Vision 2020 Australia

Submission to the Inquiry into the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals

March 2018

Introduction

Vision 2020 Australia (V2020A) was established in October 2000. We are part of VISION 2020: The Right to Sight, a global initiative of the World Health Organization and the International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness.

As the national peak body for the eye health and vision care sector, Vision 2020 Australia's role is to ensure that eye health and vision care remains high on the health, ageing, disability and international development agendas of Australian governments.

Vision 2020 Australia represents 50 member organisations involved in local and global eye health and vision care, health promotion, low vision support, vision rehabilitation, eye research, professional assistance and community support.

This submission was informed by V2020A's Global Committee. The Committee is made up of representatives providing eye health and vision care expertise to the Indo-Pacific region.

Vision 2020 Australia welcomes the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as an ambitious and targeted agenda for the alleviation of poverty and a world of universal respect for human rights and dignity. The SDGs are set to become the new framework for poverty relief and reducing inequality both in Australia and around the world. Over the next 15 years, this innovative agenda will be an instrumental advocacy tool for the work of Vision 2020 Australia and our members who are involved in: local and global eye care; health promotion; low vision support; vision rehabilitation; eye research; professional assistance and community support.

Vision 2020 Australia and the SDGs

The prism in which Vision 2020 Australia interprets the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is informed by the four strategic pillars of Vision 2020 Australia; prevention and early intervention, independence and participation, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and global advocacy with the pursuit of the following goals:

1. To eliminate avoidable blindness and vision loss in Australia through prevention, early detection and intervention, and improved awareness
2. To improve the ability of Australians who are blind or vision impaired to participate in the community
3. To ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have equity of access to quality eye health and vision care services
4. To ensure evidence supports better, sustainable service and program delivery
5. To ensure that eye health and vision care is regarded as a public health priority in Asia and the Pacific
6. To increase capacity to deliver eye health, vision care and services and supports for independence and participation in Asia and the Pacific

The SDGs describe the need for inclusive development that leaves no one behind, empowering nations to become actors of change. The strategic pillars of Vision 2020 Australia can be clearly identified in the post-2015 development agenda. While health is identified as one of 17 goals within the SDGs: *Ensure healthy lives and promote wellbeing for all at all ages*, thematic links can be drawn to goals relating to water and sanitation, poverty, gender inequality and education.

Importantly, the document references disability 11 times, including in targets related to education, employment and inequality. Increasingly, disability is being framed and addressed as a human rights issue. Given the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) made no reference to persons with disabilities, this is an achievement in itself, presenting a tangible opportunity for the inclusion of people who are blind or vision impaired to be counted.

Summary of recommendations

Foster public discussion around the SDGs to help facilitate national ownership.

A consultation process should be established with the Australian media, to help generate a public conversation around the 2030 Agenda. The engagement of the Australian public is critical to the success of the SDGs, with the majority of Australians being unaware of the UN initiative. The potential benefits for the 2030 Agenda need to be marketed and branded to Australia so people can be informed and involved.

Look to key opportunities.

The elimination of preventable blindness and vision loss, and the full participation of people who are blind of vision impaired in the community provide a key opportunity for Australia to show leadership and reduce inequalities within our community. Vision impairment disproportionately affects those over the age of 50, as well as populations with lower incomes.[1] While approximately 90% of blindness and vision impairment among both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians is preventable or treatable if it is detected early.[2]

Establish an interdepartmental Sustainable Development Committee.

While Australia has declared a whole of government approach to be headed by DFAT and the DPMC, it lacks an interdepartmental body to consolidate and guide SDG implementation.

Develop a Sustainable Development Strategy at the federal level.

Australia is currently lacking a quantifiable and concrete Sustainable Development Strategy, with the most recent strategy being formulated in 1992. This needs to be updated to incorporate the ideals encapsulated in the 2030 Agenda. Without a formal strategy to evolve Australia's sustainable development capability, it creates a potential situation that sees Australia lagging in its international obligations. This would be disastrous for the Australian Government's ambition to grow into a regional leader.

Commit to long term funding for SDGs.

Funding arrangements must be reconsidered as successful public health interventions require long-term commitment which goes beyond short term policy and political cycles.

Construct a set of National Indicators to provide an Australian context to the SDGs.

This recommendation is possibly the most critical of all listed. Without a set of national indicators that explore the needs and current climate of Australia, reporting will remain difficult and superficial. Many of the UNs official indicators are unsuitable for Australia, as they are concerned with issues the Australian populace currently do not face. Given an Australian context, the SDGs could become a driving factor to facilitate lasting change to the lives of many and enforce accountability on to the Australian Government.

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[1] World Health Organisation, WHA Res. 66.4, 2013, *Universal eye health: a global action plan 2014-2019* www.who.int/blindness/actionplan/en

[2] Foreman, J, Keel, Xie, J, Wijngaarden, P, Crowston, J, Taylor, H and Dirani M, 2016, *The National Eye Health Survey Report 2016*, The Centre for Eye Research Australia and Vision 2020 Australia, Melbourne

Integrated and engaged reporting mechanisms.

Reporting through existing mechanisms would engage a wider range of Departments while consolidated Parliamentary reporting could raise a stronger public profile and community engagement. Australia should also support a civil society shadow reporting process to ensure that reporting represents the breadth of community voices. A national and inclusive discussion on the SDGs will foster greater national ownership. Global progress in developing and implementing effective eye health services as part of a broader health system need to be documented and circulated widely so that all countries can learn from these successes.[3]

Create a bipartisan long-term action plan on Sustainable Development.

The 2030 Agenda is a robust initiative that will take an extensive period to fully implement. To avoid changing objectives and stalling progress, a bipartisan long-term sustainable development action plan should be established. In recent years Australia's domestic politics have been tumultuous with continuous changes of leadership, a bipartisan action plan would negate the possibility of the SDGs being sidelined by political agendas and allow them to flourish across Governments and parties.

Expand on current Foreign Aid investment for regional partners.

At a time when the world is becoming more insular and isolationist policies are becoming more prevalent, Australia must avoid cutting foreign aid. Many regional neighbours such as Timor-Leste and Papua New Guinea rely on the support provided by the Australian Government. As a major component of the SDGs is to make sure no one is left behind, the cutting of this support would be extremely detrimental and completely erode a foundational component to the UNs initiative. The exclusion of countries to the benefit of the Agenda could lead to disillusionment for those left behind.

Provide support to regional neighbours to facilitate SDG implementation.

The SDGs are a global initiative that require a holistic approach to ensure they are successful. In South-East Asia, Australia presents as the country with the greatest ability to affect the outcome. Australia is positioned to provide; expertise, leadership and monetary support to their regional counterparts on many SDGs. Furthermore, as Australia could potentially feel disastrous effects of global issues, the most preeminent being climate change, it becomes a necessity to revive a global coalition on these matters.

Explore bilateral and multilateral frameworks throughout the region for successful implementation of the SDGs.

Bilateral and multilateral frameworks remain essential to cooperation on an international level. With Australia's slowly increasing access to the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the willingness of key members to be involved in the 2030 Agenda, this remains a crucial framework to explore. Agreements through the ASEAN on the SDGs could lead to the betterment of many people throughout South-East Asia and Australia. It would also cultivate closer ties with a region of growing importance to the Australian economy and security.

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[3] WHO, 2013

Leverage Australia's established educational platforms, particularly in ensuring quality health services in low and middle resource settings of the Indo-Pacific region.

Australia has a long history of providing education in the region. In health, the members of medical colleges volunteer in a coordinated and collaborative manner to provide education and training to health personnel in the Indo-Pacific. Despite multiple engagements and successful programs, this remains a largely untapped resource of specialists and doctors, and the potential for greater engagement is there. Currently, this a lost opportunity.

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

A common understanding of the universality of the SDGs and their relevance to all-levels of government in Australia is needed to ensure the SDGs are not seen purely as the domain of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) and are embedded across all levels of government. The SDGs have the potential to provide a powerful means for addressing some of the chronic human situations that exist both domestically and internationally. However the understanding of the SDGs and their relevance is limited mainly to those in the international development sector. The Australian Government should be exploring ways to better incorporate sustainable development and the SDGs within Australian society, as dialogue in the public space remains sparse on the matter.

Governments in France, Germany, the United Kingdom and Switzerland all held widespread and comprehensive consultation processes with civil society. As the SDGs are viewed as an all-encompassing initiative, stakeholder consultation remains at the forefront of developing the SDGs at a national and international level. Due to the diverse nature of the SDGs, consultations have involved bringing in specialists from many different fields across a range of issues, such as scientists, academics, civil society, the business sector, youth movements and local governments. It is through this diversification of viewpoints and expertise that a comprehensive and accepted implementation strategy can be created. It is the view of these governments that if the Agenda 2030 is to be successful, it must be adopted by people from all walks of life.

The Australian Government must elevate knowledge of the goals beyond the international development and NGO sector by mainstreaming the SDGs into priorities across government, civil and private sectors in simple and understandable terms. This could be achieved through embedding SDG reporting requirements into existing frameworks and reporting mechanisms, and utilising the reach of key stakeholders such as ACFID to broaden stakeholder and community knowledge. It is recommended that awareness activities centre on the overarching premise of ‘leave no one behind’ rather than the full suite of goals.

Recommendation

Foster public discussion around the SDGs to help facilitate national ownership.

A consultation process should be established with the Australian media, to help generate a public conversation around the 2030 Agenda. The engagement of the Australian public is critical to the success of the SDGs, with the majority of Australians being unaware of the UN initiative. The potential benefits for the 2030 Agenda need to be marketed and branded to Australia so people can be informed and involved.

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

The central principles of the SDGs to 'leave no one behind' and 'reach the furthest behind first' apply equally to Australia's domestic and international priorities of reducing inequalities in economic and social - including health - outcomes. Australia has a role to play as a leader and norm setter in the region and internationally by bridging the need for collective global action with a clear national implementation plan. The dual nature of the Australian response to the SDGs provides an opportunity to connect national and international groups that can provide support among groups who are consistently "left behind" such as persons with a disability.

The SDGs are an important opportunity for Australia to accelerate efforts to eliminate trachoma, a painful and devastating disease. This would represent a significant achievement in Australia's efforts in line with its global commitment to eliminate trachoma as a public health problem by 2020 as a member of the WHO's Global Elimination of Trachoma Initiative. Australia is the only developed country in the world where trachoma remains endemic.

Achieving the SDGs also strengthens Australia's leadership on human rights, in particular on its stated priorities for gender equality, good governance and freedom of expression, and the rights of Indigenous peoples, during its term on the UN Human Rights Council. Australia will be able, under the SDG framework, to understand, address and measure our domestic inequalities through an internationally recognised and standardised approach. The SDGs provide an opportunity for Australia to demonstrate leadership in leaving no one behind.

Recommendation

Look to key opportunities.

The elimination of preventable blindness and vision loss, and the full participation of people who are blind of vision impaired in the community provide a key opportunity for Australia to show leadership and reduce inequalities within our community. Vision impairment disproportionately affects those over the age of 50, as well as populations with lower incomes.[4] While approximately 90% of blindness and vision impairment among both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians is preventable or treatable if it is detected early.[5]

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C. 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 SDG that is both meaningful and achieves real outcomes?

Given the nature of the 17 goals and their specific focus areas, there is a risk of adopting a siloed approach to implementation, delegating responsibility for each SDG within discrete policy portfolios. Focusing on specific goals in isolation may have the unintended consequence of reversing or undermining progress in other areas.

Indonesia and Thailand provide two excellent examples on the need for extensive oversight committees and clear accountability structures from the highest levels of Government. It is only through the establishment of defined accountability that the goals of the Agenda 2030 can be realised. Australia's regional counterparts and comparable countries both have extensive sustainable development strategies and entrenched sustainable development committee structures. This has enabled the Governments of these nations to create national dialogues surrounding the SDGs and create federal accountability for their implementation.

Australia's SDG implementation plan should be overseen by a cross-portfolio committee, responsible for coordinating SDG implementation and reporting to exist for the life of the SDGs. This could be an extension of the existing inter-departmental committee, but must be strengthened to include representation from all major policy portfolios, clear ties to state and territory authorities, and accountability measures such as the publishing of annual monitoring data. These requirements should be laid out in a public Terms of Reference.

Any governance structure or platform for SDG partnerships must also empower marginalised and vulnerable groups to meaningfully participate in decision-making, particularly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, persons with a disability, women, the elderly, and young people.

National implementation plans must be developed in consultation with key stakeholders from civil society, academia, and the private sector, should be developed to link action across local, national and international domains – including the Convention on the Rights of Persons with a Disability. Plans must also be supported with appropriate funding for sustainable implementation.

This is particularly complicated in Australia given the multiple jurisdictions of Federal and State/ Territory and Local governments. In particular, longstanding points of contention include the scope of Federal responsibility for the wellbeing of all Australians versus the State-level administration, including funding for services on the ground, coordination, and long-term strategy and planning. In the context of overly complex governance structures with lack of cohesion about division of responsibility, it is harder to ensure long-term accountability measures for National, State and Local levels.

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Commit to long term funding for SDGs.

Funding arrangements must be reconsidered as successful public health interventions require long-term commitment which goes beyond short term policy and political cycles.

D. 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?

Good health is a measure of sustainable development. The WHO recognise that the achievement of Universal Health Coverage (UHC) underpins the achievement of SDG 3. The provision and expansion of UHC schemes - including high-quality, comprehensive and integrated eye care services - will be key to improving health for all.

Good vision enables individuals and families to pull themselves out of poverty, helps people to go back to work or school, and to overcome the inequality, marginalisation and exclusion that blindness and vision loss often perpetuate. In contrast, poor eye health and vision impairment is a consequence of failing to address the SDGs. As such, a number of eye health indicators can be used to effectively capture and communicate the impact of Australia's SDG progress.

Monitoring prevalence and causes of poor health, including visual impairment, as well as the effectiveness of services delivered to meet these needs through the health system, must be integrated into Australia's national health information systems.[6] This information can then be utilised to guide resource allocation and service planning. [7]

Cataract surgical coverage (CSC) is a key indicator for effective, high-quality, and affordable comprehensive eye care services. CSC has been recommended by the World Bank and World Health Organization as a tracer indicator for Universal Health Coverage. CSC also serves as an important indicator for not only ophthalmological surgical care coverage, but also of access to care by the elderly, as most cataracts are related to ageing.

Australia has some of the most accurate, up-to-date and reliable data on CSC as a result of the 2016 National Eye Health Survey (NEHS). The NEHS uncovered that while almost 88 per cent of required cataract surgeries had been performed in the general population, only 61 per cent had been performed among Indigenous Australians, highlighting the need to significantly scale up investments to close the gap in health outcomes between Indigenous and Non-Indigenous Australians.

After age-adjustment, NEHS also showed that the prevalence of vision impairment was three times higher in Indigenous Australians compared to non-Indigenous Australians.[8] The prevalence of vision impairment in Indigenous Australians was more than double in outer regional areas compared to inner regional areas.[9] The Australian Government and relevant stakeholders in consultation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities must prioritise the delivery of eye health and vision care services that are culturally safe, timely and coordinated in order to address these inequalities.

Targets and indicators should be aligned with the official SDG framework, and adapted according to Australian context and availability of high-quality, disaggregated data through the Australian Bureau of Statistics, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, and other nationally accepted

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[6] WHO, 2013
[7] WHO, 2013
[8] Foreman et al., 2016
[9] Foreman et al., 2016

data. To ensure the continued availability of such data, for example the NEHS, funding must be made available to undertake repeat surveys at appropriate and regular intervals.

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Construct a set of National Indicators to provide an Australian context to the SDGs.

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Integrated and engaged reporting mechanisms.

Reporting through existing mechanisms would engage a wider range of Departments while consolidated Parliamentary reporting could raise a stronger public profile and community engagement. Australia should also support a civil society shadow reporting process to ensure that reporting represents the breadth of community voices. A national and inclusive discussion on the SDGs will foster greater national ownership. Global progress in developing and implementing effective eye health services as part of a broader health system need to be documented and circulated widely so that all countries can learn from these successes.[10]

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Create a bipartisan long-term action plan on Sustainable Development.

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[10] WHO, 2013

E. What SDG are currently being addressed by Australia's Official Development Assistance (ODA) program?

Nil comment.

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

Beyond prioritising transformational issues or strategies, the Australian government must actively embed the 2030 Agenda's principles of 'no one left behind' and 'reaching the furthest behind first' in its ODA program. Australian should focus on this overarching objective and look to how it can be achieved as a priority outcome through the goals. This means targeting programs towards the poorest, most marginalised and excluded groups, including women, indigenous peoples and ethnic minorities, people with a disability, children, the elderly, refugees and internally displaced or stateless persons. Equity, fairness and human rights are core, cross-cutting themes of the SDGs and must be positioned at the forefront of Australia's ODA program to support the achievement of the SDGs.

Eye health remains a timely reminder of the breadth of these issues: In 2017 the Lancet Global Disease Journal estimated that globally 55 % of people who are blind or vision impaired are women, and 89% of people who are blind or vision impaired live in low and middle income countries.[11] With approximately 80% of global blindness and visual impairment preventable or treatable[12] these inequalities can be reduced or eliminated by scaling up ODA investments in strengthening health systems to support the provision and expansion of UHC schemes, including the provision of high-quality, comprehensive and integrated eye care services.

The East Asia Vision Program (EAVP) was delivered between 2013 – 2016 as part of Australia's Avoidable Blindness Initiative and showed a leading example of Australia's approach to supporting Indo-Pacific nations to achieve sustainable development and universal health care. The regional consortium approach leveraged existing expertise and partnerships and reduced duplication of effort and resources. The EAVP built the capacity of the three national health sectors to provide integrated, equitable and sustainable eye health care for all persons. The planning stage for the program was extensive and ensured that the specific needs and priorities for eye health in each country were incorporated into the program.

Acknowledging the specific and often overlooked needs of vulnerable community members, a particular focus was placed on offering opportunities to women and persons with a disability to participate in planning, decision making and training opportunities, and to acknowledge the needs of children in all program design, implementation and service delivery. Using an inclusive approach to intervene at multiple levels of the health system with locally tailored responses to eye health workforce development increases the efficiency, suitability and sustainability of the investment by the Australian Government, provides the best chance to leave no one behind.

Sustainable financing for the SDGs is a critical global challenge. The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund have jointly estimated that total ODA flows will need to move from 'billions to trillions' if the SDGs are to be achieved by 2030. Australia must look to international commitments, such as the Addis Ababa Action Agenda, and implement fully Australia's official

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[11] Bourne RRA, Flaxman SR, Braithwaite T, et al, on behalf of the Vision Loss Expert Group. Magnitude, temporal trends, and projections of the global prevalence of blindness and distance and near vision impairment: a systemic review and meta-analysis. Lancet Glob Health 2017; published online Aug 2. http://doi.org/10.1016/S2214-109X(17)30293-0

[12] WHO, 2013

development assistance commitments of increasing the aid budget to 0.7 per cent of Gross National Income by 2030 through a sustained and predictable trajectory.

Recommendation

Expand on current Foreign Aid investment for regional partners.

At a time when the world is becoming more insular and isolationist policies are becoming more prevalent, Australia must avoid cutting foreign aid. Many regional neighbours such as Timor-Leste and Papua New Guinea rely on the support provided by the Australian Government. As a major component of the SDGs is to make sure no one is left behind, the cutting of this support would be extremely detrimental and completely erode a foundational component to the UNs initiative. The exclusion of countries to the benefit of the Agenda could lead to disillusionment for those left behind.

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Provide support to regional neighbours to facilitate SDG implementation.

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Explore bilateral and multilateral frameworks throughout the region for successful implementation of the SDGs.

Bilateral and multilateral frameworks remain essential to cooperation on an international level. With Australia's slowly increasing access to the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the willingness of key members to be involved in the 2030 Agenda, this remains a crucial framework to explore. Agreements through the ASEAN on the SDGs could lead to the betterment of many people throughout South-East Asia and Australia. It would also cultivate closer ties with a region of growing importance to the Australian economy and security.

Recommendation

Leveraging Australia's established educational platforms, particularly in ensuring quality health services in low and middle resource settings of the Indo-Pacific region.

Australia has a long history of providing education in the region. In health, the members of medical colleges volunteer in a coordinated and collaborative manner to provide education and training to health personnel in the Indo-Pacific. Despite multiple engagements and successful programs, this remains a largely untapped resource of specialists and doctors, and the potential for greater engagement is there. Currently, this a lost opportunity.

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

Nil comment.

H Examples of best practice in how other countries are implementing the SDG from which Australia could learn.

Switzerland, France and Germany have all taken the step to create a comprehensive set of national indicators. By completing this requirement it has allowed the countries to take ownership of the SDGs and presented the opportunity to provide a national context to the global agenda. This allows the SDGs to make tangible differences within each nation, rather than trying to conform to a national set of indicators of which may are irrelevant.

There are a multitude of insights that can be taken from the consultation processes in France, Germany, the UK and Switzerland for both the Australian Government and stakeholders interested in affecting change through the SDGs:

- Consultation processes should be conducted regularly to allow for the continued evolution of the sustainable development strategy
- They should be conducted both prior to the drafting and implementation of any strategy related to the Agenda 2030 and subsequently following an initial period of implementation of the strategy. This allows stakeholders to not only feel connected to the process but encourages continued involvement with the SDGs

The necessity for stakeholders to help shape the SDG process if given the opportunity. With extensive consultation processes that appear to demonstrate a willingness to listen from the Federal Governments, NGOs should view the Agenda 2030 initiative as a terrific opportunity to make tangible change.

VISION 2020
THE RIGHT TO SIGHT
AUSTRALIA

National body working in partnership to prevent avoidable blindness and improve vision care