FDSD’s submission on The Sustainable Development Goals and the UK to the UK Parliament’s Environmental Audit Committee

October 2016

FDSD’s Response to the EAC Inquiry into the SDGs in the UK

1 Executive Summary

1.1 FDSD believes that the SDGs provide an opportunity and framework in which to:

- create sustainable social, economic and environmental futures for the UK, devolved nations and localities;
- create the appropriate infrastructure – the participatory processes, institutions, and data – to realise sustainable development and the SDGs at a UK and devolved level;
- contribute to democratic renewal.

1.2 The SDGs can also be seen as linked to current UK challenges such as those raised by the EU Referendum: for example, participation (SDG 16), inequality (SDG 10) or ‘leave no-one behind’. The proposed industrial strategy could, through incorporating consideration of the SDGs, be seen as part of ensuring a more equitable distribution of economic activity, as well as future-proofing industry to be better able to respond to environmental challenges.

1.3 The SDGs also provide an opportunity to review and create democratic processes and institutions capable of improving decision-making, participation, problem-solving and implementation, as well as improved models of scrutiny and audit (Goals 16 and 17).

1.4 Data collected for the SDGs can enable not only assessment of progress, but underpin practice and even contribute to improved economic performance, for example, by enabling the development of the circular economy.

1.5 With very different approaches to implementation of the SDGs in Wales and Scotland, as well as likely strategies by cities and localities, devolution provides an opportunity to explore the wider challenge of how to balance locally relevant and ‘owned’ responses, whilst ensuring collective UK-wide impact.

1.6 We recommend that:

- questions about the relevance, priority, and performance of SDGs should be included in public and multistakeholder consultations across the UK. These could take the form of a UK-wide FutureWeWant national conversation;
• there is a parallel need for an urgent and transparent review of central and local government department goals and targets, matched to the SDGs, and with an appropriate gap analysis;
• responsibility for SDG goal coordination and oversight should lie with the Cabinet Office to ensure policy coherence alongside cross-government and cross-UK engagement (including devolved nations, city and local authorities);
• there is consideration of a Minister and/or Cabinet Committee with specific responsibility for sustainable development and the domestic application of SDGs to underpin their importance.

And to enable delivery, we recommend:

• a review of the architecture within Government, and local government, necessary to ensure policy coherence and coordination across departments and agencies;
• an independent oversight and scrutiny body for the SDGs. This could be along the lines of the Welsh Office and Future Generations Commissioner, and with opportunities for public and multistakeholder participation, as well as good practice sharing.

2. Introduction

2.1 The Foundation for Democracy and Sustainable Development addresses the challenge of how democracies can adapt to achieve sustainable development.¹ We are particularly concerned with finding ways to embed sustainable development thinking and practice within democracies, reducing short-termism and increasing participation. We act as a small independent forum which brings together rigorous thinking and practical examples to help inform and create the required change.

2.2 We are therefore interested in how the domestic implementation of the SDGs provides opportunities to better realise a sustainable future for the UK, and also how the need to consider their implementation has implications for our political institutions and democratic processes.

3. What are the potential costs, benefits and opportunities for the UK?

3.1 The UK Westminster Government, unlike the Welsh and Scottish Governments, has so far failed to publicly recognise the domestic relevance of the SDGs. The implication is that they are being seen primarily as an extension of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), and more applicable to ‘developing’ countries rather than having universal application.

3.2 FDSD believes rather that the SDGs provide an opportunity and framework in which to:

• rethink and create sustainable social, economic and environmental futures for the UK, devolved nations and localities;
• create the appropriate infrastructure – the participatory processes, institutions, and data – to realise sustainable development and the SDGs at a UK and devolved level;
• contribute to democratic renewal.

3.3 These opportunities, and the needs they respond to, should not be seen in isolation but as linked to other challenges. For example, the recent EU Referendum showed, among other things, the need for our political structures and government to better ‘hear’ different viewpoints, especially from those who feel their voices are ignored, and create shared visions of the future (SDG 16); as well as highlighting the profound inequalities across the UK (SDG 10).

¹ http://www.fdsd.org
3.4 The SDGs also provide an opportunity to review and create democratic processes and institutions capable of improving decision-making, participation, problem-solving and implementation, as well as improved models of scrutiny and audit. Goal 16 specifically promotes consideration of the processes and opportunities available for people to participate in decision-making. Goal 17 is concerned with policy and institutional coherence, as well as effective multi-stakeholder and public partnerships. Both goals are also necessary for the effective implementation of the SDGs since complex challenges cannot be dealt with by top-down policies, but through public and stakeholder engagement at all levels (see Section 5).

3.5 The particular need to respond to the wide differences in wellbeing and economic opportunity was recognised by the Prime Minister in her inaugural speech to Parliament: to tackle “burning injustices” and to “strive to make Britain a country that works for everyone – regardless of who they are and regardless of where they’re from.”

3.6 The proposed industrial strategy could, through incorporating consideration of the SDGs, be seen as part of ensuring a more equitable distribution of economic activity, as well as future-prooﬁng industry to be better able to respond to and provide answers to environmental challenges. By adopting the approach suggested in 3.4 above, it also opens up economic development to more innovative stakeholder and public engagement models.

3.5 One of the underpinning principles of the SDGs is that of ‘no-one left behind’. As in Germany (see 6.3-6.6 below) it could be used to inspire a thorough review and, through a more participative and multi-stakeholder approach, lead to creative strategies to tackle ongoing challenges.

3.6 As much international evidence has shown, inequality leads to lower economic performance, as well as reduced cohesion. Addressing inequalities should therefore generate significant benefits which outweigh the costs of implementation. One necessary short-run cost is that of collecting and making available data that is disaggregated enough to be able to understand the impacts on different people and places.

3.7 The forthcoming ONS consultation on the appropriate approach to SDG data collection is therefore crucially important, beyond monitoring progress on the SDGs. Data can be used by different actors, national and local governments, businesses, and individuals to design appropriate strategies, implement change, and also hold government to account. It is also part of helping to generate innovation, new economic opportunities and jobs which can arise from the responses created to address the inter-related challenges highlighted by the SDGs. An example would be creating circular economy solutions where there is currently a paucity of relevant data.

3.9 Another benefit of considering the inter-relationships between SDGs is to enable a fuller understanding and response to security and resource threats, such as energy, water or resource use.

3.11 The SDGs are currently being addressed very differently in Wales and Scotland. In Wales, for example, the WalesWeWant public conversation contributed to defining objectives for Wales which fed into legislation via the Wellbeing and Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 and which were matched to the SDGs, thus linking a bottom-up process with international obligations. This process, at the same time as providing more local control, enabled people to feel part of something bigger. The Statutory Guidance for delivery of the Act notes that: “One of the new responsibilities the Act provides is to help Wales become more globally responsible. This is important in the context of the new United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and the emphasis on national and sub-national

3.12 In Scotland, stakeholder consultations have been ongoing to explore the relevance of the SDGs to Scotland and to develop a Scottish strategy for their implementation, as well as a commitment to link the SDGs to the National Performance Framework.

3.13 The UK Government needs to recognise and learn from these approaches as well as the relevance of different SDGs to different localities across the UK. The SDGs are therefore a useful way to further explore how devolution can enable appropriate responses at the same time as enabling and ensuring collective UK-wide impact by, for example, creating mechanisms to enable the sharing of data and good practice.

4. **UK relevance and performance on Goals**

4.1 Whilst it is a useful indicative exercise to ask these questions, many responses will only reflect the interests, knowledge and concerns of the respondents. It is very difficult for any organisation, unless it has devoted adequate resources, to make any definitive assessment of the relevance of all the goals or on their relative performance.³

4.2 The question also ignores the importance of looking at the goals in their entirety, their meaning and relevance for different people, and the inter-relationships between them – important for developing appropriate means of implementation.

4.3 The diversity of the nations and localities in the UK also mean that the relevance of particular goals and their relative importance will vary.

4.4 We would therefore recommend that questions about the relevance and performance of SDGs should be included in public and multistakeholder consultations and conversations across the UK (especially in England and Northern Ireland where these have not yet happened) to better determine relevance and priorities. (See the examples provided by the three countries in Section 6).

5. **Structures, governance mechanisms, resources and lines of accountability required to ensure effective delivery.**

5.1 As a priority, we recommend an urgent and transparent review of departmental goals and targets, matched to the SDGs and with an appropriate gap analysis. At the Westminster level, this material could be fed into a cross-Whitehall ministerial group (including representation from Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland as well as local government) to enable an SDG strategy to be created across government. These inputs could be supplemented and commented on by an independent multistakeholder panel set up for the purpose (or as part of an independent sustainable development institution, see 5.7).

5.2 Similar mappings would also be useful at local authority and city levels to co-create strategies, and with mechanisms to share good practice.

³ There are some overall assessments such as Bertelsmann (2016) but this is dependent on internationally comparable data and is therefore limited. https://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/en/publications/publication/did/sustainable-development-goals-are-the-rich-countries-ready/
5.3 FDSD has already provided thoughts on sustainable development policy delivery to the EAC and these are also applicable to the SDGs. We have set out here a summary of our recommendations, revised for application to the SDGs:

5.4 **Responsibility for SDG goal coordination and oversight should lie with the Cabinet Office since this department can act as a central point for ensuring policy coherence and engagement across government departments.**

5.5 We do not believe, however, that allocating responsibility is enough to ensure effective and considered implementation. **We believe that there is a need (whether through an Inquiry by the EAC or a central government review) to review the architecture within Government necessary to ensure policy coherence and coordination across departments and agencies.**

5.6 FDSD also believes that **there should be consideration of a Minister and/or Cabinet Committee with specific responsibility for sustainable development and the domestic application of SDGs to underpin their importance.**

5.7 The Wellbeing and Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 established an independent office and Future Generations Commissioner as a way to ensure that sustainable development policy and practice was not unduly influenced by short-term political priorities and independently scrutinised. **We suggest that one way to provide an independent oversight and scrutiny body for the SDGs, could be to create a variant of the Welsh office and Future Generations Commissioner for the UK as a whole, or for England separately, which would also enable the sharing of good practice.** It should also provide opportunities for, and catalyse, public and multistakeholder participation and actions – at both national, as well as at local and city, level.

5.8 The SDGs are an opportunity, as we noted in 3.10, for the Government to become much bolder and more imaginative in its public engagement and realise the beneficial and increasing trends towards more multistakeholder and public fora for discussion, as well as creation and delivery of actions. **This way more ‘ownership’, relevance and commitment can be created at national, regional and local levels, and within industrial sectors.**

5.9 We noted in our previous EAC submission that: “The transparency and participation agenda is a government priority: it is an active participant in the international Open Government Partnership and the Cabinet Office is leading on Open Policy Making. … “Participation can generate commitment amongst participants, increase knowledge, generate new ideas, legitimise tough political choices, and challenge the power and influence of vested interests. There is increasing evidence that where participatory institutions are carefully designed to ensure considered reflection rather than knee-jerk reactions and raw preferences, citizens and other stakeholders are willing and able to deal with complex policy issues.”

5.10 Whilst there is increasing sophistication in understanding where different participatory techniques are, or are not, appropriate, there is a lack of commitment in both national and local government to embed participatory processes to enhance policy and delivery of public services, as well as scrutiny and oversight of implementation. The SDGs present an opportunity to design and trial new participatory institutions that will be crucial for realising domestic implementation of the SDGs.

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SDGs. There is much experimentation and experience around the world on which the government can draw.\(^7\)

5.11 We suggest consideration of a UK-wide FutureWeWant (or at least an England-wide) national conversation, building on the lessons from the WalesWeWant conversation to ensure that discussions over the relevance of the SDGs to the UK start from where people are, address their concerns and challenges, whilst linking to the SDGs and their relevance at local level.

5.12 FDSD also believes that discussions of the SDGs should form a part of any industrial strategy, with multi-stakeholder forums led by trade associations and involving all relevant stakeholders in thinking through how these challenges can best be realised at a sector level as well as creating new economic opportunities.

6. Examples of international best practice

6.1 The challenge of implementing the SDGs has created some innovative responses by governments, particularly the importance of engaging the public and stakeholders, as well as in policy coherence.

6.2 We would particularly like to draw attention to some examples from Germany, France, and Finland, given in their responses to the UN’s High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development.

**Germany**

6.3 Germany is linking, and hence mainstreaming, its domestic implementation of the SDGs to its ongoing National Sustainable Development Strategy.\(^8\)

6.4 Progress reports are to be prepared through a “broad-based process of dialogue and consultation with civil society groups.” There have been (at the time of reporting) “five public dialogue conferences held in all regions of Germany … with a broad range of actors from the private sector, academia and civil society”.

6.5 The German Government is engaging with each SDG and specifically “defining the need for action relevant for Germany”.

6.6 By focusing on the ‘Leave No One Behind’ principle, Germany has recognised the need to put more effort into reaching “disadvantaged and/or discriminated sections of the population in Germany and worldwide”.

**France**

6.7 France has, through consideration of the SDGs, recognised the need to “deepen our democratic tools, based especially on the use of digital means (public consultations, concensus conferences and local referendums).”\(^9\) Specific examples include:

- “… a public consultation open to all has been launched on the Internet to guarantee the inclusiveness of the consultation process”;

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\(^8\) https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/hlpf/2016/germany

\(^9\) https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/hlpf/2016/france
“A participatory Internet platform (www.agendafrance2030.gouv.fr) will propose an open digital commons to all players and citizens to disseminate good practices and recommendations, monitor progress and rally coalitions.”

6.8 France will also be creating regional consultative workshops in autumn 2016 for local actors to contribute to the development of France’s SDG National Action Plan. “Shared local diagnoses could be conducted to identify the assets and challenges of the French mainland and overseas regions with respect to the 17 Sustainable Development Goals.”

Finland

6.10 Building on a long history of action on sustainable development and futures thinking, Finland is applying its principles for sustainable development which include policy coherence and “multi-stakeholder participation and continuous dialogue based on mutual learning and trust”. They have developed integrative concepts and tools for policy coherence as well as multistakeholder forums with an integral role in national coordination, implementation and follow-up alongside Government.

6.11 Recognising the difficulties of widespread citizen engagement, Finland has specifically launched a Society’s Commitment to Sustainable Development to “generate action, put sustainable development into practice and engage larger segments of the society” alongside a strategic framework and multi-stakeholder operational tool to “boost ownership, concrete action, innovative solutions and impact”.

6.12 The Prime Minister’s Office has also asked all Ministers to map their existing policies, measures, activities and budgets across the 17 goals and 169 targets to help remove silo thinking. There has also been a ‘gap analysis’ with participation of stakeholders, which is also a crucial tool to recognise blind spots, and unrecognised opportunities for co-benefit.