



**T20** Brasil 2024  
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Task Force 01

**FIGHTING INEQUALITIES, POVERTY, AND HUNGER**

# Rethinking How to Fight Inequalities, Poverty, and Hunger: Paradigm Shifts to Accelerate Action on the SDGs

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## The Issue

At the midpoint to 2030, to address cross-cutting issues covered by Task Force 1, this policy brief advocates several specific recommendations to accelerate action regarding the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The G20 should drive a paradigm shift through the establishment of a Consortium of Centers of Research on the SDGs with a particular focus on reducing inequalities (to complement already existing Centers in many G20 countries focused on sustainability only in terms of climate and the environment). This approach would support the priorities of the Brazil G20 presidency as well as the vision of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights.

The G20 should establish “SDG literacy funds” in G20 educational institutions, including universities, so that the next generation knows about the goals, their application to problems at home and abroad, and is skilled in best practices on how to address them using systems thinking inherent in the SDG framework. Such funds would also help propel work emerging from the Summit of the Future.

The G20 should support research text-mining Voluntary National Reviews and Voluntary Local Reviews for success stories tackling poverty and hunger, delivering social protection and basic services, including universal health care on issues such as maternal mortality and life expectancy. For the one G20 country that has not produced a VNR—the United States—propose a timeline to enable the US to align with the widely adopted norm of voluntary reporting.

The G20 should prioritize and fund the collection of community-based, disaggregated data by race, gender, income, and locality in G20 countries to track and measure progress



on the SDGs. Disaggregated data should also be a priority of foreign aid from G20 countries in the service of Leave No One Behind.

The G20 should create a standing item on its agenda for sharing best practices and lessons, drawing on the work of the Consortium and the data discussed above.

## Diagnosis and Relevance

The SDGs represent a paradigm shift in the global conception of development; it happens everywhere. Yet, globally, nationally, and locally, the world is behind advancing the 2030 agenda (UN News, 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic played a decisive role in creating this situation, but critically, we also see a lack of urgency and underinvestment concerning many of the SDGs. As the G20 Development Working Group Issue Note observes, “the G20 is the best suited forum to put the Sustainable Development Agenda in its three pillars [environmental, social and economic] back to the center of the international agenda” (Development Working Group, 2024). That said, while much effort has focused on sustainability from a climate perspective, fundamentally, we must also step-up efforts to massively reduce inequalities including reframing eradicating poverty and hunger as vital to the universal application of human rights.

Put simply, at the midpoint to 2030, we need to work differently (The Brookings Institution, 2023). This policy brief proposes ways to do just that on topics that are central to Brazil’s G20 presidency (G20 Brasil 2024, 2023). What we tackle in this memo are issues also deeply relevant to the upcoming Summit of the Future (Co-Facilitators, 2024) as well as the vision advanced by the UN OHCHR (UN OHCHR, 2023).

Part of working differently means internalizing that the SDGs apply to all G20 countries. While the SDGs provide a vital guide to the effective application of development assistance abroad, every G20 country also needs to embrace the domestic and local aspects of development, especially during the ongoing recovery from the cumulative shocks of COVID-19.

The externalization of key parts of Agenda 2030 is evident from how some G20 countries have undertaken voluntary reporting. Concerning an issue such as maternal mortality, even in countries where the prevailing aggregate maternal mortality ratio may be well below the target of 70/100,000 live births set by Target 3.1, there are statistically significant differences that emerge from disaggregated data. The United Kingdom, for example, presents partially disaggregated data showing that Black women are more than three times more likely than the population as a whole to die following a pregnancy (SDG Data, UK Gov). Meanwhile, Canada, in its Voluntary National Review (VNR), appears not to report on maternal mortality at all, while France and Germany only discuss the subject as a foreign assistance priority.

While the US is the only G20 country not to have produced a single VNR, the US has long ranked last among industrial countries concerning maternal mortality. That situation was exacerbated during the pandemic. The CDC documented a sharp rise in 2021 among Black women who experienced 69.9 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births (Hoyert, 2023). Compare the aggregated maternal mortality ratio for the US of 31/100,000 versus 12/100,000 in Eastern Europe, and 24/100,000 in Central Asia (The Gates Foundation, 2022).

The G20 High Level Principles adopted in 2023 “highlight[ed] the role of disaggregated data” and promised to facilitate international and public/private cooperation to address such data gaps (Development Ministerial Meeting, 2023). But it should be underscored that with respect to the issues addressed by Task Force 1, and the indicators of the SDG16+ agenda, the challenge is not only the technological capacity to collect the human-centered data, but, in some cases, the lack of political commitment to ask difficult questions and make the answers readily available. It should simply not



remain the case that seven of the G20 states do not report any maternal mortality data in their VNRs.



## Specific, Actionable Recommendations

Building on the Brazil G20 presidency, the Summit of the Future, and the approach advanced by the OHCHR, the G20 could greatly accelerate advancement toward reducing inequalities through a number of interrelated initiatives that help build the next generation workforce that is data driven, SDG literate, and actively elevating the significance of socioeconomic rights, which, for too long, has been overlooked in importance by the global north.

To drive the paradigm shift in how to advance efforts on reducing inequalities, we propose the establishment of a Consortium of Centers of Research on the SDGs. Ideally, these Centers would be located in multiple regions, with teams coming together as communities of practice on a regular basis, both virtually and in person. We propose Centers based at universities in the United States, Brazil, South Africa, the UK, and India. These Centers--let's call them Centers for Sustainable Futures—would complement the many hubs in universities that exist focused on sustainability only in terms of climate and the environment.<sup>1</sup> In contrast, the Consortium would enhance Brazil's G20 presidency priority that recognizes the economic and social dimensions of sustainable development—especially as tied to reducing inequalities, tackling poverty, and reducing food insecurity (Brazil's G20 Presidency, 2023). The Centers would advance "... the

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<sup>1</sup> Examples of such approaches include the global "Networks for Business Sustainability," <https://nbs.net/for-sustainability-centres/>; Stanford University's Doerr School of Sustainability, <https://sustainability.stanford.edu/> ; Monash University's Sustainable Development Institute, <https://www.monash.edu/msdi>.

holistic approach to development, ensuring that economic growth is equitable, social well-being is safeguarded, and environmental resources are sustainably used, making them available for future generations as well” (The Concept Note of the Brazilian G20 Presidency, 2023). These Centers would also benefit from alignment with the current approach of the OHCHR with a focus on the “human rights economy” (UN OHCHR, 2023).

In addition, G20 countries should establish “SDG literacy funds” in multiple educational institutions, including universities, so that the next generation—Cohort 2030—knows about the goals, their application to problems at home and abroad, and is skilled in best practices to address them using systems thinking inherent in the SDG framework (Mendelson, 2020). We need a workforce fluent in the SDGs and not just those who work in global development or human rights but more broadly across government agencies, in the private sector, and in fields such as data science, engineering, and medicine. Innovations in higher education offer pathways and paradigm shifts to help create such fluency and reshape workplace cultures. Such funds could also help propel initiatives on youth emerging from the Summit of the Future.

The world communicates about the SDGs through voluntary reporting. The reporting norm on the SDGs is robust at the national level and, increasingly, at sub-national levels. Over 188 VNRs have been submitted with a number of countries—indeed most of the G20—reporting multiple times in the last several years, and over 200 Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs) exist (Elder and Newman, 2023). For the one G20 country that has not produced a single VNR—the United States—the G20 ought to propose a timeline to enable the US to align with the widely adopted norm of voluntary reporting.



These reports can and should play an important accountability function by maintaining, and indeed, increasing the political impetus in pursuit of the Goals. At their best, these reports also provide a rich portfolio of targeted policies and programming from which all stakeholders could learn, adapt, and improve (Elder and Newman, 2023). To that end, we advocate research text-mining the VNRs and VLRs for success stories concerning tackling poverty and hunger, delivering social protection and basic services, and the impact of universal health care on issues such as maternal mortality and life expectancy.

A glaring gap that must be closed in order to advance the SDGs revolves around generating disaggregated data. In a study Mendelson led assessing the impact of COVID relief funds in three North American cities, data accessibility, and specifically, access to disaggregated data on social justice needs, varied widely across localities, with most cities having little or no crucial data points by race and gender. Data lags were years long. Timely data disaggregation is, however, a key tool to identify and address gender, racial, and other inequities. It will be impossible to deliver on the SDG principle to "Leave No One Behind" (LNOB) in both the global north as well as the global south without such data (Mendelson, 2025).

To be clear, it is not that no disaggregated data exist. When we have such data, for example, from the United States, we find enormous disparities that may well feed into, as the G20 concept note observes, "socioeconomic inequalities [that] have fueled political extremism in recent times" (The Concept Note, p. 5, 2023). Inequitable access to data is also exacerbated by institutional gatekeepers. To speak in aggregates about the richest country in the world, however, is to overlook communities whose life expectancy is that of countries the World Bank labels as "developing." The American physician and social

epidemiologist David A. Ansell (2017) observes that “Black America lags thirty places behind the United States as a whole on the Human Development Index....If Black America were a country, we would have to send in foreign aid.” More recently, Princeton University sociologist Matthew Desmond (2023) has written about a rich country that tolerates millions of citizens, including “one in eight children” living in poverty, with more than two million having no access to clean drinking water or flushing toilets.

In whatever context or country, the lack of data emerges in and of itself as a human rights issue (Probert, 2022). Few likely regard it as such; data collection is often viewed exclusively through the technical lens rather than as a policy imperative.<sup>2</sup> The G20 has the opportunity to radically realign that perspective and set the bar through prioritizing and funding the collection of disaggregated data by race, gender, income, locality in G20 countries to track and measure progress toward the SDGs. Disaggregated data should also be a priority of foreign aid from G20 countries in the service of LNOB. The imperative of localization also strongly justifies supporting efforts to generate community-based data. This would signal that “the G20 ...[is] send[ing] a strong political message on the need for reducing inequalities” (Development Working Group, p. 6, 2024). Research suggests the data imperative among donors seems to be largely absent (Ingram and Hlavaty, 2021). A recent opinion piece in *Devex* by several gender researchers noted that data on gender, in particular, is “a mess” (Farley et al., 2024). Straightening out this

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<sup>2</sup> Existing human rights law, however, requires the state to have such data readily available; to not be capable of accounting for life, for example, within a state’s jurisdiction is a dereliction of its duty to protect (Probert, 2022).

“mess” would be a critical step in “global efforts to make gender equality a reality by 2030” (Empowerment of Women Working Group, 2024).

One promising initiative, alongside the process of voluntary reporting at the High Level Political Forum, has been the adoption of online data portals to present national SDG data.<sup>3</sup> There are two obvious advantages to such platforms: firstly, that data can be updated on a rolling basis, meaning critical data to inform policymaking and engagement does not lag because of the scheduling of countries’ VNRs; secondly, such platforms provide a more versatile and usable means to interact with the data and especially complex indicators with multiple vectors of disaggregation. Maintaining such portals outside the interagency processes usually linked with the drafting of a VNR does obviously come with additional personnel cost, but to the extent that regularizing such work supports something like a multi-stakeholder national advisory body, it seems likely to justify itself in linking together different policy priorities and action.

To measure movement on these initiatives, the G20 should create a standing item on the G20 agenda to share practices and learnings regarding the above recommendations and about the SDGs more broadly. In establishing their agenda for a G20 presidency, states should choose a handful of priority targets to facilitate such exchanges, which should also be based on the clear presentation of available disaggregated data, policies adopted since 2015, and funding priorities. Reporting out during the South African G20 presidency in 2025 and the US G20 presidency in 2026 will be critical milestones as 2030 nears.

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<sup>3</sup> Several G20 countries and local or regional governments in G20 countries have adopted the open-source platform developed by OpenSDG, <https://open-sdg.org>.

## Scenarios and Outcomes

While the focus of these recommendations involves universities and data collection, these entities and activities, while critical to advance the SDGs, are not currently highlighted in the working group concept notes. We nevertheless remain optimistic that these recommendations could gain traction because of their synergies with the Brazil G20 presidency, the alignment with the Summit of the Future, and the vision advanced by the OHCHR. Through the adoption of the recommendations, the SDGs could get a substantive, substantial, and timely boost.

Several G20 countries, together with private philanthropy, should create a public-private fund to support the Consortium, the SDG literacy funds, and especially, the gathering of disaggregated data including through open-source data portals. Development diplomacy, through the G20 and associates (e.g., Norway), could simultaneously take on a new life with heads of bilateral development agencies regularly coming together to share best practices and bring forward what they see as working. Donor countries should also consider how, in the context of Targets 17.18 and 17.19, they might support the work of national statistical authorities or other national stakeholders in recipient countries to develop functional SDG data portals.

These recommendations, if adopted, would help drive demand for progress on all the people-focused SDGs. The second half of the SDG era needs to create sustainable futures in which inequalities are dramatically reduced and rights are realized for all. This policy brief offers a road map for such futures.

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