



## Evidence to the International Development Select Committee on UK progress on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

January 2019

### About Scotland's International Development Alliance

1. Scotland's International Development Alliance (The Alliance) is the membership body in Scotland for over 150 organisations committed to creating a fairer world, free from poverty, injustice and environmental threats. The Alliance works in collaboration with Bond and Scotland's SDG Network on matters relating to the 2030 Agenda.

### Summary of key recommendations

2. To ensure that the UK meets the universality expectations of the 2030 Agenda, an effective whole of government approach to the SDGs should be lead at Prime Minister level with coordination through the Cabinet Office. All UK Government departments need to uphold their responsibility to implement the SDGs.
3. Single Departmental Plans (SDPs) from all Government Departments should detail progress and plans relating to relevant SDG targets.
4. Increasing commitment to implement the SDGs from other government departments remains a significant challenge, and must be made a priority by the UK Government
5. The Leave No One Behind principle must be articulated and enshrined across all government departments
6. Developing a VNR should be an open, inclusive and participatory process. As such, there must be a clearly communicated plan by all relevant UK government departments to consult and engage with appropriate civil society groups and networks across the country.
7. The UK Government should develop a more systematic information exchange mechanism that improves both vertical and horizontal coordination across and within different levels of government, including the countries with devolved government. By doing so, it would be easier to communicate and coordinate a transparent road-map for VNR development.
8. DFID would be strengthened by greater alignment with the SDGs through an implementation plan that drills down to target level, and explores gaps and interlinkages between them.
9. DFID should be a leader in the continued development of reporting systems to track ODA against SDG targets.

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## DFID's role in leading UK implementation of the SDGs

10. The SDGs are universal and by definition encompass both domestic and international sustainable development (economic, social and environmental) aspirations. Therefore, implementation of the goals and the wider 2030 Agenda must include the domestic delivery of the SDGs. Moreover, international implementation, through ODA and in partnership with other international financial institutions, must be supported by better policy coherence (SDG Target 17.14) across Government to help minimise negative impacts of different policy areas on sustainable development outcomes.
11. DFID plays an essential role in the delivery and achievement of the SDGs internationally, but it is not the right department to coordinate the domestic implementation of the SDGs; neither in terms of ensuring that any of the 169 targets that are applicable domestically are achieved, nor in ensuring that different government departments work towards better policy coherence for sustainable development.
12. DFID is focused on its overarching objective to help reduce poverty overseas, as outlined by International Development Act 2002. In line with the Act, DFID prioritises 'furthering sustainable development in one or more countries outside the United Kingdom', rather than coordinating UK domestic SDG implementation.<sup>1</sup>
13. Given the holistic nature of the 2030 Agenda, and the interconnected nature of all 17 SDGs, their implementation must be approached as a whole-government priority. This means leadership at Prime Minister level and coordination through the Cabinet Office is fundamental in order to make sure all UK Government departments uphold their responsibility to implement the SDGs. As domestic leadership on SDGs has not been formalised, many government departments have been slow to integrate the SDGs into their Single Departmental Plans (SDPs).
14. By December 2017 only two UK departments referred to the SDGs – DFID and HMRC. The Environmental Audit Committee, along with civil society, were extremely critical of this, and whilst the SDPs were improved in May 2018, with all departments at least mentioning them in their plans, these plans do not yet constitute a clear tool for achieving the SDGs. In many cases, there continues to be no reference to the different targets that sit beneath the SDGs.
15. As noted by the Environmental Audit Committee in their recent report, 'in their present format, Single Departmental Plans (SDPs) are insufficient to deliver the SDGs in the UK'<sup>2</sup>. It is essential that all departments detail progress and plans relating to relevant SDG targets in their SDPs, and that an oversight body for SDG implementation ensures no target is missed, and that SDPs are therefore used effectively as tools for SDG implementation.
16. It should be noted that DFID's role in the development of the 2030 Agenda was significant, and it therefore remains well placed to support the Cabinet Office in SDG implementation, particularly in terms of knowledge-sharing and linking the implications of domestically motivated policy decisions to development outcomes overseas.
17. Furthermore, DFID's efforts to foster Cross-Whitehall implementation have been welcomed, but cannot be seen as a sustainable solution to increase wider government commitment to the implementation of the 2030

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<sup>1</sup> UK International Development Act, 2002

<sup>2</sup> [2] House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee, Sustainable Development Goals in the UK follow up: Hunger, malnutrition and food insecurity in the UK, 2019:

<https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmenvaud/1491/1491.pdf>

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Agenda. Increasing commitment from other government departments remains a significant challenge, and must be led by the Prime Minister and the Cabinet Office.

18. It should be noted that the devolved governments in both Scotland and Wales have aligned domestic policy frameworks to the SDGs through the National Performance Framework and the Future Generations Act respectively. In both cases, although neither policy framework is fully developed, the foundation for cross-governmental SDG implementation is much stronger than at UK Government level. In Scotland, this process has been led not by their international development team, but by the Performance Team that sits under the Minister for Finance. The budgetary significance of SDG implementation may not be fully understood, but the link made by where ownership sits is more than implicit.
19. DFID has worked effectively to raise awareness of the 2030 Agenda in its public communications in terms of highlighting its importance to international development outcomes. However, public communication focussing on the links between the SDGs and other government departments has been lacking. If this does not change, the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda will continue to be seen, incorrectly, as relating primarily to the UK's international development work.
20. The fact that the UK government championed the inclusion of the 'Leave No One Behind' principle in the 2030 Agenda should be highlighted. This principle outlines the need for development to reach everyone, and for those who are currently left furthest behind to be reached first. It recognises that inequality, marginalisation and discrimination are key challenges to the implementation of sustainable development.
21. Although DFID continues to champion this principle in its work overseas, the same emphasis is not clearly articulated by other UK Government departments. This must be made clearer and, although DFID can support other departments with its knowledge and expertise, there needs to be leadership from the Prime Minister and the Cabinet Office to ensure the Leave No One Behind principle is enshrined across Government.

### The UK's Voluntary National Review (VNR)

22. Developing a VNR should be an open, inclusive and participatory process that involves all major groups and stakeholders across all levels and sectors of government<sup>3</sup>, business and civil society, according to UN guidelines<sup>3</sup>.
23. DFID has made efforts to gather case studies through an online portal and a social media campaign on SDG-related New Year's resolutions. We see these actions as a useful starting point, but they do not ensure the VNR process is inclusive and consultative on their own. Furthermore, a lack of communication with key networks and civil society groups across the UK, particularly in its areas with devolved government, meant neither action was as rewarding as it could have been in fostering an open dialogue between different stakeholders on SDG implementation.
24. The VNR process was also not clearly outlined nor communicated to key stakeholders at the outset in terms of how the Government planned to go about meaningful consultation. This has been particularly true for involving the countries with devolved government and civil society residing within them. It is our belief that a clearly communicated plan to consult and engage with appropriate civil society groups and networks in the three countries with devolved government, such as ourselves, at the very beginning, was a missed opportunity to help build momentum for wider engagement.

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<sup>3</sup> [https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/20872VNR\\_hanbook\\_2019\\_Edition\\_v2.pdf](https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/20872VNR_hanbook_2019_Edition_v2.pdf)

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25. DFID held engagement events in both Scotland and Wales, but these came at the request of civil society networks based in those countries, not the other way round, and no follow-up engagement plan was announced. Consultation and engagement of stakeholders by other UK government departments has also been slow and this has limited wider active participation in the VNR process.
26. There is little evidence of effective commitment from other government departments in the VNR process. The team in DFID has shown significant commitment, and although slow to begin with, they have made a real effort to engage with stakeholders, particularly through Bond. Other government departments have not shown this level of initiative.
27. Once the VNR process got underway, communication between DFID and devolved nations has been sufficient, but there remain barriers to making sure cooperation between national, devolved and local government is consistent, effective and systematic. We encourage the development of a more systematic information exchange mechanism that improves both vertical and horizontal policy coordination across and within different levels of government, including the countries with devolved government.
28. Overall, the VNR process has been too slow and unclear for active participation of wider stakeholders; as a result, it has not been consultative or inclusive enough up to this point. However, it should be noted that we are still in the middle of the VNR process and it has been made clear that DFID still plans a range of stakeholder consultations in February 2019. Nevertheless, for the UK's own achievement of the SDGs, this is clearly insufficient.
29. For future VNRs, there needs to be a much more transparent road-map for its development, including clear and meaningful opportunities for consultation – either online or through consultation meetings – well signposted from the outset. To date, there have been too few workshops with stakeholders on specific goals, and on the important themes, such as the LNOB agenda.
30. Furthermore, other government departments should be transparent about the process for reviewing the goals for which they are responsible, and all departments should be obligated to invite stakeholders to participate. VNR process oversight by the Cabinet Office would go some way in helping to ensure more transparency and that the VNR is more of a priority for government departments.
31. The VNR should not only present details of how the 2030 Agenda is being implemented across different sectors, but should also allow for the sharing of experiences, including successes, challenges, gaps and lessons learned. DFID has been clear that it is committed to delivering an honest VNR that outlines challenges and gaps, as well as successes. If the VNR is truly self-reflective, it will need to acknowledge significant gaps and the fact that the UK lags behind many other countries in measuring delivery of the SDGs.
32. It is vital that the VNR process is refined. In future it should aim to:
  - Review progress against all 169 targets and consider interlinkages between the goals, identify accelerators and develop plans to take them forward;
  - Look at lessons from other countries, including the countries and regions within the UK with devolved government; Scotland and Wales both have different and progressive approaches to delivering and tracking the SDGs and their experiences should be incorporated throughout the report;
  - Review existing international comparisons in some sectors, which do measure all countries of the world using the same methodology, and treating all equally – one such example is the Global Atlas of Palliative Care at the End of Life;
  - Focus on both domestic delivery and the UK's global impact on SDGs through ODA and its footprint e.g. trade, consumption and environmental footprints;

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- Engage stakeholders systematically and inclusively; to do this properly requires a clear methodology, budget and time.
33. The VNR also presents an opportunity for long-term engagement with stakeholders on the implementation of the SDGs. Therefore, the UK Government should develop an inclusive and far-reaching SDG delivery plan.
34. This plan should:
- Cover all 169 targets
  - Provide a clear framework and system for policy coherence for the delivery of the agenda domestically and in the UK's international engagement
  - Identify clear responsibilities for government departments in delivering the SDGs
  - Include an analysis of resourcing for the delivery of the SDGs and outline how resource gaps will be filled
  - Include a clear communications strategy
  - Have a monitoring and review mechanism

### Supporting the achievement of the SDGs overseas

35. DFID does not have a clear implementation plan for the SDGs and instead, approaches them as a checklist to demonstrate alignment to goals, rather than as a framework to guide decision-making. The SDGs provide a framework for sustainable development policy dialogue, and DFID would be strengthened by greater alignment with the SDGs through an implementation plan that drills down to target level, and explores gaps and interlinkages between them.
36. The UK Government's commitment to spending 0.7% of GNI on ODA should be celebrated, with ODA continuing to play an important role in supporting other countries to achieve the SDGs. However, it is critical that DFID and the UK Government address legitimate concerns about the trends suggesting that the overall use of ODA has moved away from poverty reduction and is not fully transparent or accountable when spent by other departments.
37. DFID needs to give greater priority to promoting policy coherence across Government to increase the impact of its work reducing poverty overseas. This should be central to its SDG delivery plan. SDG target 17.14, to 'enhance policy coherence for sustainable development', is recognised as essential to the delivery of the whole framework. Prioritising or implementing the SDGs in isolation from one another can undermine progress in other areas of the framework. For example, it is important not to decouple economic growth from environmental sustainability, and it will not be possible to improve access to jobs and livelihoods without more inclusive and quality education.
38. DFID's strategic vision for gender equality<sup>4</sup> that helpfully emphasises the need to identify and challenge gender inequalities that hinder development provides a framework for addressing SDG5 across DFID's portfolio. Properly implemented such a vision can precipitate a step change in wider SDG achievement where SDG5 is such a lynchpin.
39. DFID's support for SDG delivery is often perceived as being quite piecemeal and informal by civil society partners. For example, for UK Aid Direct & UK Aid Match, applicants are asked to choose only which SDG is their 'primary focus' and which their 'secondary focus'. Beyond this, they are asked for no further detail, and

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/dfid-strategic-vision-for-gender-equality-her-potential-our-future>

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are not required to align proposed indicators with SDG indicators and no further SDG reporting is required during delivery thereafter.

40. Scotland's International Development Alliance has been working with the Bond SDG Group on the Bond submission to the UK Government on the UK's progress on implementing the SDGs internationally. Please see the Bond submission to this inquiry for details on each of the focus goals at this year's High-level Political Forum (HLPF).
41. The DFID Annual Report and Accounts 2017-2018 notes the important role of multilateral organisations in the delivery of the SDGs, but does not go further and say that DFID will be encouraging them to ensure all of their investments are targeted at delivering the goals. It is unclear how DFID's work holds multilateral organisations to account with regard to the SDGs.
42. DFID conducted a major supplier review in 2017-18, which led to the publication of a Code of Conduct for DFID-contracted suppliers. This responded to a number of sector concerns, but it was disappointing that there was no reflection on supplier alignment to the implementation of the SDGs, nor is this reflected in the new Code of Conduct.
43. There is a range of mechanisms that DFID should be using to better align its work, and that of partners and suppliers, to the SDGs. These include the Smart Rules - a system for screening and assessing the environmental impacts of programmes and projects – as well as engaging with the work of the OECD DAC to create a SDG field in the Creditor Reporting System (CRS) to track ODA against SDG targets. This is a voluntary field with the OECD's ODA tracking system, and as one of the world's biggest donor governments, the UK should be a leader in its continued development.
44. The UK Government should also develop a suite of screening tools based on the OECD framework<sup>5</sup>, to be used in its SDG implementation plan and by all Government departments to consider trade-offs and synergies between their policies and other sustainable development outcomes, particularly transboundary effects in other countries.

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<sup>5</sup> [https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/development/better-policies-for-sustainable-development-2016/a-new-framework-for-policy-coherence-for-sustainable-development\\_9789264256996-6-en#page4](https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/development/better-policies-for-sustainable-development-2016/a-new-framework-for-policy-coherence-for-sustainable-development_9789264256996-6-en#page4)

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