UNOPS

The Imperative of Sustainable Development Implementation

The Imperative of Sustainable Development Implementation

Table of Contents

Introduction

Our world is facing an unprecedented period of transition, marked by major geopolitical and economic power shifts. The demographic and economic weight of historical powers is shifting and facing competition from emerging ones, and relations are increasingly confrontational and unilateralist. Competing visions and agendas for the global order are at play.

The COVID-19 pandemic, the economic shock that ensued, multiple climate-related disasters, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the escalation of conflicts in the Middle East and Africa have been accelerators of these new geopolitical and geoeconomic trends.

This is impacting development cooperation as we know it. Two of its pillars—policy and financing—both anchored in strong multilateral cooperation, are rapidly shifting.

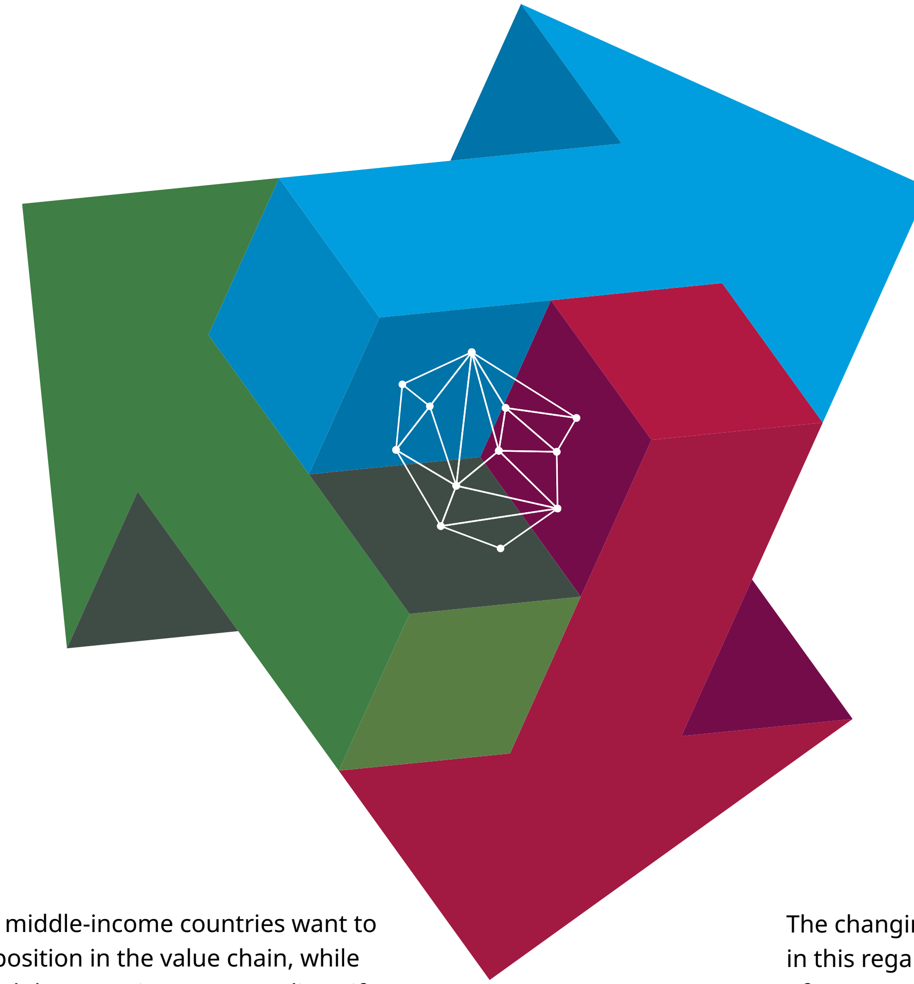
At present we see:

Fragmentation of global policy frameworks
Instead of universal policies and agendas, we are seeing more local, regional, or alliance-based policymaking. This shift makes it more and more challenging to pursue cohesive global development goals such as the 2030 Agenda and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) or climate action in alignment with the Paris Agreement.

Countries pursuing increased resilience and autonomy
We are no longer in the times of the Cold War and the binary choices it offered. There are often complementary, if not competing offers. In this multi-polar world, many countries strive to build their own geopolitical and economic resilience and autonomy, and this is reflected in the development choices and partnerships they undertake. A part of this trend links to a localisation of value chains. Many low- and middle-income countries want to improve their position in the value chain, while many traditional donor nations want to diversify their offer and dependencies.

More transactionalism
The overall trend is one of "win-wins". There is less of the 'traditional' donor-recipient view of development cooperation and more emphasis on an overall approach espousing a partnership of equals. Donors are less shy about requesting return on investment or influence, and recipients are often happy to espouse this approach if it diversifies their options. The growing resurgence of "aid for trade" is also illustrative of this trend.

Diversification of financing
The Addis Ababa Action Agenda had spelled out a wider framing for Financing for Development. However, the reality is that, for far too long, development cooperation has remained a synonym for Official Development Assistance (ODA).



Poor implementation can undermine even the best policies and adequate funding.

For our collective development agenda and multilateralism to succeed, sound, effective and impactful implementation is central.

The changing environment is accelerating a shift in this regard. While in post-colonial times, ODA often represented the bulk of external financing for developing countries, it is now dwarfed by other sources of finance such as Domestic Revenue Mobilisation, Remittances and Direct Investment. In 2022, public concessional finance (ODA) represented only 4.5% of available financing in developing countries, compared to Foreign Direct Investments (6.8%), remittances (9.8%) and government revenue (76.4%, after debt service).[1] Moreover, ODA has increasingly been given in the form of loans rather than grants over the past decade, which worsens the debt burden in many Global South countries still recovering financially from the COVID-19 pandemic.[2] At present, we see massive cuts in ODA from historical development powerhouses, with no guarantee of recovery.

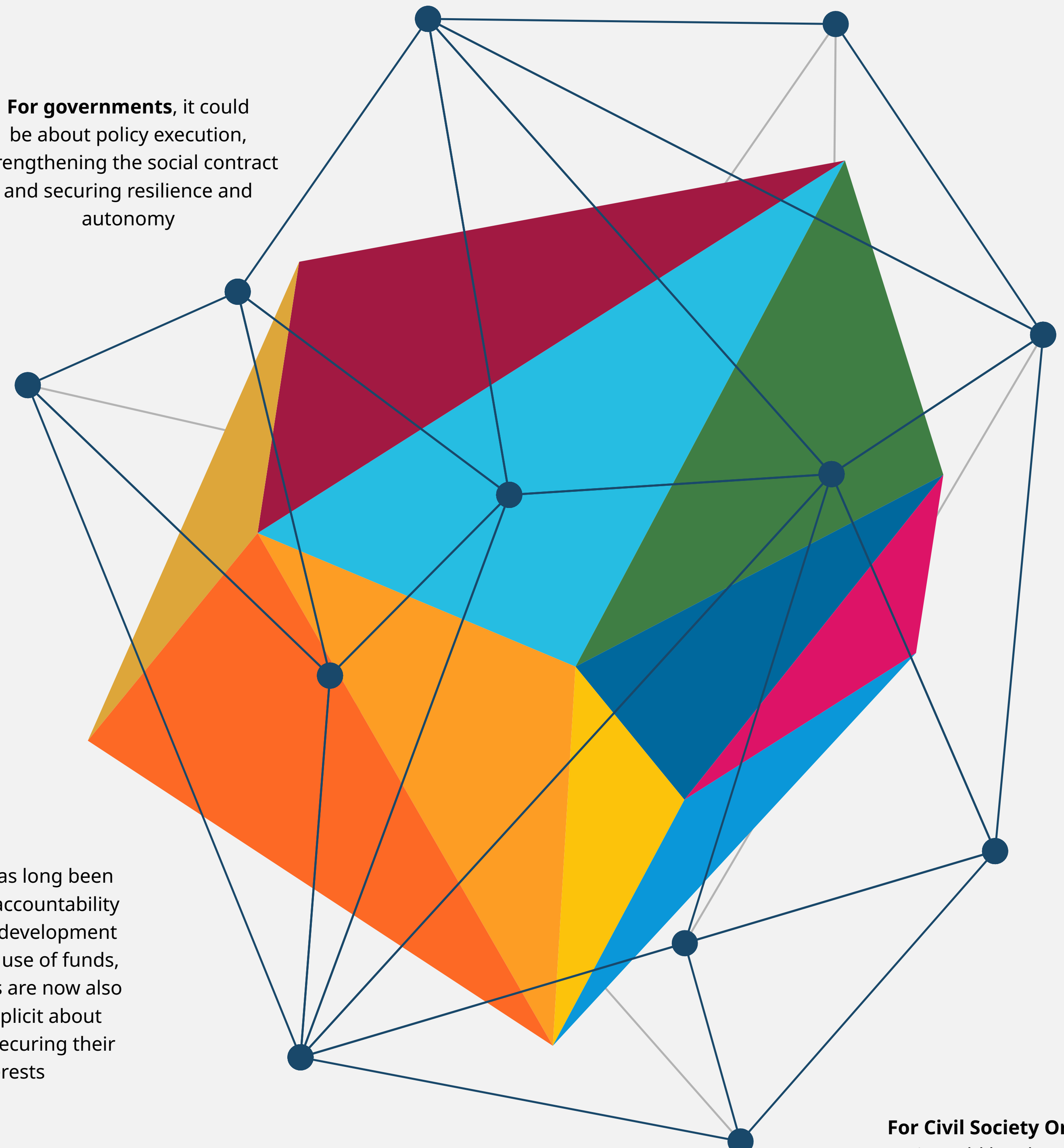
A third and crucial, yet often overlooked pillar of sustainable development cooperation is **implementation**. Implementation is where policy, intent and financing converge in practice. While policies provide guidance and financing enables action, effective implementation is essential for achieving tangible results. Poor implementation can undermine even the best policies and adequate funding. For our collective development agenda and multilateralism to succeed, sound, effective and impactful implementation is central.

While implementation is a multi-faceted concept which varies in meaning for different stakeholders and is influenced by current geopolitical shifts, it offers an opportunity to recalibrate development cooperation and offer practical solutions in these challenging times.

[1] OECD, Global Outlook on Financing for Sustainable Development, 2025.
[2] UNCTAD, Aid under pressure: 3 accelerating shifts in official development assistance, 2024.

Implementation has different meanings to different stakeholders

One of the complexities of implementation stems from the variations of understanding across different development cooperation stakeholders, based on their roles, priorities, and objectives.



For local people and communities, it's about real-world outcomes

For governments, it could be about policy execution, strengthening the social contract and securing resilience and autonomy

For philanthropic groups, it could be about delivering on specific thematic agendas, such as education or health

For the private sector, it could be about increasing efficiency and financial sustainability, delivering on social responsibilities, securing supply chains and increasing profit or new market shares

For donors, it has long been about ensuring accountability and impact and development outcomes of the use of funds, but governments are now also increasingly explicit about projecting and securing their own interests

For development finance institutions, it could be about ensuring efficient and impactful disbursements while balancing risk with return

For Civil Society Organizations, it could be about ensuring localisation, community engagement and responsiveness

Understanding these different perspectives in the current context is fundamental, as each stakeholder's approach to implementation influences the overall success and sustainability of an intervention.

Current paradigm shifts substantially affect the nature and drivers of implementation

Implementation is a complex endeavour—more than just a technical follow-up to policy. It is, in many ways, like conducting a symphony: while the score (the policy) may be written in idealistic tones, the performance depends on how well the orchestra (the system of stakeholders) plays together. Each instrument—from resource management and stakeholder coordination to monitoring, delegation, and adaptation—must be finely tuned and in sync. Yet, underlying tensions between players can throw the whole piece off rhythm.

Balancing competing interests, adjusting strategies mid-performance, and ensuring coherence across sections is what turns aspiration into tangible impact. When harmony is lacking, it affects the tempo, precision, and resonance of the entire intervention.

Moreover, effective implementation has long been shaped—and often constrained—by political realities. Factors such as sanctions, security exceptions, autocratic or weak governance, illicit financial flow listing or corruption can distort the "performance," introducing dissonance between policy intent and on-the-ground action. These dynamics not only hinder coordination but also fuel conflicting interpretations and objectives among stakeholders, making it even harder to align interests and sustain momentum toward shared development goals.

At present, just as policy and financing are impacted by the overall geopolitical and geoeconomic transition, so is implementation.

More than ever, there is impetus to act fast and on scale, yet often insufficient capacity to do so.

Development in homoeopathic doses, with thinly spread projects with limited impact and visibility becomes very difficult to justify. There is an aspiration for large transformational and multi-sectoral undertakings (illustrations of this approach include G7's PGII, China's Belt and Road Initiative or EU's Global Gateway, Italy's Piano Mattei). This in turn increases the complexity of projects and programmes, exposing limitations due to lack of multi-level cooperation frameworks, technical capacity, data and resources across international and national stakeholders to effectively design, deliver and maintain systemic approaches, especially for cross-cutting and transboundary issues.

Globally, about 99.5% of megaprojects run over budget, behind schedule, or fail to deliver expected benefits.[3] Weak laws, limited capacity, and complex regulatory environments often prevent otherwise sound projects from advancing, leading to large undisbursed MDB portfolios in vulnerable country groups. Even when projects proceed, inefficiencies and governance weaknesses undermine impact the IMF estimates show that over one-third of infrastructure spending is wasted—rising to 50% in low-income countries.[4]

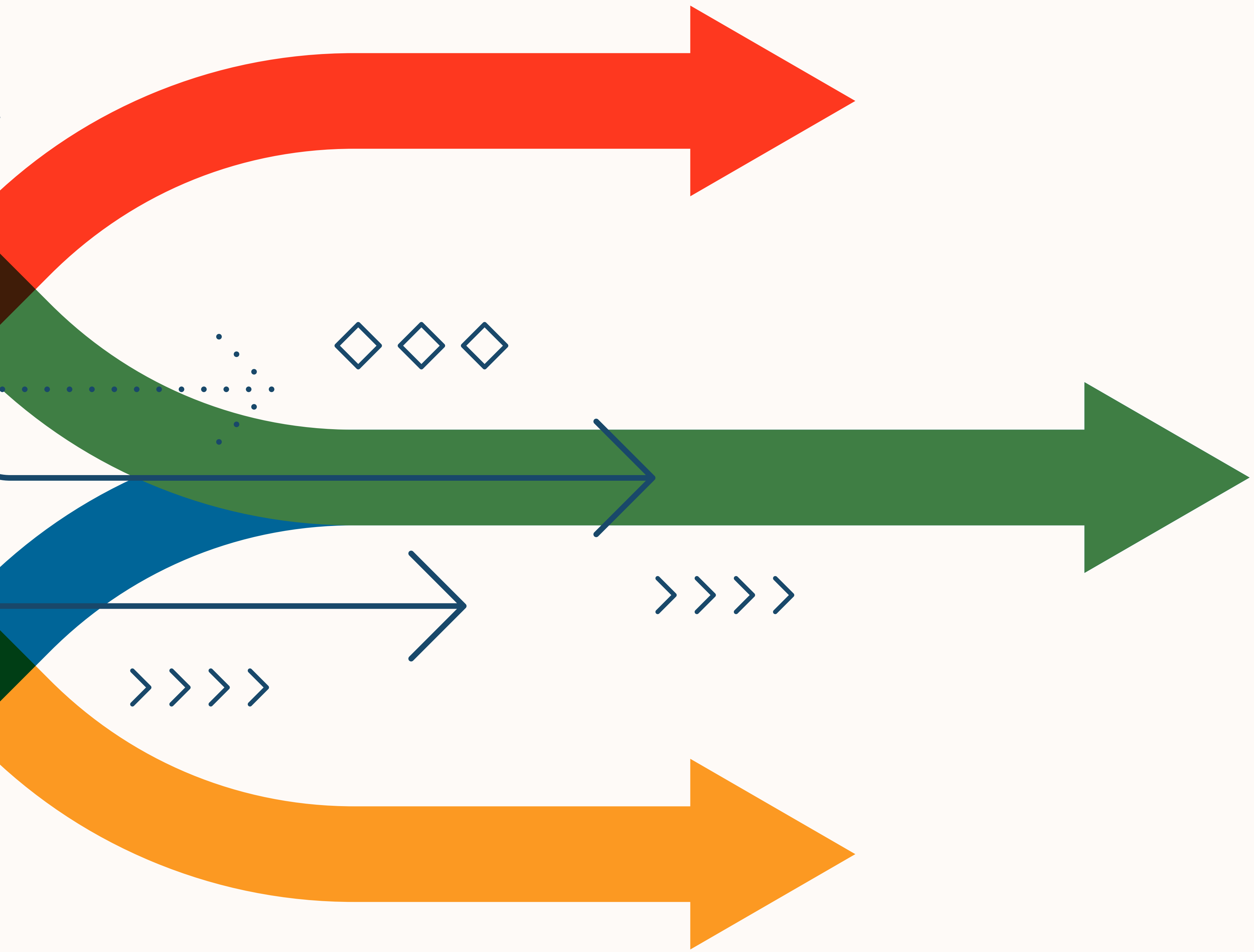
Stakeholder expectations and preconceptions affect the choice of the implementer.

It may not always be the best implementer that is chosen to undertake a task, as there is more and more tendency to favour specific - e.g. national - interests and champions, or to stick to working with known partners. There is also the tendency to select implementers proposing the lowest cost for delivering projects, without analyzing the technical capacity of the supplier or the whole life cycle cost of the proposed solutions. These factors may limit effectiveness, inflate long-term operational costs, undermine rights holders or exclude local voices.

For instance, we often see hiring international firms to deliver niche, potentially ill-fitting solutions, or channelling support through philanthropies and INGOs instead of local CSOs or state actors, which can be unsustainable over the long term. Over five years ago, for OECD DAC members, 52% of all untied contract awards were awarded to suppliers in the donor country, and only 11% of untied contract awards went to suppliers in Least Developed Countries (LDCs) and Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPCs)[5]. Nothing suggests this trend is reversing. Moreover, the lack of formal performance management systems and key performance indicators in many countries can limit the effectiveness of public procurement decisions, which discourages donors from using them to implement development cooperation projects[6].

At present, just as policy and financing are impacted by the overall geopolitical and geoeconomic transition, so is implementation.

[3] Flyvbjerg and Gardner, How Big Things Get Done: The Surprising Factors That Determine the Fate of Every Project, from Home Renovations to Space Exploration and Everything In Between, 2023
[4] IMF, Well Spent - How Strong Infrastructure Governance Can End Waste in Public Investment, 2020
[5] Eurodad, Strings still attached: Unmet commitments on tied aid, 2021



There is less tolerance for high transactional costs across the implementation value chain, yet a tendency to pass on risk and accountability down the line.

A system where implementation is cascaded through a long chain of financial transactions is not sustainable in a tightening fiscal environment and reduces the financial benefit directly experienced by people and communities. There is a request for shortening the financial transaction chain—which at present often sees intermediaries passing funds from donors to UN agencies or global funds, to a variety of implementing partners—with a clearer view of what value each layer is adding along the way. This needs to be balanced with managing risk and accountability, while still supporting localization and the participation of local communities.

Impacts are poorly planned, expected to be fast, visible and tangible, but the definition of success varies.

A key challenge in development implementation is the use of performance metrics. While donors, agencies, and governments focus on quantifiable outputs like schools built or people trained, local communities may define success in terms of broader outcomes—such as whether children can afford to attend school or if training leads to better economic opportunities. This disconnect can create friction, with communities feeling that projects prioritize external criteria over their real needs, potentially leading to mistrust and resistance.

There is insufficient focus on sustainability and long-term asset management.

Politics or financial cycles often incentivise delivery of new visible outputs rather than maintenance of existing ones. This increases vulnerability to shocks and dependency, particularly due to predatory behaviours, such as requiring collateral for loans or project development. By prioritising new infrastructure over resilience and preventative maintenance, existing assets degrade and eventually require costly replacements. This "build, neglect and rebuild" cycle has increased debt in developing countries, with estimates suggesting it costs countries up to 2% of annual GDP growth[7].

There is less tolerance for competition among implementers, but competing policy agendas make coordination and reform difficult.

Criticising the UN and the wider multilateral system has become something of a sport—and with its many silos, mandates and actors, the contradictions of multilateral implementers are easy targets. The UN development system reform and the establishment of empowered Resident Coordinators has been a very positive and widely appreciated development but that has not yet fully translated into a unified and efficient system. The expectations and pressure is out there given the current financial situation. Much hope is now placed in the UN80 process[8]—yet the UN, like the broader multilateral system, is only as effective as the sum of its parts. Meaningful change will require collective courage and consensus—both of which remain elusive in today's geopolitical climate.

These emerging and accelerating trends are both compounding existing bottlenecks and opening new opportunities. Some intensify the operational and technical challenges to delivering development efficiently and at speed, while others call for a fundamental rethinking of how the system operates.

[6] OECD, Public procurement evaluation, accessed 24 Apr 2025
[7] United Nations, "Managing Infrastructure Assets for Sustainable Development: A handbook for local and national governments" New York, 2021, p. 33.
[8] C.f. United Nations, Shifting Paradigms: United to Deliver, Report of the Secretary General

Robust implementation can be a pathway to bridge current variety of aspirations

Implementation plays a pivotal role not only in turning policy goals into tangible results but also in bridging divides between competing priorities and agendas. In today's fragmented global landscape, where tensions and institutional silos often hinder progress, implementation offers a unique and practical space for collaboration. It is through the act of delivering—managing resources, coordinating stakeholders, and adapting to real-world constraints—that trust is built, synergies are created, and common ground is found. Effective implementation is more than a technical necessity; it is a strategic tool to unite diverse actors around shared outcomes, reduce fragmentation, and transform collective ambition into meaningful, lasting change.

Effective implementation can help restore trust in the effectiveness of the multilateral system to deliver global public goods.

Despite competition, there are global challenges that no single country can solve on their own, such as climate change, and global goods that benefit everyone. Effective and efficient implementation is a concrete way to demonstrate reform—including making good on aspects of UN80 and the Pact of the Future—and thus reduce some of the anxieties that are driving polarization and protectionism.

Implementation can help forge the "beyond ODA" partnership that the development sector needs.

Strong implementation creates certainty and de-risks both public investments, including those generated through domestic revenue mobilisation, and private capital by ensuring projects are well-planned, transparent, and effectively managed. It reduces risks, builds public and investor confidence, and turns uncertainties into bankable opportunities that support sustainable, inclusive growth. The capital is out there.

Global financial assets are around 461 trillion, but only 21% is held in developing countries despite being home to 82% of the global population[9]. The emerging and frontier markets of many developing countries offer vast investment opportunities and capital needs, but risks hinder progress. Addressing the intermediation issue and strengthening underdeveloped investment ecosystems in these markets (including building capacity for sustainable public procurement and transparent governance, as well as project preparation support) can mobilize capital for sustainable development, particularly in green finance and energy transition. This helps build trust and bridge policy and politics, empowering public authorities and private actors to advance sustainable development.

Implementation plays a pivotal role not only in turning policy goals into tangible results but also in bridging divides between competing priorities and agendas.

Effective implementation is more than a technical necessity; it is a strategic tool to unite diverse actors around shared outcomes, reduce fragmentation, and transform collective ambition into meaningful, lasting change.

Implementation can help build long-term partnerships.

Effective implementation often results in the creation of long-lasting partnerships that extend beyond the immediate scope of the project. By building local capacity, such as training workers, supporting local institutions and strengthening local governance structures, development cooperation can help to establish sustainable systems that empower communities to manage their own development. When the development process is seen as a partnership rather than a one-time intervention, it fosters trust and lays the groundwork for continued cooperation in the future. Over time, these partnerships can reduce competition and division, replacing them with shared goals and mutual support.

Sustainable, resilient and inclusive implementation in spheres of common interest can unlock collective impact.

There are a number of areas—such as infrastructure, food systems or climate action—where multiple interests converge: influence for governments, markets for businesses, bankable projects for development finance institutions, resilience, opportunities and essential goods for people. They also hold potential to address multiple challenges simultaneously, from expanding renewable energy and improving energy efficiency, to reducing air pollution, enhancing agricultural productivity through climate-smart practices[10], and advancing access to education[11].

For instance, well-designed, inclusive infrastructure helps governments deliver essential services, drives economic growth, and strengthens resilience—all while supporting up to 92% of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) targets[12]. Scaling such integrated solutions is therefore essential to achieving high-impact and cascading results across sectors. Moreover, when interests align, even loosely, they create space for cooperation despite broader competition. Healthy competition—i.e. transparent, responsive to local needs and governed by fair rules—can raise standards, speed up delivery, and drive innovation.

[9] OECD, Global Outlook on Financing for Sustainable Development, 2025.

[10] World Bank, Poverty, Prosperity, and Planet Report 2024: Pathways Out of the Polycrisis, 2024.

[11] Sachs, J.D., Lafortune, G., Fuller, G., The SDGs and the UN Summit of the Future. Sustainable Development Report 2024, 2024.

[12] UNOPS, Infrastructure: Underpinning Sustainable Development, 2018.

Some practical steps for the way forward

Building on the critical role of implementation as a pathway to bridging divides and fostering long-term partnerships, it is essential to take concrete and coordinated actions that consider both technical and political realities. To fully leverage the potential of implementation, particularly in the context of sustainable development, the following steps can guide us towards meaningful progress.

Continuing to strengthen technical capacities.

More and more effective development depends on robust technical capacity to design and manage projects that are both feasible and impactful. Capacity building and technical assistance are key to preparing projects that meet the needs of both donors, IFIs, and recipients. Improving technical standards, procurement processes, and data collection will enhance project outcomes, reduce inefficiencies, and ensure transparency. Furthermore, prioritizing the maintenance and long-term management of existing systems over new, politically-driven projects can reduce costs and mitigate wasteful spending, ensuring sustainable outcomes.

Supporting flexible programmatic approaches to ensure impact.

Investing in programmatic approaches—strategies that group related projects into broader, coordinated initiatives—can reduce transaction costs and minimize the risks associated with fragmented efforts. Unlike isolated, one-off projects, programmatic approaches focus on addressing interconnected challenges through long-term, integrated plans. This method offers greater flexibility in allocating resources, allowing funds to be adjusted quickly to meet urgent needs, rather than being tied to rigid, single-project models. By streamlining initiatives into cohesive programs, this approach enables more efficient use of resources, fosters better coordination, and ensures a more agile, responsive framework for tackling complex development issues.

Ensuring increased local agency and political economy incorporation.

Genuine participation does more than check a box—it strengthens local agency, brings in grounded knowledge, and makes solutions more durable. When communities are meaningfully involved, interventions better reflect real needs, avoid harm, and build trust. But participation is shaped by political and economic power dynamics that often sideline those most affected. Closing these gaps means more than consultation—it requires shifting decision-making closer to the ground and embedding accountability to protect local priorities. Done right, it can rebalance influence, support just transitions, and build the ownership sustainable change needs.

Bringing demand and supply closer together.

The way we produce and consume is out of sync. Long, unsustainable supply chains drive pollution, exploit workers. To fix this, we need to bring production and consumption closer together—both geographically and economically—and build more circular, locally rooted economies. Take clean energy, for example. Scaling it up isn't just about installing solar panels or wind farms. It also means training local workers, helping small businesses join the supply chain, and building public demand for cleaner technologies. When supply and demand are developed in tandem, it strengthens local economies, reduces environmental harm, and makes transitions more inclusive and resilient.

Cutting waste, boosting impact.

With tighter budgets and rising needs, development can't afford business as usual. Too much is lost to duplication, delays, and siloed systems—especially in large setups like the UN. What's needed is less fragmentation, more coordination: pooling resources, aligning delivery, and using what we already have more effectively. This isn't just about efficiency—it's about getting real results where they're needed most. In a high-stakes world, making the system work better together is no longer a choice—it's a necessity.

In a world where consensus is rare and competition is rising, effective implementation may be one of the few remaining bridges between diverging priorities and fragmented systems. It is not just the delivery arm of development—it is where political intent meets public expectation, where global ambition is tested by local realities.

For development cooperation to stay relevant and credible in today's geopolitical landscape, implementation must be seen as a political, economic, and strategic endeavour in its own right—not a technocratic afterthought. Getting it right means aligning incentives, confronting trade-offs, and enabling smarter partnerships and shared ownership.

It is in the doing—not just the promising—that development regains momentum. Now is the time to put implementation back at the centre—not only to enable progress, but to make it last.

UNOPS role in bridging the implementation gap

As it celebrates its 30th anniversary, UNOPS remains the only UN organization fully dedicated to implementation.

With a triple mandate spanning across humanitarian, development, and peace, its unique expertise in expanding implementation capacity positions it as a critical player in addressing the implementation gap for sustainable development.

UNOPS bridges this gap through a comprehensive range of services:

Strengthening National Capacity for Sustainable Implementation.

UNOPS helps countries build the capacity to implement projects effectively and sustainably, providing technical advisory services, capacity assessments, and training to improve systems for project management, sustainable procurement, and infrastructure delivery. This includes establishing Project Management Offices (PMOs), reforming procurement processes, and enhancing national systems for planning and managing sustainable infrastructure.

Examples of UNOPS contributions are particularly visible in the Asia and the Pacific region.

Photo: © UNOPS/John Rae

End-to-End Technical Services for Integrated Solutions.

UNOPS ensures project success across the entire lifecycle, from planning and preparation to making solutions finance-ready. It also supports asset management planning to ensure long-term project value. When projects face setbacks, UNOPS diagnoses issues and realigns goals to ensure successful outcomes. With extensive experience operating in some of the world's most challenging environments, 66% of its delivery occurs in Fragile, Conflict, and Violence (FCV) contexts, demonstrating its capacity to navigate complexity, mitigate risks, and maintain impact where others cannot.

Examples of UNOPS contributions are particularly visible in the Latin American and the Caribbean region and the Middle East region.

Photo: © UNOPS/John Rae
Photo: © UNOPS

Promoting Sustainable Implementation for Long-Term Impact.

UNOPS fosters sustainable development by promoting the inclusion of women-owned, youth-owned, and disability-inclusive businesses in procurement. It also creates decent work opportunities through cash-for-work programs and inclusive recruitment while promoting low-carbon operations, circular waste management, and community participation in infrastructure design and maintenance.

Examples of UNOPS contributions are particularly visible in the Africa region and the Europe and Central Asia region.

Photo: © UNOPS/Elise Laker
Photo: © UNOPS/Eleanor Church

Providing Common Services to Enhance Development Cooperation.

UNOPS offers essential services such as human resources, grant management, and financial support to development partners. By managing multi-donor funds, UNOPS enables flexible, responsive programming. It also helps NGOs and local actors localize sustainable development and climate action, and in emergencies, rapidly deploys personnel to support life-saving and peacekeeping efforts.

Examples of UNOPS contributions are particularly visible as part of our Global Portfolios.

Photo: © UNOPS/UNMAS Syria programme

PRACTICAL SOLUTIONS

Follow us on social media