

UNA Westminster presses UK government to announce its SDG National Strategy

In September 2014, David Cameron, standing at the podium in the UN General Assembly, called on the leaders of developed countries to deliver on their promises of aid and work together to eradicate extreme poverty. Speaking also in his capacity as one of the three co-chairs of the UN Secretary-General's High-Level Panel of eminent persons on the Post-2015 Development Agenda, he invited his audience to “celebrate the huge progress that the world has made towards the Millennium Development Goals and commit to go even further through the new Sustainable Development Goals.”

Proud that the UK had not “just achieved the UN’s 0.7% target but enshrined it in law”, he urged others to follow Britain’s lead. “We’ve been making these aid promises for years. Now, let us all deliver on them.

The world has much for which to thank David Cameron. He played an important role in pressing for the adoption of the [Sustainable Development Goals](#) (SDG), arguing in many international fora for more focus, preferring 10, not 17 goals, fearing that “they will end up sitting on a bookshelf, gathering dust.” With his co-chairs, President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono of Indonesia and President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf of Liberia, he attended meetings worldwide, cajoling support from major aid givers. And Cameron’s message was not only to address the rich. “I’m delighted that we’ve recognised that to end extreme poverty, we need to put the poorest, weakest and most marginalised first – to ‘Leave No-One Behind’. But today, together, we commit to go even further. There can be no attack on poverty without an assault on climate change.” And so it was agreed that ‘Leave No-One Behind’ became the leitmotif of the SDGs and its important Five ‘P’s were People, Prosperity, Peace, Partnership and the Planet. At last the environment could be directly linked to human development.

Mr Cameron concluded his address stating “The UK will lead the way on this internationally, just as we did in leading this agenda with our G8 Presidency in 2013. So I say to leaders in government, business and communities around the world: If you’re committed to making progress towards these goals, the UK is on your side and we will work with you on our shared quest.”

The SDGs do not only target developing nations. Paragraph 78 states:

“We encourage all member states to develop as soon as practicable ambitious national responses to the overall implementation of this Agenda. These can support the transition to the SDGs and build on existing planning instruments, such as national development and sustainable development strategies, as appropriate.”

Paragraph 79 carries forward this process:

“We also encourage member states to conduct regular and inclusive reviews of progress at the national and sub-national levels which are country-led and country-driven. Such reviews should draw on contributions from indigenous peoples, civil society, the private sector and other stakeholders, in line with national circumstances, policies and priorities. National parliaments as well as other institutions can also support these processes.”

In 2016, the House of Commons International Development Committee set out to examine the UK’s progress in implementing the SDGs. Its [Report](#) (May 2016) includes numerous

recommendations and verbatim reports of its meetings with expert witnesses, including [Oliver Letwin MP](#), Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Cabinet Office minister responsible for 'joined up' government. Reading the record of this session, one clearly gains the impression that the British government had yet to implement the principles set out by Mr Cameron and his colleagues together with Amina Mohammed, then the UN Secretary General's special adviser on post-2015 development planning and now Deputy Secretary-General. Throughout the meeting, committee members continually sought assurances from Oliver Letwin that government at least had a strategy, as demanded by paragraphs 78 and 79 of the SDG Declaration. It was clear that government did not then have a strategy. In April 2017, the Environment Audit Committee addressed the issue, taking evidence from central government and other statutory authorities but also from devolved governments and foreign governments. [Its report can be read here](#) and its assessment of government's failure to capture the importance of promoting the SDGs in the UK are set out fully in these two paragraphs:

25. Raising awareness and encouraging engagement with the Global Goals will increase the number of people and organisations able to contribute towards meeting them. However, few people in the UK know about the Goals. Other countries and organisations have shown there are plenty of opportunities to make the Goals more widely known and understood. By contrast, the UK Government seems uninterested in raising the profile of the Goals, having undertaken no substantive work to promote them domestically. A focus on action abroad has left a doughnut shaped hole in the UK. This has to change. The Government should work with the BBC and other national media to launch a national campaign to raise public awareness of the Goals, and provide the public with ways to get involved and make a contribution. This could take place as part of Red Nose Day and Comic Relief, and link with charities working in the UK and overseas. The Government should look at possible changes to the national curriculum to provide ways for young people to become agents of change and engage with the Goals. This would form part of a national conversation about the Goals with a view to enshrining them in law, so that future Governments put sustainable development at the heart of every new legislative proposal.

26. Several businesses are already engaging with the Goals and looking at how the private sector can contribute to this ambitious agenda. The Government has said that it sees value in international business benchmarks that promote responsible business behaviour and may support them, if there is sufficient evidence that they work. We recommend that the Government commissions research on the costs and benefits of utilising business league tables and report back to this Committee on its findings when it has them. The Government should also support other initiatives designed to raise awareness of the Goals among the business community. Voluntary action by businesses and raising awareness within the business community will not of itself ensure meaningful progress on the Goals. The Government needs to look at what measures are needed to support those companies who are already engaged, and incentivise or require others to do likewise. Action on the EU circular economy package, or waste policy, linked to SDG 12 on responsible consumption and production is a good example of this.

So how does civil society push government to properly engage with the SDGs within the UK? At a meeting held at Chatham House titled "Are the Sustainable Development Goals

more than Aspirations?” a panel reviewed Britain’s progress. Lord McConnell, co-chair of the All Party Parliamentary group on the UN Global Goals for Sustainable Development (2015-17) stated that a new national strategy is sorely needed, citing the promises made by Oliver Letwin to the Overseas Development Committee. This should apply to other States through UK Aid but also to the UK. If the government fails to produce this, he stated, then ‘we’, the NGO community should mark out such a strategy (SGD para 78) and ensure adequate resources for data collection (SDG para 79).

Jessica Toale, Executive Director, Centre for Development Results, stated that she noted the general air of pessimism on the matter so there’s a need to counter this. President Santos (Colombia), Germany, Sweden, USA have started to set up their strategies but not the UK. It is after all a requirement to have an action plan. Maybe this needs a cross departmental group but the UK is still lagging. Unlike the MDGs, the SDGs are in the era of the social media age. We need new networks to include business, NGOs, local government and all.

Dr Jason Hickel, Anthropology and Development department, LSE, struck a different, rather sceptical tone, noting the ecological approach in the preamble to SDG Goal 7, the central one, which works towards 7% growth and betraying outdated concepts, not consistent with the outline of the outline of the programme. The poor won’t benefit, especially with the theme ‘*none left behind*’. He claimed that the quality of life is now placed lower in the order of priorities, subservient to growth. In summary, powerful states will be obstructions but nevertheless, he does feel the SDGs can be achieved.

In the following Q & A session, AVIVA was cited as a good example of recognition in the capital markets, noting how it is bench-marking. Again, in capital markets, large Japanese companies are moving their pension funds to reflect this. And yet there are no examples in the manufacturing field where, for instance, DIAGEO might offer a suitable example; also we should seek a role model in the extractive industries. In LDCs, there’s a need for local groups, stressing the application of the Rule of Law.

In summary, the speakers felt that the government’s implementation strategy was non-existent and in no way reflected the effort that David Cameron and Justine Greening had put into it all initially and also working towards the Addis Ababa financing meeting.

So why has the government not yet mainstreamed this initiative and why have its department not yet sorted out their ‘opening paragraphs’? After all, the UK is a P5 country and a major aid donor; similar states have done so.

These arguments convince UNA Westminster that it should voice its disappointment that the UK government continues to delay in setting out its national strategy to promote and implement the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) promised in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.