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# SDGs 'failing to create transformational change'

An international science body has criticised the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as being just another way governments label their existing projects, instead of being the platform for transformational change they promise to be.

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Children from Davao City, Philippines. The city has mapped its local development strategies along the SDGs, and prioritised the welfare of children. Image: Alex de Carvalho, CC BY 2.0

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By Ben Deighton, SciDev.net  
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of coordination across the 17 separate goals, the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) annual meeting heard.

“The reality is that if they are just seen as aspirational goals what happens is—what is actually happening now—is that governments are just labelling what they are doing anyhow as being in the obligation of the SDGs,” Peter Gluckman from the University of Auckland, New Zealand, told a panel discussion during the event, held in Washington, DC from 14-17 February.



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The [SDGs](#) were adopted by the United Nations in September 2015, and call for [governments](#) to achieve goals such as ending poverty, eradicating hunger and ensuring everyone has access to clean, affordable [energy](#) by 2030.

However, global hunger has risen for the third year in a row, according to the latest UN's [world food security report](#), while fewer than five per cent of countries are on track to meet childhood obesity and tuberculosis targets, according to [a study](#) published in The Lancet in 2017.

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## transformation, which is not the incremental approach anymore.

*Nakao Ishii, chief executive, Global Environment Facility*

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Global [carbon emissions](#) were also set to rise by two per cent in 2018 to hit an all-time high, according to [a report](#) by the UK's University of East Anglia and the Global Carbon Project. The trend is driven by rises in the use of coal, oil and gas.

“Don't get me wrong, those [the SDGs] are critically important and we are fully committed — but let's be honest about lots of words and lots of talk, but perhaps little action,” Daan du Toit, deputy director-general for international cooperation at the South African Department of Science and Technology, said during a panel discussion.

Nakao Ishii, chief executive of the DC-based funding organisation Global Environment Facility, said that in her native Japan, people would wear SDG badges at policy meetings, but that did not always mean they understood the changes that are required to implement the objectives.

“It's almost an order if you go to those meetings you have to wear the SDG badge, but the question is to what extent they really do understand the need of transformation, which is not the incremental approach anymore,” she said.

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One of the problems, according to the panel, is that there is often a trade-off between different SDGs, meaning that one goal is achieved to the detriment of other goals.


One example is that of the Aral Sea on the border between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, formerly the fourth largest inland lake in the world. The rivers that feed the lake have been diverted to irrigate desert farmland, causing it to shrink by over 90 per cent since the 1960s.

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“The irrigation of the farmland helped to achieve one SDG goal, number two, that aims to enhance food security,” said Hongbo Yang, from the US-based Smithsonian Conservation Biology Institute.

“But that progress is achieved as a sacrifice of another goal which is SDG

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One solution is for governments to conduct a broad analysis of how issues like land use, [biodiversity](#) and climate affect one another as they formulate policy, said Guido Schmidt-Traub, from the France-based Sustainable Development Solutions Network.

However, in many countries this is not being done. “It’s a bit like central banks setting interest rates without a macroeconomic model,” he said.

Similarly, science funding also needs to be better coordinated to ensure that the conflicting and interdependent nature of the SDGs is taken into account in research projects, one panel meeting heard.


For example, organisations such as the US funding agency the National Science Foundation (NSF) should be set up to work on a global scale in order to encourage [research](#) on the SDGs to be relevant globally and not just according to national or regional priorities, according to Thomas Hertel, from Purdue University in the US state of Indiana.

“That’s what we’re missing right now, is a global entity,” he told the meeting.

The important thing is for researchers and policymakers to come together to address the trade-offs between different goals and different regions of the world, the meeting heard.

“That is the motivation behind this symposium,” said Jianguo Liu, from Michigan State University, who was an organiser of one of the side meetings

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just among those different goals, but also the goals across different places across the world.”

*This article was originally published on [SciDev.Net](#). Read the [original article](#).*

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