

# Royal Society submission to the House of Commons International Development Committee inquiry into the UN Sustainable Development Goals

1. The Royal Society welcomes this opportunity to contribute to the House of Commons International Development Committee inquiry into the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

## Summary

2. The UN SDGs due to be agreed in September 2015 are globally applicable, and require direct action from developed countries as well as developing nations. They represent a major policy commitment by the UK government. As well as scrutinising how the Department for International Development (DfID) implements these goals internationally, the Committee is well-placed to determine whether the SDGs are being implemented and monitored coherently within the UK across government.
3. This submission draws on the work of the Royal Society, including recent policy reports such as 'Resilience to extreme weather'<sup>1</sup>. The Society wishes to highlight the need for a joined-up approach to implementation across the SDGs, as well as the need for evidence and expertise to be embedded in their implementation. In particular, this submission highlights:
  - i. that the International Development Committee should take an active role in championing a holistic view of the SDGs within the UK and internationally, encouraging implementation in a joined-up way, rather than treating each goal in isolation;
  - ii. that there are major gains to be achieved by bringing together actions in support of the SDGs with this year's other international agreements on climate change and disaster risk reduction;
  - iii. the need for the SDGs to be closely monitored, using the best-available locally relevant, accessible, and timely data, disaggregated where and when this is relevant; and
  - iv. that action to meet the SDGs should be evidence-based, including drawing on the best available science.

## Introduction

4. The Royal Society is the national academy of science in the UK. It is a self-governing Fellowship of many of the world's most distinguished scientists. The Royal Society draws on the expertise of the Fellowship to provide independent and authoritative scientific advice to UK, European and international decision makers.
5. The Society has a long history of policy work concerning environmental change and sustainable development. Recent work includes science-policy reports on resilience to extreme

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<sup>1</sup> Royal Society (2014) *Resilience to extreme weather* <https://royalsociety.org/policy/projects/resilience-extremeweather/>

weather<sup>2</sup>, population and consumption<sup>3</sup>, science and mathematics education<sup>4</sup>, research, innovation and growth<sup>5</sup>, open data<sup>6</sup> and climate change<sup>7</sup>. The Society has also held major events on science and the development agenda, bringing together policy makers and scientists to ensure scientific evidence is at the centre of public policy<sup>8</sup>.

6. This submission sets out the Society's positions on implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals. It builds on the Society's previous positions and contributions to discussions about this topic.

### **An integrated and context-specific approach**

7. It is important that implementation of the SDGs is ambitious, aligned and consistent across all goals. The SDGs range from ending poverty to taking action on climate change, and the social, economic and environmental linkages between them are critical. To be successful, implementation will require a holistic, interdisciplinary and forward-looking approach.
8. There are lessons to be learned from the experience of implementing the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The MDGs have been simple, memorable and to some extent quantifiable. Efforts to achieve them have led to substantial reductions in child mortality and maternal deaths, for example; changes that are likely to have had wider beneficial effects on communities as a whole. But they have also been criticised for not being appropriately evidence-based<sup>9</sup>; being over-simplistic and not reflecting the interdependencies between goals<sup>10</sup>; setting inappropriate and/or incomplete goals, targets and indicators<sup>11</sup>; and serving to

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<sup>2</sup> Royal Society (2014) *Resilience to extreme weather* <https://royalsociety.org/policy/projects/resilience-extremeweather/>

<sup>3</sup> Royal Society (2012) *People and the planet* <https://royalsociety.org/policy/projects/people-planet/>

<sup>4</sup> Royal Society (2014) *Vision for science and mathematics education* <https://royalsociety.org/education/policy/vision/>

<sup>5</sup> Royal Society, British Academy, Royal Academy of Engineering and Academy of Medical Sciences (2015) *Building a stronger future: research, innovation and growth* <https://royalsociety.org/~media/policy/Publications/2015/building-a-stronger-future-research-innovation-growth.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Royal Society (2012) *Science as an open enterprise* <https://royalsociety.org/~media/policy/projects/sape/2012-06-20-saoe-summary.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Royal Society and US National Academy of Sciences (2014) *Climate Change Evidence and Causes* <https://royalsociety.org/policy/projects/climate-evidence-causes/>

<sup>8</sup> Royal Society (Thursday 6 June 2013) 'The post-2015 development agenda: what do civil society and policymakers want from science?' <https://royalsociety.org/events/2013/science-post-2015/>

<sup>9</sup> Vandermoortele, Jan (October 2012) 'On irrational exuberance about MDG progress' <http://www.beyond2015.org/sites/default/files/On%20irrational%20exuberance%20about%20MDG%20progress.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> Harland Scott, Charlotte (2013) 'Moving Towards a Post-2015 Development Framework – Lessons from Malawi : An Interview with Her Excellency Madam Joyce Banda, President of Malawi', *IDS Bulletin*, 44.5-6, pp. 10-14. [http://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/bitstream/handle/123456789/2919/IDSB44%205-6\\_Scott\\_Banda\\_submitted.pdf?sequence=1](http://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/bitstream/handle/123456789/2919/IDSB44%205-6_Scott_Banda_submitted.pdf?sequence=1)

<sup>11</sup> Vandermoortele, Jan (October 2012) 'On irrational exuberance about MDG progress' <http://www.beyond2015.org/sites/default/files/On%20irrational%20exuberance%20about%20MDG%20progress.pdf>

marginalise certain areas (e.g. higher education and research) and downplay others (e.g. environmental sustainability)<sup>12</sup>.

9. Implementation of one SDG may aid the delivery of others. For example, education can increase knowledge of sustainable consumption, of healthy and safe living, including reproductive health, and of the importance of the environment<sup>13</sup>. The environmental goals relating to climate, biodiversity and the oceans can be aligned by considering their contributions to sustainable health and resources<sup>14</sup>. Equally, focusing on the implementation of any single goal, without consideration of the broader context can lead to unintended consequences. Education provides an example for this too; increasing the number of children attending primary school on its own may fail unless education quality is also considered<sup>15</sup>.
10. The International Development Committee should advocate a holistic view of the SDGs in their implementation both within the UK and internationally. It should encourage the UK government to approach the SDGs implementation in a joined-up way, rather than treating each in isolation. Synergies and trade-offs between different goals and/or targets should be identified as early as possible and followed through in subsequent policy.
11. Implementation of the SDGs within the UK will require action across a range of sectors and government departments. It is important to avoid duplication of efforts and confusion over roles and mandates. Government policies and programmes relating to the SDGs should be scrutinised with this in mind<sup>16</sup>. Collaboration and co-ordination between government departments should be promoted.

## **Consistent implementation of global agreements**

12. Sustainable development is closely linked to disaster risk reduction and climate change. Implementation of the SDGs should therefore be consistent with that of the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, agreed in March 2015, and the agreement due to be reached at the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change conference in Paris in December 2015.

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<sup>12</sup> German Watch (2010) *The Millennium Development Goals and Climate Change: taking stock and looking ahead* <http://germanwatch.org/klima/klimdg10e.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> Royal Society (2012) *People and the planet* <https://royalsociety.org/policy/projects/people-planet/>

<sup>14</sup> Waage, J. et al., Governing the UN Sustainable Development Goals: interactions, infrastructures, and institutions, *The Lancet Global Health*, Volume 3, Issue 5, May 2015, Pages e251-e252

<sup>15</sup> Harland Scott, Charlotte (2013) 'Moving Towards a Post-2015 Development Framework – Lessons from Malawi : An Interview with Her Excellency Madam Joyce Banda, President of Malawi', *IDS Bulletin*, 44.5-6, pp. 10-14. [http://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/bitstream/handle/123456789/2919/IDSB44%205-6\\_Scott\\_Banda\\_submitted.pdf?sequence=1](http://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/bitstream/handle/123456789/2919/IDSB44%205-6_Scott_Banda_submitted.pdf?sequence=1)

<sup>16</sup> Royal Society (2014) *Resilience to extreme weather* <https://royalsociety.org/policy/projects/resilience-extremeweather/>

## Data and effective monitoring

13. In a 2012 report, the UN states that “data is the lifeblood of decision making and the raw material for accountability.”<sup>17</sup> The best available, locally relevant, accessible, timely and disaggregated data should be used to devise practical indicators to monitor progress towards meeting the SDGs and their associated targets. The most appropriate indicators will depend on the particular context, and local actors will need to be involved in determining and acquiring the necessary data.
14. Systematic acquisition of data and utilising “big data” tools and approaches will be fundamental to robust monitoring of implementation. The international bodies concerned with the design, acquisition and use of data (such as the International Council for Sciences Committee on Data for Science and Technology – CODATA) should be closely engaged with the SDG implementation process.
15. Deeper integration of data across different datasets has the potential to greatly enhance automated approaches to data analysis.<sup>18</sup> An ‘open data’ approach should be used to allow access to data in all countries, to better enable international collaboration on global solutions<sup>19</sup>. The International Development Committee should encourage DfID to champion open and public access to data amongst its partner countries internationally.
16. The UK is leading the way on research into the uses of big data (including the management and analysis of big data sets) and this should be drawn upon in monitoring the SDGs in the UK and internationally.

## Evidence-based implementation

17. The Society advocates evidence-based policymaking, encouraging policymakers to draw on the best available evidence and engage with those at the forefront of excellent science. Natural and social scientists have a vital role in developing a full picture of the environmental and sustainable development challenges, uncertainties and the efficacy of potential solutions. In implementing the SDGs, the UK government has a responsibility to devise an informed strategy based on the best available evidence underpinned by science with expertise from all sectors covered by the SDGs.
18. The SDGs recognise the value of science, engineering, technology and innovation in international development. The scientific community has a central role to play in the development and transfer of technologies; improving the science-policy interface; in facilitating information exchange and data accessibility; and building international research collaboration. It is important to build a strong educational and research base to support these roles.
19. National science academies and learned societies can play an important role in identifying and convening experts to contribute to discussions on the SDGs. This role extends to networks of academies such as the Interacademy Partnership (IAP), the global network of science

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<sup>17</sup> United Nations (2014) *A World That Counts: Mobilising the Data Revolution for Sustainable Development* <http://www.undatarevolution.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/A-World-That-Counts.pdf>

<sup>18</sup> Royal Society (2012) *Science as an open enterprise* <https://royalsociety.org/~media/policy/projects/sape/2012-06-20-saoe-summary.pdf>

<sup>19</sup> Royal Society (2012) *Science as an open enterprise* <https://royalsociety.org/~media/policy/projects/sape/2012-06-20-saoe-summary.pdf>

academies representing 107 academies around the world, and the network of international scientific unions represented by the International Council for Science (ICSU).

20. Indigenous research expertise is imperative to manage and to monitor locally and regionally defined indicators. Science capacity should be promoted in developing countries to support their own demand-led research and be able to verify and exploit existing research delivered elsewhere. This requires investment in a strong and diverse higher education system, including building the institutional capacity of universities, research institutes and learned societies, and increasing the number of (post)doctoral students, researchers and teaching staff.
21. The International Development Committee should scrutinise the use of evidence and expertise by DfID in SDG implementation. In addition, the Committee should closely monitor science capacity building in developing countries by DfID, ensuring that developing countries receive the assistance required to establish strong scientific foundations.

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