STATE OF THE SDGs
by SOUTHERN VOICE

SDG Implementation progress: What does the Asian experience reveal?

Mustafizur Rahman, Distinguished Fellow, Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD)[1]
Towfiqul Islam Khan, Senior Research Fellow, Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD)
Md. Zafar Sadique, Senior Research Associate, Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD)

Abstract

Despite making some notable advances on certain goals and targets, Asia and Pacific as a region, at its current rate, will not be able to attain any of the 17 SDGs by 2030. An overwhelming majority of the countries have taken concrete steps to create national institutional setups and frameworks to implement the SDGs, including inter-government agency coordination, ensuring policy alignment, and undertaking priority setting and designing roadmaps. However, in localisation of the SDGs and ensuring disaggregated and inclusive implementation of the goals, Asia is facing formidable challenges both at regional and sub-regional levels. Asia is also lagging in terms of addressing the attendant challenges in view of the anticipated data revolution. The present study testifies that regional initiatives towards SDG implementation must be strengthened further as these could contribute significantly to efforts at the national level. A lack of proactive global initiatives (e.g. towards the greater flow of ODA, facilitating technology transfer, favourable market access, and conducive trade rules) has tended to undermine the capacity of regional and sub-regional bodies to draw synergies, and leverage regional initiatives, for more active support towards implementation of the SDGs.

Keywords: SDG implementation, resource mobilisation, data, progress mechanisms, regional initiatives.

1 Mustafizur Rahman, Distinguished Fellow, Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), Bangladesh. e-mail: mustafiz@cpd.org.bd

SOUTHERN VOICE

CENTRE FOR POLICY DIALOGUE

Introduction

The rich experiences gained from the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in diverse country contexts, and within various regional and sub-regional dynamics, can enable important insights to be drawn from cross-country experiences. These experiences can provide useful lessons concerning prioritisation of goals, means of implementation, institutional architecture, and financing modalities to address challenges and assess progress towards achieving the SDGs.

The achievement of the SDGs globally will hinge critically on the performance of the SDGs in the Asia-Pacific region, which accounts for about 60% of the earth's population. Sub-regions and countries in Asia vary widely in terms of baselines against which SDG progress, productive capacities, socio-economic development, and demographic, political and cultural aspects are to be assessed. Indeed, an examination of country experiences reveals distinctive regional and sub-regional patterns concerning SDG implementation, and can help better understand how the relevant measures should be designed to promote more effective implementation at the country level. In certain areas, national efforts call for an integrated regional approach for several development areas (e.g. energy cooperation), without which solutions are either not possible or will not be most cost-effective. In other areas, concerted regional efforts could help raise the efficacy of country efforts to attain the SDGs.

The objective of this regional survey is to generate insights by drawing on Asia's experience of progress and implementation of the 2030 Agenda. This has been undertaken from the perspective of five SDG implementation challenges identified in Bhattacharya et al. (2016): (i) policy alignment, (ii) institutional structure, (iii) resource mobilisation, (iv) partnerships and participation, and (v) data situation and accountability mechanisms (monitoring and evaluation). Track records of country-level performance and experience of regional initiatives were reviewed and analysed to identify regional and sub-regional trends and to evaluate the role of institutions in the Asian region towards the implementation of the SDGs.

Approach

The study is based on a review of secondary literature and analysis of relevant data and information. A comprehensive review of regional and country-level studies has been undertaken to establish a benchmark scenario for the countries in the region and to examine the progress in terms of implementing the SDGs at regional level. The study has drawn inputs from various regional reports concerning implementation progress in Asia and the relevant trends.

This study primarily focuses on South Asia and Southeast Asia. A set of 10 countries were identified to include those that have submitted respective Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) in 2017 or 2018. Among these countries, five are from South Asia (Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, and Nepal) and five from Southeast Asia (Indonesia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam). This selection is justified on the ground that they are representative of the various categories of countries in Asia, including Least Developed Countries (LDCs), Landlocked Developing Countries (LLDCs), Small Island Developing States (SIDS) and vulnerable war-torn countries; and for which SDG implementation is of heightened importance in going forward in the 21st century. The implementation experiences of these countries also tend to vary widely, which allows to capture the diversity that Asia has as a continent. 'Central Asia' and SIDS were not considered separately as sub-regions; one reason is that the central Asian countries are often compared with European countries in global reports. Also, SIDS have very specific contexts which are not common to, and comparable with, other developing countries in Asia.

Implementation Challenges

Based on the current rate of progress, as a region, Asia and the Pacific will not be able to attain any of the 17 SDGs by 2030, despite having been able to make some significant advances. For example, notable progress has been made in the areas of SDG 1, 4, and 7 (United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific [ESCAP], 2019a). Regrettably, this will not be adequate to reach the targets. For at least eight SDGs, including SDG 2, 9, 10, 11, 13, 14, 15, and 16, rates of progress are very slow or stagnant. In three areas, SDG 6, 8, and 12, progress is heading in the wrong direction. Lack of progress in attaining SDG 17 may undermine progress towards attainment of all other SDGs. This assessment should transmit an early warning sign to leaders in Asia and the Pacific, and also to global leaders. At the same time, it also needs to be kept in mind that these estimates are based on insufficient data. Data gaps exist for at least two-thirds of indicators, particularly those concerning environmental and social issues.

Policy alignment

In the early stages of addressing the SDG implementation challenges, all countries in South Asia and Southeast Asia attempted to align the SDGs with their respective policies, strategies, and planning documents. The importance of vesting responsibilities at the local levels towards decentralised SDG implementation has received wide acceptance from various countries in the region (Government of the Islamic Republic of Afganistan, 2017; Government of Indonesia, 2017; Government of India, 2017; Government of Nepal, 2017). Several countries have undertaken initiatives to involve local government institutions.

A few countries have estimated their resource requirements and also identified possible sources of funding for implementing SDGs over the period until 2030. To begin SDG implementation process at the country level, the central governments in South Asian and Southeast Asian countries completed the task of setting up the initial governance and coordination mechanisms. These countries have engaged multi-stakeholder groups in the course of the consultation processes concerning implementation at the national level. As part of background works, countries have completed mapping exercises at various levels by aligning the SDG targets/indicators with national plans. A few countries have completed prioritisation of SDG targets/indicators at the national level. However, in-depth assessment of interlinkages between the goals and evaluation of policy interventions remains a task to be undertaken with the help of further research to ensure the delivery of the 2030 Agenda.

Institutional structure

Countries are also found to gear their initiatives towards establishing SDG-related institutions to ensure proper implementation processes. Since there is a need for better coordination for smooth implementation, different core ministries of the central government, such as the Prime Minister's Office (PMO), Ministry of Finance, and Ministry of Planning, are made responsible for leading SDG implementation processes in the country along with the relevant line ministries. While strategising the implementation process, only a few South Asian countries have started mainstreaming the SDGs into an existing or new framework (e.g. Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Bhutan). Indonesia and Thailand (from Southeast Asia) have also completed the mainstreaming process. Only two Southeast Asian countries (Malaysia and Thailand) have completed roadmaps or action plans for implementing and monitoring the SDGs at the national level. Bhutan is the only country from South Asia which has a plan to prepare an SDG implementation roadmap (Royal Government of Bhutan, 2018).

Resource mobilisation

A considerable amount of financial and technical support will be required to implement the SDGs. Attaining the SDGs by 2030 may require an additional annual investment of USD 1.5 trillion for Asia-Pacific developing countries, which is equivalent to about 4% of annual average gross domestic product (GDP) for the period 2016-2030 (ESCAP, 2019b). Estimates of financial needs may differ across Asian countries and are shaped by the size of the country's economy and its levels of development. In most cases, developed countries require a relatively lower amount of resources for the necessary infrastructure, compared to developing countries and countries with special needs such as LDCs, SIDs, and LLDCs (Intergovernmental Committee of Experts on

> **Only a few South Asian countries have started mainstreaming the SDGs into an existing or new framework.**

Sustainable Development Financing, 2014). Issues and needs are different for war-torn countries (Afghanistan) and vulnerable climate countries (Bangladesh, Maldives, and Indonesia).

SDG financing calls for important policy changes and additional efforts at mobilising the resources. Official Development Assistance (ODA) has an important role to play in helping South Asian countries meet development financing needs. In the Asia region, the humanitarian aid sector has garnered the highest attention followed by economic infrastructure; in contrast, ODA in social infrastructure and services sector has fallen by almost 13% since 2007 (Khan & Tashfiq, 2019). Finance as part of South-South cooperation (SSC) has also emerged as a new opportunity to supplement ODA. Southern providers such as India and China have emerged as new funders of development projects, many of which will contribute to SDG implementation, with Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, and Nepal being the key destinations (ESCAP, 2017a). When a developing country considers an SSC financing option for a project, it should be financially viable, socially acceptable, environmentally sustainable, and transparent in terms of its governance. Addressing the financing gaps in the region will require significant improvements in the mobilisation of domestic resources, as well as leveraging international development cooperation. South Asian countries are particularly poor at collecting direct taxes, therefore improved revenue administration through tax reforms, modernised progressive tax systems, improved tax policy and efficient tax collection systems, raising institutional capacity, and ensuring enforcement of relevant laws and regulations will play an important role. More attention to fairness, transparency, efficiency, and effectiveness of tax systems can help tax net to be broadened (ESCAP, 2019b). A large amount of potentially taxable revenue/income is coming out of the developing countries through illicit financial flows. Addressing this requires not only measures in the developing countries, but also in developed countries including exchange of automatic information on trade and taxes. Regrettably, Asia and Pacific as a region has a very low level of inter-country cooperation. Developing countries are deprived of a significant amount of tax earnings because of the large amount of financial resources and investable capital being operated through off-shore tax havens (ESCAP, 2019b). Many of these are under the jurisdiction of the developed countries. There is a need for more cooperation on the part of the global community to deal with these tax-haven countries and help the developing countries to gain from the resulting domestic revenue mobilisation.

Participation and partnerships

The 2030 Agenda includes a dedicated and separate goal, SDG 17, that calls for an active global partnership and more inclusive and dynamic participation of the stakeholders. South Asian and Southeast Asian

countries are making plans to involve various stakeholders in SDG implementation. For example, Nepal plans to form SDG implementation committees at provincial, district, and municipality levels in 2018. Several Asian countries, including Bangladesh, Malaysia, and Indonesia, have initiated the so-called 'Whole of Society Approach' in implementing the SDGs (UNDP, 2017a; UNDP, 2017b; Government of Bangladesh, 2017). In India, both central and state-level initiatives are being taken to implement the SDGs. Some states are designing their vision plans, as mentioned earlier (UNDP, 2017c). Inter-regional collaborations to share best practices are present only in a few cases. The Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development (APFSD) has emerged as a leading platform for sharing of experiences and for helping the region to develop a regional roadmap for SDG achievement. In South Asia, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) in its fourth meeting of SAARC Ministers on Poverty Alleviation decided to revise the SAARC Development Goals to align with the SDGs. Not only is contextualisation of the SDGs at national and sub-national levels important, sharing of development experiences (i.e. good practices and cross-learning) in the process of implementation could also be helpful for the countries (ESCAP, 2018).

Data situation and accountability mechanisms

Data availability involves several concerns. If data are available, they also have to be made easily accessible. If data are accessible, then the quality of the data must be ensured, and this then should be subject to measurement. According to the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (2017b), there is a lack of good quality data for goals related to social and economic dimensions of the SDGs at the regional level. Additional data and information are needed for SDGs 1, 5, 6, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, and 16. Only 50 of the 169 SDG targets are currently ready for progress assessment (one-third of the total indicators) (ESCAP, 2019a).

Taking the Leave No One Behind (LNOB) concept into account, improving disaggregated data remains a key concern in the Asian region. SDG indicators should be disaggregated, where relevant, by income, sex, age, race, ethnicity, migratory status, disability, geographic location, and other relevant characteristics. A review of data availability reveals that sex-disaggregated data are better available compared to other disaggregated data, but this is only for a limited number of indicators. When it comes to disaggregation of data by sex, the United Nations database does not include the third category, gender, and only focuses on male and female (ESCAP, 2019a). In most Asian countries, data transparency and quality of data remain a critical concern. Prompt publication of data and its availability through open access and in electronic format is essential.

The study finds that many Southeast and South Asian countries have

Case Study 8   SDG implementation progress: What does the Asian experience reveal?

06

undertaken exercises to identify data gaps. For example, countries such as Bangladesh, Malaysia, Lao PDR, the Philippines, and Vietnam are in the process of conducting these exercises. According to GED (2017), in Bangladesh, 29% of data for SDG indicators are readily available, 45% are partially available, and 26% are not available[2]. The gap analysis suggests that it will be highly challenging to track SDGs 12 and 14.

For mitigating data challenges, many Asian countries are creating separate committees to collect data, and coordinate, monitor, and report on the SDG implementation process. The Government of Bangladesh has designed an 'SDG tracker' to track and monitor implementation (GED, 2018). This is an innovative web-based data repository that will enable predictive analysis for achieving goals within the stipulated timeframe. India has developed an SDG India Index considering 13 out of 17 SDGs (except for SDGs 12, 13, 14, and 17), which is based on 62 national indicators. These indicators are termed as priority indicators for India.

Conclusions and recommendations

Based on the previous review, the study arrives at the following conclusions. First, despite making some notable advances in certain goals and targets, Asia and Pacific as a region, with its current rate, will not be able to attain any of the 17 SDGs by 2030. However, progress in terms of the SDGs has varied across regions and countries, with wide variations in terms of various goals and targets. For some goals and targets, progress has taken the wrong direction.

Second, an overwhelming majority of the regional countries have taken concrete steps to create national institutional setups and frameworks to implement the SDGs. These include establishing formal platforms to institutionalise implementation of the SDGs, inter-government agency coordination, ensuring policy alignment and undertaking priority setting and designing roadmaps. This gives SDGs a distinct flavour when compared to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Also, there has been a more significant effort across countries to involve stakeholders in the implementation process. Many countries have taken a 'whole of society' approach and have included non-state actors in the formal institutional framework of SDG implementation. However, in the majority of Asian countries, participation of non-state actors is often limited.

Third, as regards localisation of the SDGs and ensuring disaggregated and inclusive implementation of the goals, Asia is facing formidable challenges both at regional and sub-regional levels. Some countries (e.g. India, Bangladesh, Malaysia, Indonesia) have taken initiatives to implement and monitor the SDGs at sub-national (state, district, local) levels. However, a more inclusive implementation of the SDGs is

2 Partially available means there is need for some modification, addition, and analysis in the existing census or surveys for obtaining relevant data.

proving to be a major challenge. Attaining the LNOB aspirations calls for further actions and measures on the identification of local priorities, engaging local stakeholders, and addressing the needs of marginalised groups.

Fourth, while many Asian countries have carried out estimates of resource needs to implement the SDGs, mobilising the funds is proving to be difficult. This is more pronounced for the South Asia region with lower per capita income. Domestic resource mobilisation is impeded by low tax-GDP ratio because of structural bottlenecks and institutional weaknesses (Chowdhury, 2019). Some countries are opting for innovative taxation (e.g. education cess and infrastructure cess in India). Similar initiatives may be considered by other countries. Deficit financing is another option which countries should make careful use of as required.

Fifth, at the regional level, several initiatives have been floated to help implement the SDGs. Regional inter-governmental platforms, such as Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), and regional institutions, such as the Asian Development Bank (ADB), have come up with concrete actions to promote the cause of SDG implementation. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has also taken initiatives to mainstream SDGs at country level. Such initiatives by these institutions include information generation, exchange of ideas, technology and knowledge, developing partnerships, and transferring best practices. However, there is scope for cross-fertilisation of ideas between the sub-regions and closer collaboration in terms of learning from best practices. The lack of proactive global initiatives (e.g. towards the greater flow of ODA, facilitating technology transfer, favourable market access, and conducive trade rules) has tended to undermine the capacity of regional and sub-regional bodies to draw synergies, and leverage regional initiatives, for more active support in implementation of the SDGs.

Finally, Asia is lagging in terms of addressing the attendant challenges in view of the anticipated data revolution. For many of the SDG indicators, there is a significant dearth of good quality data. Data is only available for the assessment of about one-third of the targets (50 out of 169 targets) (ESCAP, 2019a). Trends can be analysed for only half of the indicators, and availability of data across countries is highly uneven. More investment is needed to strengthen national statistical capacities.

This study has shown that there is significant scope for both cross sub-regional and cross-country learnings concerning SDG implementation. Experiences vary both across sub-regions and countries, and good practices could offer rich dividends as countries strive to raise efficacy of their implementation efforts. Asian countries have a lot to learn from one another in relation to localisation of the

> At the regional level, several initiatives have been floated to help implement the SDGs.

Case Study 8   SDG implementation progress: What does the Asian experience reveal?

08

SDGs, mobilisation of funds through innovative tools, effective monitoring of progress, and generation of data. This review testifies that regional initiatives towards SDG implementation must be strengthened further, as they could contribute significantly by reinforcing implementation efforts at the national level.

References

Bhattacharya, D., Khan, T. I., Rezbana, U. S., & Mostaque, L. (2016). *Moving forward with the SDGs: Implementation Challenges in Developing Countries.* Dhaka: Centre for Policy Dialogue, Southern Voice on Post-MDG International Development Goals.

Chowdhury, A. (2019). Creating Fiscal Space for Inclusive Sustainable Development. In A. Chowdhury and V. Popov (Eds). *Macroeconomic Policies in Countries of the Global South.* New York: Nova Science Publishers

General Economics Division. (2017). *Data Gap Analysis of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): Bangladesh Perspective* (SDGs Publication No. 2). Dhaka: General Economics Division (GED), Planning Commission, Government of Bangladesh (GoB).

General Economics Division. (2018). *Sustainable Development Goals: Bangladesh Progress Report 2018.* Dhaka: General Economics Division (GED), Planning Commission, Ministry of Planning, Government of Bangladesh (GoB).

Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. (2017). *Voluntary National Review at the High Level Political Forum SDGs' Progress Report Afghanistan, 2017.* Kabul: General Directorate of Policy & RBM, Ministry of Economy, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan.

Government of Bangladesh (2017). *Bangladesh Voluntary National Review (VNR) 2017: Eradicating Poverty and Promoting Prosperity in a Changing World.* Dhaka: General Economics Division (GED), Planning Commission, Government of Bangladesh (GoB).

Government of India. (2017). *Voluntary National Review Report on Implementation of Sustainable Development Goals.* Republic of India.

Government of Indonesia. (2017). *Voluntary National Review: Eradicating Poverty and Promoting Prosperity in a Changing World.* Republic of Indonesia.

Government of Nepal. (2017). *National Review of Sustainable Development Goals.* Singhdurbar: National Planning Commission, Government of Nepal.

09

Case Study 8   SDG Implementation progress: What does the Asian experience reveal?

Intergovernmental Committee of Experts on Sustainable Development Financing. (2014). *Report of the Intergovernmental Committee of Experts on Sustainable Development Financing* [Final draft]. Intergovernmental Committee of Experts on Sustainable Development Financing. New York: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs.

Khan, T. I., & Tashfiq, K. G. (2019). *An Enquiry into the Evolving Landscape of Development Finance Flows* (Occasional Paper Series No. 55). Southern Voice.

Royal Government of Bhutan. (2018). *Sustainable Development and Happiness 2018: Bhutan's Voluntary National Review Report on the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.* Royal Government of Bhutan.

United Nations Development Programme. (2017a). *Good Practices Integrating the SDGs into Development Planning, Indonesia.* Retrieved from: http://www.asia-pacific.undp.org/content/rbap/en/home/library/sustainable-development/country-briefs-on-sdg-integration-into-planning/

United Nations Development Programme. (2017b). G*ood Practices Integrating the SDGs into Development Planning, Malaysia.* Retrieved from: http://www.asia-pacific.undp.org/content/rbap/en/home/library/sustainable-development/country-briefs-on-sdg-integration-into-planning/

United Nations Development Programme. (2017c). *Good Practices Integrating the SDGs into Development Planning Assam, India.* Retrieved from: http://www.asia-pacific.undp.org/content/rbap/en/home/library/sustainable-development/country-briefs-on-sdg-integration-into-planning.html

United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific. (2017a). *Complementarities between the ASEAN Community Vision 2025 and the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development: A Framework for Action.* Bangkok: United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific.

United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific. (2017b). *Measuring SDG progress in Asia and the Pacific: Is there enough data? A Statistical Yearbook for Asia and the Pacific 2017.* Bangkok: United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific.

United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific. (2018). *Asia-Pacific Civil Society Forum on Sustainable Development 2018.* Retrieved from: https://www.unescap.org/events/apcsfsd5.

United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the

10

Case Study 8   SDG Implementation progress: What does the Asian experience reveal?

Pacific. (2019a). Asia and the Pacific SDG Progress report 2019. Bangkok: United Nations Publication.

United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific. (2019b). *Economic and Social Survey of Asia and the Pacific 2019: Ambitions beyond growth.* Bangkok: United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific.

List of contributors

Mustafizur Rahman is a distinguished fellow at the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD). He is an economist by training. His current research areas concern issues of development effectiveness, regional cooperation in Southern Asia, and multilateral trading systems and global integration of low-income countries.

Towfiqul Islam Khan is an economist and currently a senior research fellow at the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD). He has undertaken research and published in many areas including the SDGs, financing for development, data revolution, and fiscal policy. He is a member of the SDG Working Team constituted under the Prime Minister's Office, Government of Bangladesh.

Md. Zafar Sadique is a senior research associate at the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD). His areas of research interest include public policies and fiscal framework, regional connectivity, and international trade, and also a diverse range of issues related to LDCs and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals. He has co-authored a number of books on related topics which were published both in Bangladesh and other countries.

For more information and publications visit **www.southernvoice.org**