POLICY & RESEARCH PAPER

Accelerating SDG Implementation at Halftime: Policy Options for the 2023 SDG Summit

Author: Advocacy Unified Network Policy Unit Published: September 1, 2023

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY & KEY TAKEAWAYS

The convergence of these four initiatives is significant because it suggests that there is significant political momentum and a set of overlapping reform agendas across multiple constituencies: the Secretary-General, the Group of Twenty, climate-vulnerable states, and the multilateral development banks. What is missing is the decisional moment at which that momentum is translated into time-bound, monitorable commitments. The 2023 SDG Summit represents a critical opportunity for such a decisional moment. The Ten Decisions proposed in this paper are designed to inform and shape the political declaration under negotiation at the Summit, to be operationalised through the period between September 2023 and the Summit of the Future in September 2024, with implementation continuing thereafter in accordance with the requirements of the relevant intergovernmental and institutional processes, and to be monitored through the High-level Political Forum on a rolling basis to 2030. Each decision is structured to address one or more dimensions of the governance gap identified in the framework set out in this paper and to convert the political momentum that already exists into the institutional architecture that the 2030 Agenda requires.

ADVOCACY UNIFIED NETWORK (AUN)

The SDG Summit 2023

Ten Decisions Required to Move From Midpoint Diagnosis to Delivery

Policy Window

The 2023 SDG Summit • UN General Assembly High-Level Week

1 September 2023

Executive Summary

On 18 and 19 September 2023, world leaders will convene at United Nations Headquarters in New York for the 2023 SDG Summit, the high-level political forum on sustainable development convened under the auspices of the General Assembly[1]. The Summit marks the midpoint of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable

Development, the second such summit since the agenda's adoption in 2015, and the principal negotiating moment for the international community to translate seven years of incremental learning into a credible acceleration plan for the remaining seven-year horizon. It responds to a polycrisis era in which the climate emergency, the war in Ukraine, a weak global economy, and the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have converged to threaten the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and to expose the structural governance gaps that constrain their delivery.

The midpoint diagnosis is unambiguous. According to *The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2023: Special Edition*, published by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs in July 2023[2], only 15 per cent of the assessable SDG targets are on track; nearly half (48 per cent) are moderately off track; and approximately 37 per cent are either stalled or regressing. Of the 169 targets, 138 can be assessed against available data, leaving 31 targets without sufficient data for a credible trend assessment[2, 3]. The report warns that unless the world redoubles its efforts, the 2030 Agenda may become, in the Secretary-General's words, an epitaph for a world that might have been. Translating this diagnosis into delivery is the principal political task of the SDG Summit and the test against which the Summit's negotiated political declaration will be assessed.

This policy paper, prepared by the Advocacy Unified Network (AUN) and published in Opus Publica, sets out an analytical framework on the governance gap that constrains SDG implementation, and translates that framework into a concrete negotiating agenda for the 2023 SDG Summit. The governance gap is presented here not principally as a problem of ambition but of architecture: the international system possesses the diagnostic instruments to monitor progress but lacks commensurate mechanisms to convert monitoring into corrective action, the financing instruments to convert commitments into investment, and the accountability instruments to convert political will into demonstrable results. Closing this gap requires a set of negotiated decisions that move the multilateral system from voluntary reporting to structured accountability, from incremental pledges to predictable financing, and from sectoral programming to systemic transitions.

The paper proposes Ten Decisions that the SDG Summit should invite Member States and the United Nations system to consider, individually and as an integrated package: (1) operationalise the SDG Stimulus through a time-bound compact; (2) initiate an intergovernmental process toward a multilateral sovereign debt restructuring framework; (3) call for the early capitalisation and operationalisation of the Loss and Damage Fund, on a scale proposed by AUN; (4) encourage the adoption of a systemic-transitions framework for SDG implementation, drawing on the entry points of the Global Sustainable Development Report 2023 and the six transitions being articulated by the United Nations system; (5) call upon the shareholders and Boards of Governors of the multilateral development banks to reform their capital adequacy frameworks; (6) initiate an intergovernmental process to strengthen the accountability dimension of the Voluntary National Review; (7) initiate the negotiation of an SDG Data Compact; (8) anchor SDG delivery in multilateral reform and the Summit of the Future; (9) institutionalise an SDG Governance Compact for stakeholder participation; and (10) call upon the General Assembly to convene a 2025 Midpoint+ checkpoint and to strengthen the High-level Political Forum. Each decision specifies the diagnosis, the mechanism, the owner, and the timeframe required for implementation. The relevant processes should be initiated and substantially advanced through the period between September 2023 and the Summit of the Future in September 2024, with implementation continuing thereafter in accordance with the requirements of the relevant intergovernmental and institutional processes.

The case for these decisions rests on three propositions that the paper develops in detail. First, the midpoint diagnosis is sufficient to warrant decisions of structural rather than incremental ambition; the cost of inaction is no longer hypothetical. Second, the political conditions for such decisions are more favourable than at any moment since 2015, given the significant political momentum and overlapping reform agendas represented by the Secretary-General's SDG Stimulus[4], the Bridgetown Initiative[5], the COP27 agreement on loss and damage[6], and the preparations for the Summit of the Future[7]. Third, the alternative—a rhetorical reaffirmation of the 2030 Agenda without time-bound, monitorable decisions—would consolidate the very governance gap that this paper identifies. The SDG Summit must therefore be evaluated not by the eloquence of its political declaration but by the specificity of the decisions it invites and the follow-up architecture it authorises.

1. Opening Hook and Strategic Imperative

Seven years after the adoption of the 2030 Agenda and seven years from its terminal deadline, the international community approaches the 2023 SDG Summit with a paradox. The diagnostic instruments of the multilateral system have never been more precise. *The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2023: Special Edition* published in July 2023[2], the advance, unedited version of the *Global Sustainable Development Report 2023* made available in late June 2023 and presented at the High-level Political Forum on 17 July 2023[8], the voluntary national reviews presented by 39 countries at the High-level Political Forum in July 2023[9], and the parallel reports of the United Nations system and of civil society networks together constitute an unusually comprehensive assessment of the state of sustainable development. The paradox is that this diagnostic precision has not been matched by delivery. The very system that has refined the science of monitoring progress has not yet developed the architecture required to convert monitoring into action.

The implications of this paradox extend well beyond the technocratic. At the midpoint of the 2030 Agenda, approximately 122 million more people are facing hunger than in 2019, according to the *State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2023* report published by five United Nations specialised agencies in July 2023[10]. The World Bank's 2022 update on learning poverty estimates that 70 per cent of ten-year-olds in low- and middle-income countries are unable to read and understand a simple text—a figure that worsened during the pandemic and that, if uncorrected, will compound across a generation[11]. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, in its Sixth Assessment Synthesis Report of March 2023, assessed that global warming is more likely than not to reach 1.5 degrees Celsius in the near term, defined as the period 2021–2040, under the considered scenarios[12]. These are not projections of distant risk; they are measurements of present deterioration, and they converge on a single conclusion: the cost of delayed delivery is no longer hypothetical and is no longer evenly distributed. The poorest and most vulnerable, who have contributed least to the polycrisis, bear its sharpest consequences.

It is against this background that the 2023 SDG Summit acquires its strategic significance. The Summit is not merely a moment of stocktaking; it is the principal political window through which the international community can convert the midpoint diagnosis into a delivery agenda. The anticipated outcome of the Summit—a negotiated political declaration, the zero draft of which was circulated on 8 May 2023 and the revised zero draft on 8 June 2023, co-facilitated by the Permanent Representatives of Ireland and Qatar[13], supported by the Secretary-General's proposals, and informed by the Global Sustainable Development Report—is a critical factor in determining whether the remaining seven years of the 2030 Agenda are characterised by acceleration or by managed decline. As of the date of this paper's publication, the political declaration remains under negotiation. The thesis of this policy paper is that the declaration will only be adequate to that task if it invites a specific set of decisions that close the governance gap between diagnosis and delivery. A declaration that reaffirms ambition without authorising follow-up decisions would be remembered as the moment at which the international community chose diagnosis over delivery.

The Advocacy Unified Network (AUN) advances this argument from its position as a global public policy research and advocacy organisation headquartered in The Hague, whose mission is to bridge the gap between politics and policy and to promote effective democratic governance through meaningful stakeholder involvement in the policy-making process[14]. The analytical framework on the governance gap presented in this paper proceeds from the observation that the principal constraint on delivery is not solely a problem of resources, technology, or technical capacity, important as these are, but also a problem of governance architecture. The Ten Decisions proposed in this paper translate that framework into a negotiating agenda that the SDG Summit can invite, that the Summit of the Future can consolidate, and that the High-level Political Forum can monitor through to 2030.

2. Background and Context

2.1 The 2023 SDG Summit: A Midpoint Juncture

The 2023 SDG Summit is the high-level political forum on sustainable development convened under the auspices of the General Assembly at the level of Heads of State and Government. Such summits take place every four years under General Assembly resolutions 67/290 and 70/299[1]; the 2023 Summit is the second since the adoption of the 2030 Agenda in September 2015, the first having taken place in September 2019. The Summit marks the midpoint of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and is the centerpiece of the High-level Week of the seventy-eighth session of the General Assembly. Its mandate, established by General Assembly resolution 70/299, is to carry out a comprehensive review of the state of the SDGs, to respond to the impact of the multiple and interlocking crises facing the world, and to provide high-level political guidance on transformative and accelerated actions leading up to 2030. The Summit is informed by the advance, unedited version of the *Global Sustainable Development Report 2023* prepared by an independent group of scientists and made available in late June 2023[8], and by the 2023 Special Edition of the SDG Progress Report by the Secretary-General[2].

The institutional architecture within which the Summit operates is consequential for what it can and cannot decide. The anticipated outcome of the Summit is a single negotiated political declaration, covering the different and complementary functions of both the Summit and the High-level Political Forum convened under the auspices of the Economic and Social Council in July of the same year. The declaration is being co-facilitated by H.E. Mr. Fergal Mythen, Permanent Representative of Ireland to the United Nations, and H.E. Ms. Alya Ahmed Saif Al-Thani, Permanent Representative of the State of Qatar, on behalf of the President of the General Assembly[13]. The zero draft of the declaration was circulated on 8 May 2023, a revised zero draft on 8 June 2023, and informal consultations with Member States and with major groups and other stakeholders continued through June and July 2023. As of the date of this paper's publication, the political declaration remains under negotiation; the present paper therefore refers throughout to the draft declaration and to its anticipated scope rather than to an adopted text. The scope anticipated in the draft—scaling up actions on key transitions, building resilience and leaving no one behind, applying science, technology, innovation, and data, strengthening integrated policies and public institutions, strengthening the multilateral system, and mobilising finance and investments—provides the framework within which the Ten Decisions proposed in this paper are situated.

2.2 The Midpoint Diagnosis: Progress, Stagnation, and Regression

The midpoint diagnosis is the empirical foundation on which any decision of the SDG Summit must rest. *The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2023: Special Edition*, prepared by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs in collaboration with the entire United Nations Statistical System, provides the authoritative assessment[2]. Among the 169 targets of the 2030 Agenda, 138 can be assessed against available global data and analysis conducted by custodian agencies, while 31 targets lack sufficient data or additional analysis for a trend assessment. Of the 138 assessable targets, only 15 per cent are on track to be achieved by 2030; nearly half (48 per cent) show moderate progress; and approximately 37 per cent are either stalled or regressing[2, 3]. The Progress Chart 2023, which accompanies the report, employs a stoplight framework to assess trends against the baseline year of 2015 using the most recent available data. The pattern is consistent across the goals: progress where it has occurred has been unevenly distributed, and regression has been most pronounced in the goals most exposed to the polycrisis—poverty, hunger, climate, biodiversity, and peaceful societies.

Behind these aggregate figures lie specific reversals that have measurable human consequences. The COVID-19 pandemic pushed an estimated 93 million people into extreme poverty in 2020 and an additional 119 to 124 million people into extreme poverty by 2021, reversing a generation of progress[2]. The war in Ukraine, through its impact on food, fuel, and fertiliser prices, was projected to push a further 75 million to 95 million people into extreme poverty in 2022[2]. The *State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2023* report estimated that more than 122 million more people faced hunger in 2022 than in 2019, driven by the pandemic, repeated weather shocks, and conflicts[10]. On learning poverty, the joint World Bank, UNESCO, UNICEF, USAID, FCDO, and Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation report estimated in 2022 that 70 per cent of ten-year-olds in low- and middle-income countries could not read and understand a simple text, an increase from 57 per cent in 2019[11]. On women's political representation, the Inter-Parliamentary Union's *Women in Parliament 2022* report, published in March 2023, found that the global proportion of women parliamentarians had reached 26.5 per cent, up from 25.5 per cent in 2021—a rate of progress that, if continued, would not deliver gender parity by 2030[15]. None of these trends is the result of unknown causes; each is the result of policy and governance choices that the SDG Summit can influence.

2.3 The Governance Gap Framework: An Analytical Framework Developed in This Paper

The analytical framework on the governance gap presented in this paper provides the foundation for the Ten Decisions proposed below. AUN is a non-profit, non-partisan think tank and research organisation, headquartered in The Hague, that promotes effective and efficient democratic governance through deeper and more meaningful involvement of stakeholders in the policy-making process[14]. The framework proceeds from the observation that the international system has developed sophisticated instruments for diagnosing the state of sustainable development but has not developed commensurate instruments for converting that diagnosis into delivery. The governance gap, as defined in this paper, is the structural space between what the multilateral system can measure and what it can mandate, between what it can recommend and what it can require, and between what it can pledge and what it can disburse.

The framework identifies four dimensions of the governance gap that are particularly consequential at the midpoint of the 2030 Agenda. The first is a financing gap: the Addis Ababa Action Agenda, adopted in 2015 as the financing framework for the 2030 Agenda, set out a vision for how the Goals would be financed, but the annual SDG financing gap in developing countries has been estimated at approximately USD 2.5 trillion, and the international financial architecture has not been reformed to close it. The second is an accountability gap: the Voluntary National Reviews presented annually at the High-level Political Forum have generated a substantial evidence base on implementation, but they remain voluntary and are not coupled to a peer-review or corrective-action mechanism that would convert reporting into accountability. The third is a data gap: of 169 SDG targets, 31 lack sufficient data for trend assessment[2], and the data that does exist is rarely disaggregated to the level required to honour the commitment to leave no one behind. The fourth is a participation gap: the multilateral system has institutionalised the engagement of major groups and other stakeholders, but the engagement is largely consultative rather than decisional, and the translation of stakeholder voice into policy outcome is incomplete.

2.4 The Negotiating Window: From Diagnosis to Delivery

The political conditions for closing the governance gap are more favourable at the 2023 SDG Summit than at any moment since the adoption of the 2030 Agenda. Four converging initiatives have created a window of opportunity that did not exist at the 2019 SDG Summit and may not recur before 2030. The first is the Secretary-General's SDG Stimulus, launched in February 2023, which proposes to scale up affordable long-term financing by aligning all financing flows to the SDGs, targeting at least USD 500 billion per year for developing countries through three concrete actions: tackling the high debt burden of developing countries, increasing the financing capacity of multilateral development banks, and expanding contingency financing[4]. The second is the Bridgetown Initiative, launched by Prime Minister Mia Mottley of Barbados in 2022, which has placed the reform of the international financial architecture at the centre of the international agenda and has framed the case for reform in terms that combine climate justice and development finance[5]. The third is the agreement at the 27th Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change in Sharm el-Sheikh in November 2022 to establish new funding arrangements and a dedicated fund for loss and damage[6], which created a political precedent for new multilateral financial instruments. The fourth is the preparation for the Summit of the Future, scheduled for 22 and 23 September 2024, which will consider a Pact for the Future and which provides a horizon against which the SDG Summit's decisions can be consolidated[7].

The convergence of these four initiatives is significant because it suggests that there is significant political momentum and a set of overlapping reform agendas across multiple constituencies: the Secretary-General, the Group of Twenty, climate-vulnerable states, and the multilateral development banks. What is missing is the decisional moment at which that momentum is translated into time-bound, monitorable commitments. The 2023 SDG Summit represents a critical opportunity for such a decisional moment. The Ten Decisions proposed in this paper are designed to inform and shape the political declaration under negotiation at the Summit, to be operationalised through the period between September 2023 and the Summit of the Future in September 2024, with implementation continuing thereafter in accordance with the requirements of the relevant intergovernmental and institutional processes, and to be monitored through the High-level Political Forum on a rolling basis to 2030. Each decision is structured to address one or more dimensions of the governance gap identified in the framework set out in this paper and to convert the political momentum that already exists into the institutional architecture that the 2030 Agenda requires.

3. Ten Decisions to Move From Diagnosis to Delivery

The Ten Decisions proposed in this section are presented as an integrated package. They are designed to inform and shape the political declaration under negotiation at the 2023 SDG Summit and to be operationalised through a sequence of follow-up decisions at the Summit of the Future, the High-level Political Forum, and the relevant intergovernmental bodies. Each decision is presented in terms of the diagnosis it addresses, the mechanism through which it would operate, the owner responsible for its implementation, and the timeframe within which it should be operationalised. The relevant processes should be initiated and substantially advanced through the period between September 2023 and the Summit of the

Future in September 2024, with implementation continuing thereafter in accordance with the requirements of the relevant intergovernmental and institutional processes. The decisions are interdependent: a time-bound compact on the SDG Stimulus (Decision 1) requires a reformed sovereign debt framework (Decision 2) and reformed multilateral development banks (Decision 5); an accountability mechanism (Decision 6) requires a data compact (Decision 7) and a strengthened High-level Political Forum (Decision 10); and a systemic-transitions framework (Decision 4) requires the participation of stakeholders through a governance compact (Decision 9). Adopting the package as a whole is designed to address the governance gap identified in the framework set out in this paper; adopting the decisions selectively would leave parts of the gap unresolved.

Decision 1: Operationalise the SDG Stimulus through a Time-Bound Compact

Diagnosis: The Secretary-General's SDG Stimulus, launched in February 2023, proposes to mobilise at least USD 500 billion per year in affordable long-term financing for developing countries through three actions: tackling the high debt burden, increasing multilateral development bank financing, and expanding contingency financing[4]. The stimulus is supported by the Secretary-General, by the United Nations Development Programme, and by a growing coalition of Member States, but it remains a proposal rather than a commitment. Without a time-bound instrument to track and operationalise it, the stimulus risks the fate of earlier climate finance pledges. The commitment made in 2009 to mobilise USD 100 billion per year in climate finance by 2020 was not met by its original deadline; the most recent confirmed figure available at the time of writing was USD 89.6 billion mobilised in 2021[16]. The political declaration of the SDG Summit should not merely welcome the SDG Stimulus but should invite its operationalisation.

Mechanism: The SDG Summit should invite Member States, with facilitation and support from the Secretary-General and the SDG Stimulus Group, to initiate an appropriate intergovernmental process toward a time-bound compact, to be concluded by the Summit of the Future in September 2024, that translates the three actions of the SDG Stimulus into time-bound, quantified commitments by the relevant actors. The compact should establish a transparent tracking platform housed in the United Nations, with annual progress reports to the High-level Political Forum, and should include reputational accountability mechanisms in the form of public reporting and peer review. The compact should be explicit that the USD 500 billion figure is a floor and not a ceiling, and that the long-term ambition is to mobilise the expanded lending that the Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme has indicated could potentially reach approximately USD 1.8 trillion through the stimulus actions[21]. Owner: Member States, acting through an intergovernmental process, with facilitation and support from the Secretary-General in his capacity as Chair of the SDG Stimulus Group, in coordination with the President of the General Assembly and the President of the Economic and Social Council. Timeframe: Negotiation initiated between September 2023 and September 2024; commencement of implementation by 1 January 2025; first progress report to the 2025 High-level Political Forum.

Decision 2: Initiate an Intergovernmental Process toward a Multilateral Sovereign Debt Restructuring Framework

Diagnosis: The debt burden of developing countries has reached levels that actively obstruct SDG delivery. According to UNCTAD's *A World of Debt 2023*, published on 12 July 2023, global public debt reached a record USD 92 trillion in 2022, with developing countries owing almost 30 per cent of the total[17]. UNCTAD reports that 3.3 billion people live in countries that spend more on interest payments than on education or health[17]. The current architecture for sovereign debt restructuring is fragmented and ad hoc: the Group of Twenty Common Framework for Debt Treatments, established in 2020, has had limited scope, particularly because its eligibility framework did not extend broadly to middle-income countries facing debt distress, and has produced slow and uneven outcomes. The asymmetry of the present system—in which creditors, including private bondholders, enjoy structural advantages over sovereign debtors—translates directly into reduced fiscal space for SDG investment.

Mechanism: The SDG Summit should call upon the General Assembly to initiate an intergovernmental process toward a multilateral sovereign debt restructuring framework under the auspices of the United Nations, with the aim of providing predictable, timely, and orderly restructuring of sovereign debt for all developing countries, including middle-income countries. The framework, as envisaged in this paper, would incorporate predictable standstills on debt payments during restructuring, would seek to bind private creditors through statutory provisions rather than voluntary arrangements, and would link debt restructuring to SDG investment plans through debt-for-SDG swaps and similar instruments. The framework should be negotiated through a United Nations intergovernmental process, with the involvement of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank in their technical capacities, with the aim of concluding by 2025. Owner: The President of the General Assembly, supported by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development and the Secretary-General. Timeframe: Intergovernmental process initiated by January 2024; framework concluded by 2025; operational from 2026, subject to the relevant intergovernmental decisions.

Decision 3: Call for the Early Capitalisation and Operationalisation of the Loss and Damage Fund

Diagnosis: The 27th Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, convened in Sharm el-Sheikh in November 2022, reached a breakthrough agreement to establish new funding arrangements and a dedicated fund for loss and damage for developing countries vulnerable to the adverse effects of climate change[6]. The agreement was historic in principle but its operationalisation was deferred: the Transitional Committee on the operationalisation of the new funding arrangements held its first meeting in Luxor, Egypt, from 27 to 29 March 2023 and adopted a workplan toward the 28th Conference of the Parties[18]; the Transitional Committee is considering the institutional design, the governance, the eligibility, and the sources of funding, and has not yet finalised its recommendations. Without early capitalisation and operationalisation, the loss and damage fund risks becoming a symbolic rather than a substantive instrument, and the climate-development nexus that links SDG 13 to the broader 2030 Agenda will remain unaddressed at the level of financing.

Mechanism: The SDG Summit should express political support for the early capitalisation and operationalisation of the Loss and Damage Fund and should encourage Member States to announce initial pledges at the 28th Conference of the Parties in Dubai in November and December 2023. AUN proposes, as a policy recommendation, that the cumulative initial capitalisation target should be at least USD 100 billion, with a replenishment cycle of four years; this figure is an AUN policy proposal and does not constitute an internationally agreed target. The Summit should call for arrangements that ensure the fund is accessible to all developing countries vulnerable to the adverse effects of climate change, including small island developing states and least developed countries, and that it supports both slow-onset and sudden-onset events. The Summit should urge the relevant UNFCCC bodies to ensure that the governance of the fund provides for direct access for affected communities and integrates with national SDG implementation plans. Owner: The Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and its relevant bodies, with political impetus from the SDG Summit. Timeframe: Initial capitalisation and operationalisation by the 28th Conference of the Parties in 2023, with the objective of enabling initial disbursements during 2024; first replenishment cycle by 2027.

Decision 4: Encourage the Adoption of a Systemic-Transitions Framework for SDG Implementation

Diagnosis: The advance, unedited version of the *Global Sustainable Development Report 2023*, made available in late June 2023 and presented to Member States at the High-level Political Forum on 17 July 2023[8], builds on the six entry points for transformation first articulated in the 2019 GSDR—human well-being and capabilities; sustainable and just economies; sustainable food systems and healthy nutrition; energy decarbonisation with universal access; urban and peri-urban development; and the global environmental commons—and applies a framework of levers (governance, science and technology, business and finance, individual and collective action, and capacity-building) to accelerate progress. In parallel, the United Nations system has been articulating six transitions for accelerated action—food systems; energy access and affordability; digital connectivity; education; jobs and social protection; and climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution—as the focus for investment pathways to deliver the SDGs[19]. The GSDR's six entry points and the UN system's six transitions are related and complementary frameworks that share a common systemic approach, but they are not formally identical: the GSDR's entry points are organised around transformational outcomes, while the UN system's transitions are organised around investment pathways. Both frameworks proceed from the recognition that the siloed pursuit of individual goals has reached diminishing returns, and that the next phase of SDG implementation should be organised around systemic transitions.

Mechanism: The SDG Summit should encourage Member States and the United Nations system to adopt a systemic-transitions framework for SDG implementation in the second half of the 2030 Agenda, drawing on both the GSDR's six entry points and the UN system's six transitions as related and complementary frameworks. The Summit should encourage countries undertaking Voluntary National Reviews, where they consider it appropriate, to structure those reviews around the transitions. The framework should not replace the seventeen goals but should provide organising logic for their integrated pursuit. Each transition should be supported by a coalition of champion countries, by a United Nations system lead entity, and by a multi-stakeholder partnership platform that includes representatives of major groups and other stakeholders. Owner: The Economic and Social Council and the High-level Political Forum, supported by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. Timeframe: Framework encouraged at the 2023 SDG Summit; first Voluntary National Reviews structured around the transitions, where countries consider it appropriate, at the 2024 High-level Political Forum; first transition coalition reports at the 2025 High-level Political Forum, subject to the relevant intergovernmental decisions.

Decision 5: Call upon the Shareholders and Boards of Governors of the Multilateral Development Banks to Reform Their Capital Adequacy Frameworks

Diagnosis: The multilateral development banks are the principal vehicles through which the international community channels long-term financing for sustainable development. Their lending capacity is determined by their capital adequacy frameworks, which set the ratio of lending to capital. The G20-commissioned Independent Review of the Capital Adequacy Frameworks of the Multilateral Development Banks, published in 2022, concluded that the current frameworks are excessively conservative and that prudent reforms could unlock several hundred billion dollars in additional lending capacity without compromising the banks' credit ratings. The Secretary-General's SDG Stimulus explicitly calls for an increase in multilateral development bank financing of USD 500 billion per year through both increased capital bases and more efficient use of their balance sheets[4]. There is growing recognition across many governments and institutions of the need for reform, although reform has been slow and incremental. The authority to adopt such reforms rests with the shareholders and the Boards of Governors of the banks rather than with the SDG Summit itself.

Mechanism: The SDG Summit should call upon the shareholders and Boards of Governors of the World Bank Group and the regional multilateral development banks to implement the recommendations of the G20 Independent Review of Capital Adequacy Frameworks in full and on a defined timetable, and should invite the banks to adopt the recommended reforms by the 2024 Spring Meetings of the World Bank Group and the International Monetary Fund. The Summit should further encourage the banks to align their mandates, their lending instruments, and their project pipelines with the systemic-transitions framework (Decision 4) and with the SDG Stimulus targets. The reform should include the expansion of concessional financing to all vulnerable countries, including middle-income countries that face climate and other structural vulnerabilities and that are currently excluded from concessional windows. Owner: The Boards of Governors of the World Bank Group and the regional multilateral development banks, with political impetus from the SDG Summit and the G20. Timeframe: Implementation by the 2024 Spring Meetings; first results reported to the 2024 High-level Political Forum; progressive alignment with the SDG Stimulus by 2025.

Decision 6: Initiate an Intergovernmental Process to Strengthen the Accountability Dimension of the Voluntary National Review

Diagnosis: The Voluntary National Review is the principal instrument through which Member States report on their implementation of the 2030 Agenda. Since 2016, more than 168 countries have presented at least one Voluntary National Review, and 39 countries presented reviews at the 2023 High-level Political Forum[9]. The reviews have generated a substantial evidence base on implementation successes and challenges and have facilitated the sharing of experiences across countries. However, the reviews remain voluntary in two important respects: they are not required of all Member States on a regular cycle, and they are not coupled to a peer-review or corrective-action mechanism that would convert reporting into accountability. The voluntary character of the reviews is appropriate to their original design but is no longer commensurate with the urgency of the midpoint moment; the absence of an accountability dimension is a central element of the governance gap identified in the framework set out in this paper. Any transformation of the VNR system would require an appropriate intergovernmental review and decision by the General Assembly and the Economic and Social Council, and could not be imposed by the SDG Summit alone.

Mechanism: The SDG Summit should invite the General Assembly and the Economic and Social Council to initiate, through the appropriate intergovernmental mechanisms, a process to consider strengthening the accountability dimension of the Voluntary National Review through four possible reforms. First, all Member States could be encouraged to present a Voluntary National Review at least every four years, on a rotating cycle, with the second cycle beginning in 2024. Second, each review could be accompanied by a forward-looking action plan with milestones, indicators, and resource requirements, structured around the systemic transitions. Third, the High-level Political Forum could institute a peer-review mechanism, modelled on the Universal Periodic Review of the Human Rights Council, in which a panel of peers examines the action plan and offers recommendations. Fourth, the peer-review recommendations could be tracked through to the subsequent review, with public reporting on implementation. Owner: The Economic and Social Council and the General Assembly, supported by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. Timeframe: Process initiated at the 2023 SDG Summit; reforms considered through intergovernmental review during 2024; first peer-reviewed Voluntary National Reviews, if reforms are adopted, at the 2025 High-level Political Forum.

Decision 7: Initiate the Negotiation of an SDG Data Compact

Diagnosis: *The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2023: Special Edition* reports that 31 of the 169 SDG targets lack sufficient data for a trend assessment[2]. The data that does exist is rarely disaggregated to the level required to honour the commitment to leave no one behind: data on the basis of income, sex, age, race, ethnicity, migratory status, disability, geographic location, and other characteristics relevant in national contexts. The consequence is that the international system can diagnose aggregate trends but cannot reliably diagnose who is being left behind, where, and why. The data gap is both a technical and a governance problem: technical because the collection, processing, and dissemination of disaggregated data require statistical capacity that many countries lack; governance because the decision to invest in statistical capacity is a political decision that depends on the prioritisation of evidence in policy-making.

Mechanism: The SDG Summit should invite the United Nations Statistical Commission to initiate the negotiation of an SDG Data Compact, to be concluded by 2025, that commits the international community to make substantial progress toward closing the data gap on the 31 targets without sufficient trend data and to ensure that all SDG indicators are disaggregated to the level required to monitor the leave-no-one-behind commitment. The aspirational target should be substantial progress by 2027, with the aim of progressive implementation and full closure of the data gap on the 31 targets as soon as practicable thereafter, recognising that the technical and capacity constraints in some statistical systems may require longer timelines. The compact should include predictable investment commitments by donors to support national statistical systems, should institutionalise the use of new data sources—including administrative data, geospatial data, citizen-generated data, and, where appropriate, big data and artificial intelligence—within a framework that protects privacy and human rights, and should align with the Secretary-General's UN 2.0 vision and its Quintet of Change of data, innovation, digital, foresight, and behavioural science[20]. Owner: The United Nations Statistical Commission, supported by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs and the Partnership in Statistics for Development in the 21st Century. Timeframe: Compact negotiated between 2024 and 2025; first progress report to the 2026 High-level Political Forum; substantial progress toward closing the data gap by 2027, with progressive implementation and full closure as soon as practicable thereafter.

Decision 8: Anchor SDG Delivery in Multilateral Reform and the Summit of the Future

Diagnosis: The SDG Summit is not an isolated event; it is the first of a sequence of high-level moments that include the Summit of the Future in September 2024, the fourth International Conference on Financing for Development in 2025, and the next SDG Summit in 2027. The *Our Common Agenda* report, presented by the Secretary-General in September 2021, set out a vision for the future of global cooperation and called for inclusive, networked, and effective multilateralism[7]. The Summit of the Future, which derives from that report, will consider a Pact for the Future together with a Global Digital Compact and a Declaration on Future Generations. The governance gap that constrains SDG delivery cannot be closed at the SDG Summit alone; it requires alignment between the decisions of the SDG Summit and the broader multilateral reform agenda. Without that alignment, the SDG Summit risks becoming a sectoral event rather than a structural moment.

Mechanism: The SDG Summit should explicitly anchor its decisions in the broader multilateral reform agenda and should call for the carry-forward of the Ten Decisions to the Summit of the Future. The Summit should call for the reform of the Bretton Woods institutions—including the Sixteenth General Review of Quotas of the International Monetary Fund, which is ongoing and is expected to conclude by December 2023, and the evolution of the World Bank's mission and lending instruments—in line with the Bridgetown Initiative principles[5]. The Summit should welcome the Secretary-General's UN 2.0 vision and its Quintet of Change as the operational framework for the United Nations system's contribution to SDG delivery[20]. The Summit should establish a clear linkage between the Pact for the Future to be considered in 2024 and the SDG acceleration agenda, so that the two processes reinforce rather than compete with each other. Owner: The President of the General Assembly, supported by the Secretary-General. Timeframe: Anchoring language in the 2023 SDG Summit political declaration under negotiation; consolidation at the Summit of the Future in September 2024, subject to the relevant intergovernmental decisions.

Decision 9: Institutionalise an SDG Governance Compact for Stakeholder Participation

Diagnosis: The framework set out in this paper identifies the participation gap as a fourth structural dimension of the governance gap. The 2030 Agenda explicitly recognises the role of major groups and other stakeholders in its implementation, and the High-level Political Forum has institutionalised their engagement through the major groups and other stakeholders coordination mechanism. However, stakeholder participation is primarily consultative rather than decision-making in character within formal intergovernmental processes: stakeholders are heard but rarely co-decide, and the translation of stakeholder voice into policy outcome is incomplete at both the international and national levels. The consequence is a structural distance between the policy-making process and the constituencies most affected by the SDGs—the people living in poverty, the women and girls facing discrimination, the communities on the front lines of the climate emergency, the indigenous peoples whose territories hold much of the world's biodiversity.

Mechanism: The SDG Summit should invite the relevant intergovernmental bodies, including the Economic and Social Council where appropriate, to consider institutionalising an SDG Governance Compact for stakeholder participation that codifies the role of major groups and other stakeholders in the implementation, follow-up, and review of the 2030 Agenda. The compact, as envisaged in this paper, would formalise the participation of stakeholders in the systemic-transition coalitions established under Decision 4; would encourage the inclusion of stakeholder representatives in national SDG coordination mechanisms, with a particular emphasis on the inclusion of marginalised groups; would establish a stakeholder advisory mechanism to the High-level Political Forum with speaking rights in the formal proceedings; and would encourage the inclusion of a stakeholder perspective in the Voluntary National Review process, both as a contributor to the review and as a commentator on its findings. Owner: The relevant intergovernmental bodies, including the Economic and Social Council and, where appropriate, the General Assembly, supported by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. Timeframe: Compact considered at the 2023 SDG Summit; first operational tests at the 2024 High-level Political Forum; progressive implementation by the 2025 High-level Political Forum, subject to the relevant intergovernmental decisions.

Decision 10: Call upon the General Assembly to Convene a 2025 Midpoint+ Checkpoint and to Strengthen the High-level Political Forum

Diagnosis: Under General Assembly resolutions 67/290 and 70/299, the SDG Summit convenes every four years[1]; the next scheduled SDG Summit after the 2023 Summit is therefore in 2027, four years from the midpoint and three years from the 2030 deadline. The interval is long for the corrective action that the midpoint diagnosis requires: at the present rate of progress, the gap between the targets and the trajectory will widen rather than narrow in the absence of intermediate checkpoints, and the political momentum generated by the 2023 Summit will dissipate without a structured mechanism for renewal. The High-level Political Forum, convened annually under the auspices of the Economic and Social Council, provides a natural locus for an intermediate checkpoint, but its current mandate does not include the negotiation of a substantive declaration or the adoption of binding decisions. Strengthening the High-level Political Forum is therefore a structural prerequisite for the sustainability of the acceleration agenda. Any extraordinary session of the HLPF, or any change to its mandate, would require an appropriate decision of the General Assembly or the Economic and Social Council, and could not be created by the SDG Summit alone.

Mechanism: The SDG Summit should call upon the General Assembly to consider convening a 2025 Midpoint+ Checkpoint, as an extraordinary session of the High-level Political Forum under the auspices of the General Assembly at the ministerial level, with the mandate to assess progress on the Ten Decisions encouraged at the 2023 Summit, to identify gaps in implementation, and to consider corrective action. The Summit should also encourage the General Assembly and the Economic and Social Council to consider, through an appropriate intergovernmental review, whether the regular High-level Political Forum should provide for the negotiation of a substantive political declaration every two years, beginning in 2024, that responds to the evidence generated by the Voluntary National Reviews and the Sustainable Development Goals Report. The declarations should be political rather than technical in character and should serve as a basis for the public accountability of the international community for the delivery of the 2030 Agenda. Owner: The President of the General Assembly and the President of the Economic and Social Council, supported by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, subject to appropriate intergovernmental decisions. Timeframe: 2024 declaration at the regular High-level Political Forum, subject to GA/ECOSOC decision; 2025 Midpoint+ Checkpoint, subject to GA decision; 2026 declaration; 2027 SDG Summit.

4. Counterarguments, Risks, and Limitations

The Ten Decisions proposed in this paper are presented as an integrated package and as a structural rather than incremental response to the midpoint diagnosis. Three categories of counterargument merit explicit consideration: arguments from political feasibility, arguments from sovereignty, and arguments from implementation risk. The paper addresses each in turn and explains why the proposed decisions remain appropriate despite these concerns.

Political feasibility: A first counterargument is that the proposed decisions exceed the political consensus available at the 2023 SDG Summit and that the Summit should adopt only those decisions on which universal agreement is achievable. The response is that the political landscape has shifted significantly between the 2019 SDG Summit and the 2023 Summit, that the convergent initiatives identified in Section 2.4—the Secretary-General's SDG Stimulus, the Bridgetown Initiative, the COP27 agreement on loss and damage, and the preparation for the Summit of the Future—have created a policy space that did not previously exist, and that the principal risk to the SDG Summit is not overreach but underreach. A declaration that fails to invite the structural decisions that the diagnosis warrants would consolidate the governance gap that this paper identifies and would constitute, in effect, a decision to manage the decline of the 2030 Agenda rather than to reverse it. The threshold for adequacy is the structural ambition of the decisions invited, not the breadth of the consensus that can be assembled in their favour.

Sovereignty: A second counterargument is that several of the proposed decisions—in particular, the time-bound SDG Stimulus compact (Decision 1), the multilateral sovereign debt restructuring framework (Decision 2), and the strengthening of the accountability dimension of the Voluntary National Review (Decision 6)—infringe on the sovereignty of Member States and on the voluntary character of the 2030 Agenda. The response is that the proposed decisions do not require Member States to adopt particular policies or to achieve particular targets; they invite Member States to participate in good faith in the international mechanisms that the 2030 Agenda already envisages, to honour the commitments that they have already made, and to be accountable to each other for the implementation of an agenda to which they have already subscribed. Sovereignty, in the multilateral context, is not a right to non-participation; it is a right to participate in the design of the rules that govern collective action. The proposed decisions strengthen sovereignty by ensuring that the rules of collective action are negotiated rather than imposed, and that they are applied symmetrically to all Member States.

Implementation risk: A third counterargument is that even if the proposed decisions are invited at the SDG Summit, the implementation risk is high, given the historical record of multilateral commitments that have not been honoured. The response is to acknowledge the risk, to design the decisions so as to minimise it, and to insist on the value of decision over diagnosis even in conditions of implementation risk. Each of the Ten Decisions includes a specific owner, a specific timeframe, and a specific accountability mechanism, designed to create the conditions for implementation. The 2025 Midpoint+ Checkpoint proposed in Decision 10 is itself an instrument of implementation risk management: it provides a structured opportunity to assess implementation, to identify gaps, and to authorise corrective action. The alternative to a decision that carries implementation risk is a diagnosis that carries no risk because it requires no action; the latter is the path on which the international community has been travelling for seven years and on which the diagnosis reported in Section 2.2 has been the result.

Limitations of the paper: This policy paper is necessarily limited by the information available at the time of writing. It relies on the advance, unedited version of the *Global Sustainable Development Report 2023*, made available in late June 2023 and presented to Member States at the High-level Political Forum on 17 July 2023[8]. It is published before the conclusion of the 2023 SDG Summit, and the political declaration of the Summit remains under negotiation as of the date of this paper's publication; the paper assumes, without being able to verify, that the declaration will include the scope and ambition that the zero draft (8 May 2023), the revised zero draft (8 June 2023), and the subsequent consultations have suggested. The Ten Decisions are presented as a coherent package but are also individually separable, on the principle that the invitation of any subset is preferable to the invitation of none. The paper does not address the substance of national SDG implementation in detail, which is the proper subject of country-level analysis; it addresses the international architecture within which national implementation takes place. The paper does not estimate the cost of the proposed decisions in detail, which is the proper subject of subsequent technical work, but it relies on the cost estimates developed by the Secretary-General's SDG Stimulus[4] and by the relevant United Nations system entities.

5. Conclusion and Implications

The 2023 SDG Summit is the principal political window of the midpoint moment. Its significance will be assessed not by the eloquence of its political declaration but by the specificity of the decisions it invites and the follow-up architecture it authorises. This paper has argued that the diagnosis of SDG progress is sufficient to warrant decisions of structural rather than incremental ambition; that the political conditions for such decisions are more favourable than at any moment since the adoption of the 2030 Agenda; and that a central structural obstacle to delivery is a deficit of governance architecture, which interacts with persistent deficits in financing, technology and technical capacity. The Ten Decisions proposed in this paper are designed to inform and shape the political declaration under negotiation at the Summit, to be initiated and substantially advanced through the period between September 2023 and the Summit of the Future in September 2024, with implementation continuing thereafter in accordance with the requirements of the relevant intergovernmental and institutional processes, and to be monitored through the High-level Political Forum on a rolling basis to 2030.

The Ten Decisions are interdependent and are best understood as a package. A time-bound compact on the SDG Stimulus (Decision 1) is the financing foundation of the package; a multilateral sovereign debt restructuring framework (Decision 2) is the structural prerequisite for the fiscal space that the package requires; the capitalisation and operationalisation of the Loss and Damage Fund (Decision 3) is the climate-development interface of the package; the adoption of a systemic-transitions framework (Decision 4) is the organising logic of the package; the reform of the multilateral development banks (Decision 5) is the institutional vehicle for the financing flows that the package envisages; the strengthening of the accountability dimension of the Voluntary National Review (Decision 6) is the monitoring architecture of the package; the SDG Data Compact (Decision 7) is the evidence foundation of the package; the anchoring of SDG delivery in multilateral reform and the Summit of the Future (Decision 8) is the political horizon of the package; the SDG Governance Compact for stakeholder participation (Decision 9) is the participatory architecture of the package; and the 2025 Midpoint+ Checkpoint with a strengthened High-level Political Forum (Decision 10) is the accountability horizon of the package. Together, they are designed to address the four dimensions of the governance gap identified in this paper, subject to the relevant intergovernmental and institutional processes.

The implications of the proposed package extend beyond the 2023 SDG Summit to the Summit of the Future in September 2024, the fourth International Conference on Financing for Development in 2025, and the 2027 SDG Summit. The 2023 Summit is the first in a sequence of high-level moments that will be critical to determining whether the international community can convert the 2030 Agenda from a statement of aspiration into an instrument of delivery. The Advocacy Unified Network commits, through this paper and through its subsequent research and advocacy work, to tracking the implementation of the Ten Decisions; to documenting the gap between commitment and delivery; to mobilising stakeholders in support of the decisions; and to holding the international community accountable for the structural ambition of its response to the midpoint diagnosis. The midpoint of the 2030 Agenda is also, by definition, the midpoint of the effort required to achieve it. The 2023 SDG Summit represents a critical moment at which the international community can influence whether the second half of that effort is characterised by acceleration rather than continued stagnation and regression. The Advocacy Unified Network believes that acceleration is both possible and necessary and that the decisions proposed in this paper are the means by which it can be achieved.

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