South Africa's first SDG report card: How to move beyond ticking boxes

By Willem Fourie   3 Jul 2019

South Africa will present its first progress report on the Sustainable Development Goals at the United Nations on July 17. This report will provide a rather extensive snapshot of the country's progress towards the 169 ambitious targets.

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The development goals were adopted in 2015 by 193 United Nations member states. They were hailed as the first set of truly global goals, keeping both the developed and the developing world accountable to the same standards.

They cover a wide range of areas, from ending hunger and ensuring universal access to water and electricity; to promoting innovation and building strong institutions. The countries committed to achieving these goals by 2030.

But progress seems relatively slow across Africa. A recent report by the Sustainable Development Solutions Network shows that 72% of Africa's national budgets do not mention the SDGs. It also points out that 82% of all African countries do not know what the financial requirements of reaching the SDGs are, and 65% have not yet assessed how far they are in reaching the targets.

South Africa, too, has been relatively slow in reporting progress. When presenting its official progress report later this month, it will be one of the last African countries to do so. But it did present a non-compulsory baseline report in 2017 that outlined the number of indicators on which reliable national data was available.

South Africa's official progress report – known in UN parlance as a Voluntary National Review – will show that the country has done quite well on some measures, and badly on others.

But the bigger question centres on what should be done to ensure that the SDGs actually change countries' development trajectories.

A concerted effort is needed to ensure that the SDGs aren't relegated to being merely a reporting framework. The South African SDG Hub, an initiative hosted by the University of Pretoria has identified four good practices that could actually lead to changes in behaviour.

But that would require government, the private sector and civil society to be proactive. Here's what we think they should do.

Four practical steps

1. Gather complete and reliable data.

It's impossible to identify areas where urgent interventions are necessary without reliable and complete data. That's why data gaps should be addressed as a matter of urgency.

The SDGs with the greatest data gaps in Africa are SDG 8 (Decent work and economic growth), SDG 11 (Sustainable cities and communities), SDG 14 (Life below water) and SDG 16 (Peace, justice and strong institutions). South Africa's 2017 report on data availability showed that the country is able to report on 63% of the indicators with agreed methods.

2. Take the data seriously.

Reliable data is useless if it's not taken seriously. In fact, the data often highlight issues that escape public attention. Take malnutrition. South Africa's SDG progress report shows that 27% of South Africa's children are stunted (SDG 2); 13% of the country's children are overweight. This is high when compared to the global average of 6.1%.

The report also shows that without large-scale interventions, South Africa can expect a water deficit of at least 17% in 2030 (SDG 6).

Taking the data seriously also means noticing where South Africa has made progress. Between 2012 and 2018, for example, the country's electricity produced from renewable energy sources increased massively from 16.1 GWh to 8 800 GWh (SDG 7). Another positive development is the continued increase in the number of researchers per million inhabitants – from 398.6 in 2007 to 475 in 2015.

3. Benchmark against others.

The SDGs provide a global framework for benchmarking a country's progress against its peers'. The World Bank's Open Data platform is a particularly helpful resource for getting a sense of the general trends. Data from Colombia and Thailand – both countries with comparable GDPs per capita and populations – make for interesting comparisons.

South Africa's infant morality rate per 1,000 births (SDG 3), for example, has declined from 36.1 in 2012 to 28.8 in 2017. But that's still comparatively high. In 2017 the infant mortality rates in Colombia and Thailand respectively were 12.7 and 8.2.

There are other areas in which progress hasn't been as strong as it should. Tuberculosis is one example. Despite major improvements, tuberculosis infection rates remain very high at 567 per 100,000, compared to 156 per 100,000 in Thailand and 33 per 100,000 in Colombia.

On the positive side, South Africa's road deaths – while high at 21.3 per 100,000 – are lower than Thailand's (32 per 100,000). At 0.8% of GDP, South Africa's research and development expenditure is significantly higher than that of Colombia (0.24%), and comparable to that of Thailand (0.78%) (SDG 9).

Interestingly, South Africa scores better than both countries when it comes to levels of corruption (SDG 16). In the most recent Corruption Perceptions Index, South Africa is ranked 73rd out of 180 countries, compared to the 99th place shared by Thailand and Colombia.

4. Forge new types of partnerships.

In their work on problems that are particularly hard to solve, the environmentalist Kelly Levin and her colleagues identify a few characteristics of such problems. One of them is particularly applicable to the SDGs: those who caused the problem in the first place are also trying to solve it. Put in the language of the SDGs: the very institutions that gave rise to the catalogue of problems to which the SDGs respond are trying their best to solve them.

A rational response to this challenge would be to form strategic alliances that reconfigure the institutional landscape that created the need for the SDGs. How should this be done? In their report on this topic, global non-profit organisation BSR provides practical advice. It found that transformative partnerships are typically built around a "compelling common purpose", which puts "the right partners in the right roles". The trick is for institutions to actually realise that they share a common purpose.

Looking forward

It's not too late. There are still 11 years left until countries need to present their final SDG progress reports. But to ensure that the SDGs' real potential are unlocked, South Africa needs significant progress on a few fronts. Emphasis should be placed on improving data quality and coverage, and using this as basis to forge partnerships that use the data to effect real change.

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