

Measuring Progress: Environment and the SDGs

A Brief Guide

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) elaborate the 2030 Agenda, a plan of action for people, planet and prosperity. Integrated and indivisible, the SDGs balance the three dimensions of sustainable development – economic, social and environmental – with a view to shift the world onto a sustainable and resilient path. Recognizing the urgency of the task, the goals call for all countries and all stakeholders to take urgent and transformative steps, and to realize the ambitious Agenda within the decade.



What is the *Measuring Progress: Environment and SDGs* report?

Measuring Progress: Environment and the SDGs is the 2nd in a series of reports prepared by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) that examines the global and regional progress made towards achieving key environmental targets established by the United Nations in 2015. The publication also explores the interlinkages within the environmental dimension and between the environmental and socioeconomic dimensions of the SDG framework.

Why is *Measuring Progress* being released now?

Measuring Progress is an important review of the global progress towards meeting the environmental objectives of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and follows on a similar report issued in 2018. This year's report is being issued to coincide with the International Day for Biological Diversity (May 22), which was created in 1993 to promote issues of biodiversity.

What are the Sustainable Development Goals?

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are 17 internationally agreed goals that set clear global targets for a sustainable future, with indicators that help define the scale and scope of each goal. The SDGs are the centrepiece of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which established the current decade as the timeframe for achieving the SDGs. Many of the SDGs address environmental issues, such as climate action (Goal 13), life below water (Goal 14), life on land (Goal 15), and responsible production and consumption (Goal 12), while others focus on poverty, hunger, education, gender equality and economic growth, among others.

What are the key findings of the *Measuring Progress* report?

The *Measuring Progress* report found that some encouraging results have been achieved in key environmental areas such as clean water, sanitation, clean energy, forest management and waste, but that overall, countries are still living unsustainably and will not meet the environmental dimension of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The report also emphasized that some environmental areas – such as biodiversity loss and climate change – have actually deteriorated.



By exploring the interlinkages between indicators of the SDGs, the analysis revealed examples where correlations are significant and are consistent with intuition or published evidence. It also noted that a simple correlation analysis provides only limited insight and requires improvement. Data gaps persist and lead to not fully understanding the improvement or deterioration of the state of the environment.

Has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted progress towards the 2030 Agenda?

Fortunately, much of the data was actually compiled before the pandemic's effect took hold, but the coronavirus pandemic has dramatically limited the ability of governments and global organizations to implement programmes that address the 2030 Agenda, particularly with so much of the world under lockdown for most of 2020 and beyond. While the lack of travel and regular activity may have helped temporarily reduce global CO₂ emissions, most experts expect those levels to rise quickly once the pandemic subsides. In addition, the global forest cover required to regulate CO₂ in the atmosphere continues to fall too fast to be effective.

How is global progress on the SDGs analyzed in *Measuring Progress*?

Authors of the *Measuring Progress* reviewed data supplied by the countries to the Global SDG Indicators Database to evaluate the progress made since 2018. The results of that data are encouraging. In particular, more SDG indicators with data resulted in more positive trends towards achieving environmental goals. But vast gaps in global data and a lack of standardization – in addition to no clear means of assessing the outcome of policies or political actions in such a short time span – means that the results are still somewhat general and more work needs to be done to fill data gaps.

Who are the authors of *Measuring Progress*?

Measuring Progress is jointly produced by the United Nations Environment programme (UNEP), the global organization charged with coordinating responses to environmental issues within the United Nations system, and the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), the multilateral treaty that works to protect biodiversity and ensure the long-term health

and sustainable use of genetic resources. The methodology has been developed by the University College London and the Chinese Academy of Sciences played an important role in data analysis. Experts from a numerous U.N. agencies and programmes, universities, non-governmental organizations, and research institutions collaborated to analyze the data and prepare the report.

In what areas is the world making progress?

Measuring Progress cites numerous examples of important activity towards achieving the environmental goals of the SDGs. For instance, the Republic of South Africa appears to be both increasing the conservation of plant genetic resources even as it decreases the proportion of at-risk local breeds. More generally, protected areas have been expanded and pro-environment legislation has increased.

In what areas is the world falling behind?

Measuring Progress confirms that biodiversity loss and climate continue to be issues that are deteriorating and are in serious danger of not meeting the 2030 goals. *Measuring Progress* makes clear that the environmental objectives of the Aichi Targets – a 10-year framework for action agreed by all countries in 2000 to save biodiversity through 20 ambitious but achievable goals – were not met, and the world is in danger of repeating that failure with the SDGs. It also notes that not even the increase in protected areas has been enough to stem the number of species under the threat of extinction.

What can be done to improve progress towards the SDGs?

Measuring Progress calls for better data to be supplied to national governments to inform policies that will address environmental issues. The report also notes a gap on the use of environmental data and statistics to inform government policy and decision-making, and highlights the importance of combining traditional data with the robust data produced by remote sensing, in situ sensors and artificial intelligence technologies, and the diversity of data collated through environmental–economic accounting activities. *Measuring Progress* also emphasizes the need for capacity-building to improve the handling and comprehension of data, particularly if countries are going to “bend the curve” of further environmental deterioration.

