

ACHIEVING THE UNITED
NATIONS SUSTAINABLE
DEVELOPMENT GOALS

“John Ure is one of the leading lights in the field of socio-economic development at the international level, and with this thoughtful book, he addresses some of the key challenges facing humanity, specifically in achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals. John goes back to basics in explaining the underlying concepts in a textbook fashion that will help those unfamiliar with the topic, but also inform development specialists.”

—Dr Tim Kelly,
Lead Digital Development Specialist, World Bank

“This is a smart book on an urgent topic. SDGs can seem overwhelming. To some, their intrinsic genius is a weakness – everyone can commit to at least one of them, but does that not make them too broadly spread and unfocused? John Ure has spent his career as an academic, consultant economist, and policy advisor in many of the domains covered by the SDGs and is exceptionally well placed to deliver a frank appraisal of what’s going on. Reading like something between a development economics primer, a multi-lateral agency state of the globe report, and a frank briefing from an insider expert to senior decision makers, this short and pithy book will leave you much better informed. In an unexpected way, it may also leave you more optimistic. Greenwashing and other platitudinous writing and platforming kills optimism. The better way is to have an intelligent conversation about what really can and cannot be done. To talk in terms of what economists call ‘second best’ solutions. To demand action that has some chance of delivering outcomes though they may involve tricky trade-offs. This book really does cut to the core to reveal some of the sharper edges of the SDGs and explains how to sharpen them further and use them more effectively.”

—Chris Webster,
Chair Professor of Urban Planning and Development
Economics, The University of Hong Kong

ACHIEVING THE UNITED NATIONS SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS: LATE OR TOO LATE?

BY

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United Kingdom – North America – Japan
India – Malaysia – China

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

To the memory of Phoebe



A dog and a half

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PREFACE

The existential threat of climate change has to be averted. It signals ongoing disaster for humanity, and for all living things on Earth. Of all the 17 United Nations' *Sustainable Development Goals*, No. 13 'combatting climate change' overshadows them all. Of the others, perhaps only SDG No. 5 'gender equality' should be ranked alongside it as fundamental to the achievement of the SDGs. Not only because women constitute 50% of society,¹ although that alone is sufficient reason, but because gender equality is cross-cutting in its impact upon all social and cultural as well as economic and political issues.

Achieving the SDGs would without question make the world a far better place for current and future generations and give rise to a better stewardship of the planet. Yet most people have either never heard of them or would be hard-pressed to name them, and the widespread concern is that it is too late to achieve the SDGs, especially by the target date of 2030. Hence, the title of this book: 'late or too late'. Yet 'too late' applies literally if it implies one of two things: first, irreversible existential crisis due to global warming, or second, unfortunately but less seriously, missing the target date of 2030. This book is designed to address these issues in two ways: by examining the evidence underlying the SDGs, and the various ways that evidence can be interpreted, and by offering 'Ways Forward'. So, the title is not chosen to promote pessimism but rather rationalism. With a grip of rationality, humanity should be able to succeed, but that is not guaranteed. When we come to a Precipice, it is time to stop and think and then to act rationally.

This book arose from a presentation I gave at the University of the Philippines in 2022 which looked at the ways in which society could contribute to the SDGs despite yawning gaps in

policy-making and environmental responsibilities. A special thanks is due to my long-standing collaborator Dr Jenny Wan who double-checked my text throughout. Jenny worked with me when I was an Associate Professor at the University of Hong Kong in the 1990s and when I was a government and industry consultant in Singapore up to 2023.

I would further like to thank for their support in various ways Jhona Bordey, Meisan Mak, my precious Golden Retriever Phoebe who sadly passed away before she could get to chew the pages, and my wonderful supporting wife Charleth Luna. Thanks to them all and others unnamed.

NOTE

1. NED. (2020). *Are there more men or women in the world?* https://www.ined.fr/en/everything_about_population/demographic-facts-sheets/faq/more-men-or-women-in-the-world/

INTRODUCTION

Know it or not, achieving the United Nations' (UN) *Sustainable Development Goals* (SDGs) would benefit the entire planet and every living creature upon it. But are they achievable even by 2030; is it late or too late?

The UN's aim is to achieve the 17 SDGs by 2030 (Fig. 1). The aim of this short book is to assess whether it is late or already too late. SDG No. 13 identifies the need to tackle the existential crisis of climate change. In this book, due to the urgency, tackling climate change is seen as the standout issue, alongside gender equality because women involved at all levels of public policy-making are seen as vital for the overall achievement of the SDGs.



Fig. 1. United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

The purpose of this book is to provide a well-documented and realistic understanding of the issues and challenges ahead by examining each of the SDGs in light of the available evidence and according to what can be done. It is not to pour cold water onto the SDGs, the achievement of which would see the whole of humanity and the environment for all living creatures on Earth in a good place.

The thread of reality running through these four chapters is that of scarce resources with multiple demands upon them, necessitating 'second-best' solutions which inevitably trade-off alternative uses to which those resources could be put. That is an economic perspective, and the author is an economist, but the policy-making decisions governing economic resources always lie more in the realm of politics and the structure of society. This book throughout unreservedly places an emphasis upon the benefits of science-based rationality and evidence-based policy-making and the centrality of the role of civil society. By civil society, it is meant, to cite one online dictionary, 'society considered as a community of citizens linked by common interests and collective activity'.¹ This is regarded throughout as fundamental to the concept of sustainability.

Sustainable development was defined by the Brundtland Commission report² in 1987 (*The World Commission on Environment and Development: Our Common Future*) as 'development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs'. The momentum created by the report triggered many advances in the measurement and monitoring of human conditions and life on Earth, such as the Human Development Index³ that looks into economic and social metrics that standard national accounting methods that generate gross domestic product (GDP) statistics fail to do. Similarly, the World Economic Forum (WEF) produces a Social Progress Index⁴ that focusses solely upon social factors, while the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) in partnership with ZSL produces the Living Planet Index.⁵ These efforts helped shift social and environmental policy-making and research towards more evidenced-based assessments of problems and how to solve them using a much wider range of data, data methods and data sources. The biggest challenge, however, is often to inform and persuade policy-makers of these new insights.

The original effort by the UN to put into practice sustainable development came in 2000 in the form of the Millennium Development Goals⁶ (MDGs), of which there were finally eight to be achieved by 2015. But they fell short, punctured in part by the 2008 world Great Recession. The SDGs represent a collective determination by nations not to fail again, and this time, around the levels of detailed targets to be met as a metric for success is extensive: 169 targets and 232 indicators. The upside of this is that different stakeholders can aim on different targets, monitor different indicators and thereby build a truly universal effort. The downside is the danger that efforts become too diffused, too complex for civil society to totally embrace and political priorities are blurred and diluted.

Each chapter in this book suggests ways forward. These are inevitably selective as the subject matter is very broad, and each topic is the subject of specialist research. The author has therefore chosen a focus upon what is practical and could be achievable by 2030, or upon what may appear as impractical in the short-medium term but is nevertheless seen as *the* essential basis for long-term sustainability.

NOTES

1. Dictionary.com. <https://www.dictionary.com/>
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3. United Nations. *Human development reports*. <https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/human-development-index#/indicies/HDI>
4. World Economic Forum. (2023). *Social Progress Index*. <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2023/01/countries-social-progress-rising-falling/>
5. WWF/ZSL. (2022). *Living planet report*. <https://www.livingplanetindex.org/>
6. United Nations. (2013). *Millennium development goals*. <https://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/bkgd.shtml>

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2

POVERTY (SDGs 1, 2, 3, 4, 8)

Poverty is mind-destroying for anyone who experiences it. Almost by definition, it implies a lack of well-being. Yet the term covers so many different states of being, it is difficult to find a common definition and, more importantly, difficult to eradicate. Social welfare agencies, researchers, funding bodies and United Nations (UN) agencies, each has different approaches to defining and measuring poverty and poverty rates, largely according to the aims and targets they set for themselves. The lack of a common definition of poverty complicates the collection of data, yet evidence-based policy-making is always to be preferred over opinion-based policy-making, but how difficult is that without reliable data.

Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 1: End Poverty in All Its Forms Everywhere

The pivotal goal of the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is the eradication of extreme poverty for all people on the planet, but according to the UN¹ itself, it is 'woefully off track'. By 2023, around 9% of the world's population, or approximately 719 million people, were living in poverty, and the World Bank² anticipates by 2030 those living on less than USD2.15 a day will still be not less than 7%. After many years of progress, the turning

point when poverty reduction dramatically slowed down was 2015, but with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, disruption to world supply chains, and Russia's invasion of Ukraine, poverty reduction went into reverse.

The poverty line of USD2.15 a day is for lower-income countries. For lower-middle and upper-middle-income countries, the World Bank uses higher poverty lines³ of USD3.65 and USD6.85 a day. These are purchasing power parity (PPP) estimates, which means how much a similar bundle of goods and services in one country's currency would cost in terms of US dollars. Using these higher poverty lines adds over 23% and 47% to the numbers living in extreme poverty or 28 million and 44 million. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD):⁴

The poverty rate is the ratio of the number of people (in a given age group) whose income falls below the poverty line; taken as half the median household income of the total population. It is also available by broad age group: child poverty (0–17 years old), working-age poverty and elderly poverty (66-year-olds or more). However, two countries with the same poverty rates may differ in terms of the relative income-level of the poor.

MEASURING POVERTY: MEDIAN, MODE AND MEAN

The 'median' income level is the midway point in national annual income levels, meaning numerically half the population, measured either as individuals or as households, fall below that level and half above it. Given that households are typically able to provide non-monetary support to low-income individuals, 'real' poverty levels should take this into account. But not all individuals have the social protection of a family, so poverty analysis needs to be more 'micro' or granulated.

A grossly uneven global distribution of median incomes levels – see the global interactive map⁵ – is the likely first indicator of serious poverty in a country. In 2021, for example, the real median income of households in the United States was estimated by the

US Census Bureau⁶ as USD70,784, where the word 'real' takes into account all sources of measurable income. By contrast, in Burundi⁷ in East Africa, judged to be among the poorest countries in the world, the median household annual income was only USD475.

The 'mode' is different from the median and is the income level of the majority of individuals or of households, while the 'mean' is the average income of all individuals or households. A highly skewed distribution of the median, a low-level mode or a mean which is significantly greater than most households achieve can all signify the likelihood of higher poverty rates, as noted by the OECD above.

MEASURING POVERTY: INCOME, EXPENDITURE AND CONSUMPTION

Using dollar equivalents (PPP) in theory should be the same whether measuring an individual's (or household's) income, expenditure or consumption, but in practice, it isn't. *Estimating incomes* relies either upon surveys or income tax revenues. In surveys, people frequently don't provide reliable answers to how much or how many sources of income they receive. Tax-based assessments are just as unreliable. As poor people will pay no income taxes and the rich often avoid paying them, the standard statistical procedure is often little more than applying a hypothetical distribution curve to the tax revenues that are collected. The poor are those at the lower end of the distribution curve.

Expenditure is a slightly more reliable method because it is 'revealed' data, meaning that it can be observed, and it suggests what incomes are available but says little about them: for example, incomes can be unreliable because they fluctuate according to seasons, according to business cycles, or arise from undisclosed legal or illegal activities, such as peddling drugs. So, unless expenditures can be observed over a consistent period of time, their reliability as indicators is in question. But they will record difficult times such as periods of high inflation when more people are pushed into poverty.

Consumption levels can also be partly observed by survey teams visiting homes, and often social welfare agencies record the type of accommodation poor families live in, whether they have

independent access to toilets and washing facilities, to fresh running water and electricity, etc. More sophisticated survey techniques use a proxy means test (PMT) in which a statistical model is calibrated using a limited set of readily observed household characteristics in a sample survey. Consumption levels may well be the most telling measure of actual poverty because living conditions are such a determinant of people's welfare. However, as one economist⁸ specialising in poverty issues observes, '[t]hese methods have often disappointed in practice. Even with a fixed budget sufficient to eliminate poverty with perfect information, optimally designed transfers as a function of the information that is available do not come close to eliminating poverty'. For further discussion, see *Ways Ahead* below.

WEALTH, INCOME AND WELFARE

Wealth, as an indicator of financial security and avoidance of poverty, is the accumulation of various assets, from money to possessions to property. It offers a strong demarcation of the rich from the poor. The major source of wealth in a modern society is from returns on capital investment. It can be economic investment in productive manufacturing and services, or investment in financial assets such as stock and shares, or crypto-currencies, which is in reality a form of wealth distribution rather than wealth creation. French economist Thomas Piketty argues in *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*⁹ that the rate of return on capital 'r' has nearly always exceeded the rate of overall economic growth, 'g', such that wealth, concentrated in the hands of a few, accumulates faster than income. That leaves the risk of poverty for the many.

Although *incomes* can come from wealth as property incomes such as rents, profits and dividends, especially for the wealthy, mostly they come from employment. When incomes are no longer sustainable, maybe due to unemployment, to injury or illness, perhaps to discrimination, a lack of access to wealth removes a safety net. For homeowners, for example, this can occur when property market prices collapse as they did in the United States in 2008¹⁰ or in China after 2021¹¹ leaving many with mortgage loans and debts