

EXPLORING SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN ASIA

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TABLE OF ABBREVIATIONS

GA	General Assembly
GGI	Green Growth Index
K-ETS	Korean Emissions Trading Scheme
K-SDGs	Korean Sustainable Development Goals
MSDP	Myanmar Sustainable Development Plan
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
SDC	Sustainable Development Council
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
VNR	Voluntary National Review
ZEB	Zero-Energy Building

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report examines the status of sustainable development in South, Southeast, and East Asia, showcasing the current status and progress made, as well as challenges endured in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as set out within the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development within selected countries.

The General Assembly (GA) Resolution, creating the foundation for the 2030 SDGs, emphasises the paramount importance of working towards sustainable development in ensuring the well-being of the planet and ecosystems alike, as well as the equity and welfare of human beings for current and future generations.

Sustainable development within the 2030 Agenda addresses various themes of action, including People, Planet, Prosperity, Peace, and Partnership, calling on all global actors to take initiative in working towards a place where everyone and everything can thrive. Unless sustainable practices are utilised, resources will be exhausted, climate change will intensify, leading to grave consequences for the planet and human beings, equity and equality within populations will not be achieved, resulting in instability and disruption of peace, ecosystems will suffer, and economic growth will be on the decline.

Countries located within the South, Southeast, and East Asia region, including China, Japan, South Korea, North Korea, Nepal, Bangladesh, Mongolia, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka are at the forefront, exploring the status of sustainable development in Asia, for the purposes of the present report. The examination shows the presence of both progress as well as regression, caused by various challenges, towards the realisation of SDGs.

Notably, over half of the assessed countries have made progress on quality education, by improving educational access, and decreasing illiteracy rates. Common improvements have also taken place in regard to good health and well-being, as nations have worked towards improving the rates of maternal mortality. Working towards poverty eradication has been at the forefront for many countries as well. Additional achievements shared amongst nations relate to improving energy efficiency and transitioning towards clean energy, through the introduction of various programs as well as creating stability amongst peace, justice, and stronger institutions.

On the other hand, challenges faced by nations relate to environmental issues, where sustainable practices are lacking within agricultural and mining practices, waste management, and the use of non-renewable energy sources, leading to problems with pollution of air and water. The geographical location subjects these countries to extreme weather events, which are exacerbated by climate change, while remaining inadequately addressed within existing policies. Additionally, political instability and the lack of governance structures, inter-ministerial cooperation, and partnerships amongst nations slow down progress. Further challenges arise from human rights violations, social inequalities, and exclusion, especially

within rural areas where marginalised communities lack access to basic needs, such as healthcare and education, creating stagnation within sustainable development of communities. The insufficient financial capacity to allocate resources to sustainable practices plays a major role in the lack of accomplishments gained for the realisation of SDGs.

However, recommendations are provided on creating innovative financing solutions, forming partnerships, sharing knowledge, and addressing monitoring gaps to be able to intervene on emerging challenges as well as effectively deal with the current ones. Progressively adapting to the given recommendations could prompt the realisation of SDGs within the Asian nations. What remains to be seen is whether the goals can be achieved within the given timeframe.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. OVERVIEW OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN ASIA

In light of the large population residing in Asia, many people still suffer from the effects of poverty, which itself gravely affects the realisation of SDGs within Asia. Policy changes would be called for on various levels, such as national, sub-regional, and regional, as well as the utilisation and reform of resources, financial and technological advancements in order to maximise sub-regional and regional cooperation, to effectively work towards achieving SDGs of the 2030 Agenda.¹

The East Asia region is a rapidly developing and innovative sub-region, and it has made remarkable efforts over the past few decades towards sustainable development, and its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) has increased faster annually than within the Asia-Pacific region.² However, many are still living in poverty, the income levels are vastly disparate amongst countries, and environmental challenges remain. The issues that persist mostly deal with poverty reduction due to the vast amount of people still living in poverty as well as securing basic needs of people, in addition to working towards the sustainability of the ecosystem, through addressing climate change, and thereby increasing disaster resilience, while working towards creating resource efficiency leading to resource security.³

The South and Southeast Asia regions have shown uneven progress towards the realisation of sustainable development. Progress has been alarmingly slow, and critical areas such as climate change, hunger eradication, and renewable energy have not seen major advancements. It is estimated that South Asia will miss the 2030 Agenda goals by nearly 30 years, and matters such as the COVID-19 pandemic's economic downfall, political instability, and effects of climate change have slowed down possible progress.⁴ However, progress has been made in key areas such as economic inclusivity, education, healthcare, and human development.⁵

The national policies have a great effect on the achievements made, such as climate action being gravely under-prioritised within national agendas, showing slow progression within climate matters. However, taking into account the fact that many countries within the Asia region are developing countries, progress is slower and cannot be achieved within all sectors at once.

¹ Economic and Social Commission for Asia and Pacific 'Achieving Sustainable Development Goals in the East and North-East Asia' (*United Nations*, 2017).

² *ibid.*

³ *ibid.*

⁴ Saifee Islam, 'Progress of South Asia in Achieving SDGs- OpEd' (Eurasiareview, 10 September 2024)

<<https://www.eurasiareview.com/10092024-progress-of-south-asia-in-achieving-sdgs-oped/>> accessed 28 May 2025.

⁵ *ibid.*

1.2. IMPORTANCE OF WORKING TOWARDS SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Sustainable development is crucial for current and future generations to enjoy clean air, food, and water as well as ensuring equity so that everyone can live a good life. As such, working towards sustainable development promotes long-term ecological balance and human well-being.⁶ Sustainable actions, such as transitioning from fossil fuels to renewable energy, will provide long-lasting ability for future generations to pursue life on the planet as well as for the environment and ecosystems to flourish.

Improving sustainable development in Asia is crucial from an economic point of view, as over 100 million people in Southeast Asia are working within professions that are closely or directly linked to the environment. These jobs are therefore extremely vulnerable to negative effects of climate change.⁷ Unless transitions are made to slow down the effects of climate change, a large number of people will be losing their jobs, and the economic state of nations will decline. Additionally, the Southeast Asian countries' economic growth relies heavily on natural resources, however, coming up with sustainable ways to preserve natural resources and thereby secure them, is crucial in enabling economic progress in the long run.⁸

Furthermore, as the geographical location of countries in Asia makes nations highly susceptible to consequences of climate change, such as natural disasters, which can cause internal displacement, loss of livelihoods, and loss of life, it is crucial that nations in Asia and on a global level work towards mitigating climate change.

Sustainable practices allow for all life, from humans to animals, to fauna and flora, to the whole ecosystem, to thrive and be there in the long run. Therefore, working towards the SDGs is of vital importance.

2. THE 2030 AGENDA FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

2.1 AIMS OF THE 2030 AGENDA

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was promoted by the United Nations (UN) as part of the initiative “Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”. It was adopted by a GA Resolution on September 25th, 2015 and entered into force in 2016.⁹

⁶ ‘Why sustainability matters’ (ifaw, 18 November 2024) <<https://www.ifaw.org/uk/journal/why-sustainability-matters>> accessed 28 May 2025.

⁷ OECD (2024), *Towards Greener and More Inclusive Societies in Southeast Asia* (Development Centre Studies, OECD Publishing, Paris) <<https://doi.org/10.1787/294ce081-en>> accessed 28 May 2025.

⁸ *ibid.*

⁹ General Assembly, Transforming our world: the 2030 agenda for sustainable development (25 September 2015) A/RES/70/1.

The Declaration by the GA, which provides the complete text of the Agenda, is preceded by the Preamble, which gives an overview of the goals of the Agenda. In particular, the preamble begins by stating the Agenda's primary goal, namely, preparing a plan of action to be taken for people, planet, and prosperity.¹⁰ Closely following is the second goal, namely, the strengthening of universal peace in larger freedom.¹¹ To reach this ambitious objective, the Agenda intends to eradicate poverty in all forms and dimensions.¹²

Furthermore, the Preamble also underlines that the plan laid out in the Agenda should be implemented by all countries and stakeholders, calling for the involvement of every affected party, and collaborative partnerships to be created between different parties. According to the Preamble, such collaborations are necessary to free humanity from poverty and guide the world on a sustainable and resilient path.¹³ Finally, the Preamble focuses on gender equality and human rights protection themes, by stating that the SDGs and targets outlined in the Agenda "seek to realise the human rights of all and to achieve gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls".¹⁴

2.2 SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS IN 2030 AGENDA

The 2030 Agenda introduces 17 SDGs and 169 targets that should be implemented by 2030, tackling critical aspects that are fundamental to the well-being of humanity and the planet. As such, the Agenda identifies five main areas of action, listed in five categories: People, Planet, Prosperity, Peace, and Partnership.¹⁵ Within the five areas of action, the Agenda presents 17 SDGs, thoroughly explained in its text.

In particular, the first four Goals aim at ending poverty and hunger, ensuring healthy lives, and providing inclusive and quality education for all.¹⁶ Goal Five focuses on gender equality and women's empowerment.¹⁷ Goals Six, Seven, Eight, and Nine respectively aim at ensuring the availability of water, affordable energy, and promoting sustainable economic growth and resilient infrastructure. Goal Ten aims to reduce inequalities.¹⁸ Goals 11 and 12 focus on making cities inclusive and ensuring sustainable consumption. Goals 13, 14, and 15 deal with combatting climate change, conserving the oceans, and protecting ecosystems.¹⁹ Goals 16 and 17 aim at promoting peaceful and inclusive societies and strengthening global partnerships for sustainable development.²⁰

¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹ *ibid.*

¹² *ibid.*

¹³ *ibid.*

¹⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁵ UN, 'Transforming our world: the 2030 agenda for Sustainable Development' <<https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda>> accessed 25 May 2025.

¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁸ United Nations, 'Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development' (n 15).

¹⁹ *ibid.*

²⁰ *ibid.*

3. COUNTRY STUDIES ON THE STATUS OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN ASIA

3.1. CHINA

China plays a pivotal role in the global pursuit of the SDGs, not only as the world's formerly most populous country but also as its second-largest economy. China's progress, or lack thereof, has far-reaching consequences since its growth trajectory is intricately linked to international economic and environmental systems. China's implementation of the SDGs demonstrates the intricate relationship between governmental centralisation, economic ambition, and development disparity.



3.1.1. Current status and progress made on SDGs

With major advancements in infrastructure, healthcare, and poverty eradication, China has positioned itself as a worldwide leader in the pursuit of the SDGs established by the UN. Over 800 million people were lifted out of severe poverty in China between 1981 and 2013, according to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).²¹ This achievement contributed significantly to global efforts to reduce poverty and to SDG One (No Poverty), accounting for more than 70 percent of global poverty reduction during that period.²² Additionally, the nation has improved maternal and child health indicators, created a strong transportation and energy infrastructure in line with SDG Nine (Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure).²³

Major progress has been made toward SDG Four (Quality Education), as evidenced by the nearly-universal enrolment in primary schools, and an adult literacy rate of over 96 percent.²⁴ The nation also boasts substantial infrastructure development, including high-speed rail, smart cities, and digital banking networks regarding SDG Nine (Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure).²⁵ Massive investments in renewable energy have also been made as a result of environmental legislation. China is the world's largest producer of solar and wind power, advancing SDG Seven (Affordable and Clean Energy) and 13 (Climate Action).²⁶ Moreover, through initiatives like the South-South Cooperation Assistance Fund, China

²¹ UNDP, 'China and the SDGs' (2020) <<https://www.undp.org/china/publications/china-and-sdgs>> accessed 28 May 2025.

²² *ibid.*

²³ World Bank, 'China Overview' (2023) <<https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/china/overview>> accessed 28 May 2025.

²⁴ UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 'Education Profile: China' (2023) <<http://uis.unesco.org>> accessed 28 May 2025.

²⁵ 'China Overview' (n 23).

²⁶ International Energy Agency, 'China's Energy Policy Review 2022' (2022) <<https://www.iea.org/reports/china-2022>> accessed 28 May 2025.

supports the implementation of the SDGs in the developing countries, indirectly advancing SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals).²⁷

3.1.2. *Challenges in achieving SDGs*

Environmental sustainability, however, continues to be a significant challenge. Despite being the global leader in investments in renewable energy, China's dependence on heavy industries and coal still hinders progress toward SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production) and 13 (Climate Action), in combination with the fact that it is the world's largest emitter of CO₂.²⁸ Furthermore, more than 80 percent of groundwater in some areas is considered unsuitable for human consumption due to the severe air and water pollution caused by China's fast industrialisation and urbanisation.²⁹ China's commitment to sustainable development has evolved as a result of its adoption of policies like the "Ecological Civilisation" framework and its lofty carbon neutrality targets for 2060.³⁰

Yet, systemic barriers still exist. The inclusiveness of SDGs' progress is threatened by regional disparities, especially in western provinces.³¹ Human rights concerns, including restrictions on civil society, press freedom, and the limited transparency of environmental data, undermine SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions).³² Furthermore, despite advancements in healthcare, problems with fair access to medical treatment still persist, particularly for migrant and rural communities.³³ The elements suggest that although China has achieved quantifiable progress toward several SDGs, significant institutional openness and policy reform are required to remove the structural and social barriers preventing holistic progress.

3.2. JAPAN

Japan has institutionalised the 2030 Agenda through its SDGs Promotion Headquarters within the Cabinet Office and has conducted Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) in 2017 and 2021, with a third report planned for presentation at the UN High-Level Political Forum in July 2025.³⁴ This high-level coordination mechanism ensures

²⁷ Ministry of Commerce of the PRC, 'South-South Cooperation Assistance Fund' (2023) <<http://english.mofcom.gov.cn>> accessed 28 May 2025.

²⁸ International Energy Agency, 'China's Energy Policy Review 2022' (n 26).

²⁹ Greenpeace East Asia, 'China's Water Crisis' (2020) <<https://www.greenpeace.org/eastasia/issues/water-crisis/>> accessed 28 May 2025.

³⁰ Ministry of Ecology and Environment of the People's Republic of China, 'Ecological Civilization Construction' (2021) <<http://english.mee.gov.cn/>> accessed 28 May 2025.

³¹ UNESCAP, 'Asia and the Pacific SDG Progress Report 2023' (2023) <<https://www.unescap.org/kp/2023/asia-and-pacific-sdg-progress-report->2023>> accessed 28 May 2025.

³² Human Rights Watch, 'China: Events of 2023' (2023) <<https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2023/country-chapters/china>> accessed 28 May 2025.

³³ Lancet Public Health, 'Inequality in Healthcare Access in Rural China' (2022) 7(4) e323.

³⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 'Government's Efforts' (*Japan SDGs Action Platform*) <<https://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/oda/sdgs/effort/index.html>> accessed 10 May 2025.

cross-ministerial alignment of policies and sustained engagement with stakeholders, enabling Japan to monitor implementation regularly and share best practices on its SDG journey.

3.2.1. Current status and progress made on SDGs

According to the 2024 Sustainable Development Report, Japan ranks 18th out of 166 countries, with an overall score of 79.87 percent. This reflects strong performance on several goals; however, only 16 percent of its 169 targets are currently on track for achievement by 2030.³⁵ This ranking places Japan among the top OECD Member States in overall SDG progress, yet signals that much remains to be done if it is to fully realise the 2030 Agenda.³⁶

Japan has been working
towards implementing
**Goal #3 of the
Agenda: Good Health
and Well-Being**



Source: <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2023/>

On the social front, Japan enjoys one of the world's highest life expectancies (84.4 years) and near-universal health coverage, underpinned by robust public health infrastructure, and comprehensive insurance schemes.³⁷ Educational attainment is likewise strong: literacy exceeds 99 percent, and tertiary enrolment stands at over 60 percent, supported by sustained investment in learning technologies and curriculum reforms.³⁸ However, an ageing and shrinking population exerts mounting pressure on pension and long-term care systems, threatening the sustainability of social security and labour force participation rates into the 2030 horizon.³⁹

As a response to the persistent challenges in relation to Japan's environmental footprint, the government launched a Nature-Positive strategy in 2022, culminating in the "Transition Strategies toward a Nature-Positive Economy" in March 2024, aiming to reverse biodiversity loss and promote sustainable landuse, although implementation remains uneven in local and corporate sectors.⁴⁰

3.2.2. Challenges in achieving SDGs

A principal challenge confronting Japan is its demographic trajectory. The nation's fertility rate has stagnated at around 1.3 births per woman, well below the replacement level, while the proportion of citizens aged 65 and over has surged to 29 percent of the total

³⁵ 'Sustainable Development Report 2024' (SDSN and UN) <<https://dashboards.sdindex.org/profiles/japan>> accessed 10 May 2025.

³⁶ Sustainable Development Solutions Network, 'Progress on the SDGs sits at 16%, Japan ranks 18th' (5 August 2024) <<https://sj.jst.go.jp/news/202408/n0805-01p.html>> accessed 10 May 2025.

³⁷ 'UN Sustainable Development Report 2024: Health and Well-Being Indicators' (SDSN and UN, 2024).

³⁸ *ibid.*

³⁹ 'Voluntary National Review 2021 Report on the Implementation of the SDGs by Japan' (UN SDG Knowledge Platform).

⁴⁰ 'Sustainable Development Report 2024' (n 35).

population.⁴¹ This demographic shift imposes heavy fiscal burdens on pension and healthcare systems, with combined social security expenditures consuming over 55 percent of general government spending in 2023.⁴² The resulting strain constrains the government's fiscal space to invest in emerging SDG priorities, such as digital inclusion for remote communities and green infrastructure upgrades.

Japan's exposure to natural hazards exacerbates its SDGs implementation gap. Situated along the Pacific "Ring of Fire", the country endures frequent earthquakes, tsunamis, typhoons, and volcanic activity. Between 2015 and 2022, natural disasters inflicted economic losses averaging USD 15 billion per annum, disrupting supply chains and damaging essential infrastructure.⁴³ Moreover, the intensification of extreme weather events due to climate change, such as record rainfall in western Japan in 2020, has highlighted vulnerabilities in disaster preparedness and the need to mainstream resilience measures across urban planning and ecosystem restoration.⁴⁴

Environmental sustainability is further hampered by entrenched consumption patterns. Japan's material footprint per capita remains among the highest in the G7, reflecting substantial imports of raw materials and energy commodities.⁴⁵ Despite a circular economy strategy adopted in 2020, recycling rates for plastics and electronic waste have plateaued below 60 percent, impeding progress on SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production).⁴⁶ Corporate uptake of life-cycle assessment tools and green procurement policies is uneven, often concentrated among large multinational corporations rather than small and medium-sized enterprises, which comprise over 99 percent of all Japanese enterprises and employ two-thirds of the workforce.⁴⁷

Finally, governance and data-related challenges persist. Although the SDGs Promotion Headquarters has strengthened inter-ministerial dialogue, overlapping mandates among ministries, particularly between the Ministry of the Environment, the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, and the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, have led to policy fragmentation.⁴⁸ Furthermore, Japan's statistical system, while robust in national aggregates, lacks real-time disaggregation by age, gender, and region for many indicators, hampering targeted interventions for vulnerable groups such as foreign workers and persons with disabilities.⁴⁹ Enhancing data interoperability, clarifying institutional responsibilities,

⁴¹ Statistics Bureau of Japan, 'Population Estimates' (*Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications*, 1 January 2024) <<https://www.stat.go.jp/english/data/jinsui/2024np/index.html>> accessed 10 May 2025.

⁴² OECD (2023), *Pensions at a Glance 2023: OECD and G20 Indicators* (OECD Publishing, Paris) <<https://doi.org/10.1787/678055dd-en>> accessed 10 May 2025.

⁴³ Munich Re, 'NatCatSERVICE' (2023) <<https://www.munichre.com/en/products/natcatservice>> accessed 10 May 2025.

⁴⁴ Japan Meteorological Agency, 'Climate Change Monitoring Report 2022' (2022) <<https://www.jma.go.jp/jma/en/Climate/index.html>> accessed 10 May 2025.

⁴⁵ UN Environment Programme, 'Global Material Flows and Resource Productivity' (2024).

⁴⁶ Ministry of the Environment of Japan, 'Circular Economy Vision 2020' (2020) <<https://www.env.go.jp/en/recycle/circul/vision.html>> accessed 10 May 2025.

⁴⁷ Small and Medium Enterprise Agency of Japan, 'White Paper on SMEs in Japan 2023' (2023) <<https://www.chusho.meti.go.jp/pamflet/hakusyo/H30/H30PDFindex.html>> accessed 10 May 2025.

⁴⁸ 'Voluntary National Review 2021 Report on the Implementation of the SDGs by Japan' (n 39).

⁴⁹ National Statistics Center of Japan, 'Data Portal for SDGs Indicators' (2024) <<https://www.stat.go.jp/data/kenkyu/sdg/index.html>> accessed 10 May 2025.

and mobilising private-sector finance will be critical to accelerating Japan's progress with its SDGs in the remaining years to 2030.

3.3. NORTH KOREA

The Democratic People's Republic of Korea has nominally committed to the SDGs, as reflected in its 2021 VNRs. However, due to severe limitations on international monitoring, a lack of transparency, and persistent humanitarian crises, its progress remains largely unverifiable. The country's development is profoundly shaped by its militarised authoritarian governance and economic isolation, both of which complicate the genuine implementation of the SDGs.



3.3.1. *Current status and progress made on SDGs*

North Korea asserts that it has achieved advancements in gender parity in education, primary healthcare, and literacy. Its VNRs state that adult literacy is over 99 percent, which supports SDG Four (Quality Education).⁵⁰ The nation also maintains a state-provided healthcare system and strives to guarantee free medical treatment for all inhabitants, aligning with SDG Three (Good Health and Well-Being).⁵¹

Despite being a man-led and state-driven, where the government controls all aspects of life of its people, women's involvement in the workforce and in school seems to be high, nominally supporting SDG Five (Gender Equality).⁵² North Korea also mentions efforts to preserve forest cover and adopt sustainable agricultural practices as part of its environmental commitments under SDG 15 (Life on Land).⁵³ However, all reported figures remain unverifiable due to the absence of independent assessments.

3.3.2. *Challenges in achieving SDGs*

North Korea faces significant obstacles in achieving the SDGs. An estimated 40 percent of the population suffers from chronic food insecurity, which seriously jeopardises

⁵⁰ United Nations DPR Korea, 'Voluntary National Review 2021' (2021).

⁵¹ Amnesty International, 'The Crumbling State of Health Care in North Korea' (2020) <<https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/asa24/001/2020/en>> accessed 28 May 2025.

⁵² UN Women, 'Women in the DPRK' (2021) <<https://asiapacific.unwomen.org>> accessed 28 May 2025.

⁵³ Global Forest Watch, 'Deforestation in North Korea' (2022) <<https://www.globalforestwatch.org>> accessed 28 May 2025.

SDG Two (Zero Hunger).⁵⁴ The problem is exacerbated by frequent droughts, flood damage, and inefficient agricultural practices.⁵⁵ Despite being universal in theory, the healthcare system has outdated infrastructure, medicine shortages, and a lack of trained personnel.⁵⁶ Progress to SDG Six (Clean Water and Sanitation) is hampered by limited access to adequate water and sanitation services, especially outside of Pyongyang.

Most importantly, SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions) is violated by the state's systemic violation of human rights, which includes arbitrary imprisonment, forced labour, and the suppression of opposition.⁵⁷ In addition to targeting the government's nuclear ambitions, international sanctions also significantly impact funding for development and humanitarian assistance, making SDG 17 (Partnership for the Goals) initiatives even more difficult.⁵⁸

3.4. SOUTH KOREA

The influence of the SDGs, which have been incorporated within the Korean Sustainable Development Goals (K-SDGs), demonstrates the strong commitment that the Republic of Korea has to sustainable development. Consisting of 17 goals, 122 targets, and 214 indicators, the K-SDGs have been tailored to reflect the nation's priorities.⁵⁹ These priorities, while excluding global targets deemed "less relevant", global target priorities such as child marriage, incorporate locally significant objectives, including low birth rates and the management of demographic mortality rates.⁶⁰ The implementation of these SDGs exemplifies the adoption of strategic policies, aligning with global priorities and national sustainability goals.



3.4.1. *Current status and progress made on SDGs*

The integration of the SDGs within the national development framework demonstrates South Korea's commitment to sustainable development. A landmark example is the implementation of the Korea Emissions Trading Scheme (K-ETS) in 2015, as it became

⁵⁴ FAO and WFP, 'Special Report: DPRK Crop and Food Security Assessment Mission' (2023) <<https://www.fao.org>> accessed 28 May 2025.

⁵⁵ UNESCAP, 'Asia and the Pacific SDG Progress Report 2023' (2023)

<<https://www.unescap.org/kp/2023/asia-and-pacific-sdg-progress-report-2023>> accessed 28 May 2025.

⁵⁶ Médecins Sans Frontières, 'Health Needs in North Korea' (2022) <<https://www.msf.org/north-korea>> accessed 28 May 2025.

⁵⁷ UN Human Rights Council, 'Report of the Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in the DPRK' (2014) A/HRC/25/63.

⁵⁸ UN Security Council, 'Report of the Panel of Experts on DPRK Sanctions' (2024) S/2024/104.

⁵⁹ Ministry of Environment (Republic of Korea), 'A Report on Korean Sustainable Development Goals (K-SDGs)' (2019).

⁶⁰ *ibid.*

the first mandatory national carbon market within the region of East Asia.⁶¹ By overseeing approximately 74 percent of the country's total greenhouse gas emissions, this scheme plays a crucial role in the transitional progress aiming towards achieving net-zero emissions by 2050.⁶² An additional example would be that of the South Korean initiative to increase the share of renewable energy within the national energy grid. The South Korean government aims to achieve 20 percent renewable energy production by the year 2030, which progressively grows towards 35 percent by 2040, by aiming to reduce the national dependency on coal and nuclear power.⁶³ This initiative has been strengthened by the implementation of the compulsory Zero-Energy Building (ZEB) regulation, which requires compliance from all new public buildings by 2030, whilst striving for privately owned buildings to follow suit.⁶⁴

A visible example of South Korea's performance in the implementation of sustainable development practices can be quantified through international indices. Given how the nation's Green Growth Index (GGI) tracks all levels of inclusive and sustainable growth practices, clear evidence of a steady improvement in environmental and economic sustainability metrics indicates a rise has occurred from the 49.2 percent indicated in 2010 to 52.6 percent in 2022.⁶⁵

3.4.2. Challenges in achieving SDGs

Despite the aforementioned indications of sustainable improvement, persistent challenges remain in the complete implementation of the SDGs in South Korea. A primary example of this revolves around current institutional fragmentation. Due to the lack of effective inter-ministerial coordination, the operational integration of the SDGs across governmental organisations has been dampened. A factor that can be perceived from the comparison made on the execution of cross-governmental mechanisms between G20 countries.⁶⁶

In addition to these matters, the current production levels of renewable energy and air quality readings demonstrate that the nation continues to face environmental challenges. Despite accounting for almost 40 percent of electricity production through coal-derived processes, this practice accounts for a quarter of the nation's yearly emissions. Indicating that

⁶¹ International Carbon Acting Partnership, 'Korea Emissions Trading Scheme' (2022) <https://icapcarbonaction.com/en?option=com_etsmap&task=export&format=pdf&layout=list&systems%5B%5D=47> accessed 22 May 2025.

⁶² *ibid.*

⁶³ International Energy Agency, 'Korea 2022: Energy Policy Review' (2022) <<https://www.iea.org/reports/korea-2022>> accessed 21 May 2025.

⁶⁴ Korea Energy Agency, 'Zero-Energy Building Certification System' (2021) <https://www.energy.or.kr/web/kem_home_new/eng/sub.asp?menu=37> accessed 20 May 2025.

⁶⁵ Mishal J Al-Thani, and Muammer Koç, 'In Search of Sustainable Economy Indicators: A Comparative Analysis between the SDGs Index and the Green Growth Index' (2024) <<https://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/16/4/1372>> accessed 25 May 2025.

⁶⁶ Hyunjung Lim and Jonghwan Eun, 'Exploring Perceptions of Sustainable Development in South Korea: An Approach Based on Advocacy Coalition Framework's Belief System' (2022) <<https://www.mdpi.com/2199-8531/4/4/54>> accessed 24 May 2025.

although ambitious, the current SDGs planning to phase out coal-derived practices is impractical pursuant to the Climate Transparency organisation, which estimates this as a feasibility until the year 2054.⁶⁷

An additional factor influencing the success of the government's initiatives is the current inefficiency of South Korean plastic and recycling practices. The South Korean government's publishing of data illustrating that the nation holds a current recycling rate of 73 percent for plastic products, has been met with counter-arguments about how the actual rates are actually closer to 27 percent by environmentalist non-governmental organisations (NGOs). The implementation of single-use plastic practices during the COVID-19 pandemic has only aggravated the situation, as it adds another level to the compounded sources, such as limited infrastructures and improper sorting practices, for this critical area for reform.⁶⁸

A further limitation to the successful implementation of these SDGs is the national digital divide, which primarily affects inclusive development policies. Despite claiming to have high internet integration, often, rural areas and third-age individuals lack the digital literacy required to benefit from digital services and basic electronic benefits.⁶⁹ This gap further illustrates deficiencies in the implementation of sustainable initiatives that require inclusive digital policies.

3.5. NEPAL

3.5.1. *Current status and progress made on SDGs*

As of 2024, Nepal has reached around 41.7 percent of progress towards its SDGs, which reflects both significant advancements and ongoing challenges. Clear advancements have been made within areas such as poverty reduction (SDG One), sustainable cities and communities (SDG 11), and life on land (SDG 15). This progress is a result of targeted social protection programs, effective urban planning, biodiversity conservation efforts, and inclusive development policies.⁷⁰



⁶⁷ Climate Transparency, 'South Korea Country Profile 2023' (2023)

<<https://www.climate-transparency.org/countries/asia/south-korea>> accessed 26 May 2025.

⁶⁸ Joyce Lee, 'South Korea's Mountain of Plastic Waste Shows Limits of Recycling' (2024)

<<https://www.reuters.com/business/environment/south-koreas-mountain-plastic-waste-shows-limits-recycling-2024-11-22/>> accessed 26 May 2025.

⁶⁹ Korea Information Society Development Institute (KISDI), 'Digital Divide Report 2023' (2023)

<<https://www.kisdi.re.kr/kisdi/eng/>> accessed 27 May 2025.

⁷⁰ Republica, 'Nepal achieves only 41.7 percent progress in SDGs' (myRepublica, 24 January 2025)

<https://myrepublica.nagariknetwork.com/news/nepal-achieves-only-417-percent-progress-in-sdgs-679287026373d.html?utm_source=chatgpt.com> accessed 22 May 2025.

A major issue in achieving the SDGs remains the financial shortfall required to meet investment needs. Between 2024 and 2030, Nepal faces an estimated annual funding gap of Rs 585 billion (approximately USD 4.4 billion). Limited domestic resource mobilisation, underdeveloped capital markets, and insufficient foreign direct investment pose serious constraints to financing the SDG agenda.⁷¹

3.5.2. *Challenges in achieving SDGs*

Irrespective of this progress, structural issues such as limited fiscal capacity, geographic vulnerabilities, and an over-reliance on remittances create systemic barriers to sustained development. In addition, frequent natural disasters, including floods and landslides, which are driven by climate change, strain resources and impede progress, particularly in rural and mountainous regions.

Social inequality and exclusion remain persistent concerns, in particular within marginalised groups such as women, Indigenous communities, and people with disabilities. These disparities affect access to quality education, healthcare, and employment opportunities, impacting progress on goals like SDG Four (Quality Education), SDG Five (Gender Equality), and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities).

Furthermore, institutional failings and inconsistent policy implementation continue to undermine efforts related to SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions). Limited data availability and inadequate monitoring mechanisms also affect the ability to track and evaluate progress effectively, constraining evidence-based decision-making.

3.6. BANGLADESH

The first reports on the country's implementation of the Agenda were released in July 2017, on the occasion of Bangladesh's National Report on the implementation of the SDGs in the VNRs. In the report, Bangladeshi Planning Minister Mustafa Kamal underlined how the country, under the leadership of then-Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, was committed to implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development by incorporating specific measures to achieve the Agenda's goals into national development plans. Furthermore, the Bangladeshi Government highlighted how it was in the process of finalising a "National Action Plan for SDGs Implementation".⁷²

⁷¹ *ibid.*

⁷² Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Bangladesh), '2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development' <<https://nypm.mofa.gov.bd/en/site/page/2030-agenda>> accessed 20 May 2025.

3.6.1. *Current status and progress made on SDGs*

In the context of the Goals of the 2030 Agenda, Bangladesh has been focusing on the Goal 16 of the Agenda. The country has been developing several initiatives targeting the three areas of interest of Goal 16 of the Agenda. Namely, in terms of reducing all forms of violence and related death rates, Bangladesh is promoting the creation of victim support centres, community security projects, and community-based policing. In the context of the promotion of the rule of law and equal access to justice for all, Bangladesh has been promoting public interest litigations, legal aid provided by the Government, and the expertise of legal aid from NGOs. Finally, in the context of ensuring an inclusive participation of the population, Bangladesh has been endorsing projects to create school management committees, women leadership development groups, and to enhance female representation in parliament.

Bangladesh has been making great efforts in implementing **Goal #16 of the Agenda: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions.**



Source: <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2023/>

According to a report published by the UNDP in February 2024, Bangladesh has shown improvements in 31 percent of all the 248 indicators included in the Agenda. This reflects considerable progress in the country's pursuit of sustainable development. Notably, the most recent review highlighted advancements in reducing poverty, hunger, a decline in neonatal mortality, achieving gender parity in schools, and an increase in the annual GDP per capita.

Additionally, the Bangladeshi Government has launched a number of initiatives to advance the achievement of SDGs, including the SDG Action Plan, the SDG tracker webpage, the development of an SDG Financing Strategy, and a collaboration framework between the Government and UN agencies.⁷³

3.7.2 *Challenges in achieving SDGs*

While it is undeniable that Bangladesh has been very active in implementing measures to reach the objectives set out in Goal 16, more effort is needed. Greater attention must be paid to resource allocation, project prioritisation, and the establishment of effective partnerships. In particular, the Bangladeshi Government is encouraged to think strategically about which targets it wants to prioritise and start funding them.

Additional challenges in achieving the SDGs include the prevalence of violence and widespread insecurity in the country, which constitute important threats to the lives of Bangladeshi people and hinder progress towards Goal 16. Violence stemming from clashes

⁷³ United Nations Development Programme (Bangladesh), 'Toward 2030: Strategies for SDG Success in Bangladesh' (2023) <<https://www.undp.org/bangladesh/news/toward-2030-strategies-sdg-success-bangladesh>> accessed 22 May 2025.

between different political factions, and between armed gangs and the state, remains a primary driver of insecurity.⁷⁴ Growing concerns over the state of democracy threaten the achievement of the 2030 Goals in Bangladesh. Investigations reveal that media freedom and the work of rights-focused NGOs operating in the country are limited.

To conclude, it is worth mentioning that the Bangladesh government is politically committed to achieving the SDGs set in place by the 2030 Agenda. However, key challenges remain, namely the need to improve the efficiency of the way public money is spent and the elimination of delays in project implementation.⁷⁵

3.7. MONGOLIA

Mongolia has formally embedded the 2030 Agenda into its national development framework through Vision 2050 and the UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework 2023–2027. These frameworks collectively steer policy coherence and partnership with UN agencies.⁷⁶ Through these instruments, the Government of Mongolia has sought to translate the global SDG targets into concrete national plans, aligning sectoral strategies in health, education, infrastructure, and the environment with the 17 SDGs.

3.7.1. *Current status and progress made on SDGs*

Substantial progress has been recorded in poverty reduction, where targeted social protection schemes, such as cash transfers to herder households and urban poor families, have contributed to a decline in national poverty rates from 27 percent in 2016 to 21 percent in 2023, although rural areas continue to significantly lag behind the capital in living standards.⁷⁷

Improvements in health outcomes are evident by the reduction of the maternal mortality ratio by nearly four percent in 2024 compared to the previous year, driven by expanded maternal health services and strengthened referral

Mongolia has been improving regards
**Goal #3 of the
Agenda: Good Health
and Well-Being**



Source: <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2023/>

⁷⁴ The Financial Express, ‘SDGs: Challenges Bangladesh Faces in Achieving the Goals’ (16 February 2018) <<https://thefinancialexpress.com.bd/views/reviews/sdgs-challenges-bangladesh-faces-in-achieving-the-goals-1518791843>> accessed 21 May 2025.

⁷⁵ International Collective in Support of Fishworkers, ‘Bangladesh: Challenges to Achieving Sustainable Development Goals in Bangladesh’ (21 February 2023) <<https://icsf.net/newss/bangladesh-challenges-to-achieving-sustainable-development-goals-in-bangladesh/>> accessed 22 May 2025.

⁷⁶ UN Mongolia, ‘United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework 2023–2027’ <<https://mongolia.un.org/en/unsdcf>> accessed 10 May 2025.

⁷⁷ UN Mongolia, ‘Joint Steering Committee Reviews UN Mongolia’s 2024 Annual Progress’ (15 April 2024) <<https://mongolia.un.org/en/291458-joint-steering-committee-reviews-un-mongolia%E2%80%99s-2024-annual-progress>> accessed 10 May 2025.

networks in provincial hospitals.⁷⁸ Literacy remains virtually universal, and primary school enrolment rates hover around 98 percent, yet disparities in educational quality persist between urban centres and remote areas, prompting ongoing reforms in teacher training and e-learning infrastructure.⁷⁹

In the energy sector, Mongolia's commitment to achieving a 30 percent renewable energy share by 2030 has been bolstered by the commissioning of the ten megawatt Murun Solar Power Plant and several wind projects in Dornod province, which collectively supplied over two percent of national electricity demand in 2024. Despite these advances, coal continues to dominate the energy mix, accounting for nearly 80 percent of generation and contributing to severe air pollution episodes in Ulaanbaatar during winter months. On climate action, Mongolia has pledged an unconditional 22.7 percent reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2030 (relative to business-as-usual projections), supported by the landmark "Eternal Mongolia" climate finance agreement, which allocates USD 60 million over five years to grassland restoration and community-based resilience programmes.⁸⁰

Efforts to promote gender equality have yielded modest gains, with women's parliamentary representation rising to 25.4 percent in the 2024 legislature, yet women's participation in the formal labour force remains below 50 percent, and they are under-represented in senior management across public and private sectors.⁸¹ The government's revised Gender Equality Law (2022) seeks to address these imbalances through mandatory gender budgeting and quotas in party candidate lists, although enforcement mechanisms are still being strengthened.

3.7.2. Challenges in achieving SDGs

Mongolia's vast territory, over 75 percent of which is classified as rangeland—renders it acutely vulnerable to climate extremes. The "dzud" of winter 2023–24 devastated more than seven million head of livestock, eroding the livelihoods of pastoral communities and underscoring the fragility of traditional herding systems in the face of rising climatic variability.⁸² Desertification affects an estimated 70 percent of Mongolian territory, driven by overgrazing and extractive land-use practices, which in turn exacerbate dust storms and undermine food security in border regions.

Economic dependence on mining, minerals, and coal exports accounts for approximately 25 percent of GDP and over 80 percent of total exports, posing a dual

⁷⁸ *ibid.*

⁷⁹ UNESCO, 'Mid-term Progress Report on SDG 4 in Mongolia (2016–2020)' <<https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/mid-term-progress-report-sustainable-development-goal-4-mongolia>> accessed 10 May 2025.

⁸⁰ Reuters, 'Mongolia Signs Landmark Climate Finance Deal for Its Grasslands' (22 April 2024) <<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/mongolia-signs-landmark-climate-finance-deal-its-grasslands-2024-04-22/>> accessed 10 May 2025.

⁸¹ UN Mongolia, 'Joint Steering Committee Reviews UN Mongolia's 2024 Annual Progress' (n 84).

⁸² AP News, 'Heavy Snows and Drought of Deadly "Dzud" Kill More than 7 Million Head of Livestock in Mongolia' (10 February 2024) <<https://apnews.com/article/42192fdc8e9462d3983c37943a9969b0>> accessed 10 May 2025.

challenge of environmental degradation and cyclical volatility. While mining revenues have funded infrastructure projects, they have also led to contamination of water sources and limited economic diversification with small and medium-sized enterprises in agriculture and tourism struggling to attract investment amid the sector's dominance.⁸³ Rapid urbanisation has intensified these pressures: more than half of Mongolia's population now resides in Ulaanbaatar, where informal "ger" districts lack access to piped water, sanitation, and reliable electricity, exacerbating public health risks and social inequities.⁸⁴

Institutional capacity constraints further hinder SDG implementation. Data gaps remain in monitoring indicators, particularly in remote locations, and coordination among ministries is weakened by overlapping mandates. Although the National Statistical Office has launched new digital data-collection platforms, disaggregation by sex, age, and location is not yet systematic, impeding targeted policy interventions.⁸⁵

3.8. MYANMAR

To demonstrate the national commitment to align with the SDGs, Myanmar adopted the Myanmar Sustainable Development Plan (MSDP) in 2018, demonstrating signs of intermittent progression.⁸⁶ Despite the aforementioned, Myanmar's political instability, alongside environmental degradation issues and economic constraints place significant barriers to sustained advancement.⁸⁷

3.8.1. *Current status and progress made on SDGs*

The implementation of the MSDP, which runs from 2018 until 2030, illustrates Myanmar's efforts for alignment with the SDGs by implementing sustainable development practices within the national strategic framework. The implementation plan of the MSDP is founded on three pillars.⁸⁸ These three pillars include the protection of the people and the planet, peace and stability, and prosperity and partnership. To ensure efficiency, these pillars stand upon five different goals, 28 strategies, and 251 action plans.⁸⁹

⁸³ World Bank, 'Agenda for Action: Key Policy Recommendations for Mongolia's Sustainable Development Vision' <<https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/mongolia/brief/agenda-for-action-key-policy-recommendations-for-mongolia-s-sustainable-development-vision>> accessed 10 May 2025.

⁸⁴ Jeasurk Yang, Sumin Lee, Sungwon Park et al, 'Poverty Mapping in Mongolia with AI-based Ger Detection Reveals Urban Slums Persist after the COVID-19 Pandemic' (*arXiv*, 2024) <<https://arxiv.org/abs/2410.09522>> accessed 10 May 2025.

⁸⁵ World Bank, 'Agenda for Action: Key Policy Recommendations for Mongolia's Sustainable Development Vision' (n 90).

⁸⁶ Shwetaunthagathu Reform Initiative Centre and Phyo Thura Aung, 'Navigating Myanmar Sustainable Development Plan In A Post-Coup Era – Analysis' (*Eurasia Review*, 13 December 2024) <<https://www.eurasiareview.com/13122024-navigating-myanmar-sustainable-development-plan-in-a-post-coup-era-analysis/>> accessed 28 May 2025.

⁸⁷ *ibid.*

⁸⁸ Shwetaunthagathu Reform Initiative Centre and Phyo Thura Aung (n 93).

⁸⁹ *ibid.*

When assessing SDG Three on the matters of health, the nation of Myanmar has demonstrated levels of improvement. For example, the maternal mortality ratio has decreased from 282 per 100,000 live births in 2014 to 250 in 2017.⁹⁰ However, this percentage is still significantly higher than the SDG target ratio of 70.⁹¹ An additional assessment of SDG Four on education demonstrates significant improvement, as net primary enrolment rates have nearly reached 100 percent.⁹²

An additional area that demonstrates progression is that of the improvements made in accessibility to clean water and sanitation, which encompasses SDG Six. This progression can be quantified by looking at the reports indicating that 81 percent of the population has access to improved drinking water and by providing access to sanitation facilities to 80 percent of the population in 2015.⁹³



3.8.2. *Challenges in achieving SDGs*

Despite the aforementioned evident signs of national progression, Myanmar's progress towards achieving conformity with the SDGs is met with five main barriers. The first is the effect generated by the current political instability. Following a military coup in 2021, which disrupted the structures of national governance, the nation has fallen victim to international sanctions and has triggered high levels of economic and social instability.⁹⁴

The second barrier to national development is linked to the country's classification as a Least Developed Country (LDC), a label it is unlikely to lose by 2030.⁹⁵ A classification that limits the nation's access to financial resources is paramount to the implementation of the SDGs. An additional marker that illustrates this economic deterioration is that Myanmar's GDP decreased from USD 78 billion in 2020 to USD 64 billion in 2023.⁹⁶

The barrier presented by environmental degradation is largely due to deforestation rates, as can be seen by reports highlighting the reality of a significant decline from 70 percent by 1948 to 44 percent in 2015 of forest cover within the nation. Additionally, according to the Global Forest Watch, a 16 percent decrease in the country's total tree cover

⁹⁰ Open Development Myanmar, 'SDG 3 Good Health and Well-being' (2017) <<https://opendevelopmentmyanmar.net/topics/sdg-3-good-health-and-well-being/>> accessed 27 May 2025.

⁹¹ *ibid.*

⁹² International Monetary Fund, 'Myanmar: 2018 Article IV Consultation – Press Release; Staff Report; and Statement by the Executive Director for Myanmar: IMF Country Report No. 19/100' (2019) <<https://www.elibrary.imf.org/view/journals/002/2019/100/article-A001-en.xml>> accessed 28 May 2025.

⁹³ *ibid.*

⁹⁴ Shwetaungthagathu Reform Initiative Centre and Phyo Thura Aung (n 93).

⁹⁵ Open Development Myanmar, 'SDG 3 Good Health and Well-being' (n 97).

⁹⁶ Shwetaungthagathu Reform Initiative Centre and Phyo Thura Aung (n 93).

was lost during the period between 2002 and 2023.⁹⁷ The resulting barriers to the smooth implementation of the SDGs derive from the data limitations, which impede effective monitoring and the formulation of policies, as only 60 percent of the baseline data for SDG indicators is available, and the limited access to proper healthcare and education among ethnic minorities, placing constraints on systemic development.⁹⁸

As can be perceived, the aforementioned challenges require a multifaceted approach to successfully address a comprehensive political restructuring while allowing for economic reforms, environmental conservation, data network implementations, and the protection of equitable progress within Myanmar.

3.9. SRI LANKA

Sri Lanka has successfully incorporated SDGs into national policies, aligned with 108 of 169 SDG targets. Its institutional progress includes establishing the Sustainable Development Council (SDC) and launching the national SDG Data Portal, which now provides data for 159 indicators, thereby placing Sri Lanka among the top 13 Asia-Pacific countries in terms of data availability.⁹⁹ The SDG Budget Coding and Tagging system, the Sustainable Finance Road Map, and the Green Bond Framework are key financial initiatives supporting SDG integration.¹⁰⁰



3.9.1. *Current status and progress made on SDGs*

Sri Lanka ranks 93rd out of 167 countries in the 2024 Global Sustainable Development Report, with a score of 67.4, which is above the regional average but slightly lower than its 2022 peak at 76th.¹⁰¹

Progress has been made within SDG Three, good health and well being, where the maternal mortality rate has seen a slight decrease from 30.2 per 100,000 live births in 2020 to 29.5 in 2022 as well as the capacity to manage health risks and emergencies has improved from 66.6 percent in 2022 to 70.7 percent in 2023.¹⁰² Moreover, SDGs regarding the environment have improved. SDG Seven (Affordable and Clean Energy) has improved through the 50 percent increase in the use of renewable energy sources. In relation to SDG 13 (Climate Action), Sri Lanka has introduced a comprehensive National Adaptation Plan for

⁹⁷ Shwetaungthagathu Reform Initiative Centre and Phyo Thura Aung (n 93).

⁹⁸ Open Development Myanmar, 'SDG 3 Good Health and Well-being' (n 97).

⁹⁹ The Global Goals, 'Sri Lanka's Progress on Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals' (2024).

¹⁰⁰ *ibid.*

¹⁰¹ *ibid.*

¹⁰² *ibid.*

2016-2025, strengthened its disaster risk reduction frameworks which has led to a decrease in deaths, missing persons and affected individuals from 5,671 in 2021 to 1,542 in 2022, and 542 in 2023, and updated its Nationally Determined Contributions.¹⁰³ Additionally, SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Institutions) has seen advancements as the rate of intentional homicides dropped from 2.61 per 100,000 people in 2022 to 0.65 in 2023 and more people are accessing formal or informal dispute resolution mechanisms, from 4.05 percent of the population in 2021 to 6.34 percent in 2023.¹⁰⁴

However challenges remain within SDG Four (Quality education), where net enrolment rates to Early childhood development, care, and pre-primary education have been fluctuating as well. Furthermore, the employment rates in manufacturing have dropped below the national target of 36 percent by 2030 as well as non-fatal work injuries have increased from 13.6 to 15.9 per 100,000 creating regressions within SDG Eight (Decent work and Economic Growth).¹⁰⁵ From an environmental perspective, Sri Lanka is facing regression in regards SDG 14 (Life Below Water) and SDG 15 (Life on Land), as average sea water pH levels are declining from 8.2 in 2020 to 7.8 in 2022 and according to the Red List Index, biodiversity health has declined from 0.569 in 2020 to 0.555 in 2024.¹⁰⁶

3.9.2. Challenges in achieving SDGs

Sri Lanka's progress towards achieving the SDGs is hindered by a convergence of structural, economic, environmental, and governance challenges. The fiscal capacity of the State remains constrained, exacerbated by elevated debt service obligations, and reduced inflow of foreign direct investment and remittances.¹⁰⁷ This fiscal predicament undermines the State's capacity to allocate sufficient resources towards important sectors such as social protection, health, and education, thereby impeding efforts to reduce poverty and inequality and to secure the maintenance of fundamental rights.

Environmental sustainability is compromised by systemic issues, including coastal eutrophication, plastic pollution, and ocean acidification, which collectively threaten marine ecosystems and biodiversity.¹⁰⁸ The increasing prevalence of fossil fuel subsidies, coupled with inadequate investments in renewable energy infrastructure, further impedes the transition to a low-carbon economy, thereby undermining the State's commitments under climate-related frameworks.

Social disparities remain entrenched, as observed by the persistent under-representation of women in legislative and managerial roles, gender-based disparities in labour force participation, and limitations on access to equitable economic opportunities.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰³ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ The Global Goals, 'Sri Lanka's Progress on Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals' (2024).

¹⁰⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ *ibid.*

Notwithstanding efforts to enhance educational attainment, inequities in early childhood development and regional disparities in education quality continue to compromise the right to education.¹¹⁰

The governance landscape is marred by systemic inefficiencies, including corruption, lack of transparency, and delays in judicial processes. The high proportion of pre-trial detainees, coupled with limited public trust in dispute resolution mechanisms, constitutes a significant impediment to the maintenance of justice and the rule of law.¹¹¹ Data collection and monitoring frameworks remain inadequate, with the persistent gaps in key indicators, particularly those pertaining to gender equality and environmental sustainability.¹¹² These deficiencies hinder the ability to base policy decisions on reliable evidence and impede the effective achievement of the SDG commitments.

Sri Lanka's susceptibility to natural disasters, climate-induced risks, and associated economic losses underscores the urgent need to adopt comprehensive disaster risk reduction strategies, develop resilient infrastructure, and implement robust early warning systems.¹¹³ The withdrawal of external support for critical sectors, including water and sanitation, further constrains the State's capacity to deliver essential services, particularly to marginalised and vulnerable populations.

4. CONCLUSION

4.1. SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

The analysis of the SDGs implementation across selected Asian countries conveys a region marked by both commendable progress and persistent challenges.

China has made improvements in regard to poverty eradication, healthcare, and transportation, as well as energy infrastructure, including massive investments in renewable energy. While simultaneously financially supporting developing countries in their SDG implementation. Despite these advancements, major challenges remain within environmental sustainability, and persisting human rights concerns impede inclusiveness of SDG implementation.

Japan ranks as one of the top OECD Member States in SDGs progress, focusing on high levels of healthcare and education. However, Japan struggles with advancing environmental sustainability, through entrenched consumption patterns and high levels of greenhouse gas emissions. Japan's ability to effectively prioritise implementation of SDGs

¹¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹¹ *ibid.*

¹¹² *ibid.*

¹¹³ *ibid.*

across all sectors lies within its demographic trajectory of an ageing population, the nation's exposure to natural hazards, and issues related to governance.

North Korea's status in the implementation of SDGs remains widely unverifiable due to lack of transparency and international monitoring. However, North Korea has claimed to have made achievements within education, gender equality, agricultural practices, and healthcare. Major challenges lie within the systemic violations of human rights conducted by the government, hampering the advancement of the majority of the SDGs. Chronic food insecurity as well as access to clean water and sanitation within rural areas is subpar.

South Korea's achievements within SDGs implementation reflect its national priorities, focusing on low birth rates and demographic mortality rates. With the adoption of the Emissions Trading Scheme, South Korea is on its way to achieving net-zero emissions by 2050. Challenges rise within South Korea's institutional fragmentation and lack of inter-ministerial cooperation, environmental sustainability, such as inefficient plastic and recycling practices. The digital divide, especially within rural areas, is limiting inclusive SDG implementation.

Nepal has achieved notable progress in urban sustainability, biodiversity, and poverty reduction, reaching 41.7 percent of its target. Yet, financing gaps, natural disasters, and institutional weaknesses hinder further achievements.

Bangladesh highlights active commitment to SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions) with improvements in education, gender parity, and poverty reduction. Nonetheless, political violence, governance issues, and media suppression threaten sustained development.

Mongolia has taken concrete steps to create national action plans for strategies focusing on education, gender equality, health, infrastructure, and the environment, and it has made progress on poverty reduction. However, environmental challenges remain due to extreme climate events as well as the high economic dependence on natural resources, of which extraction negatively affects the standard of living for Mongolia's population. SDGs implementation is further hampered by lack of institutional coordination and the presence of data gaps.

Myanmar has demonstrated improvements within health, education, and access to clean water and sanitation. Despite progress, political instability is a major factor in limiting advancements in SDGs implementation. In addition, ethnic minorities face systemic barriers to services, hampering the inclusive implementation of SDGs within Myanmar.

Sri Lanka incorporated SDGs into national policy effectively and ranks comparatively well regionally. Still, its progress is undermined by economic instability, environmental degradation, and governance deficiencies, especially regarding gender equality and public service delivery.

Across the region, similar challenges are faced, including;

- Fiscal constraints limiting investment in health, education, and infrastructure.
- Social inequality, particularly affecting women, Indigenous communities, and rural populations.
- Environmental vulnerabilities, such as climate-induced disasters and pollution.
- Weak institutional capacity and inconsistent implementation at sub-national levels.
- Data and monitoring gaps impede evidence-based policymaking.

4.2. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACHIEVING SDGS IN ASIA

In order to aid SDG implementation and to ensure inclusive development, the following is recommended:

1. Strengthen Financing for Sustainable Development

Develop innovative financing mechanisms, including green bonds, public-private partnerships, SDG-linked budgeting, and diaspora investment instruments.

Promote tax reforms and strengthen domestic resource mobilisation to reduce reliance on remittances and aid.

2. Address Inequality and Social Exclusion

Design and implement targeted social protection programs for marginalised groups.

Enhance access to quality education, healthcare, and employment opportunities, particularly in rural and underdeveloped regions.

3. Prioritise Climate Resilience and Environmental Sustainability

Invest in renewable energy, sustainable agriculture, and climate-adaptive infrastructure.

Develop comprehensive disaster risk reduction and early warning systems, especially for vulnerable geographies.

4. Enhance Regional Cooperation and Knowledge Sharing

Encourage cross-border collaboration on transboundary issues such as climate change, migration, and water management.

Create regional platforms for sharing best practices, policy innovations, and capacity building.

5. Close Data and Monitoring Gaps

Invest in national statistical systems and promote the use of technology (e.g., digital dashboards, Geographic Information System mapping) to improve data collection and SDG tracking.

Ensure data disaggregation by gender, geography, and socio-economic status to guide targeted interventions.

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LEGISLATION

General Assembly, Transforming our world: the 2030 agenda for sustainable development (25 September 2015) A/RES/70/1.

UN Human Rights Council, 'Report of the Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in the DPRK' (2014) A/HRC/25/63.

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