

Sustainability Science

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Editorial Overview: The SDGs – Aspirations or Inspirations for Global Sustainability

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The global agenda for sustainability is currently shaped by the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Declared in September 2015 under the title “*Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*”, this agenda builds on a foundation laid in 2012 by the Rio+20 Earth Summit framed as “*The Future We Want*”. The SDGs build on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), with a major difference being that many of the SDGs are absolute goals. Whereas the MDGs aimed to halve poverty and hunger, SDG1 aims to end poverty and SDG2 to attain zero hunger. Thus the SDGs are not only aspirational, but also inspirational – declaring a clear ambition for global sustainability. Two other features distinguish the 2030 Agenda from the MDGs. First, the SDGs apply to all countries, not just the less-developed nations. Second, the seventeen SDGs together constitute a much broader agenda than the MDGs, addressing virtually all dimensions of human society and our relationships with the natural world.

This special issue of *Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability* is one of a series of SDG Perspectives which interrogate the gap between academic and policy discourses underpinning the SDGs. The nine papers presented here explore links among different SDGs with overarching contributions examining global governance of natural resources as well as more specific topics, including urbanisation, clean water provision, and food security, and gender. Not surprisingly many of the papers highlight the interactions, potential synergies and the risks of trade-offs among the SDGs.

Although links between poverty and the environment are central in the literature on sustainability and development, Schleicher et al. (2018; this issue) suggest that such interdependencies have been neglected in policy. A strength of Agenda 2030 is that the overarching nature of the SDGs can assist in identifying and integrating actions that address both poverty and degradation of the environment. They argue that SDG-related interventions must embrace local ambitions for development and be aware of the dangers of prioritising economic growth over the environment.

The role of gender equality (SDG5) in achieving food security and other SDGs is assessed by Agarwal (2018; this issue). While enhancing women’s access to land and resources through SDG5 can enhance food security, she concludes that there are missed opportunities. Better recognition of the role of forests and fisheries in food provision together with enhancing women’s access to inputs such as irrigation are needed to achieve potential synergies with SDG5. Timko et al. (2018; this issue)

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echo this sentiment that a stronger gender dimension is needed with respect to forests which, they argue, can progress several SDGs simultaneously. They identify three policy clusters: ecosystem services and livelihoods; the green economy; and rights, justice, equality and inclusion. Their central thesis is that enhancing coherence within these policy clusters can ensure the benefits forests provide at the same time as supporting sustainable forest management. Discussing more specifically the role of agroforestry in sustainable development, van Noordwijk et al. (2018; this issue) suggest that integrated land use management is required to address the SDGs as a whole. Agroforestry can be seen as a set of technologies or as a broader approach to landscape management, providing a space to overcome the artificial divide between agriculture and forestry as separate policy domains.

The impacts of climate change on agriculture and food systems are the focus of Campbell et al. (2018; this issue). The authors conclude that food systems require major transformations for many SDGs to be met. Such transformations need actions in many domains - technical, policy, capacity enhancement and finance – and should all be specifically aligned with the Paris Agreement in order to combat climate change. However, reducing greenhouse gas emissions from agriculture can generate both synergistic effects on several SDGs, as well as trade-offs between mitigation and adaptation actions.

The current unprecedented rate of urbanization is the focus of Schindler et al. (2018; this issue), who examine how urban planning can enhance environmental sustainability. Yet, although the recent trend in national urban plans may lead to more sustainable patterns of land use, these authors warn that an increase in social inequalities may also follow.

Delina and Sovacool (2018; this issue) provide an optimistic perspective, arguing that sustainable energy transitions and energy access provision are complementary. They provide an epistemic and governance agenda that acknowledges the wide range of actors involved and propose that a justice framework should be used to navigate tensions and govern transitions.

Tortajada and Biswas (2018; this issue) argue that indicators used as a baseline for SDG6 on clean water and sanitation are unreliable. Insufficient attention to water quality has left many more people exposed to unsafe, contaminated drinking water than previously assumed. They make a case for a stronger role for research in providing a clear and robust evaluation system to ensure progress to provide clean water, sanitation and wastewater treatment for all. Also on the theme of water, Stead (2018; this issue) assesses the potential of 'open innovation' to achieve the sustainable management of marine resources. She argues for a more holistic approach to decision-making and engagement among various stakeholder groups, and a move away from a sole reliance on environmental and economic indicators for the design of marine resource management policies.

The SDGs provide a useful analytical framework to address global challenges. Focusing on the interrelationships among SDGs around some of these challenges, the articles in this special issue identify both socio-environmental synergies and trade-offs that are emerging in this early phase of implementation. Academics and practitioners must work closely to bridge gaps between academic and policy discourses, and actions. Refining the framework laid out by the SDGs, will require iterative cycles of policy and intervention design, implementation and evaluation of multiple Goals, Targets and Indicators, and closer collaboration among stakeholders.

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