



## The Sustainable Development Goals: What is The Progress?

### 1. Introduction

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are a collection of 17 global goals set by the United Nations General Assembly in 2015, as part of a resolution to transform the world that we live in and to achieve sustainable development for all. They came into effect in January 2016, and should continue to guide the United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP) policy and funding until 2030. It is important to note that these goals are interdependent on one another, although each has its own set of targets and indicators to achieve and to be monitored against. They are designed to focus strategically on key areas of sustainable development, including: poverty alleviation; economic inequality; climate change; disaster risk; democratic governance; and peacebuilding. Together, they create an integrated approach that includes all three dimensions of sustainable development, i.e. economic, social and environmental sustainability. In addition, the SDGs are universal, which means that all countries are bound by the global agreement to adopt and implement the agenda.

### 2. Background

The SDGs succeed the work of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which were regarded as the global community's overarching development framework up to the year 2015. The MDGs were established following the United Nations (UN) millennium summit in 2000, as part of a declaration that was signed by world leaders. The millennium declaration was founded on principles of human dignity, freedom, equality, respect for the earth and solidarity.<sup>1</sup> Based on these principles, eight goals were established to address issues of urgency: extreme poverty; primary education; gender equality; child mortality; maternal health; HIV & AIDS;

environmental sustainability; and global partnerships.

Tremendous achievements were made through the MDG agenda, with more than one billion people lifted out of extreme poverty, for example, and more girls enrolled for primary education than ever before.<sup>2</sup> But despite such significant improvements, the MDGs were criticised for, amongst other things,

- A lack of adequate gender equality in development planning and implementation
- Insufficiently addressing inequalities to reduce societal conflicts over resources, power and religion
- Limited implementation framework to achieve environmental sustainability and reduce natural resource over-exploitation

Reflecting on the lessons learned and the gaps in implementing the MDGs, the SDGs were established to be more ambitious, inclusive and broad. Unlike with the MDGs, when the SDGs were proposed, consultation became an important part of the process towards adoption. Extensive stakeholder engagements were conducted across sectors, allowing a large number of people to play a role in influencing the SDG agenda. They were adopted with an inclusive vision to focus on people, prosperity, planet, partnership and peace; with the caption "leave no one behind."<sup>3</sup>

### 3. Implementation

The year 2016 marked the beginning of implementation for the SDGs worldwide, and a paradigm shift in development thinking was fuelled by adoption of the sustainable development agenda. With the help of the UN support system, countries are currently in the

process of localising the SDGs to fit their domestic contexts. This process entails: analysis of development challenges; prioritising areas for development; developing relevant strategies and tools; and building partnerships with neighbouring countries and within countries. Subsequent to this process will come the alignment of regional, national and local level development plans and budgets with the global agenda. South Africa is one of the countries working towards an alignment of its National Development Plan (NDP) with the SDGs, with the objective of mainstreaming the SDGs into the country's development plans across all sectors of the economy and all spheres of government.

In adopting the SDGs, member states undertook to do regular and inclusive voluntary national reviews (VNRs), as part of monitoring the implementation of the SDGs. The VNRs are to be presented before the High Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF). This serves as a platform for countries to share experiences, progress and challenges in implementing the SDGs. In 2017, 43 countries presented their VNRs to the HLPF<sup>4</sup>; and South Africa will be amongst the 51 presenting in 2019. Prior to the reviews, governments undertake a process of consultation with stakeholders across sectors to gather information on SDGs that have been prioritised and to develop a report on the chosen goals.

#### 4. Roundtable Discussion

The CPLO hosted a round table discussion on the topic, *The Sustainable Development Goals: What is The Progress* in October 2018, creating a platform for civil society, parliamentary researchers, government officials, non-governmental representatives, and media to engage. The speakers were Mr Msingathi Sipuka from the United Nations Environment Programme; Ms Percy Moleke from the Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation (DPME); and Ms Karen Shippey from the Western-Cape Provincial Department of Environmental Affairs.

Both Ms Moleke and Mr Sipuka talked about process aspects of the SDGs, and the implementation roadmap that needs to be followed to achieve the goals. Ms Moleke started her presentation by highlighting the critical role that South Africa played in the adoption of the sustainable development agenda, through international negotiations platforms. She made

specific reference to a time when South Africa chaired the G77 on international deliberations,<sup>5</sup> noting that the country therefore faces a great deal of pressure to attain the SDGs and to live up to its role as an initiator of the goals.

In giving a perspective on how far we are with implementing the SDGs, Ms Moleke indicated that processes are underway to:

- Map ongoing activities which are achieving the goals in different sectors
- Develop frameworks of implementation
- Enhance collaborations and build partnerships
- Align development plans, including the National Development Plan, with the SDGs
- Mainstream SDGs into people's everyday work

Furthermore, MS Moleke mentioned that the DPME has recently proposed a co-ordination mechanism to cabinet for approval, which will be used for facilitating multi-stakeholder dialogues. In addition, the DPME is preparing to compile a review which will be presented to the HLPF on sustainable development in 2019. Accordingly, government will be conducting stakeholder consultations with civil society to gather information on the SDGs to feed into the report.

Adding to this, Mr Sipuka mentioned that there is a great need for raising awareness on the SDGs in communities, which would hopefully lead to such communities being able to identify pertinent issues in the SDGs to be implemented in their local contexts. He further said that it is important for policy makers to understand the interconnectedness of the goals, so as to develop approaches which are integrated for implementation. He then concluded by saying that civil society organisations have to be empowered to engage local authorities and to foster accountability on public finance issues.

Ms Shippey's presentation focused more on the work that the Western Cape Government has undertaken towards achieving the SDGs at a provincial level. Work in the environment sector was evident in project areas such as the working for water initiative, where job opportunities were created for local communities to remove alien vegetation species to save water resources. She admitted, though, that in most parts of this sector it was still a challenge to align the work being done

with the sustainable development framework. This could be attributed to: growing population numbers; loss of natural resources; and lack of sufficient data. Lastly, Ms Shippey mentioned that climate change is one of the critical areas which is yet not efficiently mainstreamed into the SDGs in terms of implementation.

Participants contributed extensively to the conversation, by asking questions and giving inputs. Most of them were concerned that there is not sufficient awareness of the SDGs, especially in townships and local communities, and it was proposed that government should put more effort into broadening participation by community members in SDG stakeholder conversations. Much of the discussion was on the shift in development planning; it was said that there is a need for re-thinking and re-organising the country's economy to be more decentralised and inclusive. This would be a more effective approach towards sustainable development, which would leave no-one behind. In addition, issues such as pay structures needed to be reconfigured and the wealth of the economy should be better distributed so as to close the income inequality gaps.

## 5. Conclusion

The SDGs are a very complex and integrated approach to achieve world sustainable development. Progress is uneven, as countries and regions struggle with implementing the goals. No country is on track to achieving all the goals, including developed countries such as Denmark, Finland and Sweden. These will have to improve significantly in attaining goal 12 (sustainable consumption and production) and goal 13 (climate action), while on the other hand most developing countries in Africa and Asia have to work hard to attain goal 1 (no poverty) and goal 2 (ending hunger). Thus, goal 17 (collaborations and partnerships), is probably the most important of all 17 goals. It provides an opportunity for both developed and developing countries to increase partnerships; to strengthen the latter's capacities and to improve information and resource-sharing mechanisms. 2018 marks the third year of implementing the SDGs, and there is still a lot of work that needs to be done before 2030. Achieving the SDGs will depend on regular monitoring and evaluation; financial commitments; inclusive stakeholder engagements; and the political will to transform existing development policies.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.un.org/millennium/declaration/ares552e.htm>

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/2015\\_MDG\\_Report/pdf/MDG%202015%20rev%20\(July%201\).pdf](http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/2015_MDG_Report/pdf/MDG%202015%20rev%20(July%201).pdf)

<sup>3</sup> <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2016/leaving-no-one-behind>

<sup>4</sup> <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/20549CDPbp201846.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.enca.com/south-africa/sa-becomes-chair-g77>