

World is failing on Sustainable Development Goals, say scientists

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An independent group of scientists appointed by the United Nations' Secretary General, including from the University of Sydney, write in

Nature that scientists and policymakers must urgently join forces to overcome obstacles to achieving sustainable development goals.

Writing in [*Nature*](#), the Independent Group of Scientists' team calls on scientists to support policymakers in rethinking humanity's approach to achieving the SDGs, bringing the lessons from the 2023 [Global Sustainable Development Report](#).

This year marks the halfway point of the SDGs, which were agreed in 2015, to be reached by 2030. It is a collection of 17 interlinked objectives and 169 targets designed to serve as a "shared blueprint for peace and prosperity for people and the planet, now and into the future." Some of the objectives include, gender equality, [climate action](#), [good health](#) and well-being and no poverty.

The authors highlight three priority areas for action: removing roadblocks to progress, finding feasible and cost-effective pathways to the goals and strengthening governance.

The 17 SDGs were established in 2015 as an urgent call to action by all countries to tackle global challenges such as poverty and inequality, [climate change](#) and environmental decline.

The SDGs are broken down into individual targets, and the authors assessed a sample of 36 to get a snapshot of progress. Of those, only two are on track in 2023: access to mobile networks and internet usage.

One of the co-authors is Professor Jaime Miranda, head of the School of Public Health, Faculty of Medicine and Health at the University of Sydney. Other authors include renowned scientists ranging across multiple disciplines and nationalities, with the paper led by Shirin Malekpour and Cameron Allen from Monash University, Australia.

Professor Miranda is also the Co-Chair of the 15 independent experts who drafted the 2023 [Global Sustainable Development Report](#). The report will be presented to the United Nations Sustainable Development Summit on 18–19 September.

"The SDGs need to be seen as a collective responsibility by the world, and our Global Sustainable Development Report shows urgent action is needed, and change is possible. Transformations are inevitable," said Professor Miranda.

"But to achieve the SDGs, we need to move past the mentality of thinking about how to address each goal in isolation. Instead identifying the connections and synergies across SDGs, and how to solve it together, will be the key to making the substantial changes needed towards accomplishing Agenda 2030."

"The Global Sustainable Development Report provides a stylized model to help unpack and understand the science of transformations."

The authors write, "To break the logjam, scientists need to find out what is impeding system-wide changes in different places and sectors and identify rapid ways to overturn those obstacles."

Researchers should provide evidence for effective policy pathways tailored to different sectors and nations.

One obstacle is that most research so far has been done in high-income countries, and solutions that work there might not be suitable for low- and middle-income nations. Clean-energy transitions, for example, could falter owing to a lack of finances or supporting infrastructure.

More evidence is also needed for policy approaches that aim to achieve all SDGs simultaneously—rather than tackling them in isolation—while

balancing trade-offs. For example, health and education investments improve economic productivity and lift people out of poverty but can also increase consumption and environmental degradation.

The authors highlight a positive example in Tanzania, where modeling shows that subsidies for solar electricity installations would support not only clean and affordable energy, but also better health (by reducing air pollution) and education (by allowing people to study for more hours of the day).

Finally, scientists need to develop criteria to assess the impact of various SDG governance processes—for example, whether linking national budgets to SDGs, as Mexico and Colombia have done, improves outcomes. Researchers should also provide insights to support stronger national accountability on SDGs.

The authors conclude, "Without accelerated action, the ambitious plan that the world signed up to in 2015 will fail. Scientists, institutions and funders must do their part to save the SDGs—and the planet and human society."

The article is part of the [Progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals Collection](#), which marks the mid-point of the 15-year period envisioned to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030. The Collection includes content published in journals across the Nature Portfolio, and highlights the progress made towards the SDGs.

More information: Shirin Malekpour et al, What scientists need to do to accelerate progress on the SDGs, *Nature* (2023). [DOI: 10.1038/d41586-023-02808-x](https://doi.org/10.1038/d41586-023-02808-x)

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