

Implementing the Sustainable Development Goals: Where to start?



We need to take pragmatic and integrated approaches to implementing the most ambitious and comprehensive global agenda ever to have been agreed

Background: What are the SDGs

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are an integrated and indivisible package of goals and targets that should be delivered for all people in all countries. The SDGs were developed by 193 states of the United Nations. Never before has a global agreement been so encompassing and had such potential to drive change. The SDGs include the economic, social, environmental and governance dimensions of sustainable development, with 17 interlinked goals and 169 targets. Given the breadth and interconnected nature of the goals and targets, it may be necessary to prioritise and phase different aspects of the agenda, though this also problematic.

Where to start

Governments are accountable for delivering on the 2030 agenda as a whole, for all people, and must ensure all goals are delivered at the national level. Many of the SDGs' targets already existed in international laws, treaties, conventions and agreements, so some will have seen varying levels of progress in the past. In terms of phasing of the SDGs, governments may want to start with those goals that are most behind and those goals that have the potential to be most transformational according to each country's context.

At the same time, private sector and civil society, actors supporting SDG delivery, whether international or domestic, are likely to have a particular niche or specialism and it is not appropriate to assume they should deliver on all the goals. At a minimum, we recommend all stakeholders engaged in the delivery of the SDGs interrogate **how they contribute to the agenda as a whole**, and **ensure an integrated approach for implementation**.

To stimulate debate, the Bond SDGs group has set out key risks and recommendations on indivisibility and the prioritisation of the SDGs.

Risks:

- **Cherry picking:** In prioritising some SDGs over others, there is a risk that governments, private sector companies and other stakeholders adopt a 'pick and choose' approach where they pick easy wins and choose to avoid more controversial aspects of the agenda. For example, governments may be tempted to avoid issues which challenge prevailing social norms (e.g. gender and LGBT equality), or present a major shift to our economies and behaviour (e.g. sustainable production and consumption).
- **'SDG washing' by the private sector:** Similarly, private sector companies may avoid a more transformational approach to SDG implementation, choosing to fund various social or environmental projects while stopping short of changes to their business practices. This could lead to 'SDG washing' where businesses report on delivering some SDGs while other aspects of their business practices could undermine other goal areas. We would expect larger private corporations to assess their business practices against all the SDGs, identifying where they positively contribute and where they may have a negative impact, or where SDG targets are not relevant and why.

- **Raising the bar:** Countries are at different stages of development, with implications for their performance against the goals. The effort required for reaching the goals and targets in the least developed countries will be much greater than in developed countries, particularly for goals focused on human development outcomes. We should be mindful of developed countries prioritising issues which are easier to reach and overstating their accomplishments, while avoiding goal areas that are more challenging in their context, such as energy and sustainable production and consumption. In addition, the SDGs and their targets are not intended as ceilings and developed countries should be expected to raise their level of ambition accordingly to achieve the global aggregate target.
- **'Siloed' approach:** The way in which the goals are set out does not encourage an understanding of the connections across development domains and risks creating a 'siloed' response to the goals. As an interdependent set of goals and targets, they must be pursued together since progress in one area often depends on progress in other areas. Many important issues, such as gender equality, violence, health, climate change, and sustainable consumption and production, cut across different goals and targets.
- **Policy coherence for sustainable development gets missed:** Focusing on certain goals may have unintended consequences and undermine progress in other areas – whether domestically or globally. For example, a country which makes greater progress on infrastructure and economic development may be undermining targets related to the environment and tackling climate change. Similarly, the impact of a donor providing 0.7% of GDP as aid, while failing to improve tax transparency may reduce tax revenue and hamper SDG progress in developing countries. Only by approaching the SDGs in an integrated and holistic way will these policy coherence and domestic-global issues be identified and addressed.

Recommendations:

- **Start with the most transformational goals and targets:** Where a phased approach is needed, countries should start with the goals and targets which require urgent action and have the potential to be most transformative given their national context. This will look different for different countries. It should also be recognised that some of the most transformational issues may require an incremental approach and take a longer time to achieve (e.g. longer term action needed to tackle harmful social norms and gender equality). Stakeholder Forum has also proposed a methodology for identifying areas for transformational change in developed countries¹.
- **Leave no one behind:** In order to achieve the goals, it will not be enough to prioritise the majority of people, while failing to deliver for those who are socially excluded or experience multiple discriminations. In fact, Agenda 2030 commits all signatories to reach the furthest behind first. Governments should ensure progress against the SDGs is made for all people, particularly marginalised groups, even if it is more difficult or expensive. At the outset this requires greater contextual analysis to understand who is being left behind, followed by targeted actions and participatory monitoring.

¹ Stakeholder Forum, Universal Sustainable Development Goals: Understanding the Transformational Challenge for Developed Countries https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/1684SF_-_SDG_Universality_Report_-_May_2015.pdf

- **Informed prioritisation:** In order for governments' prioritisation to be meaningful, it should be backed by clear rationale and evidence. A first step would be for countries to assess their current status - and that of different social and economic groups - in relation to the goals and targets. Data from existing human rights frameworks and reporting mechanisms as well as a wide ranging civil society consultation should also be harnessed to identify gaps and areas to prioritise for early action. More broadly, when stakeholders decide to focus on a particular goal or target they need to consider how that goal or target links to the other goal areas, avoiding a 'siloed' approach. Assessing the linkages to other goals and targets and taking an integrated approach should always be a starting point when planning SDG interventions.
- **National plan and consultation:** Governments should clearly set out a national plan for SDG implementation, with an explicit rationale for tackling the most transformative SDGs. National implementation plans should be developed openly and transparently in collaboration with civil society and the private sector and be informed by public and parliamentary consultation.
- **Working with partners to address the goals:** While the SDGs need to be implemented as a whole, not every stakeholder (e.g. international organisation, NGO, think tank) needs to address every goal and target. One approach is to work strategically with partners to ensure that gaps are covered and the linkages between goals are fully understood. This would help ensure the goals are addressed comprehensively but with different organisations retaining their specialisms and expertise.

Conclusion: Integration is key

The SDGs are the most ambitious and comprehensive global agenda ever to have been agreed. If implemented in their entirety the SDGs stand to transform our world to be safer, fairer and healthier. Approaches to implementation need to be pragmatic but the principles of integration and indivisibility must be upheld in any process of prioritisation and phasing goals and targets.

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Contact: Mariana Rudge, Bond (mrudge@bond.org)

Bond
Society Building
8 All Saints Street
London
N1 9RL, UK

+44 (0)20 7837 8344
bond.org.uk

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