

# Chapter 26 In Brief

## Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Amazon



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**THE AMAZON WE WANT**  
Science Panel for the Amazon

# Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Amazon

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## Key Messages & Recommendations

- 1) Achieving a Living Amazon Vision (see Chapter 25) means placing the five dimensions (People, Planet, Prosperity, Peace, and Partnership) of the 2030 Agenda within the Amazon basin limits.
- 2) Synergies among SDGs can be maximized by developing locally-relevant goals, targets, and indicators.
- 3) Progress at the landscape- or watershed-level must be consistently scaled and supported by multilevel governance at the local, regional, and national levels.
- 4) SDG targets focusing on strengthening scientific and technological capacity and access to information must be complemented with biocultural or co-production approaches that connect systems based on western science with those based on Indigenous and local knowledge (ILK).
- 5) Safeguarding the rights of nature and of Indigenous peoples and local communities (IPLCs) is essential to achieving the 2030 Agenda in the Amazon. Securing 80% of forest cover and aquatic connectivity is critical, and is incompatible with current extractive development practices.
- 6) A Global Partnership for a Living Amazon should be established, channeling financial and technical resources commensurate with the global importance of the Amazon. Transparency and accountability in development projects and throughout the entire supply chain should be enforced, and stakeholders within and outside the

Amazon region should exercise responsible consumption and finance.

- 7) The Amazon region has been greatly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, possibly setting back SDG achievement. The COVID-19 crisis is a wake-up call; humans are having massive and potentially irreversible impacts on nature, and achieving the SDGs is more urgent than ever. A green, inclusive, and transformative recovery should be promoted, placing the most vulnerable at the center of an integrated policy response based on rights, incentives, digitalization, innovation, technology, and sustainable production and consumption.

**Abstract** This chapter discusses the importance and limitations of the five SDG dimensions (People, Planet, Prosperity, Peace and Partnership) in the Amazonian context. It also discusses the performance and trends of Amazonian countries in achieving the SDGs.

**Introduction** When the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) concluded in 2015, inequalities persisted within many countries and there was increased concern over anthropogenic impacts on the environment. In response, in 2015, Member States of the United Nations (UN) unanimously adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. This agenda, which includes 17 Sustainable Development Goals to be achieved by 2030, comprised five

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dimensions: People, Planet, Prosperity, Peace, and Partnership<sup>1</sup>.

Although some progress has been made over the past 20 years, current trends imply that no Amazonian country is on track to achieve all SDGs in the next 50 years<sup>2</sup>. Furthermore, despite some isolated policies aimed at supporting more sustainable pathways post-2015, all countries have largely continued to implement development models that increase inequalities and are based on unsustainable economic activities that ultimately lead to environmental degradation, labor informality, poverty, inequality, weak health and social infrastructure, corruption, and violence against IPLCs (see Chapters 14-20). The COVID-19 crisis has exacerbated these structural challenges<sup>3-5</sup>.

This chapter reinforces the Living Amazon Vision proposed in Chapter 25 as an urgent alternative to current trends in the Amazon, placing the People, Planet, Prosperity, Peace, and Partnership dimensions within the Amazon basin limits (Figure 26.1).



**Figure 26.1** Living Amazon Vision and the SDGs.

**People**

Prior to COVID-19, there was already a moderate to significant lag in the performance of all countries in the region on achieving SDG indicators under the

People dimension<sup>2</sup> (Figure 26.2). In almost all cases, Amazonian countries were also not advancing at an appropriate rate to achieve these goals by 2030.

*Limitations of the definition of poverty and the importance of natural and cultural capital* The general definition of poverty as living below a certain income threshold can be too limited. It may not be relevant for societies that do not rely on waged employment, and does not reflect many communities’ value systems or definitions of wealth. For instance, IPLCs’ own definitions of poverty remain unsatisfactorily understood and mostly absent in sustainable development planning, design, and implementation in the Amazon.

In the Amazon, biological and cultural diversity are intrinsically connected, and have co-evolved as social-ecological systems, designated as biocultural diversity (see Chapter 10). Cultural capital supports economic, human, physical, and ecological/natural capital; and as such is essential for resilient sustainable livelihoods<sup>6</sup> that can adapt to crises.

Still, the lack of similar data between Amazonian countries makes poverty comparisons almost exclusively based on income, consumption, and access to social assistance programs and basic services<sup>2</sup>. Local solutions and intercultural inclusive approaches are not well accounted for, hindering alternative poverty alleviation strategies and potential funding for these initiatives.

*The impacts of COVID-19 on health and education* Although most countries were showing moderate progress on health and education indicators in 2019, there is a high possibility that those trends were negatively impacted by COVID-19. The Brazilian states of Roraima, Amazonas, Pará, and Amapá, for instance, presented some of the highest case counts and deaths per million inhabitants in the world<sup>7</sup>. These numbers might be even higher, as evidence suggests that COVID-19 cases among Indigenous populations in Brazil have been under-reported<sup>5</sup>. COVID-19 has put health systems under tremendous pressure and universal access to vaccines is

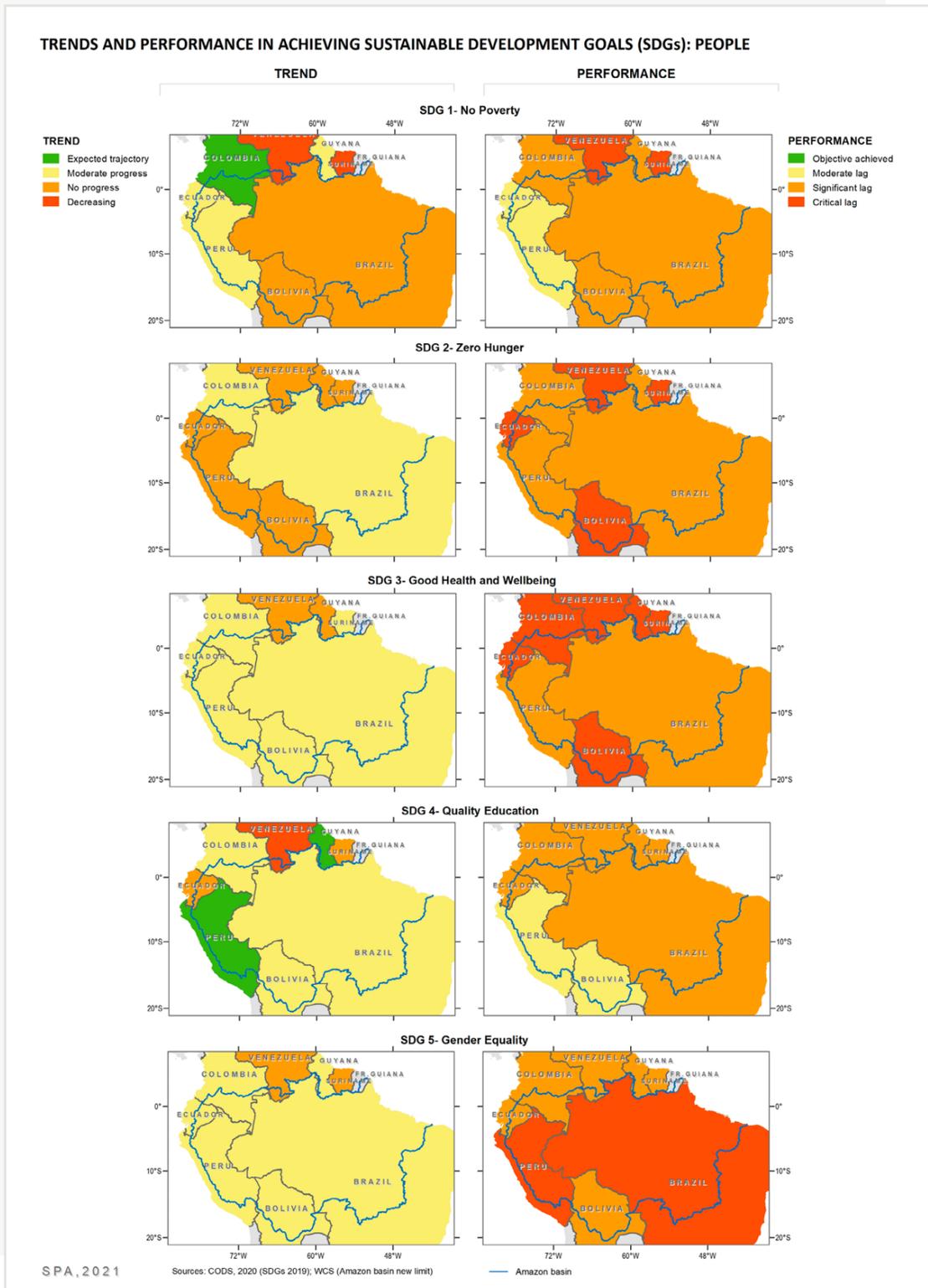


Figure 26.2 Performance and trends in achieving people-dimension SDGs. Sources:<sup>2,39</sup>

imperative to reduce inequalities, mitigate social impacts, and speed recovery.

Latin America in general is also facing an unprecedented education crisis, as many students do not have computers and/or access to the internet to participate in online classes during the pandemic<sup>8</sup>.

*Gender disparities in the Amazon* The region shows significant lags in achieving gender equality, with critically low performance in Brazil and Peru. Moderate progress is being achieved across the region, except in Suriname and Venezuela where progress has stagnated.

Rates of reported gender-based violence are high; 39% of Amazonian women in Colombia have been victims of physical violence, and the region has the highest percentage of female rape in the country (1/100)<sup>28</sup>. In 2018, it was estimated that a third of women in Guyana were victims of gender-based violence (GBV)<sup>9</sup>.

Worldwide, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated gender inequality, including through job loss, increased unpaid home care, and violence<sup>10</sup>. Amazonian countries are probably no exception to this.

## Planet

*Clean Water and Sanitation* Advances in legislation have been achieved in the Amazon, including the recognition of access to water as a human right. Still, 89% of people living in the Peruvian Amazon had no access to safe drinking water in 2020<sup>11</sup>, and 38% of households in the state of Amazonas (Brazil) had no household connection to running water in 2020<sup>12</sup>. Furthermore, 50% and 60% of Indigenous people living in Colombia and Peru, respectively, have limited access to basic sanitation services<sup>13</sup>.

Overall, Amazonian countries made moderate progress in providing access to water and sanitation, but progress is markedly slower in rural areas,<sup>14</sup> and the region still shows a moderate lag in its performance (Figure 26.3).

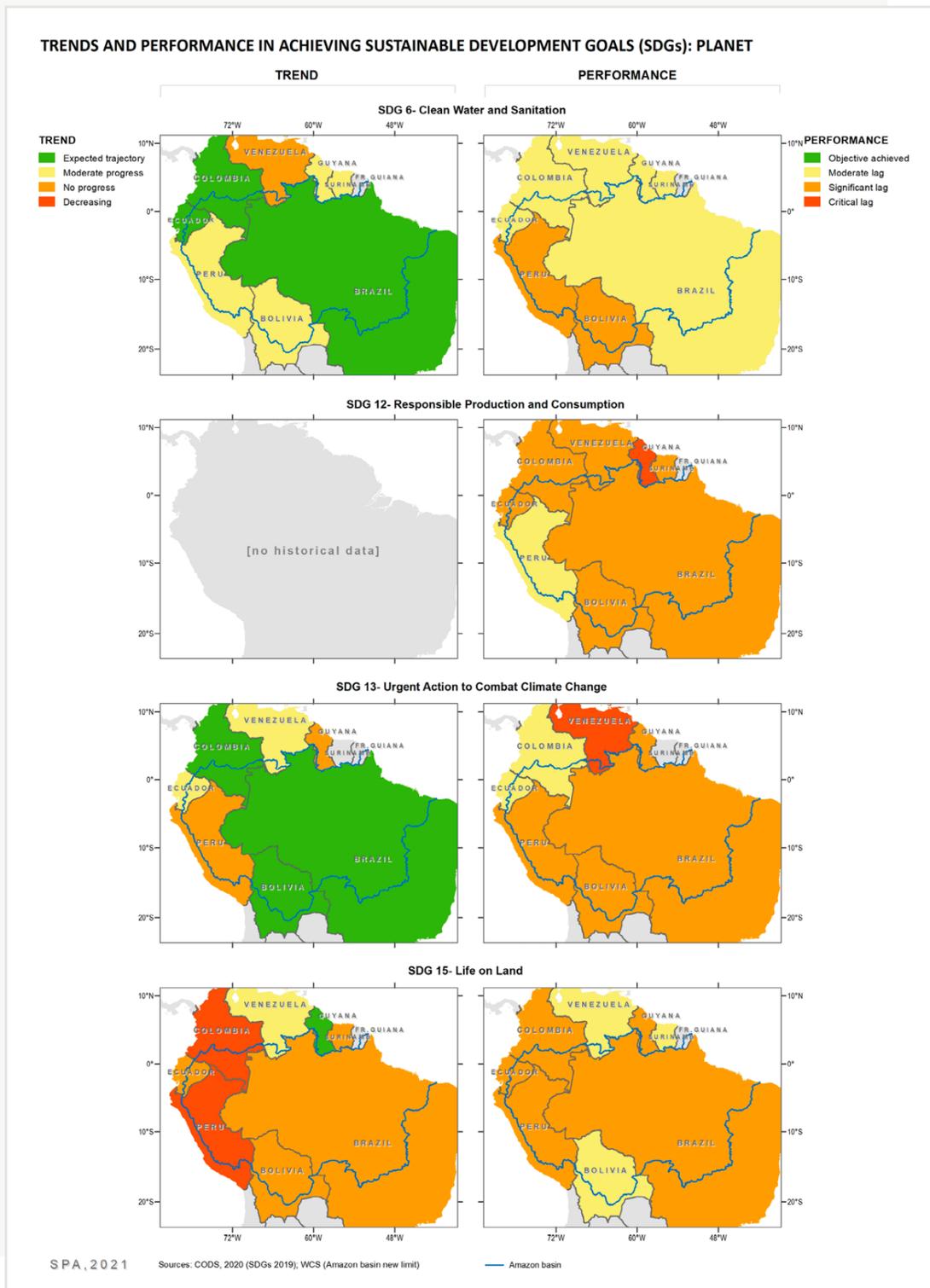
Many cities in the region increasingly experience water scarcity as a result of poor planning, climate change, and deforestation<sup>15</sup>. Concurrently, illegal mining, waste disposal, and other activities impact water quality and people's health<sup>16</sup> (see Chapter 21). The capacity of sewage treatment facilities has not kept pace with population growth, and there are still marked asymmetries between urban and rural areas.

Several Amazonian countries have established institutional frameworks to manage watersheds. However, they often lack the necessary technical capacity, continuity, enforcement, international coordination, and financial resources to fully achieve integrated watershed management objectives<sup>17</sup>.

There has been progress on cross-border agreements for watershed management, particularly in the Putumayo basin and in the Madre de Dios watershed. All eight countries have also adopted an agreement for the Integral and Sustainable Management of Cross-border water resources in the Amazon river basin<sup>18</sup>.

Connectivity between Indigenous territories and protected areas at a landscape and watershed level are critical. Recent advances in promoting intercultural dialogue between ILK and western science represent an opportunity to integrate cultural management practices into national or regional watershed management plans.

*Responsible Production and Consumption* Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru have established strategies to promote a circular economy since 2019, and all Amazonian countries have waste management laws or strategies. Colombia, Brazil, and Bolivia are rapidly adopting digitally-driven innovation<sup>19</sup>, which will be key to realizing circular economy opportunities. Nevertheless, in the absence of policy, fiscal support, and training, these opportunities are likely to be taken up by larger companies, leaving small businesses at disadvantage. The same risk is present in the agricultural sector. In Bolivia, Ecuador, and Peru, approximately 30% of the population works in



**Figure 26.3** Performance and trends in achieving planet-dimension SDGs. Sources:2,39.

this sector, largely as smallholders. Therefore, a transition to a circular and nature-based economy must prioritize smallholders, including IPLCs<sup>20</sup>.

International cooperation through robust standards is necessary to ensure that the transition to a circular bioeconomy delivers real environmental benefits, promotes innovation in high value-added sectors through research, avoids socio-environmental spillovers, and promotes transparency and accountability across supply chains. Currently, indicators related to sustainable management and efficient use of natural resources fail to consider resource flows driven by external market demands. Thus, consuming countries do not account for the environmental impact and human costs of the beef, soy, oil and gas, timber, and gold they import.

Finally, traditional value systems (see Chapters 10 and 13) represent an important potential for coupling responsible production and consumption with respect for human rights and collaboration with Indigenous people (see Chapters 31-34).

*Urgent Action to Combat Climate Change* The urgency of addressing climate change in the Amazon is twofold; firstly, the Amazon is a giant carbon reservoir (see Chapter 6) and its forest a giant cooling mechanism, and therefore any solution to tackle global climate change must consider reducing deforestation in the Amazon; secondly, climate change and deforestation feedbacks can reduce evapotranspiration and the role of the Amazon in the production of regional rainfall regimes (see Chapters 22-24).

All Amazonian countries are signatories of the Paris Agreement and present commitments to reduce deforestation and promote reforestation within their nationally determined contributions (NDCs)<sup>21</sup>. However, a common regional vision for conservation and restoration that addresses the drivers of deforestation and environmental degradation (see Chapters 14-20 and 27-29) is needed. Initiatives such as the NDC partnership (2018) and NDC Latin America and the Caribbean<sup>22</sup> can guide the establishment of an Amazonian regional vision. At a subnational scale, progress in engaging local governments in the 2030

development agenda is encouraging, though communities of practice such as the Local 2030 network. Stimulating governments to consider ILK and practices in support of target 13.2 would contribute greatly to attaining SDG 13. The abovementioned measures are also directly connected to SDG 15. International cooperation is key to developing mitigation and adaptation strategies in the Amazon, by applying social innovation to develop site-specific technologies tailored to local needs and possibilities<sup>23</sup>.

*Life on Land Conservation* can be achieved at scale by building on national and subnational protected areas, including Indigenous lands which currently cover 50% of the region<sup>24</sup>. In order to maintain the 80% of forest cover required to avoid a potential Amazon tipping point<sup>25</sup> (see Chapter 24), these areas need to be connected by new protected areas or other effective conservation measures, sustainable natural resource use management, and restoration interventions. The Leticia Pact, signed by all Amazonian countries except Venezuela in 2019, represents an opportunity for coordination across the biome to maintain healthy forests and rivers.

### **Prosperity**

*Affordable and clean energy* There has been noteworthy progress in improving access to electricity in Latin America's urban and rural areas since the 1990's<sup>26</sup>, and current trends show that most countries are moving towards achieving this target. Despite research and innovation, practical application of sustainable energy projects remains difficult and costly. As a result, there are still moderate to significant lags in access to affordable and clean energy in all countries in the region, and a critical lag in Bolivia (Figure 26.4). It is also important to highlight that this indicator does not include trade-offs between hydroelectric projects and associated emissions from forest loss, impacts on aquatic ecosystems, or effects on fisheries<sup>27</sup>.

*Decent work and economic growth* Amazonian countries show significant to critical lags in performance, and varying trends towards achievement of this goal. The modest contributions of Amazonian

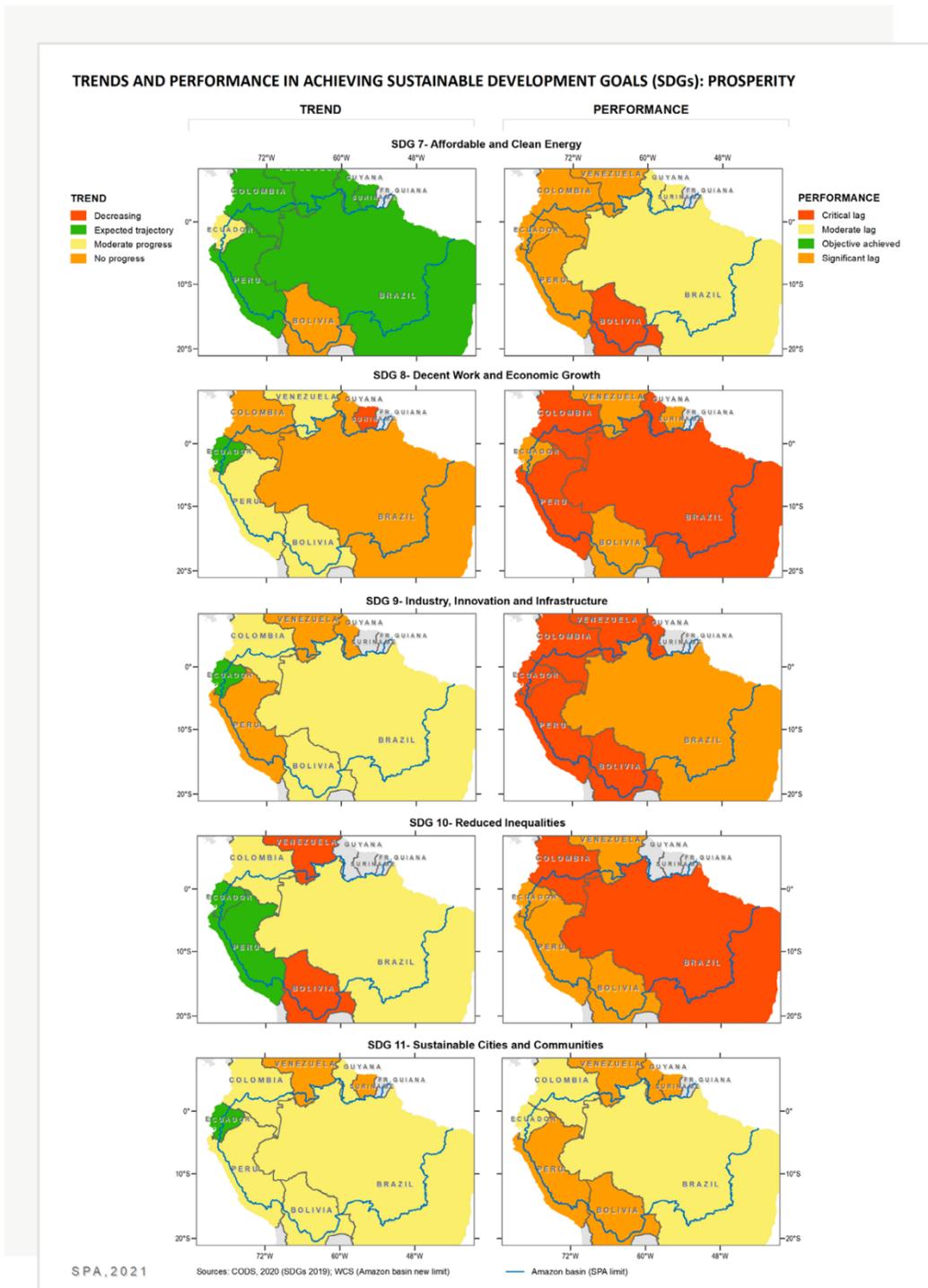


Figure 26.4 Performance and trends in achieving prosperity-dimension SDGs. Sources: 2,39.

regions to their country’s gross domestic product (GDP) are highly associated with unsustainable economic activities linked to habitat loss and degradation. This represents a negative feedback loop as ecosystem services support economic growth and jobs in key sectors. Knowledge-based, sustainable use of biological resources, or a bioeconomy, is the only way to break this paradox while maintaining climate stability and a healthy environment, key requirements to maintaining productivity<sup>28</sup>.

*Inequalities in generation of wealth from Amazonian resources* There are significant inequalities in the Amazon according to 2018 Gini coefficients, and these inequalities have been exacerbated due to COVID-19. Indigenous peoples, particularly women, are the most vulnerable and exhibit the lowest literacy and education rates, highest infant and maternal mortality rates, and highest poverty rates<sup>29</sup>. Nevertheless, inclusion of non-market resources can halve estimates of poverty in Indigenous communities with access to healthy rivers and forests<sup>30</sup>, which means that consolidating and maintaining IPLCs territories and a healthy environment are critical for reducing inequalities in the region (see Chapter 31).

*Sustainable cities and communities* The Amazon is going through a rapid urbanization process (see Chapter 14), which has led to lags in access to basic services (e.g., waste management) and increased violence (Figure 26.4). Proposals for more sustainable cities, that better integrate urban and rural areas, can be found in Chapter 34.

**Peace** All countries in the Amazon have significant or critical lags in indicators related to safety, perception of corruption<sup>31</sup>, and rule of law; only half of countries are making even moderate progress to improve these indicators (Figure 26.5). The region remains one of the most violent on the planet, with Venezuela having the highest number of intentional homicides per 100,000 (56.3) and Suriname the lowest (5.5)<sup>32</sup>. Violence is high in poor urban neighborhoods and on the outskirts of cities<sup>33</sup> and can be also related to illegal activities (e.g., drugs and gold mining) and to land conflicts (see Chapter 14).

The relationship between peace and the environment has led to the construction and development of notions such as environmental peace, in which it is assumed that there are clear and multiple links between armed conflicts and disputes over natural

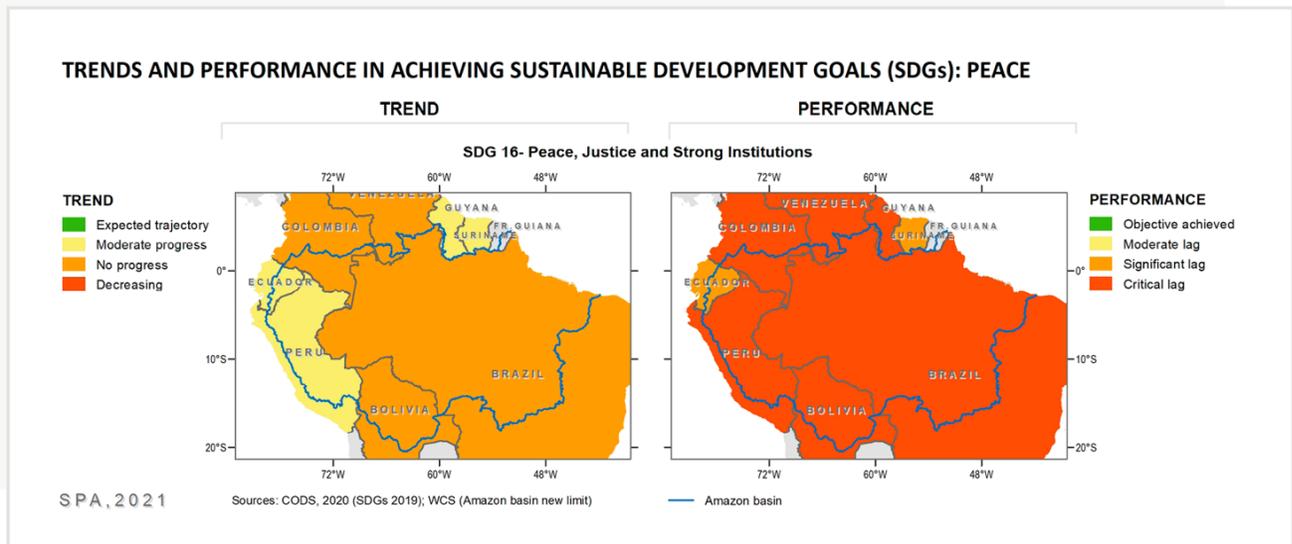


Figure 26.5 Performance and trends in achieving peace-dimension SDGs. Source: CODS 2020<sup>2</sup>.

resources and the environment. For example, the link between nature and peace is immersed in the Colombia Peace Agreement, forming a fundamental part of it<sup>34</sup>. This link is also recognized in the constitutions of Bolivia (2009) and Ecuador (2008), in the concepts of Living Well or *Sumak Kawsay*, and in an approach that recognizes the importance of nature and multiculturalism for peace<sup>35</sup>. However, lack of respect for IPLCs' rights continues to be an obstacle for peace in the region. Global Witness reported 98 murders of environmentalists in the Amazon in 2019, of which 40% were Indigenous leaders<sup>36</sup>.

**Partnerships** Overall, the region shows moderate to significant lags in performance on the Partnership dimension. Only Suriname is following a path to achieve SDG 17 by 2030, and Bolivia and Venezuela are following negative trends (Figure 24.6).

Global recognition of the cultural and environmental value of the Amazon has garnered international support for the region. Between 2013 and 2015, approximately USD 1.07 billion were invested in environmental protection, mostly by bilateral or multilateral institutions. However, much larger investments are made to unsustainable infrastructure and energy projects that drive deforestation. For instance, 33 major European financial

institutions invested a combined total of USD 20 billion in companies directly involved in deforestation in Brazil from 2015 to 2020<sup>37</sup>. In order to address these inconsistencies, a global partnership for a Living Amazon must be established, considering its critical regional and global role.

Government plans must also guide and support local landscape and sub-basin level plans bolstering human rights, including those of future generations; providing information, basic services, appropriate resilient infrastructure, innovation, and incentives or disincentives to different economic activities. Partnerships between different countries, such as the Leticia Pact, are particularly important to weigh the environmental costs of infrastructure and extractive projects against regional common goods, in particular across watersheds.

Implementation of such an agreement will require a paradigm shift that empowers and leverages multicultural partnerships between local stakeholders through decentralized bioregions, within and across national borders. Progress at the bioregional level must be scaled and supported by multilevel governance at the national and basin level in order to distribute effective law enforcement, policy, and financial resources. Finally, the private sector, research

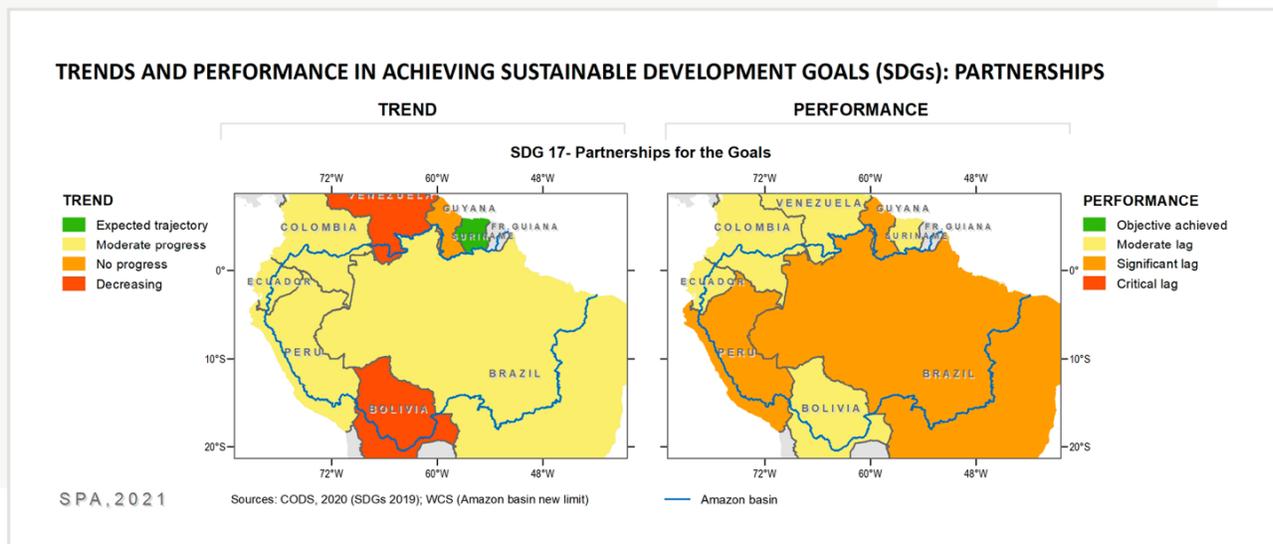


Figure 26.6. Performance and trends in achieving partnership-dimension SDGs. Sources: 2,39.

institutes, and civil society organizations can build partnerships at different scales to support investment, science, innovation, and research that leverages biological and cultural diversity in the region.

All countries will need to recover from COVID-19. Instead of scaling back their ambitions to achieve the SDGs, the crisis can be an opportunity for transformative investment towards a more sustainable and fair future<sup>38</sup>. Access to internet connectivity for the entire Amazonian population is key to foster innovation for the achievement of the SDGs.

**Conclusions** Amazonian countries were already falling behind in achieving most SDGs pre-COVID-19. However, they still have the potential to adopt a new approach to development that maintains ecological integrity and diversity, social justice and rights, economic prosperity, and equity (see Chapter 25). This transformation towards a Living Amazon requires international finance and regional partnerships. A framework to minimize trade-offs and maximize synergies between the different SDGs can be established through local, national, and international policies with clear binding agreements, and that also provide incentives for the private sector to adopt sustainability standards, especially when considering fiscal incentives for COVID-19 recovery. However, transformative change can only occur at a landscape or watershed level when the trade-offs or synergies between different priorities can be assessed. Leveraging local knowledge and agency will ensure ownership and accountability.

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