Implementation of the SDGs in Central Asia: best practices on monitoring framework for estimating regional progress and the contribution of EU projects

Baseline and methodological research

May 2024

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1. Introduction

The 2030 Agenda, adopted in 2015, is close to entering its last third of application and multiple challenges for implementing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) still remain: Social and gender inequality, acceleration of climate change and biodiversity loss, the socioeconomic consequences of a recent global pandemic, the escalation of conflicts, and political instability and polarisation.

Contrasting with this, there is also an increased political will at the country and subnational levels to implement the SDGs, with several initiatives for 'one last push' for development, along with a multitude of success stories and best practices being shared and expanded to most countries. International cooperation at the policy and project level has been a key contributor to development in recent years, but it is sometimes difficult to quantify the impact of specific policies or projects on advancing the SDGs.

More specifically, the countries of Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan) have committed to achieving the SDGs, and to support this effort the EU and UNDP have joined forces and launched a project for setting up a regional SDGs platform. The present research aims to add to this effort by providing guidelines for improved SDG progress monitoring, synergies and trade-offs among SDG targets and indicators, strategies for prioritising and accelerating development, as well as to support a future estimation of the degree of implementation of the SDGs in Central Asia and the estimated contribution of EU projects. This research ends with a set of conclusions and recommendations to consider for future development and project planning and monitoring.

2. The 2030 Agenda monitoring framework: SDG targets and indicators

The 2030 Agenda has a results framework, widely known as the SDGs. The SDGs are organised around 17 goals, then subdivided into 169 targets, and each target has at least one assigned indicator. After the latest round of review in 2022[1], the final list of SDG indicators adds up to 231 unique indicators (UN Stats, 2024a).

Understanding the technical differences between SDG targets and SDG indicators is key for policymakers and project managers, as they are intended for different uses and contexts:

- ✓ SDG targets are formulated as policy commitments and usually structured with a specific deadline, a specific level of ambition, and one or several thematic scopes. For example: *SDG target 3.3: By 2030* (deadline), *end* (ambition) *the epidemics of AIDS* (thematic scope 1), *tuberculosis* (thematic scope 2), *malaria* (thematic scope 3) *(…)*.
- ✓ SDG indicators are the proxy measurements of the commitments formulated by the SDG targets, and they identify one or more measures for such commitments. For example: *SDG indicator 3.3.1 Number of new HIV infections per 1,000 uninfected population, by sex, age and key populations* (connected with thematic scope 1 mentioned in the SDG target).

[1] With minor revisions and updates in 2023 and early 2024.

Therefore, **SDG targets are intended for policy making and development planning, while SDG indicators are intended for monitoring and evaluation**. This insight is relevant for the rest of the research as policy commitments and project impact and outcomes should be matched with SDG targets, while project activities, outputs, and especially Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) should be matched with SDG indicators.

3. Applicability of SDG targets and indicators

Accumulated experience from UNDP development practitioners shows that not all SDG targets nor indicators apply to all countries equally, for different reasons:

- Some SDG targets (and their associated indicators) do not apply to countries individually, but to the international community in general, coordinated for this effort by the UN. These targets are considered 'global calls'. For example, *see* SDG target 10.6[2] [3].
- Some SDG targets do not apply to certain countries due to their physical geography: Many of the SDG 14 targets connected to oceans do not apply to landlocked countries, and the targets for forest or mountain conservation do not apply to countries with only desert ecosystems or Small Island Development States with very low average altitude.
- Some SDG targets do not apply to certain countries due to their income level. For example, some Means of Implementation (MoI) targets are intended for high-income countries to support low-income countries, and thus not applicable to middle-income and low-income countries. For example, SDG target 17.05[4].
- Some SDG targets have an applicability deadline shorter than 2030 (2020 or 2025), so their present applicability might be contested. For example, target SDG target 8.6[5]. However, experience from UNDP development practice shows that countries usually assume the extension of the applicability period of those SDG targets until 2030.
- Some SDG indicators (mainly the ones classified as Tier 2[6]) are in practice not applicable to countries with limited statistical capacities, and although developing such statistical capacities would be development objective in itself, in line with SDG target 17.19[7], it is not expected for many countries to monitor their progress through all SDG indicators. Additionally, until March 2020 there were also SDG indicators that were not applicable to countries due to them being classified as Tier 3[8]. Many countries have not had enough time since 2020 to incorporate some SDG indicators that substituted the former Tier 3 indicators[9] into their national statistical offices' workplans to be able to gather baseline data from the beginning of the 2030 Agenda and update data to assess their progress.

[2] 10.6 Ensure enhanced representation and voice for developing countries in decision-making in global international economic and financial institutions in order to deliver more effective, credible, accountable and legitimate institutions.
[3] "*The indicator* [10.6.1] *is a global indicator that is to say the provision of national data for this indicator would not be meaningful*" (German Federal Statistical Office, 2024).
[4] 17.5 Adopt and implement investment promotion regimes for least developed countries.
[5] 8.6 By 2020, substantially reduce the proportion of youth not in employment, education or training.
[6] "*Tier 2: Indicator is conceptually clear, has an internationally established methodology and standards are available, but data are not regularly produced by countries*" (UN Stats, 2024b).
[7] 17.19 By 2030, build on existing initiatives to develop measurements of progress on sustainable development that complement gross domestic product, and support statistical capacity-building in developing countries.
[8] "*Tier 3: No internationally established methodology or standards are yet available for the indicator, but methodology/standards are being (or will be) developed or tested*" (UN Stats, 2024b).
[9] "*As of the 51st session of the United Nations Statistical Commission, the global indicator framework does not contain any Tier III indicators*" (UN Stats, 2024b).

UNDP development practice shows that it is possible to find countries that declare policy commitments connected to specific SDG targets, that at the same time do not have available data or monitoring capacities to measure the specific SDG indicators connected to said targets. In that case, it is expected that countries use proxy indicators that can be connected to the missing SDG indicators.

A second insight from the points above is that **different countries have a different combination of applicable SDG targets and indicators**, therefore, any SDG analysis tailored to any given country should first compile and document the list of applicable SDG targets and indicators for that particular country.

4. Interlinkages among SDG targets and indicators: synergies and trade-offs

There are many ways of estimating, assessing, quantifying, or visualising the interactions among the SDGs. Some methodologies derive from development practice experience, while others derive from an extensive analysis of available literature and data. Some methodologies are flexible and therefore hard to escalate, while others are easily applicable to several country realities but are rigid instead. The following subsections present different methodology types with specific examples for each.

4.1. Expert-based assessment interlinkages

The first type of methodologies relies on expert-assessments of interlinkages by development practitioners, such as what would be later referred to as COMBOS approach from UNDP[10]. Initially introduced as a concept in the context of 2016 Regional Human Development Report for Latin America and the Caribbean (UNDP, 2016), these types of methodologies are based on qualitative estimations of relationships among SDG targets, and tend to apply to specific policy interventions and to sustain theories of change only for specific projects or countries.

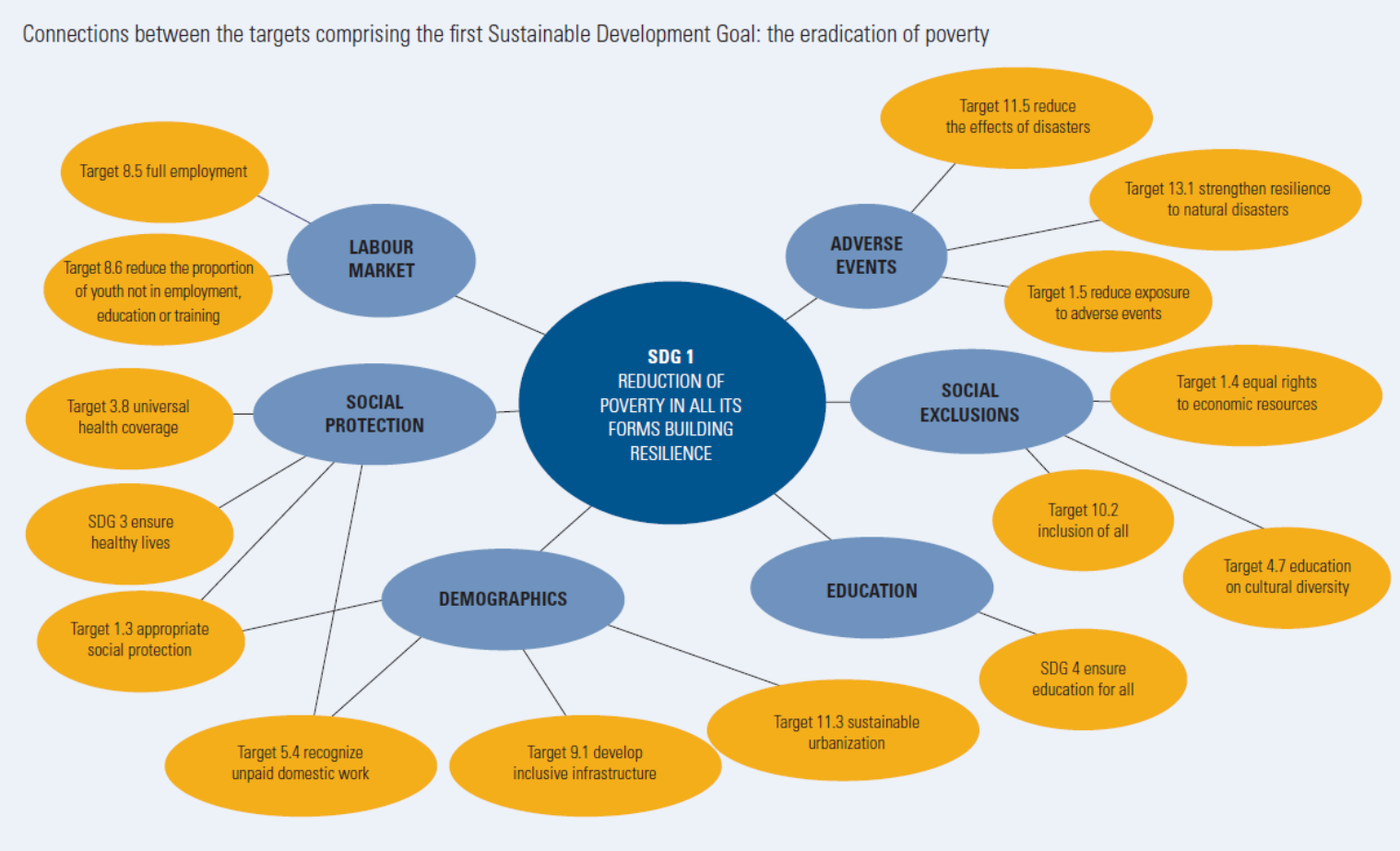

Figure 1. Example SDG target connections as shown in the 2016 Human Development Report for Latin America and the Caribbean (UNDP, 2016).

[10] To find out more about the COMBOS approach and methodology, *see* UNDP (2017).

This methodology follows a 'top-down' approach, where opportunities for acceleration are selected first, and then a set of actions is defined, producing with it a theory of change. This means that **the findings or theoretical basis for these methodologies' proposed SDG interlinkages are hard to extrapolate or generalise**. Inversely, the methodology types presented in the next subsections follow a 'bottom up' approach, where entry points for acceleration are identified after assessing the relative importance of SDG targets (or clusters of targets) and their connections based on literature, data, or expert-based interlinkages.

4.2. Literature-based interlinkages

The second type of methodologies derive SDG interlinkages from quantitative analyses of previously-coded literature review results, where synergies and trade-offs among SDG targets are mapped. The most relevant example of this methodology is the one researched and developed by the European Commission (Miola et al., 2019), which has later been adopted by UNDP's SDG Push Diagnostic[11].

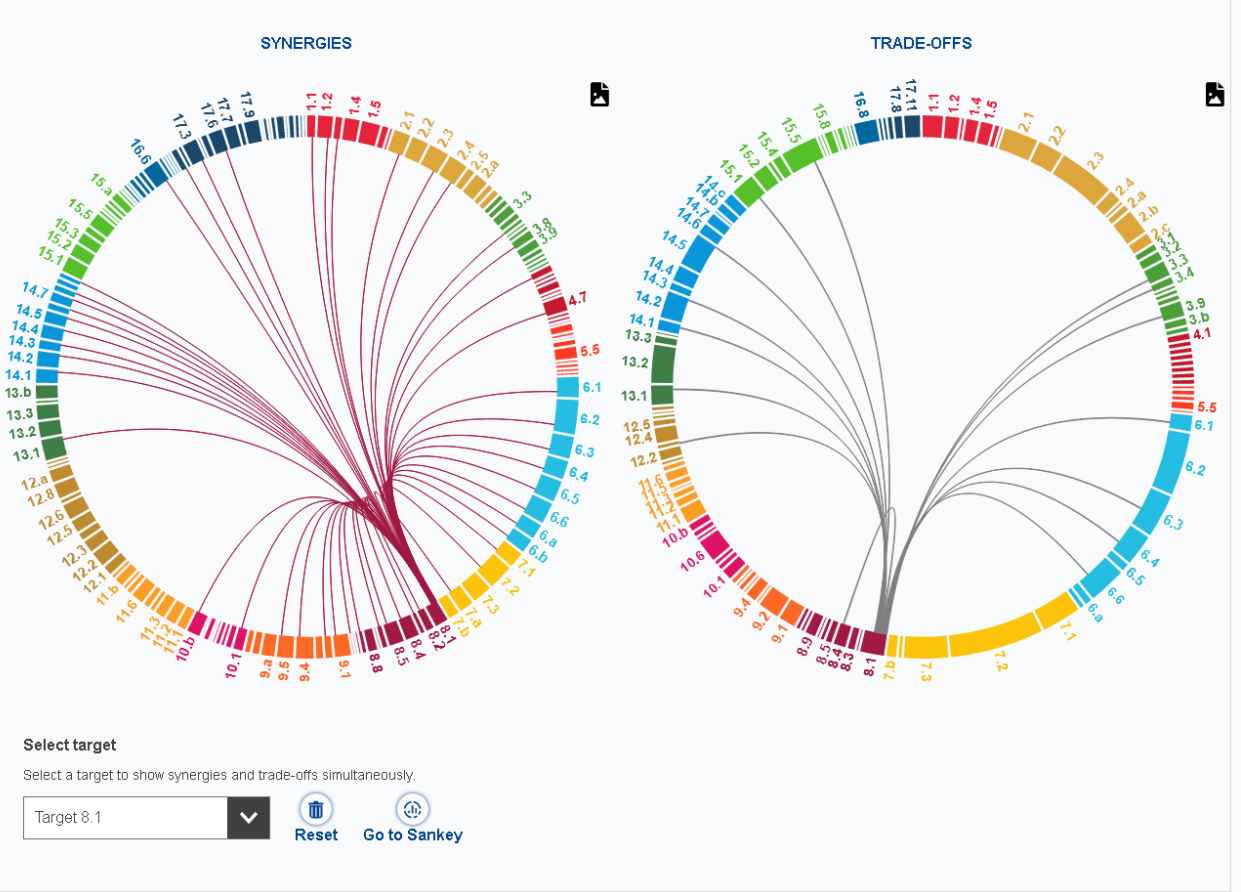

Figure 2. Target level interlinkages for SDG target 8.1 (Economic growth) where a clear set of synergies and trade-offs can be identified. This graph is made on the SDG interlinkages visualization tool - Target level website (European Commission, 2024d), which is made using the methodology by Miola et al. (2019).

The fact that this second type of methodologies tags interlinkages among SDG targets as synergies (positive correlation) or trade-offs (negative correlation) helps reflect the complexity of sustainability, and how some development interventions can even have a net negative

[11] More information about this UNDP initiative can be found at UNDP (2024).

contribution to the achievement of other development interventions. Some SDG target interlinkages are also mapped as 'ambiguous', where there is no clear positive or negative correlation. It is worth noting here that the causal relation between targets, or their linearity (i.e. the specific direction of the causality) is hard to prove in a given sense with consistent data. For example, it might be argued that a reduction of poverty (target 1.2) reduces unemployment (target 8.5), but the argument could be made if cause and effect are switched, or even if there is third or further variable that positively or negatively impacts both linked variables in the same sense. As development policy interventions have to be prioritised, it is expected that decision makers assume that the causal relation has a unique direction in line with the prioritised policy interventions. Subsection 4.4 deals with this issue with the qualitative inputs and consensus of subject matter experts.

The main methodology developed by Miola et al. (2019) and later compiled in the SDG interlinkages visualization tool (European Commission, 2024d) provides a very comprehensive set of interactions at the target level, but also, as confirmed in the UNDP Interlinkages Visualization website[12] "*The synergies and tradeoffs are global, which means they are the same for all countries (...)*" (UNDP, 2024a). This means that although comprehensive, **the set of identified interlinkages among SDG targets is rigid, and might not fit all countries or other subnational realities**. Although very comprehensive and structured, the rigidity of this methodology might show biases connected to the sources used to define the SDG target interlinkages.

[12] An example of an SDG Visualization for Kazakhstan can be found at UNDP (2024a).

4.3. Data-based interlinkages

The third type of methodologies derives the definition of linkages from available data from SDG indicators. This is, for a given country, available data for the SDG indicators is then contrasted with other SDG indicators, and from the resulting statistical correlations among SDG indicators, causal relations are then defined for SDG targets.

One such example of initiative that does SDG target interlinkages mapping, including trade-offs, and that is tailored to specific countries (and thus with different interlinkages combination for each country) is the one developed by the Institute for Global Environmental Strategies (IGES, 2021). This initiative also indicates the level of correlation (negative or positive, from -1 to 1) and therefore whether some interlinkages correspond to trade-offs or synergies. This particular tool is heavily reliant on available data (from available SDG indicators for each country) to draw its linkages, and while it gives the methodology statistical robustness, at times it assumes that *statistical correlation means causal relation*[13]*, which is not always necessary true (see Figure 3).*

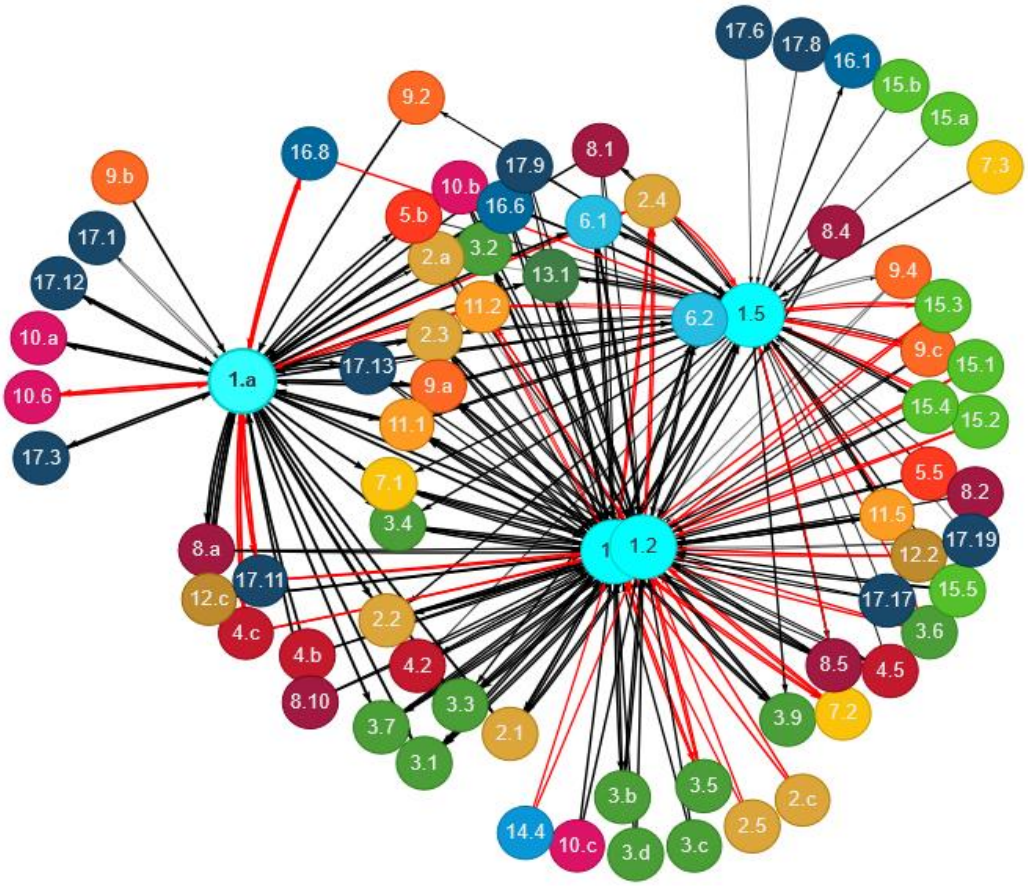

Figure 3. Chart visualisation of SDG targets for Ethiopia from (IGES, 2021a). In this example, SDG target 1.a (Create pro-poor policy frameworks) on the left, in electric blue, shows trade-offs (red arrows) with SDG targets 10.a (Special treatment for LDCs), 10.6 (Inclusion of development countries in global decision making) and 4.c (Enhance teaching capacity), which upon consideration does not seem very logical.

[13] In a document providing detailed explanation of the methodology, it reads *"(…) Placing the cursor over the line also displays a value that indicates the strength of the causal relation. The value is estimated by the correlation analysis of the indicator-level time-series data (1990-2015) corresponding to the pair Targets. The example in Figure 3 shows that with a correlation coefficient value of 0.9935, there is a strong positive linear relationship between Target 1.1 and Target 7.1 (…)"* (IGES, 2021b).

Methodologies that rely exclusively on available data without review from development practitioners can draw erroneous conclusions of interlinkages, which could also compound due to underlying issues with the UN Stats statistical framework. In the shown example from Figure 3, SDG targets 10.6 (Inclusion of development countries in global decision making) and 16.8 (Participation of developing countries in the institutions of global governance), since they ended up with the same SDG indicator[14] (Proportion of members and voting rights of developing countries in international organizations) are both mapped as a trade-off to SDG target 1.a (Pro-poor policy frameworks), which 'doubles' the causal error. **Expert review of the causal relations inferred from statistical correlations is needed to compensate for these errors**.

[14] The fact that there are repeating SDG indicators corresponding to different SDG targets is an issue worth of discussion on a separate analysis.

4.4. Expert-based score and scale-based interlinkages[15]

The fourth type of methodologies constitute a mixture and evolution of the previous three types: methodologies where the interlinkages are defined on a case-by-case basis, with expert reviews, but where the analyst mapping such interlinkages has a structured framework to follow, so even different analysts should get somewhat similar results from mapping SDG interlinkages for a given country or project. A very illustrative example of these types of methodologies is the one developed by Nilsson et al. (2016) from the Stockholm Environment Institute (SEI), where interlinkages are graded on a seven-point scale ranging from +3 (highest synergy) to -3 (biggest trade-offs), and where 0 indicates no causal correlation between two given SDGs. SEI later adopted this framework in their subsequent research (SEI, 2024).

GOALS SCORING

The influence of one Sustainable Development Goal or target on another can be summarized with this simple scale.

Interaction	Name	Explanation	Example
+3	Indivisible	Inextricably linked to the achievement of another goal.	Ending all forms of discrimination against women and girls is indivisible from ensuring women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership.
+2	Reinforcing	Aids the achievement of another goal.	Providing access to electricity reinforces water-pumping and irrigation systems. Strengthening the capacity to adapt to climate-related hazards reduces losses caused by disasters.
+1	Enabling	Creates conditions that further another goal.	Providing electricity access in rural homes enables education, because it makes it possible to do homework at night with electric lighting.
0	Consistent	No significant positive or negative interactions.	Ensuring education for all does not interact significantly with infrastructure development or conservation of ocean ecosystems.
–1	Constraining	Limits options on another goal.	Improved water efficiency can constrain agricultural irrigation. Reducing climate change can constrain the options for energy access.
–2	Counteracting	Clashes with another goal.	Boosting consumption for growth can counteract waste reduction and climate mitigation.
–3	Cancelling	Makes it impossible to reach another goal.	Fully ensuring public transparency and democratic accountability cannot be combined with national-security goals. Full protection of natural reserves excludes public access for recreation.

Figure 4. Practical examples of the seven interaction types from Nilsson et al. (2016) and later adopted by the Stockholm Environment Institute (SEI).

[15] Note: It is important to mention that the methodology developed by Miola et al. (2019) does include a 5-point scale for assessing synergies and trade-offs, but such scale is calculated from the number of times a literature entry agrees on that type of interlinkage. The fourth type of methodology of this subsection resolves the interlinkage degree through experts' assessment, which is one of its main characteristics and advantages. Acknowledged caveats can be found in Miola et al. (2019, p. 19).

An additional development from this methodology from the one initially drafted by Nilsson et al. (2016), defined in preparation to the High-level Political Forum of 2017 (Nilsson, 2017), included for each interlinkage, apart from an assessment on the seven-point scale, an indication of the state of knowledge/level of agreement among development practitioners, thus providing an additional 'safeguard' to the validity of the methodology and the assumptions behind each assessment[16]. Apart from at the country or project level, additional research using this methodology has been carried out also at the sectoral level, by identifying the SDG interlinkages connected to energy through literature analysis and expert review (*see* McCollum et al., 2018), and between different SDGs (mainly SDGs 2, 3, 7, and 14; *see* International Council for Science, 2017). This methodology by (Nilsson, 2017) uses target influence direction, by which an arrow specifies which targets influence which (cause and effect).

This fourth type of methodologies, as developed by Nilsson et al. (2016) and Nilsson (2017) **seem to have 'the best of both worlds', as they use a consistent methodological approach (seven-point scale) and an expert review from the identified interlinkages to correct or comment on the reliability of the assessment results**. However, upon further consideration from comments to the state of knowledge/level of agreement among development practitioners from Nilsson (2017), the qualitative differences between different levels of the seven-point scale might sometimes be hard to interpret, and thus the scale could benefit from a simplification to a five or even a three-point scale.

[16] In Nilsson (2017) it is argued that the several international revisions of the knowledge base help reach a robust set of interlinkages. Although arguments could be made against this, when it comes to policy research it seems that the inclusive process followed to arrive at an international knowledge base is robust enough for policy making. Similarly, the Central Asian SDG Platform uses participatory validation of interlinkages for all five Central Asian countries.

4.5. Comparison of methodology types

In support to the establishment of a regional SDGs platform for Central Asia, the four main methodology types for mapping and assessing interlinkages among SDG targets have been defined by their main traits and most relevant examples. The below table compiles those four methodology types with their advantages and disadvantages:

Methodology type	Structured methodological framework	Maps trade-offs and synergies	Upsides	Downsides
Expert-based assessment interlinkages (e.g. UNDP's COMBOS approach)	Process-focused ('top-down')	Mostly synergies Influence direction	The quality of mapped interlinkages has been carefully reviewed by experts	Heavily reliant on development practitioner's inputs; hardly scalable
Literature-based interlinkages (e.g. European Commission and UNDP Push Diagnostics)	Structured, solid methodology for defining interlinkages ('bottom-up)	Both. Scale -2 to 2; value 99 for ambiguity No influence direction	Based on solid research and extensive literature; scalable framework to many countries	Heavily reliant on literature (and its biases); rigid framework not adaptable to different country or project realities. No experts' review
Data-based interlinkages (e.g. IGES)	Structured, solid methodology for defining interlinkages ('bottom-up)	Both. Scale -1 to 1 (correlation coefficient) Influence direction	Solid statistical base on available SDG data; adaptable to different countries	Heavily reliant on data (and its biases derived from SDG indicator framework); assumption of causation from statistical correlation. No experts' review
Expert-based score and scale-based interlinkages (e.g. SEI)	Structured, solid methodology for defining interlinkages ('bottom-up)	Both. Scale -3 to +3 Influence direction	Combination of strong methodology and experts' review	Scale -3 to +3 can induce qualitative biases[17]

Table 1. Compilation of SDG interlinkages assessment methodologies with most relevant methodology aspects, upsides, and downsides.

All the methodology types that are structured around building a network of targets (data-driven, scale-based) could also be used for other purposes, such as for measuring 'networks of impact' and identifying and connecting the responsible parties for achieving synergies and managing trade-offs[18].

After consideration of the four main SDG interlinkages assessment methodologies with their advantages and disadvantages (*see* Table 1), and in the context of developing a regional SDGs platform for Central Asia, the methodology to map SDG target interlinkages could combine the following features:

[17] Development practice points out that a possible drawback of this system is the diversity of understandings of SDG targets in positive or negative terms. Some targets are phrased in positive terms (e.g. target 1.3) while others in negative terms (e.g. target 1.2). When phrasing a possible interlinkage, it might be done as '*social protection (+) reduces (-) multidimensional poverty*' or '*social protection (+) contributes (+) to the reduction of multidimensional poverty*'.

[18] An example of an SDG Complexity Analysis that defined networks of SDG interlinkages can be found in Uzbekistan's MAPS report (United Nations & The World Bank, 2018). A similar complexity analysis referring to targets of interlinked SDG targets (cluster analysis) was used for the MAPS reports of Georgia and Moldova. For more information on MAPS reports in the region covering Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States, *see* (UNDP, 2019).

- ✓ Be **structured, with a set of simple rules** to identify and assess SDG interlinkages and ensure methodological robustness and consistency of results.
- ✓ **Map both synergies, trade-offs, and low or no influence among SDG targets, ideally with target direction**. In order to simplify the system proposed by Nilsson et al. (2016), a five-point scale similar to the one used by Miola et al. (2019) could be useful. The different values of that scale could be:
  - ➢ +2: Strong synergy
  - ➢ +1: Significant synergetic relation
  - ➢ 0: little or no causal relation or influence between targets
  - ➢ -1: Significant trade-off relation
  - ➢ -2: Costly trade-off relation
- ✓ **Undergo peer-review rounds by national and international development practitioners** to ensure the uniformity of the methodology used and the consistency of the interlinkages' assessment.

Considering the similarities among Central Asian countries, **a 'template' structure of mapped interlinkages could be used for all five countries, with *ad hoc* adaptations to specific countries**. This template could be defined first by available data, then improved by available literature, and finally polished and adapted to each country.

5. Prioritising SDGs: Accelerators and bottlenecks

Initial estimations of the investment required to achieve the SDGs from as early as 2017 suggested that the world would need around "[USD] *6 trillion annually until 2030*" (United Nations, 2017). Following the 2030 Agenda principle of policy integration[19], the most efficient way would be to select catalytic investment to achieve some SDG targets through the achievement of others. Those selected SDG targets would be labelled as *accelerators*[20]. Building on the ideas of synergies and trade-offs from the previous section, policy makers and project managers must find the right combination of accelerators that maximise synergies and minimise trade-offs, this is, that optimise the return on their investment. For this purpose, UNDP developed in 2017 a five-step methodology to identify SDG accelerators and bottlenecks, the Accelerator and Bottleneck Assessment (ABA) tool (UNDP, 2017b). The five main points of the methodology are as follows:

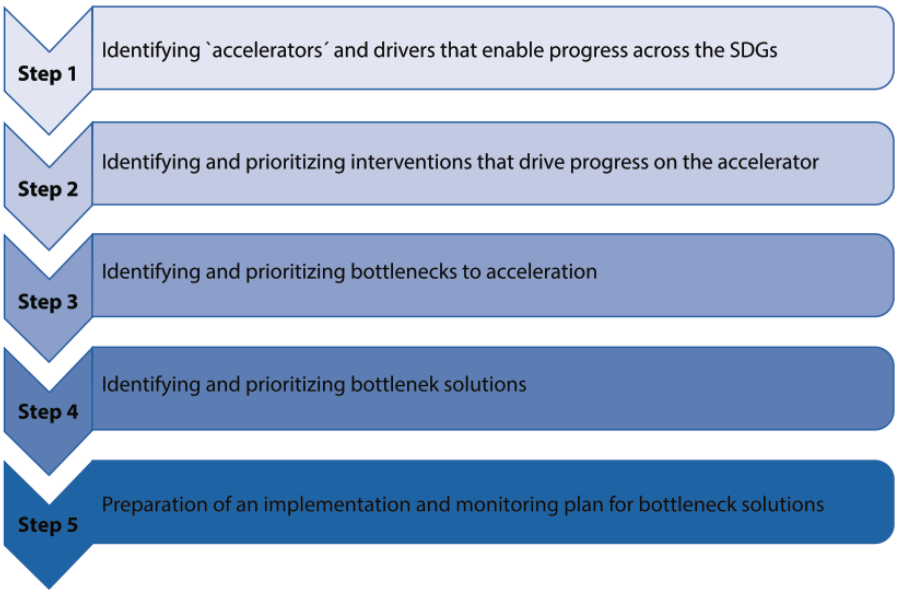

Figure 5. Five steps of the ABA tool as indicated from the ABA handbook by UNDP (2017b).

This methodology follows a 'filter' system by which development practitioners, decision makers, and project managers begin identifying several SDG accelerator 'candidates' and by checking their associated SDG targets, the associated challenges and bottlenecks to their implementation, they select a few interventions, assign concrete activities and success indicators for such activities, and set a work and time plan for their implementation. Bottlenecks can be defined as political, financial, logistical, or other barriers that can hinder the implementation of promising solutions. While carrying out an ABA exercise, identified trade-offs should be classified as possible bottlenecks.

The ABA tool helps identify the interventions that have the best return on investment while temporarily discarding promising-sounding interventions that would find significant bottlenecks in the path to their implementation. By prioritising the accelerators with the best ratio impact-to-investment and also the 'low-hanging fruits' (mid- to low-impact but easy-to-implement

[19] "*Integration of public policies means balancing the dimensions of social development, economic growth and environmental protection. An integrated approach implies managing trade-offs and maximizing synergies among objectives*" (UNDP, 2017, p.1).

[20] "*SDG accelerators can be defined as a set of development policies and/or programmme areas that accelerate progress across multiple, interconnected SDGs along with national development goals*" (UNDP, 2022, p.3).

interventions), the path for further development is cleared, which in turn facilitates future development. A recent example of successful use of the ABA tool can be found in Guatemala, in their fight against malnutrition and food insecurity (*see* United Nations, 2022).

While the ABA tool can serve as a valuable tool to transform broad 'candidate' SDG accelerators into specific, project/policy-level interventions with associated success indicators, the biggest difficulty sometimes comes from the identification of such accelerators in the first place. To this end, UNDP has developed the SDG Push process[21]. The SDG Push process guides policymakers to identify context-specific acceleration pathways to meet development needs and ambitions. The process is evidence-based, innovative, and actionable. Its very design is based on adaptivity to every country's context, prioritising principles of flexibility rather than rigidity. The SDG Push provides an integrated approach for SDG Acceleration that can be adopted at the national level.

The SDG Push has two components: a digital diagnostic, and a 'deep dive' approach that models and costs acceleration pathways. The SDG Push process consists of four phases, each designed to build from the others towards policy acceleration pathways. However, countries may also choose to only run specific phases, and build from existing processes:

1. **Scoping:** The main objective in this phase is to bring all relevant analyses that are qualitative and quantitative (including the analysis of national policy frameworks and national development plans) into one frame that allows insights to be clearly understood. The data gathered during this phase also directly supports the modelling phase. The government is expected to guide and endorse the scoping note.
2. **Acceleration Dialogues:** The Acceleration Dialogues are multi-stakeholder workshops. They provide the space to interrogate the scoping analysis done, interrogate previous policies and chart joint decision making. These dialogues are supported by other smaller touchpoints or feedback loops occurring throughout the lifecycle of the process.
3. **Modelling:** Modelling is essential for analysing development strategies at the national and sub-national levels. Building from the Scoping and Dialogues phases is an analytical modelling exercise with a few investments required to operationalise them. The acceleration proposals are subjected to rigorous modelling and analytics to ensure its feasibility. Ideally a participatory modelling approach is applied however, that might not always be possible.
4. **Sustainable Finance:** Sustainable Financing options are provided for the SDG Accelerators identified in the Modelling phase. UNDP Sustainable Finance Hub can support this process, but an external financial modelling expert can also provide the same analysis. In this phase, the accelerators are costed based on the different interventions identified. Together with country stakeholders and development partners, this component integrates SDG finance tools and experience in financing the SDGs to develop investment options.

[21] For more information about the SDG Push process, see (UNDP, 2023). The rest of the information on the SDG Push process contained in the present subsection derives from internal UNDP documents that might not reflect the final definitions of the different phases or tools of the SDG Push process.

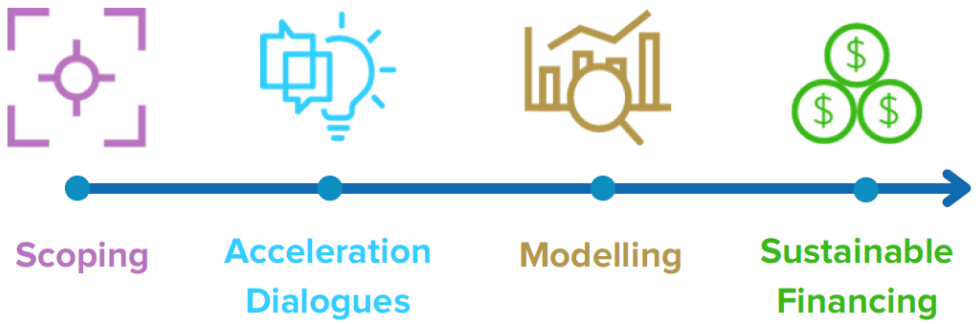

Figure 6. Four main phases of the SDG Push process.

In order to support the Scoping, Acceleration Dialogues, and Modelling phases of the SDG Push process, three complementary tools have been developed[22]:

- ✓ **The Policy Alignment Mapping (PAM)**: This tool takes the accumulated learnings from development practice from the use of the Rapid Integrated Assessment tool[23] and quantitatively shows the degree of policy alignment of a given country with the applicable SDG targets to that country. The PAM tool thus helps reflect a country's integration of the SDGs in their development planning, as well as the remaining policy gaps.
- ✓ **The Budget Allocation Tagging (BAT)**[24]: This tool maps national budget lines against SDG targets, indicating 'where the money goes', and thus identifying the budget priorities.
- ✓ **The Indicator-based Performance Review (IPR)**: This tool compiles SDG performance from SDG indicators from the starting point of the 2030 Agenda (around 2015) and the latest value of those same indicators and estimates if those SDG indicators (and thus the SDG targets to which they are linked) are already achieved, on track to be achieved, off-track, or if there are data gaps that do not allow to make any estimation.

Combining the findings and insights from the PAM, BAT, and IPR tools help identify 'candidate' accelerators, by answering the following guiding questions (examples):

- ➢ What SDG targets have a high level of policy commitment but low performance or investment?
- ➢ What SDG targets have a very low level of performance and no previous policy commitment nor investment?

[22] These three tools have been developed by the UNDP SDG Integration team and as of April 2024 they are currently in their testing/piloting phase in selected countries.
[23] To find out more about the Rapid Integrated Assessment tool *see* (UNDP, 2017a).
[24] This tool is also designed to serve as a first step of analysis before carrying out an SDG Budget Tagging exercise, led by UNDP's Sustainable Finance Hub. To find out more about the SDG Budget Tagging exercise, *see* UNDP (2022a).

6. SDG localisation, 'translation', and project-level adaptation to KPIs

The SDG framework, composed by SDG targets and SDG indicators, is mainly intended to be directly applicable to country governments, and is therefore phrased with broad targets and comprehensive indicators. This makes it difficult for subnational governments, project managers, NGOs, or private sector entities to have direct, demonstrable, and exclusive influence on their progress. Nevertheless, the 2030 Agenda principle of universality[25] indicates that all actors are responsible for achieving the SDGs. To solve this issue, there are three main solutions:

1. SDG localisation, which is the adaptation and implementation of SDGs at the subnational level (regional and local).
2. SDG 'translation', which is the transformation (rephrasing) of SDG targets and SDG indicators into similar targets and indicators, but achievable by NGOs or the private sector.
3. SDG 'impact linking', which is the elaboration of a theory of change when formulating a project by which the project outcomes can be directly linked to SDG targets or indicators.

The following subsections point to some examples and best practices of the above solutions.

6.1. SDG localisation

"*'Localizing' is the process of taking into account subnational contexts in the achievement of the 2030 Agenda, from the setting of goals and targets, to determining the means of implementation and using indicators to measure and monitor progress*" (UN Habitat & UNDP, 2016, p.6). Several successful initiatives of SDG localisation have been carried out all over the world after the initial roadmap guidelines laid out in UN Habitat & UNDP (2016) at the beginning of the 2030 Agenda. One of the latest compilation of successful initiatives by FAO & UNDP (2023) includes examples from Central Asia and Europe, and from those examples **a step-by-step approach to SDG localisation is defined** (*see* Figure 7).

Figure 7. Seven step methodology for SDG localisation from FAO & UNDP (2023).

[25] "*Universality implies that objectives and targets are relevant for each government and actor. This does not mean uniformity, but rather differentiation, applying the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities*" (UNDP, 2017c, p.1).

6.2. SDG 'translation' to the private sector

There are many examples of transformation of SDG targets and indicators to equivalent measures applicable to businesses. The methodology developed by GRI & UN Global Compact (2018) follows a nine-step process to define priority SDG targets, measure and analyse them, and implement and report on them. For the purpose of the current research, one of the most relevant steps is the one where **SDG targets find possible relevant actions to be implemented by businesses directly**. For an example of this 'translation' of SDG targets, *see* Figure 8 below:

Target 1.3

Implement nationally appropriate social protection systems and measures for all, including floors, and by 2030 achieve substantial coverage of the poor and the vulnerable

Possible relevant business actions to help achieve this target:

- Respecting employees' rights to a standard of living adequate for their and their families' health and well-being, including social protection systems.
- Providing the best possible wage (at a minimum the living wage), benefits and condition of work regarding to the needs of employees and their families and taking into account the social security benefits, and the relative living standard of other social groups. Providing businesses' own employees with basic amenities such as housing, basic medical care or food, of a good standard.
- Offering insurance to employees and their families, such as life insurance or accident insurance, as well as employee benefits (including but not limited to medical care, sickness benefits, unemployment benefits, old-age benefits, employment injury benefits, family benefits, maternity benefits, invalidity benefits and survivors' benefit/death benefit for family) – complementing, and not substituting or undermining the role of the public sector.

Figure 8. 'Translation' of SDG target 1.5 into business goals from GRI & UN Global Compact (2018a) following the methodology from GRI & UN Global Compact (2018b).

Other methodologies relevant to businesses and with a step-by-step process for **prioritising SDG targets, translate them into business KPIs, and setting up a monitoring and evaluation system** is the one defined by GRI et al. (2015) in the framework of the SDG Compass initiative, which is complemented by a dedicated website with an inventory of SDG-connected business indicators (GRI et al., 2024). Other initiatives such as the Business Call to Action also have a compilation of suggested SDG-connected indicators for business, but also for non-business actions implemented by companies, which could also be useful at the project level (*see* (BCtA, 2017). **Learnings on KPI definition from the private sector can be easily adapted to the project level**.

6.3. SDG 'impact linking' to project level

While the SDG targets are phrased more similarly to policy commitments than project outcomes, in practice most of development interventions are carried out through a combination of many projects. For example, in the context of the European Union, despite the vast regulatory and policy framework, flagship programmes such as LIFE[26], Horizon Europe[27], or NextGenerationEU[28] are implemented by funded projects by these programmes' funding windows.

[26] For more information, *see* European Commission (2024b).
[27] For more information, *see* European Commission (2024a).
[28] For more information, *see* European Commission (2024c).

Development practice makes the project level work the most heterogeneous and thus the most difficult to theoretically group or structure, and therefore no specific examples or methodology types can be offered due to the vast diversity of project implementation methods, modalities, and processes. However, all projects have something in common: They are planned and designed with an intended specific impact. Linking this impact to the SDGs is key.

In order to be able to map the multiple contributions to SDGs that derive from the implementation of projects, it is crucial to find a way to link projects' impacts to SDG targets. In line with the terminology of results-based management[29], **projects should have a positive impact in one or a few SDG targets, and those should be identified. A theory of change should provide**, through available data, relevant literature, experts' assessment, or a mix of two or all sources, **a causal link between the project's outcomes, its main impacts, and one or a few SDG targets**. **Complementary, the project's KPIs should be directly linked to SDG indicators[30]. And consequently, the SDG indicators to which KPIs are linked must belong to the SDG targets linked to the project's impacted SDGs.** For a practical example of this requirements, *see* Figure 9 below:

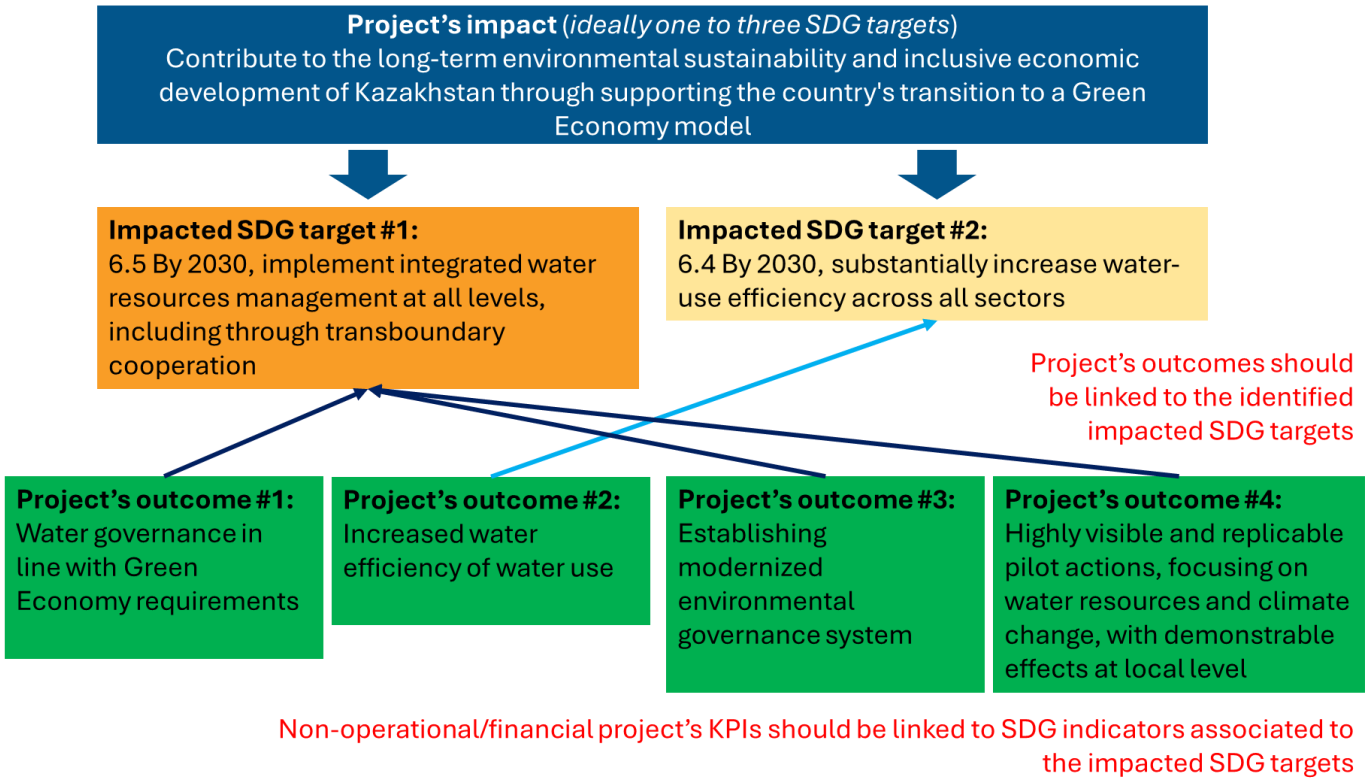

Figure 9. Example of SDG 'impact linking' with a UNDP project from Kazakhstan. To find more about the original project, see UNDP (2018).

[29] For a review of the terms 'impact', 'outcome', or 'output' referred to development projects, *see* UN Development Group (2011).

[30] Note: Operational and or financial project KPIs do not need to be aligned to SDG indicators, as they do not intend to show the external impact of the project, but rather its internal efficiency.

Additionally, it would be important to also quantify in terms of dedicated financial resources to which extent each project contributes to the SDGs. To this end, impacted SDG targets could be estimated as the sum of the budget allocations of the linked project outcomes[31]. Following the example from Figure 9, the financial contribution to SDG target #1 would be:

Financial contribution (SDG target 6.5) = *Budget allocated for Project Outcome 1 + Budget allocated for Project Outcome 3 + Budget allocated for Project Outcome 4*

And the contribution to SDG target #2 from that same example would be:

Financial contribution (SDG target 6.4) = *Budget allocated for Project Outcome 2*

The relative contribution for each SDG target for a given project would be:

$$\boldsymbol{Relative\ contribution\ (SDG\ target\ \#X)} = \frac{Financial\ contribution\ (SDG\ target\ \#X)}{\Sigma contributions\ (all\ SDG\ targets\ linked\ in\ the\ project)}$$

These calculations can also take place for a group of similar projects, analysed in a batch, in a consistent manner. For example, if 30 projects are used to provide a 'sample overview' of the implementation of the SDGs in Central Asia[32], after linking projects' outcomes with SDG targets and with the projects' outcomes' budgets, it will be possible to estimate how much all projects contribute to specific SDG targets and the sum (and relative weight) of all budget allocations for those specific SDG targets.

The next section goes deeper into how to calculate aggregated contributions to advancing the SDGs in Central Asia.

[31] In the case the project outcomes do not specify their budget allocation and only the total project budget is available, it can be assumed that the project budget is equally distributed among all the project's outcomes.

[32] An example of this case will be carried out for EU projects in Central Asia, in a continuation of the present work mandated by UNDP (see connected deliverables to this research), whereby over 40 EU projects will be analysed to estimate their contribution to advancing the SDGs in Central Asia.

7. Aggregated contribution to the SDG platform: Relevant methodological aspects

This final section compiles the best features from the previous sections to inspire improvements for the SDGs platform for Central Asia. Suggestions are provided to:

A. Estimate the status of progress of the 2030 Agenda in Central Asia.
B. Update and upgrade the status of progress of the 2030 Agenda in Central Asia.
C. Systematically integrate the contribution of projects to the 2030 Agenda in Centra Asia.

7.1. Estimated status of the 2030 Agenda progress in Central Asia

There are several initiatives that estimate the status of implementation of the 2030 Agenda. For a first estimation, the process could be as follows:

1. Create SDG country profiles for the five countries in Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan) and populate them with scores and estimations from the SDG Index Dashboards (SDSN & ESRI, 2024).
2. Reinforce the previous information on the country profiles with available information from the UN Stats and UN Women country profiles (UN DESA, 2024; UN Women, 2024).
3. Complete the country profiles with available information from the latest Voluntary National Reviews from the five countries in Central Asia (Government of Tajikistan, 2023; Government of the Kyrgyz Republic, 2020; Government of Uzbekistan, 2023; Ministry of National Economy & Economic Research Institute JSC, 2022; Turkmen State Publishing Service, 2023).

After completing these country profiles, an overview, if only qualitative, of the progress of the 2030 Agenda in Central Asia, should be reached. However, further data updates and upgrades would be required in the future to provide a more accurate depiction of the status of 2030 Agenda implementation in Central Asia (*see* next subsection). It is also worth pointing out that there is at times a mismatch or disagreement between global and national datasets and assessments.

7.2. Update and upgrade of the status of the 2030 Agenda implementation in Central Asia

The SDGs platform for Central Asia aims to collect database information, compare it with reference countries, identify data gaps, and visualise its findings. The platform is intended to allow government agencies, non-governmental organisations, and stakeholders to assess the progress toward achieving the SDGs and identify challenges and opportunities. To fulfil that purpose, the initial status of the 2030 Agenda progress in Central Asia must be periodically updated (with new data) and upgraded (with methodological improvements – better data and insights).

After the findings from the initial status, a 'template' list of applicable SDG indicators and targets should be defined, to be gradually validated, adapted to each Central Asian country, and improved with experience from development practice. With this 'template', interlinkages among SDG targets can be defined (ideally following recommendations from subsection 4.5), which can

in turn serve to the effort of integrating the contribution of projects to the achievement of the SDGs in Central Asia. It is recommended that further upgrades begin by carrying out PAM, BAT, and IPR analyses[33] in the target countries.

7.3. Systematic integration of the contribution of projects to the 2030 Agenda in Centra Asia

With the 'template' of applicable SDG targets and indicators to Central Asian countries and the identification of interlinkages among SDG targets, a sample of projects[34] could be analysed to estimate the contribution of those projects to the 2030 Agenda. The recommended process for individually analysing projects is the following:

1) For each project, map its SDG impact by identifying one to three SDG targets to which it contributes.
2) Link each project's outcomes to one of the identified SDG targets the project impacts.
3) Document resource allocation for each project outcome (how much, in total amount, and in project's percentage) is allocated to each outcome, and thus, to each SDG target.
4) Identify the project's non-operational/non-financial KPIs and indicate whether or not they correspond to SDG indicators connected to the impacted SDG targets. Flag if inconsistencies or data/monitoring gaps are present.
5) Flag if the project's identified impacted SDG targets present synergies or trade-offs among them.

Once all sample projects are individually analysed, an aggregated estimation of their contribution to the SDGs can be provided, with the following data points:

- ✓ SDG targets impacted, and with which degree of financial support.
- ✓ Degree of alignment of non-operational/non-financial KPIs to the SDGs.
- ✓ Aggregated synergies and trade-offs.

Combining the findings and insights of the estimated status of the 2030 Agenda progress (subsection 7.1) and the contributions from sample projects can help improve the SDG platform and the work on 2030 Agenda in Central Asia, through:

- ✓ Identification of possible data gaps to be corrected.
- ✓ Provision of suggestions for SDG accelerators.
- ✓ Tips for improvement of project-level KPIs.
- ✓ Opportunities for SDG localisation and synergies at the project level.
- ✓ Development of reporting formats and simplification of the M&E system and processes to improve the relevance of measurable KPIs.

[33] *See* section 5.
[34] Recommended to use a sample size of 30 projects from all Central Asian countries.

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