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Inquiry into the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals
Submission from Monash University

The understanding and awareness of the SDGs across the Australian Government and in the wider Australian community

On the whole, the awareness and understanding of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) agenda across the Australian Government and in the wider Australian community is low. There are pockets across Government, the private sector and the broader community that are informed and engaged in relation to the SDGs. A notable development is ANZ Bank's recent SDG bond, which raised €750 million to fund ANZ loans and expenditures that directly promote nine of the United Nations' 17 SDGs. More generally, there is significant opportunity to raise the community's base level of knowledge around the SDGs, which we consider would provide a valuable foundation for increased engagement and involvement with this agenda.

Intergenerational equity is at the heart of the SDGs. Given this, the engagement of younger Australians in the SDG agenda is essential. Not only are they more committed than the population as a whole to wider notions of well-being than economic growth alone, but they are also at the vanguard of mobilising action around broader perspectives. In this respect, platforms such as *SDG Zone*, an initiative of SDSN Youth, are critical for engaging school students and young people about the SDGs, providing sector-specific resources and encouraging them to take action in their local communities. The SDG zone is part of a larger effort, the SDG Students Program, which seeks to ensure that university students attending one of SDSN's 800+ member universities have an understanding of the SDGs and can engage with them at the local level.

We see the Australian Government's recent involvement in the SDGs Summit as an important step in elevating the profile of the SDGs and providing a strong foundation for further commitment to SDG implementation following the Voluntary National Review process. At Monash University, we are actively working on world-leading research, education and enterprise focused projects aligned to the SDGs, delivering innovative and integrated SDG solutions at local, national and international scales. One recent example is our AU$42M project on Revitalising Informal Settlements and their Environments (RISE) project, funded by the Wellcome Trust and Asian Development Bank. This 5 year, randomised controlled trial project works in 24 informal settlements across Indonesia and Fiji and aims to provide the evidence base and proof of concept that a localised, water sensitive approach to upgrading informal settlements can deliver sustainable, cost-effective improvements in health and the environment.

Monash University also hosts the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) in Australia-Pacific and SDSN Youth, and supports the National Sustainable Development Council. Further, Monash University has recently committed to net zero carbon emissions by 2030, and will establish a microgrid on its campuses to trial cutting-edge alternative energy technologies.

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The potential costs, benefits and opportunities for Australia in the domestic implementation of the SDGs

Implementation of the SDG agenda presents significant opportunities for Australia. It provides a global platform for Australia to demonstrate regional leadership in working towards realisation of the SDG agenda. For many countries in our region, the significant challenges of taking action on sustainable development are exacerbated by their limited resources. Nevertheless, it is essential that they do so. Efforts to realise this ambitious global agenda will be substantially undermined without the involvement of our neighbours in the Asia-Pacific.

By taking a leadership role in implementation of the SDGs, Australia's encouragement of concerted action on the SDGs within our region will be far more credible. Further, **the SDGs offer the opportunity for a 'win-win' – they will directly improve wellbeing within Australia, and by helping to end poverty and promote prosperity in the developing countries in our region, they will also reinforce Australia's future economic and security prospects.**

Domestically, SDG implementation also provides an opportunity to tackle some of the big issues across the three thematic areas addressed by the SDGs: prosperity, social inclusion and environmental sustainability. In relation to each theme, the National Sustainable Development Council identified the following priority areas.

- Australia is among the world's wealthy nations, with strong economic growth underpinned by a healthy, educated and safe society, and innovative and liveable cites. However, our persistent failure to plan, prepare and invest well for the future will be borne by the next generation.
- Australia's poor performance on collaboration does not sit well with the SDG focus on working across disciplinary and sectoral boundaries to solve complex problems. Governments have the opportunity to lead by example through how they work with each other and with stakeholders.
- Environmental performance remains Australia's Achilles' heel – across carbon emissions, energy, biodiversity, deforestation and urban sprawl. Many of our unique ecosystems are under threat and Australia is particularly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change.
- Australians are uncertain about their work prospects, would like to work and earn more than they do, and are concerned with the distribution of work's benefits, burdens and opportunities. Cost of living pressures, particularly in relation to housing, compound this sense of insecurity.
- Despite economic growth, Australia has made no progress on improving the relative incomes of its bottom 40%. The core Newstart payment has fallen well below the poverty line, Closing the Gap progress is mixed and access to educational equity remains a concern.
- Trust in how we are governed – not just in governments – has diminished. This reflects not only the challenge of delivering reform, but also decision making processes that are not seen as legitimate, fair and sustainable. This is giving rise to new models of social change.

The SDG agenda also provides a unique opportunity for the Australian Government to take steps to address the declining trust in institutions (Edelman 2018; The Essential Report 2018). Credible independent analysis, utilising the longer time horizons of the SDGs, enables stakeholders to step

back, to examine and interpret medium-term changes, and build shared understanding. If used constructively, this can help counteract the myopia of much of today's public discourse.

Numerous studies also suggest that Australia performs very poorly on measures of collaboration between the business, community, academia and government sectors (Department of Industry, Innovation and Science Australia, Australia 2030: Prosperity through Innovation, 2018). By inviting conversation around complex and interrelated challenges, the SDGs enhance the prospect of greater collaboration. Sustained effort to develop a shared understanding of these issues, and develop more integrated solutions, represents a new opportunity to increase interactions between these sectors. Whilst this represents a longer term program, if the domestic implementation of the SDG agenda to 2030 can be used as a mechanism for substantially improving trust and collaboration, that will be of much wider benefit.

We also observe an increasing awareness, particularly within the business sector, that a social licence to operate is essential both in terms of Directors duties and broader organisational strategy. There is a large gap between Australian and leading global practice in this regard, which creates an additional opportunity for capacity building as part of SDG implementation.

What governance structures and accountability measures are required at the national, state and local levels of government to ensure an integrated approach to implementing the SDGs that is both meaningful and achieves real outcomes?

Given the far-reaching and ambitious agenda outlined by the SDGs, it is important that the governance arrangements for SDG implementation within Australia are similarly broad and inclusive. **We advocate the creation of an independent, expert multi-stakeholder platform, similar to the former National Sustainability Council (2012-2013) and current National Sustainable Development Council. The primary function of such a body would be to create a strong enabling environment for action on the SDGs, without dominating the space.** The SDG agenda is expressly designed to stimulate action by government, business, academia and the community and the input of all sectors is valuable and necessary for realisation of the SDG vision. The value-add of this independent body would be in facilitating alignment and co-ordinated action among various organisations. We envision that local and state governments could also feed into and participate in its processes.

How can performance against the SDGs be monitored and communicated in a way that engages government, businesses and the public, and allows effective review of Australia's performance by civil society?

We see a key role for an independent expert panel (as described above) in measuring and reporting progress towards domestic implementation of the SDG agenda. Effective accountability relies on robust and reliable data analysis and reporting. What we measure is what we value. There is an opportunity to fund the Australian Bureau of Statistics to be an important (but not exclusive) source of information, ensuring high quality data to enhance understanding and guide action. **Importantly, we need an approach to data analysis and reporting that is both independent and credible in order to provide consistent, reliable and trusted evidence, which can not only assist stakeholders and the community to assess progress and but also build public trust and confidence.**

There are two key models that could be adopted for tracking progress against the SDG framework. The first option collects and reports data on agreed metrics at regular intervals to assess progress, as currently reflected in the Intergenerational Report produced by the Australian Government every five years. The second option similarly collects and reports data on agreed metrics, but goes beyond data tracking to provide strategic insight to identify areas in which concerted action could deliver the largest benefits. An example of this type of reporting is **the 'Shifting the Dial' report of the Productivity Commission. Given the complexity of the SDG agenda, we see immense value in this more comprehensive assessment and see a key role for an independent body of experts to monitor and communicate SDG performance.** In light of the 2030 timeframe, we advocate thorough reporting on a biennial basis, with an annual data update.

However, **it is important that the monitoring and communication of performance against the SDGs does not exclusively rely on quantitative measures, but also captures the depth of experience and tacit knowledge of the organisations actively working towards SDG implementation.** To complement the analysis of quantitative data, there would also be value in producing detailed best practice case studies to encourage the transfer of knowledge, facilitate learning and inform the delivery of programs and policies to maximise impact. By analysing and communicating *how* SDG implementation projects and programs are being operationalised in differing contexts, we can better understand the interactions between the various goals and identify strategies to help avoid or minimise perverse or unintended outcomes. Ultimately, this richer picture of SDG implementation could both help assess performance towards the 2030 agenda, and communicate progress along the way to maintain momentum.

What SDGs are currently being addressed by Australia's Official Development Assistance (ODA) Program?

We expect that the Australian Government will have the best data to make this assessment.

Which of the SDGs is Australia best suited to achieving through our ODA program, and should Australia's ODA be consolidated to focus on achieving core SDGs?

The SDG framework is explicitly indivisible. That is, there are not core and non-core SDGs, or primary and secondary goals. All are important and interconnected**. We consider that a broad view of sustainable development is helpful, particularly to maximise the opportunities for initiatives that drive progress on multiple fronts at once. A broad perspective can also help to avoid policies or initiatives focused on one outcome that deliver unintended consequences for another.** This is a learning by doing process, and we have found the SDG framework a useful touchstone for considering interactions within our own research projects. For example the RISE project (described under ToR A) which directly contributes to SDGs on health, water and sanitation, has expanded to ensure implementation processes enhance outcomes in relation to SDG 5 on gender equity.

Australia however, has unique capabilities and expertise in a number of areas, which via the ODA program, could be shared with others in the region and globally. In particular, Australian expertise in water management, extractive industries and agriculture could all be harnessed to support SDG implementation elsewhere.

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As an overarching comment, **it is essential that any decisions to consolidate focus on particular SDGs are supported by a robust, reliable and respected evidence base, and take into account the varying needs across the region. Strong and collaborative engagement with the development sector, particularly those in-country, will be important to ground these assessments in local realities and priorities.**

More generally, Australia should provide ODA recipients support in setting up frameworks for key public institutions and government agencies. This is a key strength in Australia, and capacity building around the development of strong institutional foundations will help ODA recipients with SDG implementation while also enhancing regional stability. Further, there is the opportunity to share cross-sectoral partnership models (Goal 17) already widely adopted in Australia. For example, the Institute for Safety, Compensation and Recovery Research (ISCRR) at Monash University is a leading example of a University–Government partnership enabling evidence-based decision making and innovation to meet strategic industry and public health goals. Since 2009, WorkSafe Victoria and the Transport Accident Commission have jointly invested $72 million into ISCRR to fund a collaborative and globally unique partnership model that develops, executes and translates a broad portfolio of primary research activity. ISCRR projects are closely aligned with the strategic objectives of the two partner organisations and insights are delivered on timelines that allow key decision-making processes to be supported by the best available evidence. Effectively utilising scientific knowledge to create real-world change will be crucial to the achievement of each of the SDGs and ISCRR presents a government-led model that could readily be adapted and applied to any specialist area.

How are countries in the Indo-Pacific responding to implementing the SDGs, and which of the SDGs have been prioritised by countries receiving Australia's ODA, and how could these priorities be incorporated into Australia's ODA program?

Countries across the Indo-Pacific are highly engaged with the SDG agenda and Monash University is actively working with governments across this region to advance SDG implementation. One of these is the Monash-led World Mosquito Program, which works collaboratively with national governments, civil society and research institutes across Indonesia, India, Vietnam, Sri Lanka and the Pacific Islands to help protect the global community from mosquito-borne disease. These programs rest on deployment of community led, sustainable and cost effective public health intervention and builds local capacity and capability. Local governments and communities are embracing the WMP's method in 12 countries (with more in development), which is focused on working with country partners to strengthen regional health security.

Another key area of work is in relation to the climate change and energy related goals. ClimateWorks Australia is working across the Pacific and South-East Asia to support country governments to develop and implement long-term net zero emissions development pathways without compromising economic growth. Delivered through a partnership approach, the program strengthens the capacity of key stakeholders to develop these pathways in a manner that optimises the co-benefits of mitigation with the Sustainable Development Goals. We see significant potential for the Australian Government's ODA program to further support the transfer of knowledge and local capacity building efforts in such key SDG areas.

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Examples of best practice in how other countries are implementing the SDGs from which Australia could learn?

The recent Canadian report 'Progressing National SDGs Implementation' provides a broad review of how nations are approaching their VNR reports specifically. On the issue of SDG monitoring and evaluation there are a variety of approaches that have been taken internationally. At one end of the spectrum there are data collection focused approaches, as in the UK where reporting is housed within the Office of National Statistics and limited to quantitative data reporting on agreed metrics. A step beyond that is an approach that combines data collection with interpretation and insight, reflected by USA's Centre for American Progress, which provides reporting and detailed commentary on the major issues affecting the country. A few countries have gone further to complement data collection and interpretation with detailed best practice case studies.

It is the recent report on Canada's progress published by the Brookings Institution (McArthur and Rasmussen 2017) that we believe provides the most robust and relevant template for how Australia might assess and report its progress against SDG implementation. This report is grounded in data and evidence. While not straying into detailed policy commentary, it also identifies those areas of the SDGs that require significant breakthroughs if targets are to be met. Taken together, these examples demonstrate that SDG reporting exists on a spectrum, from tracking change over time via quantitative data through to more comprehensive analysis that takes a systems perspective and considers global and local trends and influencing factors. We commend in particular the Canadian report, as it not only provides valuable information that can inform a more strategic approach to SDG implementation, but it can also help rebuild trust among all actors.