The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)  
Library research brief  

Overview  

On 25 September 2015, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (the Agenda) was unanimously adopted by all 193 United Nations member states. Included in the Agenda are 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs, also known as Global Goals), which are supported by 169 specific targets.

The Agenda and SDGs are “a plan of action for people, planet and prosperity”.¹ They are intended to stimulate action, and they seek to end poverty and hunger, protect the planet from degradation, and ensure that all human beings can enjoy prosperous and fulfilling lives. The Agenda also seeks to foster peaceful, just and inclusive societies. The SDGs are interlinked, so progress towards one goal drives progress towards others. All the goals are meant to be met within a sustainable development framework.

The SDGs are designed to be aspirational and global, with each government setting their own goal priorities. Although the Agenda is not legally binding, governments are expected to take ownership of it and establish national frameworks for the achievement of the SDGs.

The Agenda specifies that the achievement of the goals is to be worked towards jointly by all:

“Our journey will involve Governments as well as Parliaments, the UN system and other international institutions, local authorities, indigenous peoples, civil society, business and the private sector, the scientific and academic community – and all people. ... It is an Agenda of the people, by the people and for the people”.²

The Agenda and SDGs will expire in 2030.
New Zealand’s work towards the SDGs

Examples of projects that different sectors in New Zealand have used to progress towards the SDGs are provided below.

Government

- Statistics New Zealand has developed Indicators Aotearoa New Zealand – Ngā Tūtohu Aotearoa, a suite of statistical indicators that “will go beyond economic measures of progress, such as gross domestic product (GDP), to include social and environmental measures.” The indicators have been developed with a focus on sustainable development and the need to report on the SDGs.

- The Treasury has developed the Living Standards Framework (LSF), “a practical policy advice tool which supports us in applying a wellbeing approach more systematically across our policy advice and in our work with other government agencies.” The LSF includes a dashboard – a structured database of indicators - to support policy development to lift intergenerational wellbeing. This will be used as part of the regular financial and economic analysis of options for government action to support progress towards achieving the SDGs.

- The Agenda encourages member states to conduct “regular and inclusive reviews of progress at the national and sub-national levels” (Voluntary National Reviews). New Zealand submitted its first Voluntary National Review to the United Nations in 2019.

Parliament

- The Climate Change Commission was established in December 2019 through the Climate Change Response (Zero Carbon) Amendment Act 2019. It is an independent Crown entity.
that provides evidence-based advice to the Government to help New Zealand transition to a low-emissions and climate-resilient economy.

Private sector

- In October 2017, the updated NZ Stock Exchange (NZX) Code came into effect. The Code now requires a listed issuer to either report on Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) factors and practices as part of its non-financial reporting or, if the Board of an issuer decides not to report on these, must explain why this is appropriate.\(^\text{11}\)

- In November 2017, the Tourism Sustainability Commitment (TSC) was launched at the Tourism Industry Association’s (TIA) Summit Aotearoa.\(^\text{12}\) The Commitment was developed by the industry, and established 14 commitments that individual businesses could achieve to help the industry reach the SDGs. The TSC was refreshed in August 2020 and amended to 12 commitments, including the introduction of a culture and heritage commitment.\(^\text{13}\) By August 2020, over 1,400 New Zealand tourism businesses and organisations had signed up to the TSC.\(^\text{14}\) The goal is to have every New Zealand tourism business on board by 2025.\(^\text{15}\)

- New Zealand companies are also engaging through membership in the Sustainable Business Council (SBC), a Global Network Partner of the World Business Council for Sustainable Development. Members of the SBC make a commitment to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions and build sustainability into their purchasing decisions. Members are also required to introduce annual reporting practices, outlining their progress on environmental, social, governance and economic issues, which are reviewed every two years. As at June 2020, there were 100 SBC member organisations in New Zealand, which amounts to 28 percent of New Zealand’s private sector gross domestic product (GDP) and 10 percent of the New Zealand workforce.\(^\text{16}\)

Civil society

- New Zealand universities have hosted two SDG summits, in 2018 and 2019, which were intended to be part of a series of national summits “to promote, build and accelerate multi-sector action” to implement the SDGs.\(^\text{17}\) The 2020-2021 SDG Summit Series will be co-hosted by University of Canterbury and Lincoln University, using a combination of online and in-person events. The first virtual summit of the series is scheduled for November this year.\(^\text{18}\)

- Hui E! Community Aotearoa, a national body that aims to promote, strengthen and connect the tangata whenua, community and voluntary sectors, brought together a steering group, representing diverse experiences and a range of organisations, to create an alternate report on progress on the Sustainability Agenda in New Zealand. This paper, the People’s Report on the 2030 Agenda and Sustainable Development Goals, was published in 2019, just prior to the presentation of New Zealand’s first Voluntary National Review to the UN.\(^\text{19}\)

Collaborations

- The Joint Action Plan on Primary Sector Emissions (He Waka Eke Noa) is a partnership between the Government, the primary sector and iwi/Māori that aims to reduce primary sector greenhouse gas emissions, while continuing to sustainably produce quality food and fibre products.\(^\text{20}\) The milestones in the Joint Action Plan, as well as provisions to determine
whether progress is being made, were brought into law through the Climate Change Response (Emissions Trading Reform) Amendment Act 2020.\textsuperscript{21}

- Sustainable Coastlines, a New Zealand-based NGO, has developed Litter Intelligence, a programme to train 'citizen scientists' across the country to collect litter data from their local beaches in order to generate a database and solutions platform. The project has been developed in collaboration with the Ministry for the Environment, Department of Conservation, and Statistics New Zealand. Data from this project has been used in the Ministry for the Environment/Statistics New Zealand Marine 2019 Report, making it the first time that marine litter datasets and citizen science data have been included in official New Zealand government reporting.\textsuperscript{22}

**International progress and the impact of COVID-19**

The \textit{2020 SDG Progress Report} (released in May) stated that, even before the COVID-19 pandemic, progress was uneven and the world was not on track to meet the goals by 2030:

> Some gains were visible: the share of children and youth out of school had fallen; the incidence of many communicable diseases was in decline; access to safely managed drinking water had improved; and women’s representation in leadership roles was increasing. At the same time, the number of people suffering from food insecurity was on the rise, the natural environment continued to deteriorate at an alarming rate, and dramatic levels of inequality persisted in all regions.\textsuperscript{23}

COVID-19 has “abruptly disrupted implementation towards many of the SDGs and, in some cases, turned back decades of progress”.\textsuperscript{24} The World Bank estimated that, in a baseline scenario, “COVID-19 could push 71 million people into extreme poverty in 2020” (100 million in a downside scenario), increasing the global extreme poverty rate for the first time since 1998 and “effectively wiping out progress made since 2017”.\textsuperscript{25}

This will have a flow-on effect to SDGs and indicators including hunger, health and employment. “As more families fall into extreme poverty, children in poor and disadvantaged communities are at much greater risk of child labour, child marriage and child trafficking. In fact, the global gains in reducing child labour are likely to be reversed for the first time in 20 years.”\textsuperscript{26}

While there have been some positive impacts on the natural environment, such as improvement in air quality, cleaner beaches and environmental noise reduction, there have also been negative impacts, such as a reduction in recycling and an increase in waste.\textsuperscript{27}

Many organisations have recommended that governments take the SDGs into account when making plans for economic recovery. In his International Mother Earth Day message, UN Secretary-General António Guterres said: “The current crisis is an unprecedented wake-up call. We need to turn the recovery into a real opportunity to do things right for the future.”\textsuperscript{28}

An OECD policy brief stated that “a green recovery will significantly enhance the resilience of economies and societies in the face of both the severe recession and accelerating environmental challenges”.\textsuperscript{29}
On 28 September, leaders from 64 countries and regions, including New Zealand, signed a pledge ahead of the United Nations Summit on Biodiversity committing to reversing biodiversity loss by 2030. The pledge, which has since been signed by more world leaders, states that:

“We will ensure that our response to the current health and economic crisis is green and just and contributes directly to recovering better and achieving sustainable societies; we commit to putting biodiversity, climate and the environment as a whole at the heart both of our COVID-19 recovery strategies and investments and of our pursuit of national and international development and cooperation.”

A recent paper in Nature Climate Change examined the effect of global emissions reductions as a result of COVID-19 on global warming and found that it would have a negligible direct effect. However, it also estimated that, “with an economic recovery tilted towards green stimulus and reductions in fossil fuel investments, it is possible to avoid future warming of 0.3 °C by 2050”.  

In New Zealand, Forest & Bird, Greenpeace, WWF-New Zealand, Generation Zero, Environmental Defence Society, and Ecologic released a joint media release in April urging the Prime Minister to invest in projects and new jobs that would build resilience against future shocks and transform the economy into one that looks after both people and nature.

There has been some public support for a green-focused recovery. A national survey conducted by the School of Communication, Journalism and Marketing at Massey University (and fielded by Qualtrics) polled more than 1,000 New Zealanders during lockdown and found that “seven in ten New Zealanders support a clean and green COVID-19 economic recovery plan, and say that industries such as the airlines, electric utility, and agriculture sector that receive emergency government funding should be required to reduce their carbon and water pollution.”

Budget 2020 announced a $1.1 billion investment, over four years, to create 11,000 environment jobs in New Zealand, including funding for increased pest eradication and management, a new Jobs for Nature programme, enhancing biodiversity on public and private land and restoring rivers, streams, lakes, and wetlands.

Other suggestions that have been proposed for projects to improve New Zealand’s progress towards the SDGs include upgrading water, stormwater and wastewater infrastructure, cleaning up legacy waste sites, increasing investment in electric transport, including public transport, and fencing and planting on-farm waterways.

References

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2 2030 Agenda, para 52.
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