# SDSN Australia/Pacific submission to the Senate Inquiry on the SDGs

*March 2018*

## About SDSN Australia/Pacific

The Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) is a global network of universities and knowledge institutions that mobilises scientific and technical expertise to promote practical problem solving for sustainable development, including the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). SDSN has been operating since 2012 under the auspices of the UN Secretary-General, and has over 700 member institutions around the world.

The Australia/Pacific regional network of SDSN was established in 2013 and is hosted by Monash University. It works with the 30 SDSN members in Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific, as well as with many other partners from across all sectors, around a number of SDG-related areas. This submission builds in particular on our activities and experience in two key areas:

- **SDG localisation:** Since 2013 we have led and participated in a wide range of activities focussed on capacity building on the SDGs across all sectors, creating cross-sector dialogue and action, and identifying the opportunities that engagement with the SDGs brings. These activities have included several national high-level cross-sectoral workshops on *What sustainable development goals should Australia aim for?* and co-hosting a business and sustainable development event. More recently we were one of the key co-organisers of the *Australian SDGs Summits* in September 2016 and March 2018.

- **Universities and the SDGs:** For the past two years SDSN Australia/Pacific has been focussing on strengthening and accelerating SDG action by the university sector, which has a key role in implementation. A key activity in this area included the preparation of *Getting started with the SDGs in universities*, a guide that is now being used all around the world. We also organised a consultation workshop with the university sector towards Australia's Voluntary National Review on Agenda 2030, and facilitated the collection of sector case studies for the VNR.

This submission draws heavily on our experiences with these activities, as well as the following attachments:

1. ACFID, ACOSS, GCNA and SDSN Australia/Pacific (2016) *Australian SDGs Summit: On the road to implementation: Outcomes report*.

2. SDSN Australia/Pacific (2017) *Getting started with the SDGs in universities: A guide for universities, higher education institutions, and the academic sector. Australia, New Zealand and Pacific Edition*.

3. SDSN Australia/Pacific (2018) *The contribution of the Australian university sector to Australia's implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): Statement towards Australia's Voluntary National Review*.

## Summary of key overarching points

- The SDGs have great relevance to Australia both in terms of our own development and our role in the world.

- The SDGs provide a fundamentally new approach for addressing the social, environmental and governance challenges facing Australia and the world and as such are a huge opportunity to mobilise new attention, partnerships and actions to address these often intractable issues.

- While action by all sectors and actors will be needed if we are to achieve SDGs – and there is already considerable action happening – Government must play a key coordination and support role to enable and ensure greater and more effective action.

- Universities have a critical role in implementation of all the SDGs through teaching, research, operations and community leadership. They provide knowledge, innovations and solutions to the SDGs, create current and future SDG implementers, and provide cross-sectoral leadership. The Australian university sector has been strongly supportive of the SDGs and has already been taking action "beyond business as usual" to support them. As such it is an essential participant in any national and cross-sectoral implementation discussions and platforms.

- Universities have unique qualities that make them best placed to support the Government and other sectors on many aspects of implementation, including awareness raising, providing the evidence base for policies and responses, innovating solutions to specific challenges, and managing data and measuring progress. There is considerable opportunity to scale up the sector's role in national SDG implementation.

## Response to the Terms of Reference

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

Awareness and understanding of the SDGs across the Australian Government and in the wider Australian community are low. While they are slowly growing through the efforts of organisations like ours, as well as through internal Government efforts via the interdepartmental committee on the SDGs (IDC) and the VNR, this is not sufficient.

Success in achieving the SDGs will require the support and involvement of *all* actors within the Australian Government, across all sectors, and in the wider Australian community. Raising the awareness of all actors about what the SDGs are and how they can contribute to SDG achievement is therefore crucially important for mobilising widespread action.

From our experience, most audiences easily identify with the SDG agenda and its vision. However to ensure this connection and follow up action, communication on the SDGs needs to be audience-specific, focussed on creating an emotional connection, and specifically address what they can do to contribute.

Universities have already played a significant role in helping to raise awareness of the SDGs among their students and the Australian community more generally. They have been teaching the SDGs as part of formal coursework; using the SDGs as a framework for co-curricular activities, such as leadership programs and entrepreneurship challenges; providing executive education about them to professionals; supporting initiatives for students to become SDG ambassadors in their communities; and participating as key partners in most of the big SDG events that have taken place in Australia thus far. The Australian Government should encourage and support the university sector to expand these efforts, and should draw on the sector's capacities and knowledge to deliver a national SDG awareness campaign.

While all sectors have a role in helping raise awareness of the SDGs in Australia, the Australian Government is in a unique position to coordinate the development of appropriate messaging for different audiences and to coordinate delivery to ensure they reach all key stakeholders around the country.

Furthermore, a clear "signal" or statement, of support for the SDGs from the Government will greatly help increase interest and legitimacy of the SDGs for many stakeholders, including business.

### b. *The potential costs, benefits and opportunities for Australia in the domestic implementation of the SDGs*

While the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the predecessors of the SDGs, were targeted at the needs of developing countries, the SDGs cover a much broader agenda that is highly relevant for development challenges in countries like Australia. This is clearly demonstrated by the *SDG Index and Dashboards Report 2017*[1], where Australia received a score of just 75.9 and is ranked 26th in terms of progress in achieving the SDGs. That report highlights areas such as inequality, obesity, agricultural practices, greenhouse gas emissions and climate change action, waste management and recycling as areas where Australia is performing poorly relative to other wealthy countries.

Furthermore the key SDG principle of 'Leave No One behind' has particular resonance for Australia with the need to close the gap around Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander disadvantage, and with growing rates of structural poverty.

There are many studies that show there are significant costs to *not* addressing these issues, and we strongly believe, based on our experience, that the SDGs are a hugely valuable opportunity or tool to help address these existing challenges in new and innovative ways.

This is because the SDGs provide a common vision that is supported by all world governments and also resonates with and inspires people across different countries and sectors. As such the SDGs provide a framework for
- defining community priorities and guiding responsible organisational behaviour;
- breaking silos and building partnerships by bringing different stakeholders together around shared issues of interest;
- focussing action by providing a transparent and accountable way to track progress and identify and highlight areas we are not performing well; and
- helping us understand and address the interlinkages between the social, environmental and economic dimensions of the challenges facing us.

It is important for the Australian Government to recognise the opportunities of engaging with the SDGs and formally build them into government processes.

Universities are already recognising these opportunities and acting to build on them. The Vice Chancellors of 10 universities in Australia and New Zealand have signed the *University Commitment to the SDGs*[2], which affirms the university's intention to support and promote the SDGs as well as to report on activities in support of the goals. The Commitment is now referenced in many university-wide governance documents and universities are working to implement it across all areas.

### c. *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 SDGs that is both meaningful and achieves real outcomes*

While everyone in Australia needs to contribute to the implementation of the SDGs, the Australian Government has two key roles in contributing to this.

First, it needs to contribute to the SDGs through its own activities and areas of influence. The SDGs touch on all facets of the Australian Government's work, and implementation requires clear responsibilities, mandate and coordination within Government on the SDGs.

This could be supported by a national implementation plan for the SDGs, with clear priorities and targets, which outlines how Australia will achieve the goals, both nationally and through our international development. The plan should identify which areas of the Government will be responsible for progress ion which goals. Such a plan will enable consistency and coherence between Departments and policy priorities, as well as accountability for action. It will also signal the importance of the SDGs to all other sectors and help guide them in their implementation efforts.

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[1] Sachs, J., Schmidt-Traub, G., Kroll, C., Durand-Delacre, D. and Teksoz, K. (2017) *SDG Index and Dashboards Report 2017*. New York: Bertelsmann Stiftung and Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN).

[2] See http://ap-unsdsn.org/regional-initiatives/universities-sdgs/university-commitment/

Because of the importance of the work of other sectors in implementing the SDGs, the Government should institute a formal process for consulting with them on Government actions, including the development of a national action plan or other activities, to enhance transparency, collaboration and communication. This could be done through a multi-sectoral reference group that sits alongside the existing IDC.

Second, the Government is in the best position to help coordinate action on the SDGs across different sectors, locations, and levels of government. Coordination on aspects of SDG implementation, such as priorities, communication approach, information sharing, and measurement and reporting, will help enhance uptake, improve efficiency, reduce transaction costs and maximise collaboration.

While different sectors and actors, including SDSN Australia/Pacific, have been strongly active in helping to build partnerships and coordinating efforts among sectors, our reach and resources are limited. We strongly believe a national coordination hub or secretariat, funded by the Government and ran in collaboration with a cross-sector advisory group, will significantly enhance national SDG action.

The university sector, through its expertise and research in every SDG area, can provide significant support to the Australian Government in establishing governance structures and accountability measures and in their ongoing implementation. This includes support in "localising" the SDG agenda to the Australian context; identifying and evaluating pathways and policy options to achieving the SDGs; developing guidance and syntheses of knowledge on particular SDG areas; developing tools and resources to support SDG implementation; developing innovations and solutions to specific SDG challenges; understanding and managing interlinkages between the goals; and monitoring and evaluating progress. While the sector is already doing many of these things, greater funding and mandate will be needed to ramp this work up.

### d. How can performance against the SDGs 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

Appropriate frameworks for monitoring and reporting Australia's progress on the SDGs are an essential component of implementation – and are one of the key opportunities of the SDGs. Such frameworks provide an impetus for action ('what gets reported gets done'), ensure accountability, provide feedback on implementation success, create a coherent story on wide-ranging actions, and provide an opportunity for ongoing public engagement.

Reporting should happen annually or bi-annually and focus on how we are performing as a country against each of the SDG goals and targets. While the Australian reporting framework should include all relevant indicators from the official UN SDG set, it should also include Australian-only indicators that help tell the full SDG story in the Australian context. Adequate levels of spatial, demographic, and socioeconomic disaggregation to capture how we are going with Leave No One Behind are essential.

Reporting should also provide an accessible and coherent narrative of progress and actions across different sectors, and frameworks to support the collection of meaningful data on this need to be developed by the Government in collaboration with the sectors.

Regular reporting on the SDGs is a big job and needs to be adequately resourced by the Government. While the ABS is in the best position to support collecting and reporting on this data, it is crucial to have cross-sector contribution and community engagement in the reporting and analysis of the results. A good model to build on is an independent body like the National Sustainability Council, which produced the *Sustainable Australia Report 2013*.

The Government could also build on the work of the independently established National Sustainable Development Council, which has experts with considerable experience in assessing Australia's sustainability performance and in communicating the SDGs. This Council is currently finalising a comprehensive baseline report on Australia's progress in achieving the SDGs. A preliminary version of this report can be accessed at sdgtransformingaustralia.com.

The academic sector has considerable expertise in data collection, development and analysis of indicators and trends, visualisation approaches, and access to high-powered facilities for managing large data sets. The sector can support the development of comprehensive SDG reporting for Australia.

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

f. *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*

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

With the 17 goals in the SDG Agenda, it is natural to want to prioritise some goals over others. However one of the key principles of the SDGs is recognition of the interconnected nature of the Agenda, both among goals and between the social, economic and environmental dimensions within them. Focussing on just one aspect can lead to unintended consequences that undermine progress in other areas[3]. Recognition and management of these interlinkages should be key part of the ODA program.

Both general education and education in the knowledge and skills to support SDG implementation are crucial to the achievement of *all* the SDGs. With education being one of Australia's largest exports, ensuring all students are "SDG-ready" could translate to a huge positive impact on SDG implementation in the Asia/Pacific and beyond through our education system. The SDGs and associated learning outcomes should be incorporated into national school and university curriculum requirements.

Capacity building for scientific research is needed and relevant in *all* areas of the SDGs. Many universities already play a significant role in this through partnerships, joint projects, exchange programs and training programs around SDG-related issues with universities in developing countries. Support through the ODA program can further greatly enhance university capabilities to undertake these.

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

The recent report from the Canadian Council for International Co-operation, *Progressing national SDGs implementation*[4], identifies ten pillars of SDG implementation and best practices for each one. These ten pillars are strongly aligned with all the recommendations that have come out through our cross-sectoral engagement processes and should be considered by the Australian Government.

Several countries have given universities and academia a key role in supporting national implementation of the SDGs, which has greatly enabled these sectors to expand their contributions as well as improve outcomes for SDG implementation more generally. These include:

- *Germany: Science Platform Sustainability 2030:* The platform was proposed by Germany's 2016 Sustainable Development Strategy and aims to support sustainability policymaking and to foster sustainable development in Germany by generating, collating, and strategically disseminating knowledge. It is hosted by three local academic networks/institutions.

- *UK: Global Challenges Research Fund:* This 5-year £1.5Bn fund aims "to ensure UK science takes the lead in addressing the problems faced by developing countries, whilst developing our ability to deliver cutting-edge research." The SDGs form the framework under which this fund operates.

- *EU: Horizon 2020 and Framework Programme 9:* The €80 billion Horizon 2020 fund is one of the world's biggest research and innovation funds; its 2018–2019 funding call, explicitly aligns with the SDGs. Furthermore, it has recently been confirmed that FP9, its successor, will use the SDGs as its guiding principles.

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[3] Nilsson, M, Griggs, D & Visbeck, M (2016) Map the interactions between Sustainable Development Goals, *Nature*, vol. 534, pp. 320–322.

[4] Canadian Council for International Co-operation (2018) *Progressing national SDGs implementation: An independent assessment of the voluntary national review reports submitted to the United Nations High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development.*