



Covid-19: What does it mean for SDGs and universities?

– Forum summary

Overview

This document provides a summary of points raised at an online discussion forum that took place on 28 April 2020 as part of the [Accelerating SDG Practice Initiative](#) of the Sustainable Development Solutions Network Australia, New Zealand and Pacific ([SDSN AusNZPac](#)) and the Australasian Campuses Towards Sustainability ([ACTS](#)).

Approximately 40 participants from SDSN AusNZPac and ACTS member institutions and other invited organisations joined the discussion, including from Auckland University of Technology, ClimateWorks Australia, Deakin University, Future Earth Australia, Griffith University, Massey University, Monash University, RMIT University, University of Auckland, University of Otago, University of Tasmania, University of Wollongong, University of Technology Sydney, and Victoria University of Wellington.

We are grateful to the following people for providing initial remarks to help get the discussion going:

- Prof John Thwaites, Chair of SDSN AusNZPac (Monash University)
- Corey Peterson, President of ACTS (University of Tasmania)
- Dr Lesley Stone, Chair of the Universities NZ Expert Working Group on the SDGs (University of Auckland)
- Dr Belinda Gibbons, Australia/New Zealand United Nations Principles of Responsible Management Education (PRME) Chapter Coordinator (University of Wollongong)
- Dr Mark Stafford Smith, Co-Chair of Future Earth Australia (CSIRO)

The summary does not necessarily reflect the opinions of all participants or their organisations.

Scene-setting

How is the Covid-19 crisis affecting our community, which has been working to help the institutions we work for (and institutions in other sectors) deepen their contributions to sustainability, sustainable development, and the SDGs? How should we respond?

On one hand, given the immense impact that the Covid-19 crisis is having on every aspect of our lives, it is not surprising that our institutions, and society more broadly, have little bandwidth at the moment for continuing engagement on the SDGs.

On the other hand, we know that the principles and ways of thinking the SDGs encourage are essential for dealing with the current crisis, the recovery, and other current or future sustainable development challenges. And we know that our sector will continue to have a critical role in supporting society to address these through our research, teaching, operations, and community leadership.

The aim of this forum was to provide a comfortable space for the community to share how our work is being affected by the crisis, and to discuss how we can respond proactively. To do this, the forum used the following question as a starting point:

- *What are the main challenges and opportunities of the COVID-19 crisis for our work in advancing the SDGs, sustainability and sustainable development in universities and higher education institutions (including through research, learning & teaching, operations, community engagement, etc.)? What should or could we be doing differently - as individuals, institutions, and networks - to respond to them?*

Discussion summary

The overall messages that came out of the discussion were:

1. The principles of sustainable development and the SDGs have profound relevance to the response and recovery from the crisis, but we need to make the case more prominently.
2. Universities are being impacted severely by the crisis, but the SDGs still matter to them as we move forward.

These are discussed in further detail below.

1. The principles of sustainable development and the SDGs have profound relevance to the response and recovery from the crisis, but we need to make the case more prominently.

The relevance of the SDGs to the crisis

Sustainable development is just as relevant, if not more so than ever, in a crisis situation. Some of the key concepts that make it so relevant are:

- The importance of the aims of each of the goal areas for societal and planetary wellbeing: The crisis has had significant impacts (most negative, but some positive) on each one of the SDGs – including health, education, gender, poverty, inequality, nutrition, jobs, cities, etc. – and significant efforts are being made to address them in the response and recovery.
- Social sustainability and leaving no one behind: The crisis is showing that we are all in this together, and that if anyone is left out of the response and recovery, we are all likely to suffer the consequences. This includes concepts such as fairness and human rights.
- Integrative thinking: The crisis is showing how strongly society, economy and the environment are dependent on each other, and we can't try to address one without also looking at the others at the same time.
- Resilience: This has emerged as a key concept for this crisis, and although it is not strongly emphasised in the SDGs, resilience and sustainability are closely linked. In particular, we need to emphasise general resilience, rather than specific resilience to this particular crisis. This crisis is just part of a series of crises that humanity and the planet have been facing and that have common underlying causes, including climate change and structural social/economic/governance issues. We need to address these causes to make us more resilient to future crises.

Now is also an opportunity to change systems to pivot to sustainable development and fairness, including national, organisational, and societal systems. A huge shock can lead to get major change, as we are looking at issues differently, breaking habits, doing things that we never considered before, and responding very rapidly. However, the changes can also go the other way (e.g., towards greater unsustainability, or totalitarianism), and the opportunity can pass quickly, so we need to get out and promote the case for sustainable development and identify the actions that would support it.

Promoting the need for an SDG-led recovery

We need to do a much better job at promoting the case for an SDG-led or sustainable development-led recovery. Some considerations are:

- While we might all be seeing the world through a sustainable development/SDGs lens, this has not been part of the general narrative about the crisis and recovery. It would be good if we could create a consistent narrative that we can all then promote through our own networks.
- What we need is narrative that frames where we want to go in a way that resonates with what the public and policy makers want (in particular jobs and economic recovery), but injects the other dimensions of SD/SDGs, such as social and environmental sustainability. Depending on the audience, sustainable development could be framed as the goal of the recovery, as a way to enhance the overall benefits of economic recovery, or even as an accidental co-benefit of economic recovery. Particular areas of potential are to push for generating jobs through a “green” stimulus (e.g., expanding renewables and energy efficiency) and social stimulus (e.g., social housing).
- The terms “sustainable development” and “SDGs” are unfamiliar to many people, and for some can even be divisive (as a “UN agenda”). For these audiences, we should try to find ways to express the goals and principles of SD/SDGs in other terms, such as the aims of each of the goals, fairness, and leave no one behind. The SDGs are a tool/pathway to achieving a better world, but in the end what matters is the outcome, not so much how we get there.
- However, we should leverage the SDGs where we can, and not abandon them completely. While not widely known, they resonate with many people, including within our universities and among businesses, and we can use the SDGs to engage with these audiences.
- There may even be an opportunity to use communications around COVID-19 recovery as a way to raise public awareness and understanding of sustainable development and the SDGs.

The role of universities

Universities have a significant role in helping define and communicate the need for a sustainable development-led recovery. Things we can do to support this are:

- Translating/communicating the relevant research we already do quickly, so that it is timely for when governments and others are making their response/recovery-related decisions.
- Helping promote the narrative around the importance of the SDGs (or their principles/values), particularly through our leadership.
- Helping educate the public about the SDGs and the principles of sustainable development how they are relevant to the crisis and recovery.
- Helping facilitate a larger discussion on what a sustainable development-led recovery looks like and insights from what is already happening, and providing them into the public policy sphere.
- Helping develop and re-skill the workforce to support recovery from the crisis.
- Working collaboratively to support each other and strengthen the collective message.

2. Universities are being impacted severely by the crisis, but the SDGs still matter to them as we move forward.

Impacts on our sector

Although our region hasn’t experienced a COVID-19-related public health emergency like some other parts of the world (and hopefully never will), our universities – and our activities on promoting the SDGs – are experiencing significant short and longer terms impacts:

- Short-term impacts on universities include the loss of international students, moving all the teaching online, moving all the workforce to working from home, cancellation of many events, trips and projects, supporting students in financial hardship, and so on. Longer term, the crisis is likely to massively affect our budgets – both in 2020 and even more so in 2021 – and will likely to lead to significant financial reckoning.

- In terms of impacts on SDG-related activities, in the short-term, many engagement and strategy-related activities have been moved online, postponed, suspended or cancelled as people's attention has been focussed elsewhere. In the longer-term, there is concern that given budget shortfalls these activities will be seen as nice to have rather than essential, and will be cut.

Why the SDGs still matter to universities

However, there are many reasons why university engagement with the SDGs is still important despite of – or even more so because of – the crisis. Some examples are:

- The SDGs are a great way for universities to demonstrate their impact and build their public profile, and these will continue to be important (and potentially even more important) as we move into a difficult funding situation. Key audiences include governments, the public, and prospective students.
- With the success of our region in the THE Impact Rankings, the world is looking to our universities for leadership on the SDGs.
- The crisis has put a spotlight on the crucial role universities play (or could play) in evidence-based policy-making, and is helping re-build trust in science and expertise and universities. Providing policy-relevant advice on the SDGs is an opportunity for universities to continue showcasing this role.
- The SDGs could help guide universities' own thinking/planning about core principles to apply in their response to the crisis and the recovery from it – including the concept of “building back better”. These include principles such as leave no one behind, social justice, and sustainability.
- Initiatives universities have undertaken within the university to support SDG-related research and impact – such as interdisciplinary and multi-disciplinary engagement platforms and institutes, partnerships with governments and other sectors, and channels to bring research and evidence to policy making – are allowing universities to quickly mobilise new initiatives to support societal responses to COVID-19 and recovery.
- Other global challenges – including climate change – are not going away, and many are being made worse by the crisis (such as the huge setback predicted in eradicating global poverty). Research and action to address all the SDGs will be needed more than ever as we emerge (and to help us emerge) from the crisis.
- This crisis – where everyone from ordinary citizens to heads-of-state has been confronted with making difficult decisions in the face of complex trade-offs, uncertainty, and conflicting values – has shown how vital it is that all learners acquire the knowledge, skills and mindsets to solve complex societal problems. This is the essence of Education for the SDGs. Many universities undertake this in a niche way, but the crisis has shown how important it is to mainstream this type of learning across the university.
- The SDGs, as they are such a broad range of issues that resonate with most people in the university, are a good opportunity for community building across the whole university – something that is particularly important during this period of disruption and isolation.

Some responses to the crisis have demonstrated the feasibility for universities of addressing the SDGs through actions that were not previously considered possible, such as not flying as much; reducing impacts from commutes and office fit-outs by allowing more options for working from home; increasing collaboration with national/international colleagues through video-conferencing; and potential for reaching a much broader range of student audiences, who would not ordinarily have access to a high quality university education.

What we can do individually

There are some things we can do individually to support our SDG-related work in the immediate term, mindful of the stress our institutions are under. Examples include:

- Looking for ways to deliver our work in ways that are mindful of and resonate with how the context has changed, including creative ways to pivot our work to an online format, and taking care of colleagues.
- Finding opportunities to use the SDGs as a tool for internal engagement and to build internal capacity about their importance.
- Encouraging our leaders to highlight the importance of the SDGs to our universities and the crisis more generally. Some examples, although they are very few at present, are statements from [Prof Dawn Freshwater](#) – VC, University of Auckland; [Prof Duncan Ivison](#) – DVC Research, University of Sydney (restricted access); and [Prof Peter Salovey](#) – President, Yale University.

What we can do as networks

Our networks (both external – like ACTS, SDSN, PRME, FEA – and within our institutions) can have a significant role in supporting SDG-related work in universities in the short and longer terms. A key role for each of us is making our members feel more connected and supported, given people are feeling very isolated right now. However, we can achieve more through cross-network collaboration, for example:

- Sharing ideas, resources, tools, and knowledge to support our ongoing work.
- Helping our members expand their spheres of connection both within and outside their institutions through joint events and activities
- Working collectively to highlight the importance of the SDGs in the crisis, both generally and to universities.
- Helping facilitate collaborative initiatives to help with the response and recovery.

Contact

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