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# A COMMENTARY ON THE LOCALISATION OF THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

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## **Abstract**

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) embrace an ambitious and wide ranging set of environmental, social and economic issues designed to effect a transition to a more sustainable future. While the SDGs are global in nature, there is an increasing awareness that they also have an important local dimension. With this in mind, this commentary paper outlines the characteristics of the SDGs, reviews their importance at the local level, provides some illustrations of how they are being addressed locally within North Western Europe and UK and offers some reflections on localising the SDGs. The paper suggests that progress in launching and developing local initiatives within the UK has, to date, been limited. In part, this reflects the lack of a clear national policy framework for the localisation of the SDGs and in part, it reflects the challenges of raising awareness of the importance of local SDG initiatives and of funding such initiatives. Looking to the future, communications and public relations professionals may have an important role to play in raising awareness of the importance of the SDGs at the local level and this may help to change hearts and minds in addressing the policy making and financial challenges.

**Keywords** Sustainable Development Goals, Localisation, Raising Awareness, UK

## **Introduction**

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adopted by all member states of the United Nations in 2015, provide *'a shared blueprint for peace and prosperity for people and the planet, now and into the future'* and *'are an urgent call for action by all countries - developed and developing – in a global partnership'* (United Nations undated). More specifically the SDGs look to *'address the global challenges we face, including those related to poverty, inequality, climate, environmental degradation, prosperity, and peace and justice'* and to *'achieve a better and more sustainable future for all'* (United Nations 2018). While the European Commission (2017) argued *'one key feature is that the SDGs are global in nature'*, there is an increasing awareness that the SDGs also have an important local dimension. Here, action at the local level is seen to be vitally important in building sustainable communities and addressing the environmental, social and economic challenges posed by the SDGs. Stefan Bonaccini, President of the European Council of Municipalities and Regions, for example, argued *'the achievement of all the SDGs require local action and implementation'* (PLATFORMA and The Council of European Municipalities and Regions 2017). Further, Bardot et al. (2017) suggested *'many of the SDGs touch on many of the daily activities of local and regional governments: education, health, water and sanitation, waste management, public transport, housing, gender inequality, participatory urban planning, disaster risk prevention, environmental impacts, pollution and climate change, migration and adaptation, decentralized cooperation etc., regardless of whether they explicitly use the*

*SDG framework or vocabulary or not.* With this in mind, this commentary paper outlines the characteristics of the SDGs, reviews their importance at the local level, provides some illustrations of how they are being addressed locally within North Western Europe and the UK and offers some reflections on localising the SDGs.

### ***The SDGs at the Local Level***

The SDGs came into effect In January 2016 and they will guide United Nations development thinking and policy up to 2030. The United Nations (2015a) described the SDGs as demonstrating *'the scale and ambition'* of its *'2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development'*, which is designed to *'shift the world on to a sustainable and resilient path.'* There are 17 SDGs (Figure 1), and 169 associated targets, which *'offer an inspiring and inclusive vision of the future: a world free from poverty, injustice and discrimination and a healthy planet for present and future generations'*(Institute of Human Rights and Business 2015). The targets for SDG 1, for example, include eradicating extreme poverty; ensuring that all men and women, and particularly the poor and vulnerable, have equal rights to economic resources, access to basic services and ownership and control over land and property; and building the resilience of the poor and vulnerable to reduce their exposure to climate change related extreme events. The targets for SDG12, include achieving the sustainable management and efficient use of natural resources by 2030; halving per capital global food waste at the retail and consumer levels: and designing and implementing tools to monitor sustainable development impacts for sustainable tourism that creates jobs and promotes local culture and products.

While, the SDGs are rightly seen as a global agenda, not least because many of the challenges they look to address, including climate change, life below water and peace and justice, are truly international there is also an increasing awareness that they have an important local dimension. The Global Task Force of Regional and Local Government (2018) reported *'the local and regional government networks gathered in the global Taskforce are convinced that the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals depends on their full ownership by our communities, cities and regions. Local and regional governments around the world are also convinced that they have a key role to play in triggering that ownership, and an important responsibility in fostering implementation by integrating the various agendas on the ground and ensuring territorial cohesion.'*

In a similar vein, the European Commission (2018) suggested that *'local and regional authorities play an important role in implementing Agenda 2030 and.....all SDGs and targets.'* Further, the European Commission (2018) claimed *'local and regional authorities, as well as local civil society, are closest to EU citizens, and are therefore in a position to develop 21<sup>st</sup>-century service models in line with emerging needs in their communities.'* United Cities and Local Government (2018) argued that local governments have a role to play in contributing to all 17 SDGs, outlined why each of the SDGs *'matter to local governments'* and itemised the relevant targets for each SDG.

SDG 1, for example, is seen not only to be *'about raising the incomes of the poorest'* but *'about ensuring access to basic services and protecting everyone from human-caused and natural disasters.'* As such, *'local governments are in the ideal position to identify people*

*living in poverty on the ground, and to target resources and services to help them escape it'* and local governments are also seen to have a role to play in *'local economic development strategies to create jobs and raise incomes.* (Unified Cities and Local Government 2018). In focusing on SDG 5, United Cities and Local Government (2018) suggested that local governments can *'act a model for people for gender equality and the empowerment of women through non-discriminatory service provision to citizens and fair employment practices'* and *'mainstream gender equality across all areas of their work in order to tackle the multiple barriers to women's empowerment.'*

In some ways, SDG 11, seen to be concerned with *'putting cities at the heart of sustainable development in an urbanizing world'* (United Cities and Local Government 2018) provides a particularly sharp focus for local governments looking to contribute to the SDGs. Here, United Cities and Local Governments (2018) argued *'SDG 11 marks a major step forward in the recognition of the transformative power of urbanization for development, and the role of city leaders in driving global change from the bottom up.'* More specifically, United Cities and Local Government (2018) suggested that urban local authorities have important responsibilities in promoting the use of public transport, in helping to reduce carbon dioxide emissions, in developing waste management strategies that emphasise reuse and recycling and in helping to mitigate the effects of climate change.

### **Localisation Initiatives**

Across mainland Europe, initiatives are underway to localize the SDG's are in a number of cities. In the North Western Europe, for example, the Social Challenges Innovation Platform (2018) reported that the City of Amsterdam is looking for initiatives to raise awareness and translate them into action at the local level. Here the focus is initially on raising awareness of both the programme of SDGs and on specific SDGs and the target group is citizens, especially those who might be unaware of the SDGs, and on initiatives that focus on different neighbourhoods. Further, the Social Challenges Innovation Platform (2018) suggested that *'the city is specifically interested in initiatives that focus on diversity and inclusion, that make use of technology as an example to reach a bigger audience, link actors that are less likely to work together on the global goals and/or that have an innovative business model.'* More specifically, the focus is on initiatives that educate and engage the city's population, that look to build in self-sufficiency and continuity and to leverage technology and social media.

Utrecht City Council (2018) *'has adopted the SDGs as a guiding framework to orient the city's development, as well as with its cooperation with other cities, to be sustainable and inclusive'* and the *'municipalities are to increase awareness of the SDGs amongst Utrecht's residents and businesses, and to stimulate them to take supportive and (where possible) cross-sectional action.'* This framework has two main objectives namely *'to create and support coalitions with local actors..... to address international sustainable development challenges'* and *'to convene and support local stakeholders .....to raise awareness and inspire action at the local level'* (Utrecht City Council 2018). Further, the Utrecht City Council (2018) argued that its policy on *'Healthy Urban Living'* offered an important focus for the SDGs, and provided a number of specific examples of its

achievements in partnering with local businesses and connecting their products and services to the SDGs. At the same time, Utrecht City Council (2018) has also developed a *'Global Goals Dashboard'*, designed to present data about the SDGs in a user-friendly manner. On the one hand, the dashboard provides municipal employees with a clear view of how the SDGs relate to their work and helps to facilitate new methods of working between municipal departments. On the other hand, it provides an accessible, transparent and interactive tool, which motivates a range of the city's stakeholders and keeps them informed about the city's progress in contributing to the SDGs.

The City of Copenhagen (2018) has produced an *'Action Plan for the Sustainable Development Goals.'* In welcoming the *'UN SDGs'* the City of Copenhagen reported that it wished to go beyond the Danish Governments' national action plan for the SDGs by *'using the SDGs as an opportunity to raise the bar and expand on both new and existing sustainability initiatives, making the city an even better place to live and work'* (City of Copenhagen 2018). The City of Copenhagen(2018) reported that it would link its *'living labs'*, namely the urban locations where innovative solutions based on the city's traffic, public health waste, for example, are devised in dialogue with residents and companies, and also emphasised its commitment to set goals for each of the SDGs. In addressing SDG1 at the city level, for example, a number of targets, for example, fewer children growing up in poverty and fewer homeless residents, were set, a number of specific initiatives were identified and a number of selected measures were specified. In addressing climate action, the targets included the city accommodating 30% more rainfall in 100 years and improving its ability to handle more regular cloudbursts and storm surges.

Within the UK, Diprose and Taylor-Buck (2018) argued that *'with the exception of a handful of SDG initiatives driven by local stakeholders, there appears to be little on-the-ground activity in UK cities around this agenda.'* Further Diprose and Taylor-Buck (2018) suggested *'there is no clear rationale for city-regions to engage and limited discussion of the potential of the new devolution context in the UK to promote the SDGs.'* In looking to explain this limited local engagement with the SDGs Diprose and Taylor-Buck (2018) suggested three possible explanations. Namely, *'much of the work to define the SDGs has been undertaken in isolation from the daily pressures and realities of urban local government'*, *'the potential benefits of using the SDG framework are not being communicated effectively'* and *'the absence of a clear national guidance or priority setting'* Diprose and Taylor-Buck (2018).

That said, a variety of initiatives can be identified in a small number of cities. The Canterbury Sustainable Development Goal Forum (2019), a coalition of individuals and local organisations, has been established to *'advance global agendas within the city'* and it has produced reports on a range of issues, including health care and wellbeing, tackling climate change, waste management and education for sustainable development, linked to 12 of the SDG's. The Greater London Authority (2019) reported working with young Londoners to understand their priorities and concerns and how they relate to the SDGs, and looking to develop a vision for London, which is informed by the SDGs and the views of young Londoners. At a smaller scale within London, the City of London Corporation (2018) announced plans in 2018 to establish the *'City Corporation's Sustainable Development*

*Capital Initiative'*, which will *'work to develop London as a leading hub for development finance, with the aim of helping to raise the necessary capital required to help meet the SDGs.'*

The UK's first local 2030 Hub was established in Liverpool and here the objectives are *'to raise awareness of the SDG framework and share how it adds value to cities, businesses, social sectors and individuals'* while *'also facilitating additional local impact against the 17 goals, 169 targets and 230 indicators'* (2030hub, 2018). The 2030hub (2018) looks to deliver these objectives through its workspace, community, communications agency, consultancy services and research and has a number of ambassadors who are helping to *'shape local SDG impact.'* These ambassadors include the Head of Sustainability at one of Liverpool's hospital trusts, who is concerned to connect the SDGs to the hospital's sustainability planning and reporting process and the Mayoral Lead for Energy and Smart City on Liverpool City Council who has experience in sustainable food, climate change and sustainable travel.

The Bristol SDG Alliance came into being following meetings of local activists, campaigners and academics in 2016. Its aims are *'to drive Bristol's long-term sustainability and resilience; to monitor progress and enable the region to hold itself to account; and to connect community and city-level action to national and global challenges'* (Bristol Green Capital Partnership and the University of Bristol 2018). More practically, the Alliance was *'developed to facilitate on the ground action on the SDG's'* and has been involved in *'creating and assisting in several initiatives'* (Bristol Green Capital Partnership and the University of Bristol 2018). These include fostering the integration of the SDGs into the One City Plan, an ambitious collaborative approach to reach a shared vision for Bristol and more generally into the work of Bristol City Council, developing research links with Bristol University and running a Festival of the Future City in 2017.

## **Discussion**

In some ways, the phrase localising the SDGs slips easily off the tongue, and it echoes the environmental call to 'Think Global Act Local' coined some 50 years ago, but attempts to address the SDGs at a local level face a range of challenges. These challenges are most acute in less developed economies but there are also many challenges in looking to localise the SDGs in developed countries, not least in terms of raising awareness, policy, finance and monitoring progress. As such, a number of issues merit reflection.

For Localising the SDGs (2017), *'advocacy or raising awareness is the first step to start localizing the SDGs.'* PLATFORMA and the Council of European Municipalities and Regions (2017) suggested *'the priority for awareness-raising activities is to present the SDGs as a concrete and relevant policy framework for local players in order to reduce any reticence and to stress the concrete implications for local and regional governments and their national associations.'* More positively PLATFORMA and the council for Europe Municipalities and Regions (2017) argued that *'local and regional government associations working on this issue grasp the importance of better communications in this respect to tackle the low visibility surrounding the SDGs among citizens and other colleagues.'* More practically, the CPD Certification Service (2019) claimed *'all across the UK, organisations, charities, businesses and individuals are working on the SDGs. Raising awareness of the*

*goals, through conversations, community groups and SDG trainings, is central to their success.'*

While the localisation of the SDGs within the UK is still very much in its infancy, there is little by way of policy guidance as to how the process is to be supported and facilitated. While the Government has outlined its approach to *'delivering the Global Goals for Sustainable Development at home and around the world'* (GOV. UK 2017), there is no explicit mention of localising the SDGs. The Department for International Development is the lead department for implementing the SDGs and other departments are required to embed the goals into their Single Departmental Plans and associated reporting mechanisms. The Cabinet Office has a role in coordinating the domestic delivery through the Single Departmental Plan Process, as does the devolved administrations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Indeed, Osieyo (2019) argued *'a crucial discussion has been missed on how central government can facilitate an enabling environment to make the Goals responsive to local issues.'*

However, in outlining its approach to delivering the SDGs, the Government (GOV.UK 2017) made outline mention of some of the ways in which local authorities, and businesses, were working, to contribute to a number of the SDGs. This work was seen to embrace a number of issues including working with families and schools to promote healthy and balanced diets and giving local authorities £6 billion for highways maintenance. At the same time, the House of Commons International Development Committee (2017) welcomed the Local Government Association's engagement with the SDGs and expressed its hope that the Local Government Association will *'encourage all UK local authorities to engage with the SDGs and incorporate them into their work, to support domestic achievement of the Goals.'* Local authorities within the UK are looking to address many of the environmental, social and economic issues that reflect the SDGs, but calls for them to formally adopt the SDGS and to integrate them into their policies and programmes come at a time of major reductions in their budgets. Many local authorities are currently struggling meet their existing policy commitments and service delivery targets let alone introduce new ones.

More generally, Localizing the SDGs (2018) argued *'to happen locally Agenda 2030 needs to be sufficiently funded'* and that *'localizing finance means not only to assign funds for the local level, but also to create the enabling space for economic development at local level.'* In a similar vein, the Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments (2018) suggested *'one of the main challenges for localizing the goals remains addressing subnational governments' access to finance.'* At the same time, the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (2016) argued *'local governments engaged in SDG localization need to mobilise innovative funding mechanisms and to incorporate financial planning as an integral aspect of all action plans.'* Further, the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (2016) advised that *'financial planning for the SDGs should be based on a comprehensive needs assessment.'* Such assessments *'will not only need to account for capital interventions'* but also to *'the costs of operations and maintenance, depreciation, capacity development, cooperation and coordination mechanisms, monitoring systems and the additional operating and marginal costs for attaining universal coverage of services and systems'* (Sustainable Development Solutions Network 2016). Such a prescription currently seems a tall order for local authorities in the UK.

That said, the localisation of the SDGs need not, and indeed should not, be confined to local authorities. Many business and voluntary organisations are effectively playing a role in looking to alleviate a number of the environmental, social and economic problems underlying the SDGs. Under the *'Better Retail, Better World'* (Jones and Comfort 2018) initiative launched by the British Retail Consortium in 2018, for example, many of the UK's leading retailers claim to be contributing to the SDGs at the local level as well as the international level. These local contributions include IKEA's decision to pay its workers the Real Living Wage and the London Living Wage as part of its contribution to SDG 8 and Marks and Spencer's commitment to procure only renewable sources of energy as part of its approach to tackling climate change. At the same time, many UK food retailers donate to local food banks and provide collection bins for customers to donate to food banks. In many parts of the UK, voluntary organisations are also involved in organising food banks, in providing food and temporary shelter for the homeless and those sleeping on the streets, and in helping to run a variety of local community food production programmes. However, the continuing viability of some of these voluntary initiatives, dependent, in part, as many are, on local authority support, is threatened by the cuts in local council budgets mentioned above.

While businesses and voluntary and community organisations are, de facto, playing a part in localising the SDGs within the UK, such contributions effectively sit outside any coordinated localisation policy and are unlikely to be collated to enable them to be monitored, measured and reported. Monitoring and reporting are seen to be essential in order to assess if, and how, local initiatives are contributing to the achievement of the SDGs. The Sustainable Development Solutions Network (2016), for example, argued *'achieving the SDGs requires robust monitoring and evaluation frameworks in order to track progress and ensure accountability'* but warned *'the challenge for most local governments will be in designing monitoring and evaluation systems that are affordable yet comprehensive, and above all, effective in reliably capturing progress on local goals and targets.'* However, currently there is little consensus or clarity on which indicators are most relevant to measure local contributions. While this presents a challenge, not least a financial challenge, for local authorities who are looking to commit to formal engagement with the SDGs, it seems unlikely that many businesses or voluntary and community organisation will either want, or be able, to establish and operate such measurement or reporting mechanisms.

## **Conclusions**

There is growing belief that the achievement of the SDGs has an important local dimension but progress in launching and developing local initiatives within the UK has, to date, been limited. In part, this reflects the lack of a clear national policy framework for the localisation of the SDGs and in part, it reflects the challenges of raising awareness of the importance of local SDG initiatives and of funding such initiatives. A more explicit approach to policy making and greater financial resources would seem to be essential if the localisation of the SDGs is to be achieved in the UK. That said, communications and public relations professionals may have an important role to play in raising awareness of the importance of the SDGs at the local level and this role may, in turn, help to change hearts and minds in addressing the policy making and financial challenges.



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# SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS



FIGURE I THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS