3-0 at half-time... How to draw inspiration from Liverpool FC to achieve the UN Sustainable Development Goals by 2030 and beyond?

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In 2015, the international community adopted 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for 2030. Halfway through, the latest edition of the 2022 Sustainable Development Report shows that the international community is no longer making progress towards the SDGs and that we are off track. Heads of States from around the world will meet in September 2023 to discuss priorities for advancing the SDGs. This article draws a parallel with the 2005 Champions League final between Liverpool FC and AC Milan. Led 3 to 0 at halftime, Liverpool FC managed to turn the situation around and win the game. This was made possible thanks to the leadership of key players, its teamwork and with the support of its “12th man” (the Liverpool FC fans) which, in the context of the SDGs, can be associated to the key role played by civil society, and in particular the scientific community to support sustainable development actions plans and identify technological solutions and innovations.


1 The views expressed in this opinion piece are the sole views of the author. They may not represent the views of the SDSN Leadership Council.
The SDG “score” at half-time

Like Liverpool in the 2005 final, at half-time the international community is not on track to achieve the SDGs and “win the game”. After notable progress between 2010 and 2019, which nevertheless masks differences by country and by objective, the international community has not made any progress since 2020 towards sustainable development. This is one of the key findings of the latest Sustainable Development Report (SDR) published in June 2022 by the UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN).

Multiple and simultaneous health, geopolitical and climate crises had negative impacts on the SDGs, particularly in the poorest and most vulnerable countries. Peace and international cooperation are fundamental conditions for making any progress on the SDGs. Moreover, the uneven recognition of the urgency to act combined with public policies that were not always well designed did not always allow to mobilize the public and move forward in the field of sustainable development.

The first half was disappointing but there are reasons to hope. 3-0 is not 10-0. Contrary to what some people say, we must not rethink or « abandon » the SDGs or “scale-back ambitions”. Liverpool would not have won by giving up. On the contrary, we need to step up international efforts for the SDGs. There is still time to act to avoid further climate disasters, a collapse of biodiversity and social and economic crises by implementing the SDGs. But time is running out.

Three keys to bounce back in second half

Not everything should go to waste in this first half as there has been some progress in public policies and paradigm shifts in business conduct and private sector investment to build on. The 2023 SDG Summit should be an opportunity to learn from what worked well and less well during the first half of the SDGs to come back stronger in the “second half”.

There are at least three parallels to be drawn between the keys to Liverpool’s success in 2005 and the priorities for restoring and accelerating progress towards the SDGs.

First, leadership. Liverpool’s key players were able to play much better and inspire the rest of their team mates during the second half. The head coach adjusted his tactics at half-time and the iconic Liverpool captain - Steven Gerard - scored the first goal that put Liverpool back in the game.

In the context of the SDGs, “key players” must also step up their game and inspire the rest of the world. Because of their size, both in population and in economic terms, G20 countries must strengthen their leadership. New data published by SDSN reveals that there are very different levels of commitments to SDG efforts across G20 countries at halftime. The United States, Brazil and the Russian Federation are the countries that exhibit the least support for the SDGs. By contrast, Nordic countries show relatively strong support for the SDGs, as do Argentina, Germany, Japan and Mexico (all of which are members of the G20).

Domestically, through the adoption of the “European Green Deal”, the European Union has made carbon neutrality its compass, which has prompted many other countries to also make bold commitments in favor of climate neutrality, including the United, Canada, China (2060) or India (2070) and many others. Countries like Finland and Sweden go even further with some of the most ambitious climate policies in the world. In the European Union, the Parliament and Eurostat play their role in monitoring the implementation of the SDGs. The war in Ukraine is a human tragedy and war is a major distraction for sustainable development. The EU pathway is now clear: doubling down
on the implementation of the Green Deal and accelerate the transition to renewable energy. The EU single market is a powerful tool to influence the rest of the world.

At the international level, the G20 countries also have a special responsibility. The EU (Global Gateway), China (Belt and Road) and the United States (Build Back Better World) have launched large-scale projects to support the development of quality infrastructure throughout the world. The G7 also announced a $600 billion global infrastructure plan. These investments must support progress towards sustainable development in the years to come. Several G20 countries, including Australia, Canada and the United States, must also significantly increase their contribution to reach the objective of 100 billion dollars devoted to the fight against climate change by the rich countries. Island nations are suffering, and the rich world – responsible for the lion’s share of greenhouse gas emissions - needs to act. Technical cooperation and technology transfers between rich and poor countries must be strengthened.

Second, teamwork. In the second half, thanks to tactical adjustments and a change in mentality, the Liverpool team played more collectively like a real team.

A strong United Nations system, combined with regional and bilateral cooperation between countries, is fundamental to tackling global challenges such as pandemics or climate change. COVID-19 has exposed the weaknesses of the multilateral system. We must learn the lessons and use them to improve multilateralism. This is the objective of the Lancet Covid-19 Commission chaired by Professor Jeffrey Sachs, which will deliver its final report in September 2022.

Beyond emergency policies, it is necessary to rethink the role of institutions and the mechanisms of international financing for sustainable development. The SDGs are above all an agenda for investments in infrastructure (access to drinking water, electricity, digital, renewable energies, etc.) and in human capital (education, health, etc.). However, about half of the countries in the world face major financing constraints. The authors of SDR22 propose a five-part plan for financing the SDGs globally.

On financing, the creation of sovereign SDG bonds is really good news. Notably because in some cases, such as that of Benin, issuances are accompanied by "greenium" (a lower interest rate compared to "classic" government treasury bonds) and a long maturity (12.5 years!). This lowers the cost of money, including for middle- and low-income countries, and allows for long-term investment programs. Investing in the SDGs is, without a doubt, a way to increase future growth potential and therefore its ability to repay loans. Governments, the UN, financial institutions but also civil society can work more together to better link national SDG ambitions / action plans and access to financing.

Third, the role of the “12th man” (the fans). In interviews published after the end of the game, several Liverpool players emphasized the key role played by their fans in the stadium, who sang the famous "You'll Never Walk Alone" [Liverpool FC anthem] just before the return to the locker room to give them confidence and strength. The crowd continued to support the players throughout the whole second half.

In the context of the SDGs, the “12th man” is civil society. Companies, scientists, NGOs, interest groups etc. who all have their role to play. Scientists and research groups in particular must continue both to provide evidence to support public action but also to help find solutions, including through technological innovation, in partnership with governments and the private sector. The speed at which vaccines were developed to respond to the COVID-19 crisis shows the role that science can play in addressing the great challenges of our time. Aligning R&D efforts and major research projects with the SDGs and strengthening interactions between scientists and decision-makers, particularly at
the local level, must be prioritized to accelerate the transformation of production and consumption systems. We must build on the innovations and new partnerships that emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Obviously, new ways to engage with citizens must also be put in place - including in G7 countries which are facing institutional challenges and polarized public opinions - to take account local specificities in the implementation of public policies, for example in terms of energy transformations and agricultural systems.

As in the 2005 Champions’ league finals, it may take more than 90 minutes to win the battle for sustainable development. No doubt, in the second half of the 2020s decade, we will need to start thinking about the next global agenda for sustainable development post 2030. This could be aligned, for example, with the Paris Agreement for Climate which includes objectives for 2050. In any event, and even if certain objectives will probably be difficult to achieve by 2030, ambitious public policy and investment frameworks can and must be in place by 2030 to implement the SDGs. The UN and international cooperation must play a key role in financing the infrastructure and human capital needed to achieve the SDGs. This is what is at stake in the major international meetings to come, starting with the United Nations High Level Forum next July, the Climate and Biodiversity COPs next November and December and the 2023 SDG Summit.