

ACT Strategic direction for engagement with 'Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development'

Background

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, including Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adopted by the UN General Assembly in September 2015 brings together 17 goals with 169 targets in an ambitious and comprehensive programme to transform the world by 2030. As such, it presents both huge opportunities and challenges. Much has been written about the SDGs, and it is beyond the scope of this paper to analyse the framework itself. However for ACT Alliance, as it moves to develop a strategic approach to its engagement with the framework, as important as the goals themselves, are the set of common principles that underpin it and which parallel ACT's own understanding of transformational development. These principles were endorsed by the UN¹ to guide how it will support the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The principles acknowledge first and foremost that the 2030 Agenda is country-led and country-owned, with actions firmly determined by national needs and capacities. The principles align with and amplify a number of the defining characteristics of the 2030 Agenda, including its universal, integrated and global nature; its focus on people and their rights; its pledge to "leave no one behind" and to reach the furthest behind first; its attention to peace, justice and strong institutions; and its emphasis on collective ambition and partnership.

External context

ACT's thinking about the changing global context has been outlined in the Changing Paradigms work, but a few trends that are particularly salient for ACT in engaging with the SDGs should be highlighted. One is the growing inequality within many countries and across countries, with the obscene figures showing that the richest 1% own as much as the rest of the world combined². Yet this is coupled with a growing recognition of the negative impact that inequalities, particularly gender inequalities, have on development and fair economic growth. For the UN, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is, in large measure, an agenda for equality, and it has committed to put combating inequalities and discrimination at the forefront of its efforts to support implementation of the 2030 Agenda. It is less clear that there is the political will to address this at national and business levels, so the challenge for ACT in its work at all levels is to shift power imbalances and work for the inclusion of all of life in its fullness.

Another major challenge to implementing the 2030 Agenda is that of shrinking space for civil society globally. In many areas, we are witnessing the rise of populism, nationalism and xenophobia, and increasingly polarised and extreme views shaping public discourse and working against the spirit of the SDG framework. We have also seen an erosion of fundamental rights, whether through the security agenda, impunity, repression or lack of accountability. And while the increasing recognition of the role of business as a stakeholder in development is a necessary and potentially positive factor, it is also contributing to the reduction in civil society space as governments and donors expand the role for the private sector in development policy often at the expense of civil society organisations (CSOs). For ACT, the challenge is to support and help amplify the voices of the poor and the disempowered, from the community to global levels, not only to participate in the decisions and processes that affect them, but also in monitoring and holding governments and decision-makers to account.

¹ <http://undocs.org/E/2017/55>

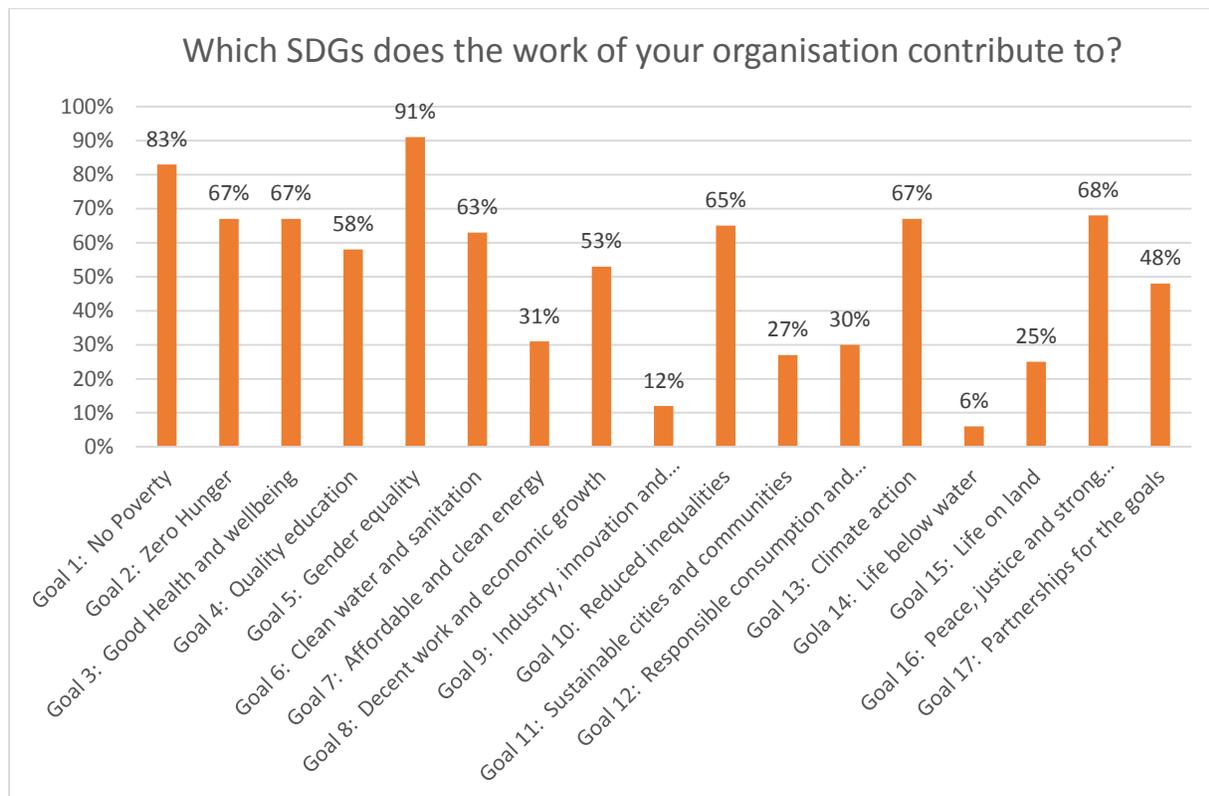
² <https://www.oxfam.org/en/research/economy-1>

Looking forward to 2030, ACT Alliance and its members, working with other ecumenical bodies, also have a huge opportunity to play an influential role through bringing a progressive faith-based voice to the table.

The third area to highlight is the challenge of resourcing such an ambitious plan. With the emphasis of implementation rightly placed at the national level, it raises the issues of capacity – financial, technical, strength of governance or political will – to produce effective and coherent development policies and to deliver them. The UN system has flagged assisting members as a priority for delivering the SDGs, but coming in an era of declining support for development assistance, changing donor priorities and general global economic vulnerability, it is essential that development cooperation (including innovative new models) with a fairer sharing of resources is established to underpin the 2030 Agenda. ACT as a global alliance is well suited to rise to this challenge, including capacity development and resourcing amongst its members, as well as effective north-south collaboration for strong advocacy on the global partnership required to achieve transformation. Bearing in mind that the SDGs are universal, as ACT seeks to operationalise ecumenical diakonia we will also need to see changing patterns of accountability to build strong mutual respect, trust and accountability across the alliance.

Internal context

Developing a strategy some two years after the adoption of the SDGs inevitably means that work in relation to SDGs has already been developed across the alliance and amongst its members and strategic partners, as we see from the 2016 Members Survey.



This shows a wide range of thematic engagement, and will include direct programming and service provision, national advocacy, and regional and global advocacy. ACT experience to 2015 in engaging with the process to develop the SDG framework, and subsequently as it begins to be rolled out, shows that there is variable capacity and interest among ACT forums and members. At the same time it is reasonable to assume that - as with the previous Millennium Development Goals – it will take some time for the SDGs to become the global framework but as it gains traction and becomes the global norm, interest and engagement will increase.

Within ACT, as the alliance looks to develop a more strategic approach to the SDGs, a critical factor is the very different regional contexts in which members work. Members and forums prioritise their work in relation to their contexts resulting in the wide spread of thematic focus; equally contexts differ from region to region and country to country in the extent to which governments are engaging with implementation plans, and the extent to which civil society is equipped and able to participate. At the same time, just as externally there is growing recognition of the important role faith-based organisations play in development, there appears to be a growing shared vision among members of ACT's niche here. ACT will need first and foremost to build a shared understanding and commitment to ecumenical diakonia. Combined with a growing interest and prioritisation of the SDGs in other ecumenical organisations such as the WCC and LWF, ACT should also prioritise establishing its place within the wider 'religion and development' debate, rather than around particular themes or goals.

There are two key caveats to this. First, the 2030 Agenda has sustainability at its heart, so that all goals work towards a sustainable future, as well as including a specific, stand-alone climate goal. Just as the SDGs recognise the UNFCCC as the key global process for climate issues, ACT will continue to prioritise global advocacy on climate justice, as outlined in its climate strategy. At the same time it must also work to incorporate sustainability throughout its other SDGs engagement. The second is that while the SDGs are essentially a development framework, ACT must seize the opportunity both in its programming and its advocacy, to fuse the divide between humanitarian and development work with a greater focus on resilience and preparedness as the core of sustainable development. As with climate justice, ACT has an existing strategy for its humanitarian response and advocacy on the Grand Bargain which will drive this work, but which also now needs to be tied more explicitly into the SDG work.

ACT Long Term Direction to 2030

By 2030:

Aim 1. ACT, through its members and forums, will be well-known and respected for effective programme work contributing to national implementation plans

Aim 2. ACT will be playing an influential role at national and international levels bringing in faith-based and community perspectives to SDG implementation policy debate

Aim 3. ACT will be recognised as a constructive voice holding decision-makers to account at national, regional and global levels

Aim 4. ACT will be well-known and respected for providing evidence-based monitoring of SDG achievement.

To achieve these aims, contributing to the global SDGs implementation plan, ACT Alliance will undertake three specific components that promote the transformation of existing structures. It will integrate awareness raising, programmatic development work and advocacy at all levels, and be adapted to be implemented in both the Global South and North.

- 1) **Awareness raising and capacity building**, particularly to churches and faith-based organisations and the communities they serve, about the SDGs and how they can engage with them, helping to empower people to gain their entitlements. At the same time ACT members will ensure they are listening, gathering and processing information received from these communities regarding their proposals to find solutions to the identified problems. ACT will seek to involve FBOs, churches, communities and their leaders in long-term processes and create capacities for meaningful engagement and advocacy.
- 2) **Advocacy** on the SDGs to governments and other actors at local, national and international levels, both in relation to development planning and funding and in holding governments to account for the achievement of the SDGs. This will use a *human rights based approach* in identifying groups of people whose rights have been violated, neglected or overlooked in development processes, and in promoting their views to local and national governments. ACT will build on its presence at the local level, do analysis from its evidence base, and cooperate with other civil society organisations in dialogue with national level actors on the relevant policies and processes.

ACT will also work to hold governments in both the Global North and South accountable for the Sustainable Development Agenda globally advocating to UN Member States, UN and other multilateral organisations and regional intergovernmental forums. It will focus on existing challenges and showcasing good practices on roles and responsibilities especially regarding civil society participation, as well as on learning around specific thematic programming. ACT will participate in the formal monitoring and reporting mechanisms to ensure that faith voices are heard.

- 3) **Strategic partnering in the implementation** of the sustainable development agenda with faith-based and other civil society organisations at all levels – with community based organisations for programme delivery at local levels, creating bridges between communities and governmental authorities on other levels. While national governments hold primary responsibility for delivering services in their country, the private sector, political parties and parliaments, communities and CSOs also play an important role, particularly in situations where governments lack capacity, capability or the will to provide essential services for their citizens. This is particularly relevant in areas affected by conflict and characterised by high levels of poverty and a lack of access to basic services.

ACT Strategy till end 2018

The vastness of the SDG framework is itself a challenge in determining how ACT can make a meaningful contribution, especially as the graph above shows, ACT members are working across all the goals. This strategy therefore focuses on where ACT's particular strengths are or can best be allocated to achieve the transformational change we need to see as reflected in the principles of the framework. This will primarily be through strong identification as a faith-based organisation and taking the opportunities this presents, and

through promotion of the principles and values we hold. This more strategic approach is also important for fundraising, in being able to develop credible proposals in relation to the global cross cutting principles, as well as for specific thematic or geographic programmes.

It should also be stressed that ACT's engagement with the SDG framework should be seen more as a realignment, or shift in framing, of existing work rather than a new stream of work or a priority issue in its own right. Most if not all current work of the alliance and its members, developed according to local and regional contexts, as well as its global advocacy, is covered within the 2030 Agenda, so the challenge is less to change this work at a programmatic level than it is to build on these experiences to shape development policy at all levels to achieve the ambitious goals. It must also be recognised that some key areas of activity will work towards more than one goal, for example sexual and reproductive health rights may address both the Gender and Health & Well Being goals, just as the Waking the Giant ecumenical initiative will focus on several different goals.

As ACT, at the time of writing, is just embarking on the process to define its new strategy for 2019 and beyond, it is recommended that this strategy be reviewed, refreshed and sharpened at the end of 2018 to ensure it continues to work strategically in support of ACT's organisational objectives, which should build on and align what ACT is already doing rather than bringing in new issues.

It is also recommended that ACT develops the means to tell a common story and its shared learning about its work in delivering the SDG framework. ACT must be able to aggregate the activities of all ACT members to underline the effectiveness of our worldwide network and to provide evidence for further lobby and advocacy activities. While monitoring must remain focused on legal human rights instruments, we must also be able to show the links to the SDGs.

1. Whole Alliance:

By end 2018:

1.1 The first, fundamental objective is to increase awareness about the SDG framework, increase understanding among members, churches and partners across the alliance of how they can engage, and build their capacity to engage with the SDG agenda at a local and national level, and support global advocacy.

The expectation is:

- Increased participation of ACT members/partners in national level planning and implementation
- Increased participation of ACT members/partners in national monitoring and review
- Increased engagement of local and national members in regional and global SDG processes

1.2 Beyond this, the main focus for ACT Alliance, positioned as a key faith-based voice and encompassing strategic resource allocation at all levels will be in support of the overall achievement of the 2030 Agenda and its fundamental principles of sustainability (linking with ACT climate strategy), reducing inequalities and 'Leave No One Behind', and holding governments to account for delivery, including resourcing and enhanced space for civil society in both planning and monitoring, of the framework.

While the focus is less on specific goals than the cross cutting and prerequisite principles, given the nature of the framework, it will inevitably link to work on the goals that reflect these principles, i.e.:

Goal 1 – No poverty

Goal 5 – Gender equality

Goal 10 - Reduced inequalities

Goal 13 – Climate action

The expectation is:

- all ACT activities – development, humanitarian and advocacy – will promote or encompass the underlying principles, and particularly our faith-based perspectives, and be based on a demonstrable link to achieving the 2030 Agenda at local, national and international levels
- ACT resources, including the Secretariat, to support members and forums and to facilitate ACT advocacy will primarily be directed at this systemic level, at whatever the level activities are being carried out
- ACT, at all levels will look to work equally at both the implementation and accountability processes

Activities will include:

- Continuing engagement in the global faith organisations and development initiatives PaRD (Partnership for Religion and Development), Joint Learning Initiative (JLI) and the Moral Imperative, convened by the World Bank, to help shape them into effective and useful fora to help deliver the framework
- Active participation in the planning and implementation of the Ecumenical Strategic Forum in October 2017, with alliance-wide engagement in its follow up and recommendations
- Alliance-wide consideration of how ecumenical diakonia supports ACT work on the SDGs, to ensure this informs the 2019+ strategy formation
- Developing a longer term plan for ACT Alliance-wide engagement with the High Level Political Forum, bringing national experiences into the global accountability mechanism
- Developing and expanding the Waking the Giant project in collaboration with WCC and LWF
- Building the Advocacy Academy SDG module and capacity development resources to encourage and support ACT member engagement with the sustainable development agenda
- As lead for the Faith-based constituency of the Civil Society Partnership for Development Effectiveness (CPDE) and the Global Partnership for Development Effectiveness (GPEDC), assess the potential and develop appropriate plans for integrating this agenda to that of delivering the SDG framework
- Emerging work on ACT's engagement with the private sector incorporates a strong 2030 Agenda framing

2. Regional and shared thematic interest

ACT will also use its collective resources, including those of the Secretariat, where ACT can demonstrably make a strong contribution to the 2030 Agenda through its advocacy, based on real, on-the-ground experience regionally, or across a number of forums and/or members with shared interest.

Based on where ACT is building a profile as and in the name of the Alliance, this would indicate a focus on:

Goal 8 – Decent work and economic growth

Goal 16 - Peace, justice and strong institutions

Goal 17 – Partnerships for the goals

The expectation is:

- Different parts of the alliance, i.e. advisory groups, communities of practice, forums, etc., will communicate and coordinate around mutual areas of interest in relation to these goals
- Forums and members will increasingly initiate and organise across traditional borders in relation to achieving these goals
- Sustainability and climate justice will inform all work
- Where members currently working on common priorities, e.g. Goal 2 – Zero Hunger, want to raise the profile, they will come together with other members or as forums to define an Alliance wide approach including advocacy, and build ACT's name in that area.

The activities include:

- Building ACT's reputation as a progressive voice on gender through its work at the Commission on Population and Development and elsewhere on Goal 3 focused on women's sexual and reproductive health and rights
- Building the Advocacy Academy SDG module and capacity development resources to encourage and support ACT member engagement with the sustainable development agenda
- Waking the Giant project, and work of the Gender Strategy, aligned to achieve this
- Engagement with the JLI and ETF, as above
- Linking work from the Migration and Displacement strategy to the SDG agenda, where appropriate
- Continuing or increased levels of engagement with the financing for development agenda

Exploring innovative models/developing new models of multi-stakeholder partnerships, ensuring delivery of goals on the basis of equity and capabilities

3. Local and national specific priority concerns

Development programming and advocacy on other specific goals or targets will remain the responsibility of national members and forums, working with other stakeholders in relation to national implementation planning and priorities.

The expectation is:

- Where there are relatively high levels of member engagement, for example in education, hunger eradication or water and sanitation, members will be encouraged and supported to engage with SDG goals in relation to their work
- ACT will support national (or regional) forums engaging in their own SDG priorities as part of (but only as part of) existing support mechanisms, such as participation in the Advocacy Academy (including SDG, migration, gender, climate and humanitarian modules) and other capacity development, sharing information and learning through any relevant community of practice, and promoting case studies of good work through ACT web and other communications channels.