

Compendium

What are the Sustainable Development Goals?

An explanation of the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals and how progress is being monitored.

Contact:
Claudia Wells
claudia.wells@ons.gov.uk
+44(0)1633 455867

Release date:
26 July 2018

Next release:
11 October 2018

Table of contents

1. [Introduction](#)
2. [What are the Sustainable Development Goals?](#)
3. [Economy, environment and society](#)

1 . Introduction

This Economic review publication explores inclusive growth, inequality and the value of urban green space in the context of the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

2 . What are the Sustainable Development Goals?

Back in September 2000, the UN General Assembly made the Millennium Declaration and initiated the [Millennium Development Goals](#) (MDGs). The MDGs made huge leaps and were the most successful global anti-poverty push in history. The target of reducing extreme poverty rates by half was met five years ahead of the 2015 deadline and while a number of other targets were narrowly missed, [Brookings Institute](#) concluded that progress was accelerated because of the MDGs. However, the MDGs were aimed at developing countries. As 2015 came closer, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon launched an initiative to build upon the momentum for the next 15 years that would be aimed at all countries.

The UK was involved in forming the new goals from the start. The then Prime Minister, David Cameron, co-chaired a high-level panel that presented the first iteration of the [SDGs](#). These were then discussed further in the UN General Assembly and then at the UN Sustainable Development Summit. In New York, in September 2015, the 193 member states of the UN accepted the resolution “Transforming our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”.

The resolution states: “the goals and targets will stimulate action over the next 15 years in areas of critical importance: People, Planet, Prosperity, Peace and Partnership”. The high-level panel announced 17 SDGs and 169 associated targets, which are, as described in the resolution: “integrated and indivisible and balance the three dimensions of sustainable development: the economic, social and environmental”.

The Global Goals for Sustainable development



Source: Office for National Statistics

Immediately after the goals were launched, the UN Statistical Commission was tasked with developing the indicator framework that underpins the global targets, so that progress, or lack of progress, can be monitored. Responsibility for reporting global progress towards each of the 232 unique global indicators was assigned to relevant international organisations, referred to as custodian agencies, such as the World Bank, International Labour Organization (ILO), the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and UN Women. In the UK, ONS has the responsibility for sourcing and reporting UK data to feed into the global monitoring and reporting process. The challenge for all countries is finding relevant data for the indicators, not all of which can be reported using official statistics. National statistical offices will also need to work with the various custodian agencies to develop metadata as a significant number of indicators still do not have agreed methodology or standards. A further challenge will be disaggregating these data to show the picture by age, sex, geography, disability, migratory status, income and ethnicity so that we meet the SDG principle of “leave no one behind”.

3 . Economy, environment and society

Ahead of negotiations to finalise the goals, some of the world’s top economists warned the UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon that: “Achieving the SDG targets will not be possible unless the agenda focuses squarely on individuals as active generators of their own income, lifting themselves out of poverty.”

In an [open letter](#) it was stated: “there is no magic bullet for delivering economic growth”, instead: “It requires an effective state, productive firms, functioning cities, and access to energy. Helping societies to achieve economic growth thus means empowering them to create their own solutions.” The result was an agreed set of SDGs that represent a global strategy for achieving economic growth that is consistent with the planet’s capacity, society’s basic needs and the capabilities and stability of the economy.

Many of the main concepts represented in the SDG framework (such as the multiple dimensions of well-being and the importance of measuring how people spend their time) clearly align with the recommendations of the Report by the Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress (Stiglitz, Sen and Fitoussi, 2009). Recommendations of both consider the distribution of income and the need to assess inequality across a range of characteristics. In the SDG framework, this is captured by the “leave no one behind” commitment, which requires data to be disaggregated by age, sex, geography, disability, migratory status, income and ethnicity plus other characteristics as needed. In the UK we have [pledged](#) to ensure that:

- every person has a fair opportunity in life no matter who or where they are
- people who are the furthest behind, who have the least opportunity and who are the most excluded will be prioritised
- every person counts and will be counted

These principles are given equal weight alongside the need to have clear measures of environmental resources and natural assets, which are captured within Goals 13, 14 and 15 covering Climate Action, Life Below Water and Life on Land.

The comprehensive framework for SDGs fits with our [Better Statistics, Better Decisions strategy](#). Sourcing and analysing data covering the economy, environment and society, which is then disaggregated to show the full picture, will enable better-evidenced policy decisions. The data required to report on all indicators will push us to be more innovative and creative and make more use of administrative data, “big data” and satellite imagery, to name a few.

Some may dismiss the goals as an unattainable wish list. In fact, they are a structure to help us monitor progress and to identify areas that may need development. The targets and indicators give us a way to measure whether we are actually on track to transform our world. They are not aimed just at the less-developed countries but are universal in nature so that all countries must play a part in meeting the global goals.

So, how are we doing, so far? You can see all the data we have on our [online reporting platform](#). To date, we have 148 indicators, around 61% of the total, many with disaggregation. However, we still have much work to do and this economic review gives just a flavour of some of that ongoing work. We welcome your support and comments and you can contact our team at sustainabledevelopment@ons.gov.uk.

You can read more about the [UN Sustainable Development Goals](#) or find out more about the [Global Goals](#), which has a wide online presence.