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Beyond 2030: A Transformation Architecture for Delivering Sustainable Development

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Abstract

As 2030 approaches, this paper argues that the central question is not whether to extend, revise or replace the Sustainable Development Goals, but how to govern systemic transformation within ecological limits. Synthesising evidence on the SDGs' political effects and implementation constraints, it finds that the goals established a shared language and reporting architecture, yet generated limited and uneven institutional, financial, ecological and accountability reforms. The paper proposes a Beyond 2030 transformation architecture comprising principles, delivery layers, verifiable commitments and a set of interconnected pathways. Geopolitical stress tests assess its credibility under cooperative, fragmented, debt-constrained, climate-stressed and low-trust conditions. Jamaica illustrates its relevance for vulnerable middle-income Small Island Developing States, where policy alignment coexists with climate exposure, limited fiscal space, ecological dependence and implementation constraints. A credible successor framework must connect universal ambition to differentiated responsibility, finance, authority, accountability, local participation, technological safeguards and adaptive learning, and remain operational across contexts.

Keywords:
Post-2030 agenda; sustainable development transitions; global governance; ecological regeneration; development finance; Beyond GDP; accountability; digital governance.

JEL Classification:
Q01; O20; F53; O19; Q56.

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Key messages

- Beyond 2030 should be designed as a transformation architecture—not an expanded catalogue of goals—linking global ambition to institutions, finance, accountability and ecological limits.
- Goals and indicators remain necessary, but they must be connected to mandates, budgets, delivery systems, independent review and mechanisms for corrective action.
- Sustainable development must improve human well-being within ecological limits without transferring environmental costs across countries, communities or generations.
- Commitments should be costed and matched to fiscal space, debt sustainability, affordable finance, institutional capacity and credible delivery mechanisms.
- Accountability should specify the responsibilities of governments, local authorities, firms, financial institutions and international organizations, while distinguishing reporting from independently verified performance.
- Universal ambition should be implemented through differentiated pathways reflecting national capacities, vulnerabilities, ecological footprints, historical responsibilities and development circumstances.
- Localisation requires authority, finance, data, institutional capacity and protected participation—not the downward delegation of unfunded responsibilities.
- Digital technologies and AI require public-interest governance that protects rights, inclusion, transparency, information integrity and ecological sustainability.
- The architecture should preserve common standards while adapting delivery to cooperative, fragmented, debt-constrained, climate-stressed and low-trust environments.
- Jamaica demonstrates that SDG alignment can improve policy coherence but cannot overcome SIDS' structural vulnerabilities without finance, resilience, implementation capacity and accountable institutions.

Introduction

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development marked a major achievement in global cooperation. Through the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the international community established a universal, integrated framework to address poverty, inequality, environmental degradation, institutional weakness, and uneven development (United Nations 2015c). The SDGs provided public, private, academic, and civic actors with a shared language for understanding interconnected global challenges and strengthened reporting, measurement, and cross-country comparisons across levels of governance. Their significance, therefore, lies not only in the goals themselves but also in their role in consolidating sustainable development as a common framework for global policy coordination.

As 2030 approaches, the framework's limitations have become increasingly apparent. Many targets remain off track, while ecological breakdown, economic fragility, conflict, food insecurity, technological disruption, and deepening inequality have intensified (Sachs et al. 2025). These outcomes cannot be reduced to implementation delays. They reveal deeper weaknesses in the design and delivery of the SDGs, including an agenda that was broad, unevenly implemented, weakly financed, insufficiently accountable, poorly localized, and inadequately grounded in ecological limits (Biermann et al. 2022; Cernev and Fenner 2024). The agenda has also been criticized for failing to engage sufficiently with colonial histories, unequal power relations, differentiated responsibilities, climate coloniality, and the disproportionate ecological and developmental burdens borne by countries and communities in the Global South (Arora-Jonsson 2023; Kumar et al. 2024; Sultana 2022).

These limitations expose a critical gap in current post-2030 discourse. Much of the emerging discussion asks whether the SDGs should be extended, revised, or replaced (Arora, Fatima, and Arora 2025). While this question matters, it is too narrow. The deeper issue is that the SDG model generated a shared language and reporting system without embedding the governance mechanisms needed to drive institutional, financial, ecological, technological, and political transformation. Targets are not only off track; they are off track in part because the framework lacked sufficiently strong arrangements for independent verification, financing alignment, phase-based transformation management, Beyond Gross Domestic Product (GDP) measurement, science-policy-society interfaces, local co-design, and the governance of emerging domains such as artificial intelligence, information integrity, water stress, outer space, and peace and security.

The post-2030 question is therefore not simply which goals should follow the SDGs, but what kind of architecture can steer systemic transitions that secure human well-being within ecological limits. This question is already politically salient. Even before formal negotiations begin, informal discussions around agenda-setting, coalition-building, and political positioning are already shaping the post-2030 debate, including questions concerning participation, financing, accountability, and localisation (Forus 2026). This aligns with evidence that, although the SDGs have had important discursive effects, their impact on institutional, legal, financial, and budgetary transformation has been more limited (Biermann et al. 2022).

This policy document addresses that gap by developing a conceptual framework for post-2030 transformation governance. It integrates research on the SDGs' political effects and implementation constraints with the broader literature on governing, financing, and measuring sustainable transformation within ecological limits. Rather than testing a causal model, the analysis identifies the architectural conditions that a credible post-2030 framework must satisfy. The subsequent discussion of Jamaica, a Small Island Developing State (SIDS), shows why these design conditions matter in practice, as formal SDG alignment can coexist with climate exposure, narrow economic structures, constrained fiscal space, ecological fragility, and limited implementation capacity. Geopolitical scenarios used later in the paper serve as heuristic robustness tests rather than forecasts, assessing whether the proposed architecture remains coherent across different political, fiscal, ecological, and institutional constraints.

The paper's central contribution is to recast Beyond 2030 as a transformation architecture rather than a successor list of goals. Seven principles establish its normative foundations, while six delivery layers—pathway governance and sequencing, multilevel governance, accountability and independent review, finance, knowledge and measurement, and emerging-domain governance—provide its implementation machinery. These are translated into operational commitments and priority transformation pathways, while geopolitical scenarios test whether the architecture remains credible under contrasting conditions. The central argument is that post-2030 design must connect ambition to authority, finance, accountability, measurement, technological safeguards and protected civic participation.

The paper first assesses the SDG legacy and explains why post-2030 design choices are already urgent. It then develops the proposed architecture, operational commitments and transformation pathways; examines the political fault lines and geopolitical conditions that could affect implementation; and applies the framework to Jamaica before drawing final policy implications.

1. Why Post-2030 Design Choices Matter Now

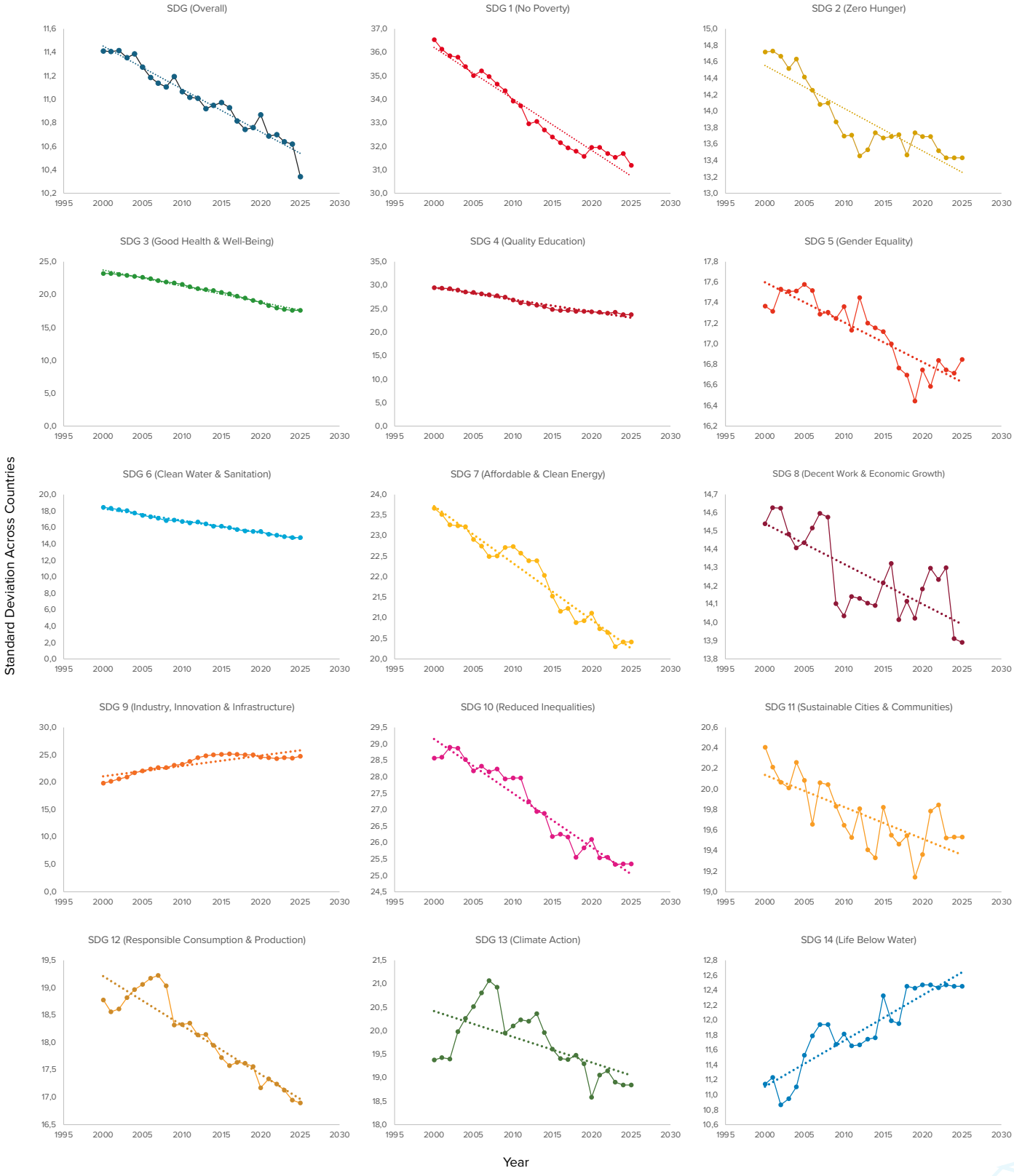
The question of what follows the 2030 Agenda can no longer be deferred. As the SDGs approach their formal endpoint and progress remains uneven, decisions made before 2030 will shape the institutional architecture, financing arrangements, political priorities, and normative foundations of sustainable development in the decades ahead. The post-2030 debate matters because the next development framework will not simply inherit unfinished SDG targets. It will determine whether global sustainable development governance continues to rely on broad aspirational goals or evolves toward a more selective, accountable, and transformation-oriented architecture. Four considerations make early post-2030 agenda-setting necessary.

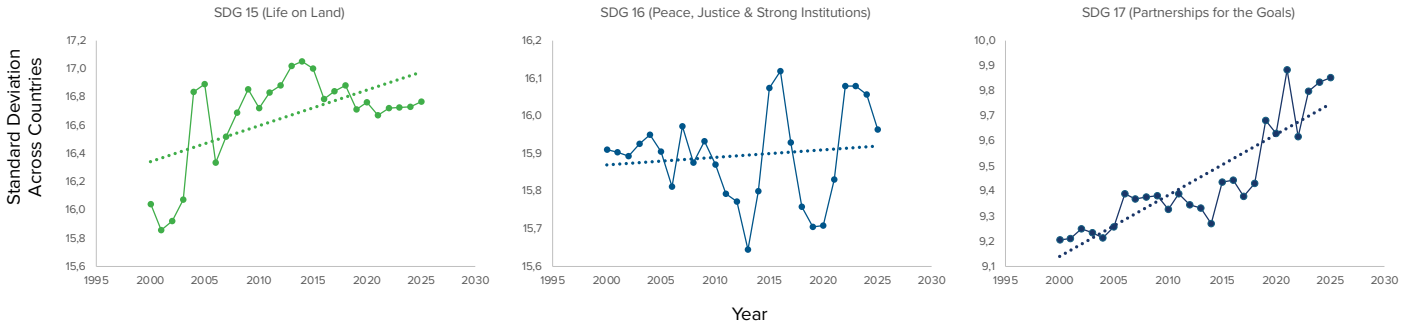
The first concerns the current state of SDG progress. Recent assessments show that SDG progress remains substantially off track, only 35 percent of SDG targets with available trend data are on track or show moderate progress, while 18 percent have regressed (United Nations 2025c). This has intensified calls to reset and sharpen priorities for the post-2030 period (Nature Sustainability 2025). Progress has been constrained by overlapping health, geopolitical, climatic, and economic shocks, compounded by debt pressures and inadequate development finance, with poorer and more vulnerable countries, including SIDS, falling further behind (Sachs, Lafortune, and Fuller 2024; Independent Group of Scientists Appointed by the Secretary-General 2023).

These implementation gaps are especially acute in the Agenda's environmental dimensions. Persistent deficits in water and sanitation, clean energy, sustainable consumption, climate action, biodiversity protection, deforestation, land degradation, and ecosystem integrity point to deeper weaknesses in integrating environmental sustainability within the SDG framework, rather than implementation delays alone (Arora and Mishra 2019; Hametner 2022; Sachs *et al.* 2025). The convergence evidence reinforces this concern. Figure 1 suggests that global SDG performance is not moving uniformly toward common outcomes. While convergence is evident across several SDG dimensions, other goals continue to show divergent trajectories across countries (Bigerna and Micheli 2025). This uneven convergence matters because a post-2030 framework must address not only average progress but also the distribution of progress across countries and goals.

The second consideration concerns weaknesses in the SDG framework's design. Universality and integration remain important achievements, but the breadth of 17 goals and 169 targets has complicated prioritisation, sequencing, accountability and scenario analysis (van Vuuren *et al.* 2022). These weaknesses require attention before designing a successor framework. Institutions nonetheless continue to operate in sectoral silos despite the growing interdependence of social, economic, environmental, and governance systems. A systematic review finds that interactions within goals and across geographical boundaries remain understudied (Khot, Warchold, and Pradhan 2026), while the OECD emphasizes coordination across sectors and levels of government, as well as attention to transboundary and long-term policy effects (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2024).

Figure 1. Unconditional (sigma) convergence patterns globally across the SDGs





Source: Authors' calculations based on the Sustainable Development Report 2025 database. Sigma convergence measures changes in cross-country dispersion of SDG scores from 2000 to 2024. A downward trend indicates narrowing dispersion across countries, while an upward trend indicates divergence.

Transition-management research suggests that a post-2030 framework could connect long-term direction with short-term experimentation, policy learning, and institutional adaptation (Rotmans, Kemp, and van Asselt 2001; Loorbach 2010). The question is whether global goal-setting, without stronger arrangements for prioritization, financing, accountability, and adaptive learning, can adequately respond to cascading systemic risks. Other recent work frames the post-2030 task through the historical evolution of global sustainability governance and linked social, economic, environmental, governance, peace, and technological priorities (Tavanti and Sfeir-Younis 2025). One option is a streamlined, science-based, and quantifiable target space extending to 2050 (van Vuuren *et al.* 2022). Cernev and Fenner (2024) similarly propose a more focused structure centered on planetary limits, basic services, poverty, inequality, and institutional capacity.

The third consideration is that unresolved political and institutional choices are already shaping the post-2030 agenda. A future framework will need to integrate ecological limits, social justice, finance, technology, and institutional capacity into a coherent transformation agenda, rather than treating them as parallel policy domains (Independent Group of Scientists Appointed by the Secretary-General 2023; van Vuuren et al. 2022). The current SDG framework has been criticized for retaining weak sustainability assumptions, insufficiently constraining development within planetary and biophysical limits, or failing to address the distributional consequences of ecological pressures (Bonnedahl, Heikkurinen, and Paavola 2022). Climate stability, disaster resilience, biodiversity integrity, and functioning ecosystems are foundational conditions for poverty reduction, food security, health, livelihoods, and economic resilience (United Nations 2015a, 2015b; Independent Group of Scientists Appointed by the Secretary-General 2023; van Vuuren et al. 2022). At the same time, current evidence shows that poverty, inequality, inadequate social protection, informal employment, youth unemployment, gender inequality, deficits in decent work and labour rights, disability exclusion, and digital divides continue to constrain transformation (International Labour Organization 2025; United Nations 2025c). These priorities were reaffirmed in the Doha Political Declaration, which places poverty eradication, full and productive employment and decent work, and social inclusion at the center of the renewed global social-development agenda (United Nations 2025a).

Finance and technology must also be integrated early into the post-2030 process. These issues are not ancillary to agenda design because they determine whether future commitments can be financed, implemented, measured, and governed credibly (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2024; United Nations 2024b; United Nations, Inter-agency Task Force on Financing for Development 2026). Financing remains one of the clearest constraints on SDG delivery, requiring stronger domestic resource mobilization, more effective development cooperation, innovative financing instruments, and closer alignment of public

and private financial flows with sustainable development priorities (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2024; United Nations 2025b; United Nations, Inter-agency Task Force on Financing for Development 2026). UNCTAD estimates that developing countries face an annual SDG investment gap of approximately US$4 trillion, while the Sevilla Commitment and recent financing assessments call for expanded fiscal space, debt solutions, stronger tax systems, multilateral development bank reform, concessional finance, and improved international tax cooperation (UNCTAD 2023; United Nations 2025b; United Nations, Inter-agency Task Force on Financing for Development 2026). At the same time, science, technology, data systems, and artificial intelligence are reshaping both development opportunities and risks. They can strengthen planning, public service delivery, research collaboration, climate and environmental analysis, and early warning, but without effective governance they may also deepen inequality, disrupt labour markets, amplify misinformation, erode privacy, reproduce bias, and widen inequalities in access to technological capabilities (Martin 2025; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2024; United Nations 2024b, 2026a).

Eight decades of UN experience underline the continuing importance of inclusive multilateral cooperation, shared norms, institutional adaptation, and foresight in advancing sustainable development (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs 2025). Lessons from the 2015 SDG negotiations point more specifically to the need for early political engagement, evidence-building, inclusive stocktaking, transparent forums, and sustained coalition-building before the current Agenda expires (von Haaren and Berger 2026). A Beyond-2030 process will require political negotiation, evidence-building, coalition formation, inclusive stocktaking, transparent forums, and sustained multilateral cooperation well before the current Agenda expires (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs 2025; von Haaren and Berger 2026). The choices made before 2030 will determine whether the next framework merely articulates new aspirations or establishes the governance arrangements needed to make future commitments deliverable (Cernev and Fenner 2024; von Haaren and Berger 2026).

The fourth concerns the deterioration of the civic and participatory environment. Civil society enters the post-2030 period with fewer resources, more limited access to global forums, and greater exposure to legal, political, and financial constraints (CIVICUS 2025; Forus 2026). This matters because civil society is not only an advocacy constituency. It is also a source of locally grounded evidence, public accountability, rights advocacy, community engagement, and independent monitoring. A post-2030 framework negotiated without meaningful and safe civic participation would risk reproducing one of the SDGs' central weaknesses, namely the gap between formal inclusion and real influence (Forus 2026).

1.1 The SDG Legacy: What Changed–and What Did Not

The SDGs leave a consequential yet incomplete legacy. They established a universal language, a global reporting architecture, and an extensive measurement framework for sustainable development, while producing much weaker changes in institutional arrangements, resource allocation, accountability, and the governance of ecological limits (Biermann *et al.* 2022; van Vuuren *et al.* 2022). By bringing poverty, inequality, health, education, infrastructure, climate action, biodiversity, institutions, and international cooperation into a single universal framework, the SDGs embedded economic development within a much broader set of social, environmental, and institutional objectives (Biermann *et al.* 2022; van Vuuren *et al.* 2022). Their clearest political legacy has therefore been discursive and procedural. They provided governments, international organizations, cities and local authorities, civil society, firms, and research communities with a common vocabulary for defining and communicating sustainable development priorities across sectors and contexts (Arora-Jonsson 2023; Biermann *et al.* 2022).

This achievement should not be underestimated. The SDGs established and helped normalize the principles of universality, integration, indivisibility, and leaving no one behind, while increasing the visibility of sustainable development across national and subnational governance (United Nations 2015c; Biermann *et al.* 2022). By 2025, 190 of the 193 United Nations Member States had participated in the Voluntary National Review process, and 249 Voluntary Local Reviews were listed by the United Nations by March 2025, extending SDG reporting and review to a growing number of cities, regions, and other subnational authorities (Sachs *et al.* 2025). The global indicator framework also institutionalized SDG monitoring through national statistical systems, international datasets, and regular global assessment, although significant gaps in data availability and disaggregation, and persistent constraints on statistical capacity, remain (United Nations 2015c; Independent Group of Scientists Appointed by the Secretary-General 2023; United Nations, Inter-agency Task Force on Financing for Development 2026). The framework also coincided with measurable gains in selected areas, including mobile broadband, electricity access, internet use, under-five mortality, and neonatal mortality, demonstrating that substantial progress has been possible in specific dimensions even while overall SDG progress remains off track (Sachs *et al.* 2025; Independent Group of Scientists Appointed by the Secretary-General 2023).

The framework's breadth and complexity contributed to this implementation gap. The 17 goals, 169 targets, and extensive indicator system reflected an ambition to integrate multiple dimensions of development, but they also complicated prioritization and the operational management of synergies and trade-offs (van Vuuren *et al.* 2022; Cernev and Fenner 2024; Khot, Warchold, and Pradhan 2026). The framework was comprehensive but not consistently operational. Governments could endorse the full agenda while selectively implementing goals aligned with existing priorities or cherry-picking targets without adequately accounting for their interactions and trade-offs (Biermann et al. 2022; Khot, Warchold, and Pradhan 2026). Fragmented implementation compounded this problem. Although the SDGs were designed to be integrated and indivisible, institutions have often addressed interconnected development challenges through sectoral silos, weakening their capacity to manage synergies, trade-offs, and transboundary spillovers (Independent Group of Scientists Appointed by the Secretary-General 2023; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2024; Khot, Warchold, and Pradhan 2026). The SDG framework recognized interdependence, but it did not consistently create the institutional mechanisms needed to govern it (Biermann *et al.* 2022; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2024; Khot, Warchold, and Pradhan 2026).

Accountability and measurement reveal a similar tension. The SDGs' voluntary, non-binding character facilitated broad political acceptance but constrained enforceability. Accountability has therefore depended largely on reporting, peer learning, domestic institutions, and stakeholder pressure rather than binding obligations or systematic, independent verification (Arora-Jonsson 2023; Biermann *et al.* 2022; Independent Group of Scientists Appointed by the Secretary-General 2023). Voluntary National Reviews have increased the visibility of implementation and supported peer learning, but have not consistently served as independent performance assessments, corrective feedback mechanisms, or robust instruments of public accountability (Biermann *et al.* 2022; Le Blanc 2025).

At the same time, indicators are essential for monitoring but can obscure distributional inequalities, ecological pressures, and transboundary harms. National averages may conceal differences by income, gender, age, ethnicity, migratory status, disability, and geography, while strong domestic SDG performance can coexist with high consumption-based environmental footprints, emissions embodied in imports, and other negative international spillovers (United Nations 2015c; Arora-Jonsson 2023; Bonnedahl, Heikkurinen, and Paavola 2022; Independent Group of Scientists Appointed by the Secretary-General 2023; Sachs *et al.* 2025). Post-2030 measurement should therefore complement GDP with a concise dashboard capturing well-being and agency, inequality, ecological sustainability, participatory governance, institutional quality, and resilience to future risks (United Nations Secretary-General 2023c). Measurement improved visibility but did not consistently reveal whether progress was equitable, ecologically sustainable, or achieved by shifting social and environmental costs elsewhere (Arora-Jonsson 2023; Bonnedahl, Heikkurinen, and Paavola 2022; Sachs *et al.* 2025).

The SDGs also remain insufficiently grounded in ecological limits. Although they include goals addressing climate, oceans, land, water, energy, cities, and consumption, the framework does not sufficiently embed planetary boundaries, strong sustainability, ecological integrity, or the unequal distribution of environmental pressures and responsibilities (Arora-Jonsson 2023; Bonnedahl, Heikkurinen, and Paavola 2022; Cernev and Fenner 2024). It also leaves unresolved tensions among economic growth, resource consumption, biodiversity protection, and climate stability (Independent Group of Scientists Appointed by the Secretary-General 2023). The emphasis on growth in SDG 8 is particularly contested because economic growth has historically been associated with increased greenhouse-gas emissions and resource use, while progress on socioeconomic goals can create trade-offs with biodiversity and other environmental objectives (Bonnedahl, Heikkurinen, and Paavola 2022; Independent Group of Scientists Appointed by the Secretary-General 2023). The framework therefore incorporates environmental goals without consistently constraining economic activity within the biophysical limits on which sustainable development ultimately depends (Bonnedahl, Heikkurinen, and Paavola 2022; Cernev and Fenner 2024).

Financing has been another central constraint. Achieving the SDGs requires large-scale public and private investment across social, economic, infrastructure, digital, and environmental priorities, yet financing has not matched ambition. UNCTAD estimated that developing countries faced an annual SDG investment gap of about US$4 trillion, concentrated particularly in energy, transport and telecommunications infrastructure, water and sanitation, agrifood systems, biodiversity, health, and education (UNCTAD 2023). More recent financing assessments identify a continuing squeeze in developing countries, characterized by constrained fiscal space, high borrowing costs, elevated debt-service burdens, limited domestic revenue mobilization, declining official development assistance, weak investment, trade fragmentation, and heightened exposure to climate and macroeconomic shocks (United Nations 2025b; United Nations, Inter-agency Task Force on Financing for Development 2026).

This exposes a central weakness of the SDG model, namely that global goals can be endorsed even when the financial means required to achieve them remain inadequate or unequally accessible (UNCTAD 2023; United Nations 2025b; United Nations, Inter-agency Task Force on Financing for Development 2026). The implementation gap is therefore inseparable from financing constraints, debt vulnerabilities, and persistent weaknesses in the international financial architecture (United Nations 2025b; United Nations, Inter-agency Task Force on Financing for Development 2026).

Finally, the SDGs insufficiently confront power, history, and differentiated responsibility. Universal goals create a common purpose, but they can also obscure uneven geographies, plural development pathways, and the historical conditions that shape countries' capacities and responsibilities, including colonial legacies, unequal consumption and emissions footprints, market-centered development, and unequal voice in global governance (Arora-Jonsson 2023; Kumar *et al.* 2024; Traill and Cumbers 2025). The framework also leaves the responsibilities of influential non-state and transnational actors insufficiently specified. Cities and businesses, in particular, exercise substantial influence over development outcomes without correspondingly explicit targets, while other powerful actors can affect SDG implementation without bearing clearly defined formal responsibilities (Bai 2024; Bexell 2025b). Universalism can therefore function as formal equality while leaving differences in capacity, responsibility, historical contribution, and ecological burden insufficiently addressed (Arora-Jonsson 2023; Kumar *et al.* 2024; Traill and Cumbers 2025).

To sum up, the SDGs created a powerful global vocabulary, strengthened measurement and multilevel engagement, and supported progress in selected areas. Yet their breadth, weak accountability, inadequate financing, limited ecological grounding, and insufficient attention to power and differentiated responsibility constrained implementation. The lesson for Beyond 2030 is not to abandon universal goals, but to connect them to finance, institutional mandates, ecological limits, actor-specific accountability and local authority. Without these conditions, continuity risks preserving the SDGs' symbolic strengths while reproducing their implementation weaknesses.

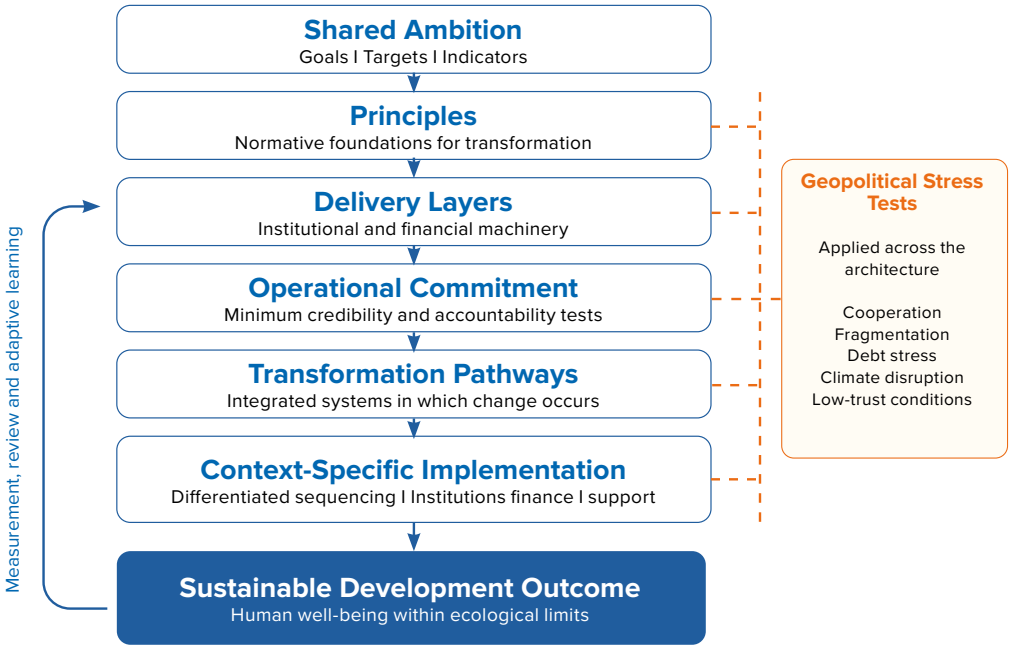
2. A Transformation Architecture for Beyond 2030

The central design challenge for Beyond 2030 is to preserve the universal ambition of the SDGs without reproducing them as another expansive catalogue of goals. The next framework should therefore be conceived less as a successor list of targets than as a transformation architecture that aligns governance, finance, accountability, technology, participation, science, and foresight with systemic change within ecological limits (Independent Group of Scientists Appointed by the Secretary-General 2023; Sachs *et al.* 2019). In transition-management terms, such an architecture would combine long-term orientation, actor coordination, institutional learning, experimentation, multi-level and reflexive transition governance, and adaptive steering across interacting social, economic, ecological, institutional, and technological systems (Kemp, Loorbach, and Rotmans 2007; Loorbach 2010; Köhler *et al.* 2019).

It would also build on the SDG transformation literature by organizing implementation around integrated transformation pathways rather than separate goals that can become siloed (TWI2050 2018; Sachs *et al.* 2019; Independent Group of Scientists Appointed by the Secretary-General 2019; Independent Group of Scientists Appointed by the Secretary-General 2023). Building on the preceding diagnosis, this architecture treats the SDG implementation gap as a design problem rather than merely a delivery failure. A post-2030 agenda is therefore not only about what the world seeks to achieve but also about the institutional, political, and governance conditions through which transformation can be delivered (United Nations Research Institute for Social Development 2016).

The framework can be organized around seven mutually reinforcing principles. These principles do not replace goals but define the normative and governance requirements needed to translate shared ambition into institutional reform, budgetary choices, legal and regulatory change, public accountability, technological safeguards and locally legitimate implementation.

Figure 2. Beyond 2030 Transformation Architecture



Source: Authors' elaboration.

The architecture is organised as a design-to-delivery framework. Shared ambition is grounded in seven principles, operationalised through a series of delivery layers and verifiable commitments, and implemented through transformation pathways adapted to national context. Geopolitical stress tests apply across the chain, while measurement, review and adaptive learning feed outcomes back into delivery. The Jamaica section illustrates how this architecture applies in a vulnerable SIDS context. Table 1 summarises the question each principle poses and the architectural requirement it establishes. Subsequent sections translate these requirements into delivery layers, operational commitments, institutional mechanisms and accountability tests.

Table 1. Normative principles and architectural requirements for Beyond 2030

Principle	Core question	Architectural requirement
Ecological boundedness	Does development advance human well-being within ecological limits?	Treat planetary boundaries and critical natural capital as binding conditions for planning, investment and measurement, while making ecological restoration an explicit objective.
Justice	Who benefits, who bears the costs, who has voice and who remains excluded?	Make distributional impacts, rights, differentiated responsibilities, social protection and just-transition measures integral to every transformation pathway.
Financial credibility	Are commitments costed and matched by fiscal space, financing and debt-sustainable delivery pathways?	Build credible financing strategies, fiscal assessments and delivery mechanisms into commitments from the outset.
Political accountability	Who is responsible, and how will implementation be independently verified?	Assign actor-specific responsibilities and connect reporting to budgets, regulation, scrutiny, corrective action and measurable outcomes.
Local legitimacy	Are priorities co-designed by affected places and communities, with the authority and resources needed to act?	Give local actors meaningful roles, capacities and resources to shape and implement territorially appropriate transformation pathways.
Technological responsibility	Are technology, data, AI and digital infrastructure governed in the public interest?	Subject technological development to rights, transparency, inclusion, public accountability and ecological safeguards.
Intergenera-tional stewardship	Do present decisions protect future capabilities, resilience and ecological inheritance?	Institutionalize foresight, long-term risk assessment and future-generations tests in major policies and investments.

Source: Authors' elaboration.

Ecological boundedness is the first condition. Development cannot be considered sustainable if it exceeds the biophysical limits on which human well-being depends. In a post-2030 framework, climate stability, biodiversity integrity, freshwater systems, soils, oceans, forests, and atmospheric integrity should not be treated as separate environmental concerns but as foundational conditions for human well-being, poverty reduction, food and water security, health, livelihoods, and economic resilience (Independent Group of Scientists Appointed by the Secretary-General 2023; van Vuuren *et al.* 2022). This requires a shift from weak sustainability, which permits substantial substitution between natural and manufactured or human capital, toward strong sustainability and the protection and restoration of critical natural capital (Bonnedahl, Heikkurinen, and Paavola 2022; Independent Group of Scientists Appointed by the Secretary-General 2023).

Some ecological functions are non-substitutable, so development that intensifies climate change, biodiversity loss, pollution, deforestation, water stress, or resource depletion cannot credibly be considered sustainable (Bonnedahl, Heikkurinen, and Paavola 2022). A transformation architecture should therefore place planetary boundaries, sustainable consumption and production, reduced environmental footprints, and ecosystem protection and restoration at the center of planning and measurement (Cernev and Fenner 2024; Independent Group of Scientists Appointed by the Secretary-General 2023; Han *et al.* 2024). Its ecological ambition should move beyond harm reduction to restore ecological functions and reduce material and environmental footprints while improving human well-being (Independent Group of Scientists Appointed by the Secretary-General 2023; Han *et al.* 2024).

Justice is the second condition. Sustainable development cannot be judged by aggregate progress alone. It must also ask who benefits, who bears the costs, who has voice, and who remains excluded. Poverty eradication, inequality reduction, decent work, social protection, gender equality, disability inclusion, youth opportunity, and universal access to basic services should therefore remain central to the post-2030 agenda (United Nations 2025a; International Labour Organization 2025). This social foundation is inseparable from ecological responsibility. Climate change, biodiversity loss, pollution, and resource scarcity impose unequal burdens, while poverty and exclusion reduce the resources, resilience, and political voice available to people and communities to adapt and shape development choices (Independent Group of Scientists Appointed by the Secretary-General 2023; Kumar *et al.* 2025). Justice requires recognition that countries have contributed unequally to today's global challenges and possess unequal power and capacity to address them. Responsibilities, financing, and representation should therefore reflect historical contributions and continuing structural inequalities. Countries and communities have not contributed equally to climate change, resource extraction, biodiversity loss, or global inequality, nor are they equally exposed to debt burdens, ecological risks, or constrained capacities to respond (Arora-Jonsson 2023; United Nations 2015a).

High-income and high-consuming countries would therefore need to reduce overconsumption, emissions, resource use, and unsustainable production, while developing countries require policy space, concessional finance, technology transfer, debt solutions, and investment to pursue dignified development within ecological limits (Han *et al.* 2024; United Nations 2025b). Universalism should therefore mean shared commitment rather than uniform prescription. Post-2030 universalism should allow plural pathways while recognizing historical responsibility, differentiated capacities, unequal power relations and hierarchies of knowledge, and plural development and transition imaginaries (Arora-Jonsson 2023; Kumar *et al.* 2024; Kumar *et al.* 2025; Traill and Cumbers 2025).

Financial credibility is the third condition. One of the clearest lessons of the SDGs is that ambition without adequate implementation capacity widens the gap between commitment and delivery. Financing should therefore be built into the next agenda's design rather than treated as an afterthought. A credible framework must address domestic resource mobilization, progressive taxation, public financial management, illicit financial flows, debt sustainability and restructuring, concessional and climate finance, financing for loss and damage, and the reform and scaling up of multilateral development banks (United Nations 2025b; United Nations, Inter-agency Task Force on Financing for Development 2026). It must also confront the unequal cost of capital.

Many developing and vulnerable countries must simultaneously invest in health, education, infrastructure, resilience, digital transformation, climate adaptation, and biodiversity protection while managing high debt-service burdens, high borrowing costs, and constrained fiscal space (United Nations, Inter-agency Task Force on Financing for Development 2026). Integrated National Financing Frameworks can help align public and private finance with national sustainable development priorities, but they cannot substitute for reform of the international financial architecture or stronger multilateral cooperation (United Nations 2025b; United Nations 2026b; United Nations, Inter-agency Task Force on Financing for Development 2026). Private finance can contribute, but it should align with public purpose and sustainable-development outcomes rather than organize primarily around de-risking private investment (United Nations 2025b; Mazzucato 2025).

Political accountability is the fourth condition. The voluntary and non-binding character of the SDGs facilitated broad political acceptance but also enabled discursive adoption without commensurate institutional and policy change. Future accountability must therefore clearly distinguish between endorsement and reporting on the one hand and financing, legal and regulatory change, institutional reform, independent verification, and measurable outcomes on the other (Biermann *et al.* 2022; Bexell 2025a; Le Blanc 2025). Transition-governance research shows that steering systemic change is not merely a technical coordination problem but a political process shaped by agency, power, directionality, and unequal access to resources (Smith, Stirling, and Berkhout 2005; Köhler *et al.* 2019). The issue is not simply whether governments report against indicators but whether commitments are reflected in budgets, regulation, institutional mandates, and policy coherence, and ultimately in measurable social, ecological, and transboundary outcomes (Biermann *et al.* 2022; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2024).

Accountability must also become more actor-specific (Bai 2024; Bexell 2025a, 2025b). Cities shape land use, transport, housing, infrastructure, energy demand, waste, and consumption, while firms and investors influence production, employment, supply chains, technology, capital allocation, and emissions. International institutions likewise shape rules and resources that affect national policy space. Supreme Audit Institutions can provide an independent layer of accountability by auditing preparedness, implementation, performance, institutional arrangements, and public spending, thereby linking reporting to corrective action (Le Blanc 2025). A post-2030 framework should therefore shift from reporting as presentation to reporting as public answerability, in which identifiable actors must account for whether commitments have translated into action and outcomes (Bexell 2025a; Le Blanc 2025).

Local legitimacy is the fifth condition. Sustainable development is experienced in particular places–in cities and settlements, islands and rural regions, workplaces, schools, communities, and households–and local conditions shape its priorities and effects. Yet global frameworks have generally set objectives and targets through international negotiation, leaving localization largely to subsequent adaptation and implementation. A Beyond 2030 architecture should move beyond this model by treating local actors as co-designers rather than merely implementers (Bonsu, Tyree Hageman, and Kele 2020; Sever, Tok, and Sellami 2025). Local governments, community organizations, civil society, businesses, youth, and other affected and marginalized groups should help define priorities, identify trade-offs, and determine how sustainable development should be interpreted and implemented in particular contexts, including the cultural meanings that shape local priorities and legitimacy (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs 2023b; El Faouri and Sibley 2026).

Localization, however, must not become a way to transfer responsibility without resources. Local legitimacy requires adequate finance, institutional capacity, locally relevant data, participatory governance, and effective multilevel mechanisms through which local experience can inform national and global decision-making (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, UN-Habitat, and United Nations Development Programme 2024). A locally legitimate framework should therefore allow context-specific pathways while maintaining shared commitments to rights, dignity, ecological integrity, and justice (United Nations 2015c; Sever, Tok, and Sellami 2025).

Technological responsibility is the sixth condition. Science, technology, data systems, digital public infrastructure, and artificial intelligence (AI) will increasingly shape development opportunities and risks beyond 2030 (United Nations 2024b, 2026a). These tools can strengthen climate and environmental analysis, disaster early warning, food systems, health, education, public services, and scientific collaboration. Yet they can also deepen inequality, enable intrusive surveillance, amplify misinformation and disinformation, disrupt labour markets and employment, reproduce bias and discrimination, concentrate economic and technological power, create risks to privacy, and increase environmental pressures (United Nations Secretary-General 2023d, 2023g; United Nations 2024b, 2026a; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2024). Technology should therefore be understood not as a neutral accelerator but as a domain of rights, power, equity, ecological impact, and accountability that requires active governance (United Nations Secretary-General 2023d; United Nations 2024b, 2026a).

Responsible technology governance should protect human rights and privacy, promote inclusion and transparency, strengthen information integrity, support open science, and ensure meaningful oversight and accountability for data and AI systems (United Nations Secretary-General 2023d, 2023g; United Nations 2024b; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2024). Innovation can enable transformation, but its contribution depends on the wider social, institutional, and ecological conditions that govern it. It cannot substitute for redistribution, social protection, democratic accountability, ecological safeguards, or public trust.

Intergenerational stewardship is the seventh condition. Sustainable development after 2030 must account for decisions whose consequences for climate, biodiversity, public finances, technological systems, infrastructure, institutions, human capabilities, and social cohesion will extend across generations. Present decisions and inaction have intergenerational consequences, requiring policymakers to systematically incorporate future generations' interests rather than leave them outside short political and electoral cycles (United Nations Secretary-General 2023a; United Nations 2024b; Chalali 2026).

A credible framework should therefore institutionalize long-term responsibility through strategic foresight, scenario planning, forward-looking impact assessments or future-generations tests, anticipatory climate, fiscal, and ecological risk analysis, and long-horizon measures of sustainable development (United Nations Secretary-General 2023a; United Nations 2024b). Young people should be recognized separately from future generations, as they are not merely beneficiaries of sustainable development but present political actors and agents of change who should participate meaningfully in designing the institutions and decisions that will shape their futures (United Nations Secretary-General 2023b; United Nations 2024b).

Together, these principles define what a credible Beyond 2030 framework should achieve and the conditions for its success. Goals, targets, and indicators remain necessary to set priorities and measure progress, but they do not deliver change on their own. Their effectiveness depends on whether institutions possess the authority, finance, data, capabilities, and accountability mechanisms needed to act. The central design challenge is therefore not simply to expand the global agenda, but to create the institutional, financial, ecological, technological, and democratic conditions required to implement it. Progress would ultimately be judged by whether these arrangements align power, resources, responsibilities, and participation to improve human well-being within ecological limits.

Table 2. Six delivery layers of the Beyond 2030 transformation architecture

Delivery layer	Operational purpose	Core institutional capabilities and mechanisms
Pathway governance and sequencing	Organise implementation around integrated systems rather than separate goals, while managing synergies, trade-offs, sequencing and transition phases.	Context-specific pathway portfolios; phase-based transformation plans; cross-sector coordination; deliberate phase-out of unsustainable systems; just-transition packages; experimentation and adaptive review (Independent Group of Scientists Appointed by the Secretary-General 2019, 2023).
Multilevel governance	Allocate authority, responsibilities and resources across local, national, regional and global institutions.	Formal role allocation; intergovernmental coordination; territorial transformation compacts; local administrative and fiscal capacity; regional and transboundary cooperation; Resident Coordinator and UN country team support; protected civic participation (United Nations Secretary-General 2023a, 2023b; United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, UN-Habitat, and United Nations Development Programme 2024; United Nations Development Programme 2023; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2024; Forus 2026).
Accountability and independent review	Move from voluntary presentation to public accountability, independent verification and corrective action.	Actor-specific reporting (Bexell 2025a, 2025b); parliamentary scrutiny and Supreme Audit Institution reviews (Le Blanc 2025); strengthened national and local review mechanisms, civil-society shadow reporting, and community-generated evidence (Lauwo, Azure, and Hopper 2022; Forus 2026; United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, UN-Habitat, and United Nations Development Programme 2024); peer review and formal feedback loops (Kanie *et al.* 2026).
Finance	Align commitments with fiscal space, debt sustainability, public budgets and transformation-aligned investment.	Costed financing strategies; budget integration; Integrated National Financing Frameworks; debt restructuring; domestic resource mobilisation and tax cooperation; concessional and climate finance; MDB reform; public-purpose investment standards (United Nations Secretary-General 2023e; United Nations 2025b, 2026b).
Knowledge and measurement	Embed evidence, foresight, Beyond GDP measurement and institutional learning in decision-making.	Science-policy-society interfaces; open and co-produced knowledge; concise indicator dashboards covering well-being, ecological limits, distribution and spillovers; scenario analysis; future-impact assessments; evaluation and adaptive-learning mechanisms (United Nations Secretary-General 2023a, 2023c; Kanie *et al.* 2026).
Emerging-domain governance	Anticipate and govern rapidly evolving technological and transboundary domains that are advancing faster than existing institutions.	Horizon scanning; anticipatory and adaptive governance; AI and data safeguards; accountable digital public infrastructure; information-integrity mechanisms; outer-space sustainability; interoperable standards; periodic review and public-interest, rights-based and ecological safeguards (United Nations Secretary-General 2023d, 2023f, 2023g, 2023h, 2023j).

Source: Authors' elaboration.

Table 2 identifies six delivery layers through which the principles can be converted into implementation capacity. The first–pathway governance and sequencing–describes how institutions organise implementation across interconnected systems. It differs from the priority transformation pathways in Table 4, which identify the substantive systems where transformation should be concentrated. Together, the delivery layers provide the operational bridge between the normative principles in Table 1, the commitments and credibility tests in Table 3, and the pathway portfolio presented in Section 2.2.

2.1. From Principles to Commitments: Operationalising the Beyond 2030 Architecture

The seven principles define the conditions that a credible post-2030 framework must respect. Operational commitments specify what governments, international institutions, firms, financial actors, and other stakeholders must do to satisfy those conditions. The distinction matters as principles set direction, while commitments create observable obligations that can shape policy, budgets, institutional mandates, and accountability. Table 3 converts each principle into a common implementation chain comprising an operational commitment, the institutional mechanisms required to act, a minimum verifiable deliverable, and an accountability test. This makes it possible to distinguish alignment from credible implementation without requiring a uniform or fully binding global framework.

Table 3. Operational commitments and accountability tests for the Beyond 2030 architecture

Principle	Operational commitment	Required institutional mechanisms	Verifiable minimum deliverable	Accountability test
Ecological boundedness	Make compliance with ecological limits a condition of development planning and investment.	Ecological-boundary reviews; climate, biodiversity, water, pollution and material-footprint assessments; circular-economy and ecosystem-restoration plans.	Every national and local plan publishes ecological baselines, science-based thresholds, targets, projected impacts and corrective measures.	Progress fails the test if social or economic gains depend on ecological overshoot, irreversible damage or the displacement of environmental harm across borders or communities.
Justice	Combine universal minimum commitments with differentiated responsibilities, pathways and international support.	Distributional and rights-impact assessments; social-protection floors; just-transition plans; participatory planning; differentiated financing and support.	Every pathway identifies affected groups, expected benefits and costs, exclusion risks, participation arrangements, mitigating or redistributive measures, responsible actors and financing.	Aggregate gains fail the test if they increase poverty, inequality or exclusion, deepen unequal exposure to risk, or transfer costs to those least able to bear them.
Financial credibility	Adopt no major commitment without a costed, debt-sustainable financing and delivery pathway.	Integrated National Financing Frameworks; budget integration; fiscal and debt assessments; domestic resource mobilisation; concessional and climate finance; debt solutions and MDB reform.	Every plan publishes costs, financing sources and timing, fiscal and debt implications, financing gaps, responsible institutions and contingency arrangements.	A commitment is operational only when financing and delivery responsibilities are identified. Unfunded elements must be reported as financing gaps, not implementation progress.

Political accountability	Assign specific responsibilities to public, private and international actors.	Actor-specific mandates and targets; links to budgets, regulation and procurement; parliamentary and Supreme Audit Institution scrutiny; corporate due diligence; civil-society and community monitoring.	Every responsible actor publishes role-specific commitments linked to legal mandates, budgets, milestones, reporting cycles and independent review.	Endorsement or reporting alone does not count as implementation. Credible progress requires independently verified action and outcomes, with explanation and corrective action where performance falls short.
Local legitimacy	Require affected places and communities to co-design pathways and receive the authority, capacity and resources needed for implementation.	Local Transformation Compacts; Voluntary Local Reviews; participatory planning and budgeting; territorial plans; community data systems; grievance mechanisms and decentralised finance.	Every national plan includes a published territorial compact or response showing how local proposals shaped priorities, budgets, trade-offs, responsibilities and implementation arrangements.	Participation fails the test if it merely validates predetermined choices or transfers responsibilities to local actors without commensurate authority, capacity and finance.
Technological responsibility	Govern technology, data, AI and digital infrastructure as domains of public interest, rights, equity and ecological responsibility.	AI-governance frameworks; data-protection laws; algorithmic transparency and audit; human-rights and environmental-impact assessments; digital-inclusion strategies; information-integrity mechanisms; open-science safeguards.	Every major digital or AI system used for public purposes publishes its mandate, responsible authority, data-governance arrangements, risk and impact assessments, audit results, environmental implications and channels for remedy.	Technological innovation fails the test if it increases exclusion, surveillance, discrimination, misinformation, concentrated power or environmental harm, or lacks independent oversight and effective remedy.
Intergenera-tional stewardship	Embed long-term responsibility and future-generations tests in major policies, budgets and investments.	Strategic foresight; scenario planning; forward-looking impact assessments; long-term climate, fiscal, ecological and technological risk analysis; future-generations institutions; meaningful youth participation.	Every major policy or investment publishes an assessment of its long-term consequences, distribution across generations, underlying assumptions, risks and mitigating measures.	A decision fails the test if it transfers avoidable risks, liabilities, ecological degradation or capability losses to future generations without justification, mitigation and independent review.

Source: Authors' elaboration.

Ecological boundedness commitment

Assess major development strategies, public investments, and sectoral policies against science-based ecological thresholds. The SDGs include goals addressing climate, oceans, land, water, cities, energy, and consumption, but they do not fully embed planetary boundaries, strong sustainability, and ecosystem integrity into the architecture of implementation (Bonnedahl, Heikkurinen, and Paavola 2022; Cernev and Fenner 2024; van Vuuren *et al.* 2022). A post-2030 framework should therefore require assessing major development strategies, public investments, infrastructure decisions, and sectoral policies against science-based thresholds for climate, biodiversity, water, land, pollution, and resource use (Cernev and Fenner 2024; van Vuuren *et al.* 2022).

Justice and differentiated pathways commitment

Universal ambition should be implemented through differentiated pathways that reflect countries' capabilities, vulnerabilities, ecological footprints, and historical responsibilities. The SDGs' universality created a powerful common language, but it also risked treating countries as formally equal while obscuring differences in development histories, capacities, ecological footprints, fiscal constraints, and exposure to environmental and economic risks (Arora-Jonsson 2023; Kumar *et al.* 2024; Traill and Cumbers 2025; United Nations 2024a, 2025b). Beyond 2030, universal ambition should be preserved, while uniform prescriptions should be rejected. All countries should transform, but pathways, obligations, and implementation mechanisms should reflect different responsibilities, capabilities, and national circumstances (United Nations 2015a).

Transformation pathways should therefore incorporate distributional impact assessments, social-protection floors, just-transition plans, disaggregated equity indicators, and participatory planning (United Nations 2025a; International Labour Organization 2025). High-income countries and high-consuming groups would be expected to reduce excessive consumption, emissions, resource use, and environmentally unsustainable production, while developing countries would require policy space, concessional finance, debt solutions, technology transfer, infrastructure investment, and institutional capacity to pursue poverty reduction and human development within ecological limits (Han *et al.* 2024; United Nations 2025b). Vulnerable countries, including SIDS and LDCs, would require enhanced international support and stronger resilience to climate, debt, food, energy, and disaster risks (United Nations 2022, 2024a).

Financial credibility commitment

Every major commitment should include a costed financing pathway specifying fiscal implications, financing sources, institutional responsibilities, and delivery timelines. One of the clearest lessons of the SDGs is that ambition without adequate implementation capacity widens the gap between endorsement and delivery. High borrowing costs, debt-service burdens, weak domestic resource mobilization, constrained fiscal space, and uneven access to concessional finance have limited sustainable-development investment, particularly in developing and vulnerable countries (United Nations 2025b; United Nations, Inter-agency Task Force on Financing for Development 2026).

Financial credibility should therefore be treated as a design requirement, not an afterthought in implementation. Integrated National Financing Frameworks can support this alignment by linking public and private financing strategies, investment priorities, risk management, and national sustainable-development objectives (United Nations 2026b). However, national financing frameworks cannot substitute for stronger international tax cooperation, effective debt-restructuring mechanisms, expanded and more affordable multilateral development bank finance, adequate climate finance, or systemic action to reduce the cost of capital (United Nations 2025b; United Nations, Inter-agency Task Force on Financing for Development 2026).

Financial credibility should also extend to the civic infrastructure for implementation. Civil society organizations, local platforms, community groups, and independent monitoring actors cannot be expected to play sustained, meaningful roles in co-design, accountability, rights protection, and monitoring if they are included only procedurally and left without predictable resources. A credible framework should therefore treat predictable support for meaningful civil-society participation and independent monitoring as part of implementation, rather than as an ancillary participation cost (Forus 2026).

Actor-specific accountability commitment

Assign responsibility for implementation to identifiable public, private, financial, and international actors, and subject it to independent review. The voluntary and non-binding nature of the SDGs facilitated broad political acceptance but also enabled extensive discursive adoption without commensurate implementation, independent verification, or corrective action (Biermann *et al.* 2022; Bexell 2025a; Le Blanc 2025). Beyond 2030 should therefore shift from generalized responsibility to actor-specific accountability by specifying who is responsible for what and how performance will be assessed (Bai 2024; Bexell 2025a, 2025b).

National governments would retain primary formal responsibility for implementation, including policy coherence, regulation, public finance, social protection, ecological protection, and international commitments (Bexell 2025b; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2024). Cities and local authorities should have clearly defined responsibilities that reflect their influence over land use, transport, housing, infrastructure, waste, resilience, and service delivery (Bai 2024). Firms should be responsible for labour and human-rights standards, emissions and environmental impacts, taxation, technology use, supply chains, and risk-based due diligence, while investors and financial institutions should be accountable for how capital allocation, stewardship, and financing decisions affect climate, biodiversity, social outcomes, and sustainable-development priorities (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2023b). International financial and economic institutions should likewise be accountable for how their rules, financing decisions, and policy advice affect debt sustainability, fiscal space, policy autonomy, and countries' capacity to pursue sustainable development (United Nations 2025b).

Local legitimacy and co-design commitment

Local actors should participate in setting priorities and should possess the finance, authority, data, and institutional capacity needed to implement them. The issue is not merely whether local actors are consulted, but whether they have the institutional authority, resources, capacity, and political space to shape decisions before priorities are set. Meaningful localization requires bottom-up, inclusive governance, structured mechanisms for participation, and stronger local ownership of development choices (Bonsu, Tyree Hageman, and Kele 2020; United Nations Development Programme 2023; United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, UN-Habitat, and United Nations Development Programme 2024). Local actors are not merely delivery agents, they also possess context-specific knowledge of trade-offs, risks, institutional constraints, social priorities, and ecological realities that national averages and global indicators cannot fully capture.

A Beyond 2030 architecture could operationalize this through Local Transformation Compacts. That is, negotiated arrangements that link national commitments to territorial development plans, participatory planning and budgeting, local resilience strategies, community data systems, local financing arrangements, and Voluntary Local Reviews (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs 2023b; United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, UN-Habitat, and United Nations Development Programme 2024). However, localizing should not become a mechanism for shifting responsibility downward without corresponding resources. Co-design should therefore be paired with appropriate institutional authority, capacity, locally relevant data, and predictable financing.

Technological responsibility commitment

Digital, data, and AI systems should be governed through rights-based, public-interest, and environmentally responsible safeguards. Science, data systems, digital public infrastructure, and artificial intelligence can strengthen climate and environmental analysis, disaster early warning, health and food systems, education, public services, and scientific collaboration (Martin 2025; United Nations 2024b; United Nations 2026a). Yet digital and AI systems can also deepen inequality, enable intrusive surveillance, reproduce bias and discrimination,

disrupt labour markets and displace some forms of work, create risks to privacy, amplify misinformation and disinformation, concentrate economic and technological power, and increase environmental pressures through energy, water, and mineral resource use, emissions, and e-waste (United Nations Secretary-General 2023d; United Nations Secretary-General 2023g; United Nations 2024b; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2024; United Nations Environment Programme 2024).

Beyond 2030, public-interest technology safeguards should be required. These should include AI governance frameworks, enhanced data-protection laws, algorithmic transparency and audit requirements, ethical and human-rights impact assessments, digital-inclusion strategies, information-integrity measures, open-science mechanisms, and assessments of the environmental impacts of digital and AI systems (United Nations 2024b; UNESCO 2021; United Nations Environment Programme 2024). Digital public infrastructure should be governed as public-purpose infrastructure, with clear public-interest obligations and safeguards, rather than treated merely as a technical platform (United Nations 2024b). AI systems used in public administration and other high-impact domains—including welfare, education, health, migration, policing, and resource allocation—should be subject to rights-based impact assessment, meaningful human oversight, auditability, and clear institutional accountability (UNESCO 2021; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2024).

Intergenerational stewardship commitment

Major policies and investments should undergo forward-looking assessments of their fiscal, ecological, technological, and social consequences. The post-2030 agenda will shape ecological stability, public finances, technological systems, infrastructure, institutions, human capabilities, and social cohesion for decades, so future generations will inherit the consequences of today's choices. Yet governance systems often prioritize electoral cycles, immediate fiscal pressures, short-term incentives, and crisis response at the expense of long-term resilience and the well-being of future generations (United Nations Secretary-General 2023a; United Nations 2024b).

A Beyond 2030 architecture should therefore assess major policies and investments for their long-term effects on future generations. Where appropriate, this assessment should take the form of a formal future-generations test covering infrastructure, fiscal and debt strategies, environmental policy and technology governance. These assessments should be supported by strategic foresight and scenario planning, long-term fiscal, climate, and ecological risk assessments, forward-looking sustainability and resilience measures, meaningful youth participation, and independent or appropriately mandated institutions capable of representing the interests of future generations (United Nations Secretary-General 2023a, 2023b; United Nations 2024b).

Together, these commitments establish the minimum institutional conditions needed to make post-2030 goals, targets and indicators credible and achievable.

2.2. Priority Transformation Pathways

The operational commitments set out above require a clear account of where transformation should begin and how to sequence priorities. A central lesson of the SDGs is that comprehensiveness does not automatically ensure governability. The SDGs' breadth helped establish a universal, integrated agenda, but it also made it harder to prioritize and sequence action, assign accountability, and manage trade-offs in practice. A Beyond 2030 framework should therefore focus on a smaller number of catalytic transformation pathways while preserving the integrated logic of sustainable development (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs 2023a; Cernev and Fenner 2024; van Vuuren *et al.* 2022; Nature Sustainability 2025). These pathways should be understood not as replacement goals but as governable transition arenas where multiple goals, actors, financing needs, and ecological constraints converge.

These pathways should be selected because they generate broader multiplier effects and because they are the systems through which ecological, social, financial, technological, and institutional pressures intersect most directly. Food, energy, cities, social protection, education, health, digital connectivity, biodiversity, climate resilience, finance, and debt are not separate policy areas but instead interdependent transition domains in which progress in one area may enable, constrain, or undermine progress in another. A Beyond 2030 framework should therefore make complementarities and trade-offs visible, politically negotiable, institutionally managed, and publicly accountable.

These pathways are selected based on four criteria, namely systemic importance for human well-being, exposure to ecological and fiscal risk, capacity to generate cross-sector multiplier effects, and relevance to unresolved SDG implementation gaps. Table 4 groups these interdependent domains into priority transformation pathways and identifies for each its core transformation, principal trade-offs, lead actors, and contribution to the wider architecture. These pathways build on the United Nations' six transitions approach—food systems; energy access and affordability; digital connectivity; education; jobs and social protection; and climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution—while giving cities and territories, health and care, and finance and debt greater visibility as distinct governance arenas (United Nations 2023).

Table 4. Priority transformation pathways and architectural contributions for Beyond 2030

Pathway	Core transformation	Main trade-offs	Lead actors	Architectural correction
Food systems	Shift from production-centred food security to resilient, nutritious, equitable and ecologically sustainable food systems.	Hunger and nutrition; land and water use; biodiversity; rural livelihoods; trade and affordability; health; emissions.	Governments, farmers, rural communities, Indigenous Peoples, food producers, trade bodies and development finance institutions.	Integrates hunger, health, land, water, biodiversity, rural development and trade within one pathway.
Energy systems	Deliver universal and affordable energy access while accelerating decarbonisation and resilience.	Access and affordability; industrial development; employment; public finance; fossil-fuel phase-down; energy security; climate targets.	Energy ministries, regulators, utilities, cities, MDBs, investors, firms, workers and communities.	Connects energy access and security with decarbonisation, industrial policy, finance, employment and climate responsibility.

Cities and territories	Align housing, transport, land use, waste, infrastructure, public services and resilience through territorial transformation.	Urban growth; housing affordability; emissions; land conversion; social inclusion; infrastructure finance; climate risk; service delivery.	Local governments, national planning bodies, communities, urban authorities, infrastructure agencies, private developers and civil society.	Gives cities, regions, islands, rural areas and local authorities explicit responsibilities and resources for delivery.
Social protection and decent work	Make social protection, labour rights, care and just-transition measures central to transformation.	Fiscal space; informality; automation; green-transition costs; labour-market disruption; gender inequality; productivity; social cohesion.	Labour and social ministries, employers, trade unions, communities, firms, fiscal authorities, ILO-aligned institutions and local authorities.	Links poverty and inequality reduction with employment, care, climate transition and political legitimacy.
Education, health, and care	Treat human-capability systems as essential transformation infrastructure.	Universal access and quality; workforce capacity; fiscal constraints; digitalisation; demographic change; public trust; resilience.	Education and health ministries, local authorities, care providers, schools, universities, health systems, communities and development partners.	Moves human development beyond service provision towards long-term capability, agency, resilience and adaptive capacity.
Digital connectivity and AI	Govern digital systems, data, AI and digital public infrastructure in the public interest.	Digital inclusion; privacy and surveillance; misinformation and bias; labour disruption; energy and mineral demand; concentrated power.	Governments, regulators, technology firms, researchers, civil society and standards bodies.	Counters technological solutionism by embedding rights, transparency, inclusion, accountability and ecological responsibility.
Biodiversity and climate resilience	Place ecological restoration, adaptation, disaster-risk reduction and climate resilience at the centre of development planning.	Conservation and livelihoods; land rights; adaptation costs; loss and damage; infrastructure choices; disaster risk; development needs.	Environment ministries, disaster-risk agencies, local governments, Indigenous Peoples, communities, scientific bodies, climate funds and MDBs.	Corrects the framework's weak ecological grounding and treats resilience and ecosystem integrity as development infrastructure.
Finance and debt	Align fiscal space, debt sustainability, taxation, public investment, concessional finance and private finance with transformation.	Debt service; public spending; investment needs; policy autonomy; private returns; climate finance; social protection.	Finance ministries, central banks, MDBs, creditors, tax authorities, investors and donors.	Corrects unfunded ambition by embedding fiscal space, debt sustainability, tax cooperation and public-purpose finance in the architecture.

Source: Authors' elaboration.

These pathways fall into four interconnected clusters – resource systems; territorial and social transitions; human and technological capabilities; and ecological and financial enablers.

The first cluster comprises food and energy systems, which underpin human well-being, productivity, and resilience. Food-system transformation should go beyond increasing production to address nutrition, affordability, rural livelihoods, ecosystem protection, food loss and waste, and exposure to climate and market shocks. Energy-system transformation should similarly link universal access and affordability with decarbonization, industrial development, employment, renewable energy, fossil-fuel phase-down and grid resilience. Both pathways require managing trade-offs involving land, water, biodiversity, emissions, public finance and distributional impacts.

The second cluster brings together cities and territories with social protection and decent work because transformation is experienced both spatially and socially. Decisions on housing, transportation, land use, infrastructure, public services, waste, emissions, and disaster risk are implemented in specific places, including cities, islands, rural regions, coastal zones, and informal settlements. At the same time, climate policy, digitalization, demographic change, automation, and economic restructuring affect employment, incomes, informality, care responsibilities, and social cohesion. Territorial transformation should therefore be linked to social protection floors, labour rights, decent work, skills, care systems, and just-transition measures.

The third cluster integrates education, health and care with digital connectivity and AI. These pathways shape the human capabilities, institutions and technologies through which societies participate in and adapt to systemic change. Education, health and care should be treated as transformation infrastructure rather than residual social expenditure, as they determine whether people can benefit from changing economic, technological and environmental conditions (United Nations Secretary-General 2023i; Popa 2025). Digital systems, data, AI, and digital public infrastructure can strengthen public administration, early warning, research, and the delivery of health, education, and agricultural services. However, their contribution depends on safeguards that address exclusion, surveillance, misinformation, bias, labour disruption, concentrated power and environmental impacts. Public-interest standards, data protection, algorithmic transparency, digital inclusion, information integrity and ecological assessment should therefore be integral to this pathway.

The fourth cluster comprises biodiversity and climate resilience, together with finance and debt. These pathways determine whether transformation across the other systems is ecologically and fiscally credible. Climate change, biodiversity loss, water stress, pollution, land degradation, and disaster risk increasingly affect food security, health, infrastructure, livelihoods, and fiscal stability. Water security depends on governance that can adapt and coordinate action across institutions and levels. Sharing authority among multiple decision-making centres can strengthen flexibility and learning, but decentralization without effective coordination may deepen fragmentation (Pahl-Wostl and Knieper 2014). Water-security pathways should therefore integrate governance, finance, data, institutional capacity and technology rather than treating water as an isolated sector (United Nations 2024d). At the same time, implementation depends on adequate fiscal space and sustained investment. Beyond 2030, adaptation, ecosystem restoration, disaster-risk reduction, water security, and climate-risk screening should be integrated with debt sustainability, domestic resource mobilization, concessional and climate finance, international tax cooperation, multilateral development bank reform, and accountable private finance.

These clusters are analytical groupings rather than institutional silos. Finance, ecological limits, accountability, technology, and local governance cut across all transformation pathways, creating interdependencies that require collective management. These transformational pathways are not meant to replace universal goals or national priorities but instead enable a more manageable structure for sequencing implementation, assigning responsibility, aligning finance, negotiating trade-offs, and measuring transformation. Their value lies in connecting the architecture's principles to the systems through which development is produced, thereby moving Beyond 2030 from a broad framework of aspirations toward a focused architecture for governing sustainable transitions within ecological limits.

2.3. Post-2030 Fault Lines

The architecture proposed above would not be negotiated in a neutral technical space but in a contested political field shaped by conflicts over whose knowledge counts, which development pathways are legitimized, who pays for the transition, how ecological limits are enforced, and how responsibility is distributed among states, markets, institutions, and communities.

How these tensions unfold will depend on a changing landscape of influence. Traditional donors are likely to remain important, although fiscal constraints may make their engagement more selective and transactional. At the same time, Global South coalitions, emerging powers, Gulf states, multilateral development banks, private actors, local governments, civil society, youth movements and labour organizations will shape the agenda according to their different interests and priorities. The design of a Beyond 2030 framework will therefore depend not only on agreement over shared principles, but also on building effective coalitions for financing reform, differentiated responsibility, civic participation, ecological sustainability and accountable implementation.

The first major fault line concerns ecological limits and differentiated responsibility. Beyond 2030 must reconcile the pursuit of human well-being with climate, biodiversity, water, land, ocean, pollution and material-use constraints (Bonnedahl, Heikkurinen, and Paavola 2022; van Vuuren et al. 2022). Ecological ambition will lack legitimacy, however, unless the costs, benefits and responsibilities of transformation are distributed fairly. Higher expectations should therefore be matched by climate finance, debt solutions, adaptation and loss-and-damage support, technology transfer and differentiated means of implementation reflecting unequal capabilities, vulnerabilities and contributions to environmental pressures (Arora-Jonsson 2023; United Nations 2015a, 2024a, 2024c, 2025b). This is especially important for SIDS, LDCs and LLDCs, which face disproportionate environmental risks while possessing limited fiscal and institutional capacity to respond.

The second fault line concerns peace, rights and multilateral legitimacy. Armed conflict, impunity and the erosion of international law undermine human rights, institutions, civic space, development gains and the international cooperation required for sustainable transformation (United Nations 2015c, 2024b; Forus 2026). Peace, human rights and adherence to international law should therefore be treated as enabling conditions for sustainable development rather than as separate diplomatic concerns. Rebuilding multilateral legitimacy will also require international cooperation to be grounded more explicitly in social justice, including decent work, just transitions, universal social protection, equality and inclusion (Triangle 2025).

The third fault line concerns integrated transformation versus institutional fragmentation. Although the SDGs were designed to be indivisible, implementation, financing and monitoring have frequently remained organized through sectoral and goal-specific structures. This weakens the capacity to manage interactions among socioeconomic development, ecological systems, infrastructure, technology and finance, including trade-offs and cross-border spillovers (Khot, Warchold, and Pradhan 2026; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2024). Beyond 2030 should therefore organize implementation around the transformation pathways and require each pathway to address cross-sector interdependencies, distributional effects and transboundary consequences. Global scientific assessments should similarly examine climate–development interactions across the full sustainable development system rather than reproduce disciplinary and Working Group silos (Pradhan et al. 2025). The purpose is not to eliminate trade-offs, but to make them visible, politically negotiable and institutionally manageable.

The fourth fault line concerns finance and the political economy of constraint. Ambition without fiscal space and affordable long-term finance reproduces the gap between commitment and delivery. Fiscal capacity, debt sustainability, international tax cooperation, concessional and climate finance, multilateral development bank reform and the governance of private finance should therefore be treated as design conditions rather

than as implementation questions deferred until after goals have been agreed (United Nations 2025b; United Nations, Inter-agency Task Force on Financing for Development 2026). Financial reform must also address who determines investment priorities, how risks and rewards are distributed and which development pathways financial systems enable. Public support for private investment should carry transparent sustainable development conditions and be assessed against demonstrable social, economic and ecological outcomes (Mazzucato 2025).

The fifth fault line concerns technological acceleration and democratic governance. Data, AI, digital public infrastructure and scientific innovation can strengthen public services, early warning, environmental analysis, health, education and institutional capacity, but they can also deepen exclusion, surveillance, misinformation, bias, labour disruption and concentrated power while increasing energy, water and mineral pressures (Martin 2025; United Nations 2024b, 2026a; United Nations Environment Programme 2024). A Beyond 2030 framework should ensure that technology development and use are governed by clear standards for rights, equity, and accountability. These standards should address data protection, algorithmic transparency, information integrity, digital inclusion, online safety and environmental impacts. Technological decisions should also draw on social science, Indigenous and local knowledge, and inclusive public deliberation alongside scientific expertise, ensuring that affected communities have a meaningful voice in the choices that shape their lives (UNESCO 2023; United Nations 2026a).

The sixth fault line concerns local legitimacy and unfunded localisation. Global commitments are ultimately implemented in particular cities, communities and territories, yet local actors are often consulted only after priorities have been established. Local governments, communities, civil society, businesses and marginalized groups should help define priorities, identify risks and shape implementation—not merely deliver decisions made elsewhere (Bonsu, Tyree Hageman, and Kele 2020; United Nations Development Programme 2023). Meaningful localisation requires mandates, finance, institutional capacity, relevant data, decision-making authority, and protected civic participation. Its central test is whether participation demonstrably changes priorities, budgets, trade-offs and implementation choices rather than legitimizing predetermined agendas (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, UN-Habitat, and United Nations Development Programme 2024; Forus 2026).

Together, these fault lines show that Beyond 2030 is a political settlement concerning development, ecology, finance, technology, responsibility and voice rather than a technical exercise in revising indicators. Its architecture should combine universal ambition with differentiated responsibility, ecological limits with justice, finance with public purpose, technology with rights and localisation with resources. It should not dilute existing commitments to human rights, gender equality, civic freedoms or climate action; reproduce voluntary and performative accountability; endorse unfunded commitments; or expand the role of private actors without public-interest safeguards. The objective is a framework that is more focused and operational while remaining universal, ambitious and politically legitimate.

2.4. Geopolitical Scenarios and Risk Mitigation

A credible Beyond 2030 architecture cannot assume stable or favourable political and economic conditions. Drawing on recurring pressures identified in recent UN and research literature, this paper uses five stylized scenarios to test whether the proposed architecture would remain workable across a volatile and uneven global system: cooperative multilateralism; fragmented geopolitical competition; debt-constrained and fiscally stressed development; climate-stressed and disaster-prone governance; and low-trust, polarized or authoritarian environments. These scenarios are not predictions. They are analytical stress tests of whether the architecture's principles and delivery mechanisms can withstand different political, fiscal, ecological, and institutional pressures.

Each scenario exposes a different potential weakness. Cooperative multilateralism may produce an overly expansive agenda with weak accountability; geopolitical fragmentation may lead to selective implementation; fiscal stress may leave commitments unfunded; recurring climate and disaster crises may prioritize immediate responses over long-term transformation; and low-trust or authoritarian conditions may encourage superficial reporting while restricting civic participation. Table 5 summarizes the principal risk, likely consequence, and design safeguard associated with each scenario, providing a common framework for the analysis that follows.

Table 5. Geopolitical scenarios and design safeguards for the Beyond 2030 architecture

Geopolitical environment	Principal risk	Likely consequence	Required design safeguard
Cooperative multilateralism	Over-expansion, symbolic agreement, weak ecological ambition and soft accountability.	Broad agreement produces another expansive catalogue that lacks prioritisation, credible financing and enforceable accountability.	Limit the framework to priority pathways; require costed financing and delivery plans, ecological-boundary tests, independent review and corrective feedback.
Fragmented geopolitical competition	Weakened consensus, politicised finance, competing technology blocs and cross-border spillovers.	Implementation becomes selective; standards and finance follow strategic interests; ecological and social harms are displaced through global supply chains.	Use a modular minimum operating architecture with common safeguards for ecological limits, spillovers, debt sustainability, technology governance and accountability.
Debt-constrained and fiscally stressed development	Unfunded commitments, constrained fiscal space, debt-driven austerity, unfunded localisation and excessive reliance on private finance.	Governments endorse commitments they cannot implement, while responsibilities are transferred to local actors without adequate authority, capacity or resources.	Make financial credibility an entry condition through costings, debt-sustainability analysis, identified financing sources, concessional support and protected social and ecological spending.
Climate-stressed and disaster-prone governance	Recurrent shocks, reversed development gains, fiscal instability, ecological degradation and crisis-driven short-termism.	Development planning is repeatedly disrupted, while vulnerable countries question the legitimacy of ecological ambition that is not matched by finance and support.	Treat resilience as development infrastructure through climate-risk screening, adaptation, loss-and-damage support, ecosystem restoration, disaster-risk reduction and future-generations tests.
Low-trust, polarised or authoritarian environments	Performative reporting, restricted civic space, surveillance, misinformation, exclusion and weak independent scrutiny.	Reporting becomes presentational, participation becomes symbolic, technology undermines rights, and public trust deteriorates.	Require independent audit, public data, parliamentary and civic scrutiny, rights-based technology governance, protection from reprisals and evidence that participation changes decisions.

Source: Authors' elaboration.

These scenarios show how a Beyond 2030 architecture would need to respond as operating conditions change. The objective is not to construct a different framework for each environment, but to distinguish the principles and safeguards that must remain constant from the delivery arrangements that must adapt. Examining each scenario in turn identifies the architecture's principal vulnerability and the corresponding design response needed to preserve its ambition, credibility, legitimacy and capacity for implementation.

Scenario 1 – Cooperative multilateralism

Under cooperative multilateralism, Beyond 2030 would have the best chance of securing an ambitious agreement on finance, ecological limits, institutional reform, technology governance, and peer review. The main risk would be over-expansion. Favourable diplomatic conditions could encourage adding too many goals, targets, themes, and constituencies, replicating the breadth that has made the SDGs difficult to sequence and operationalize. The design implication is disciplined ambition, using cooperative conditions to secure a stronger framework rather than a longer one. This means limiting the agenda to priority transformation pathways, requiring financing and delivery mechanisms for each commitment, embedding ecological boundary tests, and converting voluntary reporting into review, audit, peer scrutiny, and corrective feedback.

Scenario 2 – Fragmented geopolitical competition

In a fragmented geopolitical landscape, Beyond 2030 would face weaker consensus, selective implementation, politicized finance, competing technology standards, and increased cross-border spillovers. The risk is that sustainability commitments are subordinated to strategic rivalry, while ecological harms, labour exploitation, emissions, and resource extraction are displaced through global supply chains. The design implication is modularity. Beyond 2030 should serve as a minimum common operating architecture with shared safeguards for ecological boundaries, spillovers, debt sustainability, public-purpose finance, technology governance, and accountability. This would preserve common standards while allowing differentiated pathways and variable coalitions.

Scenario 3 – Debt-constrained and fiscally stressed development

Under debt-constrained development, the central risk is that Beyond 2030 becomes another framework of unfunded commitments. Countries may endorse transformation pathways without the fiscal space to implement them, and localizing may become an unfunded delegation of responsibility to local authorities and communities. The design implication is financial credibility. Commitments should not be treated as operational unless they are linked to costings, fiscal space analysis, debt sustainability assessment, financing sources, and delivery mechanisms. Debt restructuring, concessional finance, climate and adaptation finance, tax cooperation, MDB reform, and private-finance safeguards should therefore be embedded in the architecture rather than treated as external implementation tools.

Scenario 4 – Climate-stressed and disaster-prone governance:

In climate-stressed governance, recurrent shocks could reverse development gains, undermine fiscal stability, and push governments toward short-term crisis response. Vulnerable countries may also question the legitimacy of rising ecological ambition if it is not accompanied by adaptation finance, loss-and-damage support, debt relief, and technology transfer. The design implication is to treat resilience as development infrastructure. Climate-risk screening, adaptation planning, ecosystem restoration, disaster risk reduction, water security, long-term fiscal and ecological risk assessments, and future-generations tests should be embedded across transformation pathways.

Scenario 5 – Low-trust, polarised, or authoritarian environments

Under low-trust or authoritarian conditions, the central risk is performative implementation. Governments may report progress without independent verification, restrict civic space, use consultation to legitimize predetermined decisions, or deploy digital systems that deepen surveillance and exclusion. The design implication is verifiable legitimacy. Beyond 2030, requirements should include independent audits, public data, parliamentary scrutiny, civil society participation, rights-based technology governance, and distributional accountability. It should also include safeguards against reprisals, exclusion, and political risk for participants operating in restrictive environments, including women, youth, grassroots organizations, human rights defenders, and marginalized communities. Assess participation by whether it changes priorities, budgets, trade-offs, or implementation choices, not merely whether consultation occurred.

Risk Mitigation and Design Robustness

The scenarios point to four requirements for a geopolitically robust architecture. First, the framework should retain a limited portfolio of priority pathways rather than expand whenever diplomatic conditions become favourable. Second, commitments should meet minimum financing tests covering costing, fiscal space, debt sustainability, financing sources and delivery capacity. Third, accountability should be actor-specific, independently reviewable and connected to mandates, budgets, public data and corrective action. Fourth, the architecture should permit differentiated delivery arrangements without weakening its ecological, social and rights-based standards.

What changes across scenarios is the delivery configuration, not the framework's core commitments. Cooperative conditions permit stronger multilateral coordination; fragmentation requires modular coalitions and regional platforms; debt-constrained settings require binding financing tests; climate-stressed environments require protected resilience and adaptation investment; and low-trust settings require stronger verification, transparency and civic safeguards. Geopolitical robustness should consequently be treated as an architectural design criterion, not as an external implementation challenge.

2.5. Five Policy Priorities for the Post-2030 Transformation Agenda

The preceding analysis points to five priorities for post-2030 negotiations. These priorities shift attention from the number of goals that might follow the SDGs to the institutional, financial and political functions required to make sustainable transformation deliverable.

First, negotiate delivery functions alongside goals. Goals and targets should remain part of the global framework, but negotiations should also establish how implementation will be governed, financed, sequenced, reviewed and corrected. This requires agreement on priority transformation pathways, institutional responsibilities, mechanisms for managing trade-offs, multilevel governance arrangements and independent review. Each pathway should specify what must change, which actors are responsible, what resources and capabilities are required and how progress will be assessed. Such an approach would preserve the integrated ambition of the SDGs while making implementation more selective and governable (Independent Group of Scientists Appointed by the Secretary-General 2023; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2024).

Second, make finance and debt sustainability integral to framework design. Commitments should be accompanied by costed implementation plans, fiscal-space and debt-sustainability assessments, identified financing sources and credible delivery mechanisms. Integrated National Financing Frameworks can help align public and private finance with national priorities, climate commitments and disaster-risk management, but they cannot substitute for reform of the international financial architecture. Beyond 2030 should therefore support domestic resource mobilization, international tax cooperation, sustainable debt solutions, lower capital costs, concessional and climate finance, and multilateral development bank reform. Private finance should be governed by public purpose and assessed against measurable social, economic and ecological outcomes rather than capital mobilization alone (Mazzucato 2025; United Nations 2025b; United Nations, Inter-agency Task Force on Financing for Development 2026).

Third, assign responsibility and accountability to identifiable actors. National governments should retain primary responsibility for policy coherence, public finance, regulation and implementation, while local authorities should have defined mandates for territorial planning, infrastructure, resilience and service delivery. Firms should be accountable for labour and human-rights standards, emissions, environmental impacts, taxation, supply chains and technology use. Investors, development banks and international financial institutions should similarly be accountable for the sustainable-development consequences of their financing and policy advice. Parliaments, Supreme Audit Institutions, civil society and affected communities should provide complementary forms of scrutiny. The framework should distinguish endorsement and reporting from financing, legal change, institutional reform, implementation, independent verification and outcomes. Accountability becomes operational only when performance can be reviewed, and corrective action follows (Bexell 2025a, 2025b; Le Blanc 2025).

Fourth, measure transformation rather than target attainment alone. A post-2030 monitoring system should assess whether development pathways reduce inequality, strengthen resilience and institutional capacity, remain within ecological limits and avoid shifting environmental or social costs across borders. A concise global dashboard could cover human capabilities, distribution, ecological integrity, vulnerability, institutional quality, participation and long-term risk, while national and local indicators reflect differing contexts. These outcome measures should be complemented by indicators of financing, institutional reform, implementation capacity and policy coherence. Measurement should function as a governance tool that reveals where progress is converging or diverging, where costs are being displaced and where corrective intervention is required (Sato 2025; Bigerna and Micheli 2025; Han et al. 2024; Sachs et al. 2025).

Fifth, permit differentiated implementation without diluting common commitments. The framework must remain operational amid geopolitical fragmentation, debt distress, technological competition, ecological disruption and declining public trust. It should preserve universal principles and minimum safeguards while allowing countries and coalitions to vary the sequencing, institutions and instruments through which they implement them. Cooperative settings may support deeper multilateral reform; fragmented settings may depend on regional platforms and issue-specific coalitions; debt-constrained settings require binding financing tests; climate-stressed settings require protected resilience investment; and low-trust settings require stronger independent verification and civic safeguards. Modularity should therefore apply to delivery arrangements—not to human rights, ecological integrity, accountability or other core commitments.

Taken together, these priorities would create a post-2030 framework that manages transitions rather than merely announces goals. Its value would lie in connecting ambition to finance, responsibility, institutional capacity, measurement and implementation. In the next section, Jamaica is used to test whether such an architecture can remain credible under conditions of climate exposure, ecological vulnerability, constrained fiscal space, and recurrent external shocks.

3. Illustrating the Architecture in a SIDS Context: Jamaica

Jamaica provides a practical illustration of whether a post-2030 framework can address structural vulnerability rather than merely articulate universal aspirations. Integrating the SDGs into Vision 2030 Jamaica strengthened alignment between global commitments and national planning, while Voluntary National Reviews supported coordination, stakeholder engagement and monitoring. Yet alignment has not overcome constrained fiscal space, climate and disaster exposure, ecological vulnerability, limited economic diversification or implementation-capacity constraints (Auditor General's Department of Jamaica 2018; Planning Institute of Jamaica 2022; World Bank 2022; Ministry of Finance and the Public Service 2026). Jamaica therefore illustrates the paper's central argument: aligning national policy with the SDGs can improve coherence, but genuine transformation requires the institutions, financing and ecological safeguards needed for effective implementation.

Jamaica's 2026 VNR reinforces this argument by identifying interconnected priorities across human capabilities and social protection; food, water and energy systems; digital and productive transformation; territorial development, climate resilience and biodiversity; and institutions and development finance (Planning Institute of Jamaica 2026). These priorities show that Jamaica's post-2030 challenge extends beyond completing unfinished SDG commitments. It must also manage the interconnected social, economic, environmental, and financial transformations needed for sustainable development. The VNR's emphasis on climate finance, vulnerability-sensitive allocations, Climate Resilient Debt Clauses and collective SIDS advocacy further demonstrates why a successor framework must connect goals to finance, institutional capability, and resilient implementation.

Jamaica's experience with the SDGs has been shaped by four overlapping challenges. *The first is persistent exposure to external shocks*. COVID-19 exposed the vulnerability of a small, open, and tourism-dependent economy, sharply reducing output and public revenue, disrupting employment and education, and increasing demands on social protection (Planning Institute of Jamaica 2022; World Bank 2022). Climate and disaster risks create a persistent layer of instability. Hurricanes, floods, droughts, earthquakes, landslides, and storm surges, together with chronic coastal erosion, threaten infrastructure, livelihoods, agriculture and food systems, settlements, tourism assets, ecosystems, and public finances (ODPEM 2024; GFDRR 2017). Hurricane Melissa subsequently demonstrated the scale of this structural exposure, with direct physical damage estimated at approximately US$8.8 billion, equivalent to 41 percent of 2024 GDP (World Bank and Inter-American Development Bank 2025). External shocks are therefore not occasional interruptions to Jamaica's development trajectory but recurring structural conditions that shape the feasibility, sequencing, financing, and cost of sustainable transformation.

The second challenge is financing transformation without undermining fiscal sustainability. Jamaica's layered disaster-risk-financing strategy—including reserves, insurance, contingent credit and a catastrophe bond—provided rapid liquidity after Hurricane Melissa and limited the need for immediate borrowing (World Bank 2026). This protection built on a decade of fiscal consolidation that had strengthened macroeconomic stability and substantially reduced public debt, although the hurricane has renewed pressure on the public finances (World Bank 2024; Ministry of Finance and the Public Service 2026). Jamaica must now finance human development and social protection alongside investments in resilient infrastructure, water, housing, renewable energy, digital transformation, disaster preparedness, biodiversity and local implementation capacity. Like other vulnerable middle-income SIDS, however, it faces limited fiscal space, high financing costs, recurrent shocks and restricted access to affordable long-term and concessional finance (United Nations 2025b; United Nations, Inter-agency Task Force on Financing for Development 2026). Jamaica therefore exemplifies a central post-2030 challenge: creating sufficient fiscal space for transformative social, economic, environmental and resilience investments while protecting hard-won gains in debt sustainability and macroeconomic stability.

The third challenge is the institutional capacity required to implement a broad and integrated agenda. Assessments of Jamaica's SDG implementation identify substantial demands related to interagency coordination, financing, data, monitoring, localization and policy coherence (Auditor General's Department of Jamaica 2018; Planning Institute of Jamaica 2022). OECD evidence shows that similar capacity constraints impede climate action across SIDS more broadly (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2023a). Jamaica has benefited from a designated national focal point, an oversight committee, strong statistical capacity and alignment between the SDGs and Vision 2030 Jamaica. However, sustaining these arrangements requires adequate staffing, expertise, financing and institutional coordination. A successor framework should therefore be easier to implement and calibrated to different national capacities. For capacity-constrained administrations, effective delivery depends not only on political commitment, but also on their ability to coordinate institutions, maintain proportionate monitoring systems, mobilize finance and translate national priorities into local action.

The fourth challenge is pursuing development within ecological limits. Jamaica's economy and people's well-being depend heavily on coastal and marine ecosystems, freshwater, forests and wetlands, which support tourism, fisheries, agriculture and human settlements. These natural assets face overlapping pressures from climate change, pollution, resource exploitation and development (National Environment and Planning Agency 2017; World Bank 2022; ODPEM 2024). Economic growth that damages these systems will weaken the ecological foundations on which future prosperity depends. Jamaica must therefore expand employment, housing, infrastructure, tourism and productive investment while protecting biodiversity, freshwater resources, coastal ecosystems and the climate. This requires ecological integrity to become a core condition of development planning, public investment, land-use regulation and infrastructure decisions, rather than remain a separate environmental concern (Bonnedahl, Heikkurinen, and Paavola 2022; Independent Group of Scientists Appointed by the Secretary-General 2023; van Vuuren et al. 2022).

What Jamaica implies for Beyond 2030

Jamaica's experience points to five requirements for a successor framework. First, universal ambition should be implemented through differentiated pathways that reflect unequal fiscal space, capabilities, vulnerabilities and historical responsibilities (Arora-Jonsson 2023; United Nations 2015a, 2024a). Second, multidimensional vulnerability and resilience should complement income-based measures of development, particularly for SIDS whose exposure to climate shocks, debt, import dependence, adaptation costs and institutional constraints is not adequately captured by income per capita (United Nations Development Programme 2021; United Nations General Assembly 2024). Third, commitments should be connected to costing, debt sustainability, concessional and climate finance, pre-arranged disaster-risk financing and credible delivery mechanisms (United Nations 2025b; United Nations, Inter-agency Task Force on Financing for Development 2026). Fourth, responsibility should be assigned to identifiable public, private, financial and civic actors, while national and local institutions receive clear mandates, adequate resources, decision-making authority and proportionate reporting requirements (Bexell 2025a, 2025b; Lauwo, Azure, and Hopper 2022). Finally, implementation should be organized around integrated pathways connecting food, water and energy systems; human capabilities and social protection; digital and productive transformation; territorial development, climate resilience and biodiversity; and finance, debt and disaster resilience (Independent Group of Scientists Appointed by the Secretary-General 2023; Planning Institute of Jamaica 2026).

For Jamaica, Beyond 2030 should be less about negotiating a revised list of goals and more about creating the conditions for effective sustainable development. A credible framework would account for the multidimensional vulnerabilities of SIDS, expand access to affordable long-term and climate finance, integrate disaster risk into development planning, reduce disproportionate reporting burdens and strengthen implementation at the local level. It would help convert policy alignment into effective delivery, reporting into meaningful accountability, and recognition of vulnerability into practical support for resilience and long-term transformation.

Conclusions

As 2030 approaches, the SDGs leave a substantial but incomplete legacy. They established a universal language for sustainable development, a global monitoring architecture, and a basis for mobilization across governments, international institutions, businesses, cities, and civil society. Yet this agenda-setting power has not consistently translated into the institutional reform, adequate finance, ecological safeguards, and accountable delivery required for transformation. Persistent shortfalls reflect not only successive crises and uneven political commitment but also a design gap: goals and targets were not systematically linked to authority, budgets, implementation capacity, independent review, and corrective action.

The post-2030 debate should therefore move beyond the narrow choice of extending, revising or replacing the SDGs. This paper proposes a transformation architecture that retains goals and indicators but embeds them within a system capable of governing interconnected social, economic, ecological, technological and financial transitions. Seven principles form its foundation, while six delivery layers, operational commitments, and transformation pathways provide the machinery for implementation. The purpose is to make ambition deliverable by connecting commitments to responsibilities, finance, sequencing, measurement, accountability, and learning. Core principles and safeguards would remain universal, while institutions, financing arrangements and implementation pathways could adapt to different national circumstances and geopolitical conditions.

Jamaica demonstrates why this distinction matters. Alignment with the SDGs has strengthened national planning, coordination and monitoring, but it cannot by itself overcome climate and disaster exposure, ecological dependence, limited fiscal space, debt pressures and implementation constraints. For vulnerable middle-income SIDS, differentiated responsibility must therefore have practical consequences. These include vulnerability-sensitive access to affordable long-term and climate finance, stronger disaster-risk and debt mechanisms, proportionate reporting requirements, institutional support and greater capacity for local delivery. A credible global framework must treat these constraints as core design conditions rather than secondary implementation problems.

This paper does not prescribe a final list of post-2030 goals or resolve the political choices that future negotiations will entail. Instead, it identifies the minimum conditions needed to make a successor framework credible and operational. Any new framework should be judged by whether commitments are financed, responsibilities are assigned, implementation is supported, results are independently assessed, and shortcomings lead to corrective action. The opportunity Beyond 2030 is not to produce another catalogue of aspirations, but to convert shared global ambition into an accountable and adaptable compact for improving human well-being within ecological limits.

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