



*Practitioners may find it liberating to understand that their work need not be narrowly confined to educational and employment goals. Photo: Colourbox*

## **The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals: An inspiration for career development practice**

Increasingly career development practitioners around the world are turning to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, to inform and inspire their practice. This article provides an overview of the Goals, and it explores what they might mean for career development practitioners and services.

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### **Introduction: What are the UN Goals?**

The [United Nations Sustainable Development Goals](#) (SDGs) define shared international policy objectives for the period 2015-2030. They replace the UN Millennium Development Goals, which covered the previous 15 years, and were widely seen as a successful initiative. The SDGs aim to mobilise governments and peoples to achieve global economic, social, and environmental priorities.

‘Leaving no one behind’ is the central, transformative promise of the SDGs. This means that UN member states commit to the eradication of poverty and discrimination, and to reduce

inequalities. To put it another way, the Goals are framed in such a way that a nation growing its GDP and enriching its elite citizens whilst its people remain poor or unjustly treated, could not be considered a success.

It represents an ambitious attempt at global governance through goal setting. The UN cannot make member states comply with its decisions – it has no authority to impose sanctions. It can only proceed by reaching consensus.

193 Nation states agreed and committed to deliver on  
17 Sustainable Development Goals, supported by  
169 more specific targets.

An alternative way to think about the SDG framework is to see it not in terms of governance, but as the UN seeking to create a global movement for social change. This movement is based on a global values-based consensus.

Some critique of this UN initiative is possible. Arguably because the Goals need to be very broad brush to be of global relevance and widely acceptable, this means they are also vague, or at least open to interpretation. Also, the Goals are inter-connected and may sometimes be in conflict – for example if industrial development will raise women out of poverty but also harm the environment.

Crucially the UN framework identifies goals but offers no route map to delivery. For career development professionals, that means it is a framework suggesting what we should strive towards, but it leaves us without a recipe book for practice to follow. We have to bring our own.

### **What we are trying to achieve: The big picture**

In most European nations, including Norway, governments are involved in the delivery of career services, so government policy shapes what we do. Their policies set out what services should be aiming to do. Our current understanding of the goals of public policy for career development is based on some excellent international comparative studies carried out on behalf of the OECD, the World Bank, and agencies of the European Union, by scholars like Tony Watts and Ronald Sultana in the early 2000s. It seems that governments tend to see career services in terms of their potential to deliver on goals related to:

- i) Efficiency in the labour markets
- ii) Efficiency in the education system, and smooth transition into work
- iii) The promotion of social equity

The UN has effectively provided a catalogue of policy goals that responsible governments should be striving towards, summarised in this diagram:



In this framework we can see the career guidance professionals' concern for employment clearly represented in goal 8, which is framed in terms of decent work and economic growth. Education is clearly represented in goal 4. Social equity is also clearly represented in goal 10, and also in goal 5, which focuses on gender equality, and in the 'leave no-one behind' agenda. The established public policy goals for career development are captured in the framework.

### **Using the framework as an inspiration for practice**

The extensive scope of the framework might suggest a wider role for career services (Robertson, 2020). Career development work can also contribute to other goals. This is most obvious in relation to 'green guidance' which has become increasingly prominent in recent years, notably through the work of Professor Peter Plant from Denmark – you can hear him discussing it in this [podcast](#). Environmental concerns are very strongly represented in the SDGs, notably but not exclusively goal 13 (Climate action). The prominence of green issues in the SDG framework suggests this should be a priority area for career services.

A particular interest of mine is the relationship between careers, health, and well-being. I am no longer alone in this, as the COVID pandemic has focused the world's attention on how employment can be disrupted by health issues, and how work and study (or lack of it) can impact on our well-being. There have been growing concerns about the mental health of young people, even before the pandemic, and young people, and career service can have a [positive impact on well-being](#) (Robertson, 2019). Goal 3 in the SDG framework



directly addresses health and well-being, and I am not alone in believing that career development can contribute to public health outcomes.

Less obviously, I have also argued that work towards Goal 16 - Peace and Justice - is something that career service can contribute towards. Although this area is under-researched, in this article (2023) in the [Indian Journal of Career and Livelihood Planning](#) I argue that there is a sound rationale for suggesting that good career services may tend to divert people away from crime and promote social harmony, provided they are working together with other social institutions.

## **What does this mean for practitioners?**

You may find it liberating to understand that your work need not be narrowly confined to educational and employment goals. But in addition to inspiration for practice, the SDG provides a framework to help you to deal with three difficult challenges that arise from implementing the [National Quality Framework for Career Guidance](#)

Firstly, the SDG gives us a structure you can use to communicate with policymakers in the language of policy. This is not easy to do. By showing how your work can contribute to delivering on the SDG, the leaders of career services can explain its value to policymakers and funding bodies, across a range of government objectives.

Secondly, it provides a structure to help organise the research evidence base. By seeking evidence that demonstrates the impact of career development services in relation to the Goals, we can systematically build research evidence – and identify gaps – to inform your work and communicate its value.

Thirdly, it provides a cross-cultural moral compass. By identifying what matters at a societal level, it helps to shape the ethical dimension of careers work with individuals. This means that career education and counselling must be infused with a concern for environmental sustainability, healthy long-term choices, decent work, and a fair and harmonious society. That means a strong ethical dimension not just in the process of helping, but also in the choice of opportunities we guide people towards.

## **Future articles**

The SDGs provide us with a rich source of ideas to inspire our work. As a guest editor, I am planning to bring you a short series of articles from international authors linking the UN goals to career development practice. These topics will relate to different aspects of the SDGs:

- Sustainability, equilibrium and careers (Dr Tibor Bors-Borbely from Hungary)
- Career development and mental health (Dave Redekopp & Associate Prof. Mike Huston from Canada)
- Green career education and guidance (Dr Stefania Maggi, from Canada)
- Decent Work (Dr Fiona Christie, from the UK)

## **Conclusion**

The UN Goals represent a global movement for social change, and I invite career development practitioners to consider if this is a movement they want to join.

UN goals are framed in a broad-brush way, and as a result they are open to interpretation. Career development professionals might have different perspectives on what they mean for practice. They provide a useful structure to enable us to gather evidence, and to explain to policymakers how we can help them to deliver on valued social, economic and environmental outcomes.

The career development profession came late to this party. It has taken us a while to recognise the significance of the UN goals, and we are half-way through the period they relate to, 2015-2030. One of the most valuable things we can do is to look forward, and to be ready to respond rapidly to the development and publication of the next generation of UN goals beyond 2030.

*Guest editor [Professor Pete Robertson, Edinburgh Napier University](#), Scotland, has processed and edited several articles on the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.*

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