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Good governance and the Sustainable Development Goals

Achieving the UN's 17 Sustainable Development Goals will require strong political leadership, a willingness to change and good, outcomes-based governance.

In 2015, the 193 United Nations (UN) member states agreed on a blueprint to end poverty, improve health and education, protect the planet and reduce inequalities.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development formed a global partnership to achieve 17 major targets, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs):

1. No poverty
2. Zero hunger
3. Good health and wellbeing
4. Quality education
5. Gender equality
6. Clean water and sanitation
7. Affordable and clean energy
8. Decent work and economic growth
9. Industry, innovation and infrastructure
10. Reduced inequalities
11. Sustainable cities and communities
12. Responsible consumption and production
13. Climate action
14. Life below water – marine conservation and sustainability
15. Life on land – protecting terrestrial ecosystems
16. Peace, justice and strong institutions
17. Partnerships for the goal – strengthening the means of implementation

It was not the first time the UN had attempted to set such goals. In 2000, the UN launched eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) to be met by 2015, but the target was grossly missed. In 2015 15.5% of the world population still suffered from hunger and in some regions like the sub-Saharan and Southern Asia, 80% of people still lived in extreme poverty.



Learning from the Millennium Development Goals failures

There were two major flaws to the MDGs: there was a failure to consider the roots causes of issues like poverty and the initiative overlooked the holistic nature of development. Additionally, while the MDGs applied to all countries, there was a strong sense that they were really targeted at the poorest countries and funded by the richest.

Learning from this, the Sustainable Development Goals try to address these issues by adopting a clearer and broader set of targets and indicators that are meaningful to all UN member states.

National governments are expected to use the SDGs to inform their political agendas and policies and with 17 different goals to choose from, different governments can identify themselves with the targets for sustainable development that best suit them.

Achieving the SDGs takes strong political institutions and processes and this is where good governance comes in. Governance, in contrast to government, relies on a diversity of participating actors which are key to policy-making and implementation. There is a central role for community-based organisations in driving and implementing the SDGs and delivering change.

How can the Sustainable Development Goals benefit from good governance?

Reflecting on the lack of progress of the MDGs, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon, highlighted the 'unmet commitments, inadequate resources, lack of focus and accountability, and insufficient interest in sustainable development' as the main causes.

This time around, it is important that member states acknowledge that achieving the SDGs requires strong political institution and processes. Governments have to align national policies with the breadth and complexity of the SDGs and must involve public and private parties in policy creation and implementation.

In other words, the achievement of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals is heavily dependent on effective governance.

Experience tells us that the goals will not be met by simply throwing money at them or through legislation. The goals cannot be peripheral to government. They must be integrated into governments' national sustainability and development plans and approached from the top-down and the bottom-up.

Good governance will help by fostering an environment for collective action, ensuring that the actors involved are held accountable and dealing with emerging complex trade-offs between the goals.

Given its importance in driving the efforts to meet the goals, governance has been referred to as the fourth pillar of sustainable development – together with social, environmental and economic factors.

What can governance learn from the Sustainable Development Goals?

During GGI's Three Kings series of interviews with Professor Mervyn King, Professor King highlighted the important relationship between governance and sustainable development.

He describes this relationship as: "A fitting response to the organisation being an integral part of society, its status as a corporate citizen and its stakeholders needs, interests and expectations," and points to integrated thinking as the way forward for organisations, as an integral part of society, to create value overtime.

illuminations



Professor King explains the benefits for governance to adopt an outcome-based approach. And at their heart the SDGs are outcomes-based targets that require integrated thinking and integrated reporting.

Professor King suggests that organisations should reflect on what their outcomes are from a governance point of view and sets out four key governance outcomes:

- Ethical culture with effective leadership – Directors of an organisation should be mindful that the organisation in itself is an incapacitated, artificial person that has no mind and no conscience. The board is the controlling mind of the organisation and, should anything go wrong, directors are accountable.
- Creating sustainable organisational performance and value creation – Is the organisation creating true value when looked at holistically? The organisation should go beyond delivering products or services and adopt a value creation programme with the aim to create a positive impact on society and on the environment.
- Legitimacy – The board should reflect on whether the organisation has legitimacy of operation and how it is perceived by the community. Does the organisation have the trust and confidence of the community in which it operates?
- Adequate and effective control by the governing body – Stakeholder relationship should be a standing agenda item at board meetings to allow the directors to learn about stakeholders' needs, interests, expectations and hardships. This allows the board to make long-term decisions that are in the best interests of the health of the company.

Greater focus on outcomes will pave the way for organisations to understand governance not just as a mindless compliance exercise but as something that creates genuine results if it is approached mindfully.

Illuminations

- Governance is a key steering tool to achieving the UN's Sustainable Development Goals.
- Organisations are important stakeholders in policy-making and are an integral part of the communities in which they operate. That makes them key players in driving sustainable development and they should reflect on whether they are making a positive impact.
- Integrated thinking and integrated reporting are fundamental to achieving good governance and driving positive outcomes.

If you have any questions or comments about this briefing, please call us on 07732 681120 or email advice@good-governance.org.uk.