

Chapter 7

Conclusions and recommendations

7.1 The committee's inquiry into the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs) and associated 2030 Agenda was a challenge due to the large scope of the agenda. There are 17 goals and 169 supporting targets, covering a broad swathe of economic, social and environmental policy issues. Adding to the challenge, the inquiry received more than 160 written submissions from diverse sectors including business, international development, education and civil society. Throughout the inquiry, the committee spoke with some highly engaged sectors, organisations and individuals. However, despite all UN member states committing to the SDGs in 2015, awareness for the general population of the SDGs is generally low across Australia, and the inquiry has been the first time the parliament has engaged with the SDGs in a comprehensive manner.

7.2 This chapter outlines the committee's view of the potential benefits and costs of implementing the SDGs in Australia. The chapter then summarises the current domestic policy landscape and details recommendations for improving implementation by strengthening the leadership and coordination role of the national government; establishing awareness-raising initiatives; and creating partnerships with other levels of government, the private sector and civil society. The chapter ends with the committee's conclusions regarding Australia's support for the international implementation of the SDGs through official development assistance.

Potential benefits, opportunities and costs

Benefits and opportunities

7.3 Throughout the inquiry, the committee heard that implementing the 2030 Agenda in Australia and achieving the SDGs would bring many benefits. For example, a key aspect of the 2030 Agenda is the pledge 'that no one will be left behind'. The committee recognises that acting on this commitment would improve conditions for many Australians, including people with disability and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Evidence to the inquiry also highlighted that the 2030 Agenda provides the opportunity to improve domestic policy coherence by identifying where initiatives in one sector may impact on efforts in other areas.

Costs

7.4 The committee heard that public and private investment will be required to meet the funding gap across a range of sectors in order to achieve the SDGs. A few submissions also noted that some businesses may face costs as they transition towards using more sustainable practices in alignment with the SDGs. However, the committee also heard that sustainable business practices can be more efficient, and is aware that many businesses are already seeking to align with the SDGs because they are perceived as an opportunity for business rather than a burden.

7.5 Implementing the SDGs could also impose additional reporting requirements on private and public sector organisations—unless reporting is effectively aligned

with existing processes. Acknowledging that pursuing the SDGs will require some financial investment, the committee nevertheless believes that the potential costs are outweighed by the business and employment opportunities and other benefits presented by the SDGs.

Current situation

7.6 The committee acknowledges the committed and innovative efforts to engage with the SDGs made by some civil society organisations, businesses, universities, schools, leading local governments and a number of Australian Government agencies. However, the committee was concerned to hear that the SDGs are generally unknown across Australia, apart from some highly engaged stakeholders. It further heard that when the SDGs are considered, they are often mistakenly viewed as only relating to overseas aid. While Australia is supporting other countries to implement the SDGs through its aid program, the committee firmly believes that Australia also needs to concentrate on domestic implementation to make the most of the opportunities presented by the agenda.

The Australian Government's approach

7.7 Several departmental officials asserted that the Australian Government has been adopting a whole of government approach to implementing the 2030 Agenda. Central to this approach is an interdepartmental committee (IDC) at the Deputy Secretary level, which is co-chaired by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) and Prime Minister and Cabinet (PM&C). The IDC has been supported by working groups at the First Assistant Secretary (FAS) and executive officer level.

7.8 Individual agencies are responsible for integrating the SDGs into their policies, communications and reporting. Various agencies have also been designated 'lead' and 'supporting' responsibility for domestic reporting on each of the SDGs for Australia's first Voluntary National Review (VNR). Australia presented its first VNR in 2018, and has committed to presenting at least one more before 2030. The Australian Government has also supported the development of an online reporting platform on the SDG indicators and a website with domestic case studies and links to resources on the SDGs.

Concerns regarding the approach

7.9 Submissions revealed some scepticism regarding the Australian Government's level of commitment to the SDGs, and the effectiveness of its governance arrangements. The committee heard that, while officials indicated that they were implementing a whole of government approach, individual agencies are engaging with the SDGs to different degrees without clear standards or an agreed communication strategy. Several lead and supporting agencies failed to make written submissions to the inquiry. An agency was also initially resistant to appearing at a public hearing, despite having lead responsibility for more than one goal. The committee was concerned that this did not reflect the necessary and avowed commitment and coordinated leadership on the SDG agenda. Moreover, unlike many other countries, Australia does not have mechanisms for coordinating the national implementation of

the SDGs, such as an overarching plan, formal consultative platform or regular progress report.

7.10 The committee is concerned that this lack of focussed national leadership is hindering the implementation of the SDGs. The terms of reference for this inquiry did not include an assessment of Australia's progress against the SDGs. However, evidence indicated that Australia has the scope to do better domestically against most of the SDGs, particularly with regards to climate action and reducing inequalities. In 2018, Australia was ranked 37th in the world by the independent Bertelsmann Stiftung and SDSN SDG Index. The committee is concerned that this is likely to continue to fall unless the national government takes on a more active role in advancing the SDGs. Evidence to the inquiry identified many suggestions for how to improve the Australian Government's approach to the SDGs to ensure that consistent action is taken across all agencies. The key suggestions are summarised below.

National government role

National implementation plan

7.11 The committee believes that a national implementation plan is needed to 'localise' the SDGs to the Australian context and coordinate their implementation. A plan should be developed to identify national priorities, designate responsibilities to stakeholders and establish a regular reporting mechanism. The plan should identify priorities by incorporating existing Australian concerns in consultation with civil society and the private sector. Approaches such as SDG interaction mapping and scenario modelling could also assist.

Recommendation 1

7.12 The committee recommends that the Australian Government, through the interdepartmental committee, publish a national Sustainable Development Goals implementation plan that includes national priorities and regular reports of Australia's performance against the goals.

Regular reporting

7.13 The committee notes that the reporting associated with the plan should go beyond narrative case studies to actually evaluate Australia's progress against the SDG targets and indicators. The committee views the Australian Government's online reporting platform on the SDG indicators as providing a foundation for regular analysis reports. The site will better illustrate Australia's performance once the colour-coding system is updated to reflect whether Australia is improving or declining against an indicator (rather than just showing whether data is provided for each indicator or not).

7.14 The disaggregation of data sets is an ongoing challenge. However, the committee is reassured that the Australian Bureau of Statistics is seeking to improve disaggregated data collection in partnership with other government agencies, and encourages efforts to monitor whether anyone is being left behind.

7.15 Evidence indicates that parliaments can contribute to the implementation of the SDGs through their legislative, budgetary and oversight functions. The committee

believes that the Australian Government should provide a regular public update to parliament on progress against the SDGs. This would help to inform the Australian public and parliament and facilitate further engagement with the SDGs.

Recommendation 2

7.16 The committee recommends that the Australian Government provide an indicator-based assessment to parliament at least every two years that tracks Australia's performance against the Sustainable Development Goals.

Voluntary national reviews

7.17 The committee was pleased with aspects of the first VNR, including the use of artwork by the Wiradjuri artist Jordana Angus. Evidence regarding the stakeholder consultation process was also largely positive, though the committee heard that advocates for people with disability were not sufficiently included. This review consultation process should have provided a solid basis for ongoing engagement across the community.

7.18 Australia has committed to presenting a second VNR before 2030, and some other countries are intending to present three. The committee recommends that the Australian Government begin considering how future VNRs will be developed. In particular, it should consider how to ensure stakeholder views are incorporated into the document, and how to demonstrate progress without any baseline data from the first VNR. While the first VNR adopted a narrative and case study approach, future VNRs should include quantitative data showing Australia's performance against the SDGs, targets and indicators in line with the data collected on the Australian Government's reporting platform on the SDG indicators.

Recommendation 3

7.19 The committee recommends that the Australian Government, through the interdepartmental committee, establish an approach to preparing future voluntary national review/s that ensures data on Australia's performance against the goals is included.

Coordination secretariat

7.20 While the IDC will continue until 2030, it meets relatively infrequently and is comprised of high-ranking officials. Therefore, the evidence identified a need for a dedicated secretariat to support the work of the IDC. This could also support the development of the national implementation plan, prepare Australia's future VNR/s and partner with civil society and the private sector to support national action on the SDGs.

7.21 The committee acknowledges the work in DFAT over many years in the SDG agenda through the international development of policy and reporting responsibilities. DFAT has led the Australian response, through its portfolio, and has clearly provided support across other areas. Significantly, there appears to be a perception across the community, and in some areas of the public sector, that the SDG agenda relates principally to our international programs, in line with the earlier Millennium Development Goals process. The committee believes that there must be greater

understanding of the domestic policy commitments and effective coordination. This should be reflected in the location and resourcing of a coordination secretariat.

Recommendation 4

7.22 The committee recommends that the Australian Government establish a national Sustainable Development Goals secretariat to provide ongoing support to the interdepartmental committee, develop a national implementation plan and provide effective coordination of Australia's actions to implement and report on the SDG agenda. The location of the secretariat should be determined by government to ensure the best use of resources.

Alignment of Australian Government agencies and policies with the SDGs

7.23 The committee acknowledges that some agencies have embraced the SDGs, particularly DFAT and the Department of the Environment and Energy. The latter has committed to embedding the SDGs into departmental planning and integrating information on the environment and energy SDGs, targets and indicators into Australia's next State of the Environment report. However, evidence to the inquiry indicated that many Australian Government agencies are failing to integrate the SDGs into their communications, policies and reporting frameworks.

7.24 The committee encourages all agencies to make a greater effort to engage with the SDGs. In particular, the committee supports the consideration of the SDGs when other documents and strategies are updated, such as the second Australian National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security and the 'refresh' of the Closing the Gap targets and indicators.

Recommendation 5

7.25 The committee recommends that Australian Government agencies integrate the Sustainable Development Goals across all internal and external websites, strategies and policies as they are updated.

7.26 The committee was pleased that a number of agencies referred to the SDGs in their recent annual reports, noting that there was some variety in the extent of the information provided. Most referred to the SDGs in broad terms, without including data on how the agency was making positive or negative contributions to the SDGs. At least one 'lead' agency did not refer to the SDGs in its most recent annual report at all. Therefore, the committee recommends that the Australian Government develop a framework that agencies can adopt to report against the SDGs consistently.

Recommendation 6

7.27 The committee recommends that the Australian Government, through the interdepartmental committee and Department of Finance, develop a framework to ensure that agencies include the Sustainable Development Goals in their annual reporting by 2020–21.

Increasing awareness and understanding

7.28 The committee was pleased to receive evidence from some highly engaged sectors about their awareness of the SDGs. However, the committee believes there is

scope to increase awareness about the SDGs across the Australian Government and the general community.

Sharing best practice across government

7.29 There is a general lack of understanding of the SDGs across Australian Government agencies. However, the body of literature on the SDGs is developing rapidly, and many information resources are being developed to guide the implementation of the SDGs, including some tailored specifically for governments. The committee encourages agencies to engage in best practice reviews. The committee recommends that this information should be regularly disseminated through the IDC.

Recommendation 7

7.30 The committee recommends that the Australian Government, through the interdepartmental committee, regularly share resources on international best practice across government to improve Australia's performance against the Sustainable Development Goals.

Promoting awareness beyond government

7.31 Evidence showed that a few sectors have a high level of awareness and understanding of the SDGs, such as international development groups, large businesses and the tertiary sector. However, the committee is concerned that Australia will not fully benefit from the 2030 Agenda unless the general community's awareness of the SDGs improves.

7.32 The committee views that some sectors require guidance on how to understand and implement the SDGs. For example, while sustainability is one of three cross-curriculum priorities under the Australian Curriculum, the committee was concerned to hear that school educators have found it difficult to access and interpret Australian information on the SDGs.

7.33 The committee is pleased that some links to information resources and case studies are already provided on the Australian SDGs website, launched in June 2018. The committee recommends that the IDC undertakes a literature review and updates the resources section regularly with the website partner Global Compact Network Australia. In addition, the committee recommends that the Australian Government partner with a range of stakeholders to develop and disseminate guidance on implementing and reporting against the SDGs for fields that have identified a need for Australian information, such as primary schools. The committee notes that the partnership between CSIRO and the Australian Council for International Development to develop the online SDGs Toolkit may provide a model.

Recommendation 8

7.34 The committee recommends that the Australian Government, through the interdepartmental committee, undertakes a literature review relating to the Sustainable Development Goals and updates the links to the information resources on the Australian website at least annually. Where gaps are identified,

the committee recommends that the interdepartmental committee partners with stakeholders to develop and disseminate Australian information resources.

Awareness-raising campaign

7.35 The committee understands that DFAT has engaged a communications company to develop some SDGs communication products, but that the Australian Government does not have a communications strategy for the SDGs. A few agencies are developing their own communication strategies. The committee is concerned that this is unnecessarily duplicating work, and risks sending a confused message to stakeholders across and beyond government. Therefore, the committee recommends that the IDC develop a strategy for communicating the SDGs to reduce duplication and ensure that agencies are adopting consistent messaging.

7.36 The committee supports suggestions from submissions that communication initiatives should emphasise the link between the SDGs and Australian values, and highlight how individuals, communities and businesses can contribute to progress against the SDGs. However, the evidence was mixed regarding whether the Australian Government should establish a nation-wide awareness campaign or whether it would be more effective to tailor smaller campaigns to specific stakeholder groups. Therefore, the committee recommends that the IDC assess the merits of each approach before developing the communication strategy.

Recommendation 9

7.37 The committee recommends that the interdepartmental committee develop a Sustainable Development Goals communication strategy for the Australian Government after assessing the merits of a national awareness campaign compared to targeted communication campaigns for specific stakeholder groups.

Partnerships with other levels of government

7.38 State and territory governments and the local government association did not participate in the inquiry. While participation was voluntary, it means that the committee did not receive much evidence on SDGs implementation at these levels. However, the committee was pleased to hear of a few local governments that have been embracing the SDGs, including the Cities of Melbourne, Sydney and Newcastle. Innovative approaches are also being implemented at the local level, including through the Western Australian SDG Network and the partnership between Healthy Cities Illawarra and University of Wollongong.

Council of Australian Governments

7.39 The committee was disappointed to learn that the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) has not made a formal statement about the SDGs agenda. This should be rectified to ensure a strong and collaborative national approach to implementing the SDGs. The committee acknowledges the discussion of the SDGs at meetings of the Senior Officials Group of the National Environment Protection Council and the Meeting of Environment Ministers. The committee believes that similar approaches should be taken by other COAG councils and advisory and support bodies.

Recommendation 10

7.40 The committee recommends that the Australian Government work with state and territory governments to add the Sustainable Development Goals to Council of Australian Governments council agendas for regular discussion.

Data collection and reporting

7.41 Evidence illustrated that many of the SDGs, targets and indicators relate to activities being undertaken at the state, territory and local levels. Therefore, the committee recommends that the Australian Government consider how information from these jurisdictions could be collated. The committee considers that the Australian Government reporting platform on the SDG indicators could provide a platform to bring together available data, but acknowledges that this would require the cooperation of multiple levels of government. Therefore, the committee recommends that opportunities to achieve this be considered through the COAG process. The committee is aware that this level of cooperation is likely to be a challenge, however, believes that longer-term projects are worthwhile in the context of the 2030 Agenda, and suggests that it would have value even if only achieved for some indicators.

Recommendation 11

7.42 The committee recommends that the Australian Government seek, through the Council of Australian Governments process, to assess opportunities to include data from state, territory and local government levels on its reporting platform on the Sustainable Development Goal indicators.

Information resources and guidance

7.43 The committee heard concerns that implementing the SDGs might create extra planning and reporting requirements for state, territory and local governments. Therefore, the committee recommends that the national implementation plan be accompanied by information resources to support state, territory and local governments integrating the SDGs into their plans, policies and reporting processes. The committee notes that implementation toolkits, guidelines, networking opportunities or events to share best practice may be of assistance.

Recommendation 12

7.44 The committee recommends that the Australian Government provide information resources alongside the national implementation plan to support state, territory and local governments to create their own plans supporting the implementation of the SDGs in their jurisdictions.

Partnerships with civil society and the private sector

7.45 The committee recognises that the participation of civil society and the private sector is crucial for the achievement of the SDGs. However, the committee is concerned that these stakeholders have generally only engaged with the SDGs to a limited and uneven extent. There needs to be a strategy for structured engagement and support, particularly celebrating and sharing achievements and best practice.

Multi-sectoral reference group

7.46 The committee acknowledges the consultation undertaken in preparation for the first VNR by Australian Government agencies with stakeholders from state and territory governments, local governments, civil society organisations and the private sector. The benefits of this consultative process were emphasised by participants throughout the inquiry. However, the committee is concerned that there is no mechanism for stakeholders to inform the domestic implementation of the SDGs on an ongoing basis.

7.47 Therefore, the committee considers that this consultative approach should be formalised through the establishment of a multi-sectoral reference group to consult with and advise the IDC. This group should include representatives from academia, civil society, the private sector, and marginalised groups including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and people with disability. The group should advise on the development of the national implementation plan and future VNR, and enhance partnerships between government, civil society and the private sector. In addition, the group could identify opportunities to streamline SDGs reporting requirements with existing reporting frameworks.

Recommendation 13

7.48 The committee recommends that the Australian Government establish a representative, multi-sectoral reference group to advise the interdepartmental committee on the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals until 2030.

Partnerships with civil society

7.49 The committee was pleased to hear examples of government and non-government organisations cooperating to advance the SDGs. For example, DFAT contributed funding to the civil society-led Australian SDGs Summit in March 2018. There have also been a range of other collaborative events, including, for instance, the co-hosted SDGs Forum on the environment and energy goals in 2017. The committee recommends that such support continues.

Recommendation 14

7.50 The committee recommends that the Australian Government continue to support civil society engagement with the Sustainable Development Goals, including by supporting events, summits and the development and dissemination of information resources.

Partnerships with the private sector

7.51 Evidence to the inquiry emphasised that the private sector is already contributing to the implementation of the SDGs in Australia through their business practices and investment choices. The committee heard that companies are eager to expand this contribution, and it is pleased that the Australian Government is partnering with businesses on the SDGs to a certain extent. For example, DFAT supports the Global Compact Network Australia, a business-led network that advances corporate sustainability and the private sector's contribution to sustainable

development. However, the committee is concerned that many businesses remain unaware of the SDGs.

Guidance on reporting

7.52 The committee is concerned with how to increase awareness without creating an additional reporting burden for businesses. Throughout the inquiry, businesses called for guidance on how to measure and report their impact on the SDGs. Some international and domestic resources are already being developed to support businesses reporting against the SDGs. Therefore, the committee recommends that the Australian Government partner with stakeholders in the private and tertiary sectors to build on these efforts and ensure Australian businesses have access to guidance on how to report against the SDGs in a transparent and streamlined way.

7.53 This would also reduce the risk of businesses superficially adopting the language of the SDGs without making substantive changes or acknowledging their negative impacts on the SDGs ('SDG-washing').

Recommendation 15

7.54 The committee recommends that the Australian Government partners with private and tertiary sector stakeholders to develop and disseminate Australian guidance on reporting against the Sustainable Development Goals in order to ensure consistent and transparent reporting and minimise the reporting burden for businesses.

Supporting small and medium enterprises

7.55 The committee was concerned that small and medium enterprises (SMEs) may face barriers in engaging with the business opportunities presented by the SDGs. In particular, the committee seeks to ensure that small and medium enterprises can access the opportunities without facing prohibitive reporting requirements. Therefore, the committee suggests that the IDC identify opportunities to assist SMEs to build capacity to use SDG-related procurement and reporting systems.

Recommendation 16

7.56 The committee recommends that the Australian Government, through the interdepartmental committee, identify opportunities to assist small and medium enterprises to build capacity to access sustainable procurement and reporting systems.

Other initiatives

7.57 The committee also recommends that the Australian Government consider how to further support initiatives that promote deeper private sector engagement with the SDGs. The committee recommends that the Australian Government consider supporting sustainable development by incorporating the SDGs throughout public procurement processes. It should also consider promoting social impact investment by establishing an impact investment institution with the private and community sectors.

Recommendation 17

7.58 The committee recommends that the Australian Government, through the interdepartmental committee, assesses opportunities to encourage sustainable public procurement, impact investment and business practices that support the Sustainable Development Goals.

Official development assistance

7.59 The SDGs are a global blueprint to end extreme poverty, and the committee believes that they should guide Australia's international development program. Australia's existing official development assistance approach and investment priorities are aligned with the SDGs, particularly with regards to gender equality, and DFAT has committed to continuing to integrate the SDGs into DFAT policies.

7.60 The committee supports DFAT's approach, which is to support holistic action on the SDGs (rather than seeking to prioritise one SDG over another) while considering the contexts and priorities of countries receiving aid. The committee also acknowledges efforts to mobilise private sector investment to support the SDGs through co-funding and other arrangements. Australia needs to support the implementation of the SDGs in partner countries through adequate official development assistance.

Recommendation 18

7.61 The committee recommends that the Australian Government continue to integrate the Sustainable Development Goals throughout the international development program and prioritise the commitment to leave no one behind.

Senator Alex Gallacher

Chair

