

What do the Sustainable Development Goals mean for the UK?

The current global development framework, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)¹ expires at the end of 2015. Consequently, the international community and stakeholders around the world have been engaged in a process to negotiate a new set of global goals to incentivise and measure progress on sustainable development and poverty eradication: the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)². These consist of 17 goals and 169 targets, which were formally adopted by the international community towards the end of September 2015 at the UN in New York.

Unlike the MDGs – which focus primarily on social development priorities in low-income countries – the SDGs are intended to apply to developing and developed countries alike. They are designed to go beyond the MDGs and to provide a comprehensive vision and framework for development for all countries. The goals will therefore have to contribute to poverty eradication in low income countries whilst at the same time addressing the patterns of high consumption and production in the developed world, in an attempt to balance or integrate economic activity and environmental sustainability.

This ambitious plan was outlined in the outcome document of the Rio+20 conference on sustainable development, which took place in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil in June 2012³. The document, entitled “The Future we Want”, stipulates that the SDGs will be ‘universally applicable to all countries’, regardless of their level of development. The SDGs are intended to embody a shared vision of progress towards a safe, just and –most of all – sustainable space in which all of us can thrive on the planet. They reflect the principle of social justice that no-one and no country should be left behind, and that everyone and every country should be regarded as having a common responsibility for delivering this sustainable global vision. However it is not clear how this idea of universality will be put into practice in the UK, leaving it to open to subjective interpretation. It seems that little consideration has been given to how the principle of universality will be applied in practice and what implications a universal framework might have at the national level.

The terms ‘sustainability’ and ‘sustainable development’ are problematic in themselves. They have been weakened as concepts by having become rather different from the aspirations set out in the Brundtland report, and have been transformed into an excuse for economic growth. So we might ask, what exactly is being sustained? To underline this point, here in the UK the National Planning Policy Framework⁴ published by the Department for Communities and Local Government in 2012 states in no uncertain terms “*Development means growth*”. Quite how this is to be reconciled with the report’s preceding statement that “*Sustainable means ensuring that better lives for ourselves don’t mean worse lives for future generations*” remains to be seen.

Another publication, the UK government’s Sustainable Development Strategy, Securing the Future⁵, published in 2005, is more consistent with the Sustainable Development Goals framework with its twin goals of ‘ensuring a strong, healthy and just society’ whilst ‘living within environmental limits’ and its three supporting aims: ‘achieving a sustainable economy’, ‘promoting good governance’ and ‘using sound science responsibly’. Even so there is clearly an issue to be resolved in enabling the developing world to reduce poverty levels in line with the global aspirations set out in targets like the MDGs and SDGs, whilst ensuring that we do

¹ <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals>

² <http://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-development-goals/>

³ <http://www.uncsd2012.org/content/documents/727The%20Future%20We%20Want%2019%20June%201230pm.pdf>

⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-planning-policy-framework--2>

⁵ https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/69412/pb10589-securing-the-future-050307.pdf

not impoverish the generations to come. Few global leaders have the courage to say it, but might this mean taking a critical look at what we understand by “development” as applied in the developed world?

Focussing on the concept of universality, a recent report⁶ published by Stakeholder Forum for a Sustainable Future examined the challenge that the SDGs will pose for the developed world⁷. Overall the report identifies the goals of sustainable energy (SDG 7), sustainable consumption and production (SDG 12) and combating climate change (SDG 13) as the three greatest challenges facing developed countries. These are the goals on which the world as a whole needs the developed world to place a strong emphasis for action on if we are to relieve the pressures on our planet and its natural systems. A fourth goal (SDG 8) on economic growth, also contains targets that pose serious challenges to continuing with “business as usual” in the developed world.

To date, however, the focus of the UK government on the SDGs has been in terms of international aid commitments. Going forward there is an opportunity to match this with a programme of actions focusing on how the SDGs will impact on development in the UK. This would require preparatory work on UK-specific policies in anticipation of their introduction. This approach has already been taken in Wales, which adopted a bottom-up approach and undertook a national consultation to determine sustainable development priorities designed to map to the SDGs, resulting in the “Well-Being of Future Generations Act (Wales)” introduced in April 2015.

In contrast, there have been no discussions in England involving the general public or organisations (whether civil society or business) on how the SDGs might apply to domestic policy and what their implications might be. This lack of interest is perhaps surprising, especially since David Cameron chaired the High Level Panel on the Post-2015 Development Agenda⁸. Establishing formal mechanisms for engagement by the UK Government with the Post-2015 process, including clear plans for the UK's domestic implementation of the SDGs, would improve transparency at home and support the UK's publically stated commitment to the SDGs being implemented in other countries.

Within DFID there is a Post-2015 team leading on negotiations over the SDGs at an international level; and a Cabinet Office team co-ordinating Post-2015 international and domestic response. Public statements on Post-2015 have mostly been from DFID and, as stated above, tend to suggest that, as with the MDGs, the Government's focus will be primarily on developing country issues and less on the implications of the SDGs for the domestic agenda.

This current limited approach by the UK government risks giving a superficial interpretation of what the SDGs are designed to achieve. The Sustainable Development Goals have extended the focus on development from simply a question of improving material living conditions in developing countries, but to setting out how everyone can achieve a decent standard of living in the long term, within our environmental limits. This means designing relevant strategies for protecting resources and the environment on which we all depend, with developed countries being held up to the same level of scrutiny as developing countries were under the MDGs.

⁶ <http://www.stakeholderforum.org/index.php/our-publications-sp-1224407103/reports-in-our-publications/621-the-implications-of-the-sdgs-for-developed-countries>

⁷ The methodology used in the report asked assessors to assign a relative score to each of the 17 Goals, and the different targets within them, according to three criteria: applicability, implementability, and transformational impact (both in the UK and for the world as a whole). The assessors' scores were then aggregated and averaged to give an overall score for each target, then combined to give an average score for each goal. The four goals examined in this present report scored maximum or near-maximum points on their relevance to the UK.

⁸ www.post2015hlp.org

As far as the UK is concerned there are several targets within the SDGs that are clearly relevant and would require clear policy changes if they are to be achieved. These are examined below.

For example, within SDG 7 – *Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all* - the commitments include:

7.2 Increase substantially the share of renewable energy in the global energy mix by 2030.

and

7.3 Double the global rate of improvement in energy efficiency by 2030.

The SDG targets clearly require increased incentives to prioritise the take up of renewables over fossil fuel use. If this were to be applied in the UK it would at the very least mean the Conservative government having to rethink their recent decision not only to end onshore windfarm subsidies in 2016, but also the withdrawal of support for renewable energy as a whole⁹. Anyone with an interest in promoting renewables and encouraging energy efficiency would find it useful to draw the government's attention to these targets.

In contrast, it is less clear at first sight how Goal 8, which requires governments to "*Promote inclusive and sustainable economic growth, employment and decent work for all*", would transform policies within the UK since on the surface this does not appear to suggest that the UK should move away from solutions based on GDP growth (as Green House advocates). Nor is it immediately clear in the goal how the pursuit of growth would realistically be truly sustainable. High dependency on continuing increases in consumption and production in developed economies has had an obvious detrimental impact on the environment. However, target 8.4, which focuses on resource efficiency, sets out the challenge for the UK and other developed countries to square the circle and decouple development from environmental damage:

8.4 Improve progressively through 2030 global resource efficiency in consumption and production, and endeavour to decouple economic growth from environmental degradation in accordance with the 10-year framework of programmes on sustainable consumption and production with developed countries taking the lead.

Referring to "economic growth" in this context is probably not particularly helpful – whatever qualitative improvements this target intends, they are unlikely to rely on traditional, resource-intensive GDP growth. The specific exhortation for developed countries to take the lead on this means that the UK government, if it is serious about its commitment to the SDGs, cannot shirk its responsibility to examine possibilities for different kinds of growth that are less damaging, and perhaps even consider a post-growth approach to achieving this target.

Goal 10 on inequality is something we are used to seeing in the context of international development, but this goal could also equally be used to good effect in the UK since its title – "*Reduce inequality **within** and among countries*" (author's emphasis) – does not simply focus on the gap between the developed and the developing world, but provides a reason to examine domestic inequality as well. One target in particular:

10.4 Adopt policies especially fiscal, wage, and social protection policies and progressively achieve greater equality

⁹ <http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2015/jun/18/tories-end-onshore-windfarm-subsidies-2016>

could be used to question the logic of the Conservatives' tax credits cut last month¹⁰ and highlight the cognitive dissonance of a government that introduces a high-profile controversial change to fiscal policy ten days before its leader publicly aligns himself with a global agreement that contradicts it.

The issues of sustainable consumption and production – which clearly pose a huge challenge for developed countries – are set out in the targets that make up Goal 12. Two targets are particularly relevant to the UK:

12.1 Implement the 10-Year Framework of Programmes on sustainable consumption and production (10YFP), all countries taking action, with developed countries taking the lead, taking into account the development and capabilities of developing countries.

and

12.6 Encourage companies, especially large and trans-national companies, to adopt sustainable practices and to integrate sustainability information into their reporting cycle.

Any attempt to achieve these targets is likely to involve substantial changes in current UK practices and economic policies, which currently put growth before environmental and social sustainability. If the government wishes to achieve these, a rather different approach than the one currently being followed will be needed to underpin its response as the implication of both of these targets is that a larger share of the responsibility should be borne by those who are richer and better resourced.

Climate change features in Goal 13 – “*Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts*”, with two targets particularly relevant to the UK:

13.2 Integrate climate change measures into national policies, strategies, and planning.

and

13.3 Improve education, awareness raising and human and institutional capacity on climate change mitigation, adaptation, impact reduction, and early warning.

The former relates to the UK's approach to planning, which has de-prioritised environmental sustainability recently. The latter's clear emphasis on education could, if implemented appropriately, help increase the weight of public opinion behind those campaigning for a change to more sustainable practices. This in turn might then be reflected in climate change becoming a higher priority for all parties in elections, both in terms of public opinion feeding into the debates and the resulting manifestos of political parties.

The SDGs therefore give us another legitimate reason to ask the UK government searching questions about its policies, and provide a platform on which to hold their answers up to international scrutiny. They should be a focal point for those campaigning for a more sustainable global future. The MDGs were not perfect, but did show how the prospect of countries being judged publicly on an international stage can bring about change for the better. In a similar way the SDGs provide an additional framework, but for developed as well as developing countries. So where in the past the MDGs directed campaigners to question whether UK trade and aid policies were effective in making poverty history, now the SDGs will equally put the focus upon the UK itself. Defra, DECC, BIS and the UK Treasury will be scrutinised alongside DFID. The government will have to answer questions on whether domestic efforts to reduce the risk of global ecological and environmental disaster and

¹⁰ <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2015/sep/15/government-wins-vote-to-cut-working-tax-credits>

achieve social justice, is sufficient enough - as all governments are held to account over the next 15 years.

There is growing concern in some quarters, however, that the SDGs have been hijacked by corporate interests. A recent article, "Public SDGs or Private GGs?" on the Global Policy Watch blog¹¹ sounded the alarm at the way that the "Sustainable Development Goals" have been rebranded as "Global Goals", with the titles of the goals themselves subtly altered and the icons promoting them subject to copyright. The article suggested that this was related to the high level of corporate involvement in the launch and efforts to publicise the Goals.

Whether this concern is misplaced and the changes are simply the result of a badly thought through PR exercise remains to be seen. What is clear is that if groups that stand to benefit from the Goals do not understand how they can be used in campaigning and fail to take ownership of them from the start, there is a risk that the implementation of the Goals will become diluted and toothless. If we understand the SDGs' potential and apply the right vision and strategy, we can ensure that they will be a useful lever and powerful indicators of real progress going forward. We should use them.

¹¹ <https://www.globalpolicywatch.org/blog/2015/09/25/public-sdgs-or-private-ggs/>