

SDGs IN THE UK INQUIRY | ENVIRONMENTAL AUDIT COMMITTEE

Evidence Submission

SUMMARY

- ▶ **There should be a particular focus on SDG12, on sustainable consumption and production.**
- ▶ **We would like to see greater emphasis on indicators to measure overseas impacts of UK consumption.**
- ▶ **There should be cross-government co-ordination of SDG implementation, with the explicit support of the Prime Minister and HM Treasury.**

Guildford, 16 September 2016

INTRODUCTION

1. The Centre for the Understanding of Sustainable Prosperity (CUSP) is an ESRC-funded research programme, based at the University of Surrey, concerned with sustainability and its implications at all levels, from individuals' understandings of their own "prosperity" to global questions such as climate change and the implementation of the UN Sustainable Development Goals.
2. As part of this work, we are concerned with a number of aspects of the implementation of the SDGs within the UK, and therefore welcome the Committee's inquiry into this topic and the opportunity to give evidence.

DOMESTIC DELIVERY OF THE SDGS

3. All of the Goals are relevant to the UK, but some appear more relevant than others. We would particularly highlight Goal 12 – "ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns" - because the SDGs must be understood in the context of the interconnectedness of the global economy. The pervasiveness of international trade means that decisions made in the UK have impacts globally. The kinds of goods UK consumers purchase and the ways in which UK companies choose to produce their goods affect the daily lives of many millions of people around the world.
4. Recent work at the University of Surrey highlights this for the case of clothing, showing the extent to which 'fast fashion' in the UK (and Western Europe more generally) relies on and facilitates the use of sweatshop labour overseas. From the point of view of the final consumer the cost savings of these practices are minimal, but in the worst case scenario they cost overseas workers their lives. A high profile (but not isolated) example of this was the Rana Plaza collapse. Many UK high street clothing brands had clothes made in the Rana Plaza complex in Bangladesh. When the complex collapsed in 2013, 1,100 people died and a further 2,500 were injured.

5. Much recent academic research has demonstrated that although UK carbon emissions appear to be falling, this is not the case if we count the carbon emitted in the production of goods no longer manufactured in the UK, but which are still consumed by UK consumers.
6. Tackling such problems is possible. UK clothing (and non-clothing) brands have substantial power over their suppliers, and could use it to prevent tragedies such as Rana Plaza, or to foster cleaner production processes. However, this will require support, much of which could come from government programmes for the implementation of the SDGs, and particularly SDG12.
7. We would like to see DCMS take on a larger role in SDG implementation, in view of the potential which cultural activity has for expressing and promoting different visions of “prosperity”, “development” and “the good life”. Unless there is widespread and socially inclusive involvement in this sort of exploration, it will be difficult for the UK to move from its current trajectory to one which is geared towards sustainable development.

HOW BEST TO DELIVER THE GOALS

8. The International Development Committee (IDC)’s report ‘UK Implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals’ (June 2016) made clear that the Government is not currently planning to use the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as a lever or framework for changing UK domestic policy. Instead it appears to have adopted the approach of simply planning to construct a retrospective review designed to show the extent to which existing policy is advancing the Goals. However if we distinguish between two sets of SDG targets, it may be possible to encourage the Government to take a more positive approach.
9. Some of the targets correspond to policy objectives set out in the Conservative Party 2015 manifesto, or to the broad aspirations set out by the Prime Minister when she took office; in this case, publication of performance against the targets can help the centre of government, Parliament and the public hold ministers to account, particularly if the choice of indicators allows international comparisons of progress; this accountability can in turn act as a spur to delivery, including the inter-departmental co-ordination that will often be needed for success – provided of course the targets are used to guide policy and policy delivery before the event rather than simply to report on it afterwards.
10. For example, the Prime Minister wants to create ‘a country that works for everyone’ and the Conservative manifesto promised that inequality and child and pensioner poverty will continue to fall. Targets 1.2, 8.6, 8.8, 10.2, 10.3 and 10.4 are all relevant to this theme, and they could form the basis for a co-ordinating unit report. In this way the SDG performance would be made politically relevant, rather than appear to be an ‘add on’. Of course over time (and with a new government) the precise composition of the themes may change – although for the most part they will reflect objectives that are widely held across the political spectrum.
11. For this first set of targets, departments should revise their departmental plans to incorporate the targets and appropriate indicators. As has been pointed out in the IDC report, this is likely to require a central co-ordinating unit (similar to that operating in the Czech Republic) which will ensure that appropriate targets and indicators are used in the plans, press for quantified milestones where appropriate, facilitate the policy co-ordination needed to deliver these, and report to Parliament on performance and the reasons for success or failure. Self-evidently, this unit will need sufficient political authority to do its job, which in practice means the backing of the Prime Minister and the Chancellor of the Exchequer. Ideally the system would be linked to budgets, in the style of the Public Service Agreement system.
12. For targets not implied by existing Government commitments, it would be for relevant select committees to hold departments to account, although again (as within government itself) a co-ordinating role may need to be played (presumably by one of the select committee secretariats and the Liaison Committee).

13. It is important to distinguish these two different sets of targets because a refusal by the Government to set up the machinery needed for the first set of targets raises questions about its commitment to accountability, effective government and the SDG process – in a way that a refusal to do so for both sets would not, given that the second set will not reflect existing policy.
14. The UN report on the SDG agenda, *Transforming Our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, asks all member states to develop national strategies on the SDGs and to “conduct regular and inclusive reviews of progress at the national and sub-national levels”. It is recommended that these reviews engage a wide range of stakeholders, including national parliaments but going beyond these to include other institutions across sectors. In order to live up to this recommendation and - important in the context of ‘Brexit’ and the UK’s need to maintain its ‘soft power’ and reputation as a leader in sustainability - to set a suitable example in domestic implementation of the Global Goals, the UK Government should consider a broader and more inclusive approach to implementation of the SDGs than indicated so far. Evidently the Goals cannot simply be regarded as a matter for the national tier of governance, nor as a concern only of public policymakers: other levels of public administration need to be involved, and so do business and civil society institutions.
15. One approach to achieve this would be to draft a high-level implementation guide, aimed at UK stakeholders at all levels of governance and across sectors. This would encourage development of SDG implementation strategies by key actors and would also commit the UK Government to producing an annual report on activity related to SDGs by Whitehall departments charged with particular targets, and to scrutiny by Parliament and an annual debate on progress with the Global Goals (domestic and international). Devolved administrations (Scotland, Wales, N Ireland and city-regional authorities) should be encouraged to produce similar implementation strategies and scrutiny plans. Such strategies should include plans for engagement with major businesses and with civil society organisations already active in relation to SDG implementation, for example via an annual SDGs conference supported by government and drawing in all key stakeholders. One of the partner organisations affiliated to CUSP, An Economy That Works, is currently organising roundtable discussions with business representatives to discuss sustainability issues, and we would hope to see related initiatives being facilitated by the Government as part of the SDG delivery process.
16. A very thorough set of governance mechanisms and lines of accountability were established by the ‘Securing the Future’ UK sustainable development strategy in 2005. There is a need now to establish a new strategy, in line with the UK commitment to the SDGs, and a set of mechanisms with a similar scope, including the creation of a new sustainable development advisory body independent of government but linked to government departments in the way the Sustainable Development Commission was.
17. In view of the importance of HM Treasury within government, Treasury support for action to implement the SD Goals is essential. Part of the reform needed in order to implement the SDGs will therefore be reform of the Treasury, which we are glad to see is the subject of a specific EAC inquiry, which should be explicitly linked to this inquiry on the SDGs.
18. Recent changes within government have raised the profile of the idea of “industrial strategy” and infrastructure planning, both of which have major implications for sustainable development. Any new arrangements should make this connection, for example through ensuring that sustainability considerations are fully reflected in the methodology used to assess requirements for new infrastructure.

MEASURING AND COMMUNICATING PERFORMANCE

19. To achieve maximum impact the ONS and Government should consider developing single headline indicators for the themes that are most important. Thus there could be a 'country that works for everyone' indicator, based on equality, a health indicator, and so on. The New Economics Foundation report 'Five Headline Indicators of National Success' (October 2015) describes the kind of approach that could be adopted. Given that the numbers will be published anyway, such a set of headline indicators could be published by the EAC as part of its monitoring of progress with SDG implementation.
20. Given the timeframe of the Global Goals, extending to 2030, and the importance attached in the Goals to young people and education, it would be appropriate and valuable for government and other institutions to explore ways of supporting and encouraging the engagement of schools, colleges and universities in communicating, debating and implementing the Global Goals.
21. Finally, we return to our earlier point that the UK should take a global approach to implementing the SDGs. This will require indicators that are not only focused on national issues. For example, the UK government might look into further extending its consumption based carbon accounts (which count carbon emitted in the overseas production of goods for consumption in the UK) to include other environmental and social impacts, for example impacts on biodiversity and water stress.