



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
**SYDNEY**

**Dr Michael Spence AC**

Vice-Chancellor and Principal

29 March 2018

Senator Alex Gallacher

Chair

Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee

PO Box 6100

Parliament House

Canberra ACT 2600

By email: [fadt.sen@aph.gov.au](mailto:fadt.sen@aph.gov.au)

Dear Senator Gallacher,

### **Inquiry into the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals**

The University of Sydney welcomes the opportunity to provide the attached submission to the committee's important inquiry into the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

We are pleased to be part of the discussion your inquiry has stimulated and is facilitating.

The University of Sydney's mission aligns very closely with the SDGs in that the institution exists for the benefit of the people of NSW, Australia and the wider world.

We have interdisciplinary teams of leading researchers grappling with the complex and multidimensional challenges that must be addressed locally, in our region and globally if the SDGs are to be achieved.

In our approach to education, we seek to produce graduates with the knowledge, skills and qualities that industry, governments, NGOs and communities will need to achieve the ambitious social, economic and environmental goals and targets set by the 2030 Agenda.

We would be delighted to arrange for academics with relevant expertise leading relevant initiatives to meet with the Committee at its convenience. If it would be of interest, we may also be able to put the committee in contact with students who have been involved in development projects in the region, including those who have been supported through the New Colombo Plan.

Yours sincerely,

(Signature removed)

Michael Spence

**Attachment**    University of Sydney Submission to the Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee's inquiry into the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, March 2018



## **University of Sydney Submission to the Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee's inquiry into the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, March 2018**

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### **Summary**

The United Nations' 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are a response by the global community to unprecedented existential threats to humanity and the ecosystems that sustain life on earth. The SDGs address a wide range of complex social, economic, and environmental challenges. Effective local, regional and global responses will require transformations in how societies and economies function, and in how we interact with our planet.

The Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee's inquiry into the SDGs provides a timely opportunity to increase awareness of the fundamental importance of integrated systems approaches for the implementation of the UN's 2030 SDG Agenda. The SDGs are a new agenda providing a framework for governments, business, industry, communities, education and research organisations to tackle collectively the most pressing challenges facing humanity and to work collaboratively towards a sustainable future. The goals emphasise the interlinkages between the social, economic and environmental dimensions of sustainable development and therefore build on and provide an enhanced space to introduce, progress and normalise interdisciplinary approaches.

Education, research, innovation and leadership will be essential in helping societies address the many obstacles they face to realising the SDGs. Universities, with their broad remit around the creation and dissemination of knowledge have a critical role to play in the achievement of the SDGs. For example, the University of Sydney's mission aligns very closely with the SDGs in that it exists for the benefit of both Australia and the wider world. We have teams of leading researchers and educators grappling daily with the very complex and multidimensional challenges that must be addressed if the SDGs are to be achieved in Australia and our region.

In international development, we are focusing our research and education to address some of the vital national and global challenges of our time and to engage with the communities for whom our work has real meaning. Recognising the complexity of the problems we confront we pursue a distinctive interdisciplinary and collaborative approach, bringing people together from across the University with communities, industry, governments and NGOs.

Through our Charles Perkins Centre for Obesity, Diabetes and Cardiovascular Disease, we are pioneering new models for interdisciplinary research to tackle both under- and over-nutrition. In other areas of health, our Brain and Mind Centre, the Marie Bashir Institute for Infectious Diseases and Biosecurity and the Cancer Network are demonstrating what can be achieved when different disciplines and sectors work together.

The Sydney Environment Institute aims to change the relationship between human societies and the systems that sustain them, and to help them adapt positively to environmental change. The Sydney Institute of Agriculture brings together researchers and industry partners around megatrends such as digital transformation, profitability, resilience, provenance and connectivity to improve sustainable food production for an increasing global population. Our Australian Centre for Field Robotics is applying world-leading sensing, artificial intelligence and robotic solutions to improve the sustainability and productivity of agricultural production.



Another recent initiative at the University – the Planetary Health Platform – builds on a concept embedded within the SDG vision and was launched at about the same time the SDGs were agreed in 2015. Planetary Health, put simply, is *the health of human civilisation and the natural systems on which it depends*. Inherent in achieving the SDGs and enacting such a concept is a belief that de-coupling economic development from ecological impact is possible. This can be difficult to reconcile, however, particularly when processes driving the enactment of the SDGs are entrenched in the same systems of governance and industrial development that contribute to poverty, inequality and ecological degradation.

Given this difficulty, there is a vital need to develop research and practice that seeks to understand the range of positive and negative interactions among SDGs to ensure that progress that appears to be made in relation to one or more SDG, does not come at the expense of lack of progress in others. This means seeking interventions supporting policy coherence and considering co-benefits in planning and financing decisions. Ultimately, this will require a fundamental shift in mindset, from one of competition to one that emphasises cooperation and collaboration between all stakeholders.

### **Recommendations**

In our responses to the inquiry's terms of reference below we make seven specific recommendations for the Committee's consideration:

1. Integrate Australia's implementation of, and reporting on, the SDGs explicitly and formally to Treasury's Intergenerational Reporting Framework (ToR 2).
2. Endorse the Australian Council for International Development's (ACFID) proposal for a national SDG implementation plan (ToR 3).
3. Develop and invest in review and accountability mechanisms at the national, regional and international levels, including resourcing for coordination as well as fully costed and financed implementation plan (ToR 3).
4. Establish a multi-sector SDG reference group to enhance transparency, collaboration and communication of Australia's implementation of the SDGs (ToR 3).
5. Support and adequately fund a national public awareness campaign to increase public engagement and commitment to the SDGs (ToR 4).
6. Adopt a transformational approach to SDG implementation through the aid program by focusing on key systemic drivers that cut across goals and working with partner countries to identify focus areas in line with their development priorities (ToR 6).
7. Ensure the Prime Minister and the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet provide overall strategic leadership for SDG implementation given their significance and because the 17 SDGs cover the full spectrum of social and economic issues (ToR 8).

We look forward to discussing any issues arising with the Committee at its convenience.



## **Responses to the inquiry's terms of reference**

### **1. The understanding and awareness of the SDGs across the Australian Government and in the wider Australian community**

There is currently very little public awareness and debate about the SDGs in the media or in Australian parliaments. The announcement last year that Australia will deliver its first voluntary national review (VNR) on the 2030 Agenda at the UN High Level Political Forum in July 2018 was very welcome. It stimulated debate in the Australian development sector by providing an opportunity to look across Australia at the effectiveness of our implementation of the SDGs and consider how we can accelerate our progress.

Foreign Minister Julie Bishop described how the SDGs will only ever be a “statement of ambition unless we plan for how we will achieve them.” We agree and have participated in the national consultations to produce the VNR, which both profiles achievements so far and helps set a path for improving implementation into the future. Significantly, the VNR consultations have increased awareness within the Australian development sector on SDG implementation, including about how different organisations such as universities are advancing the 2030 Agenda by implementing projects that can have direct impact on achieving the SDGs. The need to better share and showcase ongoing research and education initiatives and programs remains, as does the need to support future work that addresses the SDGs – whether around data capture and assessment for reporting purposes – or focused on specific interventions in areas such as health, nutrition, food production and consumption, or climate change.

The adoption of the SDGs has signaled a new phase for international development, and with it an opportunity to critically assess how new development goals and milestones are likely to be shaped and delivered. There is a need for a greater understanding of how development needs and practices can sustain a new agenda for change, and a deeper awareness that identifying priorities based on both new and longstanding knowledge gaps is a key step in orienting decision-making processes with the allocation of limited funding. The process of identifying research priorities needs to move beyond academia and involve a broader set of political and social stakeholders, as the delivery and impact of solution-based research approaches depends on effective engagement involving the academic community with challenges faced by communities, practitioners and policy-makers.

Research that underlies development policy agendas has not always been effectively translated into practice. To achieve real impact there is a need to combine the expertise of academics, practitioners and policy-makers. Calls for more inclusive and evidence-based decision-making processes and advocacy efforts have resulted in international interdisciplinary research initiatives, however, uncertainty remains about how to successfully align research, advocacy and policy priorities to devise effective approaches for contemporary problems. Doing so is charged with challenges; there are issues of politics and difficulties of implementation that go beyond the solutions designed in such a process. Nevertheless, a first order problem is that of finding space for agreement on some fundamental areas that must be the focus of attention.

The SDGs provide a unique opportunity to take an interdisciplinary, cross-sector approach to solving big complex challenges, such as poverty eradication, gender inequality, food and nutrition insecurity, disease outbreaks, natural resources management and environmental degradation. The SDGs are inclusive and diverse enough to be able to speak the language of the majority, providing a common language and platform for building collaboration internally and with external partners.



## **2. What are the potential costs, benefits and opportunities for Australia in the domestic implementation of the SDGs?**

Effective implementation of the SDGs requires the mobilisation of means of implementation, including financial resources, coordination and accountability mechanisms, technology development and collaborative partnerships.

The follow-up and review of the SDGs requires investment in review and accountability mechanisms at national, regional and international levels. It is important that this includes resourcing for coordination as well as a fully-costed and financed implementation plan.

For example, in our contribution to the SDG Baseline for Australia Report, we highlighted that in relation to SDG12 on Responsible Consumption and Production, 'Food suitable for human consumption that is lost in the food chain frequently results in reduced income for farmers. Minimising food wastage during production and transportation will improve the efficiency of resource usage and likely increase income for farmers, enabling them to more sustainably manage their land.'<sup>1</sup> Moving forward, to enable Australian producers to maintain access to premium global markets, it will be essential that they can demonstrate that their products are not only high quality, but also produced in an ecologically sustainable manner.

Looking across all the goals, one specific opportunity for Australia is to explicitly link Treasury's Intergenerational Report to domestic implementation of the SDGs. The Intergenerational Report – and its policy implications – are relevant to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda because the SDGs have a strong focus on intergenerational equity. The timing of the next Intergenerational Report – due in 2020 – is propitious.

## **3. What governance structures and accountability measures are required at the national, state and local levels of government to ensure an integrated approach to implementing the SDG that is both meaningful and achieves real outcomes?**

We support the Australian Council for International Development (ACFID's) proposal for a national implementation plan. A national action plan should include shorter-term targets as stepping stones to enable consistent progress towards the 2030 deadline, supported by specific financial commitments. Concrete plans for implementation are key to translating policy commitments into action and ensuring the Government will have progress to report.

We also support ACFID's call for a multi-sectoral reference group to enhance the transparency and effectiveness of the Inter-Departmental Committee. Currently, an intergovernmental committee co-chaired by the Deputy Secretaries of DFAT and DPMC has been established to coordinate reporting and implementation of the goals across several federal government departments. We have concerns around how effective this approach is, particularly for external consultation, as to date it has had very little visibility. Governance mechanisms for the SDGs should be designed to enable greater policy coherence across different departments and levels of government, and external stakeholder consultation and expert input.

We suggest the creation of a multi-sectoral reference group comprising representatives from civil society, the private sector and academia to sit alongside the existing inter-departmental committee to enhance transparency, collaboration and communication of Australia's implementation of the SDGs. This will ensure expert input. It will also help coordinate the various initiatives in private sector (Global Compact), academia (Sustainable Development Solutions Network SDNS), civil society/NGOs (ACFID and

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<sup>1</sup> Available: <https://www.sdgtransformingaustralia.com/?wpv-relationship-filter%5B0%5D=1253>



ACOSS) and youth (SDSN Youth). It can also help build new collaboration and partnerships, and leverage the skills, expertise and resources of different sectors and organisations.

**4. How can performance against the SDG be monitored and communicated in a way that engages government, businesses and the public, and allows effective review of Australia's performance by civil society?**

The success of the SDGs depends on collaboration and partnership across issues and against targets, with a shared vision for people, planet and prosperity. We must work to strengthen connections and joint action, both at home and abroad. This must involve raising the global public's awareness of, and engagement with, the critical importance of SDG implementation, as well as fostering new partnerships between governments, private sector actors and civil society.

Given the interconnected nature of the goals, lack of progress in one area has the potential to undermine the whole. The SDGs provide a common framework against which to test policies from different areas of government, to ensure efforts made in one area are not undermined by another, and to ensure SDG implementation is integrated with existing cross-government action plans and coordination mechanisms.

A public awareness campaign on the SDGs should form part of Australian state and federal government implementation to increase public engagement and commitment to the SDGs.

It is essential that we engage with the wider public and key sector representatives to encourage their active participation in setting and achieving targets. For example, the indicators developed for SDG2 focusing on Zero Hunger are more appropriate for low- and middle-income countries. We have an opportunity to tailor these indicators so that they resonate with Australian producers and agree on feasible and sustainable targets. At the University of Sydney we are already engaging with farmer and producer representative bodies to bring them into the discussion.

The University of Sydney Master of Sustainability Program<sup>2</sup> is a strong example of our University's commitment to graduating the leaders of tomorrow, graduates who are equipped with a sound understanding of how to effectively tackle complex problems. Our passionate student cohorts come from a wide variety of disciplinary and geographical backgrounds and their capstone projects and communication activities<sup>3</sup> enable them to gain real-world experience in putting their ideas into practice.

**5. What SDGs are currently being addressed by Australia's Official Development Assistance (ODA) program?**

All the SDGs are supported to varying levels by Australia's development program. However, the diminished funds available for aid have severely constrained DFAT's ability to effectively respond to the challenges of achieving the goals. New initiatives are fewer in number, with little opportunity to build upon notable successes in health and education from the previous decade. While many of DFAT's country aid investment plans have been updated to reflect links to relevant targets they lack detail and few include specifically targeted interventions that have progress against specific goals as an integrated objective.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://sydney.edu.au/science/sustainability/>

<sup>3</sup> <http://sydney.edu.au/environment-institute/blog/food-nought-sacrificing-quality-quantity-disregarding-taste-altogether/>





The new Indo-Pacific Centre for Health Security is a very welcome initiative and a clear opportunity for Australian ODA to support progress in areas of health and wellbeing (SDG3), both short-term through infectious disease and biosecurity and in the long-term by addressing drivers of risky behaviour at the individual, household, community, national and regional levels. The new 10-year strategy from the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR) is another stand-out example. With a focus on reducing poverty and improving livelihoods in the Indo-Pacific, ACIAR's six high-level objectives directly address the 17 goals, in particular poverty (SDG1), chronic food and nutrition insecurity (SDG2), good health (SDG3) and inappropriate food production and consumption (SDG12), as well as natural resource management (SDG6, 14, 15), inclusive value chains (SDG8 and 9), climate action (SDG13) and empowerment of women and girls (SDG5).

The University of Sydney is currently implementing an ACIAR-funded project that is facilitating interdisciplinary and multi-sectoral engagement in sustainable food and nutrition security (which includes SDGs 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 12, and 15) in resource-limiting settings.<sup>4</sup> Regional approaches to sustainable food systems were the focus of an Australia Awards-funded workshop hosted by the University of Sydney in December 2016. Experts from 17 countries across six continents representing practitioners, researchers, policy makers and community development workers participated in this workshop on secure, safe, sustainable food systems. The workshop participants highlighted the importance of adopting an interdisciplinary and multi-sectoral approach which provides an essential foundation on which strategic pro-nutrition and pro-environmental food systems can be anchored.<sup>5</sup>

## **6. Which of the SDGs is Australia best suited to achieving through our ODA program, and should Australia's ODA be consolidated to focus on achieving core SDGs?**

The SDGs are by definition multi-sector, cross-agency and interdisciplinary, which will allow the Australian Government to bring in ideas and approaches from a variety of actors and organisations. Hunger, inequality, and climate change are pressing problems of global scale that speak to more than just one SDG. Indeed, the SDGs are closely interconnected and build on each other; achievement of each goal is contingent on the achievement of others. The pursuit of one or a few goals at the expense of the balance may undermine the achievement of the sustainable development agenda as a whole.

There is need for a framework to better understand and address the complex interlinkages between the social, environmental and governance challenges facing us. The Australian Government should consider adopting a transformational approach to SDG implementation through the aid program by focusing on key systemic drivers that cut across goals, and working with partner countries to identify focus areas in line with their development priorities. Planetary Health offers this framework, connecting in powerful ways global efforts to tackle climate change and build community resilience, improve health and wellbeing for all, achieve equal rights and opportunity for women and men, alleviate poverty and ensure no-one is left behind. Through a planetary health lens, we suggest using SDG17 Partnerships to Achieve the Goal as the overarching starting point and then address key issues around Food (SDG1, 2, 12), Health (SDG1, 3, 6, 7, 13, 14, 15), Inequality (SDG1, 4, 5, 10, 16) and Economic growth (SDG8, 9, 11), and their interlinkages.

<sup>4</sup> <http://sydney.edu.au/vetscience/research/Nkuku4U/events.shtml>

<sup>5</sup> <http://rdcu.be/J1JG>



**7. How countries in the Indo-Pacific are responding to implementing the SDG, and which of the SDG have been prioritised by countries receiving Australia's ODA, and how these priorities could be incorporated into Australia's ODA program?**

No comment.

**8. Examples of best practice in how other countries are implementing the SDG from which Australia could learn.**

Because the 17 SDGs cover the spectrum of societal sectors, in many countries the Prime Minister's Department – or equivalent – is providing overall strategic leadership for SDG implementation. The Scandinavian countries, the Netherlands, UK and a few others who have already submitted their VNR and made specific funding commitments and targets could serve as useful reference points for Australia.