

Implementing the Sustainable Development Goals in Australia

David Griggs, Professor of Sustainable Development, Monash University, Australia.

dave.griggs@monash.edu, Tel: +61 3 9902 0239,

Monash Sustainability Institute, Monash University, 8 Scenic Boulevard, Clayton, Victoria 3800, Australia.

John Thwaites, Chair, Monash Sustainability Institute, Monash University

Tahl Kestin, Monash Sustainability Institute, Monash University

Abstract

A three year initiative has been undertaken to stimulate implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals in Australia. The initiative was carried out by the Monash Sustainability Institute under the auspices of SDSN Australia/Pacific through a series of high-level workshops, the development of reports and peer reviewed papers and widespread engagement with a diverse range of stakeholders from government, business, civil society and academia.

Although the SDGs follow on from and continue the work of the Millennium Development Goals, they are also very different in covering a much broader agenda and applying to all countries. They present a new experience for a developed country like Australia. The initiative therefore sought to examine how the SDGs are relevant to Australia, the specific issues and priorities that Australia needs to address, and roles of the different sectors of Australian society in contributing to the SDGs, and how progress in achieving the SDGs in Australia could be reported on, including data and indicators. The initiative explored these questions with the aim of raising national awareness of the SDGs and promoting Australian leadership in the development of the SDGs and the solutions for implementing them.

Key issues that were identified for Australia included the development challenges facing Australia's Indigenous community, Australia's role within the Asia-Pacific region, along with Australia's particular sustainable development challenges in areas such as water availability, greenhouse gas emissions, biodiversity loss, inequality, non-communicable diseases and long term economic prosperity. Interlinkages among the SDGs were also identified as a key issue, so a major focus of the work was an analysis of these interlinkages, including synergies and trade-offs.

Key outputs from the program included:

- An interim proposal for Sustainable Development Goals and targets for Australia.
- A matrix of SDG interlinkages relevant to Australia
- A proposed set of actions for federal government, state and local governments, civil society, business and academia to pursue to contribute to the implementation of the SDGs
- Peer reviewed papers on an integrated framework for the Sustainable Development Goals, the need for integration in the implementation of SDGs and a framework to manage synergies and trade-offs within SDG implementation
- A conference statement calling for the initiation of a national non-partisan dialogue, involving leaders from all sectors of Australian society, to develop a Sustainable Development Goals implementation plan for Australia, including Australia's international role
- A series of public events with high-profile overseas and local to Australia to raise awareness of the SDGs with the public and in the media

The outputs and conclusions of the initiative were provided as input to national, Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN), and UN discussions on the SDGs, including the Open

Working Group, the Intergovernmental Negotiations, and the UN Statistical Commission discussions on indicators.

The initiative's approach to "localisation" of the SDGs and their national implementation was recommended to all regional and country SDSN networks by the SDSN leadership, and the team provided direct support and assistance to other SDSN national and regional networks.

Background

Australia is a highly developed country and one that often performs well across a range of liveability and other criteria. Australia ranks second in the world on the United Nations Development Program's Human Development Index (ref), which measures education, health and income and Australia performs very well in many measures of well-being relative to most other countries in the OECD Better Life Index (ref). Australia ranks at the top in civic engagement and above the average in income and wealth, environmental quality, health status, housing, jobs and earnings, education and skills, subjective well-being, and social connections.

However, as the following information from the National Sustainability Council (2013) shows, Australia faces a number of issues and challenges:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders - There are significant challenges facing the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders population on a wide range of indicators. For example, there is a significant gap in life expectancy for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population compared to total Australian population (11 years for males).
- Planning for an ageing population - Over the next 20 years, the number of Australians aged 65 and over is expected to increase by 84%. The number of people of working age to those over 65 has already declined from 7.5 in 1970 to 5.0 in 2010 and is projected to decline further to 2.7 by 2050 with major projected implications for health and other services.
- Education - Students in more disadvantaged or remote areas are less likely to complete Year 12 or perform well. Only 74% of young people in the most disadvantaged areas have completed Year 12 or basic vocational qualification compared to 94% in the least disadvantaged areas.
- Health – While there has been a significant increase in life expectancy in the last 40 years, chronic disease is rising as the population ages. Obesity has increased greatly over the past three decades with over 28% of Australians now obese. Socio-economic status has a significant impact on life expectancy and morbidity.
- Sustainable growth and prosperity through innovation and engagement - In the coming years, higher productivity growth will be required and that productivity growth will need to come from improving human capital and innovation.
- Sustainable cities - Australia's cities are among the most liveable in the world, but lag behind on some aspects of sustainability. Key issues for Australia's cities in becoming sustainable are energy consumption, car dependency and equity.
- Regional Australia - Regional communities face a diverse range of issues, which give rise to distinct sustainability challenges in different communities. Performance against social and health indicators is often lower for regional Australians than for their urban counterparts.
- Climate change - Australia's greenhouse emissions are higher than any other developed country. However, Australia is also highly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change.
- Reducing the environmental impact of economic growth - Traditionally, economic growth has been highly resource-dependent, resulting in resource depletion and adverse environmental impacts. For Australia to sustain the wellbeing of its population over the long term, it needs to find ways of supporting economic growth without degradation of the environment.

- Food and agriculture, sustainable production and productivity in a changing landscape - Increases in food production in Australia, to meet the needs of its growing population and increasing demand from Asia need to be managed carefully to avoid adverse environmental and social impacts.
- Inequality and disadvantage, implications for wellbeing and sustainability - While Australians generally enjoy high levels of financial wealth and security compared to those in most other countries, the gap between rich and poor has been rising.

Project overview

Sustainable Development Goals ↔ Sustainable Development Solutions has been a three-year Monash Sustainability Institute (MSI) initiative to foster Australian and regional leadership in the development and implementation of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Launched in late 2012, this initiative has been facilitating conversations with a wide range of national and international stakeholders on the opportunities, priorities, challenges and solutions for implementing the SDGs in Australia and the Asia-Pacific region. Specifically, it has been aiming to:

1. Influence the make-up of the UN SDGs
2. Contribute to making the SDGs relevant and appropriate for Australia and the Asia-Pacific region
3. Demonstrate Australian leadership in the development and facilitation of SDGs
4. Prepare Australia and the region for the SDGs through planning and awareness raising
5. Generate new knowledge and insights to facilitate the SDGs and the implementation of sustainable development

The initiative has had three inter-linked components:

1. **National and Regional SDGs workshops:** The initiative has been bringing business, government, civil society and academic leaders in a series of annual national and regional workshops to advance SDGs and sustainable development solutions in Australia, Southeast Asia and the Pacific. As the focus of this paper is on implementation of the SDGs in Australia the regional workshops will not be discussed further here.
2. **Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) Australia/Pacific Secretariat:** In late 2012 Monash, was chosen to lead the Australia/Pacific Regional Network of the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN). SDSN is a global network of universities and other knowledge institutions launched by the UN Secretary General in August 2012 to mobilise global scientific and technological expertise in support of sustainable development and the SDGs.
3. **The Science of the SDGs:** This component brings together leading sustainability scientists from across the world to develop a science-based framework for the SDGs that integrates environment and development and seeks to strengthen the inclusion of science in the goals.

National workshops

A series of three national workshops were held in 2013, 2014 and 2015. The first national Workshop “What sustainable development goals should Australia aim for” (Melbourne, 13–14 May 2013) brought together senior leaders from government, business, civil society and academia to develop a vision of what a sustainable future means for Australia and for the world. Participants

discussed what a sustainable Australia might look like, what sustainable development goals it should aim for, and how Australia could influence the UN process to develop Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that would apply to all countries post 2015. The workshop specifically considered the following:

- Activities and processes taking place nationally and internationally to contribute to the development of the SDGs;
- Where Australia was then in terms of sustainability and where it is headed, drawing on the National Sustainability Council's report *Sustainable Australia Report 2013: Conversations with the Future*;
- Sustainable development challenges and opportunities for Australia, within a changing global and regional socio-political environment;
- Potential goals and targets for sustainability in Australia;
- Implications of the global debate on sustainable development for Australia, and how can Australia influence it.

Several key themes emerged from the discussions, namely:

- The need for better communication of sustainability and SDGs in Australia
- That young people should play a significant role
- Business should be involved in developing the SDGs
- Because of its expertise Australia can play a leadership role in energy and water efficiency
- Addressing inequalities in health and education is vital to sustainability in Australia
- Australia should move away from GDP as measure of progress

The workshop also recommended that a series of short papers should be prepared on each potential goal setting out global and Australian challenges and potential targets and indicators. The papers covered the following themes: (1) food security and agriculture, (2) energy security and the transition to a low-carbon economy, (3) water security, (4) health, (5) social inclusion and gender issues, (6) education, (7) sustainable economic growth, (8) biodiversity and ecosystem services, (9) governance, and (10) cities (ref). These discussion papers on potential goals and targets for Australia were developed and were distributed to all participants prior to the second National Workshop and the goals and targets proposed in these papers formed the starting point for the discussions at the workshop.

The aim of the second national workshop (Melbourne, 19-20 May 2014) was to produce a concrete proposal for SDGs as they would apply to Australia, in particular to:

1. Agree on a set of goals, targets and indicators for Australia;
2. Develop a framework for the SDGs that takes account of the trade-offs, synergies and need for integration between the goals; and
3. Map a way forward to implement the framework.

The second national workshop used World Café style rotations to refine the 10 goals and targets for Australia and to develop a framework for the SDGs that identifies the trade-offs and synergies and need for integration of goals.

Break-out groups were given a group of potential SDGs and asked to identify specific inter-linkages between them. Finally, the participants were asked to map a way forward for engaging stakeholder groups and implementing the framework.

This second national Workshop produced a number of specific outputs. The main output was an Interim Proposal for 10 Goals and 54 targets for Australia (ref). These were fed into national, Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN), and UN discussions on the SDGs, including the Open Working Group, the Intergovernmental Negotiations, and the UN Statistical Commission

discussions on indicators. In addition, a framework was developed for goal integration and integrating targets was developed using a matrix approach to map the interactions between goals and targets.

Preparing Australia for the implementation of the SDGs was the focus of the third National Workshop (Melbourne, 6-7 May 2015). By the time of this national workshop draft SDGs were already available through the Open Working group process. The third workshop therefore considered which aspects of the UN's SDGs proposal were particularly relevant for Australia and how Australia could prepare for the implementation of the SDGs in 2016 and contribute to their long-term achievement.

The workshop built on the previous workshops to develop concrete proposals for how Australia can address priority SDGs implementation issues, namely:

1. Identifying which of the UN's proposed goals and targets are the most relevant for Australia and identify if any important goals or targets are missing.
2. Proposing the 5–10 most important “integrated targets” that will address inter-connected issues.
3. Mapping out how Australia could measure and report on progress in achieving the SDGs, including what indicator data is already available for Australia and what new indicators will need to be developed. Identify a small number of easily measurable key indicators that could form a “dashboard” for how well Australia is achieving the SDGs.
4. Identifying how different sectors – including federal, state and local government, business, civil society, and academia – could be affected by the SDGs and identify their roles in contributing to achieving the SDGs.

In addition to making recommendations on these topics the workshop also issued a workshop statement calling for the initiation of a National Summit on implementation of the SDGs in Australia to be held in 2016 with the aims of creating a national non-partisan dialogue, involving leaders from all sectors of Australian society, to develop an SDGs implementation plan for Australia, including Australia's international role. This Summit is currently scheduled to take place on 7 September 2016 in Sydney, thus continuing the program of national engagement on development and implementation of SDGs in Australia.

Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) Australia/Pacific

Through this initiative, Monash University was chosen to lead the Australia/Pacific Regional Network of the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN). Through its Chair, John Thwaites, and his role as Co-Chair of SDSN's global Leadership Council, SDSN Australia/Pacific also plays an important role in SDSN internationally.

SDSN Australia/Pacific fosters global SDSN activities within the region by developing and promoting solutions, policies and public education.

The roles of the Regional Network include:

- To mobilise SDSN Members in the region and coordinate the activities of the Regional Network
- To publicise regional and global SDSN activities amongst policy makers, private sector and NGOs
- To promote regional solutions initiatives
- To coordinate and contribute to the SDSN's policy support to governments in the region
- To organise annual regional sustainable development meetings bringing together key actors from the region to identify and promote regional solutions initiatives

- To identifies opportunities for broadening the network

The SDSN Australia/Pacific network currently consists of 21 universities and knowledge institutions from across Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific and membership is growing rapidly. Under the auspices of SDSN Australia/Pacific several initiatives, projects and events have been carried out with the aim of promoting and facilitating implementation of the SDGs in Australia and internationally.

Some highlights of these include:

- SDSN Youth started as an SDSN Australia/Pacific initiative and was launched as a global initiative of SDSN in June 2015. SDSN Youth's mission is to empower youth globally to create sustainable solutions. Through education and cooperation it aims to amplify the tremendous energy and capabilities of youth in generating broader buy-in for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). SDSN Youth is quickly establishing itself as a leading organisation representing the voice of youth on the SDGs and the SDSN Youth Campaign #KnowYourGoals spurred over 100 events in over 30 countries on the SDGs and their localisation.
- The 'Pathways to Deep Decarbonisation in 2050: How Australia can prosper in a low carbon world' project produced by ClimateWorks Australia and Australian National University presents an illustrative deep decarbonisation pathway for Australia developed using a combination of well-established modelling tools to identify feasible and least-cost options. This project is part of the global Deep Decarbonisation Pathway Project of the SDSN. This work finds that Australia can achieve net zero emissions by 2050 and live within its recommended carbon budget, using technologies that exist today, while maintaining economic prosperity.
- Jointly with the Global Compact Network Australia a workshop was held in February 2016 on *Sustainable Development: Building business engagement in sustainable development and the UN Sustainable Development Goals*. The workshop was hosted by BHP Billiton and was attended by over 80 senior representatives from business, government, NGOs and academia.
- To mark the occasion of the adoption of the SDGs by the UN, a high profile public event was held with a panel of prominent speakers to discuss why the SDGs are important in Australia. The event sold out with over 500 registrations. Videos of the event have been viewed over 500 times.
- Visits were organised by renowned economist and SDSN Director Jeffrey Sachs and global cities expert Aromar Revi, during which they met with government ministers as well as senior government officials and business leaders. Over 1000 people came to a public lecture given by Jeffrey Sachs at the Melbourne Town Hall.
- Engagement with government at a national, state and local level to stimulate implementation of the SDGs at different levels of government. For example SDSN Australia Pacific has been engaged by the Victorian Government to peer review the monitoring and reporting framework for the strategic plan for Melbourne, Plan Melbourne to ensure that it aligns with the Sustainable Development Goals.

The Science of the SDGs

The third component of the program aims to provide scientific and thought leadership on sustainable development and the SDGs. This is carried out by partnering with and bringing together leading sustainability scientists from across the world to publish a series of papers in the peer reviewed literature, conference papers and articles. A main focus of these papers and articles has been the integration of development imperatives, such as poverty alleviation and reducing hunger with environmental issues, including climate change and biodiversity loss in the implementation of the SDGs.

The first of these was a groundbreaking paper published in *Nature* (Griggs et al 2013). This paper, which has already been cited 346 times, was the first attempt to create a comprehensive set of Sustainable Development Goals that integrated both development and environmental considerations, and it generated worldwide interest, including articles in *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, and other agenda-setting international media. This was followed by a more detailed paper, (Griggs et al. 2014) setting out an integrated framework for Sustainable Development Goals.

A further paper on the topic of integration in the implementation of the SDGs, Stafford-Smith et al., 2016, suggests there must be greater attention on interlinkages in three areas:

- across sectors (e.g. finance, agriculture, energy, technology, transport);
- across societal actors (local authorities, government agencies, the private sector, civil society); and,
- between and among low, medium and high income countries.

Most recently Nilsson et al., 2016, have published a paper establishing a simple framework for managing synergies and trade-offs in implementation of the SDGs, as part of a wider project led by the International Council on Science (ICSU) who are beginning to use the framework and populate it with empirical evidence, (ICSU, 2016).

In 2014 and 2015, the team published three articles in *The Conversation* and an article in the *Age* Newspaper on the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals. The articles provided a background to the SDGs and what they mean for Australia. The *Conversation* articles were accessed 7000 times.

These papers have had a significant impact, both scientifically as evidenced by the numbers of citations but also in the international process to agree the SDGs where the research was twice presented at the UN negotiations in New York, and on behalf of the International Council on Science (ICSU). David Griggs represented Science and Technology Major Group at the UN Open Working Group and the Intergovernmental Negotiations to develop the SDGs.

Summary

A three year initiative has been undertaken to stimulate implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals in Australia. The initiative was carried out through a series of high-level workshops, the development of reports and peer reviewed papers and widespread engagement with a diverse range of stakeholders from government, business, civil society and academia.

The initiative showed the clear relevance of the SDGs for a developed country, such as Australia and identified many opportunities for utilising the SDGs by government at national, state and local level as well as by business, the civil society sector and academia. The agreed framework that the SDGs provide represents a new opportunity for a co-ordinated and focused approach to sustainable development. The initiative highlighted the importance of having a national conversation about the SDGs and their implementation and the importance of involving all relevant stakeholders in that conversation. The initiative clearly had a significant impact in Australia by raising awareness of the SDGs and by getting all the various sectors to begin to think about how the SDGs apply to them and this is now beginning to flow through into concrete actions.

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Our Interim Report

First and second workshop reports