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# localising the sustainable development goals

**Peter Jones and Daphne Comfort** consider the characteristics of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and their importance at the local level, and review how they are being addressed in within the UK

The United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), launched in 2015,<sup>1</sup> are 'the blueprint to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all', and they aim to 'address the global challenges we face, including those related to poverty, inequality, climate, environmental degradation, prosperity, and peace and justice'.<sup>2</sup>

While the European Commission has argued that 'one key feature is that the SDGs are global in nature',<sup>3</sup> there is an increasing recognition that they have an important local dimension and that action at the local level will be vitally important in building sustainable communities and addressing the environmental, social and economic challenges posed by the SDGs. The European Commission, for example, has reported that 'many municipalities throughout Europe and globally are raising awareness about the SDGs and are looking for ways to integrate the SDGs into their policy plans'.<sup>4</sup> United Cities and Local Government, an umbrella organisation for cities, local and regional governments, and municipal associations throughout the world, has argued that:

*'All of the SDGs have targets that are directly or indirectly related to the daily work of local and regional governments. Local governments should not be seen as mere implementers of the agenda. Local governments are policy makers, catalysts of change and the level of government best-placed to link the global goals with local communities.'*<sup>5</sup>

With this in mind, this article outlines the characteristics of the SDGs, highlights their importance at the local level, reviews how they are being addressed in some areas within the UK, and offers some reflections on localisation of the SDGs.

## The SDGs

The SDGs came into effect in January 2016 and they will guide UN development thinking and policy up to 2030. The United Nations has described the SDGs as demonstrating 'the scale and ambition' of its *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, which is designed to 'shift the world onto a sustainable and resilient path'.<sup>1</sup>

The SDGs are the latest in the line of global sustainable development initiatives that can be traced back to the declaration designed 'to inspire and guide the peoples of the world in the preservation and enhancement of the human environment'<sup>6</sup> issued following the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment held in Stockholm in 1972. More recently, the SDGs aim to build on the United Nation's Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), established in 2001.

The MDGs have been described by the UN as having 'produced the most successful anti-poverty movement in history',<sup>7</sup> but other assessments of the achievements of the MDGs have been more balanced. While Fehling *et al.*, for example, acknowledged that 'remarkable progress has been made', they argued that 'progress across all MDGs has been limited and uneven across countries'.<sup>8</sup>

There are 17 SDGs 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. It is a vision that requires a global partnership of nations and peoples – from the poorest communities to the richest countries – and it is a vision that demands unprecedented changes in both thinking and behaviour.'*<sup>9</sup>



# SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS



United Nations

## The Sustainable Development Goals

The targets for SDG1: 'No Poverty', 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 SDG 12: 'Responsible Consumption and Production', include achieving the sustainable management and efficient use of natural resources by 2030; halving per-capita 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.

The European Commission has argued that 'the scale, ambition and approach of the Agenda are unprecedented' and that 'all countries have a shared responsibility to achieve the SDGs'.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, the European Commission has argued that 'the 2030 Agenda integrates in a balanced manner the three dimensions of sustainable development – economic, social and environmental' and that it is 'indivisible, in the sense that it must be implemented as a whole, in an integrated rather than a fragmented manner, recognizing that the different goals and targets are closely interlinked'.<sup>3</sup>

## The SDGs at the local level

The European Commission has suggested that 'local and regional authorities play an important role in implementing the *Agenda 2030* and ... all SDGs and targets'.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, the European Commission has claimed that 'local and regional authorities, as well as local civil society, are closest to EU citizens, and are therefore in a position to develop 21st-century service models in line with emerging needs in their communities'.<sup>4</sup>

United Cities and Local Government has argued that local governments have a role to play in contributing to all 17 SDGs, has outlined why each of the SDGs 'matter to local governments', and has itemised the relevant targets for each SDG.<sup>5</sup> SDG 1, for example, is seen not only to be 'about raising the incomes of the poorest' but also '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'.

In focusing on SDG 5, United Cities and Local Government suggested that local governments can 'act as a model for people for gender equality and the empowerment of women through non-discriminatory service provision to citizens and

fair employment practices' and can 'mainstream gender equality across all areas of their work in order to tackle the multiple barriers to women's empowerment'.<sup>5</sup>

In some ways, SDG 11: 'Sustainable Cities and Communities', seen to be concerned with 'putting cities at the heart of sustainable development in an urbanizing world',<sup>5</sup> provides a particularly sharp focus for local governments looking to contribute to meeting the SDGs. Here, United Cities and Local Governments argued that 'SDG 11 marks a major step forward in the recognition of the transformative power of urbanization for development, and of the role of city leaders in driving global change from the bottom up'.<sup>5</sup> More specifically, the organisation 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 re-use and recycling, and to in helping to mitigate the effects of climate change.

Across mainland Europe, initiatives to localise the SDG's are under way in a number of cities. In the Netherlands, for example, the Social Challenges Innovation Platform has reported that the city of Amsterdam is looking for initiatives to raise awareness and translate them into action at the local level.<sup>10</sup> 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 hitherto be unaware of the SDGs. Utrecht City Council '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'.<sup>11</sup> 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'.<sup>11</sup>

Within the UK, Diprose and Taylor-Buck argued that 'with the exception of a handful of urban SDG initiatives driven by local stakeholders ... there appears to be little on-the-ground activity in UK cities around this agenda'.<sup>12</sup> Further, they suggested that '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'.<sup>12</sup> In looking to explain this limited local engagement with the SDGs, they 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 authorities', 'the potential benefits of using the SDG framework are not being communicated effectively', and 'the absence of clear national guidance or priority-setting'.<sup>12</sup>

That said, a variety of initiatives can be identified in a small number of cities. The Canterbury Sustainable Development Goal Forum, a coalition of individuals and local organisations, has been established to 'advance the global agenda' within the city,<sup>13</sup> 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, all linked to 12 of the SDGs. The Greater London Authority has reported working with young Londoners to understand their priorities and concerns and how they relate to the SDGs, and is looking to develop a vision for London, informed by the SDGs and the views of young Londoners.<sup>14</sup>

At a smaller scale within London, the City of London Corporation 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'.<sup>15</sup>

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'.<sup>16</sup>

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'.<sup>17</sup> More practically, the Alliance was 'developed to facilitate 'on-the-ground' action on the SDGs' and has been involved in 'creating and assisting in several initiatives'.<sup>17</sup> These initiatives included fostering the integration of the SDGs into the One City Plan, an ambitious collaborative approach to reach a shared vision for Bristol through research links with Bristol University and a Festival of the Future City.

### Concluding reflections

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 such as the UK, not least in terms of policy, finance and monitoring progress. As such, a number of issues merit reflection.

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



**SDG 12 includes achieving the sustainable management and efficient use of natural resources by 2030**

supported and facilitated. While the government has outlined its approach to 'Delivering the Global Goals for Sustainable Development – at home and around the world',<sup>18</sup> it has made no explicit mention of localising the SDGs. The Department for International Development is the lead department for implementing the SDGs, other departments are required to embed the goals into their single departmental plans and associated reporting mechanisms, and the Cabinet Office has a role in co-ordinating domestic delivery through the single departmental plan process, as do the devolved administrations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Indeed, Osieyo has argued that 'a crucial discussion has been missed on how central government can facilitate an enabling environment to make the Goals responsive to local issues'.<sup>19</sup>

However, in outlining its approach to delivering the SDGs, the government made mention of some of the ways in which local authorities, and businesses, were working to contribute to a number of the SDGs.<sup>18</sup> 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 welcomed the Local Government Association's (LGA's) engagement with the SDGs and expressed its hope that the LGA will 'encourage all UK local authorities to engage with the SDGs and incorporate them into their work, to support domestic achievement of the Goals'.<sup>20</sup>

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 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.

That said, the localisation of the SDGs need not, and should not, be confined to local authorities. Many business and voluntary organisations are effectively playing a role in seeking to alleviate a number of the environmental, social and economic problems underlying the SDGs within the UK. Under the 'Better Retail, Better World' 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, as well as the international, level.<sup>21</sup> 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: 'Decent Work and Economic Growth', and Marks & Spencer's commitment to procure only renewably sourced 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 in store 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. 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 co-ordinated localisation policy and are unlikely to be collated to enable them to be monitored, measured and reported. Monitoring and reporting are certainly seen to be essential in order to assess if, and how, local initiatives are contributing to the achievement of the SDGs. However, currently there is little consensus or clarity on which indicators are most relevant to measure local contributions. This presents a challenge, not least a financial challenge, for many local authorities who are aiming to commit to formal engagement with the SDGs. At the same time, it seems unlikely that many businesses or voluntary and community organisations will either want, or be able, to establish and operate such measurement or reporting mechanisms or integrate them into more general local monitoring and reporting processes.

Finally, and more specifically, although the 'purpose of the planning system is to contribute to the achievement of sustainable development',<sup>22</sup> there is no mention of the SDGs in the latest edition of the National Planning Policy Framework published in July 2018 and re-issued with updates

February 2019.<sup>22</sup> Currently, there is certainly little evidence of local planning authority engagement with the SDGs within the UK. More generally, the Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie has published a guide to integrating the SDGs into local development plans.<sup>23</sup> Here, the principal aim is to inform, sensitise and mobilise local leaders and practitioners responsible for local development and to promote SDG considerations within the local planning process.

At present it seems unlikely that local authority planning departments within the UK will play a role in explicitly contributing to the localisation of the SDGs, but many planners may want to maintain a watching brief on if, and how, that process evolves.

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## Notes

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