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Building primary capacities in the Global South for inclusive SDG acceleration

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The challenge of SDG acceleration in contexts of crisis

At the midpoint to the 2030 deadline, global progress on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is precarious, and indeed has been stagnating for the last two years (Persson & Bennich 2023; Sachs et al., 2022). The sluggish pace of progress can be attributed to a constellation of crises, including the lingering impact of COVID-19, climate change, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and subsequent global disruptions including soaring commodity prices and inflation.

These crises have not only slowed global progress on the SDGs, but in some cases have also reversed it, for example in the case of subjective well-being, access to vaccination, poverty, and unemployment rates (International Institute for Sustainable Development [IISD], 2023; Sachs et al., 2023). Meanwhile, the pace of improvement has stagnated for SDG objectives related to hunger alleviation, sustainable food consumption, and overall health outcomes (IISD 2023; Sachs et al., 2023). According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), the global jobs gap¹ is projected to be 453 million in 2023, which is an increase of 33 million compared to 2019 (ILO, 2023; UN News, 2023). This gap disproportionately impacts women, who are 1.5 times more likely to be affected than men (ILO, 2023). Moreover, the pandemic has caused the global Gini index to rise by 0.7 points and has plunged an additional 90 million people into extreme poverty (Mahler et al., 2022).

Such setbacks on the SDGs have been particularly pronounced among low- and middle-income countries, and have prompted a critical re-evaluation of the current approach. In this way, there have been calls for transformative policies designed to speed up progress on the SDG agenda. Interest has now shifted towards innovative policy design, coherent implementation, and a renewed emphasis on urgency for accelerating progress, as highlighted by Persson and Bennich (2023). However, such a strategy is not without risk. Rapid policy acceleration may lead to inequities in progress, and the systemic exclusion of those nations lacking the necessary capacities or preparedness to implement and benefit from these transformative changes.

Indeed, such inequitable acceleration has already been evidenced in the uneven impact of COVID-19 on education, for example (Azevedo et al., 2021). The hurried transition to online education exposed deep-seated socioeconomic and regional disparities, whereby those with limited digital literacy or lacking internet access were left behind, resulting in poorer educational outcomes and higher learning losses among these vulnerable populations (Azevedo et al., 2021). Such educational losses have long-term repercussions, affecting the future socioeconomic status of these individuals in terms of job market sector, occupation, and income levels (Dorn et al., 2021).

In this context, *Southern Voice's Global State of the Sustainable Development Goals Report II: Leveraging Abilities to Navigate Inequalities* emphasises that the effectiveness of policy responses to crises like COVID-19 relies on what the report identifies as "primary abilities" among the population (digital skills, social capital, agency, and ability to access support). Primary abilities serve as the

¹ This measure is broader than unemployment rates, capturing all those who wish to work, but do not have a job.

foundational resources that individuals and communities need to effectively navigate the complex landscape of a world transformed by a pandemic. Research spanning nine countries and three regions suggests that populations equipped with these abilities were better able to cope with the negative effects of the pandemic, and were markedly more resilient. In contrast, those lacking these abilities encountered systemic barriers and exclusion from access to the resources needed to better cope with the pandemic. Discrepancies in these primary abilities have therefore created enduring inequalities both within and across communities.

This chapter is concerned with applying lessons learned from COVID-19 to the challenge of SDG acceleration. It argues that key insights into how to best achieve inclusive acceleration can be gained by exploring how primary abilities at the individual and community level interact with, and shape, national-level primary capacities to achieve such acceleration.

To this end, it is first useful to set out some key aspects of each of these primary abilities. Digital skills are key to digital transformation, and refer to a mix of digital literacy, use of online platforms and search engines, communication via email, or instant messaging. These skills have become an indispensable tool for accessing information, remote learning, and remote work, among other things. Without these skills, people are cut off from a range of opportunities, from basic information sharing to income-generating activities. Countries in which people have higher and more equitable access to, and use of, digital skills, will be better prepared for the widespread adoption of digital public infrastructure,² itself a crucial enabler of digital transformation. We call this a country's *ecosystem system for digital transformation*.

2 Digital public infrastructure is described as a set of shared digital systems that should be secure and interoperable, and can be built on open standards and specifications to deliver and provide equitable access to public and/or private services at societal scale and are governed by applicable legal frameworks and enabling rules to drive development, inclusion, innovation, trust, and competition and respect human rights and fundamental freedoms

3 Social capital serves as a key resource residents can draw upon before, during, and after a crisis to ensure that they obtain mutual aid from family, friends, and neighbours and also gain access to key public or semi-public goods from lawmakers (Fraser et al., 2022).

COVID-19 also highlighted the importance of intangible resources, particularly social capital,³ in mitigating the challenges presented by such crises (Gölgeci & Kuivalainen, 2020; Putra et al., 2020; Corrêa et al., 2021). Social capital—defined as social ties that enable trust, mutual aid, and collective action—provides a support structure to respond to and recover better from crises (Fraser et al., 2022). Specifically, the ability to tap into these networks to access financial resources and emotional support has been particularly important during in times of uncertainty like the pandemic. It also brings together groups of key actors who—each through their unique role—can work together to transform that system (Stibbe et al., 2018). Scaling this up, therefore, we call this the capacity of a country to make *impactful partnerships*.

Agency refers to the capacity to have the power and resources to fulfil the potential of individuals and communities, to adapt to changing circumstances, overcome challenges, and recover from setbacks. It is associated with learning and growing from changing circumstances. A high degree of agency, therefore, enables societies to respond to shocks in a timely and efficient manner, while minimising the adverse impacts of those shocks and enabling sustainable recovery. We refer to individual and community agency in a society, therefore, as a country's *capacity to (re)act within changing and uncertain structural circumstances to absorb shocks, and recover sustainably*.

Accessibility refers to the ability of individuals to access support mechanisms—provided by governments, foundations, or civil society organisations—that are designed to shield them from the impacts of external shocks like COVID-19. This ability is a significant factor in determining how such crises affect vulnerable populations. Complex requirements and bureaucratic barriers often worsen existing social inequalities by limiting this vital access. These impediments disproportionately favour individuals, communities, or enterprises that are already in better positions, more visible, and equipped with more resources, while excluding those that lack these advantages. Ultimately, effective accessibility is not just about the presence of support but also hinges on the extent to which people can understand, navigate, and benefit from public policies. Scaling up to the national level, therefore, this ability to access support can be understood as a country's *capacity to access and benefit from global initiatives, forums and policies*.

In this context, this chapter maintains that the inclusion of the Global South in acceleration action through fostering primary capacities can lead to inclusive SDGs acceleration, that is, acceleration which balances urgency with the inclusion of vulnerable populations, and marginalised countries and regions. Conversely, lack of these capacities or having a lower degree thereof poses a risk of structural exclusion of those already farthest behind, as also occurs at the individual and community level among those lacking digital skills, social capital, and agency, and with less ability to access support policies during COVID-19.

The rest of this chapter is structured as follows: Section 2 summarises lessons learned from policy responses to COVID-19, and showcases how primary capacities form building blocks for inclusive SDG acceleration. Section 3 provides a description of these primary capacities in the Global South. Section 4 explores the relationship between urgency and inclusion in relation to SDG acceleration, arguing that a sole focus on urgency may lead to the structural exclusion of the Global South from SDG acceleration. Section 5 sets out the three mutually-reinforcing layers of inclusive acceleration at the national, regional and global levels, and finally section 6 provides conclusions.

Looking back to look forward: What policy responses to COVID-19 can teach us about SDG acceleration

Looking back: Exploring the links between COVID-19 policy, inequality and primary abilities

The COVID-19 pandemic has not only been a global health crisis but also a force that has exacerbated long-standing social and economic inequalities. These inequalities manifest in myriad ways across diverse socioeconomic, educational, and demographic groups, and

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can be seen in the distribution of primary abilities among different population segments.

Pre-existing structural inequalities according to socioeconomic status, educational level, age, gender, ethnicity, and geographical location are reflected in disparities in the primary abilities which are needed in times of crisis. For example, a highly-educated individual in an urban setting is more likely to possess the digital skills necessary for remote work, have a robust network of social capital to draw upon, and display greater agency due to there being fewer structural constraints limiting their decisions. This multifaceted interaction between primary abilities and systemic issues warrants in-depth scrutiny, as it has immediate and long-lasting implications for how individuals and communities can engage in social, economic, and political spheres in a meaningful way.

It is worth exploring some specific examples of the relationship between primary abilities and structural constraints. The inability to adapt to new job requirements is acutely felt among workers in lower-level roles, and particularly those employed in small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) who are highly likely to struggle to adapt to new job requirements, or who lack access to upskilling and reskilling opportunities. Evidence suggests that large firms, with more than 250 employees, train approximately 40 percentage points more than micro firms with 10 or fewer employees (Almeida & Aterido, 2015).

This lack of training can perpetuate inequalities in employment outcomes and hinder individuals' ability to secure stable, well-paid jobs. Inequality in training opportunities is aggravated by the fact that many SME workers already operate under challenging circumstances, characterised by financial instability, limited social capital, and a general lack of access to policies designed to support job retention and skill development. This creates a negative feedback loop: without these primary abilities, workers in SMEs find it hard to adapt to new job requirements, thereby perpetuating their vulnerability and reinforcing existing inequalities. In essence, without the foundation of primary abilities, these workers are set up to fail in a world that demands constant adaptation. Taken together, these processes translate into inequalities in human capital accumulation and asset building which pose longer-term risks to equality and social mobility (Vargas & Narayan, 2020).

Furthermore, labour market policies designed to prevent job layoffs had uneven impacts on SMEs.⁴ On one hand, commercial banks did not effectively implement the measures to provide liquidity to SMEs due to higher risk of defaults. On the other hand, informal sector SMEs who lacked the necessary documentation and legal status were unable to attain formal loans and financial support. Overall, credit assistance to SMEs was low, with credit mainly going to larger firms (Javed, 2021). Informal sector SMEs in particular continued to suffer liquidity issues, and had to make substantial redundancies (Javed, 2021). Conversely, businesses that were proficient in digital trade and capable of adapting to remote working models experienced fewer closures and quicker recoveries. The ability to adapt to and use digital tools and platforms helped people and businesses survive the pandemic and recover sustainably (Javed, 2021).

⁴ The fiscal policy responses to COVID-19 by governments across the world included fiscal stimulus measures which mainly involved transfers targeting lower-income households, liquidity support for companies, and employment retention measures.

A large number of permanent closures of SMEs left many workers unemployed. A survey conducted in 132 countries found that between 25% and 36% of small businesses were at a major risk of permanently closing down amid the disruption in the first four months of the pandemic (International Trade Centre, 2020). This led to a surge in long-term unemployment, eroding the ability of vast sections of the workforce to sustain themselves and their families, and further marginalising them from social and economic participation.

The pandemic also disproportionately affected immigrant groups, who suffered greater job and income losses than host communities. For instance, in Chile and Peru, more than two-thirds of immigrants have seen their monthly household income decrease during the pandemic, compared to only half of the non-immigrant population (Freier & Espinoza, 2021).

Despite their heightened need for social assistance, international migrants and migrants working in the informal sector were less able to benefit from policies due to a general lack of inclusion in social policies and emergency responses to the pandemic across the region (Bengochea et al., 2022), associated with lower social integration (Freier & Espinoza, 2021). Due to a lack of social capital, and lower accessibility to public services, they were less able to benefit from emergency responses and recovery policies (ILO, 2021). Undocumented immigrants in particular were unable to access support policies due to fear of getting caught (United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, 2020). On the other hand, communities with stronger shared values and better institutional arrangements were able to foster cooperation between and across communities, government and other stakeholders. In this regard, effective family, community and local networks enabled access to available government support measures, thus highlighting the importance of social capital.

Overall, these examples demonstrate how pre-existing inequalities and the associated lack of primary abilities make certain groups less able to benefit from emergency response and recovery policies. In the medium to long term, the combination of existing inequalities and the impact of COVID-19 is likely to amplify inequality of opportunities in affected countries, and reduce resilience to future crises (Vargas & Narayn, 2020). Furthermore, the absence of primary abilities diminishes the capacity of vulnerable groups to recover and adapt, relegating them to a perpetually disadvantaged position. COVID-19-induced changes in the education and employment spheres, such as increased remote learning, remote working and the increased automation of work, are likely to permanently change the likelihood of particular population groups accessing jobs which require abilities such as digital skills, which will further limit social mobility. Evidence suggests that technological advancements in production disproportionately benefit high-skilled workers. As the trend of remote working becomes more permanent, high-end jobs become increasingly out of reach for those unable to work remotely, thus creating long-lasting labour market and associated income and wealth inequalities. A study conducted in Italy shows that a longer-term increase in remote work opportunities would favour

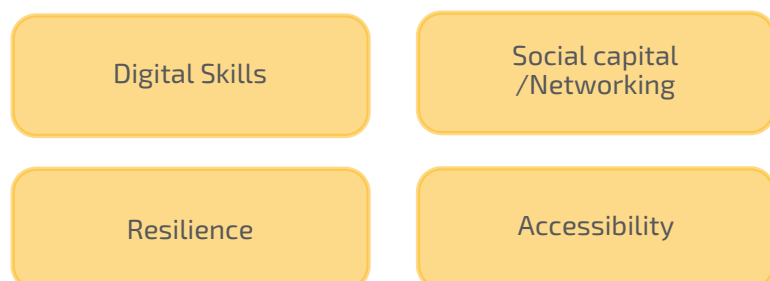
workers who were male, older, highly educated, and better paid (Bonacini et al., 2021).

Specifically, digital skills, including digital literacy and the ability to use digital forums, became a universal requirement to cope with the pandemic and benefit from supporting policies. This brought a clear divide in policy outcomes, with those possessing digital skills, supporting infrastructure and ability to work remotely suffering considerably less loss in education, health, income and jobs compared to those who lacked these skills and infrastructure. Over time, this long-term inequality in human capital and asset formation may lower income growth and wealth formation among poorer households, increasing income inequality between rich and poor households, and leading to increased poverty and further social exclusion of vulnerable populations, which extends to subsequent generations.

Moreover, the digital divide is gendered. Data vary, but all suggest women have lower rates of digital access than men. GSM Association (2020) report that women in low-income countries are 20% less likely to use a smartphone, which translates to around 300 million fewer women than men using mobile internet in these countries. According to Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD] (2018), in 2018 women in South Asia and Africa were 70% and 30% less likely than men to own a smartphone, respectively. Among other impacts, this could limit women's access to job and income opportunities, limiting their career growth and creating a cycle of disadvantage that could result in persistent gender disparities in employment outcomes and income over the long term.

The preceding discussion, and a synthesis of SVSS-2 evidence studies from Africa, Latin America and South Asia, show therefore that final policy impact was strongly influenced by the extent of primary abilities held by different populations. Individuals, households and communities possessing the four primary abilities were better able to cope with the pandemic and benefit from recovery policies (see Figure 5.1).

Figure 5.1. Primary abilities shaping inclusiveness of policy impacts during COVID-19



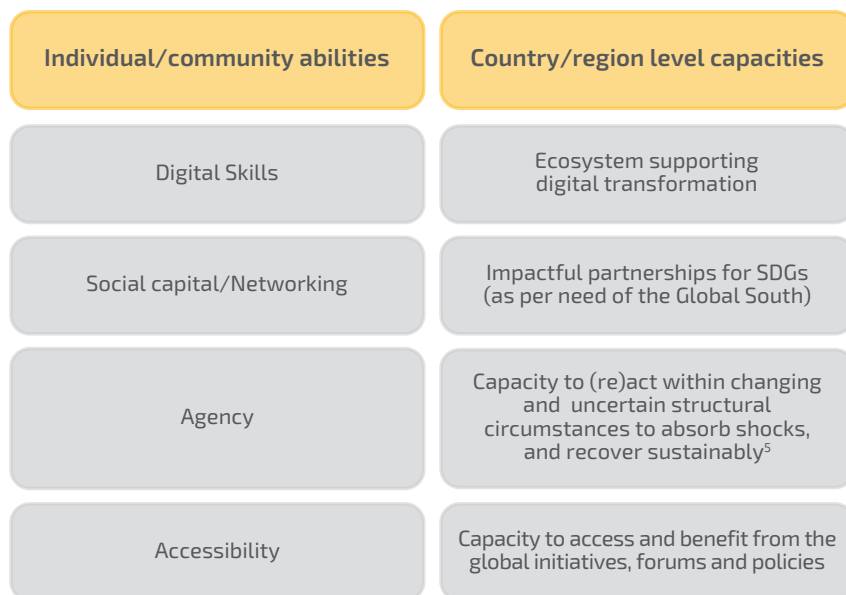
Note. Elaborated by the author.

Looking forward: Connecting lessons learned from COVID-19 with SDG acceleration through a focus on primary capacities

The COVID-19 pandemic has clearly demonstrated that the equitable distribution of primary abilities is key to minimising the risk that vulnerable populations will be excluded from accessing, using and benefiting from available policies and instruments. The pandemic has not only laid bare the disparities in these abilities but also emphasised their collective significance in creating more resilient individuals and societies. Crucially, these abilities form the foundation upon which countries and communities can build their own *primary capacities*, which are required in order to accelerate progress on SDGs.

Based on the observed relevance of digital skills during COVID-19, a country's digital ecosystem becomes a pivotal primary capacity. It encompasses a range of factors, from affordable broadband and national internet coverage, to robust data privacy regulations and digital literacy programs. Such an ecosystem enables nations to bridge the digital divide and leverage technology for sustainable development, aligning closely with the UN's 2023 SDG Digital Acceleration Agenda (see Figure 5.2).

Figure 5.2. Linking individual abilities to country/regional capacities



Note. Elaborated by the author.

Social capital—a cornerstone among the primary abilities—extends as a primary capacity to the creation of impactful partnerships at the national or regional level. Impactful partnerships are those which give the Global South a substantive say in policy decisions, thus creating an equitable power balance. The essence of such partnerships lies in their flexibility, adaptability, and focus on serving the specific needs of low-income countries.

⁵ Such as recovering without increased debt and debt distress, and at the cost of poverty, inequality, unemployment.

In an era fraught with global crises, a nation's agency—its capacity to (re)act within changing and uncertain structural circumstances to absorb shocks and recover sustainably—is indispensable. This capacity is particularly important in the context of the long-term pursuit of SDGs. High levels of vulnerability, coupled with weak state capacity, can adversely affect the speed and inclusivity of actions targeting the SDGs.

Finally, a country's ability to effectively integrate into, and benefit from, global initiatives directly contributes to the strengthening of its primary capacities. Enhanced participation from both the Global South and cooperative measures from developed countries can foster an enabling environment for reaching collective sustainability targets.

By elevating the concept of primary abilities to the national and global level, we can better articulate their collective role in shaping a country's primary capacities. The intertwining of these abilities and capacities is far from a theoretical overlay; it is a pragmatic approach to understanding the practical workings of equitable policy measures. Notably, achieving equitable policy impacts, whether in the context of the pandemic or accelerating the SDGs, relies on the widespread cultivation and equitable distribution of these primary abilities and capacities.

Digitalisation and information and communications technology (ICT) are transforming the world economy, everyday life, politics, and communication. Evidence on the critical role of digital skills of people and associated digital divide in shaping policy outcomes during the COVID-19 (as discussed in section 2.1) shows that having *an ecosystem for digital transformation* will be the foremost enabler for inclusive acceleration on the SDGs agenda. Indeed, according to the UN's SDG Digital Acceleration Agenda, published in 2023, "digital technologies directly contribute to around 70% of the targets of all 17 SDGs, and with the potential to inform the achievement of the other 30% of targets, digital is a crucial tool in achieving this essential and urgent ambition" (International Telecommunication Union & United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2023)

Digital transformation, therefore, is key to accelerating progress towards SDGs. Conversely, countries/regions with deficient digital capacities are therefore unlikely to be able to accelerate the SDG agenda. The digital divide across countries and regions can strengthen and produce new forms of inequality, just as occurred in relation to digital skills during COVID-19. Bridging this digital divide between and across the country therefore is essential for inclusive acceleration.

The capacity of a country or region to be in, and form, *impactful partnerships*—be they South-South or triangular relationships—in order to leverage the implementation of acceleration actions, will affect the scale and nature of the acceleration. The notion of impactful partnership is used carefully and purposefully. It refers to partnership for acceleration where partnerships are formed based on the needs of the Global South. The partners—bilateral or multilateral—provide more space and freedom to low-income countries and regions to have stronger power of opinion, and freedom to choose policy options which best suit them. The dynamic nature of the partnership

is primarily determined by the behaviour of leading partners in the partnership. The partnership must be flexible to adapt to the needs of the low-income partners and not to the convenience of high-income partners with greater resource and technical support.

Recent global shocks have demonstrated how the capacity of a country or region to (re)act within changing and uncertain structural circumstances, and to absorb shocks and recover from them sustainably, is a critical element in shaping how far they can make effective and inclusive progress on the SDGs. Higher vulnerability, coupled with lower capacity to absorb the shocks and make sustainable recovery, can leave the Global South lagging behind on the acceleration agenda. Evidence suggests that countries and regions which are more vulnerable to global shocks have seen slower recovery, with higher social, economic, and environmental costs.

Two recent global shocks, COVID-19 and global commodity price surge, have left already struggling economies in heightened debt distress. Global public debt is higher and is projected to grow faster than forecasted before the pandemic (International Monetary Fund [IMF], 2023). Corresponding policies to manage debt have led to sluggish growth and higher inflation, resulting in rising poverty, unemployment and inequality in debt-distressed countries.

The last of the four primary capacities is the capacity of a country or region to integrate into, and benefit from, global initiatives, policies and forums. It can provide a foundation for strengthening other primary capacities, including developing an ecosystem for digital transformation, improved South-South cooperation and increased capacity to absorb shocks and recover sustainably. The capacity of the Global South—in cooperation with the Global North, multilaterals and UN agencies—to develop and strengthen the frameworks for regional and global policy coherence for the SDGs is critical in this regard.

Looking forward: Focusing on primary capacities for inclusive SDG acceleration in the Global South

The preceding discussion suggests that meaningful acceleration on the SDGs requires a minimum threshold and effective combination of key primary capacities at the national/regional level, specifically: an ecosystem supporting digital transformation, the capacity to form impactful partnerships, the capacity to (re)act within changing and uncertain structural circumstances to absorb shocks and recover sustainably, and the capacity to benefit from global initiatives to support progress on SDGs. Yet, more importantly, it makes a strong case for balancing urgency with inclusion. This section focuses on the importance of advancing the primary capacities of low-income countries, recognising their immediate needs, considering diverse contexts, and fostering impactful partnerships for the region, in order to that strategies put in place to achieve the SDGs are effective in the sense of being both urgent and inclusive, leaving no one behind.

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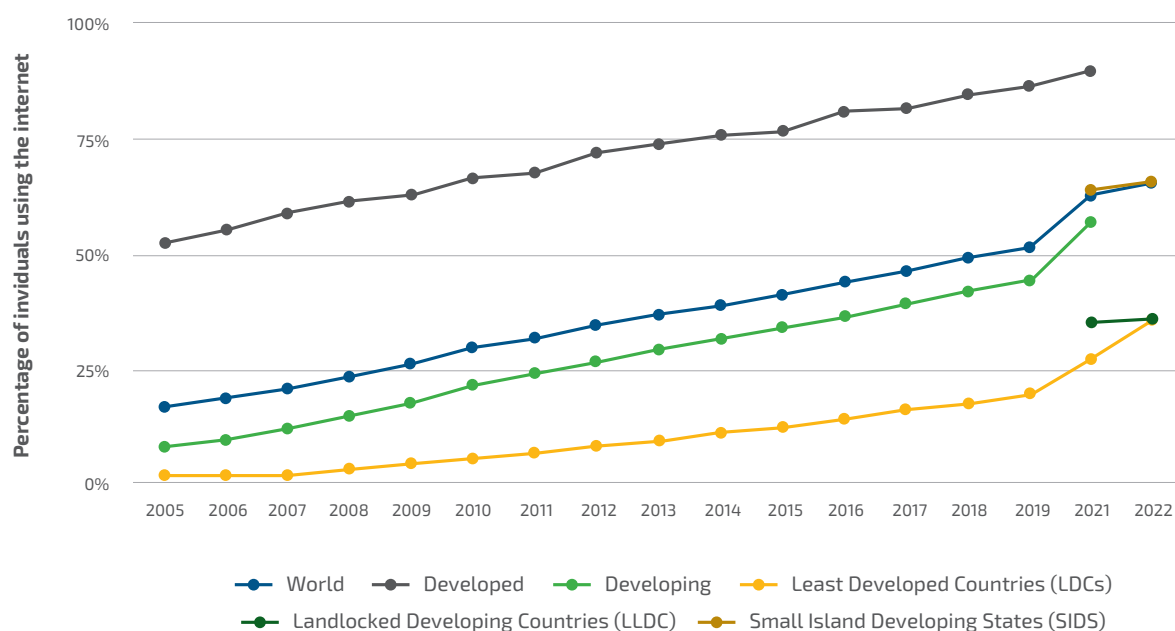
Countries in the Global South have a broad range of avenues through which to make impactful partnerships for inclusive acceleration.z

It is structured according to key challenges relating to the primary capacities identified.

Ecosystems for digital transformation are generally poor and with an inherent digital divide

About 94% of the world's 'unconnected' population lives in low- and middle-income countries (Delaporte & Bahia, 2022). In South Asia in 2019, only 33% of the population had mobile internet connection (GSMA, 2019). In Africa, internet penetration is only 40%, the lowest of any region in the world (Taylor & Silver, 2019). Global data shows that a wide gap exists between regions in the share of population who use the internet (Figure 5.3).

Figure 5.3. Impact on sales and profits – Pakistan



Note. Extracted from *Global internet access rate 2005-2022, market maturity* by Petrosyan (2022).

The internet coverage gap is highest in low-income countries of the Global South (World Bank, 2022). Importantly, internet usage is not just affected by coverage, but also by the ability to afford digital devices, and internet and broadband services, which contributes to the large usage gap of 61% in South Asia (World Bank, 2022). As noted in section 2.1, gender is also a factor affecting internet usage. In 2022, at a global level 264 million fewer women than men had internet access (Signé, 2023).

Perhaps most importantly, insufficient digital infrastructure in the Global South hinders the accessibility of digital services, with issues ranging from a lack of consistent electricity supply to insufficient bandwidth. Overall, 56% of people in sub-Saharan Africa do not have access to electricity (Monyei & Akpeji, 2020), compared to the global average of less than 10% (International Energy Agency,

2023). Inadequate digital infrastructure, data privacy and security issues, and the inability to make larger investments in the sector may limit the capacity of the Global South to fully harness digital public infrastructure and modern innovations such as AI-based technologies (Nugraha, 2023). Together, these factors combine to constrain the region's capacity for *ecosystems for digital transformation*.

Lack of capacity to form impactful partnerships

Within South-South cooperation, social capital serves as an essential primary ability that enables meaningful, impactful partnerships. Social capital and network literacy serve as indispensable primary abilities, influencing how countries in the Global South utilise their primary capacities to forge impactful, long-lasting partnerships. The effective utilisation of primary capacities such as financial resources, technological infrastructure, and human capital in any cooperation initiative is often dictated by the strength of a nation's social capital and the competency of networks that countries have developed.

Many countries in the Global South are keen on expanding South-South and triangular cooperation. They recognise the value of leveraging their unique strengths and resources. However, some major challenges exist that hinder cooperation. First and foremost is the lack of impactful partnerships. Despite huge emphasis on partnerships for SDGs—between governments, the private sector, and civil society—low-income countries not only have fewer partnerships, but the partnerships they do have are not effective in producing positive outcomes.

For instance, financial resources alone are insufficient to address the complexity of debt distress faced by many countries in the Global South (Ramos et al., 2023). It is the social capital—the established trust and mutual respect—that allows for intricate negotiations and flexible terms in debt restructuring. Countries in which their populations have high social capital, and the associated capacity of impactful partnerships, can effectively employ their financial capacities by aligning their interests with those of their partners and creditors (Woolcock, n.d.).

Ensuring the sustainability of development initiatives based on partnerships remains a challenge. Many South-south cooperation initiatives rely heavily on the financial and technical support of a few key countries or organisations. This dependence can be unsustainable if those resources are not consistently available over the long term (Nauta, 2022). Likewise, political changes can disrupt cooperation efforts due to shifting priorities or leadership changes.

Worryingly low capacity to (re)act to changing and uncertain structural circumstances

The Global South faces various shocks, including economic, environmental, and health crises. A lack of resources to invest in



Limited financial resources, inadequate infrastructure, and constrained access to technology hinder capacity among Global South countries to invest in resilience and sustainable recovery strategies.

resilience and sustainable recovery strategies puts the Global South at a disadvantage in addressing shocks and ensuring sustainable development. As we have seen in this chapter, health crises such as COVID-19 expose these vulnerabilities, as do other economic and environmental shocks. Many countries are enhancing their resilience through disaster preparedness, social safety nets, and sustainable development strategies. Investments in resilience can mitigate the impact of shocks and aid in swift recovery. However, resource constraints are a significant challenge to building this capacity.

Limited financial resources, inadequate infrastructure, and constrained access to technology hinder capacity among Global South countries to invest in resilience and sustainable recovery strategies. In turn, economic shocks, natural disasters, or health crises often leave the Global South with insufficient financial resources to respond effectively, forcing them to borrow unsustainably. This feeds into a cycle in which a lack of resources to invest in resilience puts the Global South at a disadvantage in addressing shocks and ensuring sustainable development. South Asia is one of the most vulnerable regions in the world to climate disasters. More than 750 million people in the region have been affected by one or more climate-related disaster in the past two decades, with estimated damage of over \$150 billion (Milivojevic & Xie, 2021). Repeated impacts of these recurring climate events hinder sustainable recovery and resilience efforts in the region (Ngcamu, 2023).

Climate vulnerable countries in the Global South therefore face a risk premium that increases the cost of capital in these countries. Data shows that sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia face some of the highest costs of capital compared to other regions of the world. This risk premium could trap countries into a vicious cycle where continued exposure to climatic disasters leads to higher debt costs and a tightened fiscal capacity to deal with the disaster and invest in climate resilience (Ramos et al., 2023).

The mounting debt stress of countries in the Global South is an enormous challenge, severely limiting their capacity to accelerate the agenda for achieving the SDGs. The share of low-income countries that are at a high risk of, or are already in, debt stress increased from 30% in 2015 to a staggering 60% in 2022, with several countries urgently requiring debt restructuring (Chabert et al., 2022).

UNDP estimates show that out of 120 low- and middle-income countries, 72 were debt vulnerable in 2021, with 19 countries being severely debt vulnerable. This escalating debt stress increases the debt servicing burden of the indebted countries that simultaneously face a high cost of capital, reducing their ability to allocate resources toward sustainable growth and the development agenda.

Limited capacity in the region to access and benefit from global forums and policies

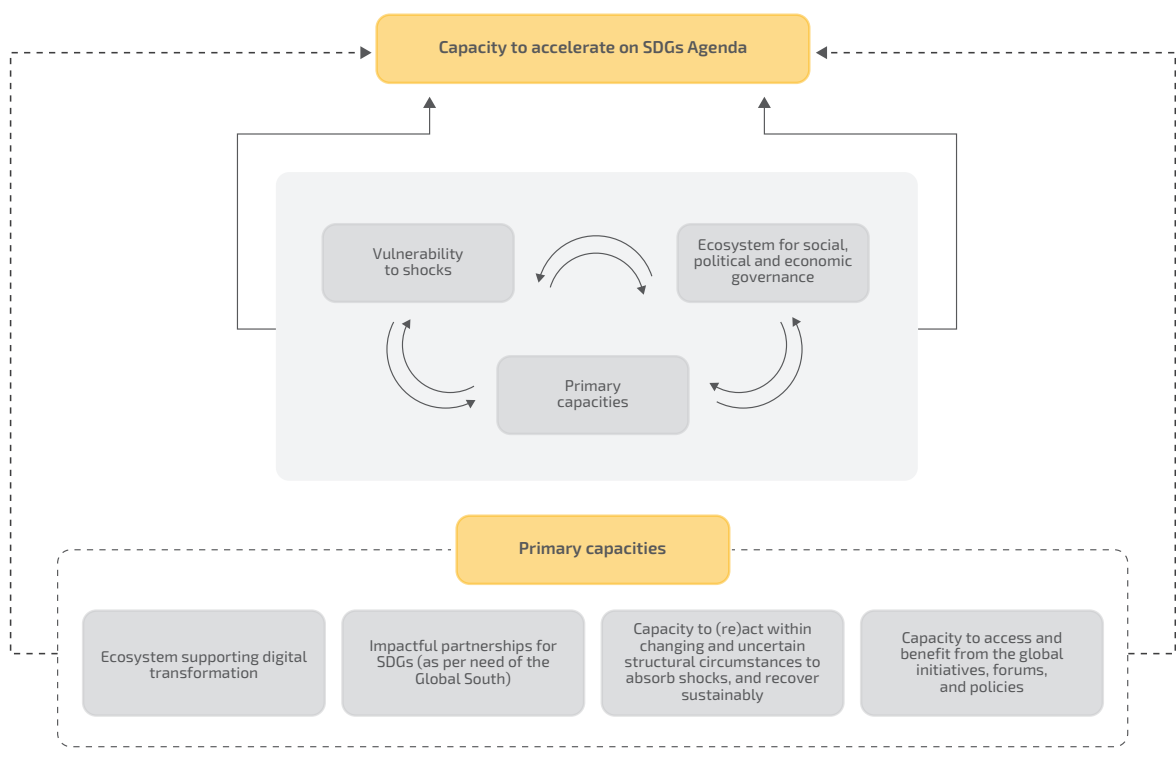
Integration into global forums and policy-making processes is essential for the Global South to influence and benefit from international development agendas. However, existing power dynamics often relegate the Global South to subordinate roles

in decision-making processes in global forums. The dominance of rich countries in terms of economic and political influence on global economic, financial and environmental forums can lead to unequal representation and limited voice (Focus on the Global South Team, 2022). This imbalance results in decisions that do not reflect the interests and priorities of the Global South, hindering their meaningful participation.

Conditions shaping the nature and scale of SDG acceleration in the Global South

The capacity of the Global South to accelerate progress on SDGs is hampered by the limitations to primary capacities, as outlined above, coupled with higher vulnerability to shocks and poor governance. The nature and scale of SDG acceleration depends on three *dynamic conditions*, according to the Global Sustainable Development Report (GSDR) 2023 (Persson & Bennich, 2023): vulnerability to shocks, the degree of primary capacities, and existing systems of political, social and economic governance. These three conditions interact to shape the scale and nature of SDG acceleration (Figure 5.4).

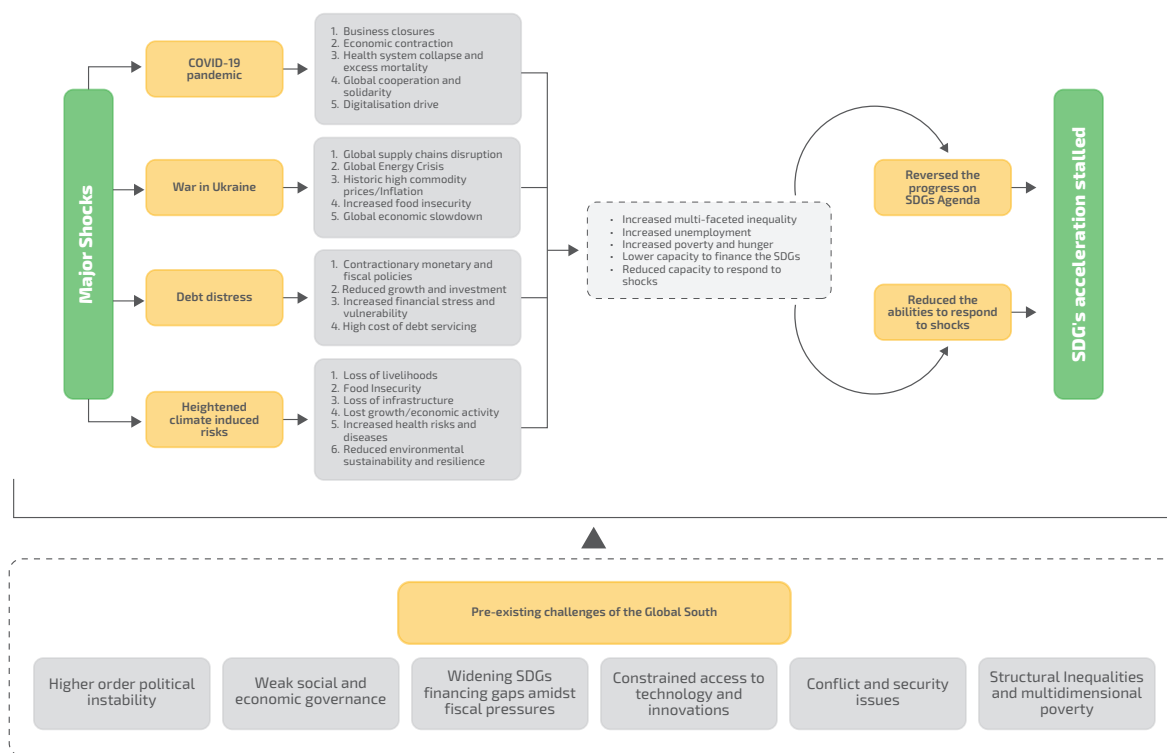
Figure 5.4. Three dynamic conditions shaping the nature and scale of SDG acceleration



Note. Elaborated by the author.

Regions with a higher capacity for SDG acceleration are those with lower vulnerability to shocks, higher levels of primary capacities and better social, political and economic governance, while regions (of which the Global South is one) with higher vulnerability to shocks, lower primary capacities, and poor social, political and economic governance have a lower capacity for SDG acceleration. The pre-existing challenges facing the Global South compound the problem further (Figure 5.5).

Figure 5.5. Shocks and existing challenges limiting SDG acceleration in the Global South



Note. Elaborated by the author.

Not only is the Global South more vulnerable to shocks, but it also has a lower capacity to absorb these shocks, due to for example poor digitalisation ecosystems and a limited capacity to integrate into global forums and policies to minimise the effects of these shocks, together with other political and economic factors such as higher levels of political instability, poor governance, and the increased SDGs financing gap. The region therefore faced especially adverse impacts of shocks including COVID-19, the Russia-Ukraine war, heightened climate-induced risks, and debt distress.

These crises have led to an increase in unemployment, poverty and hunger, reversing progress on the SDGs. Importantly, the prolonged impacts of these crises, such as a deepening digital divide, the changing nature of work and the labour market, sluggish growth, a steep rise in debt service, and higher food and energy inflation, will significantly constrain SDG acceleration. Most importantly, the loss of jobs and the increase in poverty and hunger have been

higher among more vulnerable groups and communities within low-income countries. At a global level, the countries and the regions with a lower capacity to effectively respond to these shocks were hit the hardest. This difference in vulnerabilities and primary capacities—shaping effective policy responses—has led to a more inequitable world, widening divisions between the countries and regions, and poses a risk to inclusive acceleration for the SDGs.

In this context, the urgency to accelerate progress on the SDGs must be carefully balanced with the need for inclusion, especially in regions facing unique challenges such as political instability, poor governance, and economic constraints. Prioritising urgency over inclusion could result in two significant risks: structural exclusion and inequitable progress. Firstly, focusing solely on urgency could systematically exclude countries from the Global South from participating in accelerated SDG actions. This exclusion stems from existing social and economic inequalities, weak governance structures, and limited access to global resources. Moreover, these countries often lack the influence to shape global policies, further cementing their exclusion.

Secondly, this approach could lead to uneven progress on the SDGs, leaving behind the very countries and regions most in need of acceleration. Such disparities in progress undermine the core aim of the SDGs to reduce inequalities within and among countries. If urgency drives action without considering inclusion, it risks perpetuating existing inequalities and impeding global progress toward the 2030 agenda.

Lastly, maintaining the status quo—often referred to as “business as usual”—poses another risk, especially for the Global South. Due to lower capacities and higher vulnerabilities, these regions may not move beyond existing unsustainable systems. Factors such as financing gaps, debt issues, and lack of digital infrastructure can hinder efforts relating to sustainable energy, social protection, and digital inclusion. This could delay the much-needed shift from unsustainable to sustainable systems, challenging the acceleration pathways suggested in the GSDR for 2023.

Challenges and opportunities for an inclusive post-2030 development agenda

As set out above, the balance between urgency and inclusion will shape the outcomes of the future global development agenda. Countries and regions left to falter on the SDG agenda will find it very hard to recover sustainably for the post-2030 Agenda. Inclusive acceleration—balancing urgency and inclusion—can lay down strong foundations for a post-2030 development agenda.

International cooperation to harness digital transformation, inclusive multilateral governance platforms, equitable provision of resources such as climate finance, and institutional capacity building can enhance both national *primary capacities* and individual *primary*

abilities to create a holistic and sustainable strategy for inclusive acceleration.

Building three layers of primary capacities to balance urgency and inclusion in SDG acceleration

Building the primary capacities required to balance urgency and inclusion in acceleration action—inclusive acceleration—has three interconnected and reinforcing layers (Figure 5.6). Connections between these layers are paramount, for example where there is responsibility of the Global North to ensure inclusion of the Global South, there is corresponding responsibility of the Global South to ensure that policies—at national and regional level—are directed towards inclusive SDG acceleration.

Figure 5.6. Shocks and existing challenges limiting SDG acceleration in the Global South



Note. Elaborated by the author.

The first layer—inclusive acceleration at national level—involves investment in individual/community primary abilities to ensure that marginalised population groups and regions within the country are not left behind. Policies for accelerating the SDGs must not only be inclusive in relation to outcomes and impacts, but also participatory in design and implementation.

The policy-making process must ensure through promoting participatory governance—inclusive policy formulation, and meaningful engagement of civil society organisations—that marginalised groups are actively involved in decision making. This will require improvements in the primary abilities of individuals and communities, such as digital literacy, inclusive access to the internet, and improved local governance structures to strengthen the ability of communities to make local networks.

Broadly, this layer of inclusion requires the alignment of fiscal planning and policy design to foster primary abilities: digital skills, social capital, agency, and accessibility of the vulnerable groups and regions of the countries. It requires these primary abilities be mainstreamed into public policy design and implementation

through an equity lens. Population groups and regions lagging in SDG progress must be given priority, with a focus on finance and investment for social and economic inclusions. Both fiscal and monetary policies must take into consideration their social footprint (Javed, 2022). National, provincial and local tax policies need to reduce reliance on indirect taxation, as this burdens disadvantaged groups already suffering from poverty and inequality.

The second layer focuses on inclusive acceleration within the regions (South-south cooperation) (Figure 5.6). Countries with improved primary abilities, a higher degree of inclusive acceleration, and improved socioeconomic inclusion of vulnerable populations are better prepared to benefit from regional cooperation. Inclusion at this level will require a multi-prong strategy including government-to-government partnerships, regional development banks, regional platforms for dialogue, knowledge sharing, and collaborative action to address common challenges and share best practices to foster primary capacities and accelerate SDGs.

In this regard, countries in the South have a broad range of avenues through which to make impactful partnerships for inclusive acceleration. Trade initiatives such as African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), Southern Common Market, Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and Pacific Alliance and Central American Integration System (SICA) can play a crucial role in promoting regional integration, expanding market access, and driving economic growth not only in sub-regions, but also in the Global South as whole. The same holds true for infrastructure investment initiatives across the region, such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Regional investments in digital public infrastructure to bridge the digital divide, and building climate adaptation and mitigation capacity, can be important means of fostering primary capacities.

The third, and most important layer is inclusion of the Global South—furthest behind in progress on SDGs—by the Global North in SDG acceleration. This requires policies for strengthening and developing primary capacities among Global South countries, particularly in terms of impactful partnerships and accessibility of decision-making and agenda-setting processes.

These three layers are mutually reinforcing. While inclusive acceleration at the national and regional levels provides a strong foundation for inclusive acceleration more widely, policies actively promoting better integration of marginalised regions into global forums and enhanced access to finance, technology and knowledge can strengthen primary capacities which, in turn, can help achieve inclusive acceleration at national and regional level.

Enhanced cooperation in areas such as the digital ecosystem and impactful partnerships in climate finance, energy transitions, digital infrastructure investments, technology transfers and debt relief, can enable the Global South to better embrace inclusive acceleration actions at the regional and national level. Yet it is important to note that improving primary abilities at individual and community level can make this international cooperation more effective. For example, improved digital literacy can make technology transfers



Enhanced cooperation in areas such as the digital ecosystem and impactful partnerships in climate finance, can enable the Global South to better embrace inclusive acceleration actions at the regional and national level.

more impactful, and hence develop primary capacities and national/regional levels.

The process of inclusion requires engagement of stakeholders in three dimensions (Figure 5.7). First and foremost is the recognition and acceptance of the need for balancing urgency and inclusions and its explicit integration in acceleration action. Currently missing, this shift will require broad-based, consistent and tailored messaging on the need for balancing urgency and inclusion.

Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), networks like Southern Voice, and academia, particularly within the Global South, can be effective voices in national, regional and global forums. They need to work together to identify and communicate alternative processes, policies and areas of impactful partnerships around primary capacities for SDGs acceleration, where low-income countries are able to embrace and implement the transformative policies.

Figure 5.7. The integration of inclusion into acceleration action



Note. Elaborated by the author.

Finally, inclusive acceleration will require enhanced support of the Global South by the Global North, including, but not limited to: investment in digital infrastructure, changes in the global governance system in support of Global South-led impactful partnerships, implementation of policies to increase access to sustainable finance including climate adaptation and mitigation finance, rule-based debt relief, and capacity development of low-income countries to benefit from global initiatives to support SDG acceleration.

Potential tensions between urgency and inclusion at the global level

Voluntary National Review (VNRs) perceived as inclusion

There is a high risk that the global acceleration agenda may continue to be driven by urgency. It is highly likely that country level Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs), presented at the United Nations in 2023, may be taken as a substitute for inclusion. They are not. They are just commitments, like the SDG targets were in 2015. It is the capacity of countries to translate these into actions that will define the inclusiveness of acceleration. The implementation of the VNRs in a particular country or region is contingent upon its exposure to shocks, endowments of primary abilities, and the social, political and economic governance challenges facing the country or region. Differences in these endowments and regional characteristics will define the outcome and impact of these VNRs.

SDG acceleration is different to COVID-19

To a large extent, the world came together to overcome the challenges of COVID-19. The development and distribution of vaccines is a global cooperation success story. At the domestic level, despite shortcomings, central banks, treasury and the private sector came together to try and protect people from the adverse effects of the pandemic and promote sustainable recovery. Overall, despite errors and omissions, the pandemic increased global and regional cooperation.

Yet, COVID-19 was a shared and immediate risk. This is not the case with the SDGs; some countries falling behind on agenda 2030 does not bring the same scale of risk to others, and so the goal of inclusion may not be prioritised. This increases the risk that developed countries and regions may accept the fallacy that VNRs alone are enough for inclusive acceleration.

Wider differences in vulnerability to shocks, primary capacities and regional challenges

The pressure of urgency may take over inclusion as countries are left with seven years to achieve the ambitious agenda set out in 2015. The sense of being far away from the goal may push countries and regions to rush towards the goal, without considering who is falling behind. Importantly, the gap in primary capacities between the Global South and North will pose a serious challenge to effective inclusion. Take the example of digitalisation. Worryingly, in 2022, one third of the world's population, or 2.7 billion people, lacked internet access, and 53% does not have access to high-speed broadband (Signé, 2023). Continental differences in access to and use of technology can seriously hamper inclusive acceleration.

Vulnerability to climate-induced risks and capacity to absorb the damage is another one of the largest and widening gaps between

Global South and North. The gap not only relates to the Global South—because of its economic structures such as dependency on the agriculture sector—being more vulnerable to climate change, but also to its lower capacity to effectively respond to the climate induced shocks. According to the World Bank (2020), if climate change continues to remain unaddressed, it's projected that over 130 million individuals in developing countries will be pushed into poverty by the year 2030.

Limited capacity of the Global North to undertake required investments in the Global South

The conflicting trends of rising vulnerability and needs in the Global South, and reduced capacity of the Global North to meet these needs in a tangible way, are likely to pose a serious challenge to inclusive acceleration. As of 2019/2020, total global climate finance reached USD 653 billion, far below the estimated USD 4.3 trillion in annual finance flows needed by 2030 to avoid the worst impacts of climate change (Naran et al., 2022).

At the same time, the head of the IMF rightly warns that richer countries can never close the funding gap for climate change, and that private sector investments in Global South countries need to be upscaled. This, though potentially promising, seems difficult to achieve due to poor investment opportunities in terms of higher business costs and poor human capital, rising levels of conflict and political instability, and economic slowdown in developing economies.

Conclusion and implications

The world needs to balance urgency and inclusion in SDG acceleration. Inclusive acceleration is essential for the real success of the global agenda: a more equitable world in 2030. This will require concentrated and coordinated effort to foster the primary capacities needed for inclusive acceleration action in the Global South, namely ecosystems for digital transformation, impactful partnerships, capacity to respond to changing situations and recover sustainability from shocks, and capacity to benefit from global policies and initiatives.

As manifested by policy responses to COVID-19, the final impact of transformative acceleration policies will depend on the primary capacities of different countries and regions. Policy responses to COVID-19 have shown that well meaning policies can exacerbate inequalities, hitting the vulnerable population hardest given their lower levels of primary abilities (digital skills, social networking, agency and accessibility). Acceleration policies, with a large part of the world lacking basic capacities, are likely to produce the same outcome: inequitable progress on SDG acceleration.

With a higher vulnerability to shocks and lower levels of primary capacities, the Global South is struggling to accelerate the SDGs. Strengthening these primary capacities in the Global South is, therefore, essential for inclusive acceleration. Urgency without the inclusion of the region furthest behind on the SDG agenda will lead to inequitable acceleration and a more unequal post-2030 world.

Meaningful inclusion of the Global South in acceleration action will require strengthening and developing primary capacities at national and regional level through measures including, but not limited to:

- a. Ensuring integration of the vulnerable and marginalised into development priorities at national, regional and global level;
- b. Bridging the digital divide within and across countries and regions;
- c. Equitable sharing of the burden of climate change and equal access to climate finance, operationalizing loss and damage funds;
- d. Providing effective debt relief to highly debt distressed countries, linked to vulnerabilities;
- e. Overhauling global governance with greater participation and decision-making powers for the Global South.

Most importantly, advancement in primary capacities is linked to the general capacity of countries and regions to embrace many of the transformations required for acceleration action. The combination of these capacities will shape the progress of the Global South on entry points and levers identified in Independent Group of Scientists appointed by the Secretary-General (2019) and highlighted in Persson & Bennich (2023).⁶

For example, implementing energy decarbonisation with universal access essentially requires phasing out fossil fuels. Shifting to renewable energy, however, requires huge infrastructure investments. It is almost impossible for low-income countries struggling with higher debt, low fiscal space and poor financial and capital markets to generate the required resources. Similarly, countries with higher debt and lower fiscal space will require tangible support from international financial institutions and lending consortiums to formulate an energy subsidy reform policy for phase-out. Conversely, a lack of these primary capacities will impede the implementation of these entry points and effective use of leverages.

The global community, including Global North countries, multilaterals, international financial institutions, UN agencies and other forums—must therefore focus on expanding collaboration on strengthening primary capacities of the region. It must be the priority area of global cooperation. These primary capacities will be decisive in determining how inclusive and equitable global progress on the SDGs will be, and how equitable the world is after 2030.

Instead of leaving the Global South on its own, with VNRs taking the place of genuine inclusion, the region needs impactful SDG partnerships which improve the basic capacities of the region. This includes partnerships on climate finance, loss and damage fund, debt restructuring and relief, green energy transition and other initiatives (Duggan et al., 2021). These partnerships should also prioritise capacity-building initiatives such as budgeting for SDGs, climate-sensitive fiscal planning, and digitising public procurement that enhance primary abilities, making the Global South more self-reliant and better equipped for inclusive growth.

⁶ These include i) human well-being and capabilities, ii) sustainable and just economies, iii) sustainable food systems and healthy nutrition, iv) energy decarbonisation with universal access v) urban and peri-urban development and vi) global environmental commons governance.

Alongside this, the Global South will need an enhanced role in global SDG governance, where the region has more power of opinion, and better positioning in information and digital spaces (Duggan et al., 2021; Larson, 2019). The Global South must be an integral part of the decision-making process of identifying the priority areas for partnership, as per the needs of the region, for any meaningful gain to result from cooperation. This is contrary to the present model of supply-driven cooperation forums and policies, where the Global South has negligible power, voice and representation.

Impactful work on measuring and gauging progress on SDG acceleration including the UN's Global Sustainable Development Report (2023) need to take seriously into account progress on primary abilities and capacities of communities, countries and the region. Balancing urgency and inclusion must be the primary message coming from periodic audits, future reviews and major publications and reports from the UN. Academia, civil society, and international financial institutions need to develop a clear roadmap to promote debate and action on fostering primary capacities in order to achieve inclusive SDG acceleration.

Overall, a more inclusive debate on, and an action plan for SDG acceleration, with Global South in the lead, is central to inclusive acceleration. Inclusion of the Global South must not be sidelined. Instead, it must be at the heart of acceleration action and take priority over urgency. Relatively small but inclusive progress on SDGs is better than a higher performance of few leaving vulnerable regions behind. An inclusive future depends on the degree to which the SDG acceleration agenda balances urgency with the inclusion of the Global South.

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