

The SDGs in the Asia-Pacific  
a shared agenda for action

# FORUM SUMMARY REPORT

## ABOUT THE FORUM

With a focus on opportunities and challenges for cross-sector collaboration, **The SDGs in the Asia-Pacific: a shared agenda for action** was a one-day interactive forum held on 2 June 2016 in Sydney.

The event was hosted as a collaborative effort between the University of Technology Sydney, University of New South Wales, University of Sydney, Research for Development Impact (RDI) Network and the Sustainable Development Solutions Network Australia/Pacific (SDSN Aus/Pac).

The forum was conceived and developed in response to a recognised need to build linkages and share information between Sydney-based international development practitioners and researchers seeking to influence the uptake of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in the Asia-Pacific region.

Highlights from the keynote presentations, discussions and calls to action presented on the day are outlined below.



## KEYNOTE SESSIONS



### **Patricia Sachs-Cornish, Pacific Community**

Given the unique challenges faced in the Pacific and recognising the urgency of the SDGs agenda in light of increasing impacts of climate change, meaningful collaboration will be absolutely essential for the SDGs to be achieved.

The Pacific Community is committed to assisting its member nations to prioritise the SDGs appropriately and integrate this international framework into national action plans. Using SDG 17 as the basis for means of implementation, we encourage stakeholders to re-think their siloed approaches and engage in multidisciplinary, cross-sector action.



### **Dr Yanuar Nugroho, Executive Office of the President of Indonesia**

The SDGs provide a universal development framework that has the potential to have real impact on people's lives at a community level. While the focus is now on the SDGs, the targets covered by the MDGs still require attention in many countries.

Significant barriers to uptake of the SDGs include short political terms and the complexity of the SDG framework itself. However, these can be overcome by aligning the SDGs with clearly articulated national development priorities: this helps build the buy-in of national leaders and can incorporate a longer term focus - as is being done in Indonesia. Progressing the SDGs agenda should draw in researchers, the private sector, civil society and other stakeholders to deliberately engage with government and each other in collaborative partnerships.

## GROUP DISCUSSIONS

### **Integration within the SDGs framework**

To integrate across social, economic and environmental dimensions, the SDGs call for close partnerships between development organisations, governments, private companies, civil society and academia. Individual sectors cannot address development challenges in isolation.

#### **Participants proposed that:**

- A framework is needed to manage synergies and trade-offs between the SDGs, acknowledging that actions addressing individual goals have both positive and negative impacts on other goals.
- An Australian Government-led and -funded coordinating body applying a comprehensive framework for the SDGs could enhance outcomes and facilitate collaboration across sectors and disciplines.
- Heightened interest has led to a range of events surrounding the SDGs. These should be consolidated to ensure that relevant organisations and actors are aware and engaged in opportunities for collaborative impact.

### **Monitoring and the SDGs**

A proposed list of 230 SDG indicators has been set out by the Inter-agency and Expert Group on Sustainable Development Goal Indicators (IAEG-SDGs), including four levels of monitoring: national, global, regional and thematic.

#### **Participants proposed that:**

- Voluntary reporting on progress towards the SDGs by governments would be enhanced by implementing national, comprehensive frameworks for data collection from diverse sources.
- In efforts to assess quality and validity of data, it is important to consider the balance between transparency and privacy. Actors collecting and storing data should account for the protection of sensitive data and ensure there is opportunity for independent verification.
- The question of who is involved in deciding which indicators of the SDGs are given priority within a given national context is important and potentially sensitive. The need for research and evidence to inform this process is crucial.

### **Pathways and prioritisation for development**

Some countries, institutions and businesses have already started to address which SDGs to prioritise, how to identify the targets and indicators that are most appropriate to country needs, with whom to work and how. However, since all of the SDGs are important and require attention, choosing goals on the basis of likelihood to achieve them or how high their profile is, should be avoided.

#### **Participants proposed that:**

- The SDGs are too complex for governments alone to address and prioritise. There is a need to identify which stakeholders will add value in the process of setting priorities, and what roles they should have in that process.
- Data can support an evidence-informed approach for identifying which SDG targets might be prioritised to yield the most benefit.
- The SDGs are not yet integrated into most national plans. If they are to be considered an important part of national agendas, this integration will be essential.

## GROUP DISCUSSIONS

### Addressing global inequality

Extreme inequalities are a defining issue of our time, with wealth and opportunities increasingly concentrated in the hands of the few. Disparities are estimated to grow wider unless addressed and therefore critical importance is placed on SDG 10 on reducing inequalities as well as having inequality recognised as a cross-cutting dimension. There is need for a multi-pronged approach that combines research, awareness-raising, advocacy and targeted action.

#### Participants proposed that:

- Inequality within countries, including developed countries, is often the main concern. However inequality between countries is also of enormous importance, as recognised by SDG 10.
- Demand for equality is often left in the hands of the poor and oppressed while it is the wealthy that have the power to progress action towards greater equality. Partnerships for the goals (SDG 17) should aim to address this imbalance.
- Research and the generation of evidence can contribute to not only understanding the lived experience of inequality at a local, granular level, but can also give voice and visibility to these experiences, and lead to them being addressed.

### Aid in a globalised world

The SDGs present an extensive agenda and are ambitious in scope in terms of the challenges posed not only to low and middle income countries, but to all nations. Despite rising global funding for international development, the Australian Government has made substantial cuts to the budget for development assistance. This undermines the role that Australia and Australian agencies and institutions can play within the region and at the global level. Furthermore, development finance is shifting away from a donor-recipient relationship to one of universality, shared challenges and multi-directional exchange.

#### Participants proposed that:

- More conventional relationships and forms of engagement with development (e.g. donor-recipient, project-based, exclusion of private sector) should be critiqued, with more innovative approaches encouraged.
- The considerable skills, experiences and contextual insights of in-country national personnel and institutions should be recognised and maximised.
- The Australian Government, academic institutions and civil society structures can all play an important role in strengthening capacities both in Australia and overseas to generate data and evidence to inform policy and practice.



## CALL TO ACTION

### Working together

**Approach the SDGs in an integrated, collaborative and coordinated manner.** Researchers, policy makers, practitioners and local communities need to work together, utilising quality evidence and research to unite behind shared objectives. Making use of existing networks such as SDSN, RDI Network and ACFID will assist in building a collaborative structure, and with effective leadership, will drive and coordinate efforts towards the SDGs.

### Partnering effectively

**Draw on and build local expertise through partnership:** Local expertise should be utilised and communities given opportunities to lead efforts toward priorities which are locally defined. This approach has the benefits of empowering local stakeholders and increasing the relevance of the SDGs in policies and

programmes. To strengthen partner country capacity, it is important to invest in developing key organisations such as national statistics offices and research institutions.

### Raising the profile of the SDGs

**Place the SDGs at the front and centre of development work:** For national governments, this means aligning the SDGs with national priorities and integrating them into national development plans. Raising the profile of the SDGs demands investment in awareness-raising campaigns and advocacy. Development work and research conducted by NGOs, research institutions and other organisations can be brought into alignment with national SDG priorities so that “business-as-usual” reflects and directly contributes to transformative, equity-oriented SDG targets.

### Monitoring and using data

**Contribute actively to robust data monitoring and its use in decision-making:** Each of our organisations make key contributions in monitoring progress towards the SDGs. There needs to be a careful balance between standardisation and contextualisation of methods and indicators of reporting. Strategies are also needed to ensure monitoring results inform priorities and decision-making. A wider range of actors will be in a position to contribute to robust monitoring, evaluation and critique if countries are able to establish and articulate their needs, priorities and constraints in relation to data generation and analysis.

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- Globalisation and Governance Research Network @ UNSW
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#### Organising committee:

- A/Prof Juliet Willetts (Academic Co-Chair RDI), Dr Keren Winterford, Caitlin Leahy, ISF-UTS
- Prof Anthony Zwi, Dr Susanne Schmeidl, UNSW
- A/Prof Joel Negin (RDI Committee member), Thomas Soem, University of Sydney
- Michele Rumsey, Jodi Thiessen, WHO Collaborating Centre, UTS
- Dr Tahl Kestin, representing Sustainable Development Solutions Network Australia-Pacific – SDSN
- Jenny Vaccari (RDI Secretariat)

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