

Action Agenda FAQs

Question 1: Who prepared these proposed goals and for what purpose?

The proposed goals and targets were prepared by the Leadership Council of the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) to help inform the debate around Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including the work of the High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Development Agenda, which has recently submitted its report to the Secretary-General, and the Open Working Group on the Sustainable Development Goals established at Rio+20. The Leadership Council took into consideration proposals emerging from the thematic and national consultations organized by the UN Task Team, other processes, and numerous reports issued by civil society and research organizations (Annex 4). The Leadership Council also benefited enormously from hundreds of comments received during public consultations on the document.

Question 2: What are the four dimensions of sustainable development?

The Rio+20 outcome document refers to three dimensions of sustainable development (economic, social, and environmental) and emphasizes the importance of good governance as well as peace and security which are sometimes referred to as a foundation of sustainable development. For simplicity we refer to the four societal objectives as dimensions of sustainable development: economic development (including ending extreme poverty), social inclusion, environmental sustainability, and good governance including peace and security.

Question 3: Why does the world need sustainable development goals?

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) demonstrate the power of global goals, backed by quantitative targets, in building momentum for national and local action. Addressing the challenges of sustainable development requires a shared focus on ending extreme poverty in all its forms and a structural transformation in the way that national and local economies operate. The necessary focus and collaboration across actors and countries can best be achieved through shared global objectives for sustainable development. That is why the Rio+20 Summit called for SDGs. Of course setting global goals – even if they are based on shared values – will have little impact unless followed up by concerted action. However, averting the business-as-usual (BAU) trajectory will be nearly impossible without an ambitious and universal set of SDGs.

Well-crafted SDGs will guide the public understanding of complex long-term challenges, inspire public and private action, and promote accountability. They will build on existing global initiatives and bring together ongoing efforts in sustainable development. The SDGs will be complementary to the tools of international laws, such as global treaties and conventions, by providing a normative framework for the global partnership needed to address the interconnected challenges the world faces. Children around the world will learn a simplified version of the goals as a clear introduction to sustainable development. For businesspeople, government officials, civil society, and others, the goals will promote integrated thinking and help to stave off the futile debates that often pit one dimension of sustainable development against another. They will mobilize governments and the international system to strengthen measurement and monitoring for sustainable development.

Question 4: How does the scope of the SDGs compare with the scope of the global policy agenda?

The SDGs are one part of the global policy framework for the period after 2015. Just as the MDGs were part of the Millennium Declaration, which goes well beyond the MDGs to include issues of war and peace, the

SDGs will be one part of the global policy agenda after 2015. The broader agenda will include issues of war and peace, ridding the world of nuclear weapons as per the Non-Proliferation Treaty, and addressing major macroeconomic challenges such as reforming the global financial systems to prevent a repeat of the devastating 2008 financial crisis.

Question 5: Why are the proposed goals called “Sustainable Development Goals”?

The Rio+20 Conference adopted the principle of sustainable development goals to be crafted and adopted by UN member states before the end of 2015. The proposed goals outlined by the SDSN are one of many inputs into this debate.

Question 6: Who would such goals apply to? What would be the role of civil society and business?

The SDGs should be universal, applying to all nations, rich and poor alike. We also suggest that they should have a 15-year time frame, like the MDGs, thereby covering the period 2015 to 2030. The SDGs should address all four dimensions of sustainable development (economic, social, environmental, and governance) and set objectives for governments at all levels, as well as for business and civil society. Not every goal will be a “stretch goal” for every country. Rich countries, for instance, will have met goals related to ending extreme poverty. Yet all countries lag behind on some dimensions of sustainable development.

Business deserves special note as a principal engine for economic growth and job creation. The term “business” comprises a great diversity of organizations ranging from small shops to large multinational corporations and financial institutions. Collectively, businesses will develop and deliver many of the new technologies, organizational models, and management systems that are needed for sustainable development. Businesses also directly account for some two-thirds of natural resource use. If businesses embrace the SDGs and are supported by clear government policies and rules that align private incentives with sustainable development, then rapid positive change will become possible.¹ If businesses operate under values and incentives that are misaligned with the objectives of sustainable development, then the transformations outlined in this document will be impossible.

Similarly, sustainable development cannot occur without civil society doing its part. The SDGs are a guide and standard for civil society as well, including universities and other expert communities, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), philanthropies and foundations, environmental groups, social enterprises, and others. Each of these civil society actors will have their own distinctive role to play in support of the SDGs.

Question 7: How do the proposed SDGs relate to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)?

The MDGs are the world’s shared goals for ending extreme poverty in all its forms and will expire at the end of 2015. They have supported tremendous progress, including the reduction by half of the poverty rate of developing countries taken as a group. However, the job of ending extreme poverty in all its forms is far from complete country by country, particularly among disadvantaged groups and regions within countries. For this reason we propose that the SDGs start with a clear commitment to finishing the work of the MDGs by resolving under SDG 1 to end extreme poverty and hunger by 2030. We are pleased that the World Bank has recently committed to the goal of ending extreme poverty by 2030. Member states may decide to include suitably updated MDG targets under SDG 1 as measures of extreme poverty in all its forms. Alternatively, the targets on ending extreme poverty may be distributed across the corresponding SDGs.

¹ One example of a values-based business initiative that also includes a development dimension is the [United Nations Global Compact](#).

Question 8: Are the proposed SDGs prioritized? How have they been ordered?

We have ordered the proposed goals in such a way as to stay close to the structure of the Millennium Development Goals. They are not ordered by priority. All are very important and work in harmony with the others.

Question 9: How do the goals relate to sustainable development and its dimensions? How do they deal with integration?

As described in this document and [illustrated in Annex 2](#), the world's challenges are interconnected and must therefore address all four dimensions of sustainable development (economic development and ending poverty, social inclusion, environmental sustainability, and good governance including peace and security). To reflect the need for integration, the proposed ten SDGs and their thirty targets have been designed to address multiple dimensions of sustainable development.

Question 10: What are the reasoning and criteria behind crafting the goals and targets?

Several criteria have been identified for crafting the goals. They should be:

- i. **Universal:** The goals should be applicable to all countries. In particular they should address the needs of low-income, middle-income, and high-income countries.
- ii. **Comprehensive:** Together, the ten goals should spell out the principal challenges of sustainable development and provide a normative framework for the global partnership needed to address the profound and interconnected challenges the world faces. For example, the SDSN feels that climate change is such an important challenge that these words need to appear in the title of one of the goals.
- iii. **Operational:** To the extent possible, each goal should address and mobilize clearly defined knowledge communities comprising government departments, business, civil society, international organizations, and academia/research. Some goals therefore focus on specific operational or place-based challenges, such as urban management, climate change, or sustainable agriculture. Others focus on cross-cutting issues like gender equality or water management that must be addressed in every goal, but should also be highlighted through a dedicated goal.
- iv. **Jargon-free and easy to understand:** Children should be able to learn the goals at school as a clear introduction to sustainable development. To this end the wording of the goals needs to be free of jargon. Where important technical concepts (e.g. ecosystems) are needed these should be included and become part of the introduction to sustainable development.
- v. **SMART Targets:** In general, targets should be "SMART": specific, measurable (though some targets should remain fairly general and may require the setting of national/local targets or new metrics – see Question 11: and Question 14: below), attainable (though some will be "stretch" goals that can be attained only with considerable effort), relevant (to the four dimensions of sustainable development), and time bound to 2030 or earlier.
- vi. **Applicable to all stakeholders:** The goals should apply to governments at all levels, business, civil society, international organizations, and other stakeholders.
- vii. **Integrated:** The goals should promote integrated thinking and put to rest the futile debates that pit one dimension of sustainable development against another (see also Question 9)
- viii. **Limited in number:** The SDSN believes that ten is the maximum practical number. Beyond ten, the goals would lose the benefit of public understanding and motivation. We did not find a way to reduce the SDGs to fewer than ten.

Question 11: How can the targets be measured? Where are the indicators?

The targets proposed in Annex 1 should be specified at the global and national level to ensure that they can be measured in a timely and accurate way using one or more indicators. The indicators should be well designed to enable data collection and monitoring. The statistical agencies should promote the use of advanced data tools, including remote sensing, real-time monitoring with smartphones, crowdsourcing, GIS mapping, and other techniques.

Question 12: Why do some goals focus on outcomes whereas others focus on outputs or means?

Where possible, the SDGs should focus on outcomes, such as ending extreme poverty. Yet, the distinction between outcomes, outputs, and inputs needs to be handled pragmatically, and the design of goals and targets should be – we believe – guided by approaches that are best suited to mobilize action and ensure accountability. For example, ensuring universal access to healthcare or high-quality early childhood development (ECD) are important commitments for every government. Goals and targets that focus on these outputs will ensure operational focus and accountability. In some instances it also makes sense to target inputs. For example, official development assistance (ODA) is critical for ensuring many SDGs and needs to be mobilized in every high-income country. Mobilizing resources for sustainable development is difficult, so subsuming ODA as an implicit input into every SDG would make it harder for government leaders, citizens, and civil society organizations to argue for increased ODA. It would also weaken accountability for rich countries. Similar considerations apply, for example, to the proposed target on integrated reporting by governments and businesses on their contributions to the SDGs.

Question 13: What does reducing to “zero” or “universal access” mean?

Many targets call for “universal access” (e.g. to infrastructure) or “zero” deprivation (e.g. extreme poverty, hunger). For each such target, the technical communities and member states will need to define the precise quantitative standard for their commitment to “universal access” or “zero” deprivation. We hope that in most cases these standards will indeed be 100 percent or 0 percent, respectively, but there may be areas where it is technically impossible to achieve 100 percent access or 0 percent deprivation. In such cases countries should aim to get as close as possible to 100 percent or 0 percent, respectively.

Question 14: Why are some targets not quantified and marked with an asterisk? Why do some targets have numbers in square brackets?

It is important that every target can be measured at the national or local level, but not every target can be defined globally in a meaningful way, for three distinct reasons:

- i. The starting points may differ too much across countries for a single meaningful quantitative standard at the global level;
- ii. Some targets need to be adapted and quantified locally or may be relevant only in subsets of countries (e.g. those that refer to specific ecosystems);
- iii. For some targets no global consensus exists today, and these still need to be negotiated, as is the case with greenhouse gas emission reduction targets. In the meantime, countries should establish their own plans and targets.

In some cases proposed numerical targets are presented in square brackets since these numbers are preliminary and may need to be reviewed by the corresponding technical communities.

Question 15: How do the goals define poverty?

We use the term “extreme poverty in all its forms” for the multidimensional concept of poverty encapsulated in the MDGs, comprising *inter alia* income poverty, hunger, gender inequality, lack of

education, poor health, and lack of access to basic infrastructure services. Extreme income poverty or “absolute income poverty” is defined by the World Bank as a per capita income of less than \$1.25 per day. We measure social inclusion in part by the use of “relative poverty,” defined by the OECD as the proportion of households with incomes less than half of the national median income.

Question 16: Why is hunger included under poverty instead of agriculture?

Several arguments have prompted the Leadership Council to include hunger and nutrition under extreme poverty:

- i. Hunger and malnutrition are challenges that affect rural as well as urban areas, so grouping hunger under a place-based “rural” goal might weaken the focus on urban hunger;
- ii. Hunger is not only a function of food availability, which a goal focused on sustainable food production might suggest;
- iii. Stunting and malnutrition are key dimensions of extreme poverty that give substance to the notion of “extreme poverty in all its forms”; and
- iv. A poverty/hunger goal ensures full continuity with MDG 1.

Note that in sub-Saharan Africa, the links between hunger and low agricultural productivity are especially acute, so that, in this region, the reduction of hunger and the achievement of sustainable agriculture are deeply intertwined.

Question 17: How do the proposed SDGs deal with inequalities?

The proposed SDGs deal with inequalities in several ways:

- i. SDG 4 has explicit targets on ending discrimination and reducing relative poverty, which describes the proportion of households with incomes below 50 percent of the national median. Relative poverty is a widely used measure of inequality.
- ii. Many of the goals emphasize universal access to various public services and infrastructure that give every person, especially women, a fair chance at prosperity (note in particular SDGs 3 to 9). Achieving universal access will require that special strategies address deep-rooted inequalities across regions, gender, ethnicities, income levels, and other dimensions.
- iii. We recommend that the SDG indicators be disaggregated as much as possible by geography, income, socio-economic group, and other identifiers to track inequalities in SDG outcomes. As described in Section V, for every SDG we call on countries to monitor and to end inequalities in outcomes across sub-populations.

Question 18: What is the reasoning behind the focus on highly vulnerable states and regions?

Certain parts of the world, including the Sahel, the Horn of Africa (plus Yemen), the Great Lakes region of Central Africa, and parts of Central Asia, face extraordinary challenges as the result of the combination of extreme poverty, weak infrastructure, chronic violence, rapid population growth, and inherently difficult geographical conditions (such as being landlocked, small island states, extremely arid, highly vulnerable to droughts and floods, and/or having a high burden of communicable diseases such as malaria). Countries facing these tremendous and interconnected challenges need special international support, including timely and adequate external assistance. They also need a regional focus, since many of the problems (weak transportation, cross-border nomadism, displaced populations, droughts, epidemics, and conflicts) occur at the regional scale and must be addressed in part at that scale.

Question 19: What is the reasoning behind SDG 2 (Development within Planetary Boundaries)?

Modern Earth-systems science (including geology, climate science, hydrology, and ecology) makes clear that human activity is now dangerously impinging on vital Earth functions, including climate, the water cycle, the nitrogen cycle, biodiversity, ocean acidification, particulate pollution, and more. Scientists are identifying certain thresholds or “planetary boundaries” beyond which human activity can have dire effects on human wellbeing and on ecosystem functions everywhere. Unless human development respects these planetary boundaries, people in all countries are likely to face severe environmental degradation that could severely set back human development. Yet it is possible for countries to grow while respecting these boundaries, mainly by improving efficiency, shifting to sustainable technologies, restraining various kinds of wasteful behaviors, and by decelerating population growth more rapidly. The proposed SDG 2 therefore underscores the right to development for all countries within planetary boundaries. It is closely related to the better-known concept of sustainable consumption and production. This goal includes a target on economic growth as a key dimension of the right to development. A second target focuses on the need to measure and track the environmental impact of growth in every country by reforming national accounting systems. A third target focuses on the rapid attainment of population stabilization. The transformations needed for the world and for every country to respect planetary boundaries are addressed in the goals below (particularly SDGs 6 to 10).

Question 20: Why is there no proposed goal called “Sustainable Consumption and Production”?

Most simply because it is the essence of proposed SDG 2. As emphasized throughout this document and in the “Framework of Programs on Sustainable Consumption and Production Patterns” adopted at Rio+20, the use of environmental resources and pollution must be brought down to levels that can be sustained over the long run. This in turn will require a major decoupling of pollution and environmental resource use from rising living standards and economic growth, consistent with achieving a net reduction in both aggregate pollution and resource use. In many areas consumption and production patterns will need to change significantly. Yet, the key question is not the level of “consumption” or “production” per se, but their primary resource, pollution, and ecosystem implications. Consumption and production in an economic sense (i.e., improvement of material conditions) can grow provided they are decoupled from pollution and unsustainable natural resource use. This is the normative essence of SDG 2 (Question 19: above).

Question 21: What does the notion of “decoupling” mean?

Decoupling means a drop in primary resource use and pollution as economic growth proceeds. It is achieved through a combination of new technologies (e.g. photovoltaic electricity and wind power substituting for fossil fuels), investments in energy efficiency (e.g. reduced losses on the power grid, improved insulation for homes), the dematerialization of production (e.g. the shift from vinyl albums to online music and from books to e-books), and proper economic incentives for individuals, businesses, and governments.

Resource efficiency (more output per unit of resource input) is a necessary but not sufficient condition. Greater efficiency in oil and gas extraction (e.g. hydrofracking) can expand rather than reduce CO₂ emissions. Greater efficiency in internal combustion engines can lead to larger cars rather than fuel savings. Thus, technological changes need to be combined with appropriate policy incentives.

There are many pessimists regarding decoupling who feel that the only way to limit resource use is to limit overall economic growth. We disagree. Decoupling has not yet been tried as a serious global strategy, and we believe that advances in areas such as information and communications technologies, energy technologies, materials science, advanced manufacturing processes, and agriculture will permit continued

economic growth combined with a massive reduction in the use and waste of key primary commodities, a sharp drop in greenhouse gas emissions and other forms of pollution.

Question 22: How do the goals deal with jobs, particularly for the young?

Reducing youth unemployment is a core priority for most countries. The proposed SDG 3 focuses on high-quality primary and secondary education and on effective institutions (such as apprenticeships) that can help youth prepare for decent work. The third target focuses directly on the youth unemployment rate. Likewise, the agriculture goal (SDG 6) includes the need for rural job creation and development, whereas the urban goal (SDG 7) addresses urban employment under its first target.

Question 23: What is meant by measuring "subjective wellbeing and social capital" (Target 5c)?

Many scholars and an increasing number of governments now collect data on subjective wellbeing (SWB). SWB refers to an individual's own report of his or her sense of happiness or life satisfaction. These subjective accounts have been shown to be systematic and informative of the individual and social conditions in a country that are conducive to a high quality of life. The proposed numerical targets for reducing tobacco use and harmful use of alcohol derive from the World Health Assembly resolution 66.10.2. We propose that the 2025 target of reducing harmful use of alcohol by 10% be increased to 20% by 2030.

Question 24: Why is there no stand-alone goal on infrastructure?

Access to infrastructure is essential for ending extreme poverty in all its forms and promoting sustainable development. The proposed SDGs divide the challenges of providing access to infrastructure between urban (SDG 7) and rural (SDG 6) areas. This division is motivated by the fact that infrastructure technologies, delivery models, and responsible actors vary significantly between urban and rural areas.

Question 25: How do the proposed goals deal with water supply and water resources management?

Providing access to safe water and sanitation, ensuring sound management of freshwater resources, and preventing water pollution are inter-related priority challenges of sustainable development that must be met for other goals and targets to be achieved. All three must become central components of the SDGs:

- **Water access:** Delivery models, technologies, and responsible actors for access to water and sanitation differ between urban and rural areas, so we propose to assign these challenges to the urban and rural goals, respectively. This has the added advantage of combining water supply and sanitation, which are often closely linked.
- **Water resources management:** Integrated water resources management and the allocation of water across different uses is a cross-cutting requirement for all goals. Freshwater needs for agriculture (accounting for some 70 percent of freshwater withdrawals), industry, households, and the healthy functioning of ecosystems (sometimes referred to as "green water") stand out as major challenges. Moreover, water-related disasters, such as floods and droughts, account for a large share of damage from natural disasters. Water resources management and associated disaster risk management cannot be pursued in isolation from the management of agriculture, cities, and ecosystems, so water is part of several goals. The proposed SDG 9 emphasizes the need for integrated water resources management. A suitable indicator for Target 9c might include the ratio of freshwater withdrawals to renewable freshwater supply which should be lower than one.
- **Water pollution:** Water pollution is a separate management challenge. Although not limited to urban areas, water pollution is a significant urban challenge and is therefore included under SDG 7.

² See Annex 2 - http://apps.who.int/gb/ebwha/pdf_files/WHA66/A66_R10-en.pdf

The question of how to deal with water challenges in the proposed SDGs has been intensely discussed in the Leadership Council. Some have argued for a stand-alone water goal partly to draw attention to the importance of water management. Overall, though, we believe that our proposals provide a sound basis for managing the various water challenges within the framework of ten SDGs, particularly if suitable indicators track the sustainable use of water resources, access to water supply, and water quality.

Question 26: Most goals apply to cities. Why do we need a separate urban³ goal?

Urban sustainable development is a central challenge and a major opportunity for most countries, as urban and slum populations are rising rapidly. The urban share of the world's population is expected to rise from 52 percent in 2010 to around 67 percent in 2050, and the urban share of GDP and employment will rise commensurately. If managed well, urbanization can create employment and prosperity, and become a central driver for ending extreme poverty and for strengthening social inclusion. If managed poorly, cities will deepen social exclusion and fail to generate enough jobs.

Urban sustainable development is complex, involving not only many sectors but also many political entities, including local neighborhoods, city governments, metropolitan areas, and national governments, which must empower cities and link them to rural areas. As a result, strategies for cities pose highly complex yet crucial challenges. An urban SDG is therefore important to mobilize and bring together the efforts of multiple actors and stakeholders (e.g. local authorities, national governments, businesses, knowledge institutions, and civil society) across a range of urban issues (e.g. urban jobs, housing, infrastructure, governance, disaster risk reduction, and climate change adaptation and mitigation) and mobilize the financial, institutional, and human resources to make this possible.

Question 27: Why are the targets under Goal 9 not quantified?

The world has adopted the Aichi Biodiversity targets as quantitative outcome targets for biodiversity and ecosystems. These 20 targets include outcome objectives to be achieved by 2020. The SDG targets cannot replicate the full set of Aichi targets, and it strikes us as impossible to pick one ecosystem or one quantitative target over the others. Countries therefore need to set their own quantitative targets under the SDGs, which should ideally be consistent with the Aichi targets. We propose to distinguish between ecosystem management at the national and subnational level (first target) and regional or global efforts (second target). The latter are inherently more complex and require different institutional arrangements. Both are critical for sustainable development.

The proposed SDG targets call for policies to ensure resilient and productive ecosystems. A central objective of such policies must be to address the drivers of ecosystem degradation and biodiversity loss, which includes applying the "polluter pays" and "payment for ecosystem services" principles. Suitable indicators, including halting the loss of biodiversity, can and should be constructed at national/local and regional/global levels to measure the achievement of this target across a broad range of ecosystems.

Question 28: The UNFCCC deals with climate change. Why do we propose a goal on climate change?

The UNFCCC will set legally binding targets among nations. The SDGs will not be legally binding and will not replace or hinder the work of the UNFCCC. Rather, the SDGs, like the MDGs today, will provide a global, easily understood, normative framework to mobilize all stakeholders in the fight for sustainable

³ In this document we use the terms "cities" and "urban areas" interchangeably to denote metropolitan areas and all urban centers that have economic or political importance.

development, which must include efforts to curb human-induced climate change. The SDGs should therefore help the public to understand the critical issues, the solutions, and the urgency of changing course. Similar considerations apply to biodiversity, human rights, and other areas where legally binding international conventions have been adopted, but which also need to be addressed by the SDGs. The SDGs need to get to the crux of the matter on climate change: that is, heading off the rapidly growing dangers. Because the science of climate change continues to evolve, it is important to define the related SDG so that it can evolve with the progress of scientific understanding and reflect new and hopefully stronger commitments made under the UNFCCC. Today's consensus on avoiding a 2°C increase in temperature, for example, may not be ambitious enough according to a growing body of scientific evidence. This is especially troubling since the world is far off course from even achieving the 2°C target.

Question 29: Why is there no stand-alone goal on peace and security?

We underscore the importance of peace and security as a central component of the four dimensions of sustainable development. Goal 1 includes a focus on vulnerable regions, including post-conflict regions, and a target to address conflict and violence. Goal 4 includes a target on reducing violence against individuals, especially women and children, which needs to be operationalized at the country level. This target addresses issues of gender-based violence and child protection, as well as personal security, which represent a critical challenge in conflict and post-conflict settings. Indeed many of the proposed goals address the structural causes of conflict such as inequality and exclusion, extreme poverty in all its forms, and poor governance.

The broader political issues of peace and security, which are typically addressed by the Security Council of the United Nations, go beyond the scope of the proposed SDGs. The post-2015 global policy framework, which will include more than the SDGs themselves, should also draw attention to the long-standing but still unfulfilled objective of ridding the world of nuclear weapons.