

Commentary

THE BUFFIN FOUNDATION

SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT ISSUES

United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (Part Four: 2018 Progress Report)

This edition of *Commentary* represents a continuation of the series on the topic of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. Three previous editions of *Commentary*, published in December 2017, January 2018 and February 2018, presented a concise overview of the transition from the original Millennium Development Goals, the challenges posed by the new Sustainable Development Goals, and the process of implementation to achieve the goals and specific targets by 2030. The United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development provides a global blueprint for dignity, peace and prosperity for people and the planet, now and in the future. Three years into the implementation of the Agenda, countries are transferring this shared vision into national development plans and strategies. As they do, they face daunting problems that include a changing climate, conflict, inequality, persistent pockets of poverty and hunger, rapid urbanization and environmental degradation. Policymakers in every country need to reflect on how societies can be made more resilient while confronting these challenges.

The 2018 UN Sustainable Development Goals Report highlights progress being made in many areas of the 2030 Agenda. Since the turn of the century, the maternal mortality rate in sub-Saharan Africa has declined by 35 percent and the under-five mortality rate has dropped by 50 percent. In the least-developed countries, the proportion of the population with access to electricity has more than doubled. Globally, labour productivity has increased and the unemployment rate has decreased. More than 100 countries have implemented sustainable consumption and production policies and initiatives. However, in some areas, progress is insufficient to meet the Agenda's goals and targets by 2030. This is especially true for the most disadvantaged and mar-

ginalized groups. Youth are three times more likely to be unemployed than adults; less than half of all children and adolescents meet minimum standards in reading and mathematics. In 2015, 2.3 billion people still lacked even a basic level of sanitation service. Close to one billion mostly rural people do not have electricity available. About 90 percent of people living in cities breathe polluted air. Conflict, climate change and growing inequalities present additional challenges in today's world. After a prolonged decline, the number of undernourished people rose from 777 million in 2015 to 815 million in 2016, mainly due to conflicts, drought and disasters linked to climate change. In 2017, the North Atlantic hurricane season was the most costly ever, and the past five-year average global temperature is the highest on record. With just twelve years remaining to the 2030 deadline for achieving the sustainable development goals, it becomes increasingly important to inject a greater sense of urgency towards implementing policies and strategies in several of the key development areas. This requires immediate and accelerated actions by countries along with collaborative partnerships among governments and stakeholders at all levels. Political leadership, resources and commitment are essential for this purpose. The United Nations has itself launched reform initiatives so as to reposition the UN development system to be more effective, cohesive and accountable in delivering the goals for the 2030 Agenda.

Many regions of the world continue to suffer as a result of armed conflict. Advances in promoting the rule of law and access to justice are uneven. However, progress is being made in regulations to promote public access to information and strengthening institutions upholding human rights at the national level. More than one thousand human rights defenders, journalists and

trade unionists have been killed in 61 countries since 2015 while working to inform the public and build a world free from fear and want. Freedom-of-information laws and policies have been adopted by 116 countries, with 25 of these countries doing so over the last five years. One of the most important sustainable development goals seeks to strengthen global partnerships to support and achieve the ambitious targets of the 2030 Agenda, bringing together national governments, the international community, civil society, the private sector and other actors. Although advances have been made in some areas, more needs to be done to accelerate progress; all stakeholders will need to refocus and intensify efforts on areas where progress has been slow. Transitioning towards sustainable and resilient societies hinges on responsible management of finite natural resources. Access to basic services is not only a fundamental human right, but also a stepping stone to sustainable development. Importantly, social protection systems, including social security and healthcare, provide a safety net for the vulnerable. Moreover, the path to resilient cities must address growing social, economic and environmental challenges. A resilient society can deflect the threat of conflict. Migration has the potential as a positive force to work for the benefit of all in building more inclusive and sustainable societies.

Source: 2018 Report and notes published by the United Nations relating to the Sustainable Development Goals.

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