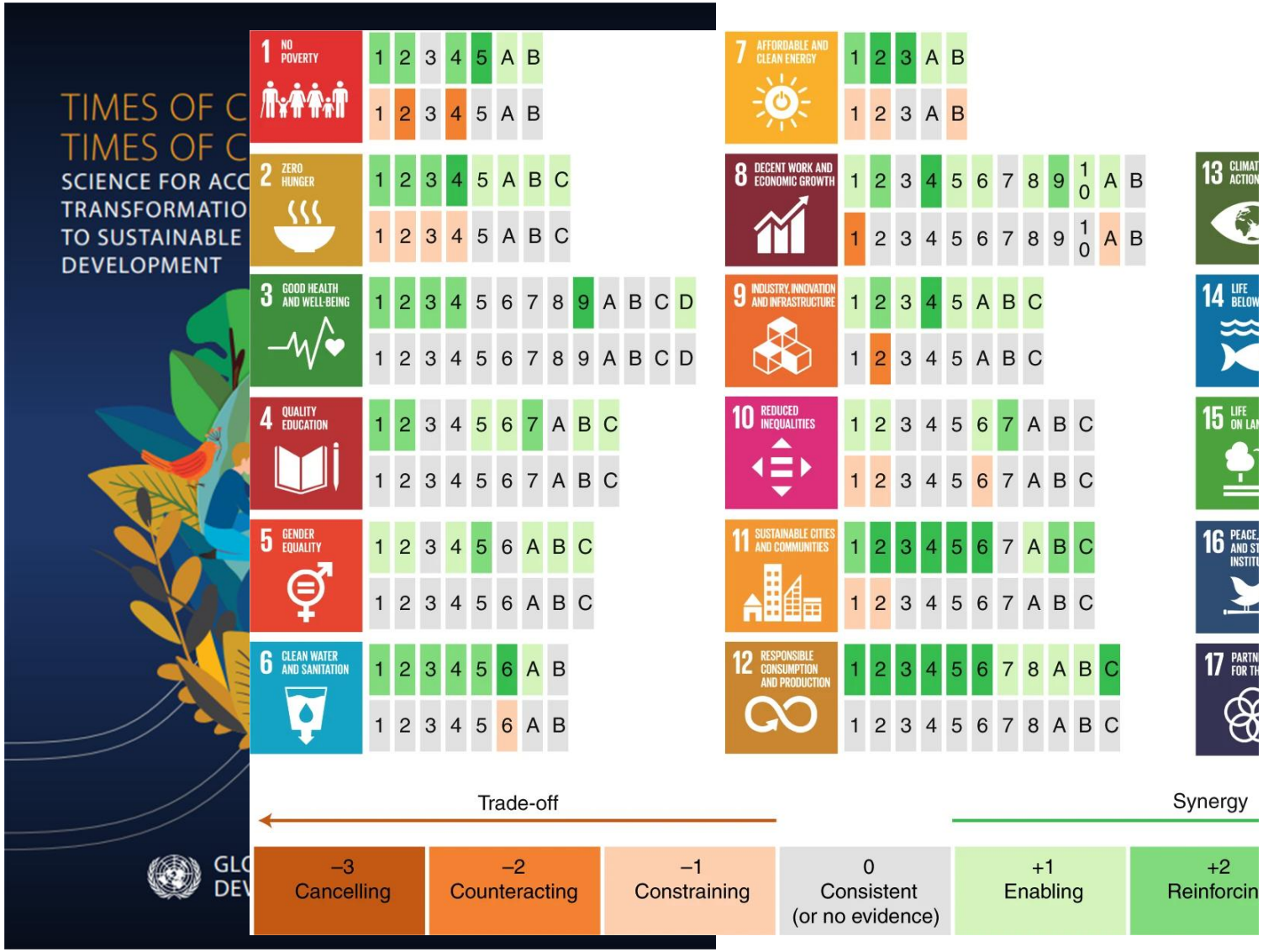
What has the world done well, and where do we need to see improvement for a post-2030 Agenda?

Åsa Persson



Comment

COSTFOTO/NURPHOTO VIA GETTY

Workers plant straw barriers in desert areas in northwest China's Gansu province to stop sand from spreading, aiding afforestation.

Extending the Sustainable Development Goals to 2050 — a road map

Francesco Fuso Nerini, Mariana Mazzucato, Johan Rockström, Harro van Asselt, Jim W. Hall, Stelvia Matos, Åsa Persson, Benjamin Sovacool, Ricardo Vinuesa & Jeffrey Sachs

The world should redouble its efforts on the SDGs, not abandon them. Here's how to progress the United Nations' agenda towards 2050.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have been widely endorsed by governments, civil society and the private sector as a framework for creating a better world. Yet, as the 2030 deadline for achieving them looms, it is clear that most, if not all, will remain unmet. Most countries are way off track (see 'Slow progress'); only a few targets, such as mobile broadband access and Internet use, are in reach[1,2].

This lag stems in part from the slowing of the global economy by shocks, including the COVID-19 pandemic and international conflicts, which weren't anticipated in 2015 when the goals were agreed[1,2]. The goals require deep transformations in education, health, energy, land use, urban infrastructure and digital platforms, financed and implemented in an integrated manner[3]. Governments are struggling to fund long-term investments in infrastructure. And the sheer range of targets, across all sectors of the economy and at local, national, regional and global levels, challenges current modes of governance.

There is insufficient finance to enable low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) to achieve the SDGs[4]. Many nations are in debt distress after the pandemic and face a tight schedule of repayments, which is setting back development. Weak domestic institutions and corruption[5] further hamper the flow of equity and debt finance to LMICs.

SDG actions, too, often remain siloed, and strategies unaligned. For example, as well as increasing spending on health, many COVID-19 recovery packages poured money into shoring up carbon-intensive industries rather than boosting renewables. Only a handful of countries' climate commitments under the Paris agreement take into account broader SDG outcomes, including impacts on incomes, poverty, jobs, inequality, health and education[6].

Given all these constraints, some people have argued that the world should take stock and focus on fewer sustainability goals and targets. We disagree. Because all of these global crises are interlinked, only a holistic and global approach to solving them will work. The SDGs should remain at the centre of global policy agendas.

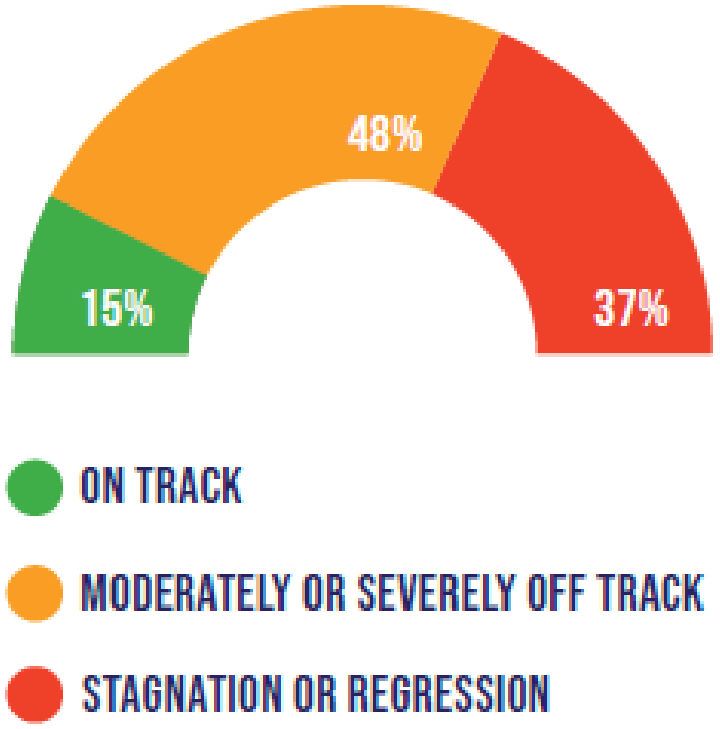
Outline

- Progress and pattern so far
- Counterfactual analysis
- Ideas for post-2030 agenda from academia
- Priorities ahead

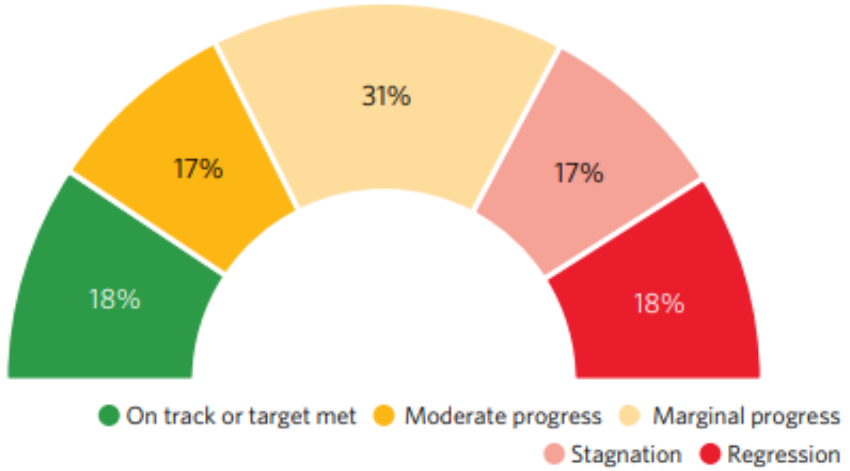
2023

2025

A CONCERNING PICTURE OF SDG PROGRESS AT THE MIDPOINT:

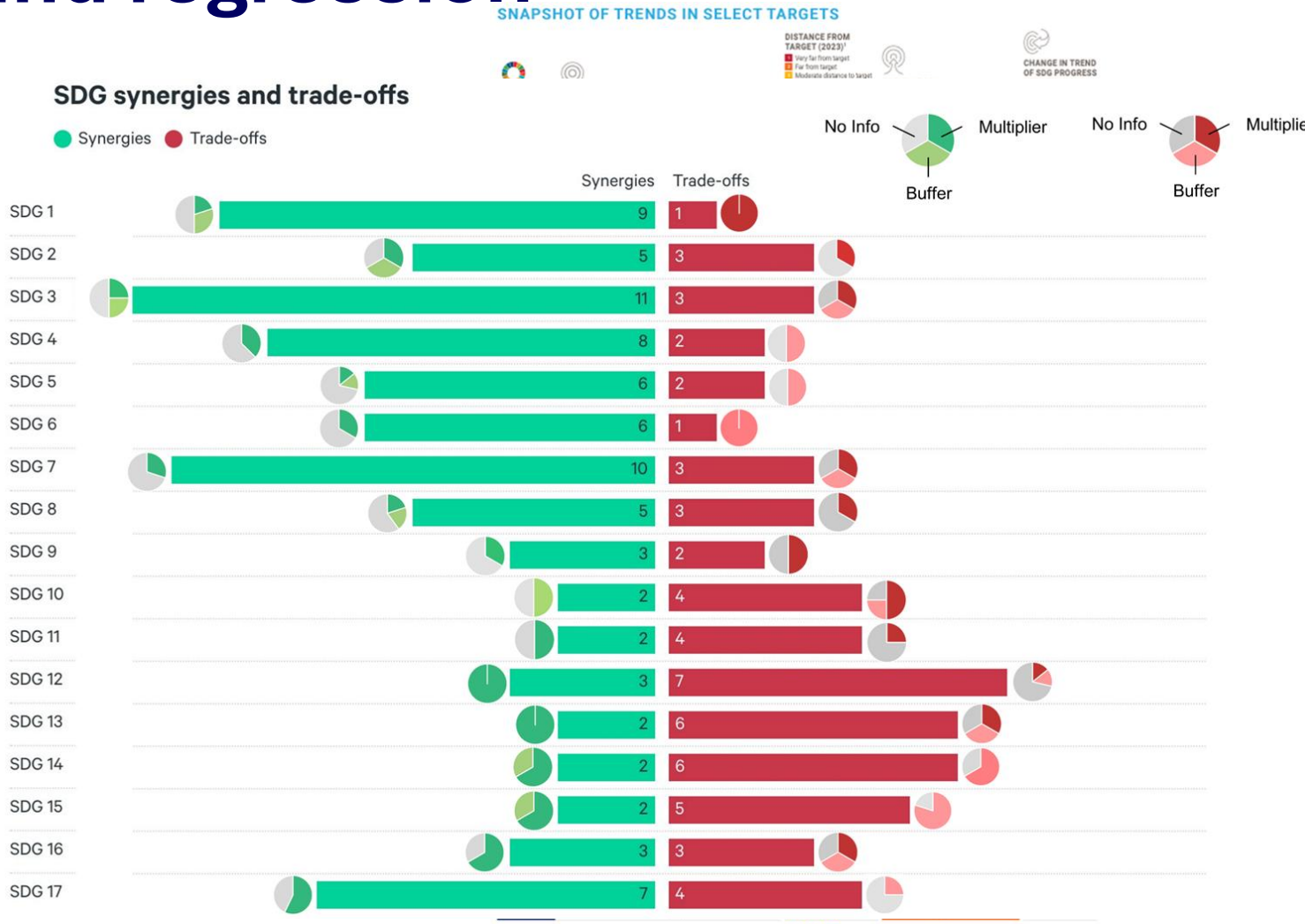


Some improvement?



Patterns of progress and regression

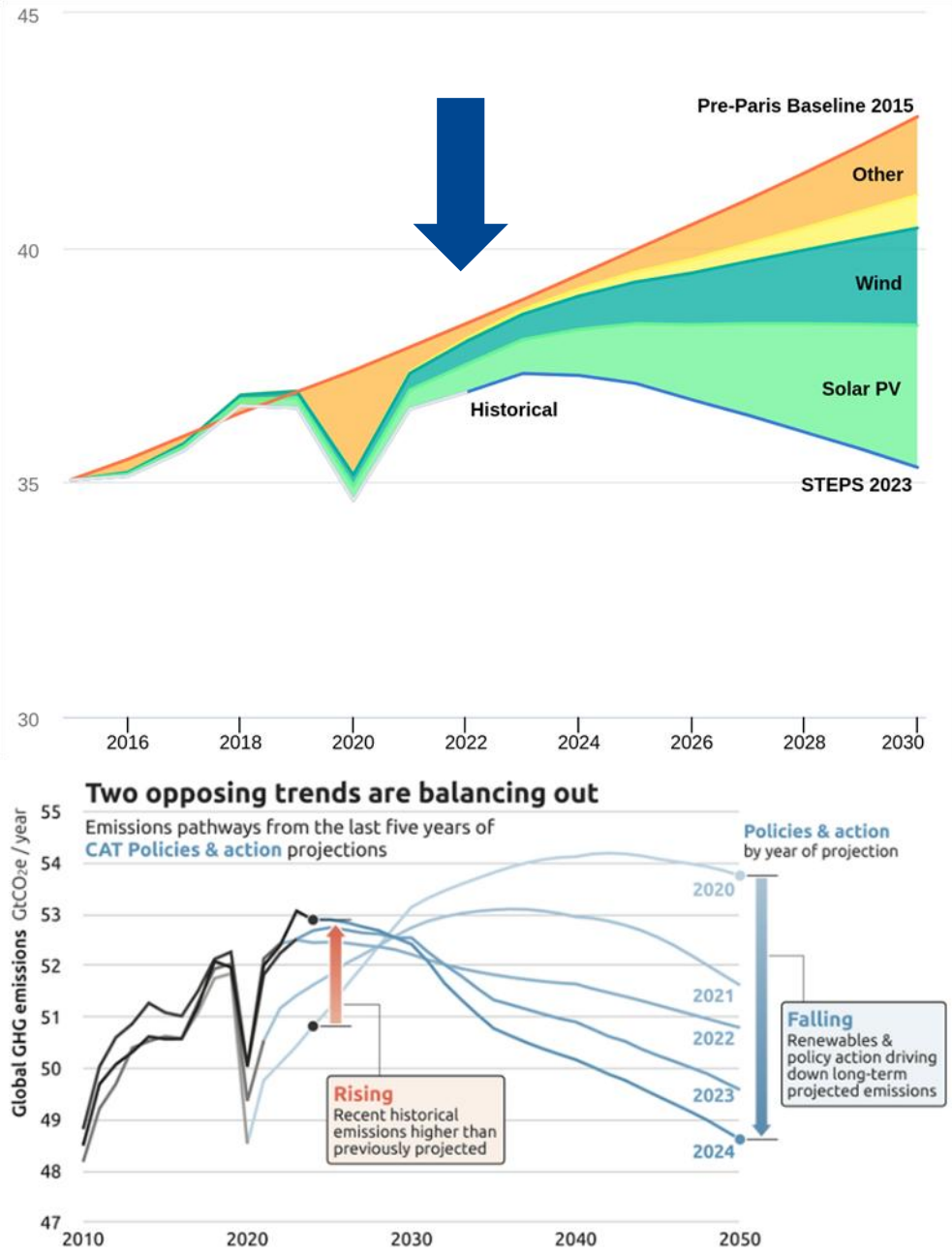
- Progress:
  - Access to electricity
  - Internet use, from 40% in 2015 to 68% in 2024
  - More progress on technology uptake targets
- Regression
  - Environmental targets are more vulnerable to negative effects from progress on other targets



The counterfactual

- Gap analysis: how far are we from 2030 targets?
- Counterfactual analysis: where would we be in 2030 without SDGs?
- Example:
  - Before Paris Agreement, warming of ~4 degrees
  - With Paris Agreement, warming of 2.7 degrees
  - Progressive pledges and action pays off!

- Need for analysis that compares projections of target attainment over time – are we on a better path, even if not fully there?



Developing and agreeing a post-2030 Agenda

- UNSG report to member states – March 2027
- UN HLPF ”SDG Summit”: consider how we will advance sustainable development by 2030 and beyond – September 2027

- Outcome likely to depend on:

  - Progress on current SDGs and narrative around feasibility, ambition and multilateralism
  - Requires new proposals – bold or pragmatic?

Ideas from academia so far

Fuso-Nerini et al., 2024:

- Extending selected goals to 2050, with interim targets for 2030 and 2040
- Improve current framework:
  - Include new technologies, such as AI
  - Align with planetary boundaries
  - Adopt mission-based approaches
  - Scale up public invesment
  - Foster accountability

Setting the agenda in research

Comment

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Ideas and proposals from academia

- University of Groningen workshop in October 2025
- SEI workshop in December 2025
- SDG Dialogue Forum in Vienna Oct 2025

- Cernev adn Fenner, 2024, Beyond 2030: structures for achieving sustainable development, Frontiers in Climate – 6 new goals
- Bai, 2024, **Post-2030 global goals need explicit targets for cities and businesses**, Science
- Perspectives focusing on urban sustainability, indigenous people, space

Suggested priorities

- SDGs as a results framework – if not a governance mechanisms
- Incorporating the time dimension
- UN reform and new visions of multilateralism
- What do people want
- Is less more

Thank you!

- **Global Perspective – What has the world done well, and where do we need to see improvement for any post-2030 Agenda?**
- **Åsa Persson, Strategic Advisor and Researcher, KTH Royal Institute of Technology, Climate Action Centre & Chair of the Swedish Climate Policy Council, Sweden**
- In this talk, we will look at the latest SDG progress reports and the 2023 Global Sustainable Development Report to assess where the world is collectively doing well and where improvement is needed. We will consider patterns, such as the stronger progress on targets related to technology uptake and the lack of progress on many of the environmental targets, and what might explain these patterns. In addition, we will explore the counterfactual; where would the world have been without Agenda 2030 and SDG framework?
- Looking forward to the next big stock-take moment of the SDG Summit in 2027, which will also kick off discussions on a sustainable development agenda beyond 2030, I will review ideas and proposals so far from academia. I will suggest some priorities for the process ahead, including the role of the SDGs as a global 'results framework', how to better incorporate the time dimension in global agreements on sustainable development, the connection to the UN reform agenda and new visions for multilateralism, and if and how 'less is more'.

- Stock-take of Agenda 2030