



Wilton Park



Report

Achieving the SDGs: building on interlinkages among goals

Monday 5 – Wednesday 7 March 2018 | WP1608

In association with:





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In September 2015, 193 countries of the UN General Assembly adopted a new development agenda Transforming Our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. With 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 169 underlying targets that are "integrated and indivisible", the agenda provides both an extraordinary chance and extraordinary challenge to society at the global, national and local level. If these goals are met, the pay-off is likely to be a higher level of well-being throughout the world, and a more sustainable planet. Innumerable connections exist among the goals and targets: some are dependent on one another; others have potential trade-offs between them. To effectively implement sustainable social, economic and environmental development and move forward on the SDGs it is necessary to understand and act on these interactions.

This Wilton Park event considered the extent to which science and policy can connect and cooperate to achieve the SDGs, in particular how they can work together to help identify the most important interactions among SDGs to improve economic and social development. Discussion focused on the SDGs which will be considered at the UN High-level Political Forum in New York in July 2018, namely the goals pertaining to water (Goal 6), energy (Goal 7), cities (Goal 11), consumption and production (Goal 12), and land (Goal 15). Key points from the discussion will be fed into the High-level Political Forum to help inform the debate and encourage consideration of the interlinkages among goals.

The importance of SDG interactions and approaches to identify and understand them

1. All 193 UN member states, rich and poor, committed themselves in September 2015 to implementing the 2030 Agenda. The SDGs and the targets which underpin them are an 'integrated and indivisible' set of global priorities and objectives that are fundamentally interdependent, calling for coherence and an understanding of interactions between and amongst goals.
2. Understanding and managing those interactions are key to achieving the SDGs. The nature of interactions may be positive, negative or neutral. Synergistic goals and targets may enable or reinforce one another, or can be inextricably linked. Trade-offs among goals may constrain or counteract one another, or even make them mutually exclusive. Interactions occur at multiple junctures, from global to local, over time, and differ depending on context. Decisions made at local level may have consequences at the national or global level, and vice versa. Efforts should focus on identifying and addressing those SDG interactions with the greatest leverage and which have the potential to mitigate against irreversible environmental or social changes (for example the 'sixth mass extinction' and large scale human

"win more and lose less"

"How interactions look depends on which glasses you are wearing"

"there are more synergies than trade-offs among the SDGs"

"Growing emphasis on egos and logos"

- migration).
3. Current approaches to understanding interlinkages describe existing or potential interactions among goals but do not capture the scale or impact of such interactions. Uncertainty is inherent in all existing methods identifying interactions. An analysis of pair-wise interactions among goals and their targets showed that the strengths of interactions varies on its 7-point scale from 'cancelling' (-3) to 'neutral' (0) to 'indivisible (+3). Applying a particular "lens", for example a human-environment perspective, will highlight certain sets of interactions among SDGs to help capture the nuances of the varying degrees of influence between goals. Other tools and frameworks to help identify these key interactions, includes the identification of 'planetary boundaries' and 'safe and just operating spaces' which can lead to the identification of 'Pathways'.
 4. Understanding SDG interactions can be improved by considering indigenous local knowledge (ILK) and grassroots voices. Countries from the global north can learn from those in the global south about how to manage competing demands on resources. Developing multi-purpose indicators driven by a participatory grassroots agenda (ILK) is one way to integrate local knowledge into SDG frameworks.
 5. Current evidence and knowledge on interactions among SDGs is dispersed. By tagging publications with relevant goals a more comprehensive understanding of how research addresses SDG interactions can be gained. Promoting and enabling internationally collaborative, cross-disciplinary research and innovation to better understand SDG interactions will also help to reframe the discussion and focus on integrated solutions.
 6. As SDG interactions become better understood, certain interactions between goals can be prioritised. Initial findings indicate that there are more synergies than trade-offs among the SDGs, suggesting that opportunities exist for targeting areas of strong positive overlap between goals. There is an argument for targeting both the strongest synergies between goals for the biggest wins whilst also tackling the biggest contradictions to address areas of policy incoherence. Whilst the importance of interactions among SDGs is partially understood by the research community, the business case needs to be made by researchers to influence resource allocation by all public and private stakeholders.
 7. Whilst policy coherence is enshrined in the SDGs (in target 17.14), policy integration is complex because the goals present different challenges to different stakeholders who often think and act within particular sectors, disciplines or themes. So approaches with multi-sectoral, multi-stakeholder partnerships involving businesses, financial institutions, researchers, civil society, and vulnerable and marginalised people will help to address interactions among SDGs. Investment flows should be redirected towards innovative solutions that address interactions among SDGs, including supporting a transformative shift towards governance systems that will promote a long-term perspective.
 8. Progress towards the SDGs will depend on political will and increased global cooperation, rather against the current global political climate which is trending towards nationalism and isolationism. It will require a positive narrative, simple but not simplistic, expressing the complexity but not overly complicated, making it clear that actions and decisions made today will have far-reaching consequences which may 'lock in' future environmental, social and economic trajectories. Achievement of the SDGs remains within our grasp, but that will not remain the case for long; the time to act is now.

Examples of interactions among SDGs: synergies and comprehensive solutions

9. Several practical examples demonstrate how understanding interactions among goals can promote actions and solutions that work towards the achievement of multiple goals. These solutions require multi-sectoral and long-term approaches that consider synergies and trade-offs among SDGs across scales.
10. Taking the example of **cities** shows how certain places and spaces are 'streams' where SDGs overlap closely. For example, Goal 6 (clean water and sanitation); Goal 7 (affordable and clean energy) and Goal 12 (responsible consumption and production) are all components of sustainable and productive urban living that overlap closely in cities. Goal 10 (reduced inequalities) is also a critical issue in cities—as well as for the SDG agenda—as 75% of cities have higher levels of income inequalities than two decades ago. Cities are also an example of how problematic narratives can hinder progress. For example, urban sprawl has been taken as a model of sustainable, spacious, urbanism. However, sprawl reduces efficiency, making these cities less sustainable than dense cities. In this case, a new narrative about the positive benefits of urban density could become a common understanding that underpins policy.
11. Goal 12 (**responsible consumption and production**) points to the role of supply chains as a case where positive impacts and multiple goals can be achieved through connecting multiple stakeholders and partnerships, such as the sustainable palm oil certification schemes that protect habitat and biodiversity. A key to sustainable supply chains is creating narratives that appeal to people highlighting the impact of their actions.
12. Global **supply chains** also demonstrate some of the worst cases of the re-distribution of negative environmental externalities, such as grape growing in South Africa depleting local water resources but still being sold cheaply to the UK market during winter. Grape exports have continued throughout the 2017 / 2018 season, despite the declaration of a national disaster due to drought in Cape Town province in February 2018. Global supply chains, as in the case of energy, can also lead to trade-offs. For example, reaching the energy goal could hinder the achievement of goals for water, health, and land ecosystems if the energy is obtained through environmentally-harmful and unsafe methods for mining or hydraulic fracking.
13. **Agriculture** is an example of a sector with the potential to make either significant positive or negative contributions to the SDGs. Agricultural production is believed to cause around one third of global greenhouse gas emissions, degrades soil, and uses a large percentage of global water resources; however, it is also the mainstay of many economies with the potential to bring people out of poverty and hunger.
14. **Agroforestry** is an example of an approach which improves resilience, contributes to nationally determined contributions as part of the Paris Agreement, and also has numerous co-benefits across SDG goals. Agroforestry is being promoted through emerging networks and partnerships between government and local organisations at a community scale. For example, in Andhra Pradesh, India, the 'Zero Budget Natural Farming' programme has trained 40,000 farmers in techniques that use no artificial agrochemicals, showing the potential for a transformative initiative at scale involving local government support and engagement from multiple stakeholders. Examples such as this agroforestry programme show that viable solutions exist, however these often compete against vested interests and the status quo, hence there is a need for strong policy narratives and support for alternative solutions.
15. Cases such as cities, supply chains and agroforestry demonstrate that the appropriate knowledge to achieve multiple goals exists, but to mobilise this knowledge requires communication, engagement and coordination.
16. Practical examples should sit alongside theory; using straight forward and

persuasive narratives will help to ensure that attempts at holistic implementation do not fall into paralysis. In addition to narratives and examples, policy simulations and aggregate views of goal interactions can help policymakers manage synergies and trade-offs.

17. Multiple related initiatives in the climate, environment and development space such as the '10-Year Framework of Programmes on Sustainable Consumption and Production' should be aligned with the SDGs, for example by ensuring integrated SDG measurement and evaluation frameworks.

Achieving multiple goals: how to make solutions happen

18. Making progress towards multiple SDGs needs an enabling environment and public policy support to be realised. Legal, corporate and regulatory processes alongside research and evidence and institutional frameworks can help achieve the SDGs.
19. Taking a legal perspective to the SDGs, which are in effect a soft legal document, represents both a potential pathway for change as well as highlighting challenges. The experience of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) demonstrates the challenges of bringing about change without legally-binding agreements as well as the need for collaboration among actors. National legal systems have the potential to hold governments to account in terms of meeting environmental and social obligations and should be seen as part of a toolkit of solutions. A number of movements are calling for a new 'global constitution' based on pre-existing international standards founded in human rights legislation and an ethic of "do no harm". This may seem visionary to some, while others think that a legally-binding agreement around sustainable development is a requirement for meeting the SDGs.
20. Investment in infrastructure has the potential to contribute to multiple goals through its equalising effect on citizens. The African Development Bank lends \$6 billion per year in Africa through multiple initiatives, and there are opportunities for aligning their proposal and measurement frameworks with the SDGs. Supporting public goods such as transport infrastructure, water and sewerage systems, as well as merit goods, such as electricity, is essential. While the private sector has a role to play, some services are better suited to public sector maintenance.
21. Business is sometimes presented as part of the problem rather than the solution to achieve sustainable development. Cultivating a shared vision of change and enabling mutual accountability across the private sector as a whole could facilitate addressing interactions among SDGs. Rather than framing the SDGs as a funding gap to be resolved, the goals could be seen as an investment opportunity.
22. To achieve the SDGs multi-country and multi-stakeholder platforms and partnerships are going to be essential, such as the 2030 Water Resource Group and the Mesoamerican Integration and Development Regional Programme, which are emerging as sectoral and regional alliances for supporting infrastructural and public goods.
23. Regulation of the private sector can provide certainty and equity between businesses, as well as being key to meeting the SDGs. However, there is differentiation within the sector, for example small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) tend to operate in more volatile contexts with shorter time horizons, where regulations may hinder growth and be less effectively implemented. The public sector needs to be both strong and willing to enforce regulations.
24. To catalyse transformative change, difficult questions need to be addressed, such as what the desired change should look like. Should change be disruptive or incremental and do the right institutions work at the right scales to address SDG challenges? There are also questions around political drivers and incentives, such

"We need horizontal solutions to vertical problems"

"should change be disruptive or incremental?"

"No-one and no-where
left behind"

as who defines the objectives, who participates and who pays.

25. Longer term governance planning horizons or behavioural changes in governments such as moving to more participatory systems may incentivise policymaking in support of the SDGs.
26. Providing research and evidence on SDG interactions to policymakers should be demand-led, informed by local needs and adequately funded. Research should involve international collaborations that supports south-north and north-south learning.
27. Jurisdictional responsibilities should be adequately distributed to ensure that different levels of governance take on appropriate levels of responsibility and that national SDG indicators align with global indicators. This could entail a localising agenda that makes use of emerging networks at local level and engages broadly, even with unusual stakeholders.
28. Other considerations important for achieving the SDGs include: highlighting the costs of inaction analogous to the approach taken by the Stern Review on the economics of climate change; enforcing and auditing governments and ministries on SDG readiness; and ensuring that SDGs are integrated into national budgets and policies.

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Wilton Park | April 2018

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