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Australia needs political courage, will and leadership to realise the SDGs

By Claire Brolan
17 October 2018

The theme of this year's [International Day for the Eradication of Poverty](#) (on 17 October) is “Coming together with those furthest behind to build an inclusive world of universal respect for human rights and dignity”. This mirrors the language and ambition of the [2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#) and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). 17 October also coincides with the first day of a two-day Melbourne symposium co-hosted by Future Earth Australia and the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) Australia/NZ/Pacific on research for SDG achievement.

Since Australia and 192 other countries committed to the SDGs in September 2015, countless Australians still don't understand what needs to be done, have not heard of the SDGs, or question why they even matter. This applies to many colleagues in Australian research, teaching and learning environments. For those colleagues, a good place to start is the [guide](#) on how local universities, higher education institutions and the academic sector can get started with the SDGs. It's crucial that Australia's educators and the institutes they work for are SDG-cogent, as realisation of the SDG promise will require the harnessing of interdisciplinary critical thinking and research, as well as cross-sectoral and multi-stakeholder planning for inclusive development change-innovation (to support intergenerational equity and prosperity within and beyond Australia's borders).

In my view a key reason for any misconception, inertia, or complete lack of researcher or institutional awareness around the SDGs three years on is the absence of a national action plan. Submissions to the [DFAT-led Parliamentary Inquiry into the UN SDGs of 2018](#) show that actors are crying out for the Australian Government to develop an overarching governance, policy and planning framework for SDG roll-out at home and as part of the nation's international development and humanitarian assistance efforts from now until 2030. Australia's [first Voluntary National Review \(VNR\) on the implementation of the SDGs](#), lodged by the Government at the UN High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development in New York in July, is a good start. But a national action plan it is not: the [S.M.A.R.T goal logic](#) that many government agencies use for operationalising policy in an

array of contexts is simply not present. Further, Australia's VNR was glowingly endorsed by former Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull. With a new government leadership team at the helm, it is unclear whether such endorsement remains, or if the SDGs are even on the radar.

There is movement forward. As mentioned, there's the Parliamentary Inquiry into Australia's SDG implementation (due to report by the end of the year), the Government's lodgement of the country's first VNR and simultaneous release of [a report outlining its approach to data for SDG reporting](#). Also, two major SDG websites went live this year: an [SDG data website and reporting platform on the SDG indicators](#), and another developed by the Global Compact Network Australia directing [where the Australian public and other stakeholders can report on their SDG-related activities and learn more](#). The Government has convened an interdepartmental group of senior officials with portfolio responsibilities that link to one or more of the SDGs, and departments have been charged with coordinating implementation of their related SDG. A brief examination of department websites along with a number of submissions made to the DFAT-led Inquiry (i.e. from Department of Health, Department of Industry, Innovation and Science) indicates internal planning is gaining traction. However, how is that traction integrated into dialogue in the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) or promoted amongst community and industry partners?

Without an overarching action plan that department heads can leverage to progress their internal SDG efforts (and hopefully cross-departmental efforts), such leaders and their staff, for all their good will and effort, are on a rudderless ship. By leaving it to the departments to develop their own plan of action, a siloed approach to SDG governance and policy is being embedded. This vertical approach is antithetical to the SDG vision for game-changing and innovative development solutions through country leadership, national policy coherence and participatory governance. Moreover, what seems to be the implicit reliance on statisticians to report on each department's respective goal achievements (or data gaps) for broader SDG oversight and reporting is not good enough.

The framing of the 2018 Senate Inquiry into the SDGs has not helped in terms of the Inquiry's leadership and name, "UN SDGs". Regarding leadership, the Senate's appointment of DFAT to co-ordinate the Inquiry erroneously suggests to the public that it relates to Australia's ODA interests only. Second, the SDGs are not the UN's. Australia was part of the SDG formulation process that was finalised by countries. Indeed, UN Member States wanted to own the SDG Agenda (and its creative process) to ensure that the SDGs markedly differed from their predecessor, the Millennium Development Goals, which were introduced to the world in a [UN Secretary-General report](#). This time, countries would not be dictated to by the UN on global development policy.

Even with a national action plan, SDG action will be hard. Without a plan (however imperfect), inclusive and co-ordinated action that cuts across Australian Government departments and galvanises all stakeholders (including state/territory and local governments) becomes much harder. Awareness-raising about the significance of the SDGs for Australians also becomes a whole lot harder: SDG awareness and SDG action is bi-directional. Other rich [OECD countries](#), however, are taking the proverbial bull by the horns: [Finland](#), [Norway](#), [Denmark](#), [Sweden](#), [UK](#), [Estonia and the Czech Republic](#) are among the many OECD nations that have already produced national action plans. [China](#), Australia's largest trading partner, released its plan in 2016, and France, Belgium and Luxembourg have dedicated sustainable development ministries.

The International Day for the Eradication of Poverty on 17 October is a timely reminder that the SDGs do matter, and are a matter for Australia and its diverse people. But without a strong governance framework and national action plan, the transformative potential of the SDG ambition will not be optimised. And failure on this front is more than just an indictment of Australia's capacity to deliver on significant and important policy agendas – it's a failure that will be felt by future generations and for a long time to come.

About the author/s

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Link: <https://devpolicy.org/australia-needs-political-courage-will-leadership-to-realise-sdgs-20181017/>

Date downloaded: 25 April 2024



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