

Executive summary

Our world today is dealing with intersecting crises of monumental proportions. The Covid-19 pandemic continues to wreak havoc across the globe, pushing millions of people into poverty, deepening inequalities, disrupting children’s education, and putting pressure on already weak health systems, exacerbating the very problems the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were designed to address. At the same time, we are seeing the growing threats of climate change and conflict.

Even before Covid-19, achieving the transformative potential of the SDGs was a huge challenge, but the events of the past few years mean we need to redouble our efforts. In an era of instability, the SDGs provide us with a framework to build resilience and address the interconnected crises of climate change, Covid-19, conflicts, poverty and inequality, whilst leaving no one behind. This report analyses the UK’s international implementation of the SDGs.

The 2030 Agenda, which includes the 17 SDGs, is a commitment that brings together human rights, development and environmental frameworks. It represents an agreement by world leaders to collectively create a fairer, more prosperous and sustainable world. The 2030 Agenda integrates the three dimensions of sustainable development – economic, social and environmental – and is closely linked to other global and regional sustainable development frameworks, such as the Paris Agreement on Climate Change and the Addis Ababa Action Agenda, the second of which provides a new framework for financing the SDGs.

The UK’s progress from an international perspective

At the annual UN High-level Political Forum (HLPF) for Sustainable Development, governments and other stakeholders come together to review international progress on the SDGs and undertake Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) of each country’s progress. The UK government last reported to the HLPF in 2019. While it played a central role in negotiating the SDGs in 2015, there are clear gaps in the UK government’s own implementation of the SDGs. In the 2019 VNR, the UK government committed to establishing a multi-stakeholder engagement mechanism to monitor progress on the SDGs, both domestically and internationally,

and to improve cross-government delivery of the SDGs. However, three years on, very little progress has been made on meeting any of the commitments laid out in the report. Against the backdrop of Covid-19 and the growing threats of climate change and conflict, which have knocked back hard-earned progress on the SDGs, the UK’s lack of global leadership on the SDGs is concerning. The UK’s decisions to cut Official Development Assistance (ODA) during the pandemic and merge the highly specialised and well-regarded Department for International Development with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office have undermined the UK’s position as a thought leader in international development and its power to convene countries to push for positive social change.

The UK’s new international development strategy

The UK’s new international development strategy was launched in May 2022¹. This provides an important framing for the future of UK international development and ODA, which are relevant to SDG implementation.

The strategy has some welcome aspects. It acknowledges the importance of the SDGs and the links between poverty, climate change and conflict. It prioritises women and girls, and it commits to upholding human rights and building transparent and accountable institutions. It also pledges that all ODA spending departments will report annually on progress to achieve the SDGs, and that the cross-government means of implementing ODA will be refreshed, yet there is a lack of clarity on how or when both will be implemented – sectoral participation here will be critical. But there are significant gaps in the strategy. Beyond the headline commitment to the SDGs, there is very little information on how they will inform decision-making. The principles of the 2030 Agenda are not addressed; there isn’t a clear commitment to leave no one behind, which was previously a central pillar of UK international development. There is an overemphasis on the economic pillar of sustainable development, without the acknowledgement of the indivisibility of the 2030 Agenda, and there is little on policy coherence, especially in the shift from multilateral to bilateral aid.

1. FCDO, UK Government (2022), [The UK Government’s Strategy for International Development](#)

The need for this report

This report builds on Bond's 2019 paper *The UK's Global Contribution to the Sustainable Development Goals*². It evaluates the UK's progress in implementing all 17 of the SDGs and highlights critical gaps. It looks at the impact Covid-19, the ODA cuts and other emerging threats are having on the UK's ability to deliver the SDGs and leave no one behind. It contains concrete policy recommendations that should be followed to get us back on track to effectively deliver on the SDGs. We have not included domestic progress on the SDGs, as this will be covered in an upcoming report by the UN Global Compact Network UK. Our analysis complements that analysis by addressing the areas where, in Bond's view, focus and investment are most needed from an international perspective.

The report provides an independent civil society perspective on the UK's international delivery on the SDGs. It is an extensive, collaborative effort, coordinated by Bond's SDG Group, which consists of over 150 member organisations. The group advocates for the full, inclusive implementation of the SDGs with a strong focus on their global impact. The report brings together material from across the international development sector and beyond, with direct contributions from over 50 organisations and 9 networks and working groups. Chapters have been compiled by individuals and organisations with the relevant expertise. All the goals are interlinked, so this report also offers us, as civil society, the opportunity to develop and improve our integrated approaches, including multi-sectoral ways of working.

The content and recommendations in this document reflect wide consensus across the sector. However, this does not necessarily mean that all organisations, including leads for each chapter, necessarily endorse every point made. The report reflects the diversity of approaches and ways of working across the sector and Bond's network. We hope this leads to fruitful discussion and improved collaboration between the UK government and civil society during future VNR processes.

Cross-cutting issues

While the individual chapters on the 17 SDGs address specific challenges and policy recommendations for each goal, several cross-cutting issues have emerged that are worth highlighting here.

1. The UK has lost its direction on the SDGs

Facing the interconnected crises of Covid-19, conflicts and climate change, the world needs leadership on the SDGs now more than ever. But since 2019, there has been a noticeable lack of strategic direction in the UK's international implementation of the SDGs.

As an internationally-agreed framework that addresses all three dimensions of sustainable development (economic, social and environmental), the SDGs provide a blueprint for global cooperation and solidarity. Recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic must be grounded in a firm commitment to the SDGs and fulfil the human rights principles that underpin the 2030 Agenda if it is to be resilient, fair and inclusive. The UK has not set out how it will contribute to this important, interconnected agenda – this lack of policy coherence is a running theme in all the report's chapters.

2. Recent crises reinforce the need for ODA, yet the UK has drastically cut its contribution

It is clear that the Covid-19 pandemic, climate change and persistent conflict are exacerbating existing patterns of inequality. In 2019, the UK government promised to leave no one behind in its international development work. But, so far, its commitment to this transformative principle of the 2030 Agenda has not translated into all of its policies, programmes and ODA spending, and it was almost entirely absent in the UK's new international development strategy. There are excellent standalone examples, which should be acknowledged, but there is a lack of consistency across the UK government's international work. There is also evidence that recent decisions made by the UK government caused significant harm to those left furthest behind, including women, girls and people with disabilities. Tackling inequalities between and within countries must be a key focus of the FCDO in the coming years.

3. The UK needs to better integrate the SDGs into its policymaking and accountability

The UK has made some strides in building the capacity of national statistical systems in partner countries and promoting data disaggregation. But it needs to go further in ensuring that everyone is counted and that evidence-based solutions to meet the SDGs, based on timely, quality, disaggregated data, are being implemented. It is absolutely crucial that we know how UK ODA is being used in efforts to achieve the SDGs, including who is being left behind and why. To know where gaps remain, data systems must be able to track, not just national or global averages, but progress relating to people who have been marginalised and left behind.

4. There needs to be more transparency on commitments

While the UK's past record on transparency and accountability has been strong, its commitment to transparency is waning, and accountability has been

2. Bond (2019), [The UK's global contribution to the Sustainable Development Goals](#)

consistently undermined. The government demonstrated an extreme lack of transparency around the ODA cuts, which significantly impacted communities that have been marginalised as well as damaging community relationships and local trust. This has eroded faith in the UK as a development partner, at home and abroad. Additionally, although the UK government has made some welcome announcements at international summits, it has been reluctant to publish delivery plans to turn these announcements into reality. Transparency and accountability are the cornerstones of effective development. To demonstrate the impact of UK ODA on achieving the SDGs these principles must be fully reembraced.

The UK could play a transformative and influential role in achieving the SDGs. To do so, urgent action is needed to unite civil society, academia, the private sector, local government and others to collectively implement an ambitious plan. A first step is to take immediate action to fulfil its 2019 VNR commitment to establish an inclusive, multi-stakeholder engagement mechanism on SDG implementation. There must be greater coherence between the UK's domestic and international policy, and whilst this report focuses on the international expertise of Bond members, there is a clear recommendation that domestic implementation needs greater clarity and coherence. This is the role of the UK government, and one this report recommends it urgently plays.

The role of civil society – why a collective effort is needed

The SDGs carry an important message: to leave no one behind. These goals really are for everyone, everywhere and that is exactly what it will take to achieve them by 2030; for everyone to come together and take action.

While the Millennium Development Goals paved the way for the SDGs, more people around the world are aware of the SDGs, why they are important, how this impacts daily life and what they can do to make them a reality. We are seeing an increasing number of individuals use the SDGs in their communications and advocacy efforts, including world leaders, private sector representatives, activists, celebrities and civil society CEOs. The comprehensiveness of the SDGs, along with their recognisable branding, has allowed the 17 goals to leave the walls of the UN and government buildings and infiltrate brands, campaigns and creativity worldwide.

Before the SDGs were agreed in 2015, we as civil society lobbied to ensure our thematic areas were included as specific goals and/ or targets. This collective and passion-driven effort resulted in a comprehensive set of SDGs. However, since then, the number of civil society organisations that use the SDGs in their communications and advocacy efforts has declined, and the focus has shifted back towards thematic-based efforts. In order to effectively advocate for and achieve the goals in the run up to 2030, we are encouraging civil society organisations to use the 17 SDGs more explicitly. The power of communication not only enables people around the world from different walks of life to learn about the SDGs, it also makes those who have committed to achieving the goals more accountable.

With the SDGs reaching their seventh year – and soon, the halfway mark – now is the time to raise awareness, to advocate for the goals and to take action towards them.