



Finding our voice: engaging with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

Last September, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) – 17 goals, with ambitious targets, to drive a new global sustainable development agenda for the next 15 years. Research into the shortcomings of the predecessor Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) recommends that coordinated, formal civil society engagement in policy and implementation will be critical to the achievement of any new development targets. How is South African Civil Society engaging with the SDGs?

As a member of the General Assembly, South Africa is a signatory to the SDGs and will have to implement the sustainable development agenda and report on progress towards the targets. But despite the acknowledged importance of the role of civil society in the process, South African organisations appear to be largely unaware of the SDG process. Is this an opportunity missed or can we still come together in a coordinated way to influence the sustainable development agenda?

KNOWLEDGE GAPS

In a snapshot survey of Cape-based organisations for the NPO Collaboration Dialogue event in April, 32% of respondent said they knew “a little but there are big gaps in our knowledge” when asked about the SDGs and 22% said “I know they exist but not much more than that”. Of a representative sample of 251, only 16% said “A lot, we are integrating them into our work and proposals”.

During the subsequent discussion at the Dialogue, it became clear that few organisations had engaged

in depth with the targets or thought about how they could leverage the goals and targets for programming, fundraising and advocacy.

UNFINISHED BUSINESS

The SDGs are meant, in some ways, to tackle the ‘unfinished business’ of the MDGs – the overarching development framework for the past 15 years. The **Millennium Development Goals Report 2015** reports some key successes:

- Globally, the number of people living in extreme poverty has declined by more than half.
- The global under-five mortality rate has declined by more than a half.
- Since 1990, the maternal mortality ratio has declined by 45% worldwide, and most of the reduction has occurred since 2000.
- New HIV infections fell by approximately 40% between 2000 and 2013.

The report also acknowledges that significant development challenges remain, including gender

inequality; large and increasing gaps between the poorest and richest, rural and urban; conflict; and persistent wide scale poverty and hunger. In addition, the development of MDGs was not perceived to be particularly inclusive, especially of civil society.

Stats SA's [Millennium Development Goals Country Report 2015](#) reports that while South Africa made good progress on the expansion of health infrastructure and improved access to health services, the country failed to meet critical targets in relation to poverty and inequality, employment, hunger, education and literacy and, most critically for those of us working the health sector, child and maternal mortality and HIV/AIDS and TB.

LACK OF CIVIL SOCIETY ENGAGEMENT

Research by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) in 2014 on [Civil Society Organisations and Participation in The Millenium Development Goal Processes in South Africa](#) argues that:

“CSOs can play a critical role in enabling the achievement of MDG targets... particularly in relation to articulating the needs and aspirations of the poor; in filling crucial service delivery gaps and in modelling and innovating good practices.”

The qualitative study and comprehensive literature review found that:

- CSOs' engagement with MDGs processes in South Africa was poorly coordinated with the expectation that government would have led such a process. Where CSOs did engage, it was driven largely by civil society themselves.
- The process unfolded in a top-down way, mainly aimed at ensuring that CSOs were notified of the process but not encouraged or enabled to directly participate.

Recommendations based on these findings include:

- Given the diversity and scale of CSOs participation, it would be essential for civil society to be **organised under an umbrella**

body which must be representative of all civil society voices and must ensure accountability.

- It is important to establish **common national goals** that could be localised to deal with area-specific developmental problems.
- CSOs are engaged mainly in service provision interventions so the need to facilitate **active involvement in policy advocacy** and monitoring activities remains.

NO ONE LEFT BEHIND

The SDGs clearly acknowledge the need for meaningful civil society engagement; a target of Goal 17: Partnerships for the Goals is, *“Encourage and promote effective public, public-private and civil society partnerships, building on the experience and resourcing strategies of partnerships.”* In fact, the General Assembly SDG resolution explicitly pledges that “no one will be left behind”.



The SDGs are a set of goals with specific targets to be achieved by 2030. “For the goals to be reached,” says the United Nations, “everyone needs to do their part: governments, the private sector, civil society and people like you.” This more people-focused approach underpins the key differences between the MDGs and SDGs:

- The process of developing the SDGs is thought to have been more consultative, open and transparent, especially in engaging civil society.
- The SDG framework has brought all three aspects of sustainable development together – economic, social and environmental – in a much more integrated way.
- The SDGs apply to all countries, not just developing ones, moving away from the North-South paradigm.

WHAT DO THE GOALS MEAN FOR US?

The goal that most applies to those of us working in the health sector is **Goal 3: Good Health and Wellbeing**, although there are others that overlap and will be just as important such as **Goal 1: Zero Poverty**, **Goal 5: Gender Equality** and **Goal 17: Partnerships for the Goals**.

The preamble to Goal 3 acknowledges that, despite progress, “many more efforts are needed to fully eradicate a wide range of diseases and address many different persistent and emerging health issues.” What is interesting about this goal is the targeting of wellbeing and the explicit focus on sexual and reproductive health and health financing.



The key target that most of us will be working towards is “**By 2030, end the epidemics of AIDS and tuberculosis**” which we are already seeing filter in to funding and government planning with [UNAIDS’ 90 90 90 strategy](#) to achieve this target. It is likely that the 90 90 90 strategy will play a significant role in the development of the next National Strategic Plan (NSP).

Other targets in Goal 3 that are notable include:

- Reduce by 1/3 premature mortality from non-communicable diseases and promote **mental health and well-being**
- By 2030, reduce the **global maternal mortality** ratio to less than 70 per 100,000 live births
- By 2030, end preventable deaths of newborns and children under 5 years of age, with all countries aiming to **reduce neonatal mortality** to at least as low as 12 per 1,000 live births and under-5 mortality to at least as low as 25 per 1,000 live births.
- By 2030, reduce by one third premature mortality from **non-communicable diseases** through prevention and treatment and promote mental health and well-being

- Strengthen the prevention and treatment of **substance abuse**, including narcotic drug abuse and harmful use of alcohol
- By 2030, ensure universal access to **sexual and reproductive health-care services**, including for family planning, information and education, and the integration of reproductive health into national strategies and programmes
- Achieve **universal health coverage**, including financial risk protection, access to quality essential health-care services and access to safe, effective, quality and affordable essential medicines and vaccines for all
- Support the research and development of vaccines and medicines for the communicable and non-communicable diseases that primarily affect developing countries, provide **access to affordable essential medicines** and vaccines
- Substantially increase **health financing** and the recruitment, development, training and retention of the health workforce in developing countries
- **Strengthen the capacity** of all countries, in particular developing countries, for early warning, risk reduction and management of national and global health risks

In Goal 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls, take note of the following targets that relate to the work of many of our member organisations:

- Eliminate all forms of violence against all women and girls in the **public and private** spheres, including trafficking and sexual and other types of exploitation
- Recognize and **value unpaid care** and domestic work through the provision of public services, infrastructure and social protection policies
- Ensure **universal access** to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights
- Adopt and strengthen sound **policies and enforceable legislation** for the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls at all levels

HOW TO ENGAGE WITH THE GOALS

This is a critical opportunity for us as civil society to make our voices heard and positively influence the sustainable development agenda. If your

organisation has not engaged with the goals yet, we urge you to visit the UN website, sustainabledevelopment.un.org, read up on the goals and targets and start to integrate the goals in your planning and programming.

You can begin by asking yourself some key questions such as:

- What are the **specific issues** within each applicable goal in South Africa?
- Which goals and **targets** are most relevant to your organisation's work?
- Do you think there is **anything missing** from the goal targets?
- What will be the **main challenges** for achieving the targets as a country?
- How can your organisation **use the targets** to plan and develop programming?
- How can civil society and NPOs contribute to and **influence policy** relating to these goals?

NACOSA is planning to join a working group of interested civil society organisations to develop a framework for national civil society engagement with the goals, with a view to creating a civil society coordinating mechanism. If you are interested in contributing to this work, please email Sophie@nacosa.org.za.

USEFUL LINKS

1. United Nations: [Millennium Development Goals Report 2015](#)
2. Stats SA: [Millennium Development Goals Country Report 2015](#)
3. HSRC research: [Civil Society Organisations and Participation in The Millennium Development Goal Processes in South Africa](#)
4. Comprehensive information on the goals and targets: sustainabledevelopment.un.org
5. Contribute your voice to the sustainable development agenda at www.globalcitizen.org



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