

The Royal Society's submission to the Environmental Audit Committee's inquiry on the Sustainable Development Goals

1. The Royal Society welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Environmental Audit Committee's inquiry on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).
2. **Executive summary**
 - a) The Society welcomes the Government's central role in developing ambitious SDGs.
 - b) The SDGs and the Government's contribution to them should not overlook the environment or the implications of population and consumption patterns for a finite planet.
 - i. Future projected changes in climate and demography must be considered when developing policies in all areas of Government.
 - ii. Socio-economic systems and institutions must be developed which are not dependent on continued material consumption for growth.
 - c) The development and implementation of effective SDGs will require collaboration between both government departments and national governments.
 - i. Resilience and sustainable growth should be considered across all Government departments in order to develop and implement policies that are effective and sustainable now and in decades to come.
 - ii. Intergovernmental coordination is required to ensure ambitious, consistent targets and indicators for the SDGs and upcoming international agreements on climate change and disaster risk reduction.
 - iii. Governments should act collectively to reduce inequality and mitigate climate change.
3. The Royal Society is the national academy of science for the UK. It is a self-governing Fellowship of many of the world's most distinguished scientists drawn from all areas of science, engineering and medicine. The Society's fundamental purpose, as it has been since its foundation in 1660, is to recognise, promote, and support excellence in science and to encourage the development and use of science for the benefit of humanity.
4. The Society has a long history of involvement with sustainable development. Recent work includes the publication of the People and the Planet report¹, the Climate Change: Evidence & Causes report², and the upcoming report on Resilience to Extreme Weather³. The Society regularly engages with discussions about the role of science in international development. For example, it has responded to the UK International Development Committee's Inquiry into Post-2015 Development Goals (October 2012), the House of Commons Science and Technology Committee's Inquiry into Science and International Development (December 2011) and DFID's White Paper on Eliminating World Poverty: Assuring our Common Future (May 2009). The Society has also recently organised 'PolicyLab' events, bringing together scientists and policymakers to discuss "The post-2015 development agenda: what do civil society and policymakers want from science?" and "Science for Disaster Risk Reduction".
5. The Society is also actively involved in building sustainable research capacity in sub-Saharan Africa. This work aims to help the development of African science academies, promote collaborative research between the UK and African countries, and recognise promising early career scientists in Africa⁴.
6. The Society welcomes the Government's central role in developing ambitious SDGs. We are now at a critical time, both in terms of the state of the planet and the wellbeing of populations. The world faces more challenges than ever before, from climate change, food, energy and water security, to a growing

¹ <https://royalsociety.org/policy/projects/people-planet/report/>

² <https://royalsociety.org/policy/projects/climate-evidence-causes/>

³ <https://royalsociety.org/policy/projects/resilience-climate-change/>

⁴ <https://royalsociety.org/about-us/international/capacity-building/>

population and increasing inequality. The post-2015 development agenda will define the direction of international development policy for at least the next decade. It will influence the way governments and other agencies around the world spend money on research and international aid to support national and regional development. It provides a critically important opportunity to mobilise support and drive progress in a sustainable and equitable way.

7. In many countries the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) have been very successful, and significant progress has been made towards achieving them. The SDGs, while building on this legacy, will differ notably from the MDGs by being globally applicable. The SDGs will therefore require direct action from developed countries as well as developing nations and will need to be considered by all areas of Government, not DFID alone.
8. This submission does not fully answer all of the questions set out by the inquiry as some aspects, such as the structure of Government, lie outside the scope of the Society's expertise. The submission has, nonetheless, been structured around the four questions.
9. ***The Government's aims and ambitions for the Goals, particularly relating to sustainable development. For example, are inter-generational issues adequately covered by the Goals?***
10. Responding to global challenges now and in the future will require recognition that these challenges cannot be addressed in isolation. The interconnectedness of global challenges requires a holistic, interdisciplinary and forward-looking approach. The SDGs should capture the need for improved integration of economic, environmental and social policymaking, and the respective roles of the public and private sectors.
11. The MDGs focus primarily on alleviating poverty in developing countries. In order to ensure sustainable development it is important that the SDGs place greater emphasis on the environment and the need to mitigate and adapt to climate change. For example, in order for communities to adapt, sufficient funding needs to be available to develop accurate models of the regional and local impacts of climate change on people.
12. To ensure that the SDGs remain relevant and meaningful throughout their lifetime, they will need to be forward-looking and mindful of how the world might look in decades to come. They should take account of demographic trends and projections (e.g. urbanisation and population ageing) and the implications of these for resource needs (e.g. food or water goals) or capacity to provide services (e.g. health or education goals) and infrastructure (e.g. cities or transport goals). Together with demographic changes, predicted changes to climate and weather must also be considered when developing the SDGs.
13. Natural systems on which societies depend for food, water, energy and other components of wellbeing may recover from disturbances slowly or uncertainly, and in some cases be irrecoverable. The timescales and dynamics of biophysical systems need to be taken into account when developing the SDGs. The construction and maintenance of natural capital accounts is a useful approach for recognising the value of natural capital and managing it appropriately.
14. The properly planned provision of water supply, waste disposal, power and other services in new and expanding cities will reduce slum conditions and increase the welfare of inhabitants, thereby reducing poverty. Any goals designed to address security of resources should include the reduction of unsustainable consumption, improved efficiency, infrastructure and production practices. Development and environment should not be considered as two separate issues.
15. ***Co-ordination between government departments in agreeing the Goals, and the potential impact on implementation of policies and programmes.***
16. As stated above, global challenges cannot be addressed in isolation. The resilience of societies should be coherently considered across all Government departments and in all policies. DFID should work with other departments to develop and implement sustainable development policies that are resilient to

future climate and demographic changes. Both cross-departmental and intergovernmental coordination is required to ensure that upcoming international agreements on climate change and disaster risk reduction have consistent targets and indicators which support the SDGs.

17. *How the Goals will influence DFID's aid programmes, and how the UK's other international policies and programmes will help the Goals to be delivered.*

18. The SDGs encompass a wide range of objectives. DFID's aid programmes should therefore have a broad focus, considering the sustainability of a programme based on poverty alleviation as well as relevant environmental drivers and dependencies. In order to encourage sustainable development DFID should ensure that building resilience to disasters is incorporated into all programmes and policies. There is a need for early planning and investment in pre-emptive resilience-building measures. This will require the traditionally separate domains of humanitarian response and longer-term development to be brought together, and be linked to good environmental and natural resource management. This in turn requires transforming existing funding mechanisms, and better coordinating funds across the proactive-reactive continuum nationally and internationally.

19. The international community should act collectively to reduce the great inequalities which exist in the world today. This will require focused efforts in key policy areas such as economic development, education, family planning and health. Reproductive health and voluntary family planning programmes urgently require political leadership and financial commitment. This would help reduce fertility rates, especially in countries with a significant unmet need for contraception.

20. The Society also recognises the importance of building local and indigenous scientific capacity in developing countries. This helps them to carry out their own demand-led research, to verify and exploit research carried out elsewhere, and to inspire the next generation of scientists. It is also important for developing countries to build capacity to engage in global discussions on global scientific issues.

21. *The accountability and reporting arrangements for the UK setting targets and indicators for the Goals, and how performance will be reported.*

22. The Society advocates evidence-based policymaking at all levels, encouraging policymakers to draw on the best available evidence and engage with those at the forefront of excellent science. The setting of targets and indicators will require a greater understanding of the link between consumption, demographic change and environmental impacts. Natural and social scientists therefore have a vital role in developing a full picture of the challenges, the uncertainties and the efficacy of potential solutions.

23. In order to monitor sustainable development the measurement of wealth must move beyond just Gross Domestic Product to comprehensive wealth measures which include natural assets. Metrics for cross-cutting features of sustainable development, such as people's resilience to disasters, also need to be developed. These metrics, plus their monitoring and reporting arrangements must be consistent across all relevant international policy frameworks in order to drive coordinated action.

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