

Policy Document

Sustainable Development Goals Policy

Background

The Australian Medical Students' Association (AMSA) is the peak representative body of Australia's 17,000 medical students. AMSA believes that all communities have the right to the best attainable health. Accordingly, AMSA advocates on issues that impact local, national and global health outcomes.

Sustainable development is defined by the United Nations (UN) as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" [1]. Over time, the concept of sustainable development has come to incorporate three broad, interdependent dimensions: economic development, social inclusion and environmental sustainability [2].

The challenges of sustainable development first entered the global agenda in 1972, when the UN Conference on the Human Environment declared that "protection and improvement of the human environment...affects the wellbeing of peoples and economic development throughout the world" [3]. In the years that followed, several multilateral environmental agreements on Climate Change, Biological Diversity and Desertification were adopted. However, by the UN Conference on Sustainable Development in 2012, these treaties had been resoundingly unsuccessful [4]. Building on the successes of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in instigating social and political mobilisation, world leaders at the conference resolved to develop a set of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for the post-2015 development agenda [2].

In September 2015, the UN General Assembly adopted "Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development". Having come into effect on the 1st of January 2016, this document outlines seventeen development goals, containing between them 169 targets and numerous indicators. In addition to the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development, a fourth dimension – good governance – was also included, as an inherent requirement for the achievement of the SDGs [5].

The SDGs and their targets are "integrated and indivisible, global in nature and universally applicable" and therefore involve both developing and developed countries [5]. The SDGs have adopted many of the developmental imperatives of the MDGs, such as the eradication of poverty, promotion of gender equality and establishment of inclusive education. However, they are broader in ambition and also endeavour to achieve sustainable management of water, oceans, lands and their ecosystems; peaceful and inclusive societies; and reduced inequality within and among countries [5].

Good health is central to sustainable development. Non-communicable diseases in particular constitute "one of the major challenges for sustainable development in the twenty-first century" [2]. Only goal 3 – "ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages" – specifically addresses health, and encompasses thirteen targets. These are dedicated to reproductive and child health; communicable diseases, non-communicable diseases and addiction; environmental health; universal health coverage; tobacco control, vaccines and medicines; and health financing and workforce and global health risk preparedness [6]. However, health-related targets can also be found among goals focusing on social circumstances and environmental factors, mirroring the increasing evidence that the conditions in which "people are born, grow, live, work, and age" are a critical influence on health [7].

Australia performs well in the domains of social and economic development. Globally, Australia ranks second on the UN Development Program's Human Development Index and ninth in the UN World Happiness Report [8, 9]. Life expectancy at birth in Australia is 79.9 years for males and 84.3 years for females [10]. Australia implements universal health care under the Medicare system and has ready access to sexual and reproductive health-care services. As a result, Australia has already met the SDG targets that relate to maternal mortality ratio, neonatal mortality and under-5 mortality[11].

Nevertheless, Australia still faces considerable obstacles in achieving goal 3, particularly target 3.4: "reduce by one third premature mortality from noncommunicable diseases through prevention and treatment and promote mental health and wellbeing". Chronic diseases represent a significant cause of illness, disability and death in Australia, accounting for 91% of all deaths in 2012 [10]. High levels of obesity and poor mental health among Australians [12] as well as widespread demographic change with a declining dependency ratio (number of people of working age to those over 65) all remain significant challenges to Australia achieving the health goal in the coming decades [12].

Goal 8 – to "promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all" – is especially pertinent for Australia's health, as rising income inequality has seen the wealthiest 20% of households come to possess 62% of total household net worth in 2010 [12]. Those from disadvantaged backgrounds experience an increased prevalence of risk factors for poor health and, correspondingly, decreased life expectancy [12]. This effect is especially notable in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations [12].

Ultimately, the SDG's mark a significant milestone and shift in mindset surrounding the global development agenda. Acknowledging this, it is necessary that AMSA is aligned with the fundamental concepts underscoring sustainable development and its link to healthcare; namely the interdependence of healthcare on greater social development aims.

Position Statement

AMSA believes that:

1. Sustainable development will guide the global development agenda in the 21st century;
2. Good health and wellbeing is both a requirement for, and product of the successful attainment of sustainable development;
3. Although only Goal 3 refers directly to health, all the SDGs address social determinants, which are the preconditions for health;
4. All medical students and health professionals have a critical role in furthering the objectives of the SDGs; and
5. The Australian government should be committed to achieving the SDGs domestically and contribute to the achievement of the SDG's internationally.

Policy

AMSA calls upon:

1. Australian Federal and State Governments to:
 - a. Adopt the SDGs as high priority objectives;
 - b. Acknowledge that working towards all of the SDGs, not solely Goal 3, has a substantial impact on individual and population health and act upon them accordingly;
 - c. Ensure that the current Australian health care policy, economic policy, and social policy is reflective of Australia's long-term commitment to the SDGs, specifically the prioritisation to:

- i. Address the significant health disadvantage experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people, those of lower socio-economic status and those in remote communities;
 - ii. Address chronic diseases, obesity and mental illness;
 - iii. Combat poor food quality, overeating and food waste;
 - iv. Ensure water security, especially to remote Indigenous communities;
 - v. Address rising income inequality and the gender pay gap;
 - vi. Address urban energy consumption, vehicle-dependence and inequity;
 - vii. Increasing energy efficiency and decoupling economic growth from greenhouse gas emissions;
- d. In devising strategies to implement the SDGs, draw upon the broad consensus of expert communities, including the need to:
 - i. Collaborate and fund research institutions to devise practical solutions for barriers to sustainability and contribute to the Sustainable Development Solutions Network;
 - e. Use the sustainability indicators to assist in the planning, implementing and progress towards achieving the SDGs. These indicators should be:
 - i. Updated regularly and reported publicly;
 - ii. Measured at local, state and national levels;
 - iii. Ensure that there is a formal, independent review process to monitor progress and provide recommendations;
 - f. Provide opportunities for key relevant stakeholder groups to engage in discussion relating to Australia's progress towards the SDGs, including youth, indigenous groups, civil society and the private sector;
 - g. Cooperate with other nations to achieve the SDGs internationally;
2. Health professionals and healthcare providers to:
 - a. Understand the purpose of the SDGs in relation to healthcare in Australia and globally;
 - b. Evaluate the sustainability of current healthcare services, including the environmental impact of:
 - i. The procurement of medicines, equipment and paper;
 - ii. The use of disposable medical equipment and inappropriate management of waste;
 - iii. The inefficient energy use, especially in heating, air conditioning, ventilation and lighting systems;
 - c. Operate to ensure equitable access to healthcare services across Australia, especially those populations who have health outcomes below the Australian average;
 - d. Contribute their knowledge and expertise for the development of effective healthcare systems in other countries, allowing for differences in resource availability, sociocultural factors and geography;
 3. AMSA to:
 - a. Advocate on issues relating to all SDGs in acknowledgement that health is affected by multiple social, economic and environmental factors, in particular, those outlined in policy point 1c;
 - b. Consider establishing a working group on sustainable development, with the specific purpose of:
 - i. Planning and initiating national advocacy and education campaigns focused on the SDGs;
 - ii. Ensuring that AMSA and AMSA-run events are in compliance with the SDGs;
 - iii. Liaising with and supporting university global health groups to hold events focused on the SDGs, especially their importance to healthcare professionals;
 4. Medical students to:
 - a. Understand the purpose of the SDGs in relation to the attainment of health both nationally and globally;

- b. Consider the impact of these goals on their future practice;
- c. Proactively seek out opportunities to upskill themselves in the area of sustainable development, through means such as, but not limited to:
 - i. Reading publications released by the United Nations, the World Health Organisation and other related organisations and authors;
 - ii. Attending events held by medical student societies;
 - iii. Completing free online courses;
 - iv. Undertaking higher education courses in the area of sustainability;
- d. Engaging in the activities of the Sustainable Development Solutions Network youth division;
5. Medical student societies to:
 - a. Consider holding events to educate all students on the SDGs;
 - b. Align their grassroots social justice/global health initiatives with the SDGs;
6. Medical schools to:
7. Include teaching about the Sustainable Development Goals and development economics within the medical curriculum, with particular emphasis on their importance to health.

References

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Appendix – Sustainable Development Goals

- Goal 1. End poverty in all its forms everywhere
- Goal 2. End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture
- Goal 3. Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages
- Goal 4. Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all
- Goal 5. Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls
- Goal 6. Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all
- Goal 7. Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all
- Goal 8. Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all
- Goal 9. Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation
- Goal 10. Reduce inequality within and among countries
- Goal 11. Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable
- Goal 12. Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns
- Goal 13. Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts
- Goal 14. Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development
- Goal 15. Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss
- Goal 16. Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels
- Goal 17. Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development

Policy Details

Name: Sustainable Development Goals Policy

Category: G – Global and Public Health Policies

History: Adopted, Second Council, 2016