THE IRONY AND CHALLENGES OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: ASSESSING THE ASEAN DILEMMA AMIDST GLOBAL CROSSROADS AND IMPACTFUL TRADE-OFFS.

Critical Analysis

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Irony presents itself from the Brundtland Report of *Sustainable Development* as "Development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (WCED, 1987).

The report considered that using up our planetary resources faster than we could regenerate would be a debt for future generations and this should be something we should avoid at all cost. This should be the responsibility of every single government and human on this planet.

A recent survey by the Real Estate and Housing Developer's Association (REHDA) in Malaysia reflected that a total of 17,971 residential units were launched, but the take up rate was only at 21 percent and at best, the industry remained cautiously optimistic for 2026 (Loheswar, R (2026)). Putting aside the financial root cause, one would wonder about the environmental damage and loss that was incurred for projects that have no demand and yet, similar models are still being developed. Logically, housing developments should be in line with need and with the increased cost of living; more reasonable projects should be considered in line with economic considerations. Then of course there are other issues such as possible land grab and corruption as well that could be present in some of these cases. Unfortunately, this is just one of the many examples that is prevalent globally.

The current focus seems to be more on glorified national and corporate reporting which at times may border on stretched or fraudulent reports. The annual international climate meetings organized by the United Nations known as the Conference of the Parties (COP) have acknowledged and discussed the issue of climate disinformation for the past few years with a sense of urgency. In last year's COP30, 12 nations have initially signed the first-ever Declaration on Information Integrity and Climate Change, aimed to fight back against flood of false content and protect those on the frontlines of truth. It was a strong acknowledgement on the severity of climate disinformation and a consideration of information laundering where false claims are cycled through multiple platforms to appear credible (de Carvalho, 2025). Similarly, corporate reporting and

sustainability standards as well as frameworks have been pushing for a move from internal to external assurance as well as a move from limited to reasonable assurance.

Though all these initiatives are positive and would lead to greater reliance on information that is being reported, it is important to also understand that corporations as well as governments may face immense difficulties to obtain and verify the information data. This also includes the increasing cost of reporting and assurance taking into account data protection and privacy, cost of storage and intensive capital expenditures to change technology platforms. These initiatives may not even be possible over the short or medium term that would significantly impact the performance and achievement of these initiatives. There may also not be integrated platforms that are connecting public-private-individuals to gather relevant information and data hence the need to forecast and analyze based on assumptions. The transition from just financial materiality to double materiality extends the scope well. However, it will take time for organizations to understand the impact of their decisions in line with sustainability matters and to assess the risk, especially on the longer-term perspective. As put forward by the 1987 Brundtland Commission Report, the precautionary principle states that a lack of full scientific certainty should not be used as a reason to postpone action against serious or irreversible environmental harm though it does recommend that if a new chemical's long-term effects are unknown, the precautionary approach favours caution until more is understood.

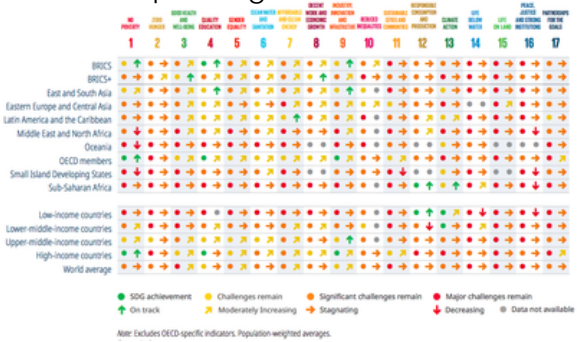
Multilateralism and cooperation amongst institutions and countries play a significant role here. When looking at the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG, 17 SDG's were adopted by the 193 member states of the United Nations on 25th September 2015 with various targets to be achieved by 2030. The Sustainable Development Report in 2026 however, paints a rather dismal picture of the SDG progression. Whilst acknowledging its worth, the report also mentions that the goals are highly ambitious and will not be achieved by the target date of 2030. The report is realistic and acknowledges the limitation that the world is not organized properly to achieve what needs to be accomplished and hence, progress is slow. This is accelerated by the spreading war and climate change challenging the norms of multilateralism. As we bulldoze towards 2030 and as mentioned earlier in this article, it is alarming to note that there are still some SDG's targets and indicators that have no data let alone have any progression as indicated in both Figure 1 and Figure 2.

Figure 1: World SDG Dashboard 2026

Source: Sachs et al (2026)

As per Figure 1 above, out of the seventeen (17) goals, only four (4) have improved moderately, which are Goal 3 Good Health and Well Being, Goal 5 Gender Equality, Goal 7 Affordable and Clean Energy and Goal 9 Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure. The others remain somewhat stagnant. Five (5) goals face major challenges including Goal 14 Life Below Water, Goal 15 Life on Land and Goal 16 Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions as well as Goal 3 Good Health and Well Being and Goal 11 Sustainable Cities and Communities.

Figure 2: 2026 SDG Dashboard by Region and Income Group (Ratings and Trends)



Source: Sachs et al (2026)

Figure 2 above expands the SDG report by region and income. Unavailable data is noted in Goal 4 Quality Education, Goal 8 Decent Work and Economic Growth, Goal 10 Reduced Inequalities, Goal 12 Responsible Consumption and Production Goal 14 Life Below Water, Goal 15 Life on Land and Goal 16 Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions. Low-income countries reflect two SDG achievements for Goal 12 Responsible Consumption and Production and 13 Climate Action. High-income countries reflect three SDG achievements for Goal 1 No Poverty, Goal 4 Quality Education and Goal 9

Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure.

It is also concerning to note that even with the renewed calls of urgency, Goal 13 Climate Action is relatively stagnant with significant challenges with the exception for Sub- Saharan Africa, low-income and lower-middle-income countries. High-income countries are also facing major challenges with stagnant performance when it is anticipated that these countries should be leading the initiatives in terms of Climate Action.

The current on-going experience of extreme heat has raised further concerns on global climate resilience and impact. Millions are experiencing extreme heat that has affected their daily life's, public health capacities, agriculture and energy systems. Heatwaves can overwhelm the healthcare system; increase wildlife risks and strain electricity grids as air conditioner usage reaches peak levels. Some European countries are already experiencing power outages as the current heatwave is straining the grid. Prolonged exposure will have more severe impacts for the overall planetary and living beings health, infrastructures and economy.

Figure 3: Forecast Highs for 30th June 2026

Source: CNN Weather (2026)

Europe is suffering under a fierce heat dome (a large area of high atmospheric pressure that traps hot air over a region for days or weeks, causing temperatures to climb well above normal) that will have significant impacts for the fastest-warming continent. Figure 3 reports the forecast weather across major cities in Europe for 1st July 2026 with governments already indicating an anticipated increase in temperatures beyond the above forecast and countries like UK have also issued "Red Extreme Heat Warnings" and France comparing the current heatwave to the one in 2003 that killed almost 15,000 people. France, Spain and Italy are considered as the most exposed economies to the growing economic costs of extreme heat which could reduce output by as much as 7% in some countries by 2030 (Katanich, 2026). The article also mentions that once temperatures exceed 30°C; labour productivity falls by around 3%; energy demands increase by roughly 1.2% per degree as households and businesses rely more heavily on cooling which would also cause a double whammy as Europe's power mix still relies heavily on thermoelectric generation which depend on water availability and cooling efficiency.

Globally, the share of working hours lost to heat stress is projected to rise from 1.4% in 1995 to 2.2% by 2030 with much higher losses anticipated in South Asia (Katanich, 2026). Southeast Asia is set to see a warmer-than-usual early summer, which is predicted to raise power demand for fuel and at the same time , will strain power grids; with an 80 – 100% chance of above-normal temperatures across Indonesia and Malaysia initially and then expected to expand to mainland Southeast Asia (Bloomberg, 2026). Concurrently, the Singapore Institute of International Affairs (SIIA) has also put South-East Asia on red alert for an elevated haze risk especially for Malaysia, Brunei, Indonesia and Singapore (The Star , 2026). The news article also reported growing concerns over the return of El Nino conditions in 2026 which raises the possibility of a stronger and more prolonged dry season, aggravated by a potential positive Indian Ocean Depole (IOD) which could further intensify the weather conditions and increase the risk of fire. None of the above provides a positive forecast. A prolonged drought through the remaining months of 2026 could lead to food shortages and spikes in prices of food and other necessities, pushing millions back into poverty.

Considering that many are still recovering from the post-Covid impact and the current global wars and other uncertainties, the repercussions are going to be significant. The growing number of individuals that are becoming homeless especially amongst the elderly individuals that are alone or have been abandoned is also increasing. In Malaysia, 7,862 homeless persons were recorded and registered from 2021 to 2025 (Yusuf, 2026). This does not include the numbers that have not been registered. Although there are many initiatives such as transit centers etc.; more assistance and outreach programmes need to be in place especially when taking into account the growing number of unemployed individuals. The Star (2026a) reported that

Malaysia's unemployment rate had returned to 3.0% in April 2026, with 511,800 unemployed persons recorded. Separately, it is important to also consider statistics involving foreign workers (with and without permits) that could also be facing financial issues or from labour and human rights perspectives, which is unfortunately still a pressing issue within ASEAN. Another challenge that is prevalent across ASEAN is the lack of coordinated definitions, concepts and measures for poverty as well as the collection of data (ASEAN,2025).

A major concern noted in the SDG Report is the somewhat relaxed approach towards Goal 14 Life Below Water and Goal 15 Life on Land. Southeast Asia's biodiversity is under severe threat caused by the encroachment of cities and farms, deforestation, warning seas and the trafficking of rare wildlife for food, traditional medicines and as pets (Jones, 2026). The article refers to the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) that reports that more than 4,300 species across Southeast Asia were "critically endangered" or "endangered", citing the Javan and Sumatran rhinos as well as the Cat Ba Langur from Vietnam as down to the last few dozens, and the Soala (Laos) may already be extinct. ASEAN is considered an illegal wildlife trade (IWT) hotspot where import, export and other illegal trade transactions involving wildlife are conducted with relative ease (ASEAN, 2023). There are increasing global initiatives and local ASEAN cooperation to collectively combat this phenomenon. As an example, Bernama (2026) had reported that there had been a series of high-profile seizures of endangered animals and wildlife products across Laos and Thailand that had exposed a flourishing black market that is harming countless species in the wild. In this case, the animals were being transported using international passenger buses, there were even those that used airlines and other forms of visible transport. Although the species are not native to Laos, they had been trafficked across the border as ASEAN is vastly linked by land and sea and various illegal routes can be creatively organized especially when corruption is involved. The article also cited a report from UNODC that claimed the global wildlife trade is worth nearly US$10 billion making it as lucrative as the trafficking of humans, narcotics and arms trade. Although it may be easier to blame governments for turning a blind eye towards this, it is also important to consider the participation of corporations and even individuals in these activities. As an example, several NGOs accused Meta of hosting the world's "largest single known illegal wildlife trade market" and effectively encouraging the trade by sharing advertising revenues with users and allowing them subscription models including across ASEAN member countries based on the findings of over 20,000 adverts for more than 260,000 wildlife products on social media platforms between April 2024 and March 2026.

Plastic pollution is another significant environmental challenge in ASEAN with over 31 million tonnes of plastic waste generated annually across six ASEAN member states, contributing to marine debris with plastic accounting for approximately 80% of all marine debris in the ocean (ASEAN, 2026). Though there have been efforts to create awareness, implement initiatives to manage waste and considerations of circular economies: there is still a huge gap in preventing marine litter and driving sustainable change across the region. This would also impact marine life and the health implications for those that consume ocean based food resources.

The battle to survive in current challenging circumstances is an individual effort aligned to the bigger picture. The consequences of the dilemma have to be faced, on whether to focus on convenience and business as usual and sabotage our chances of surviving or to respond to nature's response to us with urgency. The current status of no data or vague and ambiguous data with various assumptions is alarming as we are nowhere close to a conclusive solution. The answer to " are humans climate resilient" involves scary statistics.

Although it is encouraging to see innovations and initiatives that are attempting to add value, it is important that key stakeholders and leaders keep an eye on the final deliverable. It is an ongoing process as innovations and new technology would also cause new risks to turn up and possible long-term dilemmas and effects that have not been considered. Experiencing first-hand consequences of past greed and inaction would be a wake-up call to address sustainable development practically and with a renewed sense of urgency.

The cross roads are clear, with every step mattering. On a wishful thinking basis, platforms and data need to be more reflective and connected to show how each decision and

step makes a difference to cause any impact. Though with the ongoing conflicts, disputes, corruption and discrimination, this may be hard to envision, leading to a definite disaster especially if there is a continuing trend of putting "greed" over "need".

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