

World leaders will gather in New York later this month for the United Nations General Assembly where they will reflect on the Sustainable Development Goals or SDGs as they are commonly known. They will face an unsettling truth: according to the 2024 Sustainable Development Goals Report, only 17% of SDGs are on track, with 48% showing minimal or moderate progress. The setbacks are largely attributed to a range of factors including the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, climate crises, and rising geopolitical tensions. Developing countries will argue that we are in this grave situation because of lack of financial commitment from the developed world and an international financial system that does not act in their best interest.

For the 45 Least Developed Countries (LDCs) or the world's poorest and most vulnerable countries, the situation is even more dire. Economic growth in these countries lags behind that of developed nations, and other developing countries. Shocks including those caused by the coronavirus pandemic and the ongoing climate emergency have reversed years of progress including the reduction of income inequality. Slow and oftentimes negative growth poses a significant threat to their ability to achieve the SDGs and decrease the increasing wealth gap between the poorest and most vulnerable countries on the planet and the rest of the world.

The challenges for LDCs extend beyond economic growth. In education, despite rising global literacy rates, UNESCO reports that in LDCs only around 60% of children complete primary education. In healthcare, maternal mortality rates remain at 430 deaths per 100,000 live births in low-income countries, a significant contrast to the 13 deaths per 100,000 live births in high-income nations. Additionally, in agriculture, a key focus of SDG 2 (Zero Hunger), LDCs score only 2.6 in achieving sustainable agriculture, compared to 4.1 in Europe and Northern America.

Despite these major hurdles, there is clear one bright spot. This has to do with the role that science, technology and innovation can continue to play in helping LDCs and developing countries across the world in accelerating their development. This is why, for the first time, the international community will be celebrating the 16th September 2024 as the inaugural *International Day of Science, Technology, and Innovation (STI) for the South*. This day highlights the vital role of STI in driving development and closing the SDG gaps, especially for LDCs.

Several promising examples of STI in LDCs show how technology can uplift communities. In Rwanda, drone technology has revolutionized the healthcare sector, delivering over 20,000 emergency medical supplies to remote areas. In Bangladesh, mobile banking has transformed financial inclusion, with over 70 million people using digital services. In Kenya, mobile health services have improved maternal and child health outcomes. These examples demonstrate the potential of STI to drive development in the world's poorest and most vulnerable countries. Consequently, a Global Fund for Science, Technology and Innovation is urgently needed for the world's poorest and most vulnerable countries. Let us give life and meaning to the *International Day for Science, Technology and Innovation for the*

Deodat Maharaj is the Managing Director of the United Nations Technology Bank for the Least Developed Countries and can be contacted at: deodat.maharaj@un.org