

# Prioritizing Agenda 2030

How do Global South leaders navigate trade-offs and assess relevance?

Brief



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## Table of Contents

Key findings	1
About the Listening to Leaders surveys	2
How leaders prioritized development in 2024	3
Continuity and change over time in development priorities	7
Perceived influence of the global SDGs on local priorities	9
Alignment between donors, leaders, and citizens	10
Perceived costs of ESG conditions and project favorability	12
Conclusion	16
References	17

## Figures and Tables

Figure 1. Frequency of a development goal appearing in leaders' top priorities (2024)	4
Table 1. Frequency of a development goal appearing in leaders' top priorities in 2024, global versus regional breakdown	6
Figure 2. How much did leader priorities converge or diverge between the last two surveys (2017-2024)?	7
Figure 3. Awareness and influence of the SDGs in 2024 among Global South leaders	9
Figure 4. What do leaders say about the role of the SDGs in planning in their country?	10
Figure 5. Comparison of development priorities between citizens, leaders, and donor financing	11
Figure 6. Leaders' favorability toward a development project, given the cost of different ESG measures	14

Global agendas like the United Nations' (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are intentionally comprehensive, aiming to mobilize money and action for an ambitious slate of economic, environmental, governance, and social issues. Practically, however, countries navigate real-world trade-offs in how they deploy finite financial resources and political capital to optimize shared peace and prosperity for their societies. To better understand these dynamics, this brief analyzes nearly 10,000 responses to surveys conducted by AidData in 2017, 2020, and 2024.

Public, private, and civil society leaders from 148 countries and territories shared their views on the development challenges they most wanted to tackle before, during, and after a global pandemic. In the 2024 survey, respondents also shared insights on assessing the cost-benefit trade-offs of development projects that incorporate Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) safeguards.

## Key findings

- *Top priorities remain durable:* Over half of the leaders surveyed consistently prioritize better schools, more jobs, and strong institutions—this held true before, during, and after the COVID-19 global pandemic.
- *SDGs are still relevant:* Despite claims of the sustainable development goals being “dead,” awareness remains prevalent. Over 90 percent of respondents are familiar with the SDGs, and over 60 percent of respondents find them influential in shaping development priorities.
- *Local context matters:* Asia-Pacific and small island states focus more on addressing climate change and environmental vulnerabilities, while their African counterparts emphasize food insecurity and energy.
- *Climate's rising salience:* Climate action gains traction in absolute and relative terms, being driven mostly by the Asia-Pacific. Meanwhile, the traditional top SDGs—jobs, education, and institutions—still maintain their top positions but cede ground.
- *Spending and prioritization diverge:* Spending in health and institutions is consistently well-aligned with priorities. However, spending in education lags behind, and financial allocations have not kept pace with the increasing prioritization of climate action over time.
- *Inclusion of ESG safeguards is not always a deterrent:* Leaders were more sensitive to higher-cost environmental and social safeguards (-13 and -17 percentage points, respectively) than lower-cost alternatives when it came to viewing a given project favorably. In this context, “higher cost” meant longer implementation periods.

However, this cost sensitivity did not appear to extend to governance safeguards, where variable costs did not significantly affect project favorability.

- *Leaders who worked with China may have different safeguard preferences:* China's development model has been previously associated with economic gains at the expense of environmental, social, and governance costs. Our survey finds some evidence to support the idea that leaders internalize these trade-offs in selecting their partners. As a case in point: respondents who reported receiving advice or assistance from China demonstrated less tolerance for high-cost governance safeguards than those who did not. This may stem from a preference for funding sources without such conditions or from a sensitivity to delays linked to high-cost ESG initiatives.

## About the Listening to Leaders surveys

AidData conducts its flagship Listening to Leaders (LTL) Survey every three to four years to surface valuable insights on the state of development across a diverse cross-section of leaders, spanning 148 countries and semi-autonomous regions. Most of the sample includes low- and middle-income countries, along with a few that graduated into high-income status since the first survey wave in 2014. We use the term “leader” broadly to identify a cross-section of public, private, and civil society leaders who make or influence development policy and practice in one of 23 domains.<sup>1</sup>

These leaders represent various stakeholder groups, including: executive branch officials, parliamentarians, civil society and private sector leaders, members of domestic think tanks, academia, or media, and the local representatives of development partners in the relevant country of interest. For more information about the survey design, implementation, and weighting, please refer to the Technical Appendix of *Listening to Leaders 2025: Development cooperation over a decade of disruption* (Custer et al. 2025).

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<sup>1</sup> Respondents selected their area of policy focus from a fixed list of 23 different policy domains and an option to select “other” and write in their own answer. The fixed list of 23 policy domains included: (1) agriculture, fishing, and forestry; (2) economic policy; (3) education; (4) energy and mining; (5) environment and natural resource management; (6) finance; (7) health; (8) human development and gender; (9) industry, trade and services; (10) information and communications; (11) labor market policy and programs; (12) nutrition and food security; (13) private sector development; (14) good governance and rule of law; (15) public sector management; (16) rural development; (17) social development and protection; (18) trade; (19) transportation; (20) urban development; (21) water, sewerage and waste management; (22) foreign policy; and (23) other. The original question was: “While holding this position, what were your primary areas of focus? (If you worked across multiple areas, please select one area you are most familiar with).”

## How leaders prioritized development in 2024

In 2024, we asked leaders across the globe: “Based upon your experience, what are the most important issues for advancing [your country’s] development?” Respondents could identify up to six priority problems they wanted to solve, using the SDGs as a common framework. We analyzed the frequency with which leaders selected a goal among their top six priorities from a fixed list of 16 SDGs (excluding SDG17, Partnerships for the Goals).

Leader priorities = % of leaders who selected a goal as one of the six most important problems for their country to solve

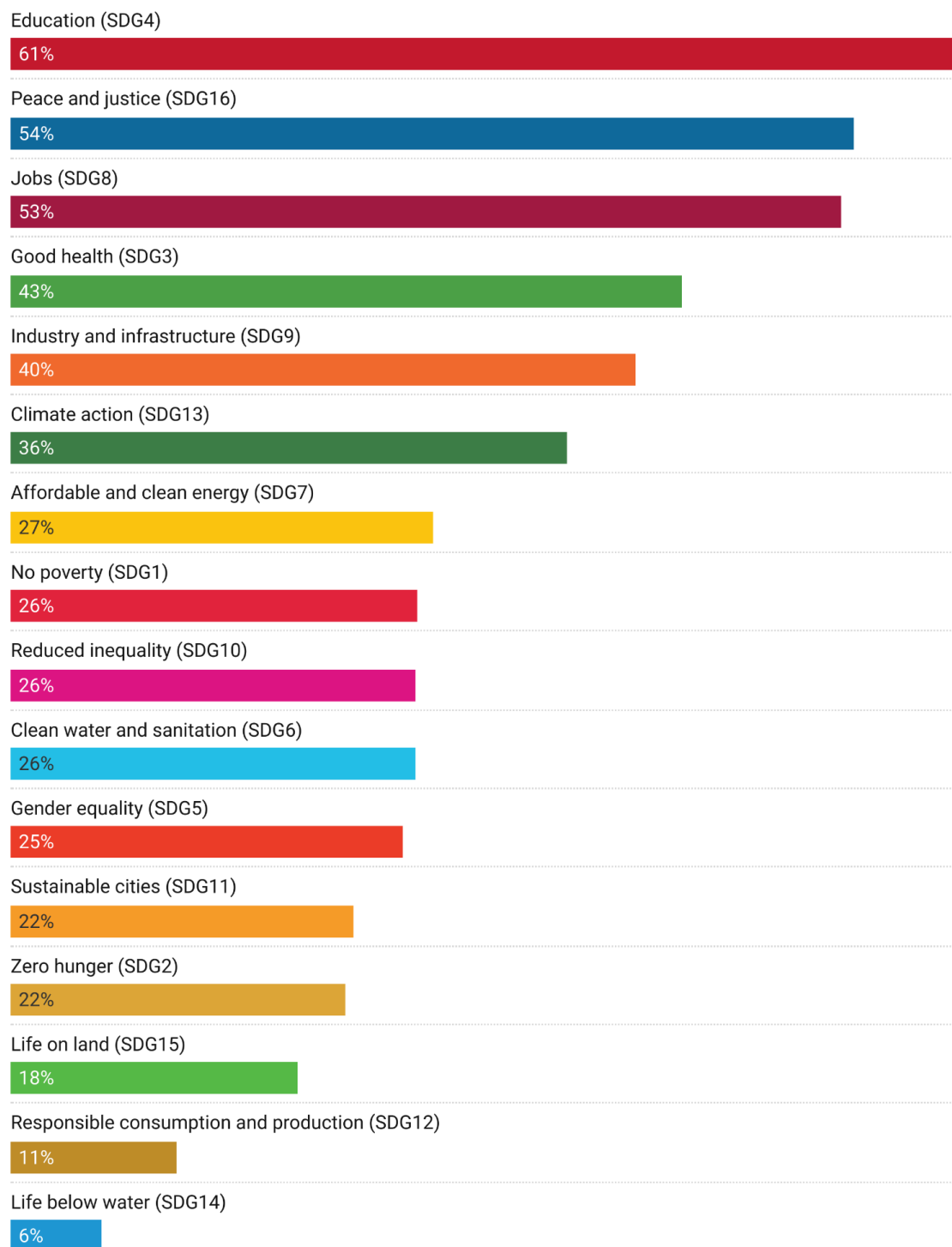
Three priorities were top-of-mind for over half of the leaders surveyed in 2024: education (61.2 percent), jobs (53.4 percent), and peace and justice (54.1 percent). Interest in these three was consistent across geographic regions (Table 1).<sup>2</sup> However, there was greater variability in the second tier of priorities. More than a third of leaders surveyed emphasized health (43.2 percent), industry and infrastructure (40.1 percent), and climate action (35.8 percent) among their top problems to solve. Responsible consumption (10.6 percent) and life below water (5.8 percent) ranked lowest among leaders’ priorities.

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<sup>2</sup> Across different regions 52 to 65 percent of leaders identified education (SDG4) as one of their top priorities in 2024. There was a 13.8 percentage point difference between the region with the lowest (MENA) and highest (ECA) share of leaders who selected education as a priority. Roughly 46 to 71 percent of leaders selected peace and justice (SDG16) as a top priority that same year. There was a 25.2 percentage point spread difference between the region with the lowest (EAP) and highest (ECA) share of leaders who chose peace and justice as a priority. Roughly 49 to 59 percent of leaders likewise selected jobs (SDG8) as a top priority in 2024. There was a 10.1 percentage point difference between the lowest (EAP) and highest (LAC) share of leaders who chose jobs as a top priority that same year.

Figure 1. Frequency of a development goal appearing in leaders' top priorities (2024)

*% of respondents who identified a given SDG among their top six priorities in 2024*



Source: AidData's 2024 Listening to Leaders Survey. Colors represent each goal. All data is weighted; see Appendix for more details.



Global averages are helpful but can obscure essential differences in how leaders understand their local realities. Reducing vulnerabilities to climate change had outsized importance in East Asia and the Pacific (EAP) and South Asia (SA), where rising sea levels and extreme weather events have been particularly catastrophic.<sup>3</sup> Small island states feel the pressures of climate change and other environmental challenges more keenly than other countries. Nearly half of leaders from small island states (49.3 percent) identified climate action as a priority in 2024. Life on land and below water were important problems to solve for 24 and 16 percent of the same cohort of leaders.

Leaders in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) were more concerned about water, along with industry and infrastructure, than their Latin American and Caribbean (LAC) and Middle East and North Africa (MENA) peers.<sup>4</sup> Food insecurity and energy are still chronic challenges in SSA, prompting 36 and 33 percent, respectively, of leaders to identify these as top problems to address.<sup>5</sup> In LAC and MENA, leaders were far more focused on reducing inequalities (35.2 and 40.4 percent, respectively).<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> These regional differences for EAP and SA relative to the global average are both statistically significant. Relatedly, leaders from the EAP region were also statistically more likely to prioritize life below water (SDG14) than respondents from other regions.

<sup>4</sup> These regional differences for SSA, LAC, and MENA relative to the global average are all statistically significant for SDG9.

<sup>5</sup> These regional differences for SSA from the world average on SDG2 and SDG9 are both statistically significant.

<sup>6</sup> These regional differences for MENA and LAC from the world averages on SDG10 are statistically significant.

Table 1. Frequency of a development goal appearing in leaders' top priorities in 2024, global versus regional breakdown

*% of respondents who identified a given SDG among their top six priorities in 2024. World average compared to each geographic region.*

Development priority in 2024	World (n=2827)	EAP (n=444)	ECA (n=455)	LAC (n=592)	MENA (n=124)	SA (n=171)	SSA (n=1002)
No poverty (SDG1)	26.2%	20.1%	20.4%	32.2%	29.6%	25.6%	28.8%
Zero hunger (SDG2)	21.5%	12.9%	4.6%	21.5%	15.3%	22.0%	36.0%
Good health (SDG3)	43.2%	42.2%	38.7%	41.9%	36.1%	45.6%	47.4%
Education (SDG4)	61.2%	57.5%	65.3%	64.6%	51.5%	57.6%	61.6%
Gender equality (SDG5)	25.2%	24.7%	23.4%	26.9%	26.3%	28.2%	25.0%
Clean water and sanitation (SDG6)	26.0%	24.3%	18.0%	23.4%	26.6%	25.1%	32.8%
Affordable and clean energy (SDG7)	27.1%	26.0%	22.6%	21.6%	32.2%	21.5%	33.1%
Jobs (SDG8)	53.4%	49.1%	57.5%	59.2%	54.9%	52.5%	49.7%
Industry and infrastructure (SDG9)	40.1%	37.9%	41.5%	32.5%	27.1%	42.8%	45.5%
Reduced inequality (SDG10)	26.0%	23.3%	21.2%	35.2%	40.4%	25.9%	23.4%
Sustainable cities (SDG11)	22.0%	27.5%	25.1%	21.8%	21.5%	27.8%	17.4%
Responsible consumption and production (SDG12)	10.6%	14.7%	8.5%	12.2%	4.0%	11.7%	10.2%
Climate action (SDG13)	35.8%	47.2%	26.2%	39.5%	40.9%	43.3%	32.2%
Life below water (SDG14)	5.8%	13.4%	2.8%	6.5%	5.2%	7.6%	3.1%
Life on land (SDG15)	18.4%	23.0%	15.5%	17.2%	16.7%	14.7%	19.2%
Peace and justice (SDG16)	54.1%	46.0%	71.2%	54.1%	51.0%	47.2%	50.1%

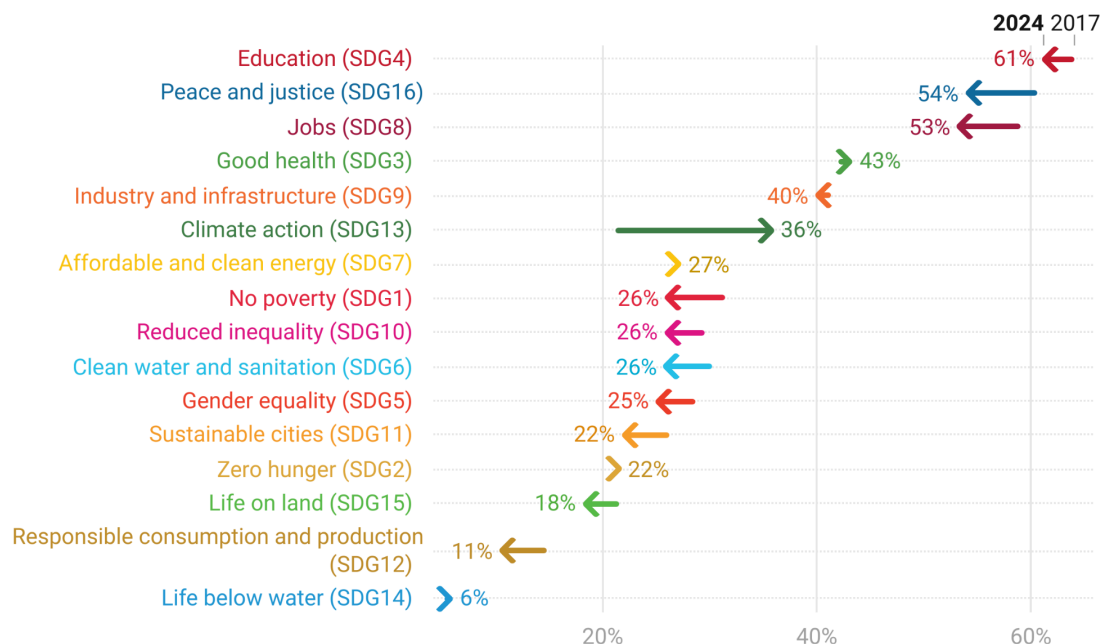
*Source: AidData's 2024 Listening to Leaders Survey. All data is weighted; see Appendix for more details.*

## Continuity and change over time in development priorities

Leaders' most pressing problems held steady before, during, and after a global pandemic. Respondents overwhelmingly selected the same three top priorities in 2024 as in the two previous survey waves conducted in 2017 and 2020 (Custer et al., 2018 and 2021). However, this is not to imply that priorities are static. As a case in point, climate action (SDG13) had a 15 percentage point increase in leaders selecting this goal as among their most important problems to solve between 2017 and 2024.<sup>7</sup> There was also a noticeable decline of 5 percentage points in the relative emphasis that respondents placed on eliminating poverty (SDG1) across the three surveys.

Figure 2. How much did leader priorities converge or diverge between the last two surveys (2017-2024)?

*% of respondents who selected a goal as a top three priority in 2024 versus 2017*



Source: AidData's 2017 and 2024 Listening to Leaders Surveys. All data is weighted; see Appendix for more details.

Much like the global picture in 2024, there have also been durable differences over time in priorities based upon leaders' understanding of their local realities. Respondents from low-lying small island states were more likely to prioritize climate action (+15 to 17 p.p.), life below water (+12 to 14 p.p.), and life on land (+7 to 13 p.p.) than their peers across all three surveys. In contrast, leaders from extremely fragile states tend to focus on securing basic needs—such as food, water, and peace and justice—while

<sup>7</sup> This difference between survey waves was not only large in magnitude but also statistically significant for climate action (SDG13). Leaders placed heightened importance on climate action, consistent across geographic regions, levels of fragility, and income.

environmental concerns remain more distant.<sup>8</sup> However, between 2017 and 2024, even extremely fragile states saw an increase in prioritization of climate action (+8 p.p.) combined with a decrease in prioritization of industry and sustainable cities (-13 p.p. in both cases).

Countries are not monolithic in their development priorities. Views on the most pressing problems also vary by income level. Low-income countries were consistently more concerned about addressing basic household needs, such as access to food and water, than their middle- and high-income peers.<sup>9</sup> In comparison, middle- and high-income counterparts focused on issues related to education, inequality, sustainable cities, and other similar topics.

Subtle differences emerge based on the type of organization leaders represent, influencing how they perceive and prioritize development challenges. For example, civil society leaders placed greater weight on tackling issues of good governance (SDG16) than government officials.<sup>10</sup> Academics placed more emphasis on education (+11p.p.) than the global average, while development partners surprisingly are the stakeholder group that least emphasises education (-9p.p.).<sup>11</sup> Gender equality is championed by NGO/CSO (+13p.p.) leaders but has substantially less buy-in from government officials (-5 p.p.).

Overall, consistency has defined SDG prioritization. The top five priorities have remained unchanged across all three waves of the survey. However, there have been notable shifts in the relative position of different priorities.<sup>12</sup> Climate action has risen in both absolute and relative importance, while gender equality and water and sanitation have gradually declined in leaders' ranking of priorities.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> These differences for extremely fragile countries relative to the global average were statistically significant for SDG2 (zero hunger), SDG6 (clean water), and SDG16 (peace and justice).

<sup>9</sup> These income level differences were statistically significant in 2024 for SDG2 (no hunger) and SDG6 (clean water).

<sup>10</sup> These differences were statistically significant in 2024 for SDG16 (good governance).

<sup>11</sup> These differences were statistically significant in 2024 for SDG4 (education).

<sup>12</sup> SDG4 was the 1st priority in all waves; SDG16 was 2nd in 2017 and 2024 and 3rd in 2020; SDG8 was 3rd in 2017 and 2024 and 2nd in 2020; SDG3 was 4th in all waves; and SDG9 was 5th in all waves.

<sup>13</sup> Climate action ranked 14th in 2017 (21 percent), 12th in 2020 (20 percent), and 6th in 2024 (36 percent). Gender was ranked 9th in 2017 and 2020 (29 percent and 25 percent, respectively), and 11th in 2024 (25 percent). Clean water and sanitation ranked 7th in 2017 (30 percent), 8th in 2020 (26 percent), and 10th in 2024 (26 percent).

## Perceived influence of the global SDGs on local priorities

Leaders also provided insights about the degree to which the SDGs as an agenda were visible and influential in shaping development priorities in their country. Despite ongoing debates around the usefulness of the SDGs—even calls to abandon them—Global South leaders are very familiar with the framework. Over 90 percent of respondents to the 2024 survey wave said they are aware of the SDGs. Moreover, the goals continue to shape decision-making in low- and middle-income countries, with over 60 percent of respondents identifying the SDG as “quite” or “very influential” in determining development priorities.

Figure 3. Awareness and influence of the SDGs in 2024 among Global South leaders

### Awareness

Only **4%** of respondents were **not** aware of the Sustainable Development Goals

### Influence

Percent of respondents who indicated that the Sustainable Development Goals were...



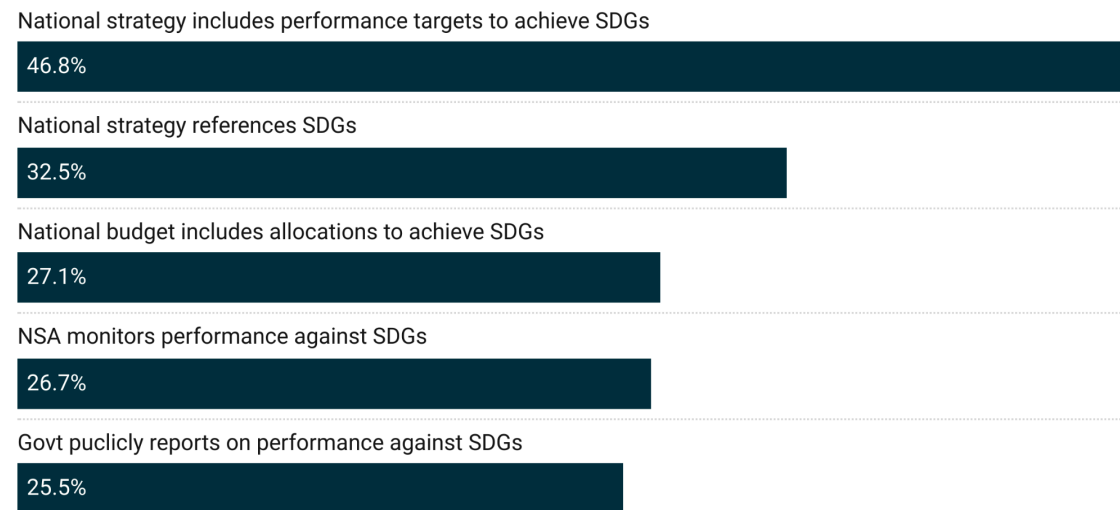
Source: AidData's 2024 Listening to Leaders Survey.

Beyond just the perception that the SDGs are still relevant, nearly 90 percent of respondents said their governments incorporate the SDGs into policy and planning in some form. Nearly 47 percent of respondents said their country's national strategy includes performance targets to achieve the SDGs, 33 percent said that the national strategy references these goals, and 27 percent said that the national budget includes dedicated financing to achieve the SDGs.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Respondents could select up to three among these options: (i) the national strategy references SDGs but does not contain any specific performance target; (ii) the national strategy includes specific performance targets to achieve the SDGs; (iii) the national budget includes specific allocations of domestic resources to achieve the SDGs; (iv) the national statistics organization monitors performance against the SDGs; (v) the government publicly reports on the country's performance against the SDGs; (vi) I don't believe the government incorporates the SDGs in their planning.

Figure 4. What do leaders say about the role of the SDGs in planning in their country?

% of respondents. Respondents could select up to three options.



Source: AidData's 2024 Listening to Leaders Survey.

## Alignment between donors, leaders, and citizens

Budgets, rather than rhetoric, may be a more accurate indication of the degree to which donor financing aligns with how leaders define local development priorities. If development partners' aid allocations are indicative of their revealed priorities, leveraging the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD's) Creditor Reporting System we approximated the degree to which donors' revealed priorities (based on support for each of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals between 2021 and 2023) aligned with their funding commitments. For this analysis, we replicated AidData's *Financing for the SDGs* methodology as described by Burgess et al. (2023).

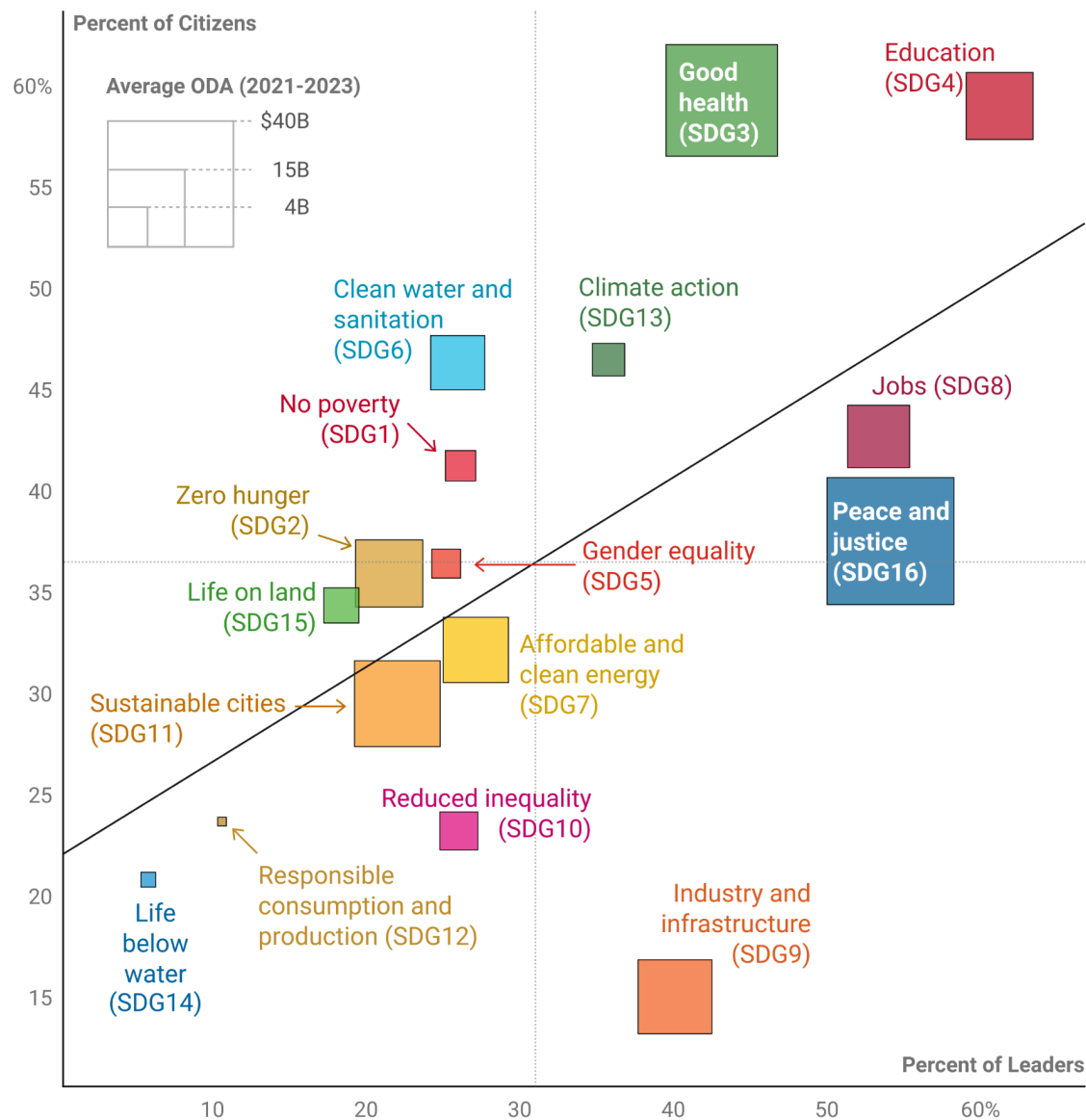
The areas of alignment—and misalignment—between donor funding and leaders' priorities have remained remarkably consistent between 2020 and 2024 (Custer et al., 2021). Peace and justice (SDG16) and health (SDG3) were the top two recipients of donor funding and were also ranked highly by Global South leaders in both survey waves. In 2020, we found that education (SDG4) and jobs (SDG8) may have been underfunded relative to how leaders prioritize them, and that remained the case in 2024. Additional underfunded areas that are of importance to leaders are eliminating poverty (SDG1), gender equality (SDG5), and climate action (SDG13). Conversely, industry (SDG9) and sustainable cities (SDG11) appear to be overfunded by donors relative to their perceived priority among Global South leaders.

Figure 5. Comparison of development priorities between citizens, leaders, and donor financing

### Leader alignment with citizens and donors

**X-Axis:** Percent of leaders in 2024 who included an SDG in their top 6 priorities

**Y-Axis:** Percent of citizens in 2024 who included an SDG in their top 6 priorities



Sources: Data on leaders' development priorities was derived from AidData's 2024 Listening to Leaders Survey. Official development assistance (ODA) data were sourced from the OECD's Creditor Reporting System (CRS) and allocated to the SDGs using the methodology outlined in Burgess et al. (2023). Citizen priority data were sourced from the MyWorld2030 survey using responses from January 2021 and December 2023 (excludes responses from OECD-DAC countries).

Citizens and leaders are well-aligned regarding health (SDG3) and education (SDG4) as top priorities, but notable gaps emerge in other areas. Citizens attribute less importance to peace and justice (SDG16) and industry (SDG9) than leaders do. Conversely, gender equality (SDG5) and clean water and sanitation (SDG6) are areas that citizens emphasize to a higher degree than leaders, whose prioritization of these areas has declined over the past waves of the survey. Interestingly, some of the SDGs showing the most progress towards their targets, according to the *Sustainable Development Goals Report 2025* by the United Nations, are among the least prioritized by both leaders and citizens. Countries are making progress on sustainable cities (SDG11) and responsible consumption (SDG12), despite those being areas of relatively low prioritization by both leaders and citizens.

## Perceived costs of ESG conditions and project favorability

The SDGs are intentionally aspirational outcomes, but how do countries operationalize these ideas of promoting inclusive development in practice, while mitigating unintended harm to communities (e.g., physical displacement, disruption to livelihoods) and ecosystems (e.g., pollution, biodiversity loss)? One such approach at the project level is the increasing adoption of (E)nvironmental, (S)ocial, and (G)overnance safeguards by financiers and governments.

ESG safeguards take many forms, such as mandated assessment and mitigation plans to identify and curb negative byproducts of projects; required monitoring and reporting on performance; competitive bidding processes; audited financial reports; and financial penalties for breaching relevant laws and regulations. Such measures are intended to protect communities and ecosystems from undue harm caused by projects; however, they are not costless. Even if they curb undesirable outcomes, Global South leaders could still view ESG safeguards as driving up costs, infringing on their autonomy, and elongating project implementation timeframes.

Global South countries have expanded choice in their development partners, as there has been a proliferation of development finance suppliers over the last decade (Custer et al., 2024). Not only has this group of potential partners increased in quantity, but they are also increasingly diverse in how they approach the design and delivery of projects, including the use of ESG safeguards. In selecting their partners, Global South leaders face real trade-offs in deciding whether to adopt ESG safeguards, and under what conditions. Moreover, not all ESG safeguards are monolithic, and leaders may view some types as more or less burdensome than others.

As part of an effort to understand the acceptability of ESG measures, we included a survey experiment in the 2024 Listening to Leaders Survey. The experiment examined



how ESG safeguards in different sectors, and with varying associated costs, may influence respondents' support for a hypothetical infrastructure project. Respondents read a project description that included a safeguard and were then asked how likely they would be to favor undertaking the project.<sup>15</sup> Although a safeguard might be considered to be 'costly' from any number of vantage points (e.g., financial, time, reduced autonomy, political capital), for the purpose of this experiment, we focused on time cost, in the form of variable implementation lengths to complete a project.

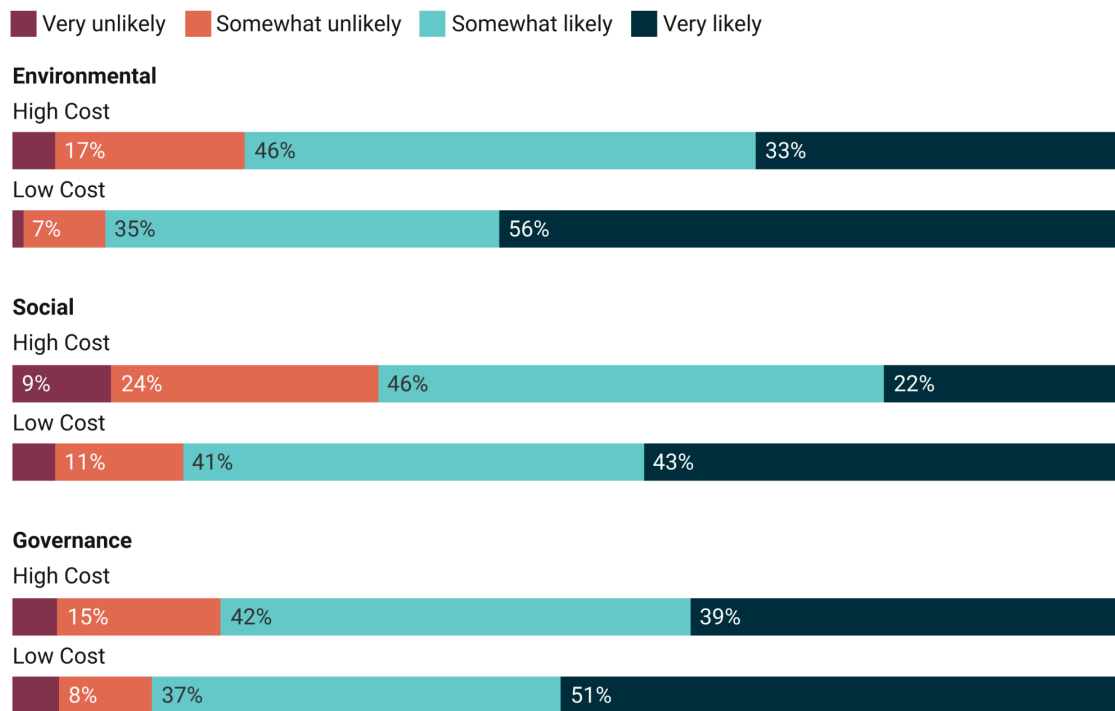
When social or environmental safeguards led to higher costs (i.e., a longer implementation period), respondents were less willing to support a project (-17 and -13 percentage points, respectively). For governance safeguards, the direction of change was the same—respondents showed lower favorability to high-cost projects—but not statistically significant. This apparent insignificance may reflect greater tolerance for higher-cost governance safeguards. Over 80 percent of respondents remained favorable to undertaking a project which featured a higher-cost governance safeguard (a drop of only 6 percentage points compared to the low-cost option).

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<sup>15</sup> The safeguard presented was randomized among respondents and was one of 6 options that sought to reflect a low-cost and a high-cost safeguard in each of the following three areas: environment, social, and governance. The "cost" was the added time associated with the safeguard, with low-cost safeguards adding 1 year to the original 4 year estimated timeline and high-cost safeguards adding 4 years.

Figure 6. Leaders' favorability toward a development project, given the cost of different ESG measures

% of respondents who said they were/were not likely to be in favor of a project



Source: AidData's 2024 Listening to Leaders Survey.

To what extent might leaders' decisions to engage with a given development partner depend on their tolerance for ESG safeguards of varying types and costs? China, for example, is seen as offering a decidedly different model of development than OECD donors. In previous AidData surveys, we found that leaders associate China's development model with perceived economic gains but at the expense of negative environmental and governance costs (Custer et al., 2024; Horigoshi et al., 2023). This raises the question of whether respondents who say they received advice or assistance from China appear to have fundamentally different preferences with regard to safeguards than their peers who did not.

Based on the 2024 survey, we find that engagement with China as a development partner did not substantially alter respondents' preferences across most ESG safeguard types. There was one exception to this general rule. Respondents who had engaged with China showed a lower willingness to support projects with a high-cost governance safeguard (67 percent, compared to 84 percent among other respondents). Moreover,

this group penalized high-cost governance safeguards more sharply relative to low-cost ones than those without engagement with China.<sup>16</sup>

This pattern aligns with the perception that Chinese counterparts are less likely to impose more stringent governance measures on project partners.<sup>17</sup> The survey results suggest that leaders who have engaged with Chinese officials may be more inclined to seek alternative partners when faced with stringent government conditions. This cost sensitivity may also indicate a particular aversion to the specifics of the measure, as presented to respondents: regularly provide independently audited financial statements that comply with international standards, extending the length of the project.

Importantly, this divergence does not extend to the environmental and social sectors. In fact, respondents with prior engagement with China were more likely than others to favor projects with high-cost social or environmental safeguard measures.<sup>18</sup> As the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) increasingly emphasizes “clean, beautiful, and sustainable” development, this may indicate a shared area of interest across partners, whereas governance remains a distinct point of friction.<sup>19</sup>

Country demographics, such as income level, may also shape preferences. Attitudes toward governance-related safeguards were broadly similar across respondents from countries of varying income levels. That was not necessarily the case for other types of safeguards. Respondents from high-income countries were willing to accept costlier environmental and social safeguards (96 and 81 percent of respondents, respectively). Meanwhile, the appetite for more costly safeguards was noticeably less among low-income country peers. Only 69 percent of these respondents favored projects with higher-cost environmental conditions, and 61 percent said the same for projects with costlier social safeguards. Middle-income respondents were similar to their low-income peers in being cautious about high-cost social safeguards, with project favorability ranging from 63 to 70 percent.

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<sup>16</sup> The difference in the percentage of respondents who were likely to be in favor of a project with a low-cost governance measure versus a high-cost governance measure was +3 percentage points for respondents who did not engage with China and +20 percentage points for respondents who did engage with China

<sup>17</sup> In the pre-BRI and early BRI days, China had less stringent ESG safeguards than OECD-DAC donors. However, more recently China has been working on de-risking its infrastructure portfolio from ESG risks (Parks et al., 2023).

<sup>18</sup> These results are, however, within the confidence interval margins and therefore not statistically significant.

<sup>19</sup> For more, see: [https://en.chinadiplomacy.org.cn/2025-06/06/content\\_117913550.shtml](https://en.chinadiplomacy.org.cn/2025-06/06/content_117913550.shtml).

## Conclusion

Three waves of AidData's Listening to Leaders Survey results reveal consistent patterns in how Global South leaders prioritize among the Sustainable Development Goals across time, as well as the divergences between leaders, citizens, and funders. In 2024, the vast majority of respondents were aware of the SDGs and reported their governments had largely incorporated them into national planning and budgeting processes. Leaders and citizens consistently prioritized education and health. Yet, education has been chronically underfunded by donors relative to its high priority level. The salience of solving problems related to climate change and its impacts has grown over time, as leaders and citizens increasingly identify SDG13 as a priority, but donor financing has not kept pace with this change.

When it comes to safeguards to promote inclusion and equity in development projects, our survey experiment our 2024 survey experiment finds that including ESG measures affects leaders' favorability toward hypothetical projects in different ways, depending on the associated costs (e.g., low- or high-cost) and the focus of the safeguard (e.g., environmental, social, governance). Respondents generally viewed projects with high-cost safeguards less favorably, particularly when it came to environmental or social safeguards. However, they did not penalize high-cost governance safeguards in the same way. Respondents who engaged with China as a development partner were more likely to penalize high-cost governance safeguards, relative to those who did not engage with China. These findings underscore the complex trade-offs that leaders face in balancing sustainability goals with financial and operational realities.

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