

Dissenting Report from Coalition Senators

Introduction

Australia was active in shaping the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and supported the inclusion of standalone goals for economic growth (SDG8), peace and good governance (SDG16), oceans (SDG14), and gender equality (SDG5).¹ Coalition Senators welcome the Federal Government's commitment to implementing the SDGs in Australia. Achieving the SDGs is in Australia's interests because it will:

...contribute to lasting regional and global prosperity, productivity and stability. The SDGs are consistent with Australian Government priorities and long-standing efforts across a range of sectors such as health, education, agriculture, water, the environment, the economy, and gender equality.²

Coalition Senators note that in supporting the SDGs, the Federal Government was clear that it wanted to see meaningful action over benchmarks for benchmarks sake. This is the same approach Australia took to its Presidency of the G20 in 2014.

That said, Coalition Senators firmly contend that Australia as the most free, democratic and prosperous nation in the world should be considered as the gold-standard in terms of all of the SDGs. While there is always room for improvement, Coalition Senators are disappointed by the approach taken by Labor and Greens which focuses on over-regulating the implementation of these goals rather than either celebrating the positive situation Australia is in and how we can better support lagging nations around the world to implement the SDGs.

The Federal Government's governance arrangements

Australia has successfully presented its first Voluntary National Review (VNR) and established the whole of government arrangements required to advance the SDGs.

Since first committing to the SDGs in 2015, the Federal Government has decided to 'mainstream' the SDGs across government. This has involved the creation of governance arrangements and initiatives that are facilitating the implementation of the SDGs across government without overturning longstanding budgetary and policy processes. Individual departments and agencies have been given the flexibility to integrate the SDGs into their work, and share information and best practice through an Interdepartmental Committee (IDC).

The IDC is co-chaired by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) and the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (PM&C). It is comprised of Deputy Secretaries representing a range of departments and agencies, demonstrating the Federal Government's commitment to the SDGs.

1 Australian Government, *Report on the implementation of the SDGs*, 2018, p. 7.

2 Australian Government, *Report on the implementation of the SDGs*, 2018, p. 6.

Among other things, the IDC provides a forum for ensuring that data is contributed to the Federal Government's online Reporting Platform on the SDG Indicators. Launched in July 2018, the Platform is expected to reduce the potential reporting burden and streamline reporting for other purposes, such as the Sendai Framework. The Platform was described in the evidence as 'a great initiative [that] provides a useful centralised database where one can access official data on the SDGs'.³

Working with non-government stakeholders

Progress on the SDGs requires partnership with all sectors of Australian society and all levels of government. The IDC has received information from business and non-profit stakeholders, a positive practice which is expected to continue.

Many stakeholders were also invited to provide input during the development of Australia's first VNR, including local, state and territory governments; civil society organisations; business bodies; science agencies and universities; communities and individuals. This consultative approach resulted in Australia's successful presentation of its VNR to the United Nations in 2018.

The Federal Government has partnered with stakeholders more broadly, for example, it provided funding for the 2018 Australian SDGs Summit. In addition, it has supported the Global Compact Network Australia (GCNA) to engage the private sector on the SDGs and to develop the Australian SDG website. This website provides Australia with 'a live and ongoing platform to centralise and showcase action being taken across government, business, civil society and academia to advance the SDGs in the Australian context'.⁴

Supporting the SDGs across the region

Australia's overseas development program, which was \$3.9 billion in 2017–18, already makes a strong contribution to the SDGs.⁵ Coalition Senators accept evidence from DFAT that it is 'actively supporting developing country partners to engage with the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda', with a particular focus on the Indo-Pacific region.⁶

Coalition Senators also recognise and welcome the Federal Government's shift in focus to ensure that its overseas development program is outcomes focused rather than on simple financial outlays.

Evidence to the Inquiry largely agreed that aspects of Australia's official development assistance (ODA) programme, particularly relating to gender equality and disability inclusive development, are in alignment with the SDGs.⁷ Coalition Senators also welcome the Government's focus on providing meaningful assistance and support to

3 Professor Graciela Metternicht *Committee Hansard*, 2 November 2018, p. 9.

4 <https://sdgs.org.au/about-us/> (accessed 6 February 2019).

5 DFAT, *Submission 60*, p. 11.

6 DFAT, *Submission 60*, p. 4.

7 See, for example, the Australian Council for International Development, *Submission 135*, p. 11.

countries in the Indo-Pacific on the implementation of the SDGs to help foster economic growth, peace and good governance.

Therefore, Coalition Senators concur with the Committee's recommendation that the Australian Government continue to integrate the SDGs throughout the international development program in line with the Government's commitment to an outcomes focused ODA programme.

The focus of the United Nations

While Coalition Senators remain supportive of the SDGs and the implementation of them, we are concerned with the continued approach of the United Nations in investing time and resources in assessing Australia's technical compliance with both the SDGs and other areas of government policies while turning a blind eye to genuine human rights abuses elsewhere in the world. An example of this is the continual criticism of Australia's approach to ensure an orderly migration programme to prevent drownings at sea while at the same time, the UN has been silent on the plight of Asia Bibi.

Similarly, Coalition Senators find it difficult to have confidence in the SDGs relating to improving human rights in circumstances where the UN Security Council continues to include amongst its membership some of the worst human rights offenders in modern history.

Noting that the Australian taxpayer funds the UN to the tune of tens of millions of dollars each year, Coalition Senators encourage the unelected officials of the UN to reconsider some of its recent actions which seem to indicate it wants to be a left-wing think tank rather than a promoter of peace and good to the world.

Concluding comments

Coalition Senators are concerned that many of the Committee's recommendations would create an unnecessary layer of bureaucracy, regulation and expense for no benefit whatsoever.

This is particularly evident given that the SDGs are in alignment with Australian values and the Federal Government is already taking action to promote the agenda. Its responsible approach to mainstreaming the SDGs across the Federal Government has already put in place the foundations needed to pursue the goals.

On that basis, Coalition Senators respectfully encourage the Government to ignore the recommendations of the majority report.

Senator the Hon Eric Abetz
Deputy Chair
Liberal Senator for Tasmania

Senator the Hon James McGrath
LNP Senator for Queensland

