

Expert Support for Implementing the SDGs¹

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Abstract: Implementing the SDGs requires reliance on expert advice. The nature of the sustainability challenge requires a new form of expert guidance, and the creation of an orchestrating expert panel on sustainability. Lessons drawn from environmental science panels and Global Environmental Assessments can help design such a panel.

Introduction

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were adopted by the United Nations in 2015 as the framework for international development agenda through 2030. The first follow up meetings are 23-27 May followed by the High Level Political Forum (HLPF) from 11-20 July, where the focus will be on prompt implementation of the SDGs.

A strong policy lesson from the implementation of the MDGs is that the major health and poverty goals were reached by relying on expert knowledge to identify best practices and to track adherence with the goals. (Fukuda-Parr and Hulme 2011; Fukuda-Parr 2011; Kanie and Biermann 2017) More generally, expert panels have effectively been widely used to help implement international regimes ranging from such areas as UNAIDs to the environment. (Haas 2004; Mitchell, Clark et al. 2006; Haas and Stevens 2011)

Expert panels perform multiple roles. They provide information about the state of the policy environment. They issue early warnings about sustainability challenges. They provide policy alternatives for achieving established objectives, and assess the merits of various policy choices. They may also verify state compliance with their global commitments. They help to educate leaders and elites about ways of pursuing sustainability. In

addition, they often play the political function of helping to build a broader constituency by involving stake holders in information collection and dissemination.

The Challenge of Implementing the SDGs

Implementing the SDGs is a complex task. Many of the 17 SDGs are themselves poorly understood or incompletely articulated, and the array of interconnections between the SDGs themselves is complex and poorly understood. (Kanie and Biermann 2017, ch 6) While ending poverty (goal #1) and hunger (goal #2) and promoting good health (goal #3) and clean water and sanitation (#6) are reasonably well understood, promoting sustainable cities (goal #11) and responsible consumption (goal #12) are much less well understood. The connections between the goals have not yet been meaningfully addressed, so that there are no instruments in place to assure that unanticipated consequences don't emerge in one area as a consequence of progress in another. For instance, achieving sustainability in life on land (goal #15) may well yield pressures on life below water (goal #14); and reduced inequalities (goal #10) may well have environmental side effects which are not addressed in the indicators applied to monitoring the reduction of inequality.

Expert advice for implementing the SDGs faces a threefold task: organizing information for the poorly understood SDGs; harvesting best practices in implementation by multiple actors for the SDGs for which shared understandings exist; and providing timely information about the interconnection between the issues.

Organizing information. Implementation requires background conditions about each of the goals. Much of this was already collected during the run up to the adoption of the SDGs, or is readily accessible to the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, which has been tasked with the bureaucratic support for the SDGs. The UN should also be able to see if there are gaps in knowledge and thus seek to create new bodies for them.

Harvesting best practices. Collecting and publicizing best practices for states as well as civil society actors and private firms in order to reach the various goals can be performed by the UN as well. Much of this information is already in the public domain or provided by actors themselves.

Orchestrating knowledge between discrete goals. Successful implementation requires that there are no unanticipated consequences for other areas of sustainability from achieving sustainability in one. Very little is known about the connections between issues because most expertise, and the organization of expertise rests on knowledge about discrete areas of activity. There are very few experts about interconnections. In order to capture these interconnections some form of orchestration needs to be introduced to coordinate information about the interconnections between the goals.

While there already exist many expert panels which organize knowledge about distinct issues,

none operate to connect the issues. A sustainability expert panel must thus be able to tap into a diverse array of expertise across issues. A new panel of panels would orchestrate the flow of information between existing discrete expert panels. Such a meta-panel would serve as an informational switchboard which was able to tap into the existing ecosystem of science panels.

Organizing Expertise for Sustainability

Social science research of the science-policy interface demonstrates that well designed expert panels contribute to the effectiveness of collective governance. The strongest lessons for expert governance comes from the environmental realm, where international science panels have been regularly applied to multilateral environmental regimes since the 1970s, and over 100 such panels are in operation. (Haas and Stevens 2011)

Governments have pursued a trial and error approach to the design of expert panels, relying on high profile previous examples, without probing deeply into the adequacy of their design. (Watson and Gitay 2004; Reid and Mooney 2016) States invoke science to attenuate uncertainty rather than to strategically control the flow of information. (Haas 2015) Thus, states can learn from a systematic study of the design of international science and assessment efforts in order to better apply organized expert knowledge to promote sustainability.

Practitioners (Watson 2005; Nations; 2015, ch 1; Reid and Mooney 2016) and analysts (Haas 2004; Mitchell, Clark et al. 2006; Haas and Stevens 2011) concur that effective scientific guidance provides usable knowledge: expert knowledge which users regard as credible, legitimate and salient. Members of expert panels must enjoy authority based on their independence, as well as accurate track records and provide information which is of a

temporal and geographic time scale to be policy relevant to decision makers.

The GSDR 2015 Report applied a slightly different set of criteria for usable knowledge.

Usable knowledge has become embedded as a criterion for the design of expert scientific panels. At the Fourth Session of the Intergovernmental Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) the USA and Switzerland emphasized the needs for science to conform to IPBES' principles of usable knowledge, focusing on scientific independence, credibility and timeliness. The USA called for applying principles of usable knowledge to the IPBES: saying that its reports should adhere to principles of scientific independence and credibility, and supported practical timelines. Switzerland said that reports should be credible and of high quality. [Earth Negotiations Bulletin 31: 23 February 2016 p 1]

The Ozone Trends Panel appended to the Montreal Ozone Protocol and its subsequent governance is one of the best examples of where a well-designed science panel was successfully able to impart its technical expertise to an efficient and scientifically warranted governance regime for ozone depleting substances. (Parson 1993; Parson 2003) Expert advice contributed to the adoption of an effective treaty which led governments to rapidly eliminate a number of ozone depleting chemicals. International expert panels drawing from the scientific community and the private sector were able to rapidly identify and develop regulations for additional ozone depleting substances.

National experiences confirm these lessons about institutional design and the recognition by states of the need for independent, impartial technical advice. Independent, nonpartisan agencies are insulated from politics by professional staffing, long term appointments and political balance in top

level administration. The United States International Trade Commission (USITC) contributes nonpartisan expert advice to the US Congress and Office of the Special Trade Representative about trade disputes, thus preventing trade wars and politically motivated protectionism. (Goldstein 1986) Federal reserve banks are also insulated from political meddling, and enable the provision of technically warranted policy advice. (Vibert 2007)

An orchestration panel must be able to provide usable knowledge as well as easily coordinate the knowledge of other, existing panels. Based on institutional design lessons drawn from other expert panels, (Haas and Stevens 2011) such an orchestration panel should:

- 1) be composed of independent experts with international reputations in their fields, drawn from multiple disciplines.
- 2) Be composed of experts from academia, civil society and the private sector in order to capture multiple perspectives on sustainability.
- 3) Members should be appointed based on merit by impartial authorities.
- 4) members should be recruited based on merit representing a diverse array of countries
- 5) the panel should have stable funding, and not be dependent upon a single funding source
- 6) It should meet regularly and report directly to governments through the UN HLPF.
- 7) It should seek to be clear on areas of consensus and contestation.

While a diversity of knowledge is necessary to capture the complexities of sustainability, one must exercise discretion in choosing members of the panel. Too many cooks spoil the broth. The panel should not value inclusiveness over effectiveness. Relevant knowledge, and the ability

to deliberate with others is a necessary credential for panel members.

Conclusion

Sustainability is too important to be left up to governments alone. Implementing the SDGs will require expert inputs to help identify best

practices, gaps in knowledge and practices, to monitor threats, and help promote public awareness and concern. A new orchestrating expert panel reporting to the HLPF can help capture the interlinkages between sustainability goals, and help develop public support for implementing the SDGs.

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