

Measuring progress in the UK towards achieving the UN's sustainable development goals

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Environment law analysis: On 9 November 2017, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) issued its first progress report on progress made towards measuring the global Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) indicators in the UK. These SDGs are ambitious goals and targets for all countries and the UK is now attempting to measure progress towards achieving them. Chris Badger of 6 Pump Court comments on this ONS report and what other developments we can expect next.

Original news

Report outlines progress of measuring sustainable development goals, [LNB News 20/11/2017 57](#)

The ONS has released a report outlining plans and progress towards better measurement of the SDGs. The report coincides with the launch of a national reporting platform, which indicates progress in relation to the SDGs in both chart and table form. The report highlights, among other things, the challenge of disaggregation when measuring the SDGs and the importance of collaboration when publishing the data.

What are the Sustainable Development Goals?

In 2015, all member states of the United Nations signed up to 17 SDGs. They are intended to set measurable aims for improving the world, covering a different aspect of life including topics such as poverty, hunger, health and wellbeing, education, equality, the environment, justice and the economy.

The 17 goals are underpinned by 169 targets and 232 indicators which can be measured and reported on. Some indicators are easily identifiable as existing national statistics, for example gross domestic product per head, unemployment rate or mortality rates by cause of death. However, for some indicators there is no universally agreed method for measuring them.

What is the background to and purpose of the ONS report?

The SDGs are a universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet and ensure that all people enjoy peace and prosperity by 2030. They are a set of ambitious goals and supporting targets, agreed at the United Nations' Sustainable Development World Summit in September 2015. The goals are universal, for all countries and people, and aim to ensure that we leave no one behind as we strive for progress.

To show what progress the world is making towards the targets, there are 232 indicators to be measured and reported. Each of these indicators should be disaggregated so that we can account for everyone. There are eight main disaggregations to be measured for all indicators. The ONS challenge is to source and interpret data for those that relate to the UK. The ONS is the UK's national statistics institute and is responsible for monitoring the UK's progress towards achieving the SDGs. The ONS says it will:

- source the appropriate UK data for the global indicators
- provide data to the international organisations responsible for each indicators who will report them onwards to the United Nations
- analyse the data so that we can put it into context
- make the data available to everybody using an online tool and supporting reports

The Environmental Audit Committee reported on the Sustainable Development Goals back in April 2017. The report was critical of the approach of the government, which it asserted saw the SDGs as something for the UK to help other countries do, rather than drawing on other countries' experiences in implementing the SDGs here at home. It also criticised the view that updating Single Departmental Plans to incorporate the SDGs would be sufficient to implementing the SDGs by 2030. It said more needed to be done to encourage cross-government working and policy coherence on sustainable development.

What are the key findings of the ONS report?

The ONS has acquired data for 41% of the global indicators (96 out of 232). Progress has been made, but the ONS has identified that it needs to develop the indicators further in collaboration with others and there is still much to do.

The ONS has launched a national reporting platform, where it is possible to view the indicators in a chart or table format, or download the underlying data.

Are any challenges identified in the ONS report?

The main challenge is that it is not considered currently possible to report against all 232 indicators using official statistics. Plans are being developed to identify the information necessary to measure progress, through the World Health Organisation, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development and the World Bank leading the work on those indicators that fall within their expertise.

In addition, the principle of disaggregation presents in itself its own challenges. National statistics do not always allow for disaggregation because of the limits in existing data sources. Enhancing the availability of high quality, timely and reliable data fully disaggregated by the relevant characteristics will be critical to the process of detailed reporting.

What other developments can be expected going forwards?

During the summer, the ONS ran a public consultation asking for feedback on their approach to reporting and prioritising data development for the SDGs. The ONS is currently analysing the results and it is anticipated that the ONS will publish its response to that consultation in December 2017.

Plans for future publications will be informed by the results of this recent consultation. At the moment the vision of the ONS is to release a series of short pieces using a variety of mechanisms to target different audiences and users.

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Interviewed by David Bowden of David Bowden Law

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