Suggesting Priorities of Sustainable Development Goals Considering the Lingering Impacts of COVID-19

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
             	Sustainable development goals (SDGs), which aim to be achieved by 2030, require a most efficient approach for the rest of the period as the achievement rate is very low and the impact of COVID-19 continues. Therefore, this study analyzes previous studies and statistics of the United Nations to suggest the priority of SDGs: Among all SDGs, this study suggests that goal 17 (partnerships for the goals) and ecosystem-related goals corresponding to goals 13, 14, and 15 are supposed to be the first priority since they are able to form the foundation for other goals. The general goals (goals 1~9, 11, 12, and 16) and goal 10 (reduced inequalities) follow the next priority, making the most effective flows. The paper also suggests that among the targets of goal 17, 17.2 (fully implement the commitment to Official Development Assistance), 17.18 (support available data to developing countries), and 17.11 (increase exports of developing countries) are supposed to be prioritized to focus on recovering the economy of developing countries in a short time. Furthermore, this study proposes that while each country carries out its urgent goals, the international community should carry out the goals according to the priorities presented, cooperating with each country.

1. Introduction

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are a joint goal of the international community that was resolved at the United Nations in 2015 and is expected to be achieved from 2016 to 2030 for sustainable development. It consists of 17 goals and 169 targets under the slogan 'leave no one behind': poverty, hunger, health, education, gender equality, sanitation, energy, economy, industry, equality, cities, consumption and production, climate, marine life, land creatures, justice, and partnerships, as seen in table 1. According to KCOC, [1] SDGs reflect more comprehensive global issues than Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) implemented from 2000 to 2015, and the range of their targets is also wider and has improved to be more flexible depending on the situation of the country (KCOC, 2016). Lee [2] argued that it pursues economic efficiency, social equality, and

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environmental sustainability. In particular, it is said that 'eradicating poverty in all its forms and dimensions, including extreme poverty, is the greatest global challenge and an indispensable requirement for sustainable development' in the preamble of the introduction of SDGs, which shows what they emphasize on, by the United Nations [3].

Table 1
Images and descriptions of 17 SDGs by the United Nations

Goals	Description	Goals	Description
1 NO POVERTY	End poverty in all its forms everywhere.	2 ZERO HUNGER	End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture.
3 GOOD HEALTH AND WELL-BEING	Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at ages.	4 QUALITY EDUCATION	Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.
5 GENDER EQUALITY	Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.	6 CLEAN WATER AND SANITATION	Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all.
7 AFFORDABLE AND CLEAN ENERGY	Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all.	8 DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH	Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all.

9 INDUSTRY, INNOVATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE	Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation.
10 REDUCED INEQUALITIES	Reduce inequality within and among countries.
11 SUSTAINABLE CITIES AND COMMUNITIES	Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable.
12 RESPONSIBLE CONSUMPTION AND PRODUCTION	Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns.
13 CLIMATE ACTION	Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts.
14 LIFE BELOW WATER	Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development.
15 LIFE ON LAND	Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss.
16 PEACE, JUSTICE AND STRONG INSTITUTIONS	Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels.
17 PARTNERSHIPS FOR THE GOALS	Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development.

According to The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2023 by the United Nations, [4] which assessed the progress of each goal with 4 categories (on track or target met, fair progress but acceleration needed, stagnation or regression, insufficient data), only goals 12 and 14 were assessed that about 30% of it is on track or target met. About 20% of goals 7, 9, 15, and 17 were rated as on track or target met, while about 10% of goals 2, 3, 5, 10, and 11 were rated as on track or target met, and all targets of goals 1, 4, 6, 8, 13, and 16 were classified as one of the remaining three categories [4]. Refer to Figure 1. The achievement rate is very low although about half of the target period from

2016 to 2030 has passed. According to Julia Malleck [5], this means that only 12% of each goal's targets are seen to be able to achieve that goal by 2030. According to the United Nations [6], even targets with 2020 deadlines have not been achieved in most cases. Only three of the 21 targets were rated as "target is archived or on track to be archived", and only two were rated as being so. The remaining 16 targets were rated as "Progress has been made, but is insufficient to meet the target", "No progress or moving away from the target", or "No data or data are insufficient to assess progress".
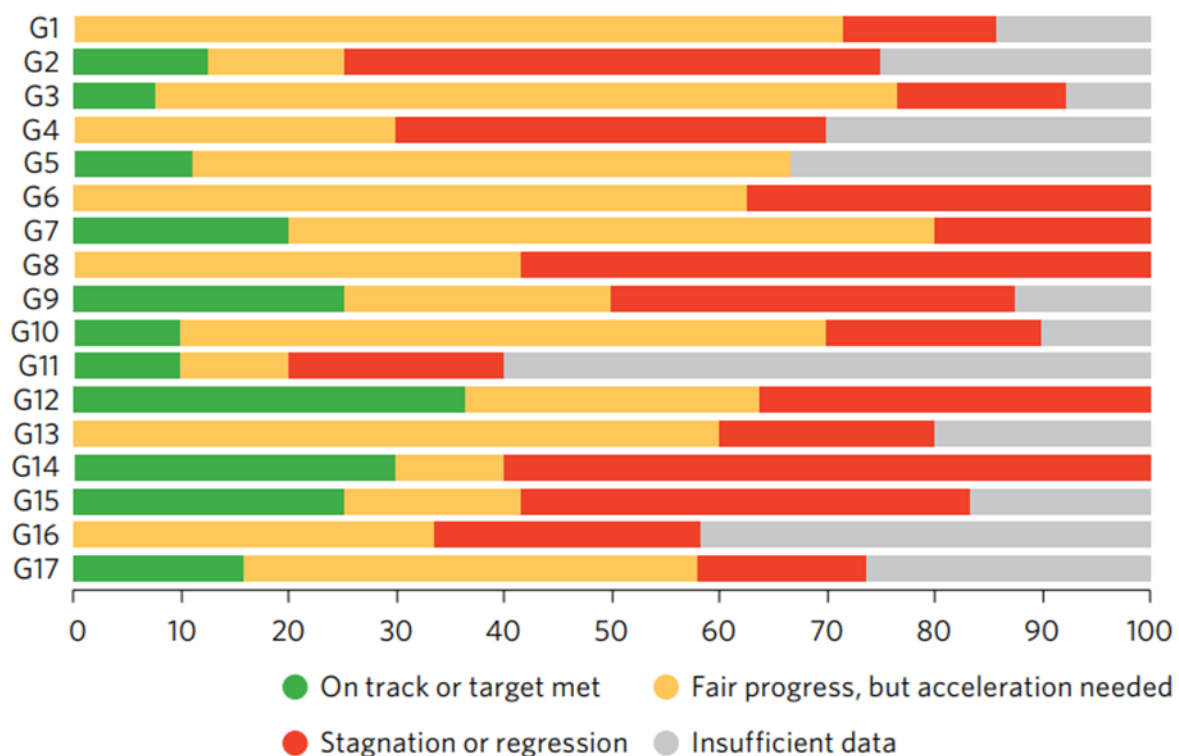

Fig. 1. Progress assessment for the 17 goals based on assessed targets by the United Nations

However, the factors that will hinder the achievement of SDGs are endlessly increasing, such as climate change, the lingering impact of COVID-19, and wars. In this situation, achieving all goals is very difficult in reality, and distributing efforts to all goals may not be the answer. Therefore, the most efficient approach is needed for the remaining time. All efforts should be focused on identifying the most urgent goals and achieving them first. Therefore, this research suggests the priority of 17 SDGs and the targets of the most urgent goal.

2. Materials and Methods

This study was conducted through analysis of data released online and various media materials released online by the United Nations (UN), ScienceDirect, MDPI, Stockholm Environment Institute, Sustainable Development Policy Institute, Wiley, Springer, JSTOR, Guni Network, and UNECE. Data on the contents and plans of the SDGs were mainly from the materials in 2015 when the SDGs were defined, but supplemented data are included to follow the progress of the SDGs projects. The analysis of the goals' priorities is mainly based on data from the late 2010s to the early 2020s when the SDGs

failed to perform as planned, predicted to be due to the need to find what are high-priority things to make up for the SDGs' low performance. During the COVID-19 pandemic, new perspectives on global sustainability emerged, and reflections on still low performance were made. Data on these are also mainly covered in this study. In addition, UN research data on analysis and priorities in 2023, which can be considered as a post-pandemic period, were also included as the subject of analysis.

In the analysis of the literature, the arguments that appeared in the process of concluding were analyzed cross-sectionally with the arguments of other documents not to rely on the conclusions of each document. The studies conducted in the existing literature were accepted and utilized without repeating them. In order to set priorities, various types of research have been conducted, including research centered on existing performance, research using system dynamics, and research through surveys of experts. It was judged that all such studies have their meaning in this study. However, since existing studies tended to reflect regional perspectives, individual SDGs' perspectives, or specific countries' positions, this study tried to devise priorities from a global perspective for the entire SDGs. For this, a simple system dynamics methodology and a national psychological and behavioral economic perspective were added to the analysis.

3. Results and Discussion
3.1 Analysis of Previous Research

The research 'Are some SDGs more important than others?' by the United Nations [7] investigated the priorities based on the four years of Voluntary National Review (VNRs, the assessment of the degree of achievement of their own SDGs by country), assuming that the priorities vary from country to country.

As a result, goal 17 (partnerships for the goals) received overwhelmingly the most attention, followed by goal 13 (climate action), goal 4 (quality education), goal 5 (gender equality), and goal 8 (decent work and economic growth). The least notable was goal 10 (reduced inequalities), which is a serious problem since the slogan revealing the core of the SDGs is 'leave no one behind.'

Goals 4, 5, 8, and 13 can be classified as problems in developed countries, which may have been taken more seriously than reality due to their influence on the international community. In addition, the reason why goal 10 is not attracting attention even though it is the basic philosophy of the SDGs can be assumed that those affected negatively by inequality are mainly the weak with low status.

The goals that are considered more important are changing every year and no clear trends are revealed. Sometimes, goals that receive high attention in the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) are considered more important in that year. This may mean that it is not clear which goals are really important [7].

In 'Prioritizing sustainable development goals and linking them to ecosystem services: A global expert's knowledge evaluation' by Yang, [8] another research related to SDGs, Siqi Yang *et al*. surveyed experts and found that goal 2(zero hunger), 1(no poverty), and 6(clean water and sanitation) are prioritized both internationally and locally. In addition, goals 13 (climate action), 14 (life below water), and 15 (life on land) were closely related [19].

In 'The COVID-19 pandemic and the achievement of the SDGs,' Kalterina Shulla [9] argues 'Unprecedented global crisis enhanced the pressure for multilateral system cooperation. Thus, highlighting the importance of the SDG17 "Partnerships for the Goals" for global cooperation processes'.

3.2 Perspectives on Classifying SDGs

From one perspective, SDGs can be divided into universal problems of mankind (poverty, hunger, health, education, gender equality, equality of countries, justice, partnerships), global environmental problems (sanitization, energy, climate, marine life, land creatures), and economic or social problems (economy, industry, cities, consumption and production).

Or, it can be divided into what has been a problem so far and what should be prepared because it can be a problem in the future. The former is mainly a problem of developing countries, and the latter is mainly that of developed countries. As for this classification, it can be assumed that global issues in developed countries can also be effectively solved only when the problems of developing countries are solved and they are developed to some extent.

In addition, SDGs' goals are interrelated, so they can be organically combined to create new tasks. UNESCWA [10] argues that this should be noted because there are some cases of objectives being against each other, such as environment protection and well-being of mankind, or targets 8.6 (By 2020, substantially reduce the proportion of youth not in employment, education or training) and 4.c (By 2030, substantially increase the supply of qualified teachers, including through international cooperation for teacher training in developing countries, especially least developed countries and small island developing States).

Factfulness by Rosling [11] can also be referred to. The subtitle of this book is 'ten reasons we're wrong about the world - and why things are better than you think,' which means that we sometimes misunderstand the world more negatively than reality. Based on this, the importance of goal 1 (no poverty), goal 2 (zero hunger), and goal 3 (good health and well-being) may be overestimated. For example, although the answer to the question 'in the last 20 years, the proportion of the world population living in extreme poverty has…' is 'almost halved', only about 10% answered correctly. The rest answered 'almost double' or 'remained more or less the same'.

3.3 COVID-19's Impact on SDGs

Wang and Huang [12] revealed through Meta-Analysis that all 17 goals were negatively impacted by COVID-19. But at the same time, according to them, the 14 goals were also positively affected. The impact was evaluated by whether any of the targets of goals were positive or negatively affected.

Cathryn Tonne [13] predicted in his study that better decisions could be made for sustainability since the vulnerability of social and human development is known by COVID-19.

Rajvikram Madurai Elavarasan *et al.,* [14] found in their study that the goals most affected by COVID-19 were goals 1 (no poverty) and 8 (decent work and economic growth). It also found that while much of the international community's cooperation during the COVID-19 period was used to counter the pandemic, there was also newly created or strengthened international cooperation, such as India's hydroxychloroquine exports to the United States. Despite some of these good partnerships, the UN as a whole argues that trade tension continues, the digital divide has become serious, and private investment flows are not reaching the level for sustainable development.

They also analyzed that economic impact is the area that should be dealt with most urgently and that can yield the most effective result in a short period, considering the post-pandemic situation. Next, impact on independent human, industrial & energy-based impact, environmental impact, and social impact were listed [] (Elavarasan, 2022).

3.4 Priority of SDGs

Refer to Figure 2 for the priority of SDGs suggested by this study. The most urgent SDGs are goal 17 and ecosystem-related goals (goals 13, 14, 15). Both of these serve as the foundation.

Goals 13, 14, and 15 are all at the heart of global and climate issues. If these are not achieved, the situation in developing countries will become worse, and more effort and money will be spent to counter it. It is also an issue nowadays for developed countries. Therefore, since these are basic goals that have no choice but to pay attention to, they must be achieved first, and then the rest of the goals can be viewed from a more local perspective.

Goal 17 is a little different from other goals. Though having slightly different ideas, cooperating and solidifying with each other is not a problem that needs to be solved, but rather the means needed to solve the problem, as argued by Maltais [15] (Maltais, 2018). According to UNESCAP, [16] it is a fundamental enabler of SDGs (UNESCAP, 2022). UNECE [17] presented that 'partnerships (SDG 17) between stakeholders including governments, international and regional organizations, businesses, academia and civil society are a driving force of UNECE's work' (UNECE). In addition, goal 17 can be overlooked or kept only formally since the specific goal or level of it is not clear and it is difficult to check, compared to other goals. However, it is the most urgent goal.

Rajvikram Madurai Elavarasan *et al* [14] argued that SDGs are divided into implementation-based goals and consequence-based goals, and that goal 17 has both characteristics. They analyzed it as one of the most complex tasks to implement, but the randomness of it is relatively low. This can be understood that goal 17 can be achieved if a relatively few do well (Elavarasan, 2022).

When discussing the priorities of SDGs, the concept of John Rawls' veil of ignorance should be applied. It is defined by Huang [18] as a 'moral reasoning device designed to promote impartial decision making by denying decision makers access to potentially biasing information about who will benefit most or least from the available options' (Huang, 2019). If deciding which problems are more right and just to solve from the perspective of developed countries, it may differ from that of developing countries, and vice versa. The positions are also different by country. Therefore, the SDGs, which aim to ensure the minimum quality of life for all mankind, should be viewed from the perspective of a veil of ignorance without either position. The beginning of this is to achieve goal 17 to form partnerships and the network.

Goal 17 and ecosystem-related goals have two effects: they are the goals that must be achieved from the perspective of developed countries, and they can reduce damage when achieved from the perspective of developing countries. In particular, if these are achieved first, developing countries can reduce the damage caused by problems that they do not have time to care about, and the foundation is formed to achieve general goals more effectively.

Next, general goals including goals 1 to 9, 11, 12, and 16 follow the priority. Goal 10 is the last target. None of the 17 SDGs are not urgent, but goal 10 is less urgent from a relative point of view, unlike the absolute point of view. For those in countries that are disadvantaged by the 'inequalities among countries,' such a life is a given, and most people take it as fate. There is a difference in positions between developed and developing countries. Furthermore, it becomes much easier to achieve general goals if the foundation is established by achieving first-priority goals, and if general goals are achieved, it becomes much easier to focus on goal 10.

In the figure, goal 17 and ecosystem-related goals are the top priority, followed by general goals, and finally goal 10, showing the flow of achieving sustainability. It also shows that when countries share the same goal and work together, they can achieve maximum efficiency in limited resources, and that synergy increases and trade-off decreases in the process of performing general goals when ecosystem-related goals are achieved. In his study, Siqi Yang [19] said that it is achieved when the

conflicts among the goals are prevented by studying the effects between them, and when multiple goals are integrated (Yang, 2020). And when general goals are achieved, goal 10 can be effectively pursued. This is because society needs to develop to some extent and become able to consider issues such as equality.
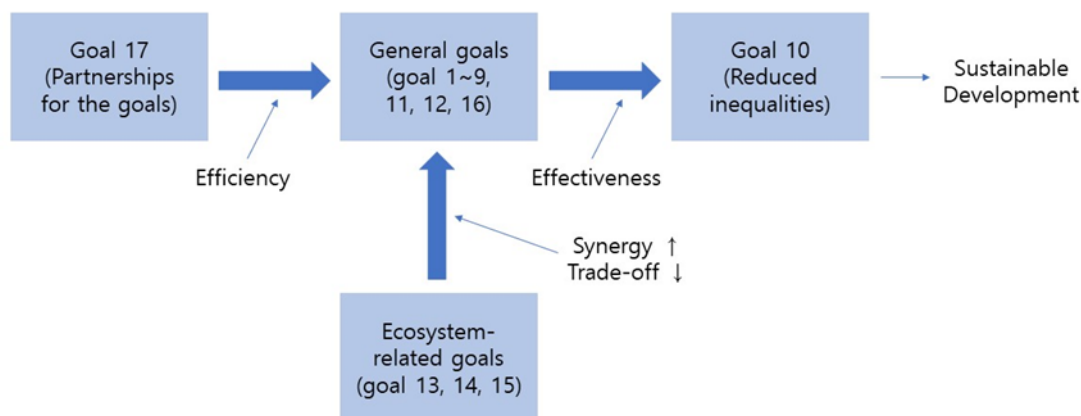

Fig. 2. Priority of SDGs suggested by this study

3.5 Priority of Targets of Goal 17

Through the common problem of COVID-19, the international community felt the importance of solidarity, and it was better known that the cooperation of every country should be the basis for solving various problems occurring in each country. This shows that goal 17 is not only the most urgent and important of the prioritized goals, but also particularly important in the current situation. Therefore, in order to pursue its practical achievement, this study proposes priorities between targets in goal 17. Refer to table 2.

Also, Rajvikram Madurai Elavarasan *et al.,* [21] analyzed that 17.4, 17.10, 17.11, 17.13, and 17.18 among the targets of goal 17 were the most negatively affected that were difficult to recover in a short period, and 17.9, 17.16, and 17.17 got positive effects, but this was temporary (Elavarasan, 2022). Therefore, unlike when proposing priorities between SDGs, the most practical and effective priorities in the current situation are suggested by actively considering the lingering impact of COVID-19. are achieved, it becomes much easier to focus on goal 10.

Table 2
Targets of goal 17 by the United Nations

Number	Description (United Nations) [20]
17.1	Strengthen domestic resource mobilization, including through international support to developing countries, to improve domestic capacity for tax and other revenue collection
17.2	Developed countries to implement fully their official development assistance commitments, including the commitment by many developed countries to achieve the target of 0.7 percent of ODA/GNI to developing countries and 0.15 to 0.20 percent of ODA/GNI to least developed countries; ODA providers are encouraged to consider setting a target to provide at least 0.20 per cent of ODA/GNI to least developed countries
17.3	Mobilize additional financial resources for developing countries from multiple sources

17.4   Assist developing countries in attaining long-term debt sustainability through coordinated policies aimed at fostering debt financing, debt relief and debt restructuring, as appropriate, and address the external debt of highly indebted poor countries to reduce debt distress

17.5   Adopt and implement investment promotion regimes for least developed countries

17.6   Enhance North-South, South-South and triangular regional and international cooperation on and access to science, technology and innovation and enhance knowledge sharing on mutually agreed terms, including through improved coordination among existing mechanisms, in particular at the United Nations level, and through a global technology facilitation mechanism

17.7   Promote the development, transfer, dissemination and diffusion of environmentally sound technologies to developing countries on favorable terms, including on concessional and preferential terms, as mutually agreed

17.8   Fully operationalize the technology bank and science, technology and innovation capacity-building mechanism for least developed countries by 2017 and enhance the use of enabling technology, in particular information and communications technology

17.9   Enhance international support for implementing effective and targeted capacity-building in developing countries to support national plans to implement all the Sustainable Development Goals, including through North-South, South-South and triangular cooperation

17.10   Promote a universal, rules-based, open, non-discriminatory and equitable multilateral trading system under the World Trade Organization, including through the conclusion of negotiations under its Doha Development Agenda

17.11   Significantly increase the exports of developing countries, in particular with a view to doubling the least developed countries' share of global exports by 2020

17.12   Realize timely implementation of duty-free and quota-free market access on a lasting basis for all least developed countries, consistent with World Trade Organization decisions, including by ensuring that preferential rules of origin applicable to imports from least developed countries are transparent and simple, and contribute to facilitating market access

17.13   Enhance global macroeconomic stability, including through policy coordination and policy coherence

17.14   Enhance policy coherence for sustainable development

17.15   Respect each country's policy space and leadership to establish and implement policies for poverty eradication and sustainable development

17.16   Enhance the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development, complemented by multi-stakeholder partnerships that mobilize and share knowledge, expertise, technology and financial resources, to support the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals in all countries, in particular developing countries

17.17   Encourage and promote effective public, public-private and civil society partnerships, building on the experience and resourcing strategies of partnerships

17.18   By 2020, enhance capacity-building support to developing countries, including for least developed countries and small island developing States, to increase significantly the availability of high-quality, timely and reliable data disaggregated by income, gender, age, race, ethnicity, migratory status, disability, geographic location and other characteristics relevant in national contexts

17.19   By 2030, build on existing initiatives to develop measurements of progress on sustainable development that complement gross domestic product, and support statistical capacity-building in developing countries

The most urgent target of goal 17 is 17.2, which is to fully implement the commitment to Official Development Assistance (ODA). According to Rajvikram Madurai Elavarasan *et al*, [21] one of the two SDGs mostly damaged by COVID-19 is goal 1, no poverty (Elavarasan, 2022).

In addition, ODA either before or after COVID-19 is much less than the value set in SDG 17.2: It is supposed to account for 0.7% of the development of developing countries, but the average amount is about 0.1%. The UN [22] said in its SDGs report that ODA is even decreasing due to COVID-19. Figures show that support has decreased by 2020 and increased by 2021. But in reality, support to aid the damage caused by COVID-19 has increased, not to help developing countries achieve SDGs, the original goal of ODA. Therefore, ODA has still decreased except for support for the response to COVID-19, and it is being used to counter COVID-19, which is not related to the originally intended development (United Nations, 2022).

However, according to Rajvikram Madurai Elavarasan *et al*, [21] the economy is the most urgent and effective area when it gets aid after the pandemic (Elavarasan, 2022). ODA can cause immediate change because it directly supports money, and it is more effective than a time-consuming method such as FDI because it is an implementation-based goal that requires only a few officials' decisions. In addition, since ODA is likely to be used not only to support the COVID-19 aid but also to support the Ukrainian war these days, more ODA is needed to achieve the original goal.

The next urgent target is 17.18, which is to support available data more to developing countries. Especially since its deadline is 2020 unlike the overall SDGs that were supposed to be achieved by 2030, it can be assumed that it was a target that could or should have been solved in a short period. However, the progress is evaluated as 'progress has been made, but is insufficient to meet the target.'

Even before COVID-19, data on the support that developing countries receive were important. Beyond the level of statistics by population, it should show whether the support is being used properly, whether it is really helpful, and if yes, how helpful it is. Then, there would be a reason for officials in developed countries to continue or provide more support, and developing countries can better utilize the support they have received without losing it to someone.

However, after COVID-19, the data became much more important. Since all countries have become difficult and ODA has decreased, higher confidence in the aid is needed to continue supporting other countries in this situation. And that trust can be strengthened by data showing how the aid is being used and how it works. It is also important to decide to increase ODA support compelling, so the data are becoming increasingly important to help someone and realize sustainable policies through international partnerships. The SDG for this is 17.18.

The third most urgent target is 17.11. It is about increasing exports from developing countries, and it has a 2020 deadline like 17.18. However, according to the UN, [23] exports from developing countries have hovered around 1% of global exports for more than a decade (United Nations, 2020).

However, being able to export means being able to create goods or services for export, while improving the domestic economy. Therefore, achieving 17.11 means improving the economy of developing countries. This is also linked to the urgency and efficiency of post-pandemic economic aid, studied by Rajvikram Madurai Elavarasan *et al*, and also to 17.2: increased ODA can be used to create a foundation for exports.

4. Conclusion

Although all SDGs are important, it is obvious that not all goals can be implemented at the same time. This is the reason why lots of research has been done on determining their priorities. However, Siqi Yang *et al* [24] argue in their study that people's preconceptions and choices are bound to have

a strong impact on their implementation, and that there is a lack of systematic research worldwide to judge its priorities in this situation (Yang, 2020).

For SDGs as a whole, this research suggests that goal 17 and ecosystem-related goals should be prioritized, targeting general goals and goal 10 later. This suggestion focuses on which goals are supposed to serve as the basis for other goals. For goal 17, it suggests that targets 17.2, 17.18, and 17.11 are the most urgent, focusing on recovering the collapsed economies of developing countries as efficiently as possible and considering the impact of COVID-19.

Although all goals and targets are important, it is time for appropriate choices and concentration in the situation of going through international crises, including COVID-19. Since each country has different situations and priorities, it should carry out urgent goals first. But at the same time, this study suggests that the international community is supposed to carry out important goals presented in this research in order and link them with each country.

Since this study focused only on the general situations and the effects of COVID-19, future studies also need to actively consider global issues other than the pandemic in prioritizing the goals, such as climate change, war, and international situations. It is also necessary to prioritize the other goals' targets as well as goal 17.

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