

# GLOBAL TRANSFORMATION AND THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

**Prof. Bruce Wilson and Dr. Emma Shortis (RMIT Melbourne)**

## INTRODUCTION

In September 2015, the United Nations adopted unanimously *Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*. With seventeen Sustainable Development Goals, 169 targets and their associated indicators, it represented the world's most ambitious initiative, aiming to eliminate the tyranny of poverty and to heal and secure the future of the planet. It sought to align People, Planet, Prosperity, Peace and Partnership, acknowledging that the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, due to meet in Paris in November 2015, was the primary international, intergovernmental forum for negotiating the global response to climate change.

## A GROWING CHALLENGE

In a review of progress in 2019, with a decade remaining, the Secretary-General declared that progress was lagging, and that urgent action was needed if the international community was to be able to deliver on the targets by 2030:

... progress has been slow on many Sustainable Development Goals, that the most vulnerable people and countries continue to suffer the most and that the global response thus far has not been ambitious enough... the extreme poverty rate is projected to be 6 per cent in 2030, missing the global target to eradicate extreme poverty; hunger is on the rise for the third consecutive year and little progress is being made in countering overweight and obesity among children under the age of 5; biodiversity is being lost at an alarming rate, with roughly 1 million species already facing extinction, many within decades; greenhouse gas emissions continue to increase; the required level of sustainable development financing and other means of implementation are not yet available; and institutions are not strong or effective enough to respond adequately to these massive interrelated and cross-border challenges... Globally, youth are three times more likely to be unemployed than adults. Children are overrepresented among the poorest people – one child in five lives in extreme poverty. Rural and urban differentials are also evident in such areas as education and health care. Persons with disabilities and those living with HIV/AIDS continue to face multiple disadvantages, denying them both life opportunities and fundamental human rights. Gender inequalities also persist. Women represent less than 40 per cent of those employed, occupy only about a quarter of managerial positions in the world and (according to data available from a limited set of countries) face a gender pay gap of 12 per cent. About a fifth of those aged 15 to 49 had experienced physical or sexual partner violence in the past 12 months.

This scorecard demonstrates the urgency of the need for action. The situation is particularly concerning in our region. According to the UN Economic and Social Committee Asia Pacific (ESCAP):

... on its current trajectory our region remains unlikely to meet any of the 17 Goals by 2030. While many countries are moving decisively to improve the quality of education and provide access to affordable and clean energy, progress in other areas is slow. Sustained economic growth is occurring in the absence of adequate measures to combat climate change, protect our ocean or preserve our forests. Uneven progress is being made to reduce inequalities, support the responsible consumption and production needed for a

healthy planet, or achieve peace, justice and strong institutions. Progress towards gender equality and building sustainable cities and communities has been far too slow.

Unfortunately, this prospect of disappointing outcomes is typical of global agreements which seek to overcome, even just to limit, potentially calamitous circumstances. Whether to do with deforestation, fishing stocks, biodiversity, or security matters, the achievements are typically disappointing (see Cashore 2020), notwithstanding the occasional exception such as the ban on mining in the Antarctic (see Shortis 2019).

The 2030 Agenda is perhaps the most ambitious of these agreements, encompassing as it does not only the Paris Climate agreement (of November 2015) but also a broad range of social, economic and environmental issues. Indeed, one criticism of the Agenda is that it is too ambitious, leading to contradictory objectives in some respects, and at the very least, ambiguity about how the aspirations for economic growth can be reconciled with the challenge of climate action (just as one example).

This tension and ambiguity is not a surprise when one considers the process through which the UN came to adopt its global agenda. An Open Working Group with 30 members was appointed to facilitate a massive process of consultation with governments, business and civil society about the next steps following the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). When the scale of this endeavour is recognised, it is understandable that there is a great deal of compromise, as well as contradiction and repetition reflected in the final document that was submitted to the UN's General Assembly. This becomes even more apparent when attention turns to the Targets, which contain and even undermine the ambition of the text of the preamble which introduces the Goals.

Nevertheless, few would question the remarkable achievement of several years of global consultation leading to a comprehensive framework for transformation that was endorsed by 193 nations. In contemplating the enormity of delivering the Agenda by 2030, many issues arise. At the heart of the challenge, two distinct yet related questions emerge:

- a) How to make sense of the complexity of a global agenda which embraced 17 Goals with multiple targets, and is at risk of fragmentation and of parallel realms in both analysis and in designing various programs of action?
- b) How to comprehend the issues and processes necessary to engage government, business, education/research and civil society in framing and coordinating decision-making and action to address global challenges successfully?

These questions have both conceptual and very practical dimensions, as their resolution can guide efforts to link together the insights from established research and inquiry outcomes, as well as helping to shape work to act in one respect or another.

## **MAKING SENSE OF THE GLOBAL AGENDA**

By comparison with their predecessors, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the SDGs are considerably more far-reaching in scope and in the depth of ambition represented in the targets and indicators associated with each Goal (see Appendix 1). They encompass a comprehensive view of sustainable development as economic, social and environmental—much more extensive than the focus on poverty. Even more significantly, the SDGs apply to all nations, whereas the MDGs and Education For All Agenda were specifically concerned with developing nations. The scale of the 2030 Agenda, and its coincidence with the Paris Accords and the urgency of the threat of mass extinction, has meant that the UN itself has committed considerable resources, not least through

each of its agencies, such as UNESCO (see the UN's online platform, supporting the overall framework for implementation: <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/>).

On the face of it, the scale of the Goals is impossibly ambitious. Their breadth and their targets, and the framing around specific issues, means that attention, activity and policy development have tended to focus on one or the other of the Goals and targets, undermining the challenge of transformation which is called for by the Agenda as a whole. While this narrowing of focus is understandable, it reduces that action to specific 'programs' and 'initiatives'—a technical response—at the expense of the political and intellectual conceptual work that is necessary to promote transformation.

In 2015, Jeffrey Sachs, in addressing the financial needs of the Agenda, suggested a way of framing the Agenda as a means of mobilising political will (see Sachs 2015). His 'sketch' of five categories of Goals was very useful in highlighting the differences nature of the Goals and Targets. More recently, he has returned to this question with other colleagues, now highlighting six 'transformations' necessary to the success of the Agenda. These six transformations cover all of the 17 SDGs and their associated targets. They are:

- (1) education, gender and inequality;
- (2) health, well-being and demography;
- (3) energy decarbonization and sustainable industry;
- (4) sustainable food, land, water and oceans;
- (5) sustainable cities and communities; and
- (6) digital revolution for sustainable development

These transformations will need to occur in every country, through collaboration amongst government, business and civil society. Sachs and his colleagues favour this approach as each 'transformation' presents a set of actions that can align relatively easily with already well-defined government structures working with business and civil society. Investment and regulatory priorities can be addressed in each area while maintaining a coordinated approach across the whole Agenda (see Sachs et al, 2019). This approach facilitates a clear marking of the agenda as a technical problem, which can be supported by appropriate scientific investigation.

This framing of the UN Global Agenda as a technical challenge has significant limitations. There are two sets of issues which are immediately obvious. The first is the emphasis on financing, on the assumption that the main impediment to realising the impact of technical knowledge is the funding for research in the first place, and for research translation in the second. Many global agreements which focus on financing have seen financial and market-driven mechanisms as the key mechanism for driving change, and for facilitating the leverage of corporate resources into the level of investment necessary to achieve the agreed outcomes.

The second issue is the presumption that an agenda such as 'Transforming our World' can be addressed through technical resources. Clearly, new knowledge in many fields is important, and part of the work necessary to deliver on the ambition for change. Procuring the funding necessary for all kinds of interventions (not least universal, essential services) is also clearly important. However, the emphasis on market-based approaches necessarily gives priority to economics rather than social and environmental objectives. This clearly draws attention to the importance of values, and the recognition that in some cases, it will be necessary to 'just say no'. As Australian Historian Katie Holmes recently argued, 'configuring climate change as a problem to be solved, which is a dominant way in which discussions about climate change progress, belies the human complexity at the core of the problem. It frames climate change as something 'outside' of us, and feeds

discussions about technological ‘solutions’ that completely ignore questions of ethics, justice, power or values’ (Holmes et al., 2020).

## **A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR GLOBAL ACTION**

These questions led the Jean Monnet SDGs Network team to focus more on a four-fold framework that distinguishes more clearly the focus of each category, and the kinds of partnerships necessary to make progress, using Sachs’ earlier work as a starting point. Taken together, the four dimensions outlined below offer a way of making meaningful sense of the scale and coherence of the Global Transformation Agenda, while at the same time accommodating the political and moral dimensions of the transforming process. Managing the climate challenge is not just a matter of generating the political will to accommodate a range of interests, it is necessary to recognise that according to all the technical knowledge, we now have to ‘just say no’ to fossil fuels, and we need to do so now. This is a question of values which relate to all of the SDGs, not least the challenge of protecting biodiversity.

### *1. Transformational Goals*

This category brings together the Transformation Agenda’s focus on environmental sustainability, addressing specific topics such as climate change, carbon, urbanisation, food, energy and ecosystems. This encompasses SDG 2 again, with respect to food systems, but also SDGs 11 (sustainable cities and communities), 12 (waste), 13 (low carbon), 14 (coastal eco-systems) and 15 (inland eco-systems). These are sometimes considered to be technological challenges; the assumption is that new technologies can enhance energy efficiencies, reduce carbon emissions and support continued economic growth that does not deplete resources.

However, this also is essentially a political process. This aspect of the global transformation challenge also highlights the importance of existing economic structures and processes. How can the interests associated with these structures be challenged and broadened to be much more inclusive?

This is demonstrated most clearly in relation to the Paris Agreement on Climate Change, and the necessity for governments to implement policy and programs to deliver on their commitments to reduce emissions. Very few countries are yet compliant with their own obligations, notwithstanding the demonstrable effects of global heating and the growing concern amongst citizens about the implications of a failure to act not only for themselves but also for future generations.

Of all these dimensions of change, this has perhaps the strongest purchase in terms of a definable agenda for intervention. However, there continues to be some priority still on technological fixes rather than deep transformation of current economic and technological processes; it is telling that environmental goals are framed as particularly ‘transformational’ in contrast to the economic or social aspects of the Global Agenda. Accountability is shared by multiple actors, yet none are prepared to exercise the leadership necessary to deliver the outcomes sought by these Goals and the Paris Agreement. The failure of all stakeholders to act with sufficient intensity illustrates the significance of seeing this challenge as much more than technical. At some point, the moral dimension and the significance of values (do we want to preserve the Great Barrier Reef, for example) mean that it is important to ‘just say no’.

### *2. Provision of Essential Public Services*

This grouping focuses on the provision of essentially public services for all citizens: health, education, utilities and infrastructure. In Sachs' reckoning, this refers to SDGs 3 (Health), 4 (Education), 6 (Water) and 7 (Energy). Each of these has an underlying commitment to a core of universal provision, and typically depends in part at least on public financing even though delivery of services in many countries is both a public and private sector (business and community) responsibility.

Two of these SDGs—Goals 3 and 4 — are concerned very much with human capacity and readiness for people to achieve a livelihood for themselves and possibly other members of their families and social groups. They require public design and regulation of institutions and programs that are accessible to individual citizens, and leadership and expertise to deliver services. They typically imply formal processes of accreditation and certification of people's status and achievement.

The other two are key aspects of physical infrastructure on which communities are utterly dependent. Again, publicly developed and managed systems are the crucial foundation for management of water and energy services, whether publicly or privately delivered. While not mentioned by Sachs in this context, the Goals focused on poverty, hunger and elimination of inequalities will only be achieved as the consequence of effective design and delivery of public services, together with the implementation of action on the 'complex intermediate' Goals.

### *3. Complex 'Intermediate' Goals Involving Public-Private Collaboration*

The focus here is on the complex 'intermediate', perhaps less tangible, Goal of enabling sufficient economic activity to deliver 'decent work' for all who want or need it. This depends on close collaboration between public and private sectors, and civil society. SDG 8, Decent Work and Economic Growth, is the central focus of this category, albeit drawing heavily on public services to prepare people for opportunities to participate in the economy, and to undertake 'decent' work (recognising that far too many current jobs involve either tasks or conditions which are demeaning, damaging or exploitative). Underpinning this focus is SDG 9, Inclusive and Sustainable Industrialisation, which promotes recognition of the importance of infrastructure, and the role of business in innovation and in supporting development in their region.

In this case, the role of public authorities at all levels of governance, from international to local, is central. Public authorities set out the standards and rules which are the minimum acceptable arrangements for people to work, typically in paid employment, but also in unpaid/voluntary environments.

Current experience suggests that regulated markets will be central to economic interconnectedness from local to global levels for at least the foreseeable future. The crucial question for the Global Agenda is how those markets, and the participants in them, will be governed and regulated. There are various movements, partly arising from the growing rejection of unfettered globalisation, that point to the importance of more locally-grounded, democratically-controlled entities as key participants in both local foundational economies, and in global trade. These entities will reflect business models committed to circular economic practices, and to strengthening livelihoods and diminishing inequalities. 'Decent work', fair livelihood and sufficient food, become key objectives for all organisations (business and otherwise) rather than incidental consequences of the pursuit of profit.

This raises questions about the capacity of public authorities to balance international expectations and local circumstances. The core issues at the heart of this work are workplace safety, terms and

conditions of remuneration, and democratic control of enterprises. The last of these matters, as aspects of work environments which affect the quality of working life, such as organisational culture, are much harder to regulate. The International Labour Office, a tripartite organisation, is an important institution in shaping the conditions for advancing the objective of decent work.

The potential of this kind of transition was demonstrated by China under the MDGs. The significant impact on the scale of poverty under the MDGs was achieved through China's rapid economic growth, new employment opportunities and higher wages for workers particularly at middle levels, notwithstanding the continuing poor conditions in many workplaces.

Is this a feasible approach for the rest of the world? China, while reflecting many aspects of a capitalist economy deeply engaged in global trade, is governed by a one-party state which exercises significant control over most aspects of economic, social, environmental and political life. This kind of intervention more widely is unlikely to occur without significant conflict. The G20, for example struggles to agree on global taxation policies, let alone the kind of direct intervention as occurs in China.

#### *4. Reconciliation*

At the heart of the Global Agenda are social and moral objectives, related to gender equality, reducing violence and increasing inclusion, and promoting global citizenship. This refers to SDGs 5 (gender equality), 4 (with respect to global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity), and 16 (peace, justice, strong institutions and reducing violence). SDG 17 is pertinent also with its focus on a shared partnership for the implementation of the transformation agenda.

While these are linked with the high-level and the transformational goals, this grouping highlights the importance of respectful social relationships and of learning in all aspects of the transformation agenda. Perhaps this is best understood as a 'cross-cutting' category of Goals, highlighting the importance of the processes of change, and their inclusivity. The 2030 Agenda is not only about objective process of identifying targets and developing new systems and technologies for implementation. It is ultimately about relationships in the Anthropocene, so that the means adopted for change in themselves are crucial to transformation.

Over the past two decades, there have been significant movements for reconciliation in diverse parts of the world: South Africa, Australia, Canada and New Zealand. This experience, and the achievements and failings of the processes to date, can support collective learning about the significance of reconciliation in the overall achievement of the Global Agenda. This learning serves as a basis for beginning to address lack of recognition of Indigenous and First Nations people in the Transformation Agenda.

Of course, this framing of the Agenda is not rigid. Indeed, one of the important reasons for focusing on the integrity of an Agenda that aims to 'Transform our World' is that many Goals are necessary for the achievement of others. Climate, Education and Partnerships are just three examples; without progress on these, the Agenda cannot be delivered.

### **CAN GOVERNMENTS DELIVER?**

How is it that the UN Secretary General's report card is so poor? Are the SDGs at risk of becoming just another example of a global effort to address planetary crisis which fails?

Ben Cashore has suggested that it is widely assumed that good governance can and will emerge under certain conditions, including the availability of resources, effective law enforcement, and technical knowledge, which will then lead to government legitimacy, improved livelihoods, economic growth and better environmental outcomes. This logic underpins the adoption of the SDGs. Cashore argued that the overly sanguine assumption that these elements are synergistic is empirically false; in fact often, these aspects are inherently contradictory.

He suggests that the heart of this issue is the way that problems and their possible solutions are understood and conceptualised – described as the ‘good governance norm complex’ (see an example of this approach as applied to Covid-19 interventions, in Cashore and Bernstein 2020). Indeed, he demonstrates how policy-makers seek out and encourage market-based solutions to ‘super wicked’ global problems, despite significant evidence that such solutions are artificial and inappropriate, thus rarely work--and often exacerbate existing problems. When it comes to the SDGs, there are inherent trade-offs in achieving economic, social and environmental goals where the good governance norm complex reinforces market-driven mechanisms that prioritise economic goals over social or environmental ones. Furthermore, the target and indicator system underpinning the SDGs purports to be able to shift inherently complex political and moral questions to the realm of the technical. However, this narrowing of ambitious Goals to tangible, perhaps measurable, objectives can in many ways be seen to undermine the moral dimension of the Agenda.

Cashore argued that this approach has arisen in part from the dominance of Ostram’s ‘cost/benefit’ framing of policy problems, which in turn relies on a dramatic but widely held misinterpretation of the idea of the ‘tragedy of the commons’ (in Cashore’s framing, ‘Type 1’ problems). In these circumstances, stakeholders continue, for example, to overharvest a finite resource on the assumption that if they do not, others will anyway. This is an apparently rational approach that has a completely irrational outcome.

This draws attention to the tendency, even where parties are negotiating to preserve a threatened resource, to seek out a path which accommodates all interests, despite the fact that this can and often does still lead to the loss of that critical resource. These processes encompass his second and third problem types, ‘optimisation’ and ‘compromise’. In these circumstances, a preoccupation with the process of negotiation and reconciliation of competing interests leads to the underlying prospect of threat being neglected. ‘Process’ tends to triumph over ‘outcomes’. Economists tend to subscribe to the former, with a focus on rational use of resources, whereas social scientists group around the latter, focused on values.

The fourth problem type comprises those super-wicked problems which remain beyond the reach of current governance and problem-solving approaches, not least climate action. With respect to the UN Agenda and its Goals, the question becomes how can stakeholders, including governments, business, researchers and civil society, work together to recognise that the challenge is not only technical but also moral; the decision-making needs to prioritise the collective good rather than the sectoral interest. In that respect, the current approach of voluntary compliance and reporting, and global peer pressure, gives little confidence that the UN can escape the good governance norm complex.

For Cashore, the motivating question for all researchers engaged in the world’s most pressing problems must be “*why* do we continue to go backwards?”. How can global governance grow into structures and processes which deliver constructively on global ambitions? He provides a starting point in this endeavour from a case study in Peru. This example drew on the four problem concepts outline above and framed their implications as ‘influence pathways’:

- a) A 'rules' pathway which focuses on rules and agreements in shaping policy responses;
- b) A 'norms' pathway which relies on shared values and cultural practices as a means of engendering 'right' or appropriate responses;
- c) A 'markets' pathways which presumes that economic incentives and disincentives will produce the necessary behavioural change; and
- d) A 'direct access' pathway which seeks to influence action through capacity-building, both financially and technically, thus shifting power relations and leading to new coalitions (see Humphreys et al., 2017).

Cashore and his colleagues drew on this work to develop a policy learning protocol that can assist where there is broad agreement about policy outcomes, but uncertainty around appropriate or relevant interventions. The protocol assists stakeholders to focus on generating greater knowledge rather than being absorbed in interest-based, zero-sum approach to assessing collectively the likely impact of a particular policy instrument (see Humphreys et al, 2017).

## **BUSINESS, EDUCATION AND CIVIL SOCIETY**

The United Nations itself has been very clear about the importance of collaboration with and amongst business, research and civil society organisations, if the ambition for global transformation by 2030 is to be achieved. Its role in establishing the Global Compact for corporate partners (<https://www.unglobalcompact.org/>), the Global Compact Cities partnership with cities (and supporting other networks such as the Global Covenant of Mayors, <https://www.globalcovenantofmayors.org/>), the Sustainable Development Solutions Network with universities (<https://www.unsdsn.org/>) and the various connections with civil organisations all demonstrate the extent of commitment to engaging partnerships across various sectors. Governments might have signed the UN agreements but all sorts of partners are implicated in those decisions.

Much of the work which proceeds through these partnerships remains rather unfocused. A review of relevant websites indicates that different partners focus on different Goals, each with quite specific ambitions when compared with the broader framework of even one Goal, let alone the whole Agenda (see, for example, <https://sdgs.org.au/>). Nevertheless, this range of activity provides an important platform for bringing in a broader range of networks and groups that can contribute to the achievement of the Goals.

The question of overall coordination and leadership remains a paramount consideration. Business, education institutes and civil society are typically actively involved in the kinds of governance processes which Cashore addresses. They often involved in lobbying for certain kinds of outcomes, often reflecting vested interests, seeking to narrow or broaden the framework through which specific challenges are understood. The implementation of international agreements will depend ultimately on the willingness of all stakeholders, from whichever perspective, to engage in understanding the complexity of multiple perspectives, and accepting the moral dimension of the issues under debate.

The responsibility for leadership of these processes does rest, however, with governments. National governments exercise the predominant responsibility in this regard, partly as the signatories to the Global Agenda and other agreements, partly because of the scale of legal authority which they command, and partly because of the resources that they control. Regional and city governments also play an important role, partly because of the key role that they tend to play in service delivery and their proximity to citizens. Unless governments accept the



responsibility to lead and act in this respect, it will be very difficult for other stakeholders to make significant progress on the implementation of any international agreements, let alone those on the scale of the UN Global Agenda and the Paris Agreement.

## CONCLUSION

How can this conceptual insight about good governance be addressed in relation to the Global Transformation Agenda, and its key stakeholders? It points to the importance of understanding how the framing of each part of the Agenda around a particular Goal and its Targets presents a potential trap: a trap framed as focus on a specific issue or cluster of issues without sufficient attention to context and the systemic connections not only with other aspects of a particular Goal, but with the wider agenda of change. How underlying assumptions are identified, issues and opportunities are understood, and attention to technical and moral aspects is framed, is crucial to the likelihood that constructive action can be developed.

In this respect, the European Union has emerged as a beacon as a governmental entity which has put the SDGs and particularly climate action at the heart of its policy agenda. This sits against a strong background of commitment to international development. Until the United Kingdom left the EU, its contribution to Overseas Development Aid was more than 25 per cent of global aid. Since 2015, the EU has required each of its Directorate Generals to have the relevant SDGs at the heart of their planning, and has exercised leadership in international meetings such as the Asia Europe Meeting. At both ASEM Foreign Minister and Leaders' meetings, the UN Global Agenda has been a prominent topic of discussion.

From 2021, this approach takes a further step with the adoption of the European Green Deal as the basis of the EU's overall strategy for achieving consolidation of the Single Market and delivering on improved livelihoods for many European citizens. In that respect, it is the foundation for achieving recovery from the dramatic implications of Covid-19.

Does this commitment by the EU represent a new opportunity in seeking to deliver the kind of global governance necessary for achievement of the UN Global Agenda? With only a decade until 2030, business, education and civil society will be very important in supporting the EU institutions in their work towards delivering on the SDGs.

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