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## Getting global development back on track: Focus and start at home

Since 2019, realisation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) has gone from patchy to off-track as a result of Covid-19, global price shocks caused by the war in Ukraine and accelerating climate change. About 100 million people were thrown back into extreme poverty and hundreds of millions more face reduced health, livelihood and income prospects for the rest of their lives. The climate change agenda also took a backseat. Long-term global effects will be profound in terms of growing migration flows, further climate degradation and, likely, more conflict, authoritarianism and populism. Putting global development back on track requires focusing on fewer priorities rather than the entire SDG agenda, namely those with the highest negative impact on developing countries: conflict, climate change and inequality. Addressing these problems primarily requires middle- and high-income countries to reduce their contribution to climate deterioration and inequality at home, and to increase their support for conflict resolution efforts elsewhere at a faster rate. While it may seem counterintuitive, the greatest development contributions that developed countries can make lie at home.

### The state of development in 2023

The UN Secretary-General's 'Our Common Agenda' (2021) aims to accelerate implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).<sup>1</sup> Conceived in 2015, the SDGs are meant to raise development to a higher level worldwide by 2030. 'Our Common Agenda' frames itself as a 'breakdown or breakthrough' action plan. Such a dramatic flourish is unusual for the UN, but appropriate. Even before 2019, SDG realisation had progressed unevenly and sluggishly but has regressed alarmingly since. About 100 million people have been thrown back

into extreme poverty since 2019 and hundreds of millions more face reduced health, livelihood and income prospects for the rest of their lives. The global climate change agenda also took a backseat.<sup>2</sup> Key causes have been Covid-19, global price shocks resulting from Russia's invasion of Ukraine and mounting effects of climate change.

1 UN Secretary-General, *Our Common Agenda*, New York: UN, 2021. I am grateful to Louise van Schaik, Mariska van Beijnum and Peter Haasbroek (Clingendael) for their helpful comments on this brief. Its contents naturally remain my own responsibility.

2 UN Secretary-General, *Progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals*, New York: UN, E/2002/55; United Nations, *The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2022*, New York: UN, 2022. Note, however, that under 50% of the world's countries have internationally comparable data available since 2015 for 8 out of 17 SDGs. See also the UN SDG Progress Chart 2022: <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2022/Progress-Chart-2022.pdf>. Some of the agreed SDG indicators are moreover unlikely to fully measure the scope of the goal (example: SDG16).

'Our Common Agenda' proposes an eclectic mix of interventions that range from paying more attention to global public goods and reform of the multilateral system, to making greater reference to data and science. All of its suggested remedies are meaningful, but they cover too much ground and do not add up to a coherent intervention. The document also continues to pursue the full gamut of SDGs, even though time and events have made clear that some are 'super SDGs', in that they have an impact on several others.<sup>3</sup> A further challenge is that the report barely addresses developing countries' estimated annual SDG-gap of US\$3,7 trillion (2021).<sup>4</sup> In sum, the global development agenda is in a poor state.

At the same time, the world is at risk of increasing upheaval due to the swift deterioration of living conditions in many countries for the reasons outlined above. For example, the UN Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) estimates that 30–40 per cent of the Middle East's Arab population lives below national poverty lines.<sup>5</sup> Post-Covid-19 recovery is proving difficult in many developing countries as the pandemic has amplified many existing development problems while reducing the public revenues needed to address them. Growing poverty has immediate negative effects in terms of hunger, misery, social tensions and even crime. Delayed recovery has a long-term impact on levels of education, health and public investment. Together, such trends are also likely to increase

migration flows, trigger more political crises, contribute to the rate of conflict, make corrective action against climate change more difficult and stimulate both authoritarianism and populism. Making a bad situation worse, many donors have re-allocated aid funds over the past years to keep refugees away, fight terrorism elsewhere and stimulate their own trade interests.<sup>6</sup>

Getting the global development agenda back on track requires middle- and high-income countries to pursue an agenda that is focused on conflict, climate change and inequality. A good starting point for European policy actors – such as the Directorate-General of International Cooperation at the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs – is to initiate a rethink and redesign of the EU's development agenda. Its core should consist of a global development initiative that combines Brussels' *Covid-19 Recovery and Resilience Facility* with its *Fit for 55 Agenda*.

## Setting global development priorities

The widening gap between the supply and demand of development points to a need to focus on a smaller number of priorities than all of the 17 SDGs, and to pursue these with greater resources and vigour in order to get global development back on track. Call it an agenda for 'development performance improvement' akin to the kind of interventions that enterprises launch when they face protracted performance problems due to a changing business environment.

The critical development priorities until 2030 are not difficult to point out. They are *conflict*, *climate change* and *inequality*. It is these three issues that have an impact across all SDGs and, in doing so, affect vast numbers of people in developing countries. Yet, in addition to the SDGs, there are many other development

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3 The SDGs were designed as a package deal premised on the notion of indivisibility for political reasons. In reality, there is arguably a hierarchy among the SDGs in terms of strength of causality and impact on development.

4 Official Development Assistance (ODA) is one (minor) source of finance in this broader picture. Annual spending on ODA was about US\$190 billion in 2021. See OECD/DAC, *ODA final data 2021*, [online](https://www.oecd.org/dev/OECD-UNDP-Scoping-Note-Closing-SDG-Financing-Gap-COVID-19-era.pdf) (accessed 5 February 2023); also: <https://www.oecd.org/dev/OECD-UNDP-Scoping-Note-Closing-SDG-Financing-Gap-COVID-19-era.pdf> (accessed 5 February 2023). Keep in mind that development assistance only contributes to SDG realisation in support of national policies and funds, at least at the country-level.

5 See: <https://www.unescwa.org/news/escwa-its-annual-survey-arab-region-one-third-its-population-living-below-lines-despite> (accessed 5 February 2023).

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6 Consider ODI's 2020 principled aid index and its underlying report by Nilima Gulrajani and Emily Silcock: <https://odi.org/en/publications/principled-aid-index-2020/> (accessed 6 February 2023).

### Box 1 Dutch development policy and the Sustainable Development Goals

The recent Dutch development policy note ‘Doen waar Nederland goed in is’ (2022) underlines the need for long-term, reliable and sizeable partnerships with the United Nations system to advance the SDGs. Yet, primarily it expresses confidence in the ability of regular trade to advance development. It does not detail how this will happen, even though the international trade system is under huge pressure. Neither does it address thorny issues such as the developmental need for trade liberalisation in agriculture or services at home. Moreover, the risk of trade practices deepening inequalities and underdevelopment is substantial (see: World Bank, *Trading for development in the age of global value chains*, Washington: World Development Report, 2020).

priorities being debated. Consider the Grand Bargain, which seeks to improve the coverage and quality of humanitarian aid; the challenge of supporting development under conditions of authoritarianism; the problem of allocating aid smoothly across the triple nexus of humanitarian, development and peacemaking work; how to localise aid given the limitations of classic top-down aid; and the challenge of leveraging private funds with aid money. All of these are important, but not critical. Localisation efforts and new finance mechanisms are means to an end. Conditions of authoritarianism and the triple nexus are part of the broader problem of conflict. So is the Grand Bargain, which moreover focuses on a consequence of underdevelopment and conflict rather than a cause.<sup>7</sup> Below, brief analyses of the triptych ‘conflict, climate change

and inequality’ from a developmental perspective offer directions for action that can help get the global agenda back on track.

### Development priority 1 – Conflict

Roughly 2 billion of the world’s 8 billion population live in countries affected by fragility or conflict, according to the OECD.<sup>8</sup> The World Bank estimates that by 2030, over half of the world’s extreme poor will live in conflict-affected and fragile countries.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) conflict tracker shows that the world witnessed a consistent rise in all types of organised violence from 2011 to 2022.<sup>10</sup> This trend reverses the relative peace of the 2000s that followed the more tumultuous 1990s. Besides, over 50 per cent of contemporary conflicts are inter- or transnational, which means that their resolution requires a regional or even global approach and these are in scarce supply. At the same time, global conflict management – UN peacekeeping – is not in good health. Only 12 peacekeeping missions are active today, of which half are legacy missions in places like Cyprus, the Golan and the Western Sahara.<sup>11</sup> There are no ‘modern’ peacekeeping missions in conflict flashpoints such as the Caucasus or the Middle East.

7 One might point to demography as an additional fundamental development problem. The UN Population Division projects an increase in the world’s population from the current 8 billion to slightly over 10 billion between 2023 and 2100. The fact that fertility rates across all regions of the world are either decreasing dramatically, or are steady at low levels already, suggests that peak population of 2100 will decrease afterwards. In other words, demographic changes will add c. 25% to the world’s current population and then the pressure will taper off. Yet, this trend only directly affects the climate agenda, especially through greater fossil energy consumption. Effects of demography on conflict and inequality are far more indirect. In consequence, demography is best considered as part of the climate change agenda from an analytical point of view. On population growth projections: <https://population.un.org/wpp/Graphs/Probabilistic/POP/TOT/900>. On fertility rates: <https://population.un.org/wpp/Graphs/Probabilistic/FERT/TOT/900> (both accessed 13 February 2023).

8 OECD/DAC, *States of Fragility 2022*, Paris: OECD, 2022.

9 World Bank Group, *World Bank Group Strategy for Fragility, Conflict, and Violence 2020–2025*, Washington: WBG.

10 See: <https://ucdp.uu.se/encyclopedia> (accessed 5 February 2023).

11 See: <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/where-we-operate> (accessed 5 February 2023).

Reducing the incidence of conflict will substantially contribute to putting global development efforts back on track, but this requires grappling with two issues. Where conflict involves regional or great power interests that block UN action, coalitions of the willing need to be more capable of intervening in a predictable and transnational manner with diplomatic, economic and military means if human rights are violated to the point of war crimes (consider Syria, Yemen and Myanmar).<sup>12</sup> The Responsibility to Protect – that seeks to ensure that the international community never again fails to halt the mass atrocity crimes of genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity – offers a conceptual and legal starting point for doing so. Only by ‘taking sides’ early and decisively can negative and long-term human and development consequences across entire regions be prevented. For a country like the Netherlands, this means developing expeditionary multi-dimensional task forces (diplomatic, development and military) that in different constellations can contribute to multilateral interventions in conflict situations, building on integrated approaches piloted elsewhere. The main lesson of the Afghanistan experience is that the mandate of any such intervention should be limited, i.e. focus on preventing war crimes rather than mixing a fight against terrorism with a nationwide reconstruction effort and a futile effort to bring democratization about in less than a generation.<sup>13</sup>

Where conflict is less tightly connected to regional or great power interests, the UN should intervene based on narrower peacekeeping mandates combined with political processes that are more transnational in nature and

focus on developing leverage to get parties to compromise.<sup>14</sup> In other words, incentivise parties by playing to their interests with both sticks and carrots, such as development funding and attractive retirement schemes, but also sanctions on domestic elites and blockades of flows of arms and resources that fuel conflict. To make this happen, it is key that UN Member State missions are adequately staffed, resourced and networked to marshal support for mandate and resourcing decisions that can make a difference.

## Development priority 2 – Climate change

The Intergovernmental Panel for Climate Change has demonstrated beyond doubt that human-induced climate change has already caused widespread harm to people, biodiversity and ecosystems across the globe.<sup>15</sup> A substantial part of this damage cannot be repaired in the short term and some of it may trigger irreversible, negative changes to the natural world that are poorly understood at present. A (financial) miracle may keep humanity on the pathway of limiting global warming to 1.5 degrees, but for all practical intents and purposes we can assume an overshoot pathway that is certain to trigger cataclysmic events. It may moreover trigger events that are potentially catastrophic for particular places and people.<sup>16</sup> For example, the massive, climate-change connected floods that ravaged Pakistan in 2022 will not only cost

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12 From this perspective, the main objection against the Dutch non-lethal assistance programme for the armed Syrian opposition was arguably its modest size. Even as part of a larger international effort, around EUR 28 million could not hope to meaningfully facilitate the overthrow of the Assad regime. See also: *Commissie van onderzoek NLA-programma in Syrië*, Den Haag, [online](#), 2022.

13 See for example: Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, *What we need to learn: lessons from twenty years of Afghanistan reconstruction*, Arlington: SIGAR, 2021.

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14 Special Political Missions will struggle to take on such a role as they have less robust mandates, less leverage and are more dependent on the diplomatic goodwill of the host country.

15 IPCC, *Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability*, Contribution of Working Group II to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, Pörtner, H.-O. and D. Roberts (eds), Cambridge University Press: Cambridge.

16 Consider for instance this 2018 IPCC special report: [https://www.ipcc.ch/site/assets/uploads/sites/2/2022/06/SPM\\_version\\_report\\_LR.pdf](https://www.ipcc.ch/site/assets/uploads/sites/2/2022/06/SPM_version_report_LR.pdf) (especially points A1 and C1) in a context of several years of limited climate change action due to Covid-19.

an estimated US\$ 46 billion<sup>17</sup> in damage and economic losses, its displacement and poverty enhancing effects also impact on the political stability of a populous and nuclear armed country that has tense relations with India as well as Afghanistan. It is a tragic example of an extreme weather event in a place that cannot cope. In similar vein did the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies recently estimate that 200 million people per year will be in need of humanitarian assistance due to climate-related disasters by 2050. It is likely many more will be affected and global migration flows would increase appreciably as a result.<sup>18</sup>

As ‘There is no Planet B’,<sup>19</sup> preventing catastrophic events resulting from climate change is the greatest shared challenge humanity faces. This problem goes beyond development but nevertheless has a developmental core because its impact will be highest in places that have the fewest resources to cope or mitigate. For the most part, these places also happen to be the most underdeveloped. Addressing climate change effectively demands a swift transformation of lifestyles and modes of production. Due to their economic weight and consumption patterns, industrialising and post-industrial countries need to make the greatest contributions – and sacrifices – not developing ones. A key part of this reversal of development perspectives is that middle- and high-income countries set mandatory sustainability standards for industry, agriculture and transportation at home, including pricing and taxing externalities. It is domestically that OECD countries in particular can make their greatest development contribution – consider the EU’s Fit for 55 agenda, for example – but they

must do so in a manner that is accountable and transparent to the developing world. It is for this reason that development ministries and agencies must drive the domestic agenda in OECD countries for a greener and fairer economy, together with their economic and finance ministries. This signifies a new role, but global development starts at home with regards to climate change. At the same time, it remains vital to establish pooled funds, such as the Amazon Fund, to protect the global commons. This is a more straightforward matter of allocating more aid money.

### Development priority 3 – Inequality

At the recent World Economic Forum get-together in Davos, Oxfam reported that the richest 1 per cent of the world’s population has managed to capture a third of all new wealth created since 2020. It is also the case that 2,200 billionaires own as much wealth as 4.6 billion other citizens of planet earth (i.e. each of these 2,200 billionaires has, on average, as much wealth as the combined resources of 2 million fellow humans).<sup>20</sup> Even though straightforward analysis of inequality is complex due to its international/domestic and income/wealth variations, the simple reality is that excessive<sup>21</sup> accumulation at the very top of the pyramid in a time when the majority of the world’s population faces rapidly declining standards of living is bound to mean trouble. It creates tense relations between social groups, feeds populism, reduces trust in government and invites political crises. In the short term, this risks overburdening political and administrative systems in developed countries that are key to addressing longer-term conflict and climate change challenges. Inequality throws, so to say, a spanner in the works of development actions

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17 See: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2022/10/28/pakistan-flood-damages-and-economic-losses-over-usd-30-billion-and-reconstruction-needs-over-usd-16-billion-new-assessme> (accessed 17 February 2023).

18 IFRC, *The cost of doing nothing: the humanitarian price of climate change and how it can be avoided*, Geneva: IFRC, 2019.

19 See: <https://theresnoplanetb.net/> (accessed 5 February 2023).

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20 See: <https://www.oxfam.org/en/press-releases/richest-1-bag-nearly-twice-much-wealth-rest-world-put-together-over-past-two-years>; Oxfam, *Time to Care: Unpaid and underpaid work and the global inequality crisis*, Oxfam International, 2020.

21 Excessive in relation to the financial needs to lead ‘a good life’. Consider the emergence of the concept of limitarianism.

by middle- and higher-income countries – in addition to being a development problem in itself.

At its core, inequality is a distribution problem with both a domestic and an international component. Both are relevant from a development perspective. Internationally, development cooperation has an opportunity in times like the present to rectify the historical plunder of much of the world through colonisation, which is the basis of much wealth accumulation in the developed world. Higher taxation and fewer exemptions of the wealth and assets of the ultra-rich could flow partially into funds that protect the global commons and help put UN finances on the footing required by the scale of today's development problems. Domestically, many developed countries can introduce adjusted versions of basic income support schemes that have been tried across the developing and middle-income world, such as Brazil's '*Bolsa Familia*', to maintain social justice at home. After all, this is an essential precondition for supporting effective development action elsewhere.

## To conclude

The events of the past few years have highlighted and deepened many pre-existing development needs to the point that they are becoming disruptors of political, economic and social relations across the globe. Recently, the World Economic Forum launched the term 'polycrisis' to express how certain trends and phenomena can converge to greater negative effect in both scope and impact.<sup>22</sup> To date, the average donor response has mostly taken the form of 'Fortress Europe', i.e. using aid to pay for keeping refugees away, to fight terrorism elsewhere and to further their own trade interests. While some of this

response is inevitable and even necessary, too much of it allows vicious spirals to deepen since underlying development problems will simply grow in the meantime. Moreover, donors have continued to pursue the SDG agenda in its entirety, even though it has become clear that choices are warranted given limited means and given the existence of 'super SDGs', i.e. SDGs that have an impact on several others.

Getting the global development agenda back on track requires international development actors to focus on *conflict*, *climate change* and *inequality*, since these three issues affect all SDGs and are likely to define the future. Addressing these problems requires middle- and high-income countries to reduce their contribution to climate deterioration and inequality at home, and to increase their support for conflict resolution efforts elsewhere at a faster rate along the lines argued in this brief. While it may seem counterintuitive, the greatest development contributions that developed countries can make lie at home.

A good starting point for European policy makers – such as the Directorate-General of International Cooperation at the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs – is to initiate a rethink and redesign of the EU's development agenda. Its core should consist of a global development initiative that combines Brussels' *Covid-19 Recovery and Resilience Facility* with its *Fit for 55 Agenda*.

An inability to rise to the challenge means being faced with cataclysmic consequences in the future.

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22 World Economic Forum, *The Global Risks Report 2023*, 18th Edition, Geneva: WEF, 2023. By way of example of how this can work: The world's richest 10% are estimated to be responsible for 50%+ of carbon emissions. See: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/dec/07/we-cant-address-the-climate-crisis-unless-we-also-take-on-global-inequality> (accessed 6 February 2023).

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[www.clingendael.org/cru](http://www.clingendael.org/cru)  
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### About the author

**Erwin van Veen** is a senior research fellow at Clingendael's Conflict Research Unit where he leads a team that analyses the political economy of conflicts and crises in the Middle East. His own work examines the political use of armed groups in processes of state development and geopolitical conflict.