

Sri Lanka
State of the Economy Report 2016

Chapter 13
Sustainable Development Goals: Challenges in
Implementation

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13. Sustainable Development Goals: Challenges in Implementation

13.1 Introduction

At the United Nations Sustainable Development Summit on 25 September 2015, the world leaders agreed to the adoption of the "2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development". This agenda includes 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) broadly aimed to end poverty and hunger, combat inequalities within and among countries, build peaceful, just and inclusive societies, protect human rights and promote gender equality and empowerment of women and girls, and ensure the lasting protection of the planet and its natural resources.¹ To monitor progress on the 17 goals, 169 targets have been identified. These are to be achieved by 2030, with SDGs set to guide decisions on development and related matters over the next 15 years.

The SDGs go much further than the MDGs which had only 8 goals and 18 targets; the SDGs seek not only to build on the MDGs, but also to balance the three dimensions of sustainable development - economic growth, environmental sustainability, and social inclusion. With a broader agenda reflected in 17 goals and 169 targets, it will clearly not be an easy task to implement and regularly monitor them, unless proper mechanisms are in place

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to do so. For SDGs to be successful, cooperation across governments, private sectors, civil society as well as the people will be critical, with national governments playing

¹ Section 3 in the declaration of the Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 25th September, 2015 A/RES/70/1.

a key role. In this context, the Policy Brief examines the background to SDGs and some of the implementation challenges for Sri Lanka in the years ahead.

13.2 What is Sustainable Development?

Sustainable development is defined as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs".² At the 2005 World Summit it was noted that this requires the reconciliation of environmental, social and economic demands - the 'three pillars' of sustainability. As such, sustainable development depends entirely on how well the social, economic and environmental objectives or needs are balanced, when making decisions on development and other related issues.

Environmental sustainability is concerned with the natural environment and how it remains diverse and productive. As natural resources are derived from the environment, addressing climate change and air quality, maintaining water quality and availability, and protecting nature, are of particular concern. As natural resources are also limited, initiatives to minimize unnecessary over consumption or waste of such resources is necessary. Use of renewable energy; reducing fossil fuel consumption and emissions; adopting sustainable agriculture and fishing,³ organic farming, tree planting to replace what is being consumed; recycling and better waste management; sustainable use of oceans/seas,

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freshwater resources, as well as forests, mountains and dry lands, protection of biodiversity, ecosystems and wildlife etc., are some of the examples of how natural resources can be protected and preserved for the use of future generations as well.

² World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987.

³ Sustainable agriculture consists of environmentally friendly methods of farming that allow the production of crops or livestock without damaging the natural systems. It involves preventing any adverse effects on soil, water, biodiversity, surrounding or downstream resources, as well as to those involved in agriculture activities or those living in agriculture areas or in the neighbourhoods of agricultural areas.

Box 13.1

Sustainable Development Goals

1. End poverty in all its forms everywhere;
2. End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture;
3. Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages;
4. Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all;
5. Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls;
6. Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all;
7. Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all;
8. Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all;
9. Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization, and foster innovation;
10. Reduce inequality within and among countries;
11. Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable;
12. Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns;
13. Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts;
14. Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development;
15. Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification and halt and reverse land degradation, and halt biodiversity loss;
16. Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels;
17. Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development

Social issues of sustainable development aim to improve living standards and quality of lives, both present and for future generations. Access to certain basic goods and services in order to lead a healthy, fulfilling and productive life is a key tenet. For instance, in the sphere of education, it requires that all people should have access to life-long learning opportunities, as well as opportunities to earn and have a decent living; in the sphere of health, it calls for

all to have access to adequate health care facilities and nutrition, with the elderly receiving medical care, social security benefits, pensions, etc.

Social sector issues are also closely linked to economic issues. For example, it is the poor, especially those living in remote rural areas who are least likely to have access to adequate health care, education, family planning

services, etc. The combined effects of these make it difficult for families to meet basic needs and escape from the poverty trap. Social issues are also linked to environmental concerns; for instance, contaminated water increases water-borne diseases and create health concerns; pollution in areas with a high concentration of industries or excessive use of vehicles can also lead to health problems. All these in turn will increase the burden on a country's health care system.

It is only when social conditions are looked at in combination with economic and environmental issues that the full impact of decisions related to development is properly understood. As such, any decision to improve the quality of life and well-being of the people today will have to be made without harming the environment and over-exploiting natural resources. Thus, balancing the social, economic and environment objectives in development is a central feature of the SDG agenda.

Thus, the SDGs are part of an important shift in thinking about development; MDGs were mainly about the poor and reducing poverty, focusing on ending extreme poverty, hunger, and preventable disease. The SDGs recognize that poverty is rooted in a whole system of inequality and injustice that calls for a broader focus on issues of governance, transparency, and creating peaceful and inclusive societies. Therefore, the SDGs go far beyond the poor, with goals proposed for urbanization, infrastructure, standards of governance, income inequality, climate change, etc. The SDGs also differed by allowing a much wider process of consultation and an unprecedented process of

stakeholder involvement. The broadness of the agenda and the complexity of 17 goals and 169 targets have also drawn criticism. While SDGs appear to be well-intentioned, the problem is that they do not reflect effective prioritization, which is critical when resources are limited.

13.3 Sri Lanka and the SDGs

Sri Lanka made considerable progress in achieving its MDGs.⁴ Out of a total of 26 indicators which had clear targets, only two indicators were not on track to be achieved by 2015. Free education, universal health care and a number of welfare programmes implemented for more than six decades have contributed to these impressive achievements in education, health and living conditions. However, despite the success at national level, there are variations between regions, as well as between socio-economic groups, which need to be addressed. In addition, implementing SDGs and achieving them by 2030 is likely to be more difficult and challenging; SDGs will require an unprecedented joint effort on the part of the government, civil society, private sector, and the public with additional funds to be allocated over the next 15 years.

13.3.1 Institutional Arrangements for SDGs

Sri Lanka has already taken a number of policy initiatives towards sustainable development, well before the adoption of the 2030 Agenda in September 2015. The National Council of Sustainable Development (NCSD) was

⁴ UN (2015), "MDG Country Report 2014 – Sri Lanka", United Nations, Colombo.

established in 2009, chaired by the Head of State, to ensure political commitment at the highest level to harmonize economic growth and environmental sustainability. The Sustainable Development Unit (SDU) of the Ministry of Mahaweli Development and Environment serves as the secretariat to the NCS. The responsibilities of the SDU include development of strategic plans for protection of the environment, disseminating knowledge on sustainable development, stakeholder coordination, promotion of a 'green economy' in national development programmes, facilitate promotion of cleaner production concepts, implementation of sustainable water management initiatives, etc. These activities cover mainly the SDGs 11 to 15, which are directly related to environmental issues. However, the SDGs are much broader than this and require a wider participation of stakeholders to ensure a successful outcome.

The integrated nature of the SDGs requires a suitable institutional arrangement, within and across national and regional administrations, involving multiple ministries, departments and other government institutions. The Ministry of National Policies and Economic Affairs (MONPEA) is expected to play a key role in coordination, as there are many crosscutting issues to be addressed. Ideally, a high powered coordinating body should have the necessary authority to direct, coordinate, monitor and evaluate performance of all activities to be carried out by multiple ministries, departments and other government institutions. It is also important for the MONPEA to play a lead role in the planning and implementation of SDGs, as there should be coherence between SDGs and national development strategies whereby SDGs are mainstreamed into national development planning.

Aside from national level considerations, the linkages between planning at national, sub-national and local levels also need to be coordinated. Thus, translating the ambitious SDGs into a workable action plan will be a considerable challenge to a country like Sri Lanka, with limited financial and human resources at its disposal. At present, ministries, departments and government agencies which are expected to implement specific SDGs have separate budgets, communication channels and monitoring systems. In cross-sectoral planning, it is necessary for them to effectively collaborate in areas, including sharing of information, human resources, technology, strategy designing, as well as in monitoring and evaluation processes of SDG related activities.

Thus, priority must be given to establish a high powered coordinating body or inter-ministerial group, and endorsed at the highest political level. Whilst MONPEA can take the lead, other subject ministries of Finance, Environment, Health, Education, Social Services, Agriculture, Labour, Industries, as well as the chambers of commerce, the Department of Census and Statistics, research institutions and other relevant stakeholders must also be represented in this group. Its primary responsibilities should be:

- Coordinate all activities related to SDGs and ensure that all three dimensions of sustainable development are well balanced in the implementation stage
- Direct planning and development of SDG implementation strategies at national, as well as sub-national and local levels, based on a long-term plan that maps out targets, milestones, and steps that need to be taken, including financing needs

- Develop a national monitoring framework and an accompanying set of national indicators (based on the UN recommended set of indicators), as necessary
- Document present status of SDG related indicators to monitor progress
- Develop and implement an effective awareness programme on SDGs to support implementation
- Compile or update a progress report on SDGs at least once in 3-4 years

- Consult with key stakeholders to obtain necessary feedback in regard to lagging regions, disadvantaged groups, etc.

13.3.2 Implementing SDGs

On establishing a coordinating body, developing an effective awareness programme is a second important step; the complexity and crosscutting issues between SDG goals need to be spelt out clearly and simply. The UNDP and other UN agencies can take the lead in implementing an efficient and effective

Box 13.2

Sri Lanka's Unfinished MDG Agenda

Sri Lanka is still lagging behind in some key areas of the MDG agenda. These items/areas need to be precisely targeted through effective interventions and policy action if the country is to achieve the SDGs by 2030. Some of the lagging items/areas are:

Poverty: Although Sri Lanka was successful in achieving poverty targets seven years before 2015, there are regional variations and vulnerable groups. Districts such as Mullaitivu, Monaragala, Mannar and Batticaloa, and some socio-economic groups such as those living in households headed by labourers, skilled agricultural workers, disabled persons or persons too old to work are still lagging behind.

Income inequality: Income inequality in Sri Lanka is high and has remained more or less unchanged for more than three decades.

Female labour force participation: Female labour force participation at around 35 per cent remains too low.

Under-nutrition among children under 5 years: Child under-nutrition of around 20 per cent at the national level and at around 30 per cent in the estate sector is too high.

High school dropout rate after compulsory age for schooling (5 to 14 years): Dropout rates of around 15 per cent in the age group 15-16 years and around 40 per cent in the age group 17-18 years are high.

Inadequate facilities for science education: Of schools with A/L classes, only 26 per cent have facilities for science education. As such, many children in rural areas do not have access to schools with science education.

Infant mortality/under five mortality/maternal mortality: Although Sri Lanka has been successful in reducing the mortality rates, there are regional variations.

HIV/AIDS: Although Sri Lanka remains a low prevalence country, the number of cases is gradually increasing.

Forest cover: Although Sri Lanka has managed to reverse the loss of forest cover, continuous attention of relevant authorities is needed, as environmental sustainability is one of the main concerns in SDGs.

SDGs will require an unprecedented joint effort if Sri Lanka is to achieve them by 2030

The proposed framework has 17 goals and 169 targets:



At the United Nations Sustainable Development Summit on 25th September 2015, the world leaders agreed to the adoption of the '2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.' As such it is the responsibility of all countries to develop suitable strategies to implement SDGs with the aim to achieving them during the next 15 years.

awareness programme. In addition, given the many SDG goals and targets to be achieved in the context of limited resources, identifying national priorities for implementation is critical. This requires an initial stock-taking exercise to better understand the priorities for implementation. It is important to note that identifying priorities does not mean choosing one goal at the expense of another. The SDGs are an integrated set, which are interdependent and complementary. As such, prioritization means, identifying those areas lagging furthest behind and taking necessary policy action to ensure rapid progress.

Since an initial snapshot is a rapid exercise, data will have to be obtained from existing official statistics, generated through national surveys and censuses, administrative records, satellite imagery and other forms of available data, disaggregated to the greatest extent possible. The exercise will also help identify existing data gaps.

After an analysis of the present status and prioritization, attention must be devoted to developing strategies to meet the SDGs across national and sub-national levels. Strategies need to be time bound and focused. For instance, a new SDG target is to eradicate extreme poverty throughout the country and to reduce poverty based on national definition to at least half by 2030. It is estimated that in 2012/13, 3.5 per cent of Sri Lankans were in extreme poverty and 6.7 per cent were below the national poverty line. Although the proportion of population in poverty is low compared to most developing countries, bringing extreme poverty to zero will be a challenging task. To achieve this, it will be necessary to properly identify people in extreme poverty and target them more precisely in welfare programmes.

Another example which is directly related to poverty is income inequality. The DCS HIES 2012/13 data indicate that the poorest in Sri Lanka are those living in households headed by agricultural and non-agricultural labourers and those headed by persons who are disabled or too old to work. The SDGs require countries to "progressively achieve and sustain economic growth of the bottom 40 per cent of the population at a rate higher than the national average". Income inequality in Sri Lanka has remained more or less unchanged for more than 2-3 decades. While the share of household income of the poorest quintile has remained around 5 per cent, the corresponding share of the richest quintile has remained at more than 50 per cent throughout; the Gini coefficient for household income has remained at around 0.48. As such, it would be necessary adopt suitable policies, especially fiscal, wage and social protection policies to ensure progressive achievement and sustained income growth of the bottom 40 per cent of the population at a rate higher than the national average.

Given the magnitude of the tasks, mobilizing adequate public and private resources in key sustainable development initiatives is important. Financial needs assessments should be transparent and account for both operating and capital costs. Areas requiring investments include health, education, social protection, food security, infrastructure, etc. The private sector can be incentivized to collaborate in areas such as: (i) sustainable production process, (ii) regenerative use of natural resources, (iii) improved social protection for labour, (iv) corporate social responsibility initiatives, etc.

13.3.3 Filling Data Gaps to Monitor SDGs

The success of the SDG Agenda depends on careful monitoring of the progress pertaining to each goal. For effective monitoring, it is essential to have high quality, timely, and reliable data disaggregated as far as possible by geographical location, gender, age, socio-economic status, etc. Disaggregated data are essential to ensure equitable progress to allow countries to identify progress of any particular group or groups or regions, so that necessary corrective action can be taken to minimize or eliminate such inequalities.

Collecting quality data to compile a broad range of indicators on sustainable development on a regular basis requires a modernized statistical system. As such, it is prudent to undertake a comprehensive needs assessment of data required to compile SDG indicators and possible sources for such data, frequency, level of disaggregation, and the cost of collecting, processing, analysing and maintaining a comprehensive data base. The data will allow governments to make evidence-based course corrections, periodically.

In Sri Lanka, tracking the progress of SDGs will increase demands on the DCS to collect, compile, analyse and disseminate statistical data in new areas, especially related to the environment. In addition, the number of indicators to be monitored has increased by around four times compared to MDGs. Moreover, new technologies will need to be adopted; for example, satellite imagery to estimate crop and forest cover, disaster impacts, measuring air quality, etc., to fill the existing data gaps. Qualitative methods of data collection may also have to be used together with

quantitative approaches, to enhance understanding on SDGs and thereby to improve the monitoring and evaluation processes.

The new demand for statistics in turn will require a substantial increase in financial and human resources to improve the statistical system and to build the capabilities of the DCS, as well as other relevant agencies responsible for collecting and providing the necessary data/information. The support of the international agencies will be essential for this purpose.

13.4 Summary of Recommendations

This Policy Brief concentrated mainly on the importance of establishing a high powered coordinating body with necessary authority to coordinate and monitor the progress of all activities related to implementation of SDGs, and what Sri Lanka needs to focus on to achieve the SDGs by end 2030. A summary of the recommendations are given below.

- Establish a high powered coordinating body or inter-ministerial group, to plan and develop SDG strategies to implement them at national, sub-national, and local levels
- The above body should coordinate all activities related the SDGs and it should specifically ensure that all three dimensions of sustainable development - economic growth, environmental sustainability, and social inclusion - are well balanced when implementing by the relevant ministries, departments or any other government or private agency
- Develop an effective awareness programme to make all stakeholders aware of SDGs and their responsibilities in implementing and achieving the goals by 2030. The awareness programme

should also be extended to the general public including school children as well

- Take stock of the present status of SDG indicators, using all available information and identify the data gaps
- Study each SDG and related targets carefully and develop detailed action plans to implement each SDG (this may have to be done by ministries/ departments/government agencies responsible for each SDG)
- Identify crosscutting issues related to SDGs (where attention and collaboration

of more than one ministry/department/ government agency is required)

- Further develop the statistical system and capabilities of the DCS as well as in other agencies in which data required for SDGs are collected and compiled
- Collect all data required to compile the SDG indicators on a regular basis
- Monitor the progress of SDGs regularly, and take action if any indicators are not on track
- Prepare SDG progress reports at least once in 3-4 years.