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The Palgrave Handbook of Global Sustainability

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Clearly structured around the three “E’s” of sustainability: environment, equity and economics.

Interdisciplinary approach that captures the experiences and practices required to understand sustainability.

A timely reference for those seeking up-to-date research in the field.

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About this book

The field of sustainability continues to evolve as a discipline. The world is facing multiple sustainability challenges such as climate change, water depletion, ecosystem loss, and environmental racism. The Handbook of Sustainability will provide a comprehensive reference for the field that examines in depth the major themes within what are known as the three E's of sustainability: environment, equity, and economics. These three themes will serve as the main organizing body of the work. In addition, the work will include sections on history and sustainability, major figures in the development of sustainability as a discipline, and important organizations that contributed or that continue to contribute to sustainability as a field. The work is explicitly global in scope as it considers the very different issues associated with sustainability in the global north and south

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Keywords

sustainability

environmental sustainability

sustainable development **ecosystem loss**

social equity **sustainability education**

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About the editor

Robert Brinkmann is the Dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at Northern Illinois University. He is also a Professor of Earth, Atmosphere, and Environment. He was born in 1961 in rural Wisconsin and was greatly influenced by his experiences growing up in a quaint, small-town environment. As a child he spent many hours in nature hiking, fishing, and canoeing, especially in the wilderness of northern Wisconsin. In 1979, he entered the Geology program at the University of Wisconsin at Oshkosh. There, he earned a Bachelor of Science with a focus on lithology, mineralogy, and field geology. During this period, he travelled throughout North America and participated in a

geology field school in the Yukon. His first publication, on the formation of the Berlin Rhyolite, was published in 1982.

After graduation, Brinkmann attended the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee where he earned an MS in Geology in 1986 and a Ph.D. in Geography in 1989. During this period, he worked in diamond exploration, ice crystallography, and soil chemistry. It was while conducting fieldwork in diamond exploration that Brinkmann began to be influenced by sustainability issues. He found the surface of the world so altered, that it was difficult to obtain undisturbed samples for detailed analysis. He started to take courses with the late Forest Stearns, one of the first ecologists to call for research on urban ecosystems, and the late Robert Eidt, a soil scientist noted for his definition and interpretation of anthrosols, or humanly modified soils. Brinkmann began to study a number of topics including heavy metal geochemistry of garden soils in cities, pre-Islamic agricultural soils in the Arabian Peninsula, and soil and sediment erosion in mountainous regions. Brinkmann also took courses with cave and karst expert, Michael J. Day and noted archaeologist, Lynne Goldstein.

In 1990, Brinkmann became an Assistant Professor at the University of South Florida where he continued his research on urban sustainability, particularly as associated with soil and sediment pollution in urban and suburban areas. He became a Full Professor in 2000 and the first Chair of USF's Department of Environmental Science and Policy. He also served as Chair of the Department of Geography and as Interim Associate Dean for Faculty Development in the 2000's. He arrived at Hofstra University in 2011 to start a new Sustainability Studies Program and eventually became Vice Provost for Research and Dean of Graduate Studies.

Over the years, he designed a number of courses, including classes on sustainability management,

wetlands, and community-based sustainability. He has been involved in a number of projects over the last several years including analysis of sustainability efforts in post-hurricane Long Island, evaluation of international sustainability planning with the United Nations, and research on sustainability in sports.

He also served two terms as Chair of the Board of the National Cave and Karst Research Institute and has served as the Co-Editor of the *Southeastern Geographer* and Associate Editor for the *Journal of Cave and Karst Studies*. He has served as an elected officer with a number of national, regional, and local organizations. Brinkmann is also active with human rights issues and sat on the Tampa/Hillsborough Human Rights Task Force that seeks to protect the human rights of all citizens in the Tampa region.

Brinkmann is the author of many articles and books including several on sustainability, the only book on the science, policy, and management of urban street sweeping (with Graham Tobin), and the definitive book on sinkholes in Florida. His most recent book, *Practical Sustainability: A Guide to a More Sustainable Life*, was published in 2022. He has appeared in a variety of media outlets including CBS News and CNN. His blog, *On the Brink* (www.bobbrinkmann.blogspot) is one of the most popular sustainability blogs on the internet.

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Bibliographic Information

Book Title	Editors	DOI
The Palgrave Handbook of Global Sustainability	Robert Brinkmann	https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-38948-2
Publisher	eBook	Number of

	Packages	Pages
Palgrave Macmillan Cham	Springer Reference Earth & Environm. Science, Reference Module Physical and Materials Science	X, 1490

**Number of
Illustrations**

30 b/w
illustrations, 30
illustrations in
colour

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Defining the Social Equity Issues in Sustainability

Florianna Lendai Michael and Shanti Faridah Salleh

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Abstract

Social equity concerns are complicated because of political and economic realities and the number of variables the lens can embrace. This book chapter discussed on the definition of social equity, issues related to social equity, key challenges in defining social equity in sustainability, and the way forward. There are five issues highlighted which are socioeconomic status, education, public transportation, health care, and environmental threat. Some of the key challenges in defining social equity in sustainability are financial challenges, uneven progress of SDG targets, preexisting socioeconomic inequalities, and equitability of natural resources.

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Keywords

Social equity · Sustainable development: SDG · Sustainability

1 Introduction

“Sustainability” is often an overused but poorly defined concept that allows anyone to see in it what they want. Over the decades, what is meant by “sustainability” has shifted from nondepletion of natural resources, and possibly protection of functioning ecosystems, to a more holistic understanding that incorporates economic stability and, in some cases, a stable social infrastructure that protects human health and well-being (Rogers 2014). Social equity is not an explicit constitutional value, but rather a term that implies a calculation of fairness, right, and justice (Nalbandian 1989). Social equity concerns are complicated because of political and economic realities and the number of variables the lens can embrace. The construct of social equity provides a robust framework for tackling domestic, international, and global issues.

The terms “equity” and “equality” are often used interchangeably, and they do have similar meanings to a large extent. The difference is one of nuance: while equality can be converted into a mathematical measure in which equal parts are identical in size or number, equity is a more flexible measurement allowing for equivalency while not demanding exact sameness (McCandless and Ronquillo 2019). Equality is a quantitative standard, determined by the level of similarity in these metrics. Equity, on the other hand, is a qualitative ethical concept that refers to the level of fairness in the outcomes for different individuals or groups. Social sustainability refers to the ability of societies to meet human physical, social, and emotional needs on an ongoing basis. Equality and equity are integral to social sustainability (Rogers 2014).

Democracy is demonstrated by justice and fairness in the provision of public services, which reflects social equity. Social equality has been defined in terms of distributive fairness and procedural due process. The problem is that determining what constitutes an equitable allocation of resources is challenging because there are oftentimes conflicting signs to consider (Lucy and Mladenka 1977; Wooldridge 1993). There are vast connections and interconnections among all equity issues. Where the quality of peoples’ lives is affected, ethical decision-making models that incorporate a global perspective with an emphasis on human rights theory are called for (Alvez and Timney 2008).

Nationwide has begun to fully appreciate what social equity means in a globalized environment. This has led us from the travails of groups to attend to global human rights initiatives, and the call for social equity for all peoples has been increasing in numbers locally. Central to the field, social equity is several things: It is a habit of mind for the decision-maker, and it is an administrative goal that can be measured. It is also a lens through which needs are identified and processes are grounded.

2 Social Equity Issues

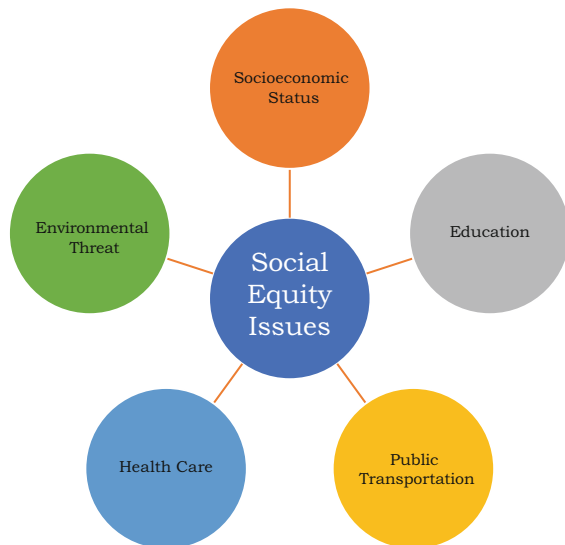
There are several issues highlighted concerning social equity which are covered in the following section: socioeconomic status, education, public transportation, health care, and environmental health (Fig. 1). The issues are not standalone issues; they are rather interconnected to one another leading to raising concerns on social equity issues.

2.1 Socioeconomic Status

Socioeconomic status is defined as the relational position in an economic-social-cultural hierarchy (Diemer et al. 2013). This definition originates in sociology and is based on the concept of social stratification, which ranks individuals or groups (including families) hierarchically according to their access to income (economic aspects), power (control over others), and prestige (honor and status given to a social position). This basic tripartite definition is equally used in research in different disciplines and across countries with different income contexts. However, the operationalization of what constitutes SES and how it should be assessed is by no means universal (Diemer et al. 2013; Oakes and Rossi 2003).

Poor social networks and low social support are more frequent among socioeconomically disadvantaged people (Weyers et al. 2008). This is also supported by Andreß, Lipsmeier, and Salentin (1995) who previously found that in low-income groups there are lower numbers of contacts with friends and less satisfaction with social support. Socioeconomic inequality is now understood to be integrally linked

Fig. 1 Social equity components



to environmental degradation, climate change, and the blocking of pathways to sustainability.

Socioeconomic inequality is a major factor in large family size and thus population growth. The inequality of women where there is a form of disempowerment including lack of access to education, jobs, political voice, birth control, and other health services, as well as lack of empowerment in personal relationships, is one of the reasons behind repeated pregnancies, even when the woman would prefer not to have more children (Arshad 2012). It goes without saying that high population density is one factor that contributes to environmental degradation, although it is certainly only a part of the equation – the other being the much higher levels of consumption by the rich.

2.2 Education

Equity in education is necessary for economic mobility. Without it, the economy will suffer from an achievement gap between groups in society. Because some students are not prepared to achieve their working potential, it creates income inequality, which, in turn, forms a wealth gap. Education is a prerequisite for upholding democratic societies (Koucký et al. 2010), and higher education is associated with higher living standards, being a key factor in the economic growth of societies (Blaug 1987). Equity of access to higher education has progressively become an increasingly prominent concern of education policies of governments and of international organizations.

The OECD argued that “equity in tertiary education is affected by inequities in preceding levels of education” (OECD 2008, p. 13). Much of the unequal access to tertiary education is the result of the inability to achieve the necessary qualifications due to inequities in the preceding levels of education, for example, the choice of secondary school or the choice of a vocational school will strongly influence access to higher education (Koucký et al. 2010) and, in general, education systems have not been successful in breaking this link (OECD 2008, p. 17).

The socioeconomic background of parents has been considered one of the strongest predictors of students’ academic achievement and attainment. Many research studies on academic achievement have focused on the mechanisms through which differences between families lead to differences in students’ academic success. Income, parental educational attainment, family structure, school quality, or choices are examples of some of these mechanisms. And Reardon concluded, “the achievement gap between children from high- and low-income families has grown substantially in recent decades. The income achievement gap is now considerably larger than the black-white gap, a reversal of the pattern fifty years ago” (Reardon et al. 2011).

2.3 Public Transportation

Social issues form an important part of the transport policy challenges in both the developed and developing world, and yet the social impacts and distributional effects of the transport system and transport decision-making have been far less well researched and addressed than the associated economic or environmental consideration (Lucas 2012). In the case of public transportation, rapid transit transports people from one neighborhood to another for work, school, play, and arts. The lack of transportation ensures that the disadvantaged have little access to distant suburbs, thus circumscribing their opportunities for jobs and exposure to other communities.

Low levels of “network capital” and transport resources can lead to low social capital and the exacerbation of existing social inequalities, the way the transport system connects people to each other and allows them to extend and/or maintain their social networks and that these network formations and reformations are essential to relations of power and place. The greater a person’s informal networks, the more opportunity they have to create, circulate, and share tacit knowledge, so developing and building new social capital. In this context, the ability to connect with people both physically and virtually becomes significant to the operation of power. By implication, people who are denied such connectivity through the absence of transport and/or information technology are denied the opportunity to network and so are unable to access new capital (Urry 2012).

The lack of focus on public transportation does affect the opportunities for the less advantaged community to travel to seek better employment. There are losses of job opportunities simply because the candidate does not own a vehicle; this is deemed as a hassle for the employers particularly if the job requires mobility.

2.4 Health Care

It is a universal debate on the disagreement of which citizens should have accessibility to healthcare, regardless of their income status. The real question is does the accessibility to healthcare solely depend on who has the ability to pay, or whether everyone should have access to healthcare. Back in 1987, Mott warned that the adequacy of health programs for the medically indigent and underinsured was increasingly in question. Some of the frequent complaints received are piecemeal services, long waits, outrageous costs, and incomprehensible regulations. Specifically in Asia, what was mentioned can be seen in any public healthcare.

Over the years, the problems of access to care have multiplied, and the political culture is tied in knots, unwilling to treat health care as a public good but equally unwilling to treat it as purely a for-profit service to those who can afford it. Again, the social equity lens allows the policymakers to discuss issues in terms of how access can be ensured in a fair and just manner. At the individual level, social capital can counteract the negative effects of stress or improve one’s ability to cope with stress by enhancing emotional or financial support (Wilkinson and Marmot 2003). A

healthier way of coping with stress may mean people are less likely to smoke, consume alcohol, or indulge in comfort eating as coping mechanisms (Halpern 2005).

Societies with a higher level of social equality seem to enjoy higher stocks of social capital and have better health outcomes, together with a lower incidence of social problems such as violence, drug abuse, school dropouts, and teenage pregnancies (Wilkinson and Pickett 2010).

Social capital creates solidarity, stimulating the government to opt for fairer policies aimed at reducing health and social inequalities (Kawachi et al. 1997). Simultaneously, it might enhance the capacity of the socially privileged to further bolster their position. Both Bourdieu and Coleman argue that social capital not only might improve health but may also exacerbate inequalities. Not everyone has access to the same sources of social capital, and not everyone will benefit in the same way.

2.5 Environmental Threats

Poor communities generally do not have the resources to adapt to environmental degradation and climate change. While rich communities can pay to access alternate natural resources, reengineer infrastructures, and invest in new subsistence and economic activities, poor communities do not have the same capability. Hence, they suffer the consequences of environmental degradation more directly and severely.

Ever larger problems of overpopulation, resource overuse, and climate change are already present (Delattre 1972; Mandeville and Kennedy 1993). Tomorrow's social equity issues present a challenge unlike those of the past decades because of their interconnected, global nature. Climate change, for example, is a concern that overrides political boundaries and demonstrates the intersection with intergenerational justice. Social equity issues focus on a carbon space for future generations and an environment that does not cause the poor to bear the brunt of the problems. Cap and trade schemes, carbon emissions taxes, and personal ecological space quotas are all means of climate change mitigation, yet they may not lead to intergenerational justice, and they may not even ensure a clean environment for future generations (Adve and Engineer 2010; Schuppert 2011).

There are a variety of environmental issues that benefit from the benefit equity lens. For instance, Bell (2011) argued that climate change violates human rights, specifically those related to life, physical security, health, and subsistence. Framing the solution as one of social equity, it was argued that there must be protection for current and future persons' basic rights from the effects of human-climate change. More immediately, future generations inherit the fiscal and environmental problems created by the current generation.

3 Key Challenges of Defining the Social Equity Issues in Sustainability

The best method for sorting out our obligations to present and future generations rests in treating sustainability as a concept that has primarily to do with equity across generations. Social equity dimension of sustainability refers to how burdens and benefits of different policy actions are distributed in a community. The more evenly they are distributed, the more equitable the community is, and this even distribution is reflected in the economic, ecologic, and social outcomes. Social equity issues related to sustainability are no longer limited to discussions about disadvantaged communities or poverty alleviation but increasingly have become mainstream topics. This chapter addresses the issues and challenges that arise when addressing social equity in the context of sustainable development. The aim is to provide an understanding of how both developed and developing countries have successfully implemented initiative designed to increase participation, reduce inequities, improve human well-being, and contribute to environmental sustainability.

The key issues incorporating social equity and sustainability are highlighted as follows.

3.1 Financial Challenges Related to Underfinancing of Sustainable Development

According to the IMF's World Economic Outlook, low-income countries (LICs) constitute 8.4% of the world's population, but currently account for less than 1% of the world's investment spending (2019). Lower-middle-income countries (LMICs) constitute 42.9% of the world's population but account for only 15% of investment spending. High-income countries (HICs), by contrast, account for 15.8% of the world's population yet account for about half of the world's investment spending. Some countries have not been able to find the capital needed for investments in education, health care, and infrastructure.

3.2 Uneven Progress of Achieving SDG Targets

The uneven progress of SDG2030 goals achievements among countries in the world as reported in the Sustainable Development Report 2022: from Crisis to Sustainable Development: the SDGs as Roadmap to 2030 and Beyond. There are two important key takeaways from the report; the progress based on different income level and disruption by pandemic and war.

3.2.1 Different Income Level

Overall, high-income countries (HICs) and OECD countries are closer to achieving the targets than other country groups, yet none are on track to achieve all 17 SDGs. These countries perform better on goals related to socioeconomic outcomes and

basic access to infrastructure and services, including SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-Being), SDG 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation), and SDG 7 (Affordable and Clean Energy).

Overall, poorer countries – low-income countries (LICs) and lower-middle-income countries (LMICs), including many countries in sub-Saharan Africa – as well as Small Island Developing States (SIDS) tend to face the largest SDG gaps. This is largely driven by a lack of the physical, digital, and human infrastructure (schools, hospitals) needed to achieve the socioeconomic goals (SDGs 1–9) and manage key environmental challenges.

3.2.2 Disruption by Pandemic and War

Ongoing conflicts in some countries have led to poor and worsening performance on most SDGs for several years, and the pandemic halted years of progress toward eradicating extreme poverty. The war in Ukraine threatens access to food globally, including in countries already facing major challenges on SDG 2 (No Hunger). By contrast, these countries perform better than the rest of the world on SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production) and SDG 13 (Climate Action). Many of them emit less than 2 t of CO₂ per person each year. Yet they are often the countries that are most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. Strengthening public-sector capacities as well as statistical capacities remain major priorities in all of these countries, as emphasized under SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions).

Most important and obvious, environmental issues include situations where the current actions of one actor negatively affect the current well-being of someone else. These are the typical “externalities,” or more specifically, unidirectional spatial externalities, of air or water pollution going downwind or downstream. The central issue is not the loss of some “aggregate benefit” to society (inefficiency) as the economists would frame it (Fisher 1981) or the inability to continue this activity into the future (unsustainability). Many of the battles in developing countries today are over such negative externalities of developmental activities, whether it is mining, dams, or factories. And it really does not matter what the social positions of the polluter and pollutee are, although in practice it is often the case that the polluters are also from the socially and economically more powerful segments of society, which is why they are able to get away with the polluting activity. Six protests are cast in “sustainability” terms, such as the sustainability of a dam in the face of heavy soil erosion and siltation, and others highlight the likelihood of a net loss to society if a proper benefit-cost analysis is done, the core issue is still one of fairness – how fairly are benefits and costs of such projects distributed.

3.3 Preexisting Socioeconomic Inequities

The central issue here is the unfairness of such a situation – it is not fair that one person, even while pursuing a legitimate livelihood, should negatively affect the health of another person (Lélé 1994, 1998). Very often, the polluters are better off

than the pollutes: such as industries polluting rivers whose waters are consumed by poor farmers, or dams destroying livelihoods of poor fisherman downstream. In such situations, one would say that the social justice question overlaps with the environmental unfairness – instead of giving special consideration to poorer sections, the policy to go ahead with such projects would lead to a double disadvantage. The “environmental justice” movement in the USA, for instance, has highlighted the double-disadvantage problem in the preferential siting of hazardous industries in the neighborhood where socially and economically marginalized groups reside (Bullard 1990).

3.4 The Need for Equitable Access to Natural Resources

This is an area in which environmental and social concerns overlap fully, because the equitable distribution of the socioeconomic benefits from the use of natural resources depends critically on how initial rights to resource use are granted. Equally efficient distributions of rights to resources may lead to very different outcomes in terms of equity. Environmental degradation aggravates poverty and thereby accentuates inequity in society. Where the poor are directly dependent on natural resources such as forests for firewood, pastures for grazing, or scarce water resources for survival, the degradation or destruction of these ecosystems hurts the poor the most. The rich are likely to have moved away from such direct dependence on ecosystems to the use of fossil fuels. The rich can also offer to purchase technologies or to access resources from further away (Pearce 1988; Nadkarni 2000).

4 Moving Forward

A more equitable allocation of resource rights is more likely to generate the cooperation necessary for sustainable management of common pool resources. How is social equity conceptualized, operationalized, and prioritized relative to sustainability? How might social equity be more effectively integrated in sustainability consideration?

According to Sach (2019), there are six investment priorities: areas in which major societal “transformations” are needed to achieve the SDGs (Sachs et al. 2019). Each Transformation identifies priority investments and regulatory challenges, calling for actions by well-defined parts of government working with business and civil society. Transformations may therefore be operationalized within the structures of government while respecting the strong interdependencies across the 17 SDGs. We also outline an action agenda for science to provide the knowledge required for designing, implementing, and monitoring the SDG Transformations (Sachs et al. 2019 – nature sustainability).

1. Education and social protection to achieve universal secondary education (SDG 4) and poverty reduction (SDG 1). This transformation has a direct impact on the

socioeconomic status and education under the social equity issue. Education is fundamental to the sustainability and equity of our culture. Access to quality education enables individuals to take control over their destiny and make meaningful contributions to the social and economic life of their communities. Education empowers us to meet our developmental needs, achieve personal goals, and contribute to the progress of our country.

2. Health systems to end the pandemic and to achieve Universal Health Coverage (SDG 3). This transformation covers the health care matters. In recent years, increasing attention has been given to the importance of healthcare and social equity in achieving sustainability. This special issue examines how specific topics in health, such as obesity prevention, mental health and well-being, nutrition, chronic diseases, and disability are important issues that affect the lives of millions of people today. Concepts such as universal health coverage (UHC), community-based services, systems thinking, and mental health are also discussed.
3. Zero-carbon energy and circular economy to decarbonize and slash pollution (SDG 7, SDG 12, and SDG 13). Environmental threat covers the social equity issues. Net zero equity – a fairer future for all – is a new investment concept to help mobilize capital in the fight against climate change. It is designed and modeled on the idea of creating positive climate impact rather than financial investments yielding large returns. It will allow investors, particularly global citizens and corporations, to demonstrate action and play an active part in the fight against climate change.
4. Sustainable food, land use, and protection of biodiversity and ecosystems (SDG 2, SDG 13, and SDG 15). The goals of sustainable food, land use, and protection of biodiversity and ecosystems are interlinked. Sustainable food requires a secure supply of nutritious food at fair prices for all people, while minimizing environmental harm. This can be achieved through various strategies that involve conserving biodiversity and ecosystems, reducing greenhouse gas emissions from agriculture, as well as reducing food loss and waste. This investment priority area has a significant impact on the environmental threats.
5. Sustainable urban infrastructure, including housing, public transport, water, and sewerage (SDG 11). This transformation deals with public transportation and socioeconomic status. Sustainability transportation, for example, is a broad concept that has emerged within the context of sustainable development and its ability to contribute toward social equity. The focus would be on the key policy issues pertaining to the significant impact of sustainability transportation on land use, urban quality, and social equity. Sustainable transportation plays a central role in reducing environmental problems while promoting other goals such as economic well-being, energy security, and health.
6. Universal digital services (SDG 9) to support all other SDG investments, including online education, telemedicine, e-payments, e-financing, and e-government services. This investment area is relevant for the socioeconomic and education issues. Investments in universal digital services are a form of public investment, but they can also include private sector activities and commercial transactions that

provide a digital infrastructure capable of supporting national growth and development including sustainable development (SDGs). It can support all other investments by enabling citizens, business, and civil society to access information on key issues related to their lives, including learning opportunities and the health service offered. In addition, universal access to telecommunications enhances economic development.

The increase of SDG financing to achieve these six transformations is by now well established. There has been ongoing effort to reduce the financing gap among countries and key players in sustainability sectors. There are six practical pathways to increase SDG financing as suggested: (1) increased domestic tax revenues; (2) increased sovereign (government) borrowing from international development finance institutions (DFIs); (3) increased sovereign borrowing from international private capital markets; (4) increased official development assistance (ODA); (5) increased funding by private foundations and philanthropies; and (6) debt restructuring for heavily indebted borrowers, mainly to lengthen maturities and reduce interest rate.

5 Summary

Social equity concerns should be constantly highlighted in various platforms taking into consideration the key challenges such as financial challenges, uneven progress of SDG targets, preexisting socioeconomic inequalities, and equitability of natural resources. The involvement of public agencies and administrators is critical as they play a vital role in addressing social equity. A partnership with elected officials needs to be formed effectively to address social equity issues by bringing problems to the attention of policymakers, making recommendations on the basis of their deep expertise, and conducting extensive citizen engagement.

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