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The sustainable development goals provide an important framework for addressing dangerous climate change and achieving wider public health benefits

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: To suggest how public health systems and the health sector can utilise the United Nation (UN) sustainable development goals (SDGs) to address climate change and other threats to future health and deliver immediate public health benefits.

Study design and methods: We examined UN and World Health Organisation guidance on SDGs and other published texts on systems thinking, integration, universality and co-benefits.

Results and conclusions: The UN SDGs are a set of globally agreed objectives to end poverty, protect all that makes the planet habitable and ensure that all people enjoy peace and prosperity. The SDGs integrate the three dimensions of sustainable development (economic, environmental and social), they apply to high-income countries as well as developing countries and there are mechanisms to hold countries to account. There are three crucial issues for public health. First, a systems approach to future proof health and social justice. Second, an evidence-based approach to aid communication, framing and engagement. And, third, the importance of interventions that deliver health co-benefits (i.e. both immediate and long-term benefits to health, equity and prosperity). The SDGs present public health professionals with an important opportunity to create the right conditions for a better future through the organised efforts of society.

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Introduction

The United Nation (UN) sustainable development goals (SDGs) are a set of objectives within a universal global agreement signed by the 193 UN member states in 2015 to end poverty, protect all that makes the planet habitable and ensure that all people enjoy peace and prosperity, now and in the future.¹ The goals were adopted to address the overwhelming evidence that the world needs a radically more sustainable approach to secure a healthy and prosperous future for all. However, it is misguided to see the SDGs as simple successors to the millennium development goals² (MDGs). They are part of a temporal sequence (each covering a decade and a half); they both have goals and targets, and they were both developed by UN's member states. However, there are crucial differences in the purpose, ambition and scale of the SDGs.

First, the goals allow a more logical and practical integration of the three dimensions of sustainable development³ (economic, environmental and social), and the links between these dimensions should be well recognised by the public health community.

Second, the SDGs are universal; they apply to high-income countries as well as developing countries. Although there is some debate about how this universality should be interpreted,⁴ there is a very clear requirement for leadership and responsibility on sustainable development implementation, particularly from those countries that have contributed most to current pressures on our planetary boundaries.⁵

Third, it is member states themselves that are responsible for monitoring progress nationally and sub-nationally; although this process is designed to be country-led and country-driven, consistency and scrutiny should apply via the UN's guidelines for voluntary national reviews.⁶

The SDG process has real challenges. The 17 goals and 169 targets can only be achieved if taken forward collectively and collaboratively—often between people and groups with who have traditionally embraced separate languages, cultures and approaches.⁷ For example, making good progress on goals 1–4 (poverty, hunger, health and education) and failing badly on goals 12–15 (consumption, climate action, life on water and life on land) will simply mean that we have doubled the misery and inequality for future generations. Similarly, addressing planetary survival by simply limiting development among the most disadvantaged populations will likely lead to future conflict, mass migration, civil disorder and widespread increasing mortality. If the MDGs were about our responsibility for human equity and social justice today, then the SDGs add custodianship; our duty and responsibilities to future generations, to other species and to the world's ecosystems.

We suggest three approaches, from a public health perspective, that we think are worth exploring in more detail:

- Developing a systems approach to future-proof health and social justice (particularly via the governance of agreed actions);
- Constructing a narrative to aid communication, framing and engagement on evidence-based practice; and

- Focusing on interventions that can deliver most health co-benefits (i.e. both immediate and long-term benefits to health, equity and prosperity).

Developing a systems approach to future-proof health and social justice

The SDGs bring together key international initiatives that risk being pursued independently or even at cross purposes. These include the Rio Earth Summit leading to Agenda 21,⁸ the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction,⁹ the Addis Ababa Action Agenda on Financing for Development¹⁰ and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change¹¹ that led to the 2015 Paris Agreement.¹² If we are to align all of these, we need public health professionals to understand the crucial role of broader, interrelated approaches and the contributions of non-health areas to improving health, equity and sustainability. This is fundamentally a systems approach to public health,¹³ as exemplified by 'Health in all Policies'¹⁴ and should not be new to the public health community. However, systems-based working has been easier to support in theory than to deliver in practice. Perhaps, this is because existing governance systems are based on competition (between countries, between government departments and between sectors) or because they favour economic growth over environmental and social goals.^{15,16}

Climate change and impending environmental collapse should make systems thinking increasingly core to all public health endeavours, but this requires us to accept that our preferred agenda may not be the best means to achieving our preferred goals. The world is too complex and inter-related to ring fence problems, challenges and their solutions. Consequently, as the SDG framework gains momentum, we should not focus only on Goal 3 (Health) or Goal 13 (Climate Action) or even the direct relationship between them but on all 17 goals and their inter-relationships.

Constructing a narrative to aid communication, framing and engagement on evidence-based practice

At an individual level, it is easy to feel overwhelmed by the scale of the issues and actions required by the SDGs, and the science can seem too complex for local application. Consequently, the required actions, from national to personal, are prone to denial and disavowal.¹⁷ Furthermore, there plenty of unscrupulous actors intent on ignoring or discrediting scientific evidence on climate change and other health risks.¹⁸

However, some of the best evidence-based practice, for example, action to reduce motorised transport, support recycling and enhance biodiversity, can be made understandable and relevant through innovative framing and engagement. The evidence needs to be well communicated and made very practical. Climate change, as a pre-eminent 21st century public health issue,¹⁹ can be framed as a practical entry point into other dimensions of sustainable development and public health, but focussing only on climate change may be

counterproductive and alienating. This may be mitigated by using evidence of wider benefits of action on climate change such as the links between urban green-space and biodiversity, reducing greenhouse gas emissions in a way that improves air quality and liveable streets and reducing fuel poverty by carbon neutral homes. Such a cross-dimensional approach to climate change and other planetary threats can demonstrate the benefits of a sustainable development approach to all public health actions in the same ways as other classic frameworks such as Lalonde,²⁰ Maslow²¹ or Dahlgren and Whitehead.²²

Although the health impacts of climate change are relatively well understood at governmental level, the health sector does not consistently nor ambitiously use its enormous potential to act, particularly considering how many people it employs and its wider economic impacts. These actions can lead to an even greater health dividend when compared with that offered by health care alone.²³ The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015²⁴ and the Public Services (Social Value) Act 2012 (England and Wales)²⁵ are notable examples, however currently under-used, of how national policies can be used to stimulate, legitimise and normalise sustainable policies for health and well-being at a sector level.

Focusing on interventions that can deliver most health co-benefits

The third reason for health professionals to embrace the importance of the SDGs lies in the concept of health co-benefits. Many of the actions needed to support long-term mitigation of climate change (less car use, reduced meat consumption, more renewable energy, increased biodiversity, more sustainable use of land and soil...) have immediate health benefits through increased physical activity, better air quality reduced calorie and saturated fat consumption and more contact with the natural environments leading to better mental and community health. Similarly, many of the actions needed for climate change adaptation also have direct and positive health benefits: greening urban environments can reduce flooding and temperatures and promote greater use of healthy green spaces and locally grown food. These immediate health benefits of mitigation (avoiding the unmanageable) and adaptation (managing the unavoidable) help connect health and sustainable development in very practical ways and can make climate change actions much more relevant to professionals, policymakers and the public.²⁶

Conclusion

The integrating nature of the SDG framework can be a powerful way to avoid false choices between economic growth, environmental protection and social well-being, by identifying the multiple wins across the three domains of sustainable development: environmental, social and economic (sometimes more memorably termed: planet, people and prosperity). These three dimensions of sustainable development can only be effectively addressed by a systems approach where multiple actions lead to multiple benefits (rather than a simpler and more linear model of isolated cause

and effect). The SDGs could be our best chance of creating the right conditions for a better future through the organised efforts of society.²⁷ The aim is to refocus from endless economic growth alone and to an approach which acknowledges that fairer economic and social prosperity for all can only be achieved by simultaneously addressing unsustainable development and climate change. Such actions include a more resilient and renewable global energy system, more humane and healthy food systems and a world where consumption, growth and environmental degradation are socially costed. If we continue to see the creation of a fair and sustainable future for all living systems as something unaffordable, too difficult and a task for the next generation, we will leave a legacy of being willfully blind to the biggest public health challenges and opportunities of our time.

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