

Sustainable Development Goals still critically important

By [Dr Cobus Oosthuizen](#)

30 Apr 2020

While the pandemic threatens to sideline the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), we are in fact more vulnerable now than ever.

In the Covid-19 era, everything must be seen through the lens of the pandemic. This is crucial, and it is immediately important that we make the interventions needed to mitigate the spread of the virus and to save as many people as possible.

“ We must employ our newly acquired solidarity not just to save ourselves, but to build a better future ”

However, the powerful solidarity that has emerged during the coronavirus response also holds great lessons for our ability not just to save ourselves from disease but to achieve lasting social and environmental change.

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide a blueprint for doing just that, and one has to resist the temptation to put these very critical global priorities on the backburner.



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Progress has been made since 2015 when the goals were conceptualized. We've seen some favourable trends – extreme poverty has declined considerably and immunisations against disease have increased. More people have access to electricity.

Many more countries are taking real action to protect our planet and ensure the sustainability of the economic activity. National policies have been developed to manage rapid urbanization. Notwithstanding this progress, there are many areas that still require urgent action. The environment continues to deteriorate at an alarming rate. Climate change is a fact of life, along with rising sea levels and ocean acidity. We've seen some of the highest atmospheric temperatures on record. Land degradation remains a concern.

Slow moving progress

We are moving far too slowly in addressing many of these challenges, towards ending human suffering and creating opportunities for everyone on our planet.

Unfortunately, our ability to respond to issues such as extreme poverty by the SDG deadline of 2030 is jeopardized by other geopolitical events. Violent conflicts, natural disasters, and the current pandemic demand our attention and again lead the critical matter of human development to fall from the radar.

There are indications that global hunger is again on the rise. Half of the global populace lacks essential health services. Many millions of children have yet to achieve the necessary standards of reading and intellectual development.

It's absolutely clear that deeper, faster and more ambitious responses are needed to unlock the sustainable social and economic upliftment of our planet.

One can approach this from five different strata. At the international level, such as at the United Nations, where initiatives like the SDGs are being driven, much can be done to educate and secure funding.

- At the macro, or national level, a policy can also be shaped to bring the SDGs closer to fruition. South Africa's National Development Plan is a good example of this.
- At the mezzo, or organisational level, much can be achieved, whether through public, private, large, small, listed, unlisted, for-profit or non-profit operations.
- At the micro-level, the SDGs can find expression as solid management practice within departments and divisions.
- Then of course, at the nano level, we find the individual, with the agency and power to influence others.

As an education professional, I am fortunate to have exposure at all five of these strata. I am a firm believer in the practical application of knowledge. Often, only when one is confronted with facts does one appreciate the urgency of action. But information can also inform our ability to make a difference.

Be a change agent

The rich online resources around the SDGs can be pulled into classroom debates, and discussions, and we can also influence individuals. Students are the agents of change that can shift social behaviour and help us achieve these goals.

At the board level, where some of these change agents already find themselves, the SDGs need to become part of the strategic dialogue and then cascaded down all the way to the micro and nano level.

For government, too, it is possible to bring a message through all these levels to where it can materially change human behaviour. We see this in action with the rapid, positive behaviour shifts achieved during the lockdown period.

The SDGs, which also pertain to human survival on this planet, is no less important, even if their time frames are longer.

Their values should also be emphasised, reinforced and inculcated into all of our people.

In the education space, there is still much room to integrate the well-thought-out aims of the SDGs into the curriculae of commerce faculties, business studies, management sciences and so forth.

For the goals to be achieved, it is important that we internalise them and make them our own. At the same time, collective action is required, but it must all start with awareness at the micro and nano levels.

Families are the building blocks of society, and it is also important that we teach the global values of the SDGs to our children and make them a family touchpoint.

The principle of the common good has enormous currency during these pandemic times, but in the longer term, it must also inform the very foundations of society. We should come together, not just to save ourselves, but to make life better for all.

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