

Human Rights and the Sustainable Development Goals

Briefing for MSPs: Debate 16/1/2020:

‘Sustainable Development Goals in Scotland, On Target for 2030?’

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**About the Commission**

The Scottish Human Rights Commission is an independent public body with a statutory mandate to promote and protect all human rights for everyone in Scotland. Its powers and duties are set out in the Scottish Commission for Human Rights Act 2006. The Commission is accredited as an A-Status National Human Rights Institution within the United Nations (UN) human rights system.

The Commission has a general duty to promote human rights and a series of specific powers to protect human rights for everyone in Scotland. This includes monitoring and reporting to the UN on the implementation of international human rights treaties in Scotland. As an independent NHRI, with international standing, the Commission is well-placed to be at the heart of the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) ‘web of accountability’[[1]](#endnote-1).

The Commission is also a member of the [SDG Network Scotland](https://globalgoals.scot/), an open coalition bringing together over 450 people and organisations to assist with the development of a comprehensive Scottish response to the Sustainable Development Goals challenge[[2]](#endnote-2).

The SDGs in Scotland

The [2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/post2015/transformingourworld)[[3]](#endnote-3) was adopted by all United Nations Member States in 2015. The 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 169 targets are an urgent call for action by all countries. They provide a cohesive and indivisible combination of the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development.

**At their heart, the SDGs seek to realise everyone’s human rights. They are inextricably linked: 92 per cent of the SDGs are relevant to realising people’s human rights[[4]](#endnote-4).**

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) for the first time, a document to which the Scottish Government contributed. To ensure a fuller reflection of Scottish progress and areas for improvement, the [SDG Network](https://globalgoals.scot/scotlands-sustainable-development-goals-network/) worked with the Scottish Government and COSLA to produce a Scottish Supplementary Review, ‘Scotland and the SDGs: a national review to drive action’. The Commission shares the SDG Network’s disappointment that this Review remains unpublished to date.

The Commission also submitted a [report to the VNR](http://www.scottishhumanrights.com/media/1886/shrc-briefing-for-the-vnr-of-the-uk-2019.docx) focusing on issues and concerns of process including the Scottish Government’s current approach to SDG monitoring and implementation. This briefing provides a summary of these issues.

Scotland’s National Action Plan for Human Rights (SNAP) and the SDGs

In July 2015, the First Minister pledged that Scotland would lead the way to deliver the Sustainable Development Goals, expressing a desire to“provide international leadership on reducing inequality across the globe”[[5]](#endnote-5).

Around the same time, a monitoring framework was developed for Scotland’s first National Action Plan for Human Rights ([SNAP](http://www.snaprights.info)) by the Commission, Scottish Government and other stakeholders[[6]](#endnote-6). In recognition that the SDG agenda was firmly rooted in the international human rights framework, the decision was taken to put the SDGs at the heart of SNAP’s desired outcomes by 2030. These are:

1. Each of us is empowered to understand and embrace the value of human rights asserting them in all parts of our lives.
2. Each of us can participate in shaping and directing decisions that affect our human rights.
3. Organisations providing public services contribute to a human rights culture by valuing and putting human rights at the heart of what we do.
4. Scotland increasingly implements its international human rights obligations, influences and learns from international experience and promotes human rights in all of its international engagements.
5. All organisations are held to account for the realisation of people’s rights through international and domestic laws, regulation and monitoring.
6. Each of us has access to and can enjoy quality public services which respect our dignity, irrespective of who we are or where we live.
7. Each of us experiences improved opportunities and life outcomes whilst Scotland experiences an overall reduction in inequality of opportunity and outcomes.

The SNAP monitoring framework also set out the relationship between the SDGs, the SNAP 2030 outcomes and the National Performance Framework (NPF) [[7]](#endnote-7) [[8]](#endnote-8). This reflects the commitment made by the First Minister to embed human rights and the SDGs within the process of measuring Scotland’s national progress:

*“When we signed up to the Sustainable Development Goals, I promised to reflect those goals within our National Performance Framework and I make the same pledge today in relation to the SNAP. We should integrate our performance framework with the sustainable development goals and the action plan. Doing that will make Scotland a world leader. It means that we will truly – not just in words but in action – be putting human rights at the heart of how we assess our national performance as a country”[[9]](#endnote-9).*

**The Scottish Parliament, SDGs and human rights**

In order to ensure systematic scrutiny using a policy coherence approach, the Scottish Parliament could look to assess all new bills and legislation through the dual lens of human rights and the SDGs.

The Commission has previously highlighted[[10]](#endnote-10) the need for all Parliamentary Committees to understand their human rights obligations. Consideration of human rights issues should not be confined as a focus only of the Equalities and Human Rights Committee. This is also the case for the SDGs and the NPF Outcomes.

All Parliamentary Committees, to a greater or lesser degree, have cross-cutting responsibilities across all three frameworks. Improving knowledge of the relevance of SDGs and human rights across all Committees would help drive Committees’ abilities to hold government to account.

To assist MSPs in this regard, the Commission has systematically included relevant references to the SDGs in its policy and legislative consultation submissions to Government and Parliament since 2016. Examples include: [A New Future For Social Security Social Security in Scotland](https://tinyurl.com/y5ymb5c9), the [Child Poverty (Scotland) Bill](https://tinyurl.com/y54lybj4) and [Guidance on engaging communities in decisions relating to land](https://tinyurl.com/y694tq5z).[[11]](#endnote-11)

Recommendations

The Scottish Parliament could better support the Scottish Government to deliver on its 2030 SDG targets by:

1. Encouraging the adoption of a human rights based approach to their National Performance Framework that fully embeds the SDG targets – both in the process of the next review cycle and the development of human rights based outcomes and indicators (also a recommendation of the 2018 [First Minister’s Advisory Group on Human Rights Leadership](https://humanrightsleadership.scot/))[[12]](#endnote-12).
2. Encouraging the government to explore how its SDG, human rights commitments and NFP Outcomes are connected and in turn how it can best implement action to achieve all three. This should include investing energy in exploring integration of SNAP2 with SDG and NPF implementation and the development of resourced implementation plans that genuinely foster cross-portfolio cooperation to deliver outcomes.
3. Ensuring that all new bills and legislation are assessed through both a human rights and sustainable development lens.
4. Supporting more debate in the Scottish Parliament on the SDGs, the NPF and human rights – ensuring the connections are made between all three frameworks whatever the original focus of debate.
5. Building internal Scottish Parliament capacity on human rights and the SDGs to assist in the mainstreaming of human rights and SDGs across Committees and a consistency of approach to human rights and SDG scrutiny.
1. See: Donald,K. Promising the World: Accountability and the SDGs, 2016. <http://www.hhrjournal.org/2016/01/promising-the-world-accountability-and-the-sdgs/>;

CESR, *Breaking the Accountability Taboo in Sustainable Development Negotiations,* June 2nd, 2015; <http://cesr.org/article.php?id=1732>;

Hosie, A. 2016, *“Contributing to the Accountability Web: The Role of NHRIs and the SDGs”,* Journal of Health and Human Rights *March 2016;* <https://www.hhrjournal.org/2016/03/contributing-to-the-accountability-web-the-role-of-nhris-and-the-sdgs/> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. <https://globalgoals.scot/> [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/post2015/transformingourworld> [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. <https://www.humanrights.dk/what-we-do/sustainable-development-goals> [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. <https://www.scotsman.com/news/politics/nicola-sturgeon-signs-un-pledge-on-global-poverty-1-3834853> [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. <http://www.scottishhumanrights.com/scotlands-national-action-plan/> [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. SNAP 1 ran from 2013-17 and following an 18 month national participation process, SNAP 2 is in the process of being developed, due to be launched in 2020.  The SDGs were also embedded within the evidence based used to help to develop the second Action Plan. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. <https://nationalperformance.gov.scot/> [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. The First Minister speaking at SNAP Innovation Forum, “Putting the Justice into Social Justice”, in December 2015 [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. <http://www.scottishhumanrights.com/media/1760/shrc-scottish-parliament-inquiry-2018.docx> [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. See <https://tinyurl.com/y5ymb5c9>; \*\* <https://tinyurl.com/y54lybj4>; \*\* https://tinyurl.com/y694tq5z [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. <https://humanrightsleadership.scot/> [↑](#endnote-ref-12)