

Sustainability Done Good

Sustainability science for the SDGs

Key messages

- Getting back on track for achieving the SDGs by 2030 requires taking urgent action.
- Recent reports suggest a three part framework to guide policy makers towards these goals.
- An expanded and empowered sustainability science is key to emerging from of this crisis.

Our Earth is in crisis. For thousands of years human society has gone from one milestone to another, rapidly rising up the food chain and transforming the very planet that it inhabits. In 2015 the world got together through the United Nations and announced the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and associated Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which were to act as blueprints for ensuring an improved, more equitable, and more sustainable society. We are fast approaching the midpoint of the SDG programme, making this an ideal time to look back and analyse our progress in achieving these goals. This analysis paints a bleak picture; whereas substantial progress has been made in some respects, issues such as the climate emergency are even further from being solved than they were in 2015.

Something must be done to put humanity back on track. Published in 2019, the Global Sustainable Development Report presents a three-pronged scientific framework to guide policy makers and accelerate our progress towards the SDGs. First, it is essential to appreciate the complexity of the problem at hand and to look at matters from a global perspective. Amongst the many targets set forth in the SDGs, progress towards one may well hold back progress towards another. By way of example, in working towards ensuring that everyone has access to adequate food may make it difficult to improve our food production mechanisms as would be required to mitigate climate change. Interactions between the targets may also be positive, of course; working to make food production more sustainable would have a positive knock-on effect on reaching environmental targets. Second, one must appreciate the various agendas involved, which sometimes compete or even contradict one another. Markets, civil society, and policy makers all have diverging definitions of “development;” without sufficient care and coordination our societies risk working against one another. It is critical to understand how policy makers could help regulate markets in such a way as to improve the sustainability of societies without compromising standards of living. Third, whereas these are global problems that necessitate global solutions, such solutions must take local contexts into account. One cannot hope to tackle issues with food supply, for example, without considering local culture, technologies, and other factors.

There is, of course, no silver bullet that will help solve all these problems. That which comes closest, however, is sustainability science. After all, the “S” in SDG stands for “sustainable.” Our academics, funding agencies, and society more broadly must redefine sustainability science to encompass all the spheres of knowledge that affect it. Access to research data is distributed unevenly, hindering progress in some of the regions of the world that most need it. Such a mission is not merely utilitarian since it would help unite the Global North and South. By leveraging practical and indigenous knowledge, scientists would ensure ownership of the process by society at large. What is required is nothing short of a wholesale rethinking of sustainability science, without which sustainable development will remain only pipe dream. ■

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