

State of the Environment Reporting framed by the UN SDGs

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Abstract:

The independent Commissioner for Environmental Sustainability in Victoria, Australia designed a process for reporting on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) at a sub-national level through State of the Environment (SoE) reporting. This is the first attempt in Australia to apply the SDGs framework to statewide, environment reporting by Government and ultimately, use the SDG framework as a basis on which to recommend actions for Government to improve social and environmental outcomes. The inclusion of SDG indicators in the Victorian SoE Report is ground breaking.

The project was not only an exercise in improving SoE reporting – it was part of a broader reform agenda to challenge conventional environmental reporting, introduce socio-economic indicators into state of the environment reporting, to link the health of the environment to human and economic health and prosperity, and to raise awareness of emerging international best practice in this area. Engagement with decision makers, academia, Government, industry and community leaders prompted a broader understanding of the SDGs and their applications, engaging those involved in a wider story of social and economic development.

Working in this way encouraged a view of the whole and cut across bureaucratic silos. It became clear that a model of reporting was going to be required that went beyond the technical application of a measurement framework and embraced the importance of creating meaningful narratives. This was not easy. Developed in parallel with National processes, the project provided a real opportunity for co-creation and co-design with the stakeholders and data custodians involved.

The project involved a seven-phase process that began with an initial mapping of existing SoE indicators to the SDGs. The resulting segmentation was then interrogated in a Roundtable Discussion with a group of trusted experts, before broader engagement with a diverse range of data-custodians.

A further workshop was conducted with decision makers, data custodians and broader

stakeholders to prioritise candidate SDG targets, and ultimately establish the final set of SDG targets for inclusion in the SoE. The workshop focused on getting people together around a common purpose (SDGs and SoE), meaningful engagement (co-creation, co-design, co-dissemination of knowledge) and polling to assist in prioritisation (direct engagement and participation).

The use of adaptive management techniques throughout enabled the project to alter direction and incorporate new knowledge as it emerged; creating broad “buy-in” from stakeholders and initiating the development of contemporary approaches that will increase the utility and accessibility of the data.

The focus is now on collecting and collating data against potentially 51 SDG targets for the first time and findings will be presented in the 2018 Victorian State of the Environment Report to be tabled in Parliament by March 2019. The report and the Commissioner’s recommendations will influence the Victorian Government’s policy and management settings. The Government must respond to these recommendations within 12 months.

Hence the outcome delivers much more than a narrative. This project is about introducing a pathway to measure Victoria’s environment – its state and derived benefits - through environmental and socio-economic indicators mapped against the SDGs framework - thereby hard-wiring change in the system of government and gradually impacting society.

Introduction

In 2003, the Commissioner for Environmental Sustainability Act (The Act) defined Ecologically Sustainable Development for Victorian state legislation. However, in the decade following the establishment of the Act, Ecologically Sustainable Development had not been operationalised into Victorian SoE reporting. The adoption of the SDGs (UN, 2015) provided an international framework that could be utilised to establish Ecologically Sustainable Development indicators for Victoria.

The Commissioner for Environmental Sustainability (CES) was interested in designing a process for the implementation of the SDGs by a State jurisdiction, with the ultimate aim to develop indicators for State of the Environment reporting. Given that undertaking this process was unchartered, CES sought advice from the Monash Sustainable Development Institute.

Within this context, the overall objective of the project was to provide evidence for decision-making around how the SDGs could be operationalised at a state-based (sub-national) level within the context of ecosystem services and reported in the Victorian State of the Environment Report.

The project has provided a real opportunity to elevate the conversation around how to make progress in sustainable development with the stakeholders and data custodians involved.

Legislative background and context

The Act also established an independent Commissioner for Environmental Sustainability (the Commissioner) and set out statutory objectives and functions to be delivered to support ecologically sustainable development in Victoria.

Clause 17(2) of the Act states that the Commissioner is required to prepare a report on the State of the Environment of Victoria according to a framework developed by the Commissioner and approved by the Minister for Environment.

The framework details the methodology and approach to be undertaken in preparing the SoE Report.

Under the Act, the Commissioner has four objectives. These are to:

1. report on matters relating to the condition of the natural environment of Victoria;
2. encourage decision making that facilitates ecologically sustainable development;
3. enhance knowledge and understanding of issues relating to ecologically sustainable development and the environment;
4. encourage sound environmental practices and procedures to be adopted by the Government of Victoria and local government as a basis for ecologically sustainable development.

The Act defined Ecologically Sustainable Development (ESD) as follows:

"Ecologically Sustainable Development is development that improves the total quality of life, both now and in the future, in a way that maintains the ecological processes on which life depends." (Section 4 of The Act)

As stated in the Act, the objectives of ecologically sustainable development are:

- (a) to enhance individual and community well-being and welfare by following a path of economic development that safeguards the welfare of future generations;
- (b) to provide for equity within and between generations;
- (c) to protect biological diversity and maintain essential ecological processes and life-support systems.

The following are to be considered as guiding principles of ecologically sustainable development—

- (a) that decision making processes should effectively integrate both long-term and short-term economic, environmental, social and equity considerations;

(b) if there are threats of serious or irreversible environmental damage, lack of full scientific certainty should not be used as a reason for postponing measures to prevent environmental degradation;

(c) the need to consider the global dimension of environmental impacts of actions and policies;

(d) the need to develop a strong, growing and diversified economy which can enhance the capacity for environment protection;

(e) the need to maintain and enhance international competitiveness in an environmentally sound manner;

(f) the need to adopt cost effective and flexible policy instruments such as improved valuation, pricing and incentive mechanisms;

(g) the need to facilitate community involvement in decisions and actions on issues that affect the community.

SoE reporting is a key function assisting the Commissioner in achieving these objectives and delivering on the principles.

Framework for the Victorian 2018 State of the Environment Report: State and Benefit.

The Commissioner's framework for environmental reporting in Victoria, *State and Benefit*, was tabled in Parliament in December 2015 and describes the approach that will be undertaken in this SoE reporting cycle.

The long-term goal of environmental reporting is to inform community, policy and decision making to improve environmental outcomes and ultimately, protect and enhance the benefits we obtain from our environment. As Victoria's population and economy continue to grow it is increasingly important that we understand both the state of our natural environment and the benefits we derive from it.

State and Benefit is a framework for reporting reform. It aligns Victoria with international environmental reporting initiatives and improves the efficacy of the collective, environmental monitoring and reporting effort. At the time of writing the Commissioner has been assigned six new, independent reporting functions in legislation since 2015, for the first time since the role was established in 2003.

The long-term goal of state of the environment reporting is to inform community and influence policy and practice to protect and enhance the environment. As Victoria's population and economy continue to grow it is increasingly important that we understand both the state of our natural environment and the benefits we derive from it.

Broadening the SoE Report to include an analysis of this fundamental relationship is central to the SoE reporting reform undertaken by CES and the new approach that *State and Benefit* represents.

Aligning Victoria's environmental reporting efforts

Despite a proliferation of Victorian environmental reports, it is often difficult to determine the linkages between them. This represented a significant gap or deficiency in current reporting arrangements and in response, the Commissioner undertook in the *State and Benefit* framework in 2015 to introduce a set of statewide indicators. These will enable the monitoring of critical issues about Victoria's natural capital to inform decision making and investment by demonstrating the interrelationships between the biophysical information, the socio-economic benefits obtained from the environment and how we are adapting to climate change.

Numerous agencies collect information about the state of Victoria's environmental assets (land and biodiversity, forests, water, coasts, marine, air). *State and Benefit* offers a process to facilitate a more streamlined, consistent approach to the way data is collected and reported across the State.

Many reports have unique indicator sets. The introduction of state-wide indicators will ensure linkages between relevant statutory environmental reports. Ultimately, by continuing beyond 2018 into the next SoE reporting cycle, this consolidation will produce a State level reporting regime, of statutory environmental reports that "talk to each other".

The process of co-creation with Victorian environment portfolio partners to deliver *State and Benefit*, provides a pathway to this integrated approach to reporting.

This collaborative process will reveal options on how to best direct resources to improve the efficacy of existing monitoring and data management systems. Through these processes *State and Benefit* is delivering both a SoE Report and a reporting process reform.

The SoE reporting reform is driving improved monitoring regimes and will improve environmental outcomes. Showing a nexus between environmental, economic and social outcomes it will help identify integrated policy solutions and responses.

Aligning reporting also improves community access to information, which in turn improves the accountability and transparency of government.

These key outcomes will be delivered through:

- Integrated environmental reporting with consistency and comparability between state-level reports
- A focus on environmental monitoring needs and data integrity
- Reports that provide an evidence base to support better agency prioritisation of investment
- Integration of indicators across the environment portfolio and agencies
- Identification of knowledge gaps and a facilitation of remedies.

Why the SDGs?

The pathway to achieving these objectives is clearly articulated in the Commissioner's Foreword in the *State and Benefit* framework.

"The title for this framework, State and Benefit, reflects the two key principles that will underpin the 2018 SoE Report. These principles are to present objective and accurate information on the state of Victoria's natural assets, and to emphasise the direct and indirect benefits that all Victorians derive from healthy and sustainable ecosystems.

... [i]t will report on climate change impact and adaptation indicators and will align with international frameworks - the United Nation's (UN) System of Environmental Economic Accounts (SEEA) and the new UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)."¹

The idea of this work germinated with the introduction of the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) providing an authorising context.

The UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which came into effect on 1 January 2016, are a landmark agreement by all countries on a blueprint for a better future. The SDGs recognise that the extent and condition of our ecosystem assets provide many social, cultural and economic benefits.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide business, government and civil society with a compelling framework for future growth that is socially fair, environmentally sustainable and economically prosperous.

There are five critical aspects of the SDG framework that were seen as particularly relevant to the SoE project. The SDGs provide:

1. a pre-prosecuted framework across complex and disparate areas of social, economic and environmental policy
2. a framework that is internationally agreed, ratified and widely supported
3. provision of a common language for articulating, and examining intersections between, goals, targets and indicators
4. broad support from across business, government and community
5. The follow-up and review mechanisms also call for inclusiveness, participation and ownership.

Victoria takes the lead

Socio-economic indicators can demonstrate how our actions impact on natural capital and how natural capital (through ecosystem services) provides benefits to society. The conservation of biodiversity and ecosystem function has an intrinsic value and the importance of our stewardship of the environment cannot be overstated. However, the

¹ *State and Benefit*, tabled in Victorian Parliament December 2015

benefits of healthy ecosystems to human health and well-being are also critical. Broadening the SoE Report to include an analysis of this fundamental relationship is central to the SoE reporting reform undertaken by the Commissioner and the new approach that *State and Benefit* represents.

Broadening the Victorian State of the Environment Reporting in this way is the first known attempt in Australia to operationalise the SDG agenda at a sub-national level.

Method

A multi-disciplinary project team was assembled to provide oversight of the initiative. It was agreed by the project team that it would be most purposeful to undertake an iterative process and to hold a learning mindset.

Given the breadth of the enterprise, it was acknowledged that there would need to be new partnerships and stakeholders and that a sophisticated approach would be needed to engage effectively. This was particularly evident in the differing levels of understanding and engagement with the SDG framework amongst stakeholders.

It became clear that it was important for participants in the project to engage with the SDG framework at the target level. Although useful as a framing and communication device, working at the Goal level proved too broad, it reinforced siloes, and did not convey the 'indivisible whole' anticipated by the SDG Framework.

The SDG targets and indicators are inextricably linked, and the selection of targets ultimately influences the selection of relevant indicators. However, the indicators, at least at their current stage of development, did not offer comprehensive measurement of the targets – and often the indicators were not nuanced for local knowledge or management priorities.

Clause 55 of the 2030 Agenda Declaration at the UN states:

“The (SDG) targets are defined as aspirational and global, with each government setting its own national targets guided by the global level of ambition but taking into account national circumstances.”

As such, the project first identified priority SDG targets of relevance and importance for Victoria's long-term sustainable development, and then explored potential indicator options drawing from the official SDG indicators as well as other State and National indicators.

Seven general phases were outlined for the Project:

1. An initial mapping of SoE Indicators from the previous Victoria State of the Environment Report, *Science Policy People* (2013), to the SDG Targets.
2. Mapping of current SoE indicators (under development for the Victorian State of the Environment Report 2018) to SDG Targets, identifying alignment of

corresponding environmental indicators (green), potential alignment with socio-economic indicators (yellow) and targets assessed to be out of scope (red).

3. Interrogation of the resulting segmentation in a Roundtable Discussion with a group of trusted experts.
4. Discussions with stakeholders and data-custodians around data, data availability and salience of SDG Targets and potential corresponding indicators.
5. Reflection of initial findings to the Commissioner's Reference Group (comprising business, NGOs and local government representatives) to 'sense check'.
6. High level workshop with senior public servants, representatives from Commissioner's Reference and Technical Advisory Groups, to prioritise socio-economic Targets identified as 'yellow' in (2) above.
7. Establishment of indicators, data collection and publication.

Principles:

- National & Regional: Where an SDG Target is described as National or Regional, it is presumed that sub-national activity will be a critical input to National or regional aggregation.
- It was noted that some of the targets do not scale down (e.g. 12.1 calls for a National Action Plan and inclusion in National Policies). In such instances the target was assessed to be out of scope.

PHASE 1: Desktop mapping of SoE to SDG Goals

The first phase was a desktop exercise where existing SoE indicators, as described in previous SoE reports, were mapped on to the four primarily environmental SDG goals (Goals 6, 13, 14 and 15) and associated targets. Given the history of the SoE, it was anticipated that this undertaking would reveal gaps as well as alignment / synergies between the SDGs and SoE in a Victorian context.

This exercise demonstrated that there was strong alignment between the SoE and the SDGs. It also showed that whilst alignment was strongest against the four primarily environmental SDG goals, there was also significant alignment across the other SDG Goals and Indicators.

This alignment reflected the pragmatism of the SDGs and prompted a comprehensive mapping of SoE across **all** of the SDG Goals and Targets.

PHASE 2: Segmentation

Phase two involved mapping the current SoE indicators to all of the SDG Goals and Targets. The mapping identified where there was a strong alignment with existing SoE environmental indicators (green), potential alignment with socio-economic indicators for the SoE (yellow) and areas assessed to be out of scope for SoE reporting (red).

Looking for synergies; alliances and gaps

The criteria for assessing alignment between SoE Indicators and SDG Targets was as follows:

1. demonstrates a natural capital component
2. relevant in the Victorian context
3. availability of data (although this criterion did not disqualify a target – it only impacted on its categorisation – i.e. being assessed for inclusion in 2018 reporting or as aspirational target for inclusion in future reports).

Through the mapping process some targets were found to be very similar. It was noted that a process is required to work through possible duplication e.g.:

Target 4.7

By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development.

with

Target 12.8

By 2030, ensure that people everywhere had the relevant information and awareness for sustainable development and lifestyles in harmony with nature.

Target 1.5

By 2030, build the resilience of the poor and those in vulnerable situations and reduce their exposure and vulnerability to climate related extreme events and other economic, social and environmental shocks and disasters.

with

Target 11.5

By 2030, significantly reduce the number of deaths and the number of people affected and substantially decrease the direct economic losses relative to global gross domestic product caused by disasters, with a focus on protecting the poor and people in vulnerable situations.

PHASE 3: Roundtable Discussion

The segmentation from Phase 2 was further interrogated in a Roundtable Discussion with a group of trusted experts. The discussion was held to step through the mapping of current SoE indicators to SDG Goals and Targets.

For the exercise undertaken by the Roundtable it was assumed that participants had an understanding of the SDGs and awareness that each of the goals has targets and indicators.

One of the key aspects of this phase was to 'stress test' the SDG framework to check whether or not it would translate into the SoE context in Victoria. The framework proved to be both purposeful and challenging.

Following the Roundtable, the SoE/SDG map was amended and prepared for presentation to a wider group of stakeholders, including data custodians.

Note:

An additional mapping exercise was anticipated to take those instances of strong interrelationships between environmental targets and non-environmental goals, and, using the Nilsson et al (2016) tool, assess relationships between the relevant 36 environmental SDG targets and targets in these non-environmental goals. This has been put on hold temporarily, given the complexity of reporting against only a sub-set of the targets (that demonstrate a Natural Capital component) and the formative dimension of the undertaking.

PHASE 4: Discussions with stakeholders and data custodians

One to one conversations were undertaken with stakeholders and data custodians tailored to their level of understanding of the SDGs. Conversations explored the 'opportunities' that may exist regarding data collection. This engagement was targeted to articulate the value proposition and reciprocity of involvement with each stakeholder (or stakeholder segment).

Key questions:

- What data exists?
- How is the current data being used?
- Would they (how would they) use the proposed data sets?

PHASE 5: Strategic engagement with The Commissioner's Reference Group

Phase 5 involved stepping through the process and progress to date in identifying candidate socio-economic SDG targets for potential inclusion in the 2018 Victorian SoE report.

It was agreed by the Commissioner's Reference Group that the ultimate purpose of the initiative to include SDG targets as part of SoE reporting should be to:

- ensure Victoria has the data that it needs in order to make the best decisions to protect and improve the environment
- influence decision makers
- improve environmental outcomes.

PHASE 6: High Level workshop

The project had by now made significant progress and was moving towards a final consultation phase. This phase pivoted on a high level workshop to prioritise candidate targets for inclusion in the 2018 Victorian SoE. Demonstrating the long standing partnership between MSDI and the Office of the CES (OCES) in this work the workshop was co-chaired by Prof. John Thwaites, Chair of MSDI and Dr Gillian Sparkes, Commissioner.

The Workshop had four key objectives:

1. to increase awareness and understating of the SDGs as practical and accessible at the state level;
2. to engage a wide number of decision makers and stakeholders from across the system;
3. to engage participants in the process of selecting socio-economic targets for inclusion in 2018 Victorian SoE; and
4. to ensure Victoria has the data that it needs in order to make the best decisions to protect and improve the environment.

The workshop was opened by the Minister for Energy, Environment and Climate Change, the Hon. Lily D'Ambrosio MP.

“Putting the United Nation’s Sustainable Development Goals under the microscope to determine which are the most relevant to environmental reporting in Victoria is a crucial step in achieving meaningful, high quality and transparent reporting.”

Hon. Lily D'Ambrosio MP

To date the project has focused on:

- mapping current SoE reporting to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals
- the identification of data custodians
- assessing the appropriateness and availability of data.

The workshop shifted the focus to the prioritisation of the targets determining which of the candidate targets are the most important / salient for Victoria and which targets the CES's stakeholders want information on.

“(The SDGs) ... support growth – but a different type of growth that works with, rather than against nature, and that benefits the many rather than just the few.”

John Thwaites

Outcomes of the workshop:

1. People came together around a common purpose (SDGs & SoE)
2. Meaningful engagement (co-creation, co-design, co-dissemination of knowledge)
3. Polling to assist prioritisation (direct engagement).

“The expansion of our reporting program necessarily means an increased focus by government on developing new baseline, scientific databases so that we can produce these new reports. The outcome for you and all Victorians is better access to better information, that means more informed policy and more useful reporting on the environment, more often.”

Gillian Sparkes.

PHASE 7: Selection of Targets (and corresponding indicators)

The initiative is now collecting and collating data against 51 potential SDG targets for the first time and findings will be presented in the 2018 Victorian State of the Environment Report to be tabled in Parliament by March 2019.

A couple of key questions remain:

- Which of the targets can be meaningfully reported against in the 2018 Victorian SoE?
- Which of the targets should be included in the Victorian SoE reporting going forward?

The stakeholder process undertaken in Phase 6 will be respected and the targets attributed high scores will be prioritised.

As we explore which SDG targets (and corresponding indicators) we have data for it has become clear that at this stage we are seeking the best targets and indicators for SoE – not the best data. The data can be improved over time, while the targets and indicators selected set the framework.

The following principles will be applied:

- Acknowledge data limitations
- Take a pragmatic approach - put caveats around data but use where possible and adopt principles of continuous improvement
- Cross reference to other relevant initiatives, like SDG Transforming Australia – Australia’s SDG Progress Report
- Where there is no useable data – highlight this as an area for future focus
- Highlight and recommend action on data gaps.

Note: the indicators selected will be influenced by Victorian management priorities, knowledge needs and data availability.

4. Discussion

Embracing the meaning and intention of the SDGs, the priority of this work was to move into the 'doing.' It was also clear that we would have to do this with partners and stakeholders. Co-production, co-creation, co-design were the principles at each phase.

A key challenge with implementing the SDGs globally is in the requisite engagement and collaboration. There is a lot of discussion around how to collaborate and how important it is to engage meaningfully. This challenge was held at the center of this work and was a key aspect in how the methodology was developed.

Countries are encouraged to develop or adapt strategies to guide national implementation. Australia has not yet developed a national implementation plan and has not announced plans to do so.

This project demonstrates the strategic application of the SDGs in the context of the role of the Commissioner. There is limited action on implementing and operationalizing the SDGs at the sub-national level in Australia. This work has been developed independently, with awareness of National approaches but consciously not waiting for national processes for Victoria to take action.

In order to establish a holding environment for this work to flourish, clear leadership was provided by the Commissioner. Key examples were to:

- “draw a line in the sand and act”
- “not let the perfect get in the way of the possible and practical”
- “start in an imperfect place and change and refine over time - iterate”
- “learn by doing” – don’t wait, improve our understanding of the SDGs over time

Leadership, coupled with the use of adaptive management techniques, has enabled our process to adapt to new knowledge as it emerged from within the partnerships. All indications are that this has already led to greater inclusiveness, participation and ownership across the environment portfolio of the Victorian Government.

Working in this way, the capacity and understanding of the SDGs amongst the project team and broader participants increased. As a result, the team and our partners have become more comfortable with the SDG framework and have deepened our understanding of how it all fits together and the trade-offs that are involved in bringing an operating framework to life so that it can inform decision making, improve the evidence base and lead to environmental outcomes.

5. Conclusions

State of the Environment (SoE) reports are only worthwhile if they inform decision making and lead to practical action. A contemporary SoE report should include indicators that inform targets and environmental management plans.

With the adoption of the UN Sustainable Development Goals, policy makers and program implementers now face the opportunity and challenge of maximizing the outcomes from

this new international operating framework. Understanding the range of positive and negative interactions among SDGs is key to unlocking their full potential.

The potential and value of the UN Sustainable Development Goals, as a fully prosecuted framework that is internationally agreed and supported by key stakeholders across Government, Business, Academia and the Community Sector, cannot be underestimated.

Furthermore, and perhaps most profound for policy makers and program implementers, is that taking such a systems view necessarily focuses attention on the sum total of impacts, both positive and negative, from across the system.

This attention highlights the need to both understand and manage those impacts with a view beyond the agency or portfolio from which the intervention is being designed.

This project has provided a real opportunity to elevate the conversation around how to make progress in sustainable development. By showing a nexus between environmental, economic and social outcomes it will help identify integrated policy solutions and responses.

The initiative is now collecting and collating data against socio-economic indicators aligned with the SDG targets for the first time and findings will be presented in the 2018 Victorian State of the Environment Report to be tabled in the Victorian Parliament by March 2019.

The report and the Commissioner's recommendations will influence the Government's policy and management settings. The Government must respond to the recommendations within 12 months. The recommendations will be developed under the banner of 'Future Focus 2030'. This time horizon is not arbitrary, but has been selected to align with the SDGs and to shine a light on the environmental priorities for the Victorian Government over the next decade – beyond electoral cycles – and focus on informing future monitoring and reporting regimes.

Hence the outcome delivers much more than a narrative. This project is about introducing a pathway to measure Victoria's environment – its state and derived benefits - through indicators mapped against the SDGs framework - thereby hard-wiring change in the system of government through a model of Investigate – Embrace – Apply - Impact.

Acknowledgments:

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