



The UN Sustainable Development Goals should not be *Terra incognita* to Westminster and Whitehall alike

In February, spurred by kids at Sunnyside Primary School in his constituency, SNP member David Linden, revealed the doubling of Parliament's use of plastic straws in the last three years. At the same time, the environmental charity Surfers Against Sewage showed that, despite the Government's launch of a 25-year environmental plan with a focus on tackling plastic waste, Parliament purchased an extraordinary amount of single-use plastic items. The Environmental Audit Committee has now called for the Government to introduce a levy on disposable coffee cups. Is that it?

Meanwhile, in November 2017, the Fijian Parliament became the first legislature to carry out a self-assessment exercise on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Praising the support of the Inter Parliamentary Union (IPU), Inia Seruiratu, Minister for Agriculture, Rural & Maritime Development stated "This exercise shows strong commitment and domestic ownership of the SDGs and sets a good example for other parliaments to follow suit." Note, he said parliaments, not governments. What a contrast.

In the UK, many have lost faith in government's capacity to implement the post-2015 Development Agenda that David Cameron, as a co-chair of the UN's High-Level Panel, had energetically and successfully persuaded the world community to adopt. Two and a half years later, few are convinced that the UK government has either the vision or grasp to develop a coherent policy to deliver the SDGs. Critical reports published by two parliamentary committees followed ill-briefed oral evidence by Cabinet Office ministers who claimed that DFID would somehow handle it, even when reminded that the SDGs have important domestic relevance. This is worrying as London will shortly host the Commonwealth Summit welcoming member states confident in their own progress on the SDGs. The [UN website](#) which monitors progress worldwide shows the UK definitely lagging behind its guests.

With such government disinterest, civil society has now taken leadership. The UK Stakeholders for Sustainable Development (UKSSD), a consortium of concerned NGOs, has set about framing a National Strategy. The degree of their challenge to promote the SDGs nationwide is shown by a *Euromonitor* survey which records public awareness on the SDGs as lowest in the UK of all European countries, an indictment of failure in government leadership. So, good for the Sunnyside schoolkids and the surfers!

As evidence of this failure in leadership, the government has doled out the seventeen SDGs to Whitehall departments, leaving them to decide how they should tackle them and how they monitor their own performance! It is more likely they will stick within their comfort zones, concentrating on their own Single Department Plans (SDP), ignoring the principle of

interconnectness which underpins the SDGs. A [report](#) published by BOND (28 March) brings bad news, showing that only DFID and HMRC's SDPs even refer to the SDGs. "So if you are looking across the plans for references to the Goals, they are largely absent. This raises questions about whether departments understand the SDGs and their commitments to deliver them, and whether they have a sense of ownership towards the SDGs" observed its author, Ruth Fuller, international development policy adviser at WWF-UK.

With an inattentive Cabinet Office, a disinterested Whitehall and an under-funded Office of National Statistics charged to assemble data, not advise on policy, what hope is there for the UK beyond the noble efforts of the UKSSD? Who might spare us embarrassment when fifty-two Commonwealth states come to town, many having completed their Voluntary National Reviews, a stage the UK will only reach in 2019.

It is here that the initiative of the Fijian parliament can be instructive. The British parliament is proud of its statutory independence. Its Annual Report (2016–17) details its many activities and challenges including efforts to reduce carbon dioxide emissions, waste and water usage. But nowhere in its 108 pages is there reference to the SDGs. And yet, in this respect, Parliament differs little from those UK companies and institutions which are members of the UK Network of the UN Global Compact. All these [take the SDGs seriously](#) in managing their Corporate Social Responsibility programmes (CSR). So why not the UK parliament? The Sunnyside kids would surely suggest it starts on this road to redemption with SDG Goal 12 which sets out to ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns, monitored by targets and indicators, regular features in the CSR reports of members of the UK Network.

By this initiative, MPs can show that all six hundred and fifty of them take the SDGs seriously, not just those on the two House committees who so forensically exposed Cabinet Office ministers as disgracefully ill-briefed. If the Fiji Islands parliament can see the light, so can Westminster! Unlike Whitehall, local authorities in the UK have already taken up the SDG challenge. Among them, London and Edinburgh, Canterbury and Lewes are working with civil society, academia and the private sector, effectively 'localising' the SDGs. (Across the Channel, the Association of Flemish Cities and Municipalities is working on 20 local pilot programmes).

Should members feel this exercise to be beneath them, they should study *Parliament's Role in Implementing the Sustainable Development Goals: A Parliamentary Handbook* published jointly by the Global Organization of Parliamentarians Against Corruption, the United Nations Development Programme and the Islamic Development Bank. Designed to be an easy-to-use resource to help parliamentarians and their staff, it shows how they too can play an effective role in implementing the SDGs.

Whether it is peer pressure from fellow parliamentarians in Fiji and the IPU, guidance from the *SDG Parliamentary Handbook*, 'localising' civic initiatives or the kids from Sunnyside Primary, our parliamentarians should now join the SDG community. They should ensure that their next Annual Report will set out how the SDGs influence policy, and where progress has been made toward agreed targets. Meanwhile, at next week's Summit, government ministers must also 'join the SDG community', learning from the achievements of their Commonwealth partners and setting out to honour the commitments they made in 2015.