

Equality and Human Rights Commission

Briefing on the Sustainable Development Goals

June 2019

Introduction

The Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) framework was adopted by the United Nations (UN) General Assembly in 2015 and will be in force until 2030. It describes 17 global goals that collectively provide ‘a shared blueprint for peace and prosperity for people and the planet’.¹ The SDGs apply at both domestic level and overseas and UN member states are responsible for implementing the SDGs at home and contributing to progress internationally.

The Equality and Human Rights Commission (the Commission) is a statutory body in Great Britain, established under the Equality Act 2006. It is one of three ‘A status’ national human rights institutions (NHRIs) in the UK, alongside the Scottish Human Rights Commission (SHRC) and the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission.² These bodies all fulfil SDG 16.A.1 – to establish independent NHRIs, operating independently to encourage equality and diversity, eliminate unlawful discrimination, and monitor and promote human rights compliance. The 2015 Mérida Declaration, encourages ‘all NHRIs, [...] to contribute to a human rights-based approach to implementation of the 2030 [Sustainable Development Goals] Agenda’,³ including providing advice to national governments and monitoring progress on the SDGs.

In June 2019, the UK Government submitted its voluntary national review (VNR) of progress on the SDGs to the UN’s High Level Political Forum (HLPF). The Forum will focus on Goals 4 (education), 8 (work), 10 (reduced inequality), and 16 (peaceful and inclusive societies, justice for all), as well as Goal 13 (climate change) and 17 (global partnership). The first four of these relate directly to the Commission’s remit. We have produced this short briefing in line with our obligations as an NHRI, as set out in the Mérida Declaration. The scope of this briefing does not cover matters that are devolved to the Northern Ireland Assembly and the Scottish Parliament, which largely drive the implementation of the SDGs in Northern Ireland⁴ and Scotland.⁵ The briefing highlights some of our key concerns about the UK Government’s current

¹ [United Nations SDG homepage](#) [accessed: 27 February 2019]

² The Commission has a shared remit in Scotland with the Scottish Human Rights Commission (SHRC), with SHRC covering human rights matters that are devolved. This briefing therefore focuses on England, Wales and non-devolved issues in Scotland where relevant.

³ The Merida Declaration (2015), *The Role of National Human Rights Institutions in implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*

⁴ Northern Ireland Executive (2019), [United Nations Sustainable Development Goals](#) [accessed 19 June 2019].

⁵ Scottish Government (2019), [Sustainable Development Goals](#) [accessed 19 June 2019].

approach to SDG implementation, and sets out where further action needs to be taken to fulfil the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

The international human rights framework and the SDGs

As noted in the Mérida Declaration, the 2030 Agenda is firmly rooted in the international human rights framework.⁶ The 17 SDGs reflect human rights standards, and 92 per cent of the associated 169 targets are linked to international human rights instruments.⁷ Implementation of the SDGs is expected to be consistent with international human rights, and in turn should contribute to the realisation of ‘human rights for all’.⁸ The SDGs and the international human rights framework are therefore inextricably linked and reinforce one another, and governments should approach the two frameworks together. The recommendations from UN treaty bodies can inform SDG monitoring and reporting, and implementation of the SDGs should be central to implementing the Government’s international human rights obligations.

Despite the clear links between the SDGs and the international human rights framework, there is little evidence that the UK Government is currently linking the SDGs to its human rights reporting and monitoring and taking a coordinated, cross-government approach to both sets of obligations. There does not appear to be any overlap at all between the leads on the SDGs and those on international human rights treaties within UK Government departments.

Domestically, the SDGs still largely appear to be perceived as applying internationally, rather than at both domestic and international level.⁹ In the UK, the lead department for the SDGs is the Department for International Development, which may reinforce this view, though all Government departments are now expected to link their work to the SDGs in their single departmental plans¹⁰ and report on progress on these plans to the Cabinet Office.¹¹ Concerns have been expressed during parliamentary scrutiny that there has been insufficient cross-

⁶ The Merida Declaration (2015), The Role of National Human Rights Institutions in implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, para 6.

⁷ Danish Institute for Human Rights (2018), ‘Human Rights and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development’.

⁸ UN General Assembly (2015), ‘Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development’.

⁹ International Development Committee (2016), First Report of Session 2016–17, UK implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals, para 74.

¹⁰ The single departmental plans are available at [‘Building a country that works for everyone: the government’s plan’](#) [accessed: 27 February 2019].

¹¹ House of Lords Library Briefing (2018), UN Sustainable Development Goals: Integration into UK Policy Debate on 22 November 2018.

government working on the SDGs¹², that there are no clear lines of accountability for implementation across Government, and that there is no clear implementation plan or strategy.¹³

Recommendations

To strengthen the links between the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the international human rights framework, and demonstrate a joined up approach to the UK's human rights commitments at domestic level, we recommend that:

- The UK and Welsh governments put in place comprehensive national mechanisms for monitoring and reporting on progress and implementation of the SDGs. These should be consistent with, and integrated with, the Government's international human rights obligations, in particular the recommendations made by UN treaty bodies and through the Universal Periodic Review process.
- Overall responsibility for the SDGs should sit with senior ministers in the UK and Welsh governments who are empowered with a significant domestic policymaking remit and who can drive forward implementation.
- The SDGs should be fully integrated into Single Departmental Plans, departmental SDG champions' posts should be made permanent, and there should be continued responsibility for progress on SDGs at a director level, following the VNR.
- UK and Welsh governments should incorporate international human rights treaties into domestic law, so that individuals can effectively challenge rights violations using the domestic legal system and access a domestic remedy for alleged breaches of their rights.

¹² Environmental Audit Committee (2019), Sustainable Development Goals in the UK follow up: Hunger, malnutrition and food insecurity in the UK, para 9.

¹³ [International Development Committee Letter, 2 April 2019, to the Secretary of State, concerning the UK Voluntary National Review on the Sustainable Development Goals](#) [accessed 6 June 2019].

Equality and human rights priorities within Sustainable Development Goals 4, 8, 10 and 16

The Commission's reviews of equality and human rights for Britain (IBF 2018) and Wales (IWF 2018),¹⁴ and our reports to UN review mechanisms,¹⁵ set out key areas of concern where further action is needed to implement the SDGs at domestic level. Our reports contain recommendations on these and other issues relevant to the SDGs.

In the section below we highlight the key evidence from our reports that relates to SDGs 4, 8, 10 and 16 – four of the Goals that are being reviewed at the High Level Political Forum later this year. It is worth noting that a lack of data on religion and belief, pregnancy and maternity, and LGBT concerns means that the true scale of adverse outcomes or progress over time is unclear for many people, so this evidence is not comprehensive. Unless otherwise stated, all findings presented in this briefing stem from analysis for the Commission's statutory review 'Is Britain Fairer?' (2018).¹⁶

Sustainable Development Goal 4: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all

Our review of the state of equality and human rights in Britain, published in 2018, shows improvements in school attainment for most children across England and Wales over the last few years. Those from lower income backgrounds, and Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children, are, however, still achieving significantly worse exam results than other groups. These same children are also more likely to face exclusion from school. The proportion of disabled children at special, rather than mainstream, schools has increased in England and Wales, and they are more likely to be excluded from mainstream schools. Young people from disadvantaged areas are less likely to go to university, and gaps in achievement at university remain for ethnic minority and disabled students. It is clear that poorer or disabled children are much less likely to benefit from work towards Goal 4. Targeted and sustained action is

¹⁴ [See the 'Is Britain Fairer?' and 'Is Wales Fairer?' 2018 reports](#) [accessed 14 June 2019].

¹⁵ As a National Human Rights Institution, one of the Commission's main jobs is to monitor the UK's compliance with the seven UN human rights treaties it has signed and ratified. We also engage in the Universal Periodic Review process. All our reports to UN review mechanisms can be accessed on our website at '[Monitoring and promoting UN treaties](#)' [accessed 14 June 2019].

¹⁶ Equality and Human Rights Commission, '[Is Britain Fairer?' 2018](#) [accessed 14 June 2019].

needed to ensure that all children, regardless of their background or circumstances, are able to enjoy an inclusive and high quality education.

Sustainable Development Goal 8: Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all

Our analysis shows that, despite increasing employment rates across Britain, better outcomes for women, Black people and Pakistani people, and a slight narrowing in the disability employment gap since 2015, there are still areas for concern in relation to Goal 8. Disabled people, Pakistani and Bangladeshi people, and Muslims have consistently lower employment and higher unemployment rates and are more likely to be in insecure employment than other groups in Britain. The overall employment rate was lower in Wales than in England, while the unemployment rate for disabled people was twice that of non-disabled people in Wales in 2016/17. Ethnic minority groups continued to be under-represented in apprenticeships in Wales in 2016/17.

The majority of children in poverty are in working families¹⁷ and people from the most deprived households have significantly lower educational attainment, putting them at a lifelong disadvantage in the employment market. Some workers are facing a range of additional barriers including low wages,¹⁸ insecure employment, rising childcare costs,¹⁹ pregnancy- and maternity-based discrimination, sexual harassment in the workplace, disability discrimination, and race discrimination. Further action is therefore needed to meet the requirements of Goal 8, and ensure that full and productive employment and decent work is a reality for all.

Sustainable Development Goal 10: Reduce inequality within and among countries

Our 'Is Britain Fairer?' 2018 report found there has been progress to reduce inequality in Britain (between 2015 and 2018), but there are still serious challenges that must be addressed. Large gaps persist between the experiences and outcomes of certain groups (disabled people, some ethnic minorities, and children from poorer backgrounds in particular) and the population as a whole, and these gaps are becoming increasingly entrenched. Multiple barriers are faced by people in poverty and the groups with the highest levels of severe material deprivation (disabled

¹⁷ Joseph Rowntree Foundation. '[Budget 2018: tackling the rising tide of in-work poverty](#)' [accessed: 14 June 2019]; Cribb, J., Hood, A., Joyce, R. and Norris Keiller, A. (2017). Institute for Fiscal Studies. '[In-work poverty among families with children](#)' [accessed: 11 June 2019].

¹⁸ Fullfact (2018), 'How have wages changed over the past decade?'

¹⁹ As seen at: [Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 'Childcare costs'](#) [accessed: 29 May 2019].

people, and Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Black people, especially Black women), have remained the same since 2010/11. Poverty rates in Wales continue to rise, with one in four people living in poverty in Wales compared with one in five across Britain. Socio-economic disadvantage is strongly linked to poorer outcomes in education and health. For example, although life expectancy across Britain is increasing, this is not the case for adult men living in the most deprived areas of Wales.

Child poverty increased between 2010/11 and 2015/16: three in 10 children in Britain live in poverty, and this rises to half of Black African, Bangladeshi and Pakistani children across Britain. Changes in public spending (and tax and welfare reforms), between 2010 and 2018 have produced differential impacts. Black and 'Other' ethnicity households have been more negatively affected than White households, and lone parent (predominantly female) households more negatively affected than any other demographic in terms of final income. Households with more disabled members (and individuals with more severe disabilities) also have larger losses as a percentage of final income.²⁰ The persistent disadvantages faced by certain groups suggest there is still a significant way to go to reduce inequalities within society.

Sustainable Development Goal 16: Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels

Much more needs to be done to create a society that is inclusive and peaceful for all, and to ensure that all people have equal access to justice and are treated fairly by our laws and institutions. Our analysis shows regression in relation to a number of the requirements of Goal 16, including the targets to significantly reduce all forms of violence, to end abuse, exploitation, trafficking and violence against children, to ensure equal access to justice, and to promote and enforce non-discriminatory laws.²¹ We have observed a deterioration in access to justice, including reductions in legal aid, deterioration in conditions of detention, a substantial rise in the use of restraint in the youth custodial estate in England and Wales, and the continued use of painful restraint on children in youth justice settings,²² and disproportionate risks of violence for many groups.

Overcrowding is prevalent in a high proportion of adult prisons in England and Wales, and there have been increases in self-harm and assaults in prisons. Children

²⁰ Portes, J. and Reed, H. (2018). Equality and Human Rights Commission. [‘The cumulative impact of tax and welfare reforms’](#) [accessed: 11 June 2019].

²¹ See [‘Sustainable Development Goal 16’](#) [accessed 6 June 2019].

²² Equality and Human Rights Commission (2019), [‘Torture in the UK: update report. Submission to the UN Committee Against Torture in response to the UK List of Issues’](#) [accessed 14 June 2019].

in youth justice settings report feeling unsafe, and rates of violence against staff and peer-on peer violence have increased.²³ There has been an increase in referrals of potential victims of trafficking, including children, to the National Referral Mechanism – the mechanism through which victims of trafficking or modern slavery are identified and receive support – but the numbers of referrals are small compared to the Government’s own estimates of 10,000–13,000 victims in the UK.²⁴ Women, disabled people, and lesbian, gay and bisexual people are more likely to be victims of domestic abuse and sexual violence. Women are much more likely than men to experience particular forms of violence, such as sexual offences, domestic violence and so-called ‘honour-based’ violence; disabled women experience disproportionate levels of violence and abuse from carers, partners and those in the community.²⁵

Goal 16 is concerned with the extent to which people feel discriminated against on the basis of a protected characteristic.²⁶ Between 2013/14 and 2016/17 the majority of offences recorded by police as hate crimes were motivated by race or religion, with the total number of all hate crimes increasing in England and Wales by 80 per cent. Although some of that increase could be a result of improvements in police practice and greater awareness, this is a particular concern given spikes in hate crime following the EU referendum or at times of recent terrorist attacks. Our recent (2018) work to develop a national barometer of prejudice and discrimination indicates that 42% of people in Britain had experienced some form of prejudice based on a protected characteristic in the previous 12 months: 64% of Black people and 70% of Muslims surveyed had experienced race or religion based prejudice respectively.²⁷

²³ Equality and Human Rights Commission (2019), [‘Torture in the UK: update report. Submission to the UN Committee Against Torture in response to the UK List of Issues’](#) [accessed 14 June 2019].

²⁴ Equality and Human Rights Commission (2018), [‘Pressing for progress: women’s rights and gender equality in 2018’](#) [accessed 14 June 2019].

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Goal 16, indicator 16.B. 1.

²⁷ Abrams, D., Swift, H., and Houston, D. (2018). Equality and Human Rights Commission research report 119. [‘Developing a national barometer of prejudice and discrimination in Britain’](#) [accessed 14 June 2019].

Contacts

This publication and related equality and human rights resources are available from [our website](#).

Questions and comments regarding this publication may be addressed to: correspondence@equalityhumanrights.com. We welcome your feedback.

For information on accessing one of our publications in an alternative format, please contact: correspondence@equalityhumanrights.com.

[Keep up to date with our latest news, events and publications by signing up to our e-newsletter.](#)

EASS

For advice, information or guidance on equality, discrimination or human rights issues, please contact the [Equality Advisory and Support Service](#), a free and independent service.

Telephone 0808 800 0082

Textphone 0808 800 0084

Hours 09:00 to 19:00 (Monday to Friday)
10:00 to 14:00 (Saturday)

Post FREEPOST EASS HELPLINE FPN6521

© 2019 Equality and Human Rights Commission

Published June 2019

ISBN 978-1-84206-800-7