

Australia must embrace transformation for a sustainable future

June 19 2018, by Shirin Malekpour



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Last Friday, the Australian government released its first report on our

progress towards meeting the United Nations' [Sustainable Development Goals](#) by 2030.

These 17 goals are a call to action to ensure economic prosperity and social inclusion, while protecting the planet. They cover issues ranging from health to reducing inequalities and clean energy.

[According to the report](#), Australia has made some steady progress towards most of our goals.

However, to achieve the goals in just 12 years from now, we need transformative actions. These are missing in the [report](#). Without a strong vision and new models of partnership between government, industry and communities, we will not meet the 2030 deadline.

What the report says

In 2015, most of the world's nations signed up to the United Nation's 2030 Agenda. In July this year, Australia will present its first voluntary review of progress towards the goals at the UN. These reviews are a crucial component of accountability.

Australia's [Voluntary National Review](#) (for which I facilitated a consultation workshop to give input from the university sector) is a showcase of policies, actions and initiatives from across different sectors that are, in the report's language, "relevant" to achieving the goals.

The report highlights that Australia is a prosperous and generally healthy country. But it also acknowledges significant challenges, such as improving the health and prosperity of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and helping workers in the resources or manufacturing sectors who are facing technological and industrial transitions.

The report highlights that local councils, statutory authorities, businesses and universities are taking actions that are explicitly aligned with the global goals. For example, a number of Australian universities have signed a commitment to the goals and are including the 2030 Agenda in their curricula.

However, no sector has fundamentally changed its practices in response to the Sustainable Development Goals, nor embedded the goals into its core business.

At the national level, there has been limited specific engagement with the goals. Most of the national policies outlined in the report were developed for other reasons, and some have been around for years or decades. Examples are the [National Disability Strategy](#), which dates back to pre-2010, or the [National Drought Policy](#), which began in 1992. In other words, at the national level, the report emphasises what we have already been doing – not new initiatives explicitly related to the goals.

Notwithstanding success stories from across different sectors, the reality is that we will not be able to meet the goals in just 12 years on a business-as-usual trajectory. Instead, we need transformative plans across all sectors.

What is transformative change?

Sustainable development, as opposed to conventional development, involves big systemic transformations. Let's use the example of clean energy.

Taking carbon out of our energy system is not simply about using wind and solar instead of coal. It involves big changes in how we consume energy, in manufacturing technologies and in the ways governments help (or hinder) the adoption of new technologies and practices. It requires

systemic transformation, rather than incremental improvements.

[Research](#) into systemic transformation has identified a range of factors for making change happen. Two critical factors are creative decision-making and strong partnerships across disciplines and sectors. If we are serious about achieving the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030, we need to act now.

Transformative decision-making

[Conventional decision-making](#) favours the status quo and is largely risk-averse. It can cope with small incremental changes, but not big ones. In transport, for instance, we often tend to augment or replicate existing infrastructure – building another highway, for example – rather than innovating by trying to get people out of their cars.

Conventional decision-making also prefers to react: we often wait for a crisis situation and then quickly respond. This almost always favours short-term over long-term benefits.

Transformative decision-making, on the other hand, is proactive and takes deliberate actions to shape a desired future. It works toward a long-term vision and doesn't shy away from uncertainty and complexity along the way.

As Australia's [review](#) correctly acknowledges, the Sustainable Development Goals are all about "longstanding, complex policy challenges with no simple solutions". Solving complex problems requires a great deal of innovation and experimentation. We need governments, businesses and communities to be willing to try new things, even if they occasionally fail.

Developing partnerships

Improving the lives of people and the planet requires myriad skills, tapping into various networks and reaching out to all segments of society.

Universities, for instance, often [play a key role](#) in analysing problems, developing new solutions and providing the evidence base that a solution actually works. But it is only through partnering with communities, businesses and policy organisations that they can put these solutions into practice.

The Voluntary National Review has highlighted the role of cross-sectoral partnerships. What is missing is a plan for fostering the partnerships that can enable substantial change in just 12 years.

As Australia prepares to present our progress report at the 2018 [UN High Level Political Forum](#) in July, we need more critical assessment of our performance. How can we start doing things differently to be able to celebrate achieving these ambitious global goals in 2030?

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