

Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Committee
Department of the Senate
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
By email only: fadt.sen@aph.gov.au

21 March 2018

Dear Sir/Madam,

Submission on the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals 2018

Mary Ward International Australia is an aid and development agency supporting the development works of the Loreto Sisters and their colleagues as they engage with women to transform structures and systems that keep them oppressed and marginalised. MWIA provides funding and volunteers for projects overseas and in Australia. The key component of the SDGs, *to leave no one behind*, is an important underlying principle of the work of MWIA.

In this submission MWIA is primarily concerned with ***the understanding of the SDG across the Australian Government and the wider Australian community***. As MWIA does a considerable amount of awareness raising with the past students, students, staff and parents of Loreto Schools in Australia it is of vital importance that civil society, in particular young people, have an understanding of the Sustainable Development Agenda and their role in achieving the Agenda by 2030.

While the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet has taken responsibility for implementing the SDGs the lead agency is Foreign Affairs and Trade. The essence of the SDGs is that they are universal and integrated. Having DFAT in the lead seems to skew the focus of the SDGs away from Australia, and the universal, to the Indo-Pacific, rather than connect the two. Australia does, of course, have a particular relationship with and responsibility for the nations of the Pacific, particularly the vulnerable Pacific Island States and a number of the SDGs have a special focus on developing nations. However, there are serious issues in Australia which would benefit from an application of the SDG lens, namely the needs of Indigenous and Torres Strait Islander people, the integration of people with disabilities, gender equality and the ever-widening rural-urban divide.

At the recent *Australian Sustainable Development Goals Summit 2018* the UNAA President, Major General Michael Smith, spoke of the lack of an Australian awareness of the SDGs noting that in a recent survey only 4 out of 140 Defence personnel knew of the SDGs. Australia has, he said “no national vision”, no Australia-wide information campaign to alert people to the SDGs and there is no broad consultation in preparation for the Voluntary National Review. Australia has slipped from 20th to 26th place in achieving the SDGs. At the same summit Marc Purcell, CEO of ACFID, spoke of needing a “national plan” and ways of communicating the outcomes of the SDGs – how they will contribute to the well-being of all not just those we think of as being “poor” or under-developed. Other speakers spoke of a “trust deficit” when it comes to government policies and spokespersons. The Minister for

International Development and the Pacific, Senator Concetta Fieravanti-Wells, acknowledged that “many do not understand the SDGs, why we have them and what are they for.”

At the inaugural SDGs Summit in 2016, *The Road to Implementation*, the representative from ACOSS made the point: *Currently the SDGs are neither well-known nor well understood in Australia so raising broad awareness of them is important. To engage these actors a positive vision of the SDGs should be articulated and an emotional connection built through stories showing what the Agenda means for peoples own lives.* Two years later there is little evidence much has improved.

Australia is not alone in its difficulty to take a whole-of-nation approach to the SDGs. The very recent ***An independent assessment of the Voluntary National Review reports submitted to the UN High Level Political Forum 2017*** noted that based on the findings, many member states still need to:

- Adopt innovative ways to raise awareness of the SDGs among the general public, with a view to long term engagement, including in partnership with civil society, and other non-state actors.
- Identify national sustainable development priorities and develop associated national targets through an inclusive and participatory process to complement global targets and indicators.
- Provide support to sub-national levels of government to raise awareness of the SDGs and develop capacities for local level implementation, including translation of the SDGs into local plans,

Part of the problem for Australia is the fragmented way the SDGs are approached. Departments such as Health and Environment and Energy are doing excellent work towards Agenda 2030 but there is minimal interconnection. There is a plethora of good stories to tell about development projects which have transformed the lives of the participants and put in place structures for sustainability. But while departmental or subject silos exist there is little hope of developing an inclusive narrative which will create public awareness and engage people in working towards positive outcomes. Such demarcations also make it difficult to accurately measure progress across the goals and their range of targets.

Belonging to a Federation has its problems and contributes to disconnection, particularly when it comes to embedding, for example, an understanding of the SDGs and their importance in the curriculum of each State Education Department. Other than the Youth Pledge and a subsequent meeting there is little indication of a comprehensive effort to engage young people in the SDGs, although they will have key roles to play before 2030. “Today’s young people”, said Sam Loni, Global Coordinator for UN Sustainable Development Solutions, New York, “can offer great imagination, energy and optimism along the way.” It is also questionable as to how we are applying the SDGs to educational achievement across the nation. A challenge for Australia is to engage State Departments of Education in the enterprise. Apart from engaging young people in the SDGs, applying SDG 4, *Ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all*, to education in Australia soon highlights the disparity in educational outcomes between

Indigenous and non-Indigenous children, between upper socio-economic areas and the poorer or remote rural areas. The SDGs are for all not just our aid recipients.

If Australia is to “create an understanding and awareness of the SDGs across the Australian Government and in the wider community” there needs to be:

- An SDG coordinating committee or Lead Agency, separate from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, although they have made an extensive effort to engage a range of people and sectors at the annual summits, whose primary purpose is community engagement
- A national SDG campaign targeting State Education Departments, small business organisations; women’s groups...
- Greater effort to engage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people
- A particular effort to connect with multicultural Australia – ethnic organisations; publications in a number of languages
- A process for a wider consultation before the Voluntary National Review in July
- Adequate funding to give the Lead Agency scope and flexibility

While funding has not been a specific component of this submission it is obvious that achieving the SDGs will require increased and carefully targeted funding. Recent cuts to overseas aid and policies of welfare reduction will not enable Australia, and the countries it supports, to achieve the Agenda by 2030. The Sustainable Development Agenda for 2030 is the world’s great hope for eliminating poverty and Australia, with an enviable standard of living, extensive social protection and increasing wealth, has much to contribute.

Yours sincerely,

Libby Rogerson ibvm
Board Member
Mary Ward International Australia