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## Understanding the second-generation challenges of SDG implementation

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## Introduction

This chapter considers country-level and regional experiences in addressing three cross-cutting issues underpinning implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. It consolidates key findings of the country case studies concerning 'leaving no one behind,' synergies and trade-offs between and among Goals, and the impact of global systemic dimensions being addressed within specific contextual realities. These three sets of issues are the 'second generation challenges' of delivering the SDGs—distinct from the initial challenges faced by the countries in Global South.

## The analytical framework

The 2030 Agenda is a comprehensive and holistic programme with specific Goals, Targets and Indicators—implemented under country ownership and reflecting national priorities and realities. These discrete programmatic objectives are unified around three area pillars (the economic, social, and environmental). They are also conjoined by a number of principles, including that the success of the Agenda will be judged by the progress of those furthest from the development frontier. To this end, each country must identify the people 'left behind'—marginalised from the mainstream of national development—and adopt specific policies and programmes to overcome this.

The presence of 17 Goals, 169 Targets, and 231 Indicators does not presuppose that they are tackled in an additive fashion. Inclusion of all Goals and Targets in national development strategies may not generate incremental results; there may be synergies and trade-offs between and among them. Each country, while identifying its national SDG priority framework, is expected to consider such potential synergies and trade-offs at least at the Goal level, if not at the Target level. Such an approach will optimise countries' paths to SDG achievement and maximise the outcomes of national efforts.

Furthermore, although the SDGs are implemented nationally, all Southern economies are connected with the global economy through international trade, investment, and migration. Global rules concerning intellectual property rights and access to technology often determine the nature and pace of national development. There are also many global commitments under the 2030 Agenda, including disbursement of official development assistance (ODA), which are important enablers of SDG implementation at the national level. No less important is counteracting the fallouts of climate change through concerted global initiatives. Countries falling into conflict situations, promoted by regional and international factors, is emerging as an added concern. Thus, SDG 17 emphasises the need for 'coherence' of global policies and institutions supporting the delivery of the SDGs and allowing 'policy space' for developing countries.

These three aspects characterising delivery of the SDGs also distinguishes them from the implementation of the MDGs. The MDG agenda did have issues such as poverty alleviation, gender rights, and environmental concerns embedded across its eight goals, but national-level prioritisation of goals and targets was not consciously

pursued. These interlinkages among goals and targets were not adequately recognised, and the effectiveness of global partnership (MDG 8) remained the 'weakest link'. The SDGs seek to break this 'silo approach'—both nationally and globally.

Table 3.1. Framework of the analyses

Issues	Description
Leave no one behind	In all the countries studied, multidimensional vulnerabilities are observed. Although each variable is important, it is their overlapping which determines the likelihood of certain groups being left the furthest behind. Exclusion criteria are not static, but rather dynamic, changing over time.
Synergies and trade-offs	A synergy is a situation where policies related to one theme support the accomplishment of Goals and Targets related to that theme and also increase the accomplishment of other inter-related goals. A trade-off is a situation where policies in one area negatively affect the possibility of achieving other Goals and Targets.
Global systemic concerns	Global systemic concerns refer to aspects of development beyond the scope of national governments. Agenda 2030 recognises these issues primarily in Goal 17, addressing international governance rules on finance, technology, capacity-building, and trade.

Source: Southern Voice (2017).

The main components of the conceptual framework deployed to analyse cross-cutting issues for the SVSS studies derive from Figure 1.2 presented in Chapter 1 of the Report. The three cross-cutting issues allow for multiple definitions, so to avoid conceptual ambiguity, each country case study mainly follows the definitions of leave no one behind (LNOB), synergies and trade-offs (S&T) and global systemic concerns (GSC) mentioned in the SVSS Approach Paper (Southern Voice, 2017). Table 3.1 presents the scope of the three cross-cutting issues addressed in the present and subsequent chapters.

Evidence has been provided from the six-country studies (Bolivia, Ghana, India, Nigeria, Peru, and Sri Lanka).<sup>1</sup> These countries are either low-income countries (LICs), or lower-middle-income countries (LMICs). To explore the synergies and trade-offs between SDGs, the studies focus on access to quality education (SDG 4), decent and gainful work (SDG 8), affordable and clean energy (SDG 7), and global partnerships (SDG 17). The implications of global systemic concerns have been investigated through the flow of international finance, access to technology and automation of industries, cross-border proliferation of arms, and coherence between national and global policies.

In the following section, we consolidate the overarching messages emanating from the three-dimensional investigation described above.

<sup>1</sup> Details of the country studies may be found in the list at the end of the report.

# Manifestations of the second-generation challenges of SDG delivery—an overview

Although Global South countries are yet to fully absorb the cross-cutting issues in their national planning and operational frameworks for SDG implementation, they are addressing them in other efforts. The importance of bolstering this aspect of SDG delivery is brought out by the SVSS country case studies. The studies reveal the manifestations of choices involved in identifying the left behind, prioritising specific SDGs, and mitigating fallouts from global processes.

While all the three cross-cutting issues will be discussed in detail in Chapters 4, 5, and 6, in the present section, we tease out the overarching messages of these three-dimensional enquiries. The key findings have been consolidated in Table 3.2. However, we pick each of these three cross-cutting issues below to delineate the commonality and uniqueness of the country-level and SDG-specific experiences.

Table 3.2. Key findings on cross-cutting issues at the country level

Country	Leave no one behind	Synergies and trade-offs	Global systemic concerns
Bolivia	Young, urban, non-indigenous males are the group mostly left behind in the education system	Bidirectional relationship between SDG 1 (Poverty alleviation) and SDG 4 (Education)—enhancing in both directions and having no impact on output	Technological shifts and unrestrained out-migration or 'brain drain' (with negative net migration) are influencing the state of education
Peru	Youth those are neither in education, employment or training (NEET) are left behind (SDG 8). They are in precarious employment condition (without living wages, job stability, and access to social benefits)	The major S&T: SDG 4 and SDG 8 Enhanced human capital (SDG 4) increases productivity (SDG 8), creates unidirectional synergy	Large disparities in ICT access along the lines of geographical regions—differentiated by rurality and socio-economic development—has turned the global push for ICT in education from an asset to a problem
Ghana	Low level of education, poverty level and disadvantaged place of residence are key determinants for falling furthest behind in access to clean energy	Access to clean energy improves health status of the poor—provides unidirectional synergy	Absence of adequate research and development (R&D) support from international development partners is impeding access to energy-efficient technologies
Nigeria	Gender, regional disparity, and rural-urban differences are key factors triggering exclusion	Bidirectional synergy between education (SDG 4) and gender equality (SDG 5) — enhancing both ways	The outcome of quality education is highly dependent on external factors like access to technology, proliferation of arms, and availability of foreign aid
India	Overlap of constrained access to resources, social norms, and safety issues (especially in the workplace) are deterring factors for female labour force participation	Provides neutral bidirectional relationship between education (SDG4) and gender equality (SDG5) as contextual social norms are more important for the trade-offs	Constrained access to technology and skills, in the face of the impending fourth industrial revolution (4IR), is having disproportionate adverse impacts on the female workforce
Sri Lanka	Locational advantage including nature of labour (resident or migrant) plays a decisive role in being left behind	The major S&T: SDG 8 and SDG 12 Economic growth causes wasteful consumption and hence produces unidirectional trade-offs between decent work (SDG 8) and sustainable consumption and production (SDG 12)	The adoption of automation and new technologies at the global level shapes the labour market, disadvantaging women in the workforce (particularly the garment industry)

Source: Collated from Adeniran, Onyekwena, Onubedo, Ishaku & Ekeruche (2020); Nair, Shah & Sivaraman (2020); Crentsil, Fenny, Ackah, Asuman & Otiaku (2020); Andersen, Medinaceli, Maldonado & Hernani-Limarino (2020); Alcázar, Bullard & Balarin (2020); Fernando, Arambepola, Niles & Ranawana (2020).



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## The LNOB principle at the country level

The leave no one behind (LNOB) principle was proposed as the first of five core principles for the post-2015 framework. The preeminence of this principle comes from the experience of the MDGs, when national-level successes were not necessarily matched in disadvantaged and marginalised populations. Experience suggests that such differential achievement of the MDGs was prompted by prevailing social disparities and exclusionary practices linked to place of residence, income level and asset status, gender, ethnicity and other identities, disability, and life cycle issues. These groups of people remained highly vulnerable to market-related shocks and natural disasters. Moreover, poor quality of political governance may further accentuate the disadvantaged position of these vulnerable people. Accordingly, by making LNOB the leitmotif of the 2030 Agenda, it was made an imperative that we pursue a disaggregated assessment of each SDG achievement. In this way, the issues were related not only to eradication of extreme poverty but also made promoting social justice and equity an irreplaceable requirement for successful delivery of the 2030 Agenda.

The country case studies establish a broad similarity among the factors predicating socio-economic (and political) exclusionary trends. These factors manifest themselves in different degrees of intensity in different national contexts. Moreover, left behind groups are victims of multiple exclusionary processes, leading to overlapping vulnerabilities. One would need to isolate the second-order factors responsible for the situation. Critically, no one set of aggregate or second-order factors are more responsible for delivery of all SDGs within a country; there is wide variation in this regard. We also note that those left behind are not a static group, but rather different dynamics affect them constantly—changing the dominant nature of their vulnerabilities.

The aforementioned observations may be illustrated through the country experiences concerning delivery of SDG 4 (quality education) and SDG 8 (decent work and economic growth). While geographical location (rural/urban, remoteness) and gender stand out as the common discriminating factors in the realisation of both SDGs, the former is more dominant in access to decent work, while the latter is more critical for access to education. Country-level inhibiting specificities (second-order factors) may also be noted in delivering the two SDGs. For example, in Nigeria and Bolivia, physical disability of children has been identified as an obstacle to access to education; in India, gender norms and agency problems are considered to be more of an impediment. Interestingly, while Bolivia highlights the disadvantaged circumstances of young, non-indigenous men living in urban areas, Nigeria and Peru underscore the marginalised position of the indigenous and ethnic minorities. Changing developmental circumstances (e.g. remote areas getting connected with new infrastructure projects) may transform the nature of vulnerability. For example, in India, the absence of adequate safety for women travelling from home to workplaces through newly built roads is pronounced. In Sri Lanka, the disadvantaged situation of women workers is expressed not through limited access to general education, but limited acquisition of skills to deal with new technologies. In Nigeria, internal conflicts have been affecting economic progress and social cohesion.

To sum up, there is an overall similarity among factors perpetuating the disadvantaged position of certain groups in different countries. However, a closer look reveals second-order discriminating factors, which are not the same across countries. Constellations of unfavourable factors need to be considered in the context of their changing dynamics, implying that the identification of the left behind must be a continuous process. This would, of course, demand availability of updated databases with necessary levels of disaggregation. Moreover, the overlapping sources of vulnerability of the left behind prompt us to look at the cross-sectionality of these factors. The last issue is quite instructively exposed through the discussion on synergies and trade-offs between and among SDGs.

## Synergies and trade-offs

The interconnected nature of the 2030 Agenda requires policymakers to address the SDGs as an 'indivisible whole'. Goals and Targets are mutually reinforcing in most but not all cases. However, managing this dimension of SDG implementation is fraught with both significant conceptual and operational intricacies. A dearth of necessary data has further complicated the practical aspects of this task. Though there is recognition in the Global South of the need to understand the interlinkages of the SDGs, countries are yet to make discernible progress in this regard as their national priority frameworks for the 2030 Agenda have already been prepared. However, understanding these interlinkages is gradually becoming more significant as countries try to identify conditions for maximising their efforts, and take on mid-course corrections. The subject is attracting further attention for strengthening the impact of SDG implementation initiatives on the left behind.

The SVSS country case studies, aiming to make a contribution in this area, explored the nature of synergies and trade-offs in parallel pursuits of certain SDGs within specific developmental contexts. In total, 11 unique pairs of SDGs have been analysed as part of this effort, applying diverse methodological approaches to yield common but unique outcomes. The country case studies have used quantitative, qualitative, and mixed approaches in their investigations. Use has been made of logit models, factor analysis, counter-factual simulation, trend and network analysis, textual analysis, interviews, focus groups discussions, and literature reviews. The studies illustrated that synergies and trade-offs are occurring at various levels, including the individual, household, regional, and national. Beyond location dependency, the dual processes of synergies and trade-offs are conditioned by timeframes, technology, and governance-related factors. No less interesting had been the findings about the direction of the two sets of interactions.

The incidence of synergies (positive relations) between SDGs was observed in more cases than otherwise (neutral or negative). For example, access to affordable and clean energy (SDG 7) positively relates to good health and wellbeing (SDG 3). Similarly, quality education (SDG 4) had positive interactions with decent work (SDG 8) in Peru, and gender equality (SDG 5) in Nigeria. However, the narrative becomes complicated when one finds that quality education

had a 'neutral' effect on poverty (SDG 1) in Bolivia, and on gender equality in India. These neutral relationships are bidirectional. Such divergent results for similar sets of SDGs are explained by the level of income inequality (Peru), timeframe dependency (Nigeria) and place-specific context (Nigeria), as against social norms and practices (India) and the nature of public policy (Bolivia).

The rare case demonstrating trade-offs was the relationship between decent work and economic growth (SDG 8) and responsible consumption and production (SDG 12), as economic growth causes wasteful consumption. The adverse relations observed in Sri Lanka between the mentioned SDGs are supposed to be caused by distorted pricing policies of the government. However, the concerned study points out that the relationship is unidirectional; a reduction of wasteful production and consumption may not lead to a reduction of economic growth.

This brief expose of the problematic interface between different pairs of SDGs has major policy implications for enhancing the SDG strategy of developing countries. First, in view of their national priority frameworks of the SDGs, each country will need to establish the interrelationship of these identified goals and targets within its own context to maximise synergies and reduce trade-offs. Second, there is a great role for public policies as well as social norms and practices in nurturing synergies and mitigating trade-offs. Third, these explorations must be repeated as the observed relationships are time-dependent, implying a currently positive relationship may turn negative in the course of time and vice versa.

## Addressing global systemic concerns

Global systemic concerns refer to aspects of development beyond the scope of national governments, impacted upon by the conduct of global policies and institutions. Global systemic concerns are relevant because they influence the delivery of SDGs in national contexts, and bear on a country's ability to accomplish the core objectives of the 2030 Agenda—including leaving no one behind. Global factors are given effect in the country context through cross-border transactions in the factor and product markets. These transactions are delimited by global regulatory and institutional frameworks, as well as conditioned by external market powers. Thus, the transmission channels of these international influences include export of goods and services, flows of finance and investments, intellectual property rights, and ICT regimes, as well as the behaviour of global commodity and capital markets. Migration, climate change, and internal and cross-border conflicts are imparting additional pressure on these relationships. The terms of such international exchanges often militate against the LICs and LMICs, as they have marginal participation and voice in shaping global rules and regulations and the nature of their practice.

Incorporation of SDG 17 into the 2030 Agenda is a de facto recognition of the relevance of global factors in delivering the SDGs at the country level. The promised 'global partnership' is supposed to ameliorate disadvantages experienced by weaker economies of the Global South through support in areas including access to concessional finance, product markets and technology. Intentions have been also expressed



under SDG 17 to inculcate 'coherence' in global policies and institutional conduct to provide a level playing field for developing countries. The efficiency gains from improved functioning of global markets and institutions could enhance the resource base of LICs and LMICs.

Curiously, this implementation challenge of the SDGs has remained one of the understated dimensions of delivering the 2030 Agenda. The significance of global partnership and its inadequate state of affairs have received limited attention in the VNRs presented by developing countries. The role of South-South cooperation and regional integration in the context of SDG delivery have remained quite inconspicuous in these presentations at successive High-Level Political Forums (HLPFs). Arguably, as the LICs and LMICs advance further, they will become more integrated with the world economy and the influence of global factors will be more prominent in their respective economies. Indeed, managing global factors will emerge as one of the key challenges of SDG implementation in these countries.

Guided by the above perspectives, the SVSS country case studies make critical contributions to improving our understanding of the implications of global systemic concerns for efficient realisation of the SDGs. The country case studies maintain that global factors could have both positive and negative impacts on national implementation. To investigate global factors, the studies adopted quantitative and qualitative methodologies, using secondary and primary data. These methodologies ranged from key-person interviews to causal loops, design evolution, and transmission mechanisms framework analyses. The studies examined the nature of global interfaces with national SDG implementation efforts in areas such as the flow of concessional finance, access to technology and innovation, expenditure on research and development, and peace and security. Challenges posed by the impending fourth industrial revolution (4IR)—a double-edged sword—are showing up as an issue of grave concern.

The Nigerian case study reveals that varied external factors, ranging from limited foreign aid to cross-border proliferation of arms, are affecting its education sector. More than half of the schools in north-eastern Nigeria are closed due to violence inflicted by 'Boko Haram' which translates to 'Western education is a sin'. Regional wars and conflicts have left Nigeria and other similar countries with large numbers of out-of-school children, putting achievement of SDG 4 under serious threat.

The Sri Lankan case study exposes that the deepening of automation and adoption of new technologies at the global level are bringing about major structural changes in the country's labour landscape. The feminised apparel industry workforce is unable to upgrade its skills to take advantage of the potential productivity and income growth brought on by the unfolding 4IR. Women labourers are being relegated to low-paid, often informal, jobs. This implies that the objective of generating decent jobs (SDG 8) is being challenged by new technologies.

Indeed, a number of country case studies expose how global circumstances are affecting the acquisition of skills and capabilities in the face of the unfolding technological transformation. Large



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disparities in ICT access along the lines of region, rurality, and socio-economic level have turned the global push for ICT in education from an asset to a problem in Peru. In failing to transition to high-skilled, high-productivity industries, Peru is caught in a middle-income trap of unsustainable growth. At the same time, the Indian case study indicates that even though an overwhelming number of women utilised internet resources, it was mostly for accessing social media, while only a marginal share used it for e-banking or accounting. This alludes to a lack of formal, technology-enabled financial inclusion of women that could impact their economic empowerment and reduce time spent on unpaid work or errands.

Evidence from Ghana shows that flows of foreign aid to schooling have been valuable in increasing access to education, although there is a gap in its contributions to improving education quality. However, a paucity of research and development (R&D) support from development partners is impeding access to energy-efficient technologies. On the other hand, technological shifts and unrestrained out-migration or 'brain drain' (with negative net migration) are influencing the state of education in Bolivia. A considerable section of the Bolivian population are emigrants residing abroad, and they include many highly skilled professionals. This perverse functioning of the global labour market is depleting the countries of the Global South of much-needed national capabilities for successfully realising the SDGs.

The country case studies also suggest that regional cooperation and global partnerships can narrow inequalities in access to household energy when funded adequately and implemented equitably. However, sustainable energy remains a contentious issue for many countries heavily dependent on fossil fuels. Geo-political dynamics and economic interests can impact countries' abilities to provide affordable and clean energy.

The evidence provided by the SVSS studies brings forward two major messages. First, the Global South must be mindful about the defining contributions that advantageous interface with global factors could make in achieving the SDGs. Thus, these countries will need to effectively incorporate global dynamics into their national SDG implementation strategies. Second, the Global South, while considering positive international interfacing of their economies, is putting a higher premium on access to technology, acquisition of world-class skills, and greater investment in R&D. These stand in contrast to traditional aspirations for more foreign aid, export markets, and FDI.

## Summing up

As the countries in the Global South move forward to actualise the multidimensional and multilayered SDGs, they will encounter challenges distinct from those tackled during the initial years of the 2030 Agenda. Three concerns among these 'second generation challenges' of SDG delivery stand out. These are (i) identification of those left behind (and pushed behind) in the development process, (ii) understanding the synergies and trade-offs involved in simultaneous pursuit of the goals and targets, and (iii) appreciation of the influence of global rules, regulations and institutional arrangements on domestic

processes of SDG implementation. Addressing these three sets of implementation issues are fraught with conceptual, operational, measurement, and data predicaments. Country experiences suggest that most have already taken on board the first challenge, while awareness and capacity around the second and third challenges are quite limited.

The complex and comprehensive nature of the SDGs demands a common but differentiated approach across countries. This was compellingly exposed by the varying composition of the 'left behind'. As may be expected, gender was a major discriminating factor (militating against women) in almost all countries, but spatial locational factors (beyond the rural-urban divide) and quality of education emerged almost with equal force in defining the marginal status of those left behind. No less remarkable were the factors that brought about second-order and overlapping vulnerabilities (e.g. identity issues and social norms). The development process of countries has been paralleled by the changing profile of the left behind. However, there has been little evidence that identification of the left behind has led to changes in allocative priorities of governments' budgets.

The importance of understanding the interlinkages of the SDGs is being gradually recognised by governments in developing countries. However, there is widespread belief among policymakers that these interlinkages are almost always synergistic, with little recognition of the concerned trade-offs. However, as countries chart their optimum pathway—guided by their nationally prioritised SDGs—to have maximum impact in the shortest possible time, the deliberations concerning synergies and trade-offs between and among Goals will gather momentum. Yet locating synergies and trade-offs at the level of Targets will still remain analytically and empirically hazardous. At the same time, persisting turf wars among different administrative entities at the country level will impede the realisation of synergies and minimisation of trade-offs among a select set of SDGs.

The international dimensions of SDG delivery at the country level is yet to receive requisite policy attention in Southern countries. Systematic analysis of transmission channels of the impact of global markets and institutions on domestic circumstances is largely absent. Regional cooperation has only in a few instances (more in Africa, less in Asia) been explicitly incorporated in country strategies for SDG achievement. Countries in the Global South are yet to show critical enthusiasm regarding demand for coherence among global policies. On the other hand, the country case studies reveal that demands on traditional modes of global partnership (e.g. the flow of concessional finance and access to export markets) are giving way to demands for access to frontier knowledge and know-how (particularly in the area of information technologies). However, the benign indifference of international development partners regarding the specific Targets of SDG 17, in the context of their overall enthusiasm about the 2030 Agenda, is quite striking.

Finally, the three issues highlighted here need to be considered discretely within specific country contexts, but they must also be considered as a composite task—to be explored through their circular causation. For example, countries would need to establish how global

systemic concerns may facilitate the generation of synergies and reduction of trade-offs between and among SDGs, with a view to having the maximum positive impact on the wellbeing of those left behind. This can very well be a substantive research agenda in the future.

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