

# Connecting the dots to catalyse change: Why managing interactions among SDGs is key to sustainable development

A diverse group of experts and stakeholders from many world regions and sectors gathered to debate the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) at a Wilton Park Roundtable (co-organised by the Sussex Sustainability Research Programme and British Council, 5-7 March, 2018). We discussed a crucial aspect of implementation, namely the interactions among 17 SDGs and their 169 targets, and how these interactions are likely to have a profound influence on efforts to achieve the goals. With this Statement we wish to highlight to the High-level Political Forum the valuable benefits to be gained by exploiting synergies among SDGs and thereby efficiently achieving all the SDGs.

## **Interactions among SDGs are crucial**

Recent research has provided important insights into interactions among SDGs. For example, some interactions have a higher potential to impact the achievement of SDGs than others, while the interactions can be either positive, neutral, or negative. Other important insights are:

- 1) In some cases, actions taken to achieve one SDG may unintentionally hinder progress towards another. Such trade-offs are likely to make the overall achievement of the goals more difficult and inefficient unless they are identified and managed.** One example is a potential clash between energy and food goals where biofuels and food crops compete for the same land and water resources. Another is the potential trade-off between food and water goals arising because the type of agriculture used for food production causes water pollution, which then hinders the achievement of the water goal. Actions that lead to such trade-offs are an inefficient way of implementing the SDGs because gains in one goal come at the expense of others.
  
- 2) SDGs also frequently reinforce each other – Actions to achieve one goal can favour progress towards one or more of the other goals. These synergies provide exceptional opportunities for investment and targeting them will reap maximum rewards.** There are numerous examples of actions leading to multiple benefits (financial, social, environmental) across several goals: Programmes for promoting clean cook stoves help achieve the energy, climate and health goals at the same time; agroforestry and other sustainable agricultural approaches advance the food, water, energy and land biodiversity goals simultaneously. **Investing in these types of actions provides a valuable opportunity to work towards multiple SDGs: it enables countries with limited resources to invest efficiently and avoid unintended trade-offs.**

All SDG investments should consider that interactions among the goals play out differently at the local, national and global scales, as well as over time and by context. For example, it may seem reasonable to achieve the food goal at the local scale by over-exploiting a coastal fishery. But this strategy works against the global target for conserving ocean ecosystems, and over time it becomes increasingly unsustainable both locally and globally. These differences between scales and time periods provide a strong case for a multi-level, cross-sectoral and long-term approach to SDG investments and policies. But current UN and national strategies for SDG implementation remain largely compartmentalised, and are often too focused on individual goals and near-term payoffs. This does not encourage an optimal use of resources, and hampers the desirable shift towards a more integrative and inclusive approach towards implementing the SDGs.

It is also urgent to act quickly to exploit the synergies among SDGs because some investments in the meantime are “locking-in” trade-offs rather than synergies. Consider the case of a country aiming to reach the goal for energy by expanding its capacity of coal-fired electricity. Investments in coal-fired plants lock-in this type of electricity for decades and in so doing make it difficult to reach the climate goal. As an alternative, these financial resources could be invested in renewable energy which would help attain the energy, climate and other goals at the same time.

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#### **Realizing the opportunities: Next steps**

What can be done to reap the financial, social and environmental rewards of an integrative approach to the SDGs? An important immediate task is to raise the level of awareness about SDGs and their interactions and how best to act on them. We recommend:

- Launching a major international initiative to identify and prioritise SDG interactions having the greatest positive leverage and impact. This initiative should also identify the most promising and efficient investment options for capitalizing on these synergies, and it should build on existing analytical efforts.\* Key science-policy institutions should be encouraged to work together and with other stakeholders to jointly contribute to this task.
- Establishing platforms to exchange experience and knowledge on SDG interactions. This includes support for existing international platforms, as well as establishing new ones at the national and sub-national levels and for specific audiences.
- Promoting inter- and transdisciplinary research about SDG interactions, which embraces traditional and indigenous knowledge as well as the northern and southern research communities. Existing methods to identify SDG interactions should be improved and new methods developed, as needed. SDG interactions should be tracked with multi-purpose indicators and efficient monitoring and evaluation systems.
- Initiating assessments of progress in reaching SDGs (e.g. a “Sustainability Gap Report”) that assess the latest research, analyse trends and gaps, and offer concrete options for a more systemic and cross-sectoral approach to achieving the SDGs.

Although raising awareness is a high priority, it is also important to take immediate action because alternative unsustainable pathways are being “locked in” every day. We therefore recommend:

- Channelling financial investments into innovative strategies and infrastructure (sustainable production and consumption, renewable energy, sustainable agriculture and water management, others) that help achieve multiple SDGs by exploiting synergies among goals. This includes incentivising the private sector (SME’s and corporations) to act as an important driving force of key innovations for technological and societal change.
- Introducing governance reforms that break down sectoral barriers and foster a multi-sectoral, multi-level, long term approach to implementing the SDGs, e.g. encourage the High-Level Political Forum to actively support this approach amongst its members; expand UN activities dedicated to this approach; modify the work plans of multilateral agreements so that they account for SDG interactions, and work collectively towards the achievement of multiple goals; introduce mechanisms and incentives that strengthen cooperation on SDGs across national ministries and different stakeholder communities.
- Supporting capacity building that strengthens the ability of stakeholders and policymakers to coherently address all SDGs at all levels.
- Rethinking current partnerships among businesses, researchers, civil society, and vulnerable peoples, and refashioning them so that they can better act on interactions among SDGs.
- Commissioning a “Stern-like” review of an “economic baseline” that estimates the costs of inaction on the 2030 Agenda with particular focus on the costs of neglecting SDG interactions.

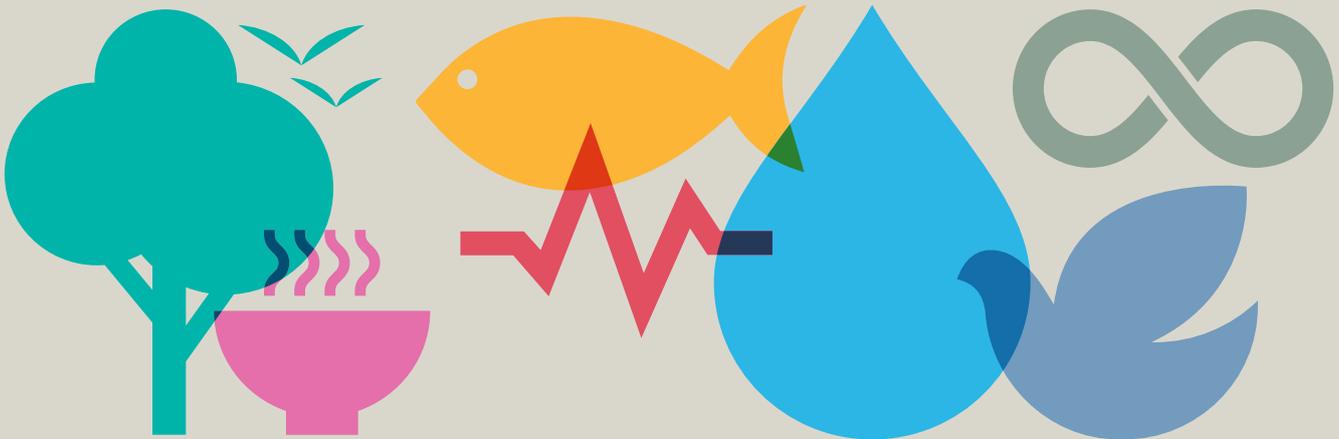
In conclusion, incremental steps are not enough for achieving the SDGs. Transformative change is urgently needed across many scales, and this includes making major investments that exploit synergies and manage trade-offs among SDGs. Governance systems and institutions need to be reformed so that they reduce sectoral barriers and support a fully integrated SDG implementation. We urge the High-level Political Forum to incorporate these key ideas into their strategy for achieving the SDGs.

\* These include, but are not limited to, initiatives of the International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis; Future Earth; the International Council for Science; Stockholm Environment Institute; the University of Sussex and the UN Environment World Conservation Monitoring Centre; and the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs.

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**About the Sussex Sustainability Research Programme (SSRP):**

The UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide both an extraordinary chance and extraordinary challenge to society. If these goals are met, the pay-off is likely to be a higher level of well-being throughout the world, and more sustainable planet. Science and research have an important part to play here by providing stakeholders and policy-makers with the evaluations, strategies, and general know-how to make the SDGs happen. With this in mind the SSRP aims to be a global centre for delivering “Science for the SDGs”. Our research in particular focuses on synergies among the SDGs, which will enable many goals to be efficiently accomplished at the same time.

SSRP is a collaboration between the University of Sussex and the Institute of Development Studies.

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