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## **Introducing the theme, study design and framework issues**

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# Background

With the first four-year delivery cycle of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development complete, the global community has accumulated substantial knowledge of the challenges of implementing this ambitious development programme. However, uneven progress across countries and goals has caused growing concern that the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) may not be met by 2030. To ensure the next implementation cycle is results-oriented, this chapter seeks to review ground-level evidence and experiences, which it argues are imperative to charting the way forward.

Southern Voice, a network of Asian, African, and Latin American think tanks, sees the 2030 Agenda as an entry point to contribute to the global knowledge system.<sup>1</sup> Building on shared experiences engaging with the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), Southern Voice's partners place unique bottom-up perspectives on the global Agenda. These scholars highlight the need for developing productive capacity and gainful employment, sustainable production and consumption, enhanced inclusivity, and strengthened institutions.<sup>2</sup> Research undertaken by Southern Voice is focussed on integrating country-level and real-time experiences within the global framework. It also aims to contribute towards the multi-stakeholder follow-up and review process envisaged by the 2030 Agenda.

The perspectives of Southern Voice authors are informed by the annual global review of SDG implementation prepared by the United Nations.<sup>3</sup> Note has been taken of other special reviews and scholarly works.<sup>4</sup>

Developing countries have keenly engaged in implementing the SDGs, and have encountered many shared, and some contextually-specific, challenges and opportunities. The most visible challenges were: (i) aligning national plans and programmes with the global Agenda; (ii) setting up inter-governmental structures and implementation mechanisms; (iii) assessing financial requirements for delivery; (iv) seeking partnership with non-state actors and NGOs; and (v) mapping the data deficit for having an effective monitoring and evaluation system.<sup>5</sup> This exposure to ground realities highlighted for the Global South the importance of informed and forward-looking approaches towards delivery in their respective countries.

## Introducing the theme

Because the SDGs are recognised as more sophisticated than the MDGs, the Southern Voice State of the SDGs (SVSS) initiative articulated three interrelated research agendas. The first expands upon the overarching aspiration of 'leaving no one behind' (LNOB). Each country must identify their communities or groups furthest from the development frontier who risk being bypassed by future progress. Exclusion is therefore highly context specific. Identifying what it means to be 'left behind' in specific Global South national contexts is a major focal point of the SVSS initiative and the cornerstone of this report.

The second research agenda investigates how countries can be provided better guidance on prioritising SDGs according to their

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**1** "Southern Voice envisages a world in which power has been realigned between countries, resulting in fair and equitable engagement on global issues. It aims to advance a world in which people's rights and needs are met and sustainable development is achieved. Thus, Southern Voice aims to contribute to a power realignment in inter-governmental relations on the SDGs. It does so by stimulating, generating, disseminating, and promoting high-quality evidence-based analyses on the SDGs, from think tanks of the Global South. It embeds Southern research in global discourse on the SDGs, to promote space for deliberative evidence-based policy-making and to ensure that governments and the global community are held accountable for effective delivery" (Southern Voice, 2017a).

**2** For distinguishing features of Southern Voice perspectives, see Bhattacharya and Ordoñez Llanos (2017).

**3** See, UN DESA (2019).

**4** See for example, Sachs et al. (2019) and Kharas, McArthur, and Ohno, (2020).

**5** See for details, Bhattacharya, et al. (2016).

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national demands. Prioritisation of SDGs involves sequencing them, in turn requiring comprehension of the synergies and trade-offs between Goals. Maximizing these synergies and minimizing trade-offs requires contextualised knowledge: interconnections between the goals differ and depend on geography, space, and time. Better understanding these interconnections is also at the core of this report.

The third research agenda considers how global trends and the conduct of international institutions affect domestic delivery of the SDGs. With developing countries increasingly integrating into the world economy, their performance is constantly shaped by factors exogenous to their economy, society and environment. Exploring the influence of these global systemic concerns (GSC) on domestic delivery of SDGs is a strategic issue for the SVSS initiative.

These three research agendas, in contrast to the five challenges above, constitute the 'second generation challenges' of implementation. The present volume reviews the experience of select developing countries during their launch phases of the 2030 Agenda. It analyses challenges emerging out of SDG delivery, and highlights policy perspectives to assist results-driven domestic implementation of the 2030 Agenda. This approach allows us to contribute to the United Nations initiative titled the 'Decade of Action'<sup>6</sup> to deliver the Global Goals (2020-2030).

## Design of the study

It is important to note that the SVSS report is not an exhaustive review of all the goals, targets, and indicators of the 2030 Agenda. It does not cover all countries in the Global South, nor does it consider many of the complex structural or inter-sectional issues embedded in the 2030 Agenda. Thus, it is not a 'monitoring report' of SDG progress. Indeed, most of these issues are better addressed by the concerned international agencies within their limitations.<sup>7</sup>

The SVSS focuses on a select set of countries to understand how they seek to change the (political-economic) status quo in favour of inclusive and transformative development. To this end, the core research objectives of the SVSS are to:

- Assess the challenges emanating from the contextualised delivery of the 'leave no one behind' agenda;
- Examine the interlinkages of selected SDG themes from cross-country perspectives; and
- Explore the global systemic concerns influencing national SDG delivery.

Consideration of these three core agendas was preceded by a review of the SDG implementation experience in selected sample countries. This is complemented by an appraisal of regional trends (for details see additional publications of the State of the SDGs). Further, forward-looking study conclusions have led to articulation of the emerging developmental needs of these countries, understood through the prism of a 'collective capability approach'.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> For details, see United Nations (2020).

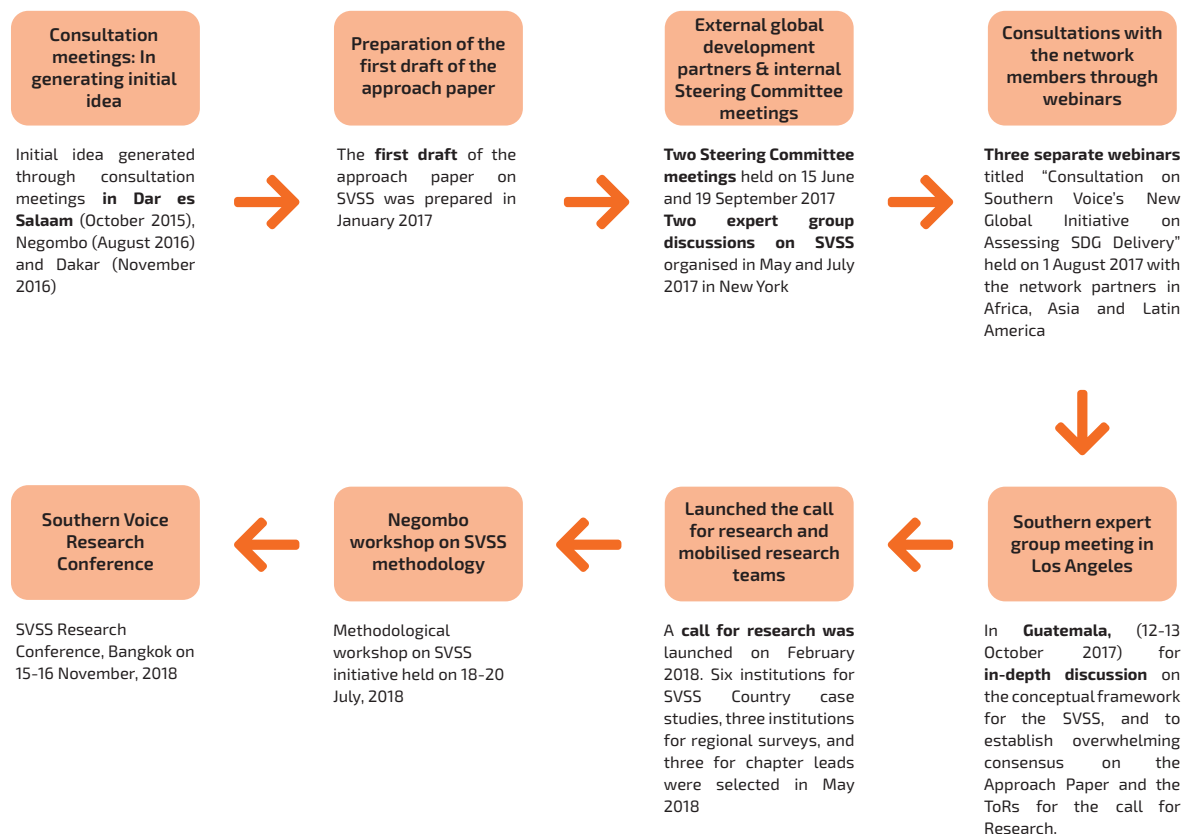
<sup>7</sup> United Nations produces annual issues of Sustainable Development Goals Report since 2016. See for example United Nations (2016, 2017 and 2018).

<sup>8</sup> See for details, chapter 7.

To develop its conceptual framework, methodological approach, and empirical base, the SVSS has gone through an elaborate process involving brainstorming sessions, workshops, webinars, validation meetings and dissemination events. An 'approach paper' portraying the integrative way of dealing with the concerned issues was an early output of the exercise.<sup>9</sup>

The major building blocks of the SVSS are shown in the Figure 1.1.

Figure 1.1. Flowchart on preparation of SVSS



Elaborated by the author.

## Analytical framework

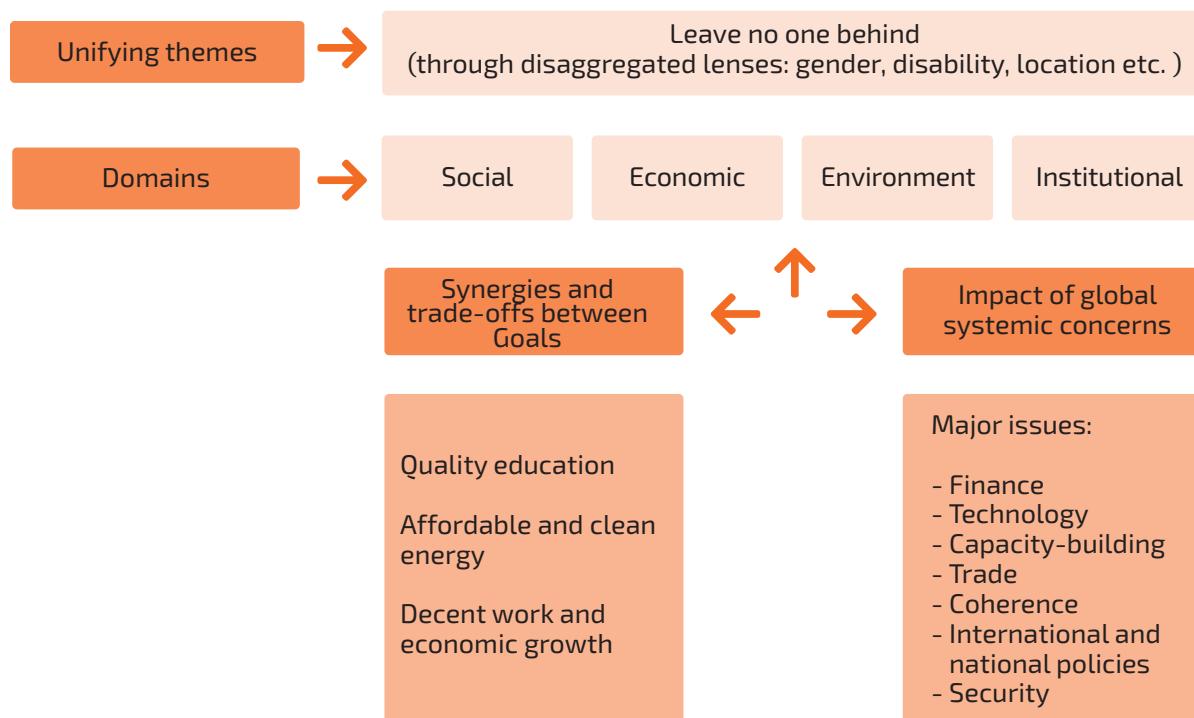
'Leave no one behind' was adopted as the overarching principle tying together the SVSS research initiative. Consequently, underlying factors leading to exclusion of groups from the fruits of development and possible mitigation approaches are central to the SVSS report. The process of 'exclusion' is explored in the context of specific Goals (SDGs 4, 8, and 7). Additionally, the choice of SDGs reflects the goals discussed at the High-Level Political Forums (HLPFs) of 2018 and 2019.

The overarching principle of LNOB is examined in four domains: social, economic, environmental and institutional. Relevantly, the 2030 Agenda builds on three pillars (social, economic, and environmental), and mentions issues related to strengthened institutions and effective rights under SDG 16. From the perspectives of SVSS authors, incorporating governance and institutional issues as one core building block of the conceptual framework was critical.

<sup>9</sup> Refer to Southern Voice (2017b).

The scope of the global systemic concerns considered in the SVSS report includes cross-border relationships in areas such as finance, trade, technology, climate action, support to capacity development, and policy coherence. The scope of synergies and trade-offs analyses are focused on the three selected SDGs. The SVSS report's conceptual framework is illustrated below in Figure 1.2.

Figure 1.2. Conceptual framework: Choice of issues



Source: Southern Voice (2017b).

The SVSS initiative is undertaken at three levels: at the national level through country case studies, regionally through the regional surveys, and globally with the global overview. Countries have been selected for in-depth study through a two-stage method. First, two country case studies in each region—Asia, Africa and Latin America—were commissioned. Secondly, a review process of responses received from the Southern Voice partners, as part of an open call for proposals, selected six countries for analysis. These are listed in Table 1.1.

Table 1.1. Distribution of the sample countries by region and level of income

Type	Asia	Africa	Latin America
Lower-middle-income	India	Ghana, Nigeria	Bolivia
Upper-middle-income	Sri Lanka		Peru

Elaborated by the author.

Regional surveys were undertaken independent of the country case studies. They provide a broad sense of the SDG landscape, facilitating better interpretation of the country-level findings. This Report builds on both the country studies and regional surveys, synthesising the findings of each.

## Methodological and empirical challenges

Implementing the conceptual framework of the SVSS exercised involved navigating some methodological and empirical challenges. These challenges related to efforts to establish interlinkages between, and reconcile, global targets and indicators with county-specific implications. Some such challenges are mentioned below.

First, developing a common template for country case studies to aid cross-country comparison was difficult, as was establishing a common benchmark year for assessing them. Countries' different development trajectories affect how they set their SDG priorities. These considerations made cross-country comparison of the findings a complex task.

Second, given limited real-time and disaggregate data, an extensive review of implementation status of SDGs was impractical. Cross-cutting (interlinkage) issues concerning the identified SDGs was particularly difficult. Data on global partnerships were missing, as many indicators were in Tier 2 and Tier 3.<sup>10</sup> Reconciling different data sources (including unofficial data) was challenging. This pervasive data deficit was an important factor constraining research.

Third, deriving common policy perspectives regarding SDG delivery was quite difficult. Developing countries operate with different governance structures and levels of institutionalisation. The sample countries were also located at different points of their political cycles. Furthermore, while some were unitary states, the others have federal structures (India and Nigeria).

In view of the above, the SVSS exercise follows an iterative and integrative approach to establish its findings. The six country case studies balance quantitative and qualitative techniques. The three regional surveys, instead of investigating the cross-regional issues, explored dominant trends in the specific region.

The global overview, while making meta-conclusions, endeavours not to lose the granularity of spatial experience. To ensure this iterative and integrative approach, more than 40 researchers and their associates worked as a team under cohesive intellectual leadership.

## Layout of the Report

The Report of the SVSS initiative is in three parts. In the first part, following the present Introduction (chapter 1), Chapter 2 expands upon the challenges of delivering SDGs in the Global South. It considers policy alignment, institutional structures, resource

**10** According to the United Nations a Tier 2 indicator is conceptually clear, has an internationally established methodology and standards are available, but data are not regularly produced by countries. While a Tier 3 indicator has no internationally established methodology or standards available, but methodology/standards are being (or will be) developed or tested.

situations, participation, and data deficits. This chapter also reflects on regional trends in SDG delivery. Chapter 3 discusses the 'second generation' challenges of SDG delivery: identifying people 'left behind', synergies and trade-offs underpinning SDG combinations, and global systemic concerns influencing domestic delivery of the 2030 Agenda. The second part contains three chapters (chapters 4, 5 and 6). These core chapters provide cross-country perspectives on the three levels of identified actions. Finally, chapter 7 synthesises the above research, putting forward policy perspectives on developing 'collective capabilities'.

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