

## MEETING REPORT

HOW CAN THE SDGs  
BRING TRANSFORMATIVE CHANGE?

## INTRODUCTION

In the context of the first 1000 days since the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, it is critical to seize the opportunity to analyse how the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are being integrated into policy processes at the country level and draw lessons from the existing governance mechanisms for the implementation of the SDGs.

The transformative character of the 2030 Agenda calls for a broad change in mind-set and the way actors are working, including think tanks and academic institutions. For this reason, the THINK\_SDGs initiative brought together more than 70 participants from 35 countries in Geneva on 4-5 December 2017 for the Second Global Meeting of Global Health Policy Think Tanks to focus on the governance implications of the SDGs and their impact on health. The conference provided a platform for mutual learning from context-specific solutions and experiences and highlighted issues in relation to the political dimensions of SDG implementation. Recommendations were identified on four crucial thematic agendas, namely AMR, NCDs, UHC and planetary health, to move the implementation of the SDGs forward.

## THINK\_SDGs

The network THINK\_SDGs was launched in 2015 by the Global Health Centre (GHC) and the Canadian International Development Research Centre (IDRC). It brings together Global Health Policy Think Tanks and Academic Institutions to strengthen the capacity of research institutions to generate evidence-based policy options and enable a collective engagement in policy dialogues on the health-related SDGs. The network enhances the role of Southern think tanks and focuses on the following six areas: better governance for the SDGs; political accountability for SDG implementation; stakeholder engagement; systemic, intersectoral health challenges; knowledge sharing as a global public good; and policy research.

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Roundtable discussion at the second global meeting of global health policy think tanks and academic institutions

Organised in cooperation with

THINK  SDGs

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## SDG IMPLEMENTATION AS A POLITICAL CHALLENGE

Countries have adopted different mechanisms and approaches to integrate the SDGs into their processes and policies. A closer look at the governance mechanisms chosen in different contexts enables a better understanding of their implications for health. The meeting highlighted that despite the many discussions and initiatives to promote policy coherence, horizontal integration remains limited in many countries. The importance of health in implementation efforts greatly varies and is influenced by the structure of the government and the relative pre-eminence of other sectors within the government. Given the difficulties of adopting effective multi-sectoral approaches, incoherencies and power imbalances need to be taken into account in efforts to mainstream health. Particular emphasis must be put on the level of knowledge on the health-related SDGs by parliamentarians as they are responsible for adopting policies and allocating budgets.

Vertical integration poses particular challenges to federal states due to the multiple governance levels. In some countries, local authorities are more advanced in developing SDG initiatives, but capacities and resources of city- and regional-level governments are not always adequate to ensure delivery on the 2030 Agenda.

At the same time, the wider political and economic context is not always beneficial to SDG implementation, creating a gap between the 2030 vision and national policies. Furthermore, policy continuity is not only challenged by crises and unexpected changes, but also by democratic elections. Electoral periods can, however, also be used by think tanks and academic institutions to promote public debate on the importance of health and health equity, with a focus on the enabling environment that is needed to shape integrated policies for better health outcomes in the SDG era.

## TOWARDS TRANSFORMATIVE FINANCING?

SDG financing is a central question to achieve the health-related Goals. The need for increased domestic funding has been once more reiterated, but the meeting also highlighted how silos are created through budget allocations, constituting a major obstacle to new ways of working across sectors within the government. The priority given in some countries to economic growth and infrastructure does not take into account the economic and social benefits of investing in health, limiting the impact of the SDGs in the health sector.

Despite the recent adoption of the 2030 Agenda, the onset of a certain “SDG fatigue” risks perpetuating a business-as-usual development approach based on donors and receivers. Political commitment at the highest levels and the engagement of all stakeholders are needed to create financing mechanisms in line with the SDG framework. In particular, integrating the role of the private sector requires a better understanding of the motivations and interests of different actors, as well as a conceptualisation of how they can work to enhance public goods. More evidence on the costs of inaction is needed as part of a compelling argument to invest in sustainable development.

## CREATING TRANSFORMATIVE COMMUNITIES

The SDGs call for a collective process involving all actors of society. Citizens and communities need to be informed and empowered to take on an accountability role. An important element in this is the inclusion of citizens in knowledge generation and in the subsequent decision-making processes.

The private sector will also be instrumental in achieving the SDGs. In addition to investments, sustainability principles must become an integral part of business practices, while ethical issues and conflicts of interest need to be explicitly addressed. As business strategies and investments are closely linked to the global consumer society, Goal 12 on sustainable production and consumption is of great relevance for health.

With regard to think tanks and academic institutions, there is a need to go beyond a technical approach and recognise that political factors are inherent and necessary to their work if they want to make a difference

at the political level. Policy relevance of research will require a better understanding of policy processes and new dissemination platforms.

Partnerships must take a new meaning in the SDG era: in addition to working with institutions with a shared purpose, actors are required to work outside of their comfort zone. David Nabarro shared his vision for a “transformative community” of actors that is able to go beyond their institutional boundaries to collectively develop new ways of tackling complex challenges, such as non-communicable diseases and mental health. Think tanks and academic institutions need, therefore, to shift from perceiving themselves as simple generators of knowledge to becoming actors of change. Many challenges are common across countries and an important element in building a “transformative community” is the need to go beyond the North/South divide to find shared solutions. However, in order for organisations from all geographical and disciplinary backgrounds to play an active role in such a community, opportunities for mutual learning must be coupled with capacity building efforts.

## A FOCUS ON OUTCOMES

Data and monitoring are a central focus in SDGs discussions. On the one hand, data gap analyses are missing in some countries due to the lack of data. On the other hand, the reliability of official data is sometimes questionable and statistics might not adequately capture those who are left behind. More needs to be done on the quality and openness of data and one major obstacle in this regard is constituted by legislation that restricts data sharing between the public and private sectors.

Although data are essential to measure progress and help achieve the SDGs, the primary focus must be on outcomes. Measurement should be seen as an instrument within a policy framework prioritising health as a human right and underlining the government’s responsibility for the health of its citizens. Health impact assessments become an important tool to ensure that related sectors consider the health co-benefits of their policies.

## A TWO-LEVEL GAME

Although the universality of the SDGs provides a global framework to all countries, their implementation requires shifting the focus to the local level. Context-specific micro analysis will guide priority setting and provide lessons on effective and ineffective interventions. Global institutions, therefore, should be much more attentive to local realities and learn from national and sub-national implementation efforts. The empowerment of domestic actors will allow for SDG localisation through policy processes tailored to the needs of the population.

Yet, these local processes must remain embedded in a global – universal – vision and follow global norms and standards. In this regard, the network THINK\_SDGs provides a platform for the sharing of knowledge as a global public good, nourishing a dynamic global-to-local and local-to-global relationship.

## ACCELERATING PROGRESS THROUGH THEMATIC AGENDAS

Universal health coverage (UHC), non-communicable diseases (NCDs), antimicrobial resistance (AMR), and planetary health are strategic areas to drive progress on the 2030 Agenda and are part of the next General Programme of Work (GPW) of the World Health Organization (WHO). Their multisectorality and their equity focus will move these agendas

forward, requiring multidisciplinary action and innovation. The country and regional offices of multilateral organisations can provide entry points for think tanks and academic institutions to contribute to these areas. The meeting provided a set of recommendations that can guide this engagement:

### Antimicrobial resistance

- Focus on a one-health approach
- Conduct research to gather better, more extensive evidence
- Analyse trade flows, including trade barriers and enablers for access to drugs
- Promote research and advocacy on financing and new models of developing and distributing drugs
- Create working groups on these topics, bringing together stakeholders and researchers with diverse institutional, disciplinary, and geographical backgrounds
- Develop dissemination platforms to inform policy makers

### Non-communicable diseases

- Organise South-South collaborative joint learning programmes to share challenges and lessons learnt
- Promote education by including NCDs as curriculum or compulsory programme
- Collaborate with WHO to bridge the knowledge gap
- Promote intersectoral activities engaging the private sector
- Contextualise the evidence to develop business ideas and practices with healthier outcomes
- Develop a knowledge platform for policy makers
- Promote dialogue between citizens and policy makers
- Monitor the impact of policies

### Planetary health

- Promote interdisciplinary approaches to recognise the relevance of the interconnections between health and the environment
- Develop arguments to persuade funders to provide resources for applied, cross-disciplinary research
- Mobilise cross-disciplinary expertise to develop appropriate methodologies
- Develop an inventory of international instruments relevant to health
- Collect and learn from good and bad practices, highlighting their impact on decision making processes and communities

### Universal health coverage

#### *Financial protection:*

- Contribute to existing platforms such as UHC 2030
- Create a learning platform to share case studies

#### *Quality:*

- Promote dialogue between healthcare providers and users
- Analyse the quality of development aid programmes on UHC

#### *Workforce:*

- Contribute to the amendment of the WHO Global Code of Practice on the International Recruitment of Health Personnel
- Analyse the required skillset in a changing technological environment
- Analyse the economic loss of brain drain

#### *Role of the private sector:*

- Engage the private sector as co-producer of knowledge
- Highlight the importance of the role and obligations of the state

#### *Citizen engagement:*

- Translate information in easily understandable language and develop media strategies for information dissemination
- Empower citizens in research processes through the use of technology

## CONCLUSIONS

SDG discussions pervade international and national policy arenas but many challenges remain to break with past approaches. Bringing new voices to the debate and ensuring inclusive processes can contribute to promoting a – much needed – society-wide “transformative” change to deliver on the 2030 Agenda. THINK\_SDGs will continue working at the global, regional and national levels to provide opportunities for

mutual learning, create greater solidarity, and build commitment of, and legitimacy for, think tank engagement on the implementation of health-related SDGs. However, only by adopting new ways of working, including by pooling expertise and helping to build capacity where needed, this commitment can be transformed into collective action for a positive change.



From left to right: Masuma Mamdani, Ifakara Health Institute; Nora Kronig Romero, Swiss Federal Office of Public Health; Ilona Kickbusch, Global Health Centre, the Graduate Institute; Paulo Buss, Oswaldo Cruz Foundation



Michael Møller, United Nations Office at Geneva



From left to right: Abijit Das, Center for Health and Social Justice; Katharina Klohe, University of Oslo and Technical University of Munich; Ilona Kickbusch, Global Health Centre, the Graduate Institute; Vinya Ariyaratne, Jathika Sarvodaya Shramadana Sangamaya; Andrea Feigl, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development



David Nabarro

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For more information on the meeting of global health policy think tanks and academic institutions “1000 Days of SDGs – Looking ahead”, please see: <http://ghptt.graduateinstitute.ch/content/1000-days-sdgs-looking-ahead>

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