

## SUSTAINABILITY IN THE TIME OF TRUMP

President Trump is not a fan of many sustainability-related programmes. His actions since taking office for the second time in January 2025 are proof of that. In fact, there was what amounted to a rejection of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, in remarks on a General Assembly resolution on the International Day of Peaceful Coexistence earlier this year, by Edward Heartney, a minister-counsellor at the U.S. mission to the United Nations.

According to Heartney, the goals and the U.N. agenda for 2030 “advance a program of soft global governance that is inconsistent with U.S. sovereignty and adverse to the rights and interests of Americans.”<sup>1</sup> Thus, the results of the election that gave President Donald Trump a second term, he said, proved that “globalist endeavours like Agenda 2030 and the SDGs lost at the ballot box” to the U.S. government, focusing first and foremost on Americans (Other countries which have withdrawn support for the SDGs include Cuba, North Korea, Iran, Russia and Syria).

Clearly in line with this stance, one of the President's first actions was to withdraw America from the Paris Agreement for the second time. The first was during his previous presidency.

According to a report by ABC News in April this year, “... In the four months since Trump took office for his second term, he has declared an energy crisis in the U.S.; withdrawn the U.S. from the Paris Agreement for the second time; increased timber production in national forests and expanded the mining and use of coal in the U.S. Trump's administration has rolled back dozens of U.S. Environmental Protection Agency regulations aimed at protecting the environment; laid off hundreds of employees at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and removed mentions of climate change from public websites”.<sup>2</sup> In fact, his energy policies have been referred to as “Drill, baby, Drill”.

This is a far cry from the views of climate change activists and even further from the sustainability-related actions like the pledges by various countries to become carbon

neutral within a specified number of years. In April 2025, U.S. authorities stated that they would begin taking public input for a new five-year offshore oil and gas leasing program that could include new zones in the Arctic and elsewhere to maximize energy development.<sup>3</sup>

What does this mean for the rest of the world? Is it a 'woe is me' now we are all doomed scenario? I think not. The US is very important as it is the largest economy in the world and funds (or at least used to) a great many excellent global initiatives, but it does not mean the rest of the world is totally dependent on U.S. leadership or that the actions we take will be meaningless without US involvement. It should also be remembered that while federal rules are powerful, state rules are also effective, and the role that the states in the U.S. will play should not be underestimated. States can step in to minimise the negative effects of federal rules that are not supportive of the SDGs.<sup>4</sup>

How has the EU been reacting? On a positive note, the EU has been responding by trying to press ahead with its sustainability agenda. There has not been any major pullback by the EU, but even before Trump's presidency, the EU had been grappling with the resistance to its wide-ranging rules on reporting especially in relation to the supply chain of European companies. The expanded reporting requirements were perceived as costly, and companies were mostly not ready for widespread adoption despite the compliance timeframes given. In fact, some companies were worried about what was perceived as the anti-competitive effects of such regulation.

Ultimately, though it is clear that the European Union remains committed to the sustainability objectives of the European Green Deal. However, some leeway has been granted to affected companies, for example, through the deferred implementation of the EU Deforestation Regulation (EUDR) and anticipated delays to the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD) and Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CSDDD) under the Sustainability Omnibus Package.

The European Commission has now explicitly stated that the sustainability agenda will be balanced with the pursuit of economic growth. This represents a significant shift in the European Commission's approach, with the sustainability agenda now being evaluated for its potential to support, rather than obstruct, economic competitiveness and delivery of tangible economic benefits.<sup>5</sup>

Other notable countries of the Global South have continued with their previously announced plans regarding climate change. Thus, China is aiming to achieve net-zero in its economy by 2060. India has pledged to reach net-zero by 2070, whereas Brazil has promised to reach carbon neutrality by 2050.<sup>6</sup>

Japan has also committed to a 73% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by fiscal year 2040 compared to 2013 levels. China, meanwhile, is also reshaping its sustainability framework, and in late 2024, it released the Basic Standards for Corporate Sustainability Disclosure, setting the groundwork for a national ESG reporting system aligned with global expectations.<sup>7</sup>

The Sustainable Development Report 2025<sup>8</sup> offers a ray of hope in these pessimistic times. It was noted that Global commitment to the SDGs is strong, with 190 out of 193 countries

having presented national action plans for advancing sustainable development. Only three UN member states have not taken part in the Voluntary National review process: Haiti, Myanmar, and the United States.

In another positive development, East and South Asia have outperformed all other regions in SDG progress since 2015. On average, these regions have shown the fastest progress on the SDGs since 2015, driven notably by rapid progress on the advances on socioeconomic targets.

On a more pessimistic or perhaps a more realistic note, the Report states that on average, the SDGs are far off track. At the global level, none of the 17 goals are currently on course to be achieved by 2030. Conflicts, structural vulnerabilities, and limited access to continue to impede SDG progress in many parts of the world. While only 17 percent of the targets are on track to be achieved worldwide, most UN member states have made strong progress on targets related to access to basic services and infrastructure, including mobile broadband use (SDG 9), access to electricity (SDG 7), internet use (SDG 9), under-5 mortality rate (SDG 3), and neonatal mortality (SDG 3).

Meanwhile, the ASEAN<sup>9</sup> community, which is being chaired by Malaysia this year, has issued its own report. On a positive note, every member state has made some progress towards achieving the SDGs, although problems such as a lack of quality data, insufficient funding, and resource personnel have affected the achievement of higher levels of the SDGs.

Where Malaysia is concerned, despite the various changes in government over the last five years, there has been no major policy shift on sustainability. Sustainability remains a fundamental principle of the Madani framework and informs our major policies such as the 13<sup>th</sup> Malaysia Plan (2026-2030).

In other words, it is a struggle and as has been admitted by the United Nations in the latest SDG Report, the 2030 goals will NOT be met. However, many of the countries within the global community have started the journey and no doubt will continue in some shape or form to attempt to reach these targets within timeframes that each considers practical and realistic.

The recent ICJ advisory opinion in response to the questions posed by the UN General Assembly regarding the *Obligations of States in respect of Climate Change*, where the court unanimously held that countries have “binding obligations to ensure protection of the climate system” under the UN climate treaties, is another milestone in the march forwards by the rest of the world.<sup>10</sup>

So, will Trump affect this progress? Undoubtedly. But I believe his impact will be felt more in terms of scope and speed rather than in principle. After all, he will only be President for four years. The SDGs will continue long after Mr. Trump has left the White House.

---

1. Edith M. Lederer, 'U.S. rejects 2030 UN goals on ending poverty, tackling climate change' (The Associated Press, 7 March 2025) <https://globalnews.ca/news/11072215/trump-administration-rejects-un-global-goals-2030/> accessed 4 September.

2. Julia Jacobo, 'Earth Day 2025: How the Trump administration's policies will impact global decarbonization' (ABC News, 23 April 2025) <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/earth-day-2025-trump-administrations-policies-impact-global/story?id=121012809> accessed 4 September 2025.
3. Franklin Paul, 'Trump administration kicks off plan for expanded offshore drilling', (Reuters, 19 April 2025) <https://www.reuters.com/sustainability/climate-energy/trump-administration-kicks-off-plan-expanded-offshore-drilling-2025-04-18/> accessed 4 September 2025.
4. State Democracy United Centre, '100 Ways in 100 Days: How States are Defending the Rule of Law in the New Trump Administration' (29 April 2025) <https://statesunited.org/resources/100-days/#section-7> accessed 4 September 2025.
5. Simon Brennan, Ramon Bravo Gonzalez, Magda Puzniak-Halford, Ruth Kilsby, Adithya Subramoni and Ejona Haka, 'EU 2025 Sustainability Regulation Outlook: Unlocking competitiveness and growth' (Deloitte Insight, 30 April 2025) <https://www.deloitte.com/us/en/insights/topics/environmental-social-governance/eu-2025-sustainability-regulation-outlook.html> accessed 4 September 2025.
6. Julia Jacobon, (n 3).
7. Setyo Budiantoro, 'EU shaping the future in Trump's sustainability vacuum' (Asia Times, 16 April 2025) <https://asiatimes.com/2025/04/eu-shaping-the-future-in-trumps-sustainability-vacuum/#> accessed 4 September 2025.
8. 'Sustainable Development Report 2025 Financing Sustainable Development to 2030 and Mid-Century' <https://dashboards.sdgindex.org> accessed 4 September 2025.
9. Association of Southeast Asian Nations, 'ASEAN SDG INDICATORS PROGRESS REPORT 2025' (2025) <ASEAN-SDG-Indicators-Progress-Report-2025-04-August-2025\_swb.pdf> accessed 19 August 2025.
10. Daisy Dunne, Josh Gabbatiss, Molly Lempriere, 'ICJ: What the world court's landmark opinion means for climate change' (Carbon Brief, 25 July 2025) <https://www.carbonbrief.org/icj-what-the-world-courts-landmark-opinion-means-for-climate-change/> accessed 4 September 2025.

**Written by:**



**Pushpa SK Nair**  
general@azmilaw.com

**Corporate Communications**  
**Azmi & Associates**  
26 November 2025