



The UK's Response to the SDGs in 2023 - Executive Summary and Overview

In May 2023, The UN Secretary General (UNSG) released a paper with specific guidance and calls to action on the national and global commitments needed from states to support the SDGs at the midpoint of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.¹

There are three elements to the UNSG's guidance:

- (1) states should identify and contribute to priority global actions to accelerate the SDGs
- (2) states should establish a domestic poverty benchmark for reducing poverty by 2030
- (3) states should make SDG achievement more central to national planning and oversight processes

In this set of three short, rapid-response papers, three research teams from Newcastle University analyse how the UK is placed to respond to each of these elements.

Paper 1 addresses the UNSG's call for states to identify and contribute to priority global actions to accelerate the SDGs.

- There is no straightforward methodology to determine the most effective SDG accelerators or multipliers, and these will often be country-specific.
- Claims that the UK is acting to accelerate the SDGs - e.g. through aid priorities around climate action, education for girls, and food security - are welcome, but are undermined by a lack of engagement with the SDGs in UK reporting and the need to engage more with recipient country priorities.
- Recent UK commitments to global financial reform are welcome, but commit only to a limited set of piecemeal, market-led reforms.
- Debt relief and calls for structural reform towards greater equality in the global financial system are left unaddressed.

We recommend that the UK (i) undertakes more detailed analysis of its global impacts in SDG terms, and (ii) engages with voices from the Global South around more radical reform of the global financial system.

¹ [UN Guidance Note on National Commitments](#)

Paper 2 addresses the UNSG's call for states to establish a domestic poverty benchmark for reducing poverty (SDG target 1.2) by 2030.

- Poverty rates in the UK have shown no sign of reduction since 2015. Though poverty is a persistent problem for the UK, there is no UK benchmark (though the situation is different in Scotland and Wales).
- The DWP has responsibilities for poverty reduction, but its performance indicators miss the emphasis on multidimensional poverty in the SDG target.
- For child poverty, Scotland and Wales do have statutory benchmarks, but the DWP does not measure its performance in terms of child poverty.
- The recent Levelling Up White Paper does have time-bound SDG-relevant targets ('missions') that reflect aspects of multidimensional poverty.
- The Global SDG target - "reduce by half" could be considered a default for the UK given recent UK government recommitment to the Goals.
- The SDGs lend urgency to recent calls from Parliament for poverty targets and for a wider set of poverty metrics in the UK.

We recommend that the UK respond by (i) deepening the Levelling Up strategy into a set of multi-dimensional poverty benchmarks and strategies that together (ii) address the "headline" ambition of the SDG poverty target in the UK whilst (iii) re-committing to new poverty metrics that can track these refined objectives and strategies.

Paper 3 addresses the UNSG's recommendation that states should shape their institutions of governance to better support the SDGs.

- An official global UN indicator (17.14.1) tracks countries' governance for the SDGs, focused around aspects of *Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development (PCSD)*
- The UK performs poorly on this indicator (41/80 - 51%) - more poorly, on our analysis, than the Government's official evaluation of 55/80 (69%).
- Key gaps are apparent in the UK - the lack of a coordination body for the SDGs within government, and a mechanism for stakeholder engagement; an absence of frameworks and institutions to encourage and embed coherence across economic, social and environmental policies; and the absence of transparency and oversight around policy coherence across these 3 dimensions of sustainable development.
- There is positive practice amongst the UK's peers and partners in all of these areas.
- The absence of domestic institution-building for the SDGs calls into question the UK's stated commitment to the SDGs, misses an opportunity to enhance partnerships, and undermines global UK leadership.

We recommend that the UK undertakes learning from partner countries and adopts tools and mechanisms, including those mentioned in the 2019 VNR, to strengthen policy coherence across government and enable engagement with stakeholders on the SDGs.