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University



Universal Goals, Devolved Powers: The Sustainable Development Goals and the UK's response

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Universal Goals, Devolved Powers: The Sustainable Development Goals and the UK's response

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Introduction

Just over a year ago, UN member states agreed a new global framework to replace the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). ‘Transforming our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development’¹ sets out an ambitious plan of action for people, planet and prosperity. It is underpinned by 17 global goals – the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) – which will drive development efforts over the next 15 years.

The new framework differs from its MDG predecessor in a number of ways. There are more goals, reflecting the broader scope of social, economic and environmental concerns that it seeks to address. Countries will now be able to focus on the issues that are most important to them rather than being forced to follow a blueprint approach. There is also a particular emphasis placed on ‘leaving no one behind’, recognising that progress to address problems of poverty has been incredibly uneven both within and between countries.

However, what particularly sets the new agreement apart is its commitment to universality. This means that all nations now have a responsibility for implementing the goals. The 2030 Agenda Outcome Document states that ‘cohesive nationally owned sustainable development strategies, supported by integrated national financing frameworks, will be at the heart of our efforts.’² It calls on member states to develop national strategies on the SDGs as soon as possible and ‘conduct regular and inclusive reviews of progress at the national and sub-national levels.’³

For the UK, as a member state and signatory to the 2030 Agenda, this concerns not only its actions internationally but also what it does domestically – from considering how global problems are manifest in the UK through to how domestic actions have an impact beyond its borders. Given sustainable development in the UK is a devolved matter, it also concerns not just what steps are taken by the UK government but how the devolved administrations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland respond to the new commitments.

During September and October 2016, The Open University hosted a series of national seminars in Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland to explore what this means in practice and review what progress is already being made. The events were organised in partnership with relevant national networks: The Coalition of Aid and Development Agencies in Northern Ireland (CADA NI); the Sustainable Development Alliance in Wales; the Network for International Development Organisations in Scotland (NIDOS) and the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations (SCVO)⁴. Nearly 200 people took part in the seminars representing civil society organisations, local and national government, universities and private sector organisations across the three nations.

This report provides a synthesis of the key issues and inputs from the events.

¹ <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/post2015/transformingourworld>

² Para 63. ³ Paras 78-79. ⁴ More information about our partners is listed in Appendix 1.

What is happening: How devolved administrations are responding to the SDGs

Scotland

Scotland was one of the first countries to publicly endorse the SDGs⁵ and has made both domestic and international commitments as part of its response.

The Scottish Government refreshed its international development policy in September 2016, following a public consultation carried out between February and May 2016⁶ entitled, 'Meeting Global Challenges and Making a Difference: Aligning our International Development Policy with the Global Goals.'⁷ It has set out commitments to focus its efforts on a smaller number of programme countries – Malawi, Zambia, Rwanda and Pakistan – while increasing the annual budget of its International Development Fund (IDF) from £9 million to £10 million from 2017.

In terms of its domestic response, the Fairer Scotland Action Plan⁸, launched in October 2016, sets out 50 actions for the current parliamentary term focused on tackling poverty, reducing inequality and building a fairer, more inclusive Scotland. These are based upon five long-term priorities:

- A fairer Scotland for all;
- Ending child poverty
- A strong start for all young people
- Fairer working lives
- A thriving third age.

Scotland is also one of 15 pilots taking part in an Open Government Partnership (OGP) programme exploring how to make governments more open, accountable and responsive to citizens at a subnational level⁹. It is through this initiative that the Scottish Government has indicated that it planned to bring the different strands of its sustainable development agenda together and develop the right mechanisms for citizen participation and public accountability.

The Scottish Government is shortly due to commence a review of its National Performance Framework – which currently comprises 16 national outcomes and 60 indicators¹⁰ – to ensure better alignment to new priorities and commitments set out in the New Programme for Government.

Wales

Wales has recently passed legislation on sustainable development. It follows a nationwide public consultation exercise entitled The Wales We Want¹¹, which ran parallel to the global World We Want consultation that fed into the creation of the SDGs.

The Well-Being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015¹² requires public bodies to act in a sustainable way. They are now required to develop and publish well-being objectives which demonstrate how they meet sustainability goals.. They also have to demonstrate how they have engaged with communities, taken a more long-term and preventative approach to their work, as well as worked more collaboratively with each other.

Public Service Boards will be established in each local authority area charged with reviewing social, economic, environmental and cultural well-being in their areas and producing local well-being plans in collaboration with key stakeholders.

The Act underpinned by seven well-being goals:

- A prosperous Wales
- A resilient Wales
- A healthier Wales
- A more equal Wales
- A Wales of cohesive communities
- A Wales of vibrant culture and thriving Welsh language
- A globally responsive Wales.

Progress against the goals will be monitored via 46 national indicators¹³ and informed by the publication of I Future Trends reports. A Future Generations Commissioner¹⁴ has also been appointed to act as a guardian for future generations in Wales and to support public bodies in working towards the goals.

Northern Ireland

Northern Ireland has not set out a formal response to the SDGs. However, its new Programme for Government (draft) introduces for the first time a national goals-based framework focused on an overall vision of 'Improving wellbeing for all – by tackling disadvantage, and driving economic growth.' It is based upon 14 strategic outcomes:

- We prosper through a strong, competitive, regionally balanced economy
- We live and work sustainably – protecting the environment
- We have a more equal society
- We enjoy long, healthy, active lives
- We are an innovative, creative society, where people can fulfil their potential
- We have more people working in better jobs
- We have a safe community where we respect the law, and each other
- We care for others and we help those in need
- We are a shared society that respects diversity
- We are a confident, welcoming, outward-looking society
- We give our children and young people the best start in life
- We have high quality public services
- We have created a place where people want to live and work, to visit and invest
- We connect people and opportunities through our infrastructure

Northern Ireland has an International Policy but this is still in draft¹⁵ form.

⁵ Press release: <http://news.gov.scot/news/leading-the-way-in-tackling-inequality>

⁶ Press release: <http://news.gov.scot/news/scotlands-place-as-global-citizen>

⁷ Details of the consultation can be found here: www.gov.scot/Topics/International/int-dev/IDconsultation
Analysis of the responses can be found here: www.gov.scot/Publications/2016/09/9473

⁸ Fairer Scotland Action Plan: <http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2016/10/9964>

⁹ <http://www.opengovpartnership.org/node/9043>

¹⁰ National performance framework: <http://www.gov.scot/Resource/0049/00497339.pdf>

¹¹ Wales We Want consultation: <http://thewaleswewant.co.uk/>

¹² The Act: <http://gov.wales/topics/people-and-communities/people/future-generations-act/?lang=en>

¹³ Indicators: <http://gov.wales/docs/desh/publications/160316-national-indicators-to-be-laid-before-nafw-en.pdf>

¹⁴ Future Generations Commissioner: <http://futuregenerations.wales/wp/>

¹⁵ <https://www.northernireland.gov.uk/topics/work-executive/programme-government>

What is needed: Providing an effective universal response to the SDGs

Participants at each of the events in Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland were invited to consider the implications of the SDGs for their own work, identifying opportunities and challenges, as well as what they thought was needed to support implementation. Whilst the discussions raised issues specific to each national context, there were some common themes that ran through each of the events. These are set out below.



“The SDGs were the result of collaboration, cooperation and compromise. There was little discussion though on how they would be delivered and met.”

*Jennifer Williams, Chief Executive,
Habitat for Humanity Northern Ireland*

1. The SDGs challenge us to ‘do development differently’, but have we shifted from a ‘business as usual’ mindset?

There was a very clear recognition from all participants that the SDGs are not simply a case of continuing what the MDGs started. They are about ensuring that no one is left behind. They are about working more holistically to reconcile social, economic and environmental agendas, as well as domestic and international concerns. They are also about operating in a more collaborative way – across sectors, across government, and across nations and regions. Above all, the most significant departure from the MDGs is the focus on universality, meaning that the SDGs apply to everyone and every nation.

Yet in spite of the significance that these changes represent for how we do development, it was strongly felt that the level of discussion regarding implementation has to date been minimal - and does not yet match the level of energy and commitment that went into negotiating the goals.

Concerns were raised that if the framework is seen solely through the lens of the 17 goals and 169

targets it will not only be seen as an overwhelming and insurmountable project, but will also reduce development to a technocratic, ‘tick box’ exercise. It also brings with it the risk of cherry picking: either by focusing on what is already being done, what is easy to measure or what is already on track for achievement.

Ensuring development interventions are truly sustainable requires a focus on transformative change. It requires an understanding of the inter-connectedness and indivisibility of development challenges. It also requires ensuring that progress in one area is not to the detriment of another, notably that economic well-being is not improved at the expense of environmental degradation. A focus on goals and targets therefore is simply not enough.

2. The SDGs need a clear and compelling narrative that goes beyond goals and targets.

New ways of thinking about and doing development, requires new ways communicating. It was widely acknowledged that goals, targets and indicators are not necessarily the means to capture the imagination of the uninitiated – or indeed those already working directly on sustainable development issues. People need to see how it relates to their daily lives, why things need to change, and what can be done.

It was recognised that the universality of the framework provides a clear opportunity to ground the goals in the national contexts and challenge the assumption that sustainable development is something that happens ‘out there’. It provides the opportunity to make the global commitments genuinely relevant to UK citizens by showing how actions at home have an impact elsewhere, as well as how global problems are manifest in the UK. In doing so it will help break down the ‘them and us’ narrative that often underlies public discourse on development, illustrating the commonalities between issues in the global North and South - and challenging the notion that solutions originate in the north.

The term ‘sustainable development’ typically conjures up images either of wind turbines or of poor people in poor countries. It was strongly felt that we need to find new ways of illustrating and conveying what sustainable development looks like, whether it is taking place in Belfast, Belarus or Belize. We even need to consider whether using the term ‘sustainable development’ is indeed helpful.

3. Public engagement and mobilisation will be critical for effective implementation but most people have never even heard of the SDGs.

There was a clear recognition that sustainable development is not, and should not, be seen as the preserve of international development practitioners or environmentalists. Sustainable development is everyone's business. Reaching beyond 'the usual suspects', however, requires new ways of engaging and mobilising. The challenge lies in how to achieve this in a context where most people have not even heard of the SDGs, where the media is uninterested at best or hostile at worst, and where the majority of CSOs have limited capacity to undertake this work.

Public engagement is required not only to mobilise individuals and communities to take action themselves but also to determine national priorities, agree how progress will be measured and, ultimately, to hold governments and other key actors to account for their efforts. It therefore goes beyond the provision of information and awareness raising to equipping people with the skills and abilities to take action and to instil the idea of collective ownership and responsibility.

It was suggested that approaches need to focus on ongoing outreach and engagement, not one off tokenistic exercises. They need to include positive and tangible examples of success: stories that can inspire, motivate and demonstrate how progress is possible. They also need to foster learning and collaboration between different communities and across nations in the UK - as well as between the global North and South.

4. Devolved powers for sustainable development offer opportunities for greater accountability, clearer channels of influence and ensuring actions are locally relevant...

There appeared to be strong support for sustainable development being a devolved issue. First and foremost it provides individuals and organisations with more immediate and direct access to decision making. It was also felt that the nations are operating at the right size and scale to galvanise action and to ensure sustainable development priorities are relevant to the local context.

While there are clear synergies between the goals and targets approach set out in the 2030 Agenda and the national plans whether they are in the form of legislative commitments, action plans or programmes for government – it was recognised there is further



“A real problem is policy coherence. One of the biggest challenges for all public bodies and governments is to bring together action across government departments to change the way we do sustainable development. If we don't get that coherence, that integration, then we're not going to make the transformative leap we need.”

Anne Meikle, Head of WWF Cymru and Chair of the Sustainable Development Alliance Wales.

work to do to understand more fully the interrelationship between the national and global frameworks, particularly around reporting and accountability mechanisms. National priorities need to focus on the areas in which we as a developed nation can have the greatest impact on sustainable development, such as through energy production, consumption and our efforts to tackle climate change. They equally need to consider the areas in which we are currently performing badly in comparison with other countries.

5. ...But a devolved approach to sustainable development does not negate the need for UK-wide leadership and coordination.

Domestic and international responses cannot work in siloes. Similarly, the devolved nations cannot work separately, either from each other or the UK government. 'Joined-up' government is essential, both across central government departments and between UK government and the devolved administrations. This would mean in practice that Northern Ireland can learn from what Wales and Scotland are doing, and vice versa.

There was a strong feeling that the leadership provided by the UK government in the process leading up to the goals and framework being agreed has not been matched by the leadership and commitment shown since. This is most evident by the absence of a UK-wide implementation plan for the SDGs. There were concerns that the emerging development discourse at the UK level is focused more on economic growth and trade



“The SDGs can sound a bit “over there”. How is any of this stuff relevant to us nationally? This is our big challenge. We need to translate the SDGs to the front line: to health and social care, to the natural

environment, to children’s services, to women’s rights.”

Lucy McTernan, Deputy Chief Executive, Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations.

rather than on sustainability. Of equal concern were the implications of BREXIT in terms of how the UK sees its role in the world, its commitment to multilateralism and where sustainable development sits within the post-BREXIT political landscape.

UK leadership is required to unite efforts around a UK-wide implementation plan, to ensure policy coherence, to establish mechanisms for civil society oversight and reporting, to champion public engagement and to facilitate learning, knowledge exchange and collaboration between different stakeholders across the UK.

6. A UK partnership for sustainable development requires new forms of governance that changes the relationship between citizen and state

Leadership on sustainable development, however, does not just lie with governments. The call for a new global partnership for sustainable development extends responsibility for delivery beyond national governments to include a whole range of other stakeholders: civil society, the private sector, academia, local authorities and others. This inevitably places a much greater emphasis on collaboration, and along with it, effective approaches to support transparency, accountability and participation. Above all, it requires a fundamental shift in how governments and citizens work together: essentially from ‘doing to’ to ‘doing with’. This new approach to doing development could herald a new era of modern government in the UK, with the Open Government Partnership providing the means to take these changes forward.

What next: Immediate opportunities and challenges for UK stakeholders

Rather than provide a list of actions on behalf of participants we would encourage each reader to develop their own list of actions and commitments in response to the output from the seminars. This of course includes the organisers of the seminars and authors of the report. These range from continuing to convene stakeholder meetings to discuss SDG implementation, public outreach to raise awareness of the goals, and partnering with national governments to continue to embed the goals in national planning frameworks and build understanding of key decision makers.

Commitments to the SDGs from The Open University:

Not just business as usual

- We will challenge ourselves to develop project and research ideas that will accelerate progress towards the SDGs and form complementary partnerships to make these happen

Engagement within The Open University:

- We will write a more compelling strategic narrative that makes the SDGs relevant to our students and employees
- We will hold engagement sessions with our students and employees throughout the university to build understanding of the SDGs and galvanise action
- We will map and regularly review and make transparent the OU's contribution and commitments to the SDGs at a local, national, and international level

Open educational resources:

- We will make our existing SDG related content open through our open education platform Openlearn (<http://www.open.edu/openlearn/>)
- We will work closely with networks of practitioners (one network in UK and one in Africa) to understand how additional educational resources should support SDG implementation and develop new resources in response to this expressed demand

Public engagement

- We will offer our presence across the UK to convene networks from private sector, government, and civil society organisations to come together to discuss progress and commitments to the achievement of the SDGs
- We will use our commitment to public education to provide regular updates on SDG delivery building on the success of the OU/BBC partnership which includes a review of progress towards the MDGs - <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b06drxls>

About the roadshow

Events

Northern Ireland

Wednesday 14 September, Stormont Hotel, Belfast

Speakers:

- Professor Giles Mohan, Chair of International Development, OU
- Orla Devine, Global Learning Programme Coordinator, Centre for Global Education
- Jennifer Williams, CEO, Habitat for Humanity Northern Ireland
- Claire Hanna, MLA, Chair of the All Party Group on International Development, Northern Ireland Assembly

Wales

Thursday 22 September, Temple of Peace, Cardiff

Speakers:

- Professor Giles Mohan, Chair of International Development, OU
- Andrew Charles, Head of Budget Effectiveness, Welsh Government

- Sophie Howe, Future Generations Commissioner
- Anne Meikle, Head of WWF Cymru, Chair of the SDA
- Sarah Simons, Member of the Sub Sahara Advisory Panel, Hub Cymru

Scotland

Wednesday 5 October, Apex Waterloo Place Hotel, Edinburgh

Speakers:

- Professor Giles Mohan, Chair of International Development, OU
- Roger Halliday, Chief Statistician and Head of Performance, Scottish Government
- Dr Samantha Ross, Director of International Programmes, Link Community Development International
- Lucy McTernan, Deputy Chief Executive, SCVO

About The Open University

The Open University has been committed to International Development for over twenty years. We are globally recognised for our teaching and pioneering research within the sector, and for driving innovation.

Uniquely, The Open University also helps deliver development programmes in partnership with governments, NGOs, funding institutions and local partners. Our programmes across sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia address areas such as frontline health, teacher education and English language teaching.

We work where there is the greatest need: where our expertise can impact the many, rather than the few, and where our work helps create sustainable social and economic development.

We work alongside academic experts within the OU to create and deliver scalable development programmes and teaching and research initiatives which positively impact developing countries.

Our teaching and education expertise directly addresses skills and leadership gaps, improves governance, boosts economies and drives social, technological and entrepreneurial innovation.

Our research, often in partnership with multiple institutions and stakeholders, is concentrated on pressing areas of need including medicine, international policy and health economics.

Our programmes combine the OU's development, distance learning and academic expertise with practical implementation plans delivered in partnership with governments, NGOs and in-country experts to impact the lives of millions of people across sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia.

Our partners



Coalition of Aid and Development Agencies (CADA) Northern Ireland

The Coalition of Aid and Development Agencies in Northern Ireland (CADA) is an umbrella organisation of those overseas aid agencies with an active presence in Northern Ireland. There are currently 19 member agencies, which are collectively supported by more than 450,000 people across Northern Ireland who donate their money and time to campaign, fundraise and volunteer.

Telephone: 028 9064 8133

Email: info@cada-ni.org

Website: www.cada-ni.org

Twitter: @CADA_NI



Network of International Development Organisations in Scotland (NIDOS)

NIDOS is the network in Scotland that unites the international development sector to promote effectiveness and collectively influence the policy agenda. Our aim is to strengthen the contribution of Scottish organisations to reducing inequality and poverty worldwide.

Telephone: 0131 281 0897

Email: info@nidos.org.uk

Website: www.nidos.org.uk

Twitter: @NIDOSNetwork



Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations (SCVO)

The Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations (SCVO) is the membership organisation for Scotland's charities, voluntary organisations and social enterprises.

Telephone: 0131 474 8000

Email: enquiries@scvo.org.uk

Website: www.scvo.org.uk

Twitter: @scvotweet



Sustainable Development Alliance (SDA) Wales

SDA is an alliance of organisations that cares passionately about the Wales people live in now and will pass on to the next generation. The alliance brings together over 30 organisations, from environment and development charities to faith and belief, language, community and women's groups.

Telephone:

Email:

Website: www.shapingfuturewales.org

Twitter: @shapingwales