



**AASW**

**Australian Association  
of Social Workers**

*Submission to Foreign Affairs, Defence  
and Trade References Committee*

*Re: United Nations Sustainable  
Development Goals (SDG)*

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## Introduction

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### Who we are

The Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) is the professional body representing more than 10,000 social workers throughout Australia.

We set the benchmark for professional education and practice in social work and have a strong voice on matters of social inclusion, social justice, human rights and issues that impact upon the quality of life of all Australians.

### The social work profession

Social work is a tertiary-qualified profession recognised nationally and internationally that supports individuals, families, groups and communities to improve their wellbeing. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversity are central to the profession and are underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and Indigenous knowledge.

Social workers practise in a diverse range of settings and fields, including but not limited to mental health, family violence, health, working with refugees and asylum seekers, family supports, disability and child protection. Social workers consider the relationship between biological, psychological, social and cultural factors and how they impact on a person's health, wellbeing and development. Accordingly, social workers maintain a dual focus in both assisting with and improving human wellbeing and identifying and addressing any external issues (known as systemic or structural issues) that may have a negative impact, such as inequality, injustice and discrimination.

Social workers are well placed to consider and respond to the issues raised in this forum and therefore the AASW welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this submission to this inquiry.

### Our submission

It is the AASW's position that the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide an important mechanism through which we can collectively address some of the biggest challenges currently facing Australia, and the world, with a particular focus on human rights and social justice.

Social workers are deeply committed to human rights. It forms the basis of our professional values and provides a framework through which we can better understand what the people we work with are experiencing. As social workers we are on the front line of human rights protection and it is our daily work to ensure that every individual is free from discrimination, oppression and persecution. As such we are key partners in assuring that the ideals and beliefs enshrined in all the relevant declarations have meaning in the daily lives of all Australians. Unfortunately, the current political, social and economic situation highlights how much work is still needed.

Continued reports from the United Nations<sup>1 2</sup> and numerous other organisations emphasise how Australia is failing in protecting the rights of so many of its citizens and those it has been tasked to look after. We welcome the opportunity to provide a submission to this inquiry and this government's interest in SDGs. We believe SDGs provide an important opportunity to work together under a shared framework towards assuring that every person, group and community is given the basic protections they require and a sustainable environment to achieve their full potential.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://tbinternet.ohchr.org/\\_layouts/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=E%2FC.12%2fAUS%2fCO%2f5&Lang=en](http://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=E%2FC.12%2fAUS%2fCO%2f5&Lang=en)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2016/aug/13/united-nations-reiterates-demand-for-australia-to-close-dire-detention-centres>

## Recommendations:

The AASW recommends that:

- the Government develop a comprehensive SDG awareness and education strategy across the Australian Government and the wider Australian community. Education will improve the level of public awareness and enhance accountability.
- the Government take note of the Business & Sustainable Development Commission research and expertise relating to this matter.
- the government establishes a central overseeing body that would be able to coordinate the implementation and evaluation of SDGs. A central overseeing body would be able to support the coordination of what would ostensibly be large-scale and multifaceted approaches across numerous sectors. The body would have a monitoring and evaluation role that would report to the federal government and the UN. This needs to be paralleled with clear reporting and accountability guidelines.
- the government look into international examples (including the United Kingdom and Denmark) and their accountability, public awareness and centralised implementation strategies, with particular focus on
  - developing and promoting a collaborative approach to achieving the SDGs among all services and organisations involved
  - producing an action plan or plan of intent with clear targets and indicators that can be measured for accountability and data purposes
  - reporting on progress with statistical evidence. Updates of progress to be presented in an appropriate forum
  - an awareness-raising campaign with clear branding
  - engaging schools by offering SDG-related education
  - consulting with civil society and general public where possible
  - undertaking further inquiry into the development of appropriate SDG consultative, governance and accountability structures.

## Terms of Reference

Our submission will respond to the following terms of reference.

- a. The understanding and awareness of the SDG across the Australian Government and in the wider Australian community;
- b. The potential costs, benefits and opportunities for Australia in the domestic implementation of the SDG;
- c. What governance structures and accountability measures are required at the national, state and local levels of government to ensure an integrated approach to implementing the SDG that is both meaningful and achieves real outcomes;
- h. Examples of best practice in how other countries are implementing the SDG from which Australia could learn.

## **AASW Response**

### **a. The understanding and awareness of the SDG across the Australian Government and in the wider Australian community**

It is the position of the AASW that the Australian government has provided an inadequate and poorly coordinated campaign to raise awareness about SDGs and their implementation. Given the lack of public campaign and limited public statements, serious questions are raised in relation to the Australian government's understanding and appreciation of the SDGs, let alone committing to serious action. The lack of understanding at a political level has resulted in lack of leadership and this is evidenced by Australia's continued decline in SDG rankings. Central to SDGs having meaningful impacts is the need for political leadership. This needs to be driven by all levels of government and primarily focusing on the global approach to these goals, rising above local politics and political factions. Australia committed to the SDGs almost three years ago and since that time there has been an absence of public information on the goals and this government's commitment and plan of action to achieving them. Public awareness and action begins with vision and leadership, something this government has failed to provide. Public awareness campaigns can provide an important educational tool but also a stronger sense of accountability and significance for the general community. Without political and public support, we will continue to see a decline in Australia's ranking. Therefore, we take this opportunity to urge the federal government to take action and provide much needed leadership in this space and drive a campaign to draw attention to the SDGs.

The lack of information has resulted in a general sense of confusion from the wider Australian community about what the SDGs represent. We believe that the SDGs have been conflated with the Millennium Development Goals leading to a general lack of understanding about their intent or local relevance.

### **Recommendation**

The AASW recommends the government develop a comprehensive SDG awareness and education strategy across the Australian Government and the wider Australian community. Education will improve the level of public awareness and enhance accountability.

### **b. The potential costs, benefits and opportunities for Australia in the domestic implementation of the SDG**

In many respects Australia has a long and proud history of protecting human rights, while there are clearly areas of significant concern. Our international standing is evidenced by Australia's recent inclusion into the UN Human Rights Council. Whether it is the advancement of worker's, women's or political rights, Australia has been valued as a world leader in this regard and it is an international responsibility that defines who we are as a nation. As with the ongoing condemnation from the UN in relation to Australia's treatment of asylum seekers, our inability to implement and carry out our international commitments will have a detrimental impact on our international standing and global reputation. SDGs provide an opportunity for Australia to demonstrate our commitment to an international approach to dealing with some of our greatest challenges and continue our proud legacy of global leadership.

In relation to the economic benefits, we want to highlight the work of the Business & Sustainable Development Commission, who in their research stated that:

sustainable business models could open economic opportunities worth up to US\$12 trillion and increase employment by up to 380 million jobs by 2030. Putting the Sustainable Development Goals, or Global Goals, at the heart of the world's economic strategy could unleash a step-change in growth and productivity, with an investment boom in sustainable infrastructure as a critical driver. However, this will not happen without radical change in the business and investment community. Real leadership is needed for the private sector to become a trusted partner in working with government and civil society to fix the economy.<sup>3</sup>

Most importantly, the implementation of the SDGs seeks to provide meaningful and sustainable solutions to addressing the major challenges we are facing at a local and global level. For example, the SDGs that focus on poverty, inequality and climate change would have numerous benefits to domestic social, environmental and economic issues. Our commitment to these goals and significant action at a domestic level would make an important contribution towards a more sustainable planet.

### **Recommendation**

The AASW recommends that the Government to take note of the Business & Sustainable Development Commission research and expertise relating to this matter.

### **c. What governance structures and accountability measures are required at the national, state and local levels of government to ensure an integrated approach to implementing the SDG that is both meaningful and achieves real outcomes?**

As stated previously, any discussion about governance structures and accountability must begin with greater understanding and awareness-raising of the significance of SDGs and the opportunities that they bring. Without a commitment to making sure governments, key groups and the wider community fully appreciate what the goals are trying to achieve, the measures are likely to fail. This would necessitate a wide-scale education campaign in collaboration with key partners and stakeholders.

Leadership in relation to SDGs must initially come from the federal government, as a whole and beyond DFAT, with the development of a clear implementation plan that is overseen by a central body or commission, which is made up of key stakeholders, experts and representatives from a wide range of relevant contexts, including Indigenous Australians. This is common practice in other member states. From the experience of our members, nationwide strategies tend to be characterised by poor coordination, inadequate communication and lack of accountability. A central overseeing body can assist in coordination. The development of an appropriate governance and accountability structure requires significant levels of consultation falling outside the scope of this inquiry, and merits further inquiry as its own specific point for consultation.

### **Recommendation**

The AASW recommends the government establishes a central overseeing body that would be able to coordinate the implementation and evaluation of SDGs. A central overseeing body would

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<sup>3</sup> <http://businesscommission.org/news/release-sustainable-business-can-unlock-at-least-us-12-trillion-in-new-market-value-and-repair-economic-system>

be able to support the coordination of what would ostensibly be large-scale and multifaceted approaches across numerous sectors. The body is to have a monitoring and evaluation role that would report to the federal government and the UN. This needs to be paralleled with clear reporting and accountability guidelines.

**h. Examples of best practice in how other countries are implementing the SDG from which Australia could learn.**

We would like to draw the Committee's attention to the top countries in the SDG ranking as we believe they provide transferrable models that can be applied in the Australian context. We will focus on Denmark and the United Kingdom, highlighting key points for your reference that can provide suitable models for Australia to emulate.

**Examples of Best Practice: Denmark<sup>4 5</sup>**

**Government response:** The Danish government acknowledges the interdependent and holistic nature of the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda. The government also emphasises the need for all actors across society to contribute to achieving the SDGs. Internationally, Denmark is already, in many regards, a frontrunner in sustainable development with a universal health care and educational system, gender equality, a generous social safety net, cooperation among social partners, responsible business, clean and efficient energy production.

**Government action:** The Danish government has, in accordance with the 2030 Agenda, formulated the Action Plan. The Action Plan is centred on the 5 Ps: prosperity, people, planet, peace and partnerships. For each of these, except partnerships which are cross cutting, the government has formulated a number of targets (37 in total). Each target has one or two national indicators, which are in large part measurable and quantifiable.

**Accountability:** The Danish government's Action Plan prioritises measurability and accountability. As such, the Action Plan contains 37 concrete national targets that are to a great extent measurable and quantifiable. The government will publish annual progress reports on the 37 targets that will be sent to the Danish Parliament. Every fourth year, the progress report will be replaced by a more comprehensive status report that will also contain initiatives for achieving the SDGs and possible adjustments to the Action Plan.

**Example of best practice: United Kingdom (UK)<sup>6 7</sup>**

**Government response:** The UK Government intends to share progress on implementing the Sustainable Development Goals at the High Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development in 2019. The UK government will report at the VNR 2018 and every 3 years thereafter.

**The UK government aims to:** raise awareness of SDGs, work with various media outlets to promote awareness (national campaign), appoint a cabinet minister to address the accountability gap. This minister is to be responsible for implementing sustainable development, including goals across government.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/memberstates/denmark>

<sup>5</sup> <http://um.dk/en/danida-en/strategies%20and%20priorities/the-un-sustainable-development-goals/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/memberstates/unitedkingdom>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/implementing-the-sustainable-development-goals/implementing-the-sustainable-development-goals>

**The role of media:** The British led Project Everyone (started by British writer Richard Curtis) facilitated the development of the striking logo and branding for the Goals. It has also undertaken a number of high profile campaigns and events endorsed by famous actors, artists and musicians.

**The role of schools:** Early engagement and education has been a priority with the use of specially designed teaching materials.<sup>8</sup>

**Public consultations:** The Welsh government has held a series of public consultations and discussions with civil society and the general public to get them to think about sustainable development and how it could be managed nationally. The Welsh Government has passed the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act to enshrine domestic implementation of the Goals into law.

**Accountability:** The Office of National Statistics (ONS) will be reporting UK progress. One of the first jobs of the ONS SDG team is to establish a baseline from which future progress on the Goals will be judged.

### Recommendation

The AASW recommends the government to look into international examples (including the United Kingdom and Denmark) and their accountability, public awareness and centralised implementation strategies with particular focus on:

- a collaborative approach to achieving the SDGs among all services and organisations involved;
- producing an action plan or plan of intent with clear targets and indicators that can be measured for accountability and data purposes;
- reporting on progress with statistical evidence. Updates of progress to be presented in an appropriate forum;
- developing an awareness raising campaign with clear branding;
- engaging schools by offering SDG-related education;
- consulting with civil society and general public where possible;
- undertaking further inquiry into the development of appropriate SDG consultative, governance and accountability structures.

### Conclusion

The AASW deeply believes in the significance of the SDGs and the need for the Australian government to show local and international leadership. We appreciate the opportunity to make a contribution to this inquiry and look forward to working with the government towards making an equitable and sustainable Australia, and world.

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<sup>8</sup><http://www.teachsdgs.org/blog/engaging-with-the-sdgs-in-uk-schools-models-and-ingredients-for-successful-practice>



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