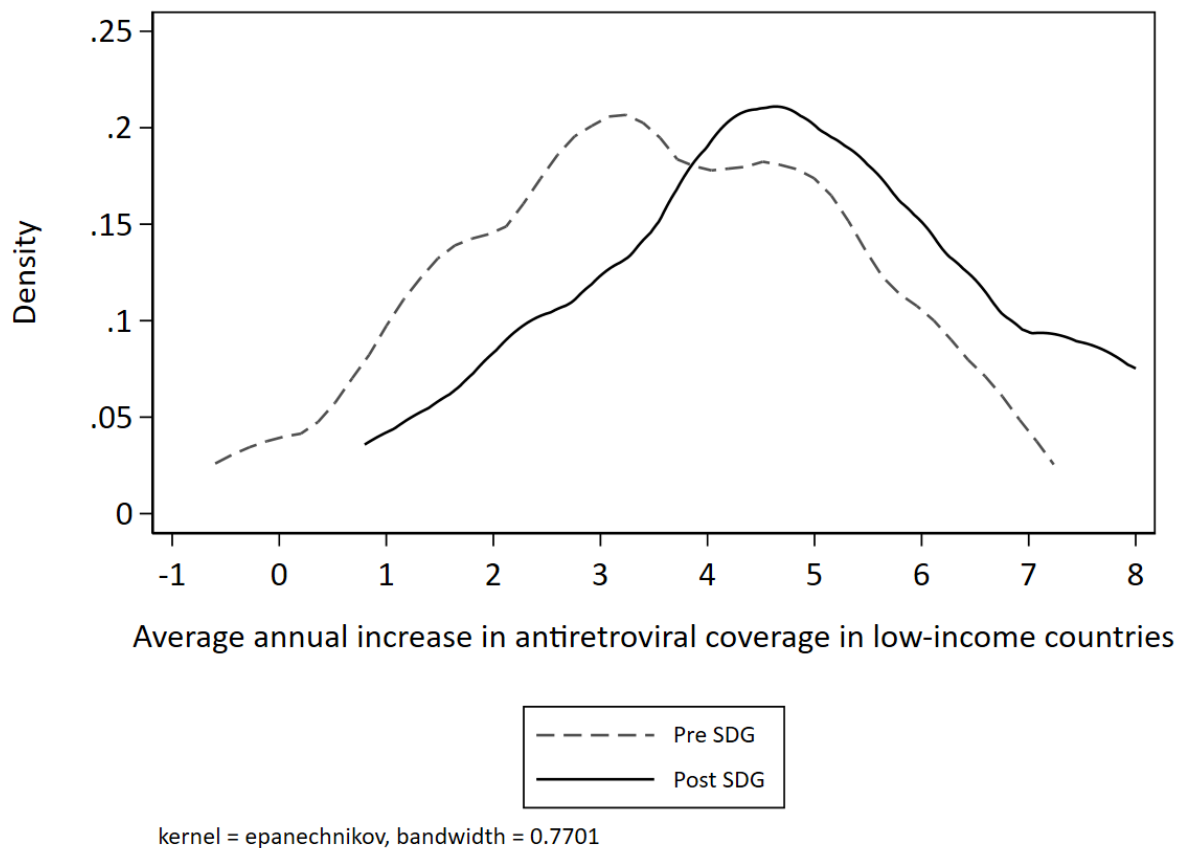
Related progress has taken place in lowering rates of HIV incidence. When the SDGs were established, Eswatini had the world's highest HIV prevalence and incidence. Since then, it has seen a nearly fivefold acceleration in its rate of decline in incidence and is now on track to meet the UNAIDS target for a 90% reduction by 2030 (UNAIDS, 2023). Lesotho had the second-highest prevalence and incidence in 2015 and is also now on track to meet the 90% reduction target (UNAIDS, 2023). All the other countries with HIV

⁸ Recognizing that the ART coverage was still scaling up in the 2000s, we also estimated percentage point rates of annual change from 2010 to 2015 for comparison. They were 3.4% for DR Congo, 1.9% for Sierra Leone, and 3.7% as the cross-country average for LICs, still implying a substantial acceleration post-2015.

prevalence rates greater than 10% of the adult population as of 2015—South Africa, Mozambique, Botswana, Zambia, Namibia, and Zimbabwe—have also seen statistically significant accelerations in progress on HIV incidence.

Access to electricity’s acceleration in progress has been more modest. Since 2015, countries have increased their average annual rate of expanding access from 1.4 to 1.6 percentage points of the population. The top success stories were in Kenya, which increased its electricity coverage from around 42% of the population in 2015 to nearly 77% in 2021, and neighboring Uganda, which increased from less than 19% to 45% coverage over the same period.

Figure 2. Cross-country distribution of pre- and post-2015 rates of progress for antiretroviral coverage in low-income countries



Source: Authors’ calculations based on UNAIDS (2023).

3. A longer-term assessment of trends shows that many shortfalls in the SDGs were apparent before the crises of the 2020s. Blame for limited progress cannot be attributed simply to COVID-19 and other unexpected shocks.

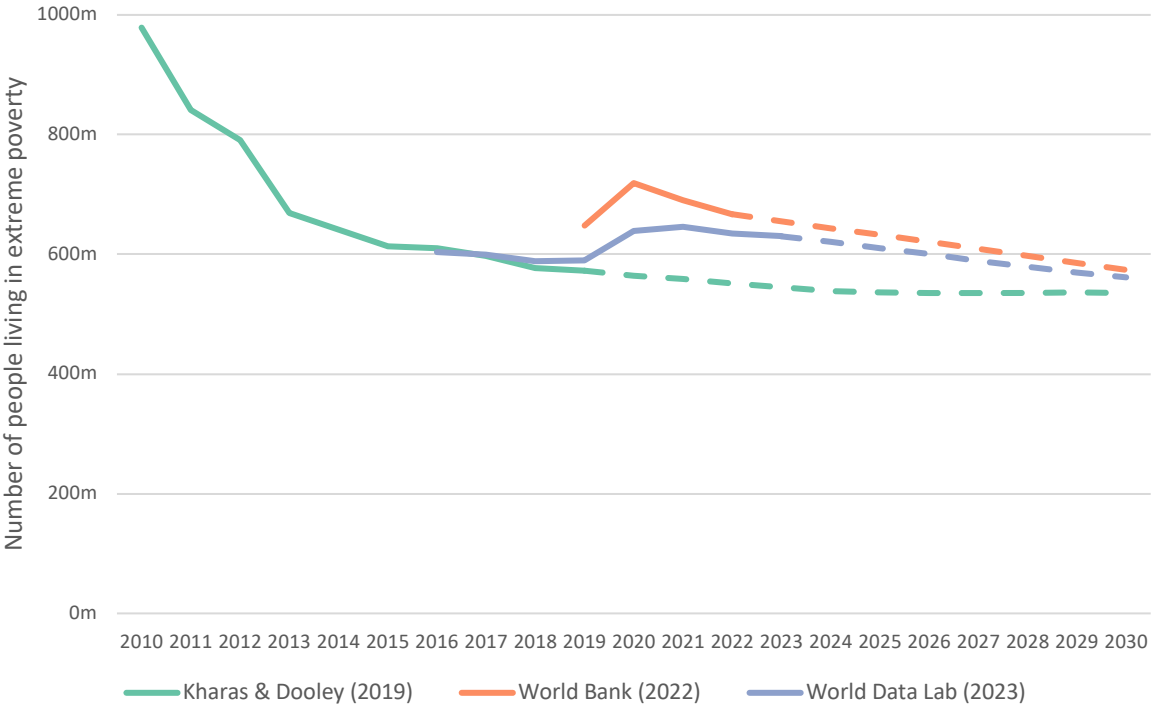
Although COVID-19 and the war in Ukraine have been frequently cited as a driving reason for SDG shortfalls,⁹ doing so gives too little recognition to pre-2020 SDG trends. This is not to minimize the educational, health, or economic consequences of the pandemic. Millions of children are falling behind in learning (UNICEF, 2022). Global excess mortality associated with COVID-19 adds up to over 27 million premature deaths as of mid-2024 (The Economist, 2024). Many countries are facing deep, long-term fiscal challenges as they emerge from the pandemic itself and other subsequent global economic shocks.

But, amid the patchy availability of post-pandemic data, it is not yet clear how many SDG indicators will see a structural shift in 2030 outcomes due to COVID-19. Many SDGs were clearly not on track for success well before the pandemic struck. In 2018, for example, we and coauthors were already emphasizing the shortfalls, asking “How many lives are at stake?” and “How many people will the world leave behind?” (Kharas, McArthur, and Rasmussen, 2018; McArthur, Rasmussen, and Yamey, 2018). The estimates from these analyses painted a similar overarching picture to what we present in this paper, even if some indicators show adjusted trajectories.

Figure 3 underscores the point by comparing pre- and post-pandemic projections of the number of people living in extreme poverty. The green line represents an estimate produced in 2019, which shows a long-term flattening of the curve after 2015 as the geographic locus of extreme poverty shifted (Kharas and Dooley, 2019). The orange line shows the World Bank’s official estimate and forecast for extreme poverty out to 2030, as published in November 2022. The purple line shows the World Poverty Clock’s trend estimates as of 2023 (World Data Lab, 2023b). Although the newer estimates show a material short-term jump in headcount numbers in the early 2020s linked to COVID, the estimates for the 2030 horizon are similar. The central story of stagnation in the fight against extreme poverty remains unchanged, with increasing geographic concentration in fragile and conflict-affected countries. The challenges were already glaring as of the late 2010s.

⁹ See, for example, World Bank (2022).

Figure 3. Extreme poverty headcount estimates before and during the pandemic



4. When looking at country-level accelerations and slowdowns across indicators, there is no single story on how individual countries are doing on the SDGs, and there is limited correlation between issues. Even the poorest countries are seeing accelerated rates of progress on some issues, while no countries are making accelerated progress on all issues.

The SDGs are often discussed as an integrated policy agenda that is both indivisible and interconnected. But progress across issues is not clearly interconnected within a near-term horizon. We conducted a statistical test for acceleration on 20 indicators compared to a general pre-SDG reference period of 2005 to 2015. Figure 4 presents the results for the 10 countries with the lowest per capita incomes as of 2015. The arrows show whether the rate of progress on that issue materially accelerated (green arrow up), decelerated (red arrow down), or remained unchanged (yellow dash) since 2015.

The figure shows that countries are typically experiencing accelerating improvements on one issue alongside slowing or steady state trends on others. Even among the poorest countries in the world, many have shown accelerated progress on a variety of indicators as of 2015. Building on and amplifying these trends through 2030 would still register as considerable success on our first and second tests, even if the countries do not all succeed on the third test of SDG achievement. A similar pattern emerges when one looks across all countries, regardless of income levels (see appendix).

The findings suggest that simplified statements on the integrated nature of SDG progress might hinder understanding of the near-term practical needs. Accelerated gains on one SDG do not automatically beget progress on another. Moreover, differentiated progress across indicators means that general assertions of country A having done better on the SDGs than country B are typically problematic. They can only be made with a degree of subjective judgments about which SDGs are more important.

To be sure, we caution against interpreting the figure's underlying data simplistically or with false precision. Sometimes, a "slowdown" reflects structural changes or underlying progress. Ethiopia, for example, achieved 59% antiretroviral coverage by 2015, up from 3% in 2005, so it could only "slow down" when reaching 83% by 2022. Other data are more puzzling. Can it really be, for instance, that progress on extreme poverty in Madagascar and Ethiopia is accelerating while gains on undernourishment are slowing down?

Figure 4. Varying rates of quickening and slowing progress in the lowest-income countries

	Extreme poverty	Undernourishment	Child stunting	Children overweight	Maternal mortality	Under-5 mortality	HIV incidence	ART coverage	Tuberculosis incidence	Malaria incidence	NCD mortality	Traffic mortality	Access to family planning	Primary school completion	Secondary school completion	Women in parliament	Access to water	Access to sanitation	Access to electricity	GHG emissions	GNI per capita in 2015 (atlas \$)
Burundi	▼		▼	■	■	▼	▲	▲	▼	▼	▼	■	▼	▼	▼	▲	▼	▼	■	▼	250
Central African Republic	▲	■	▼	■	■	▼	▼	▲	■	▼	▲	▼	▲	▼	▼	▲	▲	▲	■	■	370
Somalia	■	■	■	■	■	▲		▲	▲	▼	■	■	▼			■	▼	■	▼	■	400
Congo, Dem. Rep.	▼	▼	▼	■	■	▼	▲	▲	▲	▼	■	▼	▲	▼	▼	▲	▼	▲	■	▲	440
Madagascar	▲	▼	▲	■	■	▼	▲	▲	▼	■	■	■	▼	▼	▼	▼	▼	▲	▲	▼	470
Malawi	■	▼	▼	■	■	▼	▲	▼	▼	■	■	■	▼	▼	■	■	▼	▼	■	■	500
Niger	▼	▼	▼	■	■	▼	▼	■	▲	▲	▲	■	▼	▲	▲	▲	▼	▲	▼	■	550
Sierra Leone	■	▼	▲	▼	■	■	■	▲	▲	▲	■	▼	▼	▼	▼	■	▼	▲	■	▲	550
Gambia, The	▼	▼	▲	■	■	▼	■	■	▲	■	▲	▼	▲	▼	■	▲	▼	▲	■	■	580
Ethiopia	▲	▼	▼	■	■	▼	■	▼	▲	▲	▼	■	▼	▼	▼	■	▼	▼	▲	▲	590

▼ Slow-down ▲ Acceleration ■ No change in pace ■ Not included

Sources: Authors' calculations based on Climate Watch (2023); FAO (2024); IEA, IRENA, UNSD, World Bank, and WHO (2023); IHME (2022); Kharas and Dooley (2021); UNAIDS (2023); UN-DESA (2022); UNESCO (2023); UNICEF (2023); UNICEF and WHO (2023); UNICEF, WHO, and World Bank (2023); UN-IGME (2024); WHO (2021a, 2023, 2024); World Bank (2023); WDL (2022, 2023a)

Note: A blank cell denotes a lack of data. A gray cell indicates that a country is excluded from the analysis for having already met or been close to the SDG target as of 2015.

5. When translating current trajectories for SDG shortfalls to absolute numbers of people affected, huge numbers of people will be left behind on specific issues.

Amid the need for empirical rigor in assessing statistics and trend lines, we consider it important to stay grounded in the absolute human consequences of the issues embedded in the SDGs. This includes the goals' ambition to end many forms of human deprivation by 2030 through ambitious "zero targets" such as eliminating extreme poverty and hunger and achieving universal access to basic services like education, drinking water, and sanitation. As mentioned earlier, the world is on track to fall far short of this ambition.

In considering the total number of people affected by current trend, we estimate that there will be more than 1.1 billion people in 2030 who will not have access to basic sanitation. This represents a significant improvement from 2 billion in 2015 but far short of the target of zero. Similarly, 981 million people will still be undernourished, 593 million severely food insecure, 570 million living in extreme poverty, 540 million without access to electricity, and 533 million without access to drinking water. In the case of undernourishment and severe food insecurity, the numbers are even worse than they were in 2015.

Other issues have their own scales of need. About 290 million people are likely to be infected with malaria in 2030. Out of more than 2 billion women of reproductive age in 2030, more than 400 million women are likely to lack access to modern family planning methods. Out of 1.3 billion people living in the least developed countries, an estimated 376 million will likely not be able to afford internet access. The world will likely have more than 650 million children under five in 2030; nearly one out of every five—126 million children—is likely to be stunted. Even ART coverage falls short by at least 2 million people compared to its target for 2025.¹⁰

Snapshot cohort numbers do not do justice to the lifelong (and societal) consequences of incomplete education, young people dropping out of school, or lack of access to family planning, but our analysis does underscore the scale of investment gaps in the younger generations. We estimate that, of the roughly 134 million 13-year-olds in 2030, more than 11 million will not have completed primary school. Of the 131 million 19-year-olds, more than 40 million will not have completed secondary school.

¹⁰ This is an underestimate due to only being 154 countries having relevant indicator data in the relevant UNAIDS database. Some of the missing countries values have large overall populations, including Nigeria and the United States.

Table 1. Estimated shortfalls on basic needs in 2030 if recent trends continue*

	2015 Baseline	2030 Trajectory	2030 Target
<i>Out of 8,500m people globally:</i>			
Those who will lack access to basic sanitation services	2,000m	1,140m	0
Those who will be undernourished	549m	981m	0
Those who will live in severe food insecurity	217m	593m	0
Those who will live in extreme poverty	730m	570m	0
Those who will lack access to electricity	958m	540m	0
Those who will lack access to drinking water	862m	533m	0
Those who will get infected with tuberculosis	10.8m	10.8m	2.6m
Those who will get infected with HIV	1.4m	0.7m	0.2m
<i>Out of 3,900m people at risk:</i>			
Those who will get infected with malaria	229m	290m	33.5m
<i>Out of 2,050m women of reproductive age:</i>			
Those who will lack access to modern family planning	498m	415m	0
<i>Out of 1,300m people living in the least developed countries:</i>			
Those who will not be able to afford internet access	548m	376m	0
<i>Out of 654m children under 5:</i>			
Those who will be stunted	167m	126m	0
Those who will be overweight	36.8m	35.9m	0
<i>Out of 134m 13-year-olds:</i>			
Those who will not have completed primary school	17.7m	11.5m	0
<i>Out of 131m 19-year-olds:</i>			
Those who will not have completed secondary school	53.3m	40.9m	0
<i>Out of 30.9m people living with HIV/AIDS in 2025**:</i>			
Those who will not be receiving antiretroviral therapy	14.1m	4.9m	3.0m

Sources: Authors' calculations based on FAO (2024); IEA, IRENA, UNSD, World Bank, and WHO (2023); IHME (2022); Kharas and Dooley (2021); UNAIDS (2023); UN-DESA (2022); UNESCO (2023); UNICEF (2023); UNICEF and WHO (2023); UNICEF, WHO, and World Bank (2023); UN-IGME (2024); WHO (2021a, 2023, 2024); World Bank (2023); WDL (2023a).

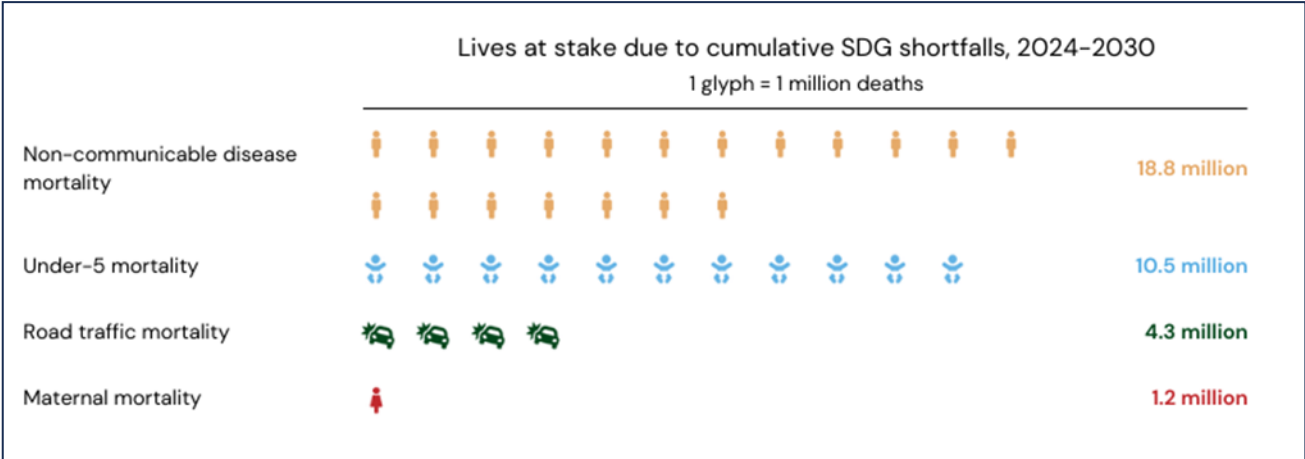
Notes: (*) Aggregate estimates are generated based on countries with available data, leading in some cases to low estimates if many countries do not have relevant data available. (**) For the indicator on antiretroviral treatment, the 95% coverage target applies to 2025 and applies only to 154 countries with available data.

6. Not all shortfalls have the same impact. SDG shortfalls on mortality indicators add up to 34 million additional lives lost by 2030.

On some indicators, the consequences of shortfalls are dire—when they translate to deaths, which could be prevented if faster progress were to be made on the SDGs. To calculate the numbers in Figure 5, we compare annualized country-level trends since 2015 to the trajectory required for each country to achieve the SDG target by 2030 on NCD mortality, child mortality, maternal mortality, and traffic deaths.¹¹ We then aggregate these gaps to calculate global totals.

Overall, we find that SDG shortfalls will translate to more than 34 million deaths by 2030, including 6 million deaths in 2030 alone. More than 18 million of these deaths are due to NCD mortality among people under 70, more than 10 million are children under 5, more than 4 million are linked to traffic deaths, and more than one million are mothers.

Figure 5. Lives at stake due to cumulative SDG shortfalls, 2024-2030



Sources: Authors’ calculations based on UN-DESA (2022); UNICEF (2023); UN-IGME (2024); and WHO (2021).

¹¹ Note that the method to calculate “lives at stake” differs from that in Kharas, McArthur, and Rasmussen (2018), so results are not directly comparable. See appendix for details.

7. The geographic concentration of people left behind differs by issue. For seven indicators, more than half the people left behind will be concentrated in just five countries.

Each shortfall in SDG trajectories has its own geographic mapping. On some targets, a large share of the people left behind are concentrated in just a handful of countries, while on other targets the challenges are more widespread. Figure 6 presents our estimates of where the largest numbers of people are likely to be left behind on each of 20 indicators by the SDG deadline, with special attention to the top five countries on each indicator.¹² Looking from left to right across the figure, the top five countries account for anywhere ranging from 63% of the humanity-wide challenge for under-5 mortality and maternal mortality to only 33% for access to family planning.

For under-5 child mortality, this means that nearly two-thirds of the world's excess deaths in 2030—meaning above the target of 25 deaths per 1,000 live births—is set to occur in just five countries: Nigeria, DR Congo, Pakistan, Niger, and Mali. Nigeria alone would account for over a third of the world's excess child deaths. On maternal mortality, a slightly different mix of five countries—Nigeria, DR Congo, Kenya, Chad, and Venezuela—are on course to account for a similar share of excess mortality, i.e., above the SDG target of 70 deaths per 100,000 live births. Indicators for malaria incidence, tuberculosis incidence, undernourishment, primary school completion, and NCD mortality also show half or more of the global challenge being concentrated in five countries each. The internet access challenge in LDCs is similarly concentrated. Of the twelve remaining indicators, ten have at least two-fifths of the global challenge concentrated in just five countries.¹³

The figure draws attention to populous countries with large challenges across multiple issues and the issue-specific variations across countries. Pakistan, for example, accounts for 9% of the projected child mortality by 2030, 13% of people in need of ART in 2025, and 20% of the children not completing primary school, all while registering success on extreme poverty. India, meanwhile, achieves the child mortality target but also accounts for nearly a third of the world's projected undernourished people.

The geography shifts somewhat for indicators of NCD mortality, children overweight, and traffic deaths. China is in the top five for these three indicators, as well as access to family planning. Indonesia, Egypt, and Brazil all stand out in children overweight. The U.S., with a projected population of more than 350 million people in 2030 (UN-DESA, 2022), stands out for its high NCD mortality and its large number of traffic deaths. Vietnam is on course to have a similarly large number of traffic deaths, even with a significantly smaller projected population of around 100 million in 2030 (UN-DESA, 2022).

Figure 6 also draws attention to smaller countries facing enormous relative domestic challenges. Madagascar, for example, is on course to have roughly 5% of the world's extremely poor people in 2030, despite a population projection of only around 36m people in 2030; this is driven by more than three-quarters of the country living in extreme

¹² Of the 21 people-focused indicators, we exclude women in parliament from this analysis because it requires a few leaps of logic to estimate numbers of people left behind.

¹³ Note that severe food insecurity and HIV incidence are missing data in several countries, so it is likely that their concentration is overestimated in the figure.

poverty (UN-DESA, 2022; Kharas and Dooley, 2021). Similarly, nearly 60% of Mozambique’s likely population of nearly 41 million people in 2030 is on course still to lack access to electricity, accounting for 4% of the world’s challenge that year (UN-DESA, 2022)

Figure 6. Concentration of people left behind by 2030 by indicator

	Under-5 mortality	Maternal mortality	Malaria incidence	Tuberculosis incidence	Undernourishment	Internet access in LDCs	Primary school completion	NCD mortality	Severe food insecurity	Child stunting	Access to electricity	HIV incidence	Children overweight	Extreme poverty	ART coverage	Access to sanitation	Secondary school completion	Access to water	Traffic mortality	Access to family planning
Share in top 5	63%	63%	60%	58%	57%	54%	53%	50%	49%	49%	46%	46%	44%	43%	43%	41%	40%	40%	39%	33%
Nigeria	34%	40%	30%	6%	7%	n.a.	9%	2%	16%	10%	15%		2%	18%	-	10%	4%	4%	3%	8%
Congo, Dem. Rep	10%	11%	15%	4%	6%	14%	9%	1%		7%	17%	<1%	2%	12%	-	10%	5%	16%	3%	4%
Pakistan	9%	1%	<1%	6%	8%	-	20%	4%	13%	6%	-		1%	-	13%	4%	10%	4%	2%	7%
India	-	-	-	21%	32%	n.a.	-	22%		21%	-		11%	-	-	-	16%	6%	14%	12%
Ethiopia	2%	1%	-	<1%	5%	-	7%	2%	7%	4%	2%	<1%	2%	-	-	12%	6%	10%	4%	3%
Indonesia	-	2%	<1%	14%	1%	-	<1%	5%	-	5%	-	2%	6%	-	14%	-	2%	-	1%	3%
Tanzania	<1%	<1%	3%	<1%	2%	15%	5%	<1%	4%	2%	5%	-	2%	4%	-	4%	4%	4%	2%	1%
Mozambique	2%	-	4%	1%	<1%	10%		<1%		1%	4%	8%	<1%	3%	-	2%		2%	<1%	<1%
China	-	-	-	5%	-	-	<1%	8%		<1%	-		15%	-	-	-	3%	-	11%	3%
Brazil	-	<1%	<1%	1%	2%	-	<1%	2%	7%	<1%	<1%	10%	4%	1%	-	<1%	1%	-	-	2%
Philippines	<1%	-	-	10%	-	-	-	6%		3%	-	13%	2%	-	4%	<1%	1%	<1%	1%	3%
Uganda	<1%	1%	5%	1%	2%	6%	8%	<1%	3%	1%	2%	6%	<1%	3%	-	4%	3%	3%	<1%	<1%
Angola	2%	<1%	6%	1%	2%	4%	3%	<1%	4%	3%	4%	1%	<1%	4%	6%	2%	2%	3%	1%	2%
Niger	7%	2%	2%	<1%	<1%	3%	<1%	<1%		3%	5%	<1%	<1%	1%	-	2%	2%	3%	<1%	<1%
United States	-	-	-	<1%	-	n.a.	-	9%	<1%	<1%	-		4%	-	-	<1%	<1%	-	5%	2%
Kenya	<1%	5%	1%	<1%	3%	n.a.	2%	<1%	5%	<1%	-	<1%	<1%	2%	-	3%	2%	4%	2%	<1%
Madagascar	2%	1%	3%	<1%	2%	7%	3%	<1%		1%	3%	2%	<1%	5%	3%	3%	1%	3%	<1%	<1%
Egypt, Arab Rep.	-	-	-	<1%	1%	n.a.	<1%	1%	1%	2%	-	4%	7%	-	<1%	<1%	<1%	<1%	<1%	<1%
Chad	3%	4%	2%	<1%	<1%	5%	3%	<1%		<1%	3%	<1%	<1%	2%	-	2%	1%	2%	1%	1%
Mali	3%	2%	3%	<1%	<1%	1%	2%	<1%		<1%	1%	<1%	<1%	1%	2%	<1%	1%	<1%	<1%	<1%
Congo, Rep.	<1%	<1%	<1%	<1%	<1%	n.a.	-	<1%	<1%	<1%	<1%	5%	<1%	<1%	6%	<1%	<1%	<1%	<1%	<1%
Bangladesh	-	-	-	4%	1%	-	1%	4%	2%	2%	-	<1%	<1%	-	<1%	5%	4%	<1%	2%	2%
Vietnam	-	<1%	-	1%	<1%	-	-	2%		<1%	-	<1%	2%	-	-	<1%	<1%	-	5%	1%
Venezuela, RB	<1%	3%	<1%	<1%	<1%	n.a.		<1%		<1%	<1%		<1%	2%	<1%	-		<1%	1%	<1%
South Africa	<1%	<1%	-	<1%	<1%	n.a.	<1%	-		<1%	<1%	11%	2%	3%	-	<1%	1%	<1%	<1%	<1%
Afghanistan	2%	3%	-	<1%	2%	8%	1%	<1%	4%	1%	-	<1%	<1%	<1%	<1%	1%	1%	-	<1%	1%
Other countries	21%	21%	26%	18%	19%	26%	24%	27%	32%	21%	37%	35%	32%	36%	50%	33%	28%	34%	37%	40%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

% In the top 5 % Off track - On track n.a. Not applicable No data

Sources: Authors’ calculations based on FAO (2024); IEA, IRENA, UNSD, World Bank, and WHO (2023); IHME (2022); Kharas and Dooley (2021); UNAIDS (2023); UN-DESA (2022); UNESCO (2023); UNICEF (2023); UNICEF and WHO (2023); UNICEF, WHO, and World Bank (2023); UN-IGME (2024); WHO (2021a, 2023, 2024); World Bank (2023); WDL (2023a).

8. Even where environmental progress is clear, the pace may not be fast enough to avoid nature's potentially imminent tipping points.

Our fourth test of SDG progress stresses that some issues are defined more by tipping points than by rates of progress, notably in the domains of climate change and biodiversity loss. A formal SDG target lens does not provide scientific guidance on avoiding tipping points, which are subject to intrinsic ranges of uncertainty, but does offer a window into considering the type of progress required in planetary terms.

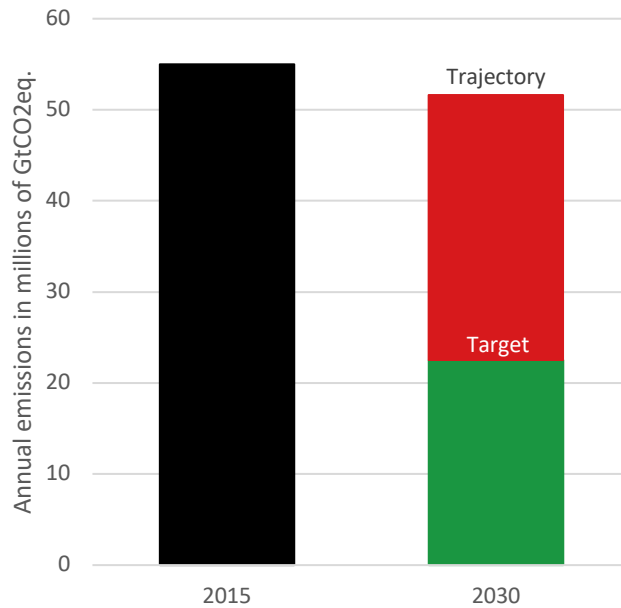
In the realm of climate action, the Paris Agreement aims to limit average global warming to 1.5 to 2°C above pre-industrial levels to prevent nonlinear changes in the world's climate system. But even that level of warming could still cause many adverse tipping points on the planet. The world has already reached at least 1.2°C warming, and there is evidence to suggest, for example, that the Greenland and West Antarctic ice sheets are collapsing, potentially leading to a 10-meter rise in sea levels (Rockstrom, 2023). A recent analysis emphasized the growing risk and major consequences of that tipping point and three others: warm water coral reefs, permafrost regions, and the North Atlantic Subpolar Gyre, which is a region of ocean circulation (Lenton et al., 2023). The outlook for additional tipping points is grim.

Figure 1 earlier showed that global greenhouse gas emissions were slightly higher in 2023 than in 2015. On a forward-looking basis, Figure 7 demonstrates that even in the optimistic scenario of the world's current national commitments being implemented by 2030, marking a gradual reduction in greenhouse gas emissions compared to 2015, the reductions will be far short of what is required to limit average global warming to 1.5°C and likely still on a path to at least 2.5°C average global warming. As emphasized elsewhere (Kharas and Bhattacharya, 2023), emerging and developing economies outside China will soon account for more than half of annual global emissions. Increased international support for these economies to invest in prosperity-promoting climate action remains particularly crucial to faster global progress.

Figure 8 focuses on the latest Global Biodiversity Framework targets linked to SDGs 14 and 15. As highlighted earlier in Figure 1, countries are on course to nearly quadruple marine protected areas (MPAs) by 2030 relative to 2015, a tremendous marker of global progress. Nonetheless, this will still be less than halfway to the country-based share of the "30 by 30" protection target. At the same time, because countries' national marine jurisdictions only cover a minority of the world's oceans, establishing the U.N. High Seas Treaty, also known as the Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction treaty, was an important step forward in 2023. It establishes a coordinated international approach to establishing MPAs on the high seas and has already been signed (although not yet ratified) by 90 countries as of June 2024.

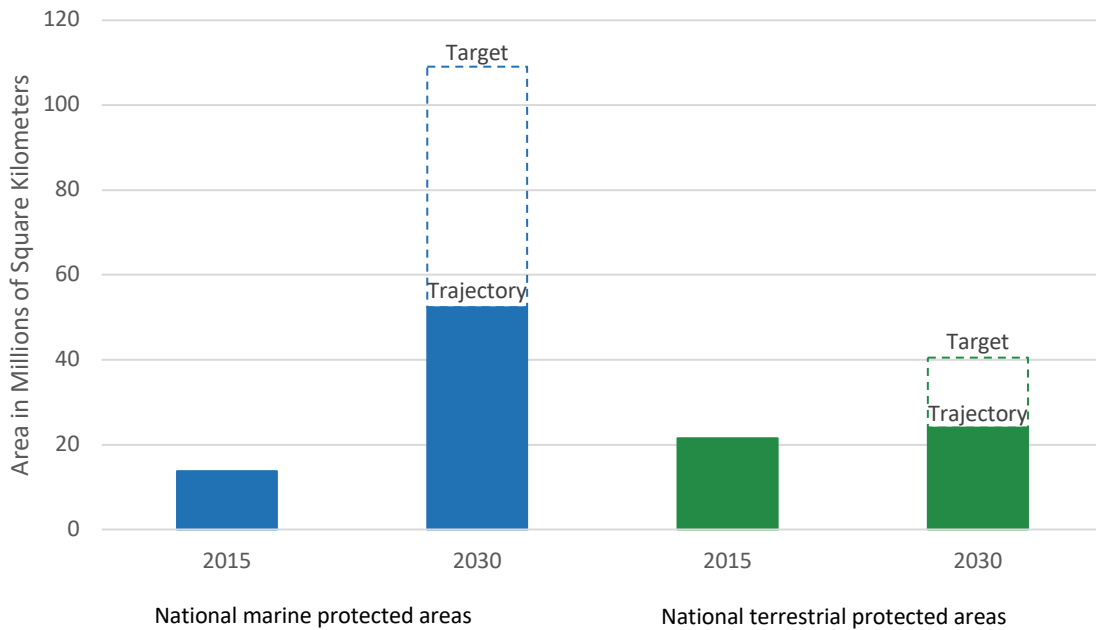
There has been much less expansion of terrestrial protected areas since 2015, and the world is on course to be more than 16 million square kilometers short of its 30% target by 2030. Shortfalls in progress imply high risks of negative tipping points in biodiversity loss due to a lack of protected areas (IPBES, 2019). Better progress will require each country to show leadership efforts within its own territory, alongside targeted international efforts to support countries with the richest reservoirs of biodiversity, which happen to be concentrated in emerging markets and developing economies (Jenkins et al., 2013).

Figure 7. National commitments to greenhouse gas reductions risk tipping points in climate change



Source: WDL (2022).

Figure 8. Trends and targets for protected area SDGs



Sources: Authors' calculations based on UNEP-WCMC and IUCN (2021).

Note: The 2030 targets are from 2022 Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework.

Conclusion

This paper considers a range of empirical benchmarks for assessing SDG progress and presents eight distinct findings as results. These are not intended to form a precise or comprehensive assessment of the status of the SDGs, but they do aim to offer a multidimensional set of insights that can inform SDG-focused deliberations moving forward.

We find that, despite the world's deep and ongoing strains and shortfall in SDG ambitions, the human condition has improved on many fronts since 2015. Considering the range of crises engulfing the world since 2020, this counts as positive news. However, most of the trends were already in motion prior to 2015, so improvement alone does not meet the higher normative standards and planetary thresholds established in the SDGs.

While the COVID-19 pandemic and recent violent conflicts highlighted the importance of building resilience to temporary shocks, many shortfalls were already underway. We give the example of the reduction in extreme poverty, where the pandemic-induced bump in the poverty headcount will likely flatten by 2030. The long-term impact of the shock, severe as it was, now appears to be of second-order importance compared to the pre-existing structural slowdown in poverty reduction caused by the shifting locus of poverty to fragile and conflict-affected countries. Nevertheless, the willingness of many leaders to act during the pandemic likely prevented outcomes from being much worse. A similarly focused energy and practicality could inform better future progress on the SDGs.

Shortcomings in action at the beginning of the SDG era need not hold back changes still required to affect future outcomes. Issue-specific progress assessments suggest issue-specific policy architecture still matters. It is important to ask, for example, why the issue of HIV/AIDS continues to register outsized gains since 2015 and what leaders in other domains can learn from this. The successes of HIV/AIDS treatment, after all, first took shape through institutions like the Global Fund and PEPFAR, which were launched to promote access to frontier treatment technologies during the early MDG era. How can similar forms of institutional leadership be mobilized for other issues, such as food security and nutrition, which seem to be facing some of the biggest challenges?

The life-and-death targets may benefit from greater selectivity of interventions in some cases. There are tens of millions of lives at stake due to the expected shortfall in the SDG targets, and many of these will be in a small number of countries. Policy leaders could explore whether targeted government programs in these countries, backed by international support where needed, could make an outsized difference in humanity's overall 2030 results.

We have written elsewhere, for example, about the need for a new Global Fund-type institution to scale up digital cash transfers to help end extreme poverty, as a new frontier technology that could make decisively fast inroads on one of humanity's greatest challenges (Kharas and McArthur, 2023a). Such purpose-driven institutions are not suited for all the SDGs (Kharas & McArthur, 2023b). Planetary issues of climate change, for example, likely require more multidimensional action across all sectors of all economies. But institutional gaps should be assessed to see where they can be readily filled.

At the same time, generalized gaps across the world's agreed ambitions for 2030 suggest an implicit cost to an overly narrow mindset on each issue. Just as no single empirical finding captures the complexity of the world's sustainable development trends, no single approach is likely to deliver the SDGs. With only six years remaining to the deadline, there is tremendous value in the existence of time-bound international goals to inform substantive assessments on the nature of global sustainable development progress during a turbulent political era. A carefully nuanced approach to assessing absolute changes, rates of progress, and potential tipping points—country by country and target by target—remains crucial to identifying better pathways toward achieving the world's stated ambitions.

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