



# GLOBAL SDG SYNTHESIS COALITION BRIEF

## WHAT WORKS TO ACCELERATE PROGRESS ON THE PARTNERSHIP PILLAR OF THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

BASED ON THE

**PARTNERSHIP PILLAR SYNTHESIS**

COMMISSIONED TO THE AMERICAN INSTITUTES FOR RESEARCH - AIR



The Global  
SDG Synthesis  
Coalition





# —Foreword

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It is our pleasure on behalf of all partners of the Global SDG Synthesis Coalition, 44 UN entities and a growing number of UN Member States, multilateral development banks, civil society organizations, philanthropic organizations and the private sector, to present you with the first Global SDG Synthesis Coalition evidence brief. This brief is based on the Partnership Pillar synthesis, the first of five planned syntheses of evaluative evidence on each of the SDG Pillars. This report marks a significant milestone in the Coalition's efforts to identify what works to accelerate progress toward SDG 17, 'Partnerships for the Goals'. This brief highlights the key insights from the synthesis work and suggests how they can be put into action.

The synthesis report presents evidence on what initiatives and approaches work to accelerate progress toward SDG 17. In doing so, it aggregates and triangulates evidence from a range of different sources, notably: impact evaluations and systematic reviews on the effectiveness of interventions; process and performance evaluations published by the evaluation offices of multilateral organizations and development agencies; country case studies derived from a positive deviance assessment of country-level data on progress towards SDG 17 indicators; and a textual analysis of all Voluntary National Reviews undertaken between 2015 and 2022.

The report is a resource designed to empower stakeholders across sectors and levels to take meaningful action towards achieving SDG 17 and, by extension, the full spectrum of SDGs. Access to this evidence is not just an opportunity but a responsibility: its utility underscores its significance in the global pursuit of a more sustainable, equitable and interconnected world, enabling stakeholders and decision makers to chart a course towards a more sustainable and equitable future.

This work serves as a testament to the power of evaluative evidence, offering lessons for stakeholders and decision makers committed to accelerating progress toward the SDGs. The Global SDG Synthesis Coalition hopes that the lessons and insights of this brief and the full synthesis report will support our collective drive for a future in which the SDGs are not just aspirations but lived realities for all.

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Evaluation  
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unicef  | for every child



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# **The Global SDG Synthesis Coalition, and the value of synthesizing evidence by SDG Pillar**



# – What is the coalition?

The **Global SDG Synthesis Coalition** is an ambitious and unprecedented multi-stakeholder initiative that includes 44 UN entities and a growing number of UN Member States, multilateral development banks, civil society organizations, philanthropic organizations and the private sector.



The Coalition aims to provide rigorous evidence around the five Pillars of the Sustainable Development Goals – People, Planet, Prosperity, Peace and Partnership. The syntheses will generate evidence-based lessons on and insights into what works to achieve the SDGs. The results will feature in key events leading up to 2030, including the [UN 2023 SDG Summit](#).

## The value of synthesis:

The wealth of evidence on the SDGs presents challenges in determining what is most relevant. Synthesis helps to identify and amplify key messages.

The issue often faced by decision makers is not so much a lack of evidence as an abundance of it. Synthesis can help to make sense of this evidence and credibly collate and aggregate findings on what works from the most rigorous evidence available. To meet the challenges of accelerating the achievement of the SDGs, the Coalition understood the need for an approach that would draw the most relevant lessons out of detailed and specific evidence. The Coalition is committed to taking a rigorous, transparent and systematic approach to collating evidence under each of the SDG Pillars. This entails undertaking comprehensive and wide-ranging searches from multiple sources to find relevant evaluations. These evaluations are then scrutinized for their relevance and appraised for quality. This ensures that the findings, lessons and insights from the syntheses are evidence-based and justifiable.

## The Pillar approach:

Synthesizing evidence by Pillar recognizes the integrative nature of the principles of the SDGs.

The Pillars embody the multidimensional and interrelated considerations needed for sustainable development that leaves no one behind, in a way that the Goals do not when considered independently. Synthesis by Pillar enables consideration of the multidimensionality and interconnectedness of the five SDG Pillars, and the Goals within each Pillar, which is not the case when the Goals are considered independently. The Partnership Pillar Synthesis report offers insights into effective initiatives and strategies for accelerating progress toward SDG 17, presenting triangulated evidence from diverse sources.



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**What is the  
Partnership Pillar?  
Why start with a  
synthesis of SDG-17?**



# – What is the Partnership Pillar?

The Partnership Pillar consists of SDG 17, with the goal of ‘strengthening the means of implementation and revitalizing the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development’.

SDG 17 is both a Goal in itself, and a catalyst for achieving all 17 SDGs. No single entity or country can achieve sustainable development in isolation: collaborative, fair and equitable partnerships are essential to realizing the 2030 Agenda. The SDG 17 targets cover international cooperation and multi-stakeholder partnerships that can be grouped into five key areas:



## TRADE

Advocating for fair, equitable and improved trade; increasing the share of exports of developing countries; achieving duty-free and quota-free market access for the least developed countries.

## FINANCE

Encouraging developed countries to meet their commitments to provide financial assistance to developing countries to support their development efforts; promoting policies and measures that attract foreign investment to developing countries to promote economic growth and development; supporting countries to enhance domestic revenue collection, which can be used to fund development initiatives without relying heavily on external assistance.



## TECHNOLOGY

Encouraging the transfer of technologies between countries and contexts to foster innovation and ensure environmentally sustainable development.



## CAPACITY BUILDING

Assisting low- and middle-income countries to develop and implement national plans for sustainable development; encouraging partnerships between governments, the private sector, civil society and international organizations to address complex development challenges. Enhancing data collection and the capacity of monitoring systems to track SDG progress and improve accountability.



## SYSTEMIC ISSUES

Enhancing policy and institutional coherence on macroeconomic stability and sustainable development; respecting countries' policy space and leadership for poverty eradication and sustainable development; promoting multi-stakeholder partnerships that mobilize and share knowledge, expertise, technology and financial resources.



# Why start with SDG 17:

The Partnership Pillar has been chosen as the first synthesis due to the enabling role of SDG 17.

SDG 17 highlights the importance of inclusive partnerships that involve an array of stakeholders to ensure that no one is left behind. This entails collaboration and a shared commitment to working together across sectors and geographies, with the aim of leveraging diverse expertise, resources and perspectives to create lasting positive impacts.

It lays the groundwork for the holistic implementation of the SDGs by providing the foundation and acting as a catalyst for cross-sectoral cooperation, and synergizing efforts, resources and expertise to accelerate progress towards achieving Agenda 2030. Partnerships are a focus of ongoing multilateral fora including:

## THE UNGA SDG SUMMIT 2023 CALLS FOR A NEW PARADIGM TO REVITALIZE GLOBAL PARTNERSHIPS

The call for 'mobilization' and 'acceleration' emphasizes the role of multi-stakeholder approaches, which includes shifting economic models and global financial architectures, reducing donor dependency, and supporting financial accountability and transparency to achieve the SDGs.



## THE 2024 UN SUMMIT OF THE FUTURE WILL FOCUS ON 'MULTILATERAL SOLUTIONS FOR A BETTER TOMORROW'

The Summit aims to forge a new global consensus on multilateral approaches to global financial architectural reform and global digital cooperation, among others.







# How have the insights been generated, and what are the limitations?

The synthesis has generated insights into the initiatives and approaches that work to accelerate progress toward SDG 17. Evidence has been triangulated from a range of different sources: 184 impact evaluations, and systematic reviews on the effectiveness of interventions; 70 process and performance evaluations published by the evaluation offices of multilateral organizations and development agencies; 7 country case studies derived from a positive deviance assessment of country-level data on progress towards SDG 17 indicators; and a textual analysis of all Voluntary National Reviews undertaken between 2015 and 2022.



Considering the challenging timeline to present the synthesis at the SDG Summit, and resource limitations, it was agreed with the Management Group of the synthesis and the Steering Committee of the Coalition that the synthesis would focus more attention on trade, finance and technology, and less on capacity development and systemic issues. This decision was made recognizing that the focus areas hold significant cross-cutting relevance across all Pillars.





# Key insights into revitalizing the global partnership for sustainable development





## Key insight 1

Emphasizing principles of horizontal cooperation – including fair, equitable and trust-based international cooperation – is key for sustainable development. Partnerships are not sufficiently calibrated to enable LDCs and LMICs to benefit from global trade, finance and technology transfer, despite this being the foundation of SDG 17.



Partnerships are falling short in their impact at the scale needed to catalyze a more equal playing field for the least-developed (LDCs) and lower-middle income countries (LMICs) to achieve the SDGs. The Global Partnership for Sustainable Development needs to be reinforced and underpinned by approaches to international cooperation that are fair and which provide an equal footing for developing countries.

## Key insight 2

Partnership models, including South-South, North-South, public-private and trilateral arrangements, benefit from using principles of horizontal cooperation based on trust and aligned incentives in partnership design, funding modalities and governance.



Partnerships of all kinds, whether focused on trade, technology, finance, capacity building or systemic issues, are more fruitful when development incentives focus on addressing all partners' incentives and priorities. Partnerships are also more successful where the uncertainties around implementation are abated by concrete planning to achieve mutually beneficial outcomes. Countries' incentives for collaborating on SDG 17 components are influenced by their priorities, which are often similar for countries with the same income status. South-South, North-South and trilateral cooperation excel when grounded in trust and national ownership, and exhibit greater capacity for success when they are guided by horizontal principles. There is a role for multilateral partners as brokers, using their skills to promote context-specific solutions and prioritize localized approaches to strengthen capacities and enhance institutional trust. Collaboration fosters cooperation, while one-sided solutions hinder it. Recognizing countries' motivations involves designing informed initiatives, establishing mutually agreed outcomes rooted in equitable power dynamics, and incorporating funding and long-term institutionalization mechanisms advocating for fair, equitable and improved trade; increasing the share of exports of developing countries; achieving duty-free and quota-free market access for the least developed countries.

## Key insight 3

Partnerships to unlock trade opportunities for lower-middle income countries (LMICs) and least-developed countries (LDCs) and to support them to comply with regulatory standards in high income countries (HICs) could help increase their exports.



Middle income countries (MICs) have benefited from regional agreements, providing a potential roadmap for LMICs and LDCs. Readiness for trade in partnerships requires institutional strengthening and trust building to support countries to navigate trade regulations. Practical steps such as reducing unnecessary regulations and addressing non-tariff barriers have proven effective for importing countries. Although trade liberalization reduces tariff-based government revenues, there is strong evidence that points toward tax reform as a promising way to make up for this loss in the medium to long term.

## Key insight 4

Tailored tax regimes can better enhance domestic capacities. While tax collection capacities have improved, official development assistance (ODA) and strategic partnerships remain essential for limiting the negative consequences of the debt crisis, and for promoting sustainable economic growth and financial reform, especially for LDCs.



Fostering domestic resource generation involves addressing international financial challenges. Evidence shows that support for national tax generation is promising, but not necessarily in countries with substantial informal sectors. Experimentation is key to finding the right solutions to maximize government revenue. There is also a trend toward building tax bases and implementing consumption-based taxes, which has proved to be effective in middle-income countries. Effective partnerships should tailor tax regimes to specific contexts and emphasize the local communication of new taxes. While domestic capacities have improved, ODA remains crucial for low-income countries.

## Key insight 5

Effective green technology adoption requires route-to-market analysis, investment de-risking, subsidy reform and green finance, underscoring the importance of tailored, context-specific interventions.



Available evidence suggests that top-down, pre-defined interventions falter when they do not consider the local factors that support technology adoption. Investment in green initiatives is insufficient on its own to drive more widespread adoption of green technologies at the required pace and scale. While they consistently promote innovation, interventions need to be adapted to local realities or may fail to facilitate transformative shifts away from polluting technologies.

## Key insight 6

Successful digitization initiatives drive growth, often led by governments partnering with the private sector.



These initiatives were able to affect growth in the digital financial services sector by enhancing the delivery of digital public services (e.g., electronic birth registration and online tax administration), and improving the cost-efficiency of technology for rural work. Large-scale broadband programmes have been delivered with a strong lead from governments, often working with private companies.



## Key insight 7

The principle of leaving no one behind is fundamental to all SDGs. However, the systemic inattention to equity in the design and implementation of SDG 17-related initiatives may lead to the further marginalization of those most likely to be left behind.



Equity considerations should not be an afterthought, but the primary driver of interventions connected to trade, finance, technology, capacity development and systemic issues. Evaluations of these initiatives should better test approaches and disaggregate findings on their effectiveness for vulnerable populations. By taking a proactive stance on equity, partnerships can ensure that their initiatives are not only effective, but also just, inclusive and context specific.

## Key insight 8

Comprehensive risk analysis, the utilization of disaggregated data and evaluative evidence, and the application of data science techniques for reporting on the progress of SDG 17 are essential elements to enhance the effective use of Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs).



A thorough risk assessment enables countries to identify and address potential obstacles to SDG 17 targets, while disaggregated data (e.g., disaggregated by gender/sex, age - including children and youth - and by level of poverty and/or vulnerability) provides insights into disparities and aids precise policy development. Evaluative evidence draws on past experiences to inform decision making, and data science has the potential to leverage machine learning to connect VNR insights with objective data on progress toward the SDGs. Collectively, these components can bolster the credibility and effectiveness of VNRs and other reports, making them more informative and actionable for policy makers and stakeholders.





The background features a hand holding a glowing lightbulb, with a color gradient from green at the top to blue at the bottom. Concentric circles in yellow and purple are overlaid on the image. A large white outline of the number '5' is positioned in the upper right corner.

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**Evidence gaps -  
what we need**



# – Thematic evidence gaps

While the synthesis provides important evidence on what works to improve SDG 17 outcomes, the evidence base currently available, while vast, is incomplete.



There is a lack of evidence on the impact of regional trade agreements and export subsidies on low-income countries in sub-Saharan Africa, as most existing research focuses on middle-income countries. There is also the need for more evidence on illicit finance flows and strategies to mitigate them. Furthermore, while there is some evidence on green finance and broadband internet expansion, the available evidence is fragmented, primarily concentrating on a few large countries in Asia. As with equity, only a minority of interventions considered the environment or environmental sustainability in their design. There is a dearth of evidence from other contexts, raising questions about the generalizability of findings related to these matters, making it challenging to better assess the impact of SDG 17 initiatives on these outcomes. Despite these evidence gaps, the synthesis still offers valuable insights into strategies to improve SDG 17 outcomes.

## LACK OF EVIDENCE

- Lack of evidence on the impact of regional trade agreements and export subsidies on low-income countries in sub-Saharan Africa
- Lack of evidence on illicit finance flows and strategies to mitigate them
- Only a minority of interventions considered equity, the environment or environmental sustainability in their design
- Some evidence on green finance and broadband internet expansion, but the it is fragmented, primarily concentrating on a few large countries in Asia

# Methodological evidence gaps

The need for a comprehensive learning agenda, including impact, performance and process evaluations on SDG achievements, is paramount.



The Coalition calls for more rigorous mixed method evaluations, that focus on the effectiveness of initiatives, as well as on the design, implementation and process factors that contribute to success or failure, and on their cost-effectiveness. There is a need to expand the geographic focus. A learning agenda should also focus on producing more evaluations, specifically in pressing global challenges such as the public debt crisis, slowing global trade due to conflicts, surging energy prices, increased interdependence in development cooperation and fluctuations in official development assistance. Moreover, shifting our focus towards the most vulnerable among us, and in different geographical contexts in addition to macro trends, is crucial.

## NEEDS

- More rigorous mixed method evaluations, that focus on the effectiveness of initiatives, as well as on the design, implementation and process factors
- Need to expand the geographic focus
- A learning agenda should focus on producing more evaluations specifically in pressing global challenges such as the public debt crisis, slowing global trade due to conflicts, surging energy prices, increased interdependence in development cooperation and fluctuations in overseas development assistance

The background features a vertical color gradient from green at the top to blue at the bottom. A rowing team of five people is shown from an overhead perspective, moving through the water. Concentric circles in orange and purple are overlaid on the image, centered on the boat's path. A large white outline of the number '6' is positioned in the upper right corner.

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**How do we bridge  
the gaps, and  
who should be at  
the table?**



# Bridging the gaps

The evidence gaps outlined in this brief highlight the importance of extending the Coalition's synthesis efforts to encompass all five Pillars of the SDGs, as much of the evidence is intertwined with other SDG Pillars.



The interconnectedness of these Pillars is a key consideration for sustainable development. Through meticulous evaluations and insightful integrated syntheses, we can illuminate the path to effective holistic strategies and trade-offs. Integrating evaluative evidence into Voluntary National Review (VNR) reports is also of key importance, considering the relevance of these documents to share successful strategies and the reasons for their success between countries. There is also a need to strengthen the connection between VNR reports and statistical data, leveraging data science and artificial intelligence for actionable insights.

## Who should be at the table

Bridging these evidence gaps and ensuring the uptake of the lessons for effective global partnerships requires a diverse chorus of voices and perspectives contributing credible evidence and ideas for meaningful change.



The Global SDG Synthesis Coalition is poised to provide the international community with the evidence needed to make informed decisions and investments to accelerate progress toward the SDGs, but it will require credible evidence, a good understanding of local contexts and diverse partnerships. This ensemble should include: government entities, the architects of policy; the private sector and their innovation, resources, and localized perspectives and advocacy for social and environmental causes; individual stakeholders whose stories and needs must inform decision making; international organizations to serve as brokers to facilitate efforts and dialogue; academic and research institutions that provide evidence-based insights; philanthropic foundations that bring financial support and expertise; technical experts who guide partnerships with their expertise; the media, who shed light on partnership activities and promote transparency; and community representatives, who safeguard the unique needs and cultural diversity of communities.



A group of people in a meeting, with a large white number 7 overlaid on the image. The background is a blurred office setting with people sitting around a table, looking at laptops and documents. The image has a color gradient from green at the top to blue at the bottom, with decorative concentric circles in the corners.

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**How can this  
synthesis be  
used?**



# – How this synthesis can be used:

The Global SDG Synthesis Coalition will publish the full synthesis report and associated data in the public domain for use by all stakeholders.

## A FOUNDATION FOR INFORMED DECISION MAKING



Together with other knowledge and data, this synthesis serves as a foundation for informed decision making on the SDGs, particularly SDG 17. Decision makers at various levels – including policymakers, government officials and international organizations – can rely on the synthesized evidence to shape policies, strategies and initiatives that are aligned with the overarching goals of the SDGs.

## REGIONAL, NATIONAL AND LOCAL APPLICATIONS

The lessons and insights drawn out of the synthesis can be adapted for roundtable discussions and deliberations at regional, national and local levels. Policy makers and stakeholders in specific regions and countries can use this information to tailor their approaches to SDG 17 based on the unique challenges and opportunities they face. In particular, the evidence can be used to better outline how initiatives can lead to sustainable and concrete outcomes that are relevant to all participants.



## STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT AND INFORMED INVESTMENT

Multilateral organizations, private and philanthropic foundations and the private sector can use the synthesis to inform their investments and initiatives related to SDG 17. The synthesis offers a comprehensive view of successful strategies and potential areas for collaboration, helping organizations, businesses and foundations align their efforts with global sustainability goals.

## A BASIS FOR FURTHER EVALUATION, RESEARCH, AND SYNTHESIS

The evidence in the synthesis provides a solid basis for ongoing evaluations, research, and synthesis efforts. Evaluators, researchers and academics can build on this foundation to not just delve deeper into the existing evidence base, but also fill evidence gaps by prioritizing the generation of new evidence into specific aspects of SDG 17 or explore its interactions with other SDGs. This can lead to a richer understanding of the complexities and dynamics involved in achieving the SDGs.



## TO SUPPORT THE SDG HIGH IMPACT INITIATIVES

The SDG Summit in September 2023 emphasizes that transformative progress is possible through a set of High Impact Initiatives. This and future syntheses provide evidence to inform decisions on all the transitions and enablers in this framework.

## TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

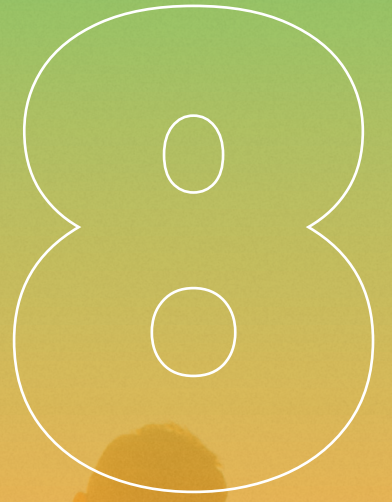
By reporting on the evidence presented in the synthesis, organizations and the media can contribute to transparency and accountability in global partnerships, ensuring that progress and challenges are communicated to the public.



## RESOURCE FOR EDUCATION, POLICY ADVOCACY AND NETWORKING

Civil society and non-governmental actors can use the synthesis to build partnerships that advance sustainable development and hold governments and institutions accountable as well as for advocacy, networking and education. The report is also a valuable resource for educational institutions and civil society groups involved in awareness campaigns, enhancing curricula, workshops, and campaigns to equip future generations and activists with evidence-based knowledge for change.





# What's next for the Global SDG Synthesis Coalition?





# 1

The next steps for the Coalition are to promote the uptake of the lessons and insights from the Partnership Pillar synthesis and conduct the subsequent syntheses on the remaining four SDG Pillars.



The Coalition continues to grow in terms of partners and collaborators, but also in ambition and strategic clarity to promote the uptake of the lessons and insights of this first synthesis. Presenting the Partnership Pillar synthesis at the 2023 SDG Summit is a first step in using the power of the Coalition to ensure that findings and lessons are considered by decision makers in different contexts.

# 2

Relying on the growth of resources and support, the Coalition is progressing with the subsequent syntheses on the other SDG Pillars: People, Peace, Planet and Prosperity.



Coalition partners are taking the lead on the syntheses of the remaining four Pillars to provide inputs to the 2024 Summit of the Future. The Coalition looks forward to the forthcoming Summit of the Future and the journey towards 2030, confident in the value that these syntheses will bring to SDG acceleration. However, more financial and in-kind support is needed to meet this ambition.

# 3

Recognizing the dynamic nature of contexts, issues and evidence, the Coalition aims to position its contributions as “living evidence syntheses” with the assistance of evaluators and synthesis methodologists.



The syntheses presented at the SDG Summit and the Summit of the Future represent snapshots of findings to date, but the intention is to maintain an ongoing reference source for stakeholders and decision makers until 2030. As contexts and the evidence base evolve, updated syntheses can provide essential insights to enable real-time, evidence-informed decision making.

# 4

What is coming next includes the development of an online, interactive evidence portal with AI technology, housing the evidence base of the syntheses.



The Coalition plans to develop an evidence portal that will present findings and lessons in an accessible and understandable way, searchable by specific geographical and population filters (gender, children/youth, disability etc.). It will also provide stakeholders and decision makers with access to the evidence bases used in the syntheses, providing opportunities to filter this according to their sex/gender, age, ethnicity, differences in ability, etc., further enhancing the accessibility and utility of the valuable insights contained within the five Pillar syntheses.









Full AIR report can be accessed at:

 <https://www.sdgsynthesiscoalition.org/pillar/partnership-pillar>

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