



SDGS (BRAZIL)

The Sustainable Development Goals in Brazil: Challenges and Setbacks in The Brazilian Shadow Report (*Relatório Luz*) and the Role of Higher Education Institutions

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ABSTRACT | Objective: To examine the challenges and setbacks faced by Brazil in implementing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), with particular attention to the role of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and a critical assessment of the 2023 Brazilian Shadow Report (*Relatório Luz*), produced by civil society. **Originality/Value:** The article underscores the importance of monitoring SDG implementation in Brazil, highlighting the structural and ideological barriers that undermine progress. By connecting the actions of HEIs with the findings of the Shadow Report, the study addresses a gap in the literature and advances the debate on higher education's role in sustainable development. **Methods:** The analysis draws on secondary data from the 2023 Brazilian Shadow Report (*Relatório Luz*), complemented by academic literature and official documents. A critical perspective was applied to identify both advances and regressions in SDG implementation. **Findings:** The results reveal that a significant number of goals are regressing, especially in poverty eradication, hunger reduction, gender equality, and environmental protection. The contributions of HEIs remain modest, often limited to isolated initiatives with limited systemic impact. **Conclusions:** HEIs occupy a strategic yet underutilized role in promoting the SDGs in Brazil. Strengthening their engagement, alongside integrated public policies and civil society monitoring, is essential for reversing setbacks and advancing toward sustainable development.

Keywords | Brazil; Sustainable Development Goals; Higher Education Institutions; Relatório Luz; Shadow Report; Public Policy

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1. INTRODUCTION

The 2030 Agenda is a global pact proposed by the United Nations (UN) with the goal of ensuring social, economic, and environmental sustainability in the signatory countries. To consolidate this agenda, in 2015, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), known as “8 ways to change the world,” were renewed through the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), consisting of 17 Sustainable Development Goals, 169 global targets, and 175 Brazilian targets to be achieved by 2030.

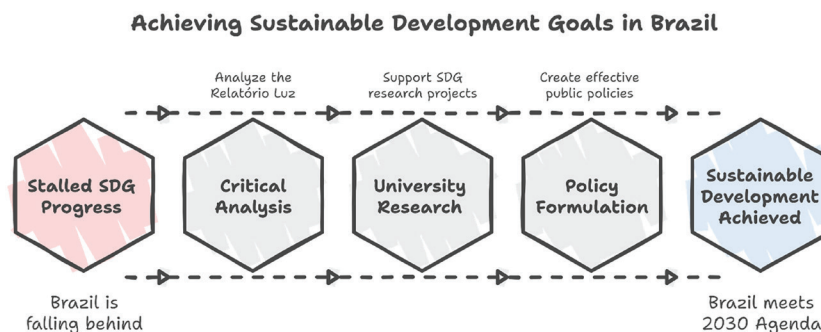
Annual evaluations of the targets are conducted and systematized by the *Relatório Luz* (Shadow Report). The *Relatório Luz* (RL 2023), referring to the year 2022, is a document produced annually by the Civil Society Working Group for the 2030 Agenda (GTSC A2030), which aims to monitor and assess Brazil’s progress in relation to the UN’s SDGs. The report is prepared by a group of more than 40 civil society organizations and sustainable development experts, who analyze data and information from various sources, including government reports, academic research, and international organization reports. The document presents a critical analysis of Brazil’s performance in relation to the SDGs, highlighting advances, challenges, and setbacks in each of the goals. Additionally, the *Relatório Luz* provides recommendations to the government and civil society on how to promote the implementation of the SDGs in the country.

The 2023 *Relatório Luz* evaluated 169 targets, of which 168 are applicable to Brazil. Of the targets assessed, 102 are in regression, 16 are threatened, 14 are stagnant, 29 are in an insufficient situation, 4 are satisfactory, and 3 lack available data (RL 2023).

Progress regarding the SDGs has been challenging, with setbacks in areas such as poverty reduction, social inequality, environmental protection, and the promotion of gender equality. The country faces structural challenges, such as a lack of investment in infrastructure, social inequality, and a lack of effective public policies to promote sustainable development.

However, public universities continue to make progress in extension and research projects, albeit timidly. An example of such efforts is the Graduate Program in Community Development (PPGDC) at the Universidade do Centro-Oeste do Paraná (UNICENTRO), which, under the coordination of Professor Silvio Roberto Stefani, conducts a research project on the SDGs and universities in Paraná. This project involves a team of postdoctoral, doctoral, master’s, and undergraduate researchers. The aim of the project is to analyze the actions of extension and research projects at Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Paraná in support of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the 2030 Agenda.

Based on these points, this book chapter aims to present a summary of the results achieved so far within the scope of the aforementioned research project, deepen the understanding of the relationship between the SDGs, and conduct a critical analysis of the *Relatório Luz* (RL 2023). The chapter explores its conclusions and recommendations in detail regarding the implementation and progress of the SDGs in the Brazilian context. This critical analysis aims to shed light on the challenges faced, the successes achieved, and the gaps that need to be filled in Brazil’s path toward meeting the SDGs, providing insights for the formulation of policies, strategies, and concrete actions that can enhance the impact of HEIs and other social actors in promoting sustainable development.





2. ANALYSIS OF THE *RELATÓRIO LUZ* (SHADOW REPORT) AND THE SDGS IN BRAZIL

The analysis of setbacks and challenges in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Brazil, as evidenced by the *Relatório Luz* (2023), reveals a significant gap between global aspirations and national reality. This gap reflects not only failures in public policies but also structural and ideological challenges that undermine efforts to achieve sustainable development in all its dimensions.

The report highlights alarming setbacks in key areas such as poverty, hunger, health, education, gender equality, access to water and sanitation, energy, decent employment, environmental conservation, and inclusive governance. These setbacks are consistent with recent analyses of development and sustainability in Brazil, which point to persistent and worsening challenges amid political, social, and environmental changes. To better assess the SDGs, Table 1 presents all 17 Goals along with an explanation of their purpose.

Table 1. The 17 Sustainable Development Goals

| SDG | Goal | Explanation |
|--------|--|--|
| SDG 1 | End poverty | End poverty in all its forms everywhere by 2030. This involves ensuring access to resources, basic services, and economic opportunities for all. |
| SDG 2 | Zero hunger | End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture |
| SDG 3 | Good health and well-being | Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages. This includes access to quality health services and the promotion of healthy practices. |
| SDG 4 | Quality education | Ensure inclusive, equitable, and quality education, and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. |
| SDG 5 | Gender equality | Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls. This involves eliminating discrimination, ensuring access to opportunities, and promoting equal participation |
| SDG 6 | Clean water and sanitation | Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all. This includes access to clean water and adequate sanitation facilities. |
| SDG 7 | Affordable and clean energy | Ensure access to reliable, sustainable, modern, and affordable energy for all. |
| SDG 8 | Decent work and economic growth | Promote sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all. |
| SDG 9 | Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure | Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization, and foster innovation. |
| SDG 10 | Reduced Inequalities | Reduce inequality within and among countries. This includes measures to promote social, economic, and political inclusion for all. |
| SDG 11 | Sustainable Cities and Communities | Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable. |
| SDG 12 | Responsible Consumption and Production | Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns. This involves reducing waste, using resources efficiently, and adopting sustainable practices. |
| SDG 13 | Climate Action | Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts. |
| SDG 14 | Life Below Water | Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas, and marine resources for sustainable development. |
| SDG 15 | Life on Land | Protect, restore, and promote the sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, manage forests sustainably, combat desertification, halt and reverse land degradation, and halt biodiversity loss. |
| SDG 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. |
| SDG 17 | Partnerships for the Goals | Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development. This includes mobilizing financial resources, sharing technology, and promoting international cooperation. |

Source: Authors based on UN (2015b).



The *Relatório Luz* (2023) highlights that SDG 1, which aims to end poverty in all its forms everywhere, is facing setbacks in Brazil. According to the report, six of the seven targets for SDG 1 are in regression, and one is under threat. The cycle of impoverishment affecting a significant portion of the population, the country's return to the Hunger Map, and restricted access to public services are cited as major causes of these outcomes. The document emphasizes the need for effective public policies and actions to combat poverty and promote social inclusion in the country.

Regarding SDG 2, it was noted that all eight targets of this goal, which aims to end hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture, are also in regression in Brazil. The report highlights that the reduction of small-scale agricultural areas and the loss of territories of indigenous peoples and traditional communities to agribusiness and mining have accelerated, and hunger affects more rural households, families where the breadwinner is unemployed or relies on informal work, black women (both African and mixed-race), and the population in the North and Northeast. The report also mentions that target 2.1 has been regressing since 2019, which violates Constitutional Amendment No. 64, which included food among social rights, as set forth in Article 6 of the Federal Constitution of 1988 (RL, 2023).

Concerning poverty and hunger (SDGs 1 and 2), there is an increase in poverty and food insecurity rates, especially among vulnerable populations and in rural areas. Recent studies, such as those by Breikreitz and Silva (2023), corroborate these trends, highlighting the relationship between socioeconomic inequality, austerity policies, and lack of investment in food security.

The *Relatório Luz* (2030) highlights that SDG 3, which aims to ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages, also presents challenges in Brazil. Access to basic sanitation services and electricity, as well as home ownership, has faced stagnation since 2016. Additionally, the report points out that the release of pesticides reached a record high, and the famine situation among the Yanomami was internationally denounced between 2022 and 2023 and ignored by the government. These aspects demonstrate the complexity and challenges faced in promoting health, well-being, and access to essential services in the country.

In the context of health (SDG 3), challenges are exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the deterioration of basic sanitation services and access to potable water. Research by Jatobá and Carvalho (2023), Ribeiro-Silva et al. (2020), and Sousa and Fernandes (2020) emphasize the importance of strengthening the Unified Health System (SUS) and promoting integrated public policies to mitigate the negative impacts arising from health issues in society, with the need for community participation and improvements in public health through open and democratic discussions.

SDG 4, which aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all, also faces setbacks in Brazil. The *Relatório Luz* (2023) highlights that target 4.1, which aims to ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable, and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes, is in regression. The report also mentions that privatization is advancing contrary to the Abidjan¹ Principles and the Federal Constitution, with age-grade distortion, high school dropout rates, and low learning outcomes. The text emphasizes the importance of promoting effective public policies and measures to ensure that everyone in the country has access to quality and inclusive education.

Regarding education (SDG 4), the increase in privatization and the persistence of disparities in access and quality highlight the need for structural reforms in education. Studies such as those by Carvalho (2013) and

1 "The Abidjan Principles on the obligations of States regarding human rights to provide public education and regulate private sector participation in education consist of 97 guiding principles. In addition to these, ten general principles offer a comprehensive overview and summary of the guiding principles. The ten general principles should be read in conjunction with the guiding principles and were adopted in their entirety as part of the Abidjan Principles." (The Abidjan Principles, 2019, p. 9).



Frigotto (2021) point out the negative impacts of privatization and the commodification of education, emphasizing the importance of public and inclusive education as a fundamental right.

The *Relatório Luz* (2023) also highlights that SDG 5, which aims to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls, faces challenges in Brazil. The document mentions that gender inequality persists in the country, with salary disparities, underrepresentation of women in leadership positions, and high rates of violence against women. Additionally, the report notes that the COVID-19 pandemic worsened gender inequalities, with negative impacts on women's participation in the labor market and increased unpaid domestic work. These aspects demonstrate the complexity and challenges faced in promoting gender equality and empowering women and girls in Brazil.

Gender inequality (SDG 5) persists, with salary disparities, underrepresentation in leadership positions, and increased violence against women. Research by Cisne and Gurgel (2008) and Meinberg and Silva (2023) highlights the need for policies that address the structural roots of gender inequality and promote women's participation in all aspects of social and economic life.

Regarding SDG 6, which aims to ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all, the *Relatório Luz* (2023) points to challenges in Brazil. The document notes that four of SDG 6's targets, which were under threat in 2020, have regressed or stagnated. Additionally, the report emphasizes that effective universal access to water and sanitation requires a state policy that prioritizes access for marginalized and vulnerable populations. The document highlights the importance of identifying service deficits, planning integrated responses nationwide, and improving monitoring through official data to reverse this situation. These aspects demonstrate the challenges faced in ensuring water and sanitation availability for all people in Brazil.

SDG 7, which aims to ensure universal access to reliable, sustainable, and modern energy services at affordable prices, also shows discrepancies in Brazil. The *Relatório Luz* (2023) notes that target 7.1, which seeks to ensure universal, reliable, modern, and affordable energy services, remains in regression. Additionally, the report points out that electricity bill arrears reached 40% in 2021, and seven out of ten families stopped buying basic food items to pay their electricity bills. These data highlight the challenges related to energy access in Brazil and the need for policies and actions to ensure universal, reliable, and affordable energy services for the entire population.

The *Relatório Luz* (2023) highlights that SDG 8, which aims to promote sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all, has faced setbacks in Brazil in recent years. The extinction and subsequent re-creation of the Ministry of Labor, the precarization of labor, and the increase in informality have been some of the marks of the previous federal administration's policy. Additionally, the Brazilian economy is extremely concentrated in national and regional oligopolies, which stifles the prospect of sustainable development in the country. Target 8.1, which aims to sustain economic growth per capita, has seen four years of regression. Despite the labor market recovery post-pandemic and the Brazil Aid Program, there has been no significant reduction in economic inequality, and the poorest population remains neglected.

Regarding SDG 9, which aims to build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization, and foster innovation, the *Relatório Luz* (2023) points out that targets 9.b and 9.c have shown insufficient progress, which was only achieved through private sector actions. The blackout of official data on these targets persisted, but Brazilian companies dedicated an average of 9% of their revenue to technology investments in 2022, with an annual growth of about 6% over 35 years (RL, 2023). However, inequality in access to technology and connectivity remains, despite the increase in the number of digital devices. Access and prices are still very unequal, especially outside major centers.

The *Relatório Luz* (2023) highlights that SDG 10, which aims to reduce inequality within and among countries, has faced setbacks in Brazil in recent years. Socioeconomic inequalities in the country have expanded



exponentially under the Bolsonaro administration, due to economic policies, ideological choices, and the lack of technical capacity of the leader and his team, inaction in the face of the pandemic, and the unpredictable impacts of the Russia-Ukraine war. Despite the labor market recovery post-pandemic and the Brazil Aid Program, there has been no significant reduction in economic inequality, and the poorest population remains neglected. Target 10.1 moved from three years of regression to a situation of progress, but still insufficient. The ratio of the average income of the bottom 40% to the total population's average income increased but is still far from the established target. Socioeconomic inequalities have deeper impacts on women and girls, black populations, indigenous peoples, and historically more vulnerable social groups, especially in the North and Northeast regions.

Regarding SDG 11, which aims to make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable, the report highlights challenges in Brazil. The SDG 11 panorama reflects fragile housing, urban mobility, sanitation (SDG 6), labor (SDG 8), and climate policies (SDG 13), combined with the freezing of rural and urban settlements for indigenous populations, quilombolas, and landless people. The number of precarious and informal settlements or inadequate housing reached 104,475, according to the 2022 Census. The ODS Brazil Panel lacks data for five targets of this goal. Additionally, the Brazilian State responded “yes” to the indicator on “existence of national urban policies or regional plans that ensure balanced territorial development with fiscal responsibility and adherence to the Sendai Framework for disaster risk reduction” amid pandemic impacts, worsening environmental racism, and climate emergency. This is contradictory, and the tragedies in the fluminense city of Petrópolis and the states of Bahia, Pernambuco, Minas Gerais, São Paulo, Espírito Santo, and Sergipe in the last two years are not accounted for in the government's ODS data repository (RL, 2023).

Regarding SDG 12, which aims to ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns, the *Relatório Luz* (2023) indicates that this goal has faced setbacks in Brazil in recent years. Of the eleven targets analyzed, only two were rated higher compared to the *Relatório Luz* 2022, with the improvement in target 12.a resulting from a change in the interpretation of available data: the installed renewable energy generation capacity per capita in the country was considered, rather than Brazil's support to other countries. Five targets remained at the same level (four of them in regression), and four declined in classification in 2022, particularly concerning access to information and environmental education. The lack of responsible and sustainable production and consumption patterns, which contributes to and suffers from the multiple crises—political, economic, social, environmental, and climatic—that the world faces, has led to a regression in the implementation of SDG 12.

The *Relatório Luz* (2023) highlights that SDG 13, which aims to improve education, increase awareness, and build human and institutional capacity on climate change mitigation, adaptation, impact reduction, and early warning, has faced regressions in environmental and climate education in Brazil. The budget analysis by specialists indicated that only three public policies in this area were developed and/or maintained between 2019 and 2022. Additionally, the ODS Brazil Panel has not been updated for this target since 2020. The lack of progress in environmental and climate education reflects a scenario of regression, with significant impacts on the human and institutional capacity to address climate change.

SDG 14, which aims to conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas, and marine resources for sustainable development, has also regressed in Brazil. Target 14.a, which deals with the conservation and sustainable use of marine resources, has not shown significant progress. Issues such as overfishing, pollution, and the degradation of marine ecosystems continue to be serious problems in the country. Additionally, target 14.b, which concerns access to marine genetic resources and the fair and equitable sharing of benefits, remains without available data. The lack of progress in conserving and sustainably using marine resources reflects a scenario of regression, with significant impacts on biodiversity and the country's economy.

SDG 15, which aims to protect, restore, and promote the sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, manage forests sustainably, combat desertification, halt and reverse land degradation, and halt biodiversity loss, has also



faced setbacks in Brazil. The budget analysis conducted by specialists indicated that only three public policies in this area were developed and/or maintained between 2019 and 2022. Furthermore, the ODS Brazil Panel has not been updated for this target since 2020. The lack of progress in protecting, restoring, and sustainably using terrestrial ecosystems reflects a scenario of regression, with significant impacts on biodiversity and environmental sustainability in the country (RL, 2023).

The environmental crisis, evident in SDGs 6 through 15, is exacerbated by the lack of effective policies for conserving and sustainably using natural resources. Studies such as those by Santos (2023), Silva and Anunciação (2023), and Silva and Branchi (2021) warn about the impacts of environmental degradation on biodiversity, climate, and water security, highlighting the urgent need for actions to protect ecosystems and promote environmental sustainability.

Regarding SDG 16, which aims to promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all, and build effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions at all levels, the *Relatório Luz* (2023) indicates that socioeconomic inequalities in Brazil have expanded exponentially due to economic policies, ideological choices, and the government's lack of technical capacity. Inaction during the pandemic and the unpredictable impacts of the Russia-Ukraine war also contributed to the widening inequalities. These factors have negatively impacted the promotion of peaceful and inclusive societies and access to justice for all in the country.

Lastly, concerning SDG 17, which aims to strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development, the *Relatório Luz* (2023) highlights that this goal has faced challenges in Brazil. The document points out that targets 17.9 and 17.10 have shown insufficient progress, achieved only through private sector actions. Furthermore, inequality in access to technology and connectivity persists, despite the increase in digital devices. The lack of significant advancements in promoting effective partnerships for sustainable development reflects a challenging scenario for the implementation of SDG 17 in Brazil.

In summary, the analysis of setbacks and challenges in the SDGs in Brazil highlights the urgent need for coordinated and evidence-based actions to address structural problems that hinder progress toward sustainable development. This requires not only adequate policies and investments but also a renewed commitment to the principles of social justice, gender equality, and environmental sustainability across all spheres of political, economic, and social life in the country.

3. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

A detailed assessment of the challenges and setbacks regarding the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Brazil, as outlined in the *Relatório Luz* (2023), reveals a concerning and complex picture. Over the years, the country has faced significant obstacles on its path to achieving the targets set by the 2030 Agenda. From eradicating poverty to promoting gender equality and environmental conservation, each SDG presents areas of concern and gaps that require immediate attention and coordinated action.

The setbacks highlighted in the *Relatório Luz* (2023) reflect not only failures in public policies but also deep structural and ideological issues that permeate Brazilian society. The lack of investment in infrastructure, persistent social inequality, and environmental degradation are challenges that demand holistic approaches and integrated strategies.

However, it is crucial to acknowledge the efforts made by various sectors of society, including universities and civil society organizations, in seeking solutions and advancements towards the SDGs. Research projects, extension programs, and community initiatives demonstrate a renewed commitment to sustainable development and provide insights to address current challenges.



Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) play a fundamental role in implementing the SDGs by promoting research, teaching, and outreach focused on socio-environmental issues. Through extension programs, research projects, and academic curricula oriented towards sustainability, HEIs empower students and the community to understand and address challenges related to the SDGs. Additionally, partnerships between HEIs and other institutions facilitate the creation of innovative solutions and the dissemination of the knowledge necessary to drive positive changes towards sustainable development.

To make significant progress towards the SDGs, effective coordination among various social, governmental, and non-governmental actors is essential. This requires not only adequate policies and investments but also a paradigm shift in relation to social justice, gender equality, and environmental sustainability. Active participation from civil society, transparency in public policies, and the strengthening of democratic institutions are crucial for ensuring sustainable and inclusive progress.

In light of the challenges presented (Figure 2), this chapter emphasizes the urgency of concrete, evidence-based actions to address the structural issues impeding progress towards the SDGs. Only through collective commitment and an integrated approach will it be possible to transform challenges into opportunities and build a more just, equitable, and sustainable future for all Brazilians.

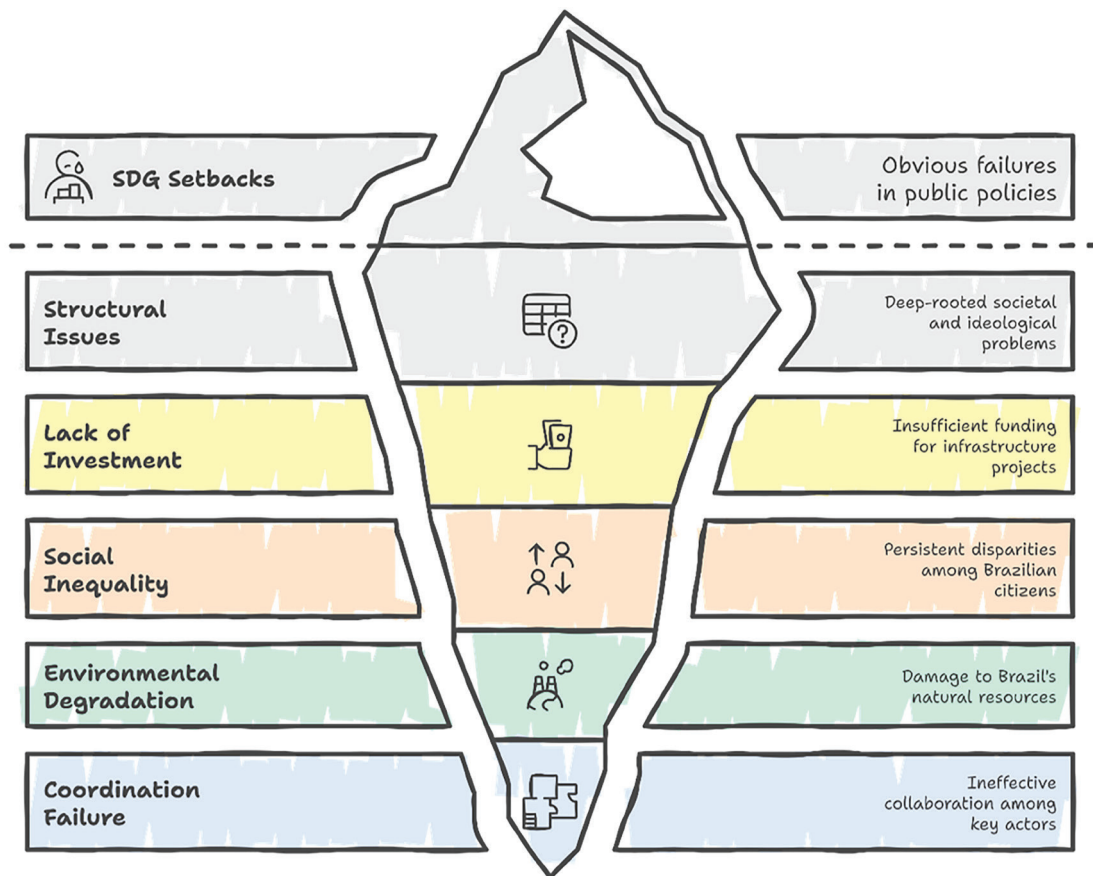


Figure 2. Brazil's SDG setbacks reveal deeper issues.

Source: Authors.



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