

Transcript of 'The Sustainable Development Goals'

Season 1, episode 3, Transforming Tomorrow

[Theme Music]

Paul Turner: Hello and welcome to Transforming Tomorrow, the podcast from the Pentland Centre for Sustainability in Business at Lancaster University Management School. I'm Paul Turner.

Jan Bebbington: And I'm Professor Jan Bebbington.

Paul: Today, Jan, we're going to be discussing the Sustainable Development Goals, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, SDGs for short, because keeping to saying Sustainable Development Goals for the next 20 minutes is eventually going to lead to a trip of the tongue, and I'll end up mangling it entirely. But yes, we're going to be talking about the SDGs and how they tie in with the Pentland Centre.

[Theme music]

Jan: SDGs, well they are the core of how we think about the problems that we want to address and the kind of solutions that we might have. So if I sort of unwind back a wee bit in time, um and I have to go right back to uh the year 2000, so before the SDGs we had the Millennium Development Goals, and this was, um coming up to the year 2000 the governments of the world got together under the umbrella of the UN and decided that they would try to address some of the really, you know things that weren't working well, and they focused on development goals, so about hunger about education, about access to clean water, etc.

And those goals um had, you know, very much a social focus and then they had one goal that said, and secure a sound environment within which to do this. And they came to the end of 2015 and they succeeded in a large extent for their ambition, of course not all problems are resolved, but they did a really good job at targeting resources and learning from, uh countries learning from each other to achieve social better social outcomes.

So the Sustainable Development Goals followed on and they started in 2015 and they run through to 2030. So sometimes, sometimes people call it the um the 2030 agenda, um because that's when, if you like, this block of time will be

finished, it won't be the end of them though I'm sure, there'll be another process that runs off there. And 15 years is a pretty good time, if somebody tells you they're going to resolve all the problems of the world in 3 years, don't believe them, okay, 'cos that, because that's too short. If they say give me a hundred years and I'll solve all these problems, then don't believe them because they're not being just and equitable 'cos that's too long. So 15 years is a pretty good time for a set of you know structured interventions to try to achieve things.

Paul: Is this why we have lots of countries who have Net Zero goals by 2030?

Jan: Yes, so 2030 is um well scientifically the latest time you might wish to, but also a lot of things are going to come see if we can reach them by 2030 because of the SDGs as well.

Paul: I was worried you were going to start going into your doom and gloom about the world ending by 2030 [Jan laughs] but we've avoided that, so there's 17 of them I dare say if I threw a random number at you you'd be able to tell me off the top of your head what what each 17 are?

Jan: Well, well I'm a nerd and a geek so I suppose that that happens. So you're right there's 17 of them, and 17's a really funny number but it was a deliberate number on behalf of people that put this together, and it was a big International um collaboration and a big um, um consultation process, the largest that's ever happened in human history as, as the case is. So 17's not divisible, which they're really keen on, so you couldn't just package them up and and forget them.

Paul: Love your prime numbers.

Jan: Yes exactly, exactly, for those lovers of prime numbers out here this is a prime number um initiative. You can think of them in blocks so number one through to number seven are the development goals, um and they've got people at the heart of them, so it's about you know having No Poverty by 2030, Zero Hunger, Good Health and Well-being, Quality Education, Gender Equality, Clean Water and Sanitation, and Affordable and Clean Energy. So these if you like are the human dimensions of the sustainable development goals.

Paul: Mhmm.

Jan: I will, that's 1 through 7, I'll then skip some because I'll come back to them. So goal 13, 14 and 15 are the the ecological underpinnings of what we're trying

to do. So it's [13] Climate Action, number 14, Life Below the Water, number 15, Life On the Land. So that's 13, 14, 15, climate change, biodiversity under the water, on the land.

Paul: And a lot of your work will tie in with number 14, your personal work that is accounting you may not think, but the project you do, SeaBOS, which I'm sure you'll explain um that ties in with life underwater, and can I just say they've really missed the opportunity, 'Life Below Water', what, just call it 'Under the Sea' and you could have had [Jan laughs] Sebastian the crab from the Little Mermaid singing, and it would have been your anthem, a missed opportunity.

Jan: [still laughing] I think that probably is a missed opportunity um. So we will come back to 14, because you're right, SeaBOS which stands for Seafood Businesses for Ocean Stewardship, is really embedded in 14, but it's also embedded in some of the others.

So when I talk about how these relate to each other we'll come back to that really good example. But we're still missing some, so we've looked at 1 through 7, 13, 14, and 15. 16 and 17 are two really important ones, they are Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions that's SDG 16 and number 17 is Partnerships for the Goals. These are the conditions for success. You're not going to have sustainable development and war, so peace has to be at the heart of it, and the collaboration aspect is where business comes in and where the Pentland Centre comes in.

And this is also where goals number 8 through to 12 come in. So I'll tell you what those goals are, so number 8 is decent work and economic growth, number 9 is Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure, number 10 is to Reduce Inequalities with regard to um economic activities, number 11 is Sustainable Cities and Communities and number 12 is Responsible Consumption and Production.

So these goals are hybrids, they involve more than just one thing, they involve social things, they involve economic things, they involve environmental things, and this is the world of business as well. So how do you ensure decent work in your own activities but along your supply chains? How do you run infrastructure well? Some of that's run by for-profit companies some are run by um public companies. How do cities and settlements come together? So how do local authorities um organise themselves and run their their systems.

And then Responsible Consumption and Production, SDG number 12, is perhaps the largest of the lot, that involves everything that we make and use and consume and that organizations might recycle, gather back in where they draw the materials from. So those if you like are the ones in the middle. And this is, if I may I'll return to SeaBOS at this stage if you like. These goals aren't, don't sit on their own. They are indivisible, we're trying to do all of these things not just one or two of them, but of course there's tensions in there as well and so there's a really difficult trade-off that would come as part of it, but also then there's constellations.

SeaBOS the, is looking at Life Below the Water, 'cause it is about fisheries, but because it's about food it's also about Zero Hunger and Good Health and Well-being. Because it's about what companies do as they capture or raise food it's about Responsible Consumption and Production, and because of course fish come from the sea, but farmed fish are fed on things from the land as well, so it's not just Life Below the Water it's also Life On the Land.

And if I think about the work that SeaBOS does it's sort of a constellation about four or five of them that link together and are trying to achieve them together and that's the knack of the the Sustainable Development Goals you don't just pick them up and sprinkle them over whatever you fancy ,but rather they sit together as as comprehensive wholes.

Paul: Do we find that through the work that goes on across the Pentland Centre as well, that people may be doing projects that bring together all the different, well not all the different, all 17 in one that's going to be a project.

Jan: That would be something.

Paul: But bring together three, four, five of the Sustainable Development Goals?

Jan: Yes, and in particular I think also it's worth saying something underneath the goals, so some people get as far as the goals and that's it, but um again the geek in me is coming out now, there are 169 targets that sit underneath it, and there are 232 indicators. Now mostly they focus, focus on countries um for countries to have good governance and various things, but some of these targets and indicators really talk about that combined effect, and where the work of members of the Pentland Centre are involved in.

So there's Target 8.7 which um, I was definitely not in the room when this all happened, but I've heard from people that were in the room that the Pope got this in as a target right at the last part of the process, and so you know civil society of various sorts was highly involved in the process as well. So 8.7, which relates to Decent Work, is for organizations and governments in partnership to take immediate and effective measures to eradicate forced labour, human trafficking, secure the prohibition and elimination of the worst forms of child labour, including the recruitment and use of child soldiers and by 2025 end child labour in all its forms.

So that's a, you know, that's about organisations and their own activities and their supply chains, depending on what kind of business are involved in, they'll have greater or lesser risk of both child labour as well as um forced labour, and that is, we're going to look at that in podcast 4 in quite a lot of depth because within that one target and that one goal there's an enormous amount of work that's going on. Looking at how you design your business through to what outcomes you have, through to reporting.

Other targets that I know we're going to be looking at in future podcasts, uh Target 15.5, so it sits under 15, so that's Life On the Land, so take urgent and significant action to reduce the degradation of natural habitats, um halt the loss of biodiversity and, by 2020, protect and prevent the extinction of threatened species.

Paul: How did that work out?

Jan: It's, well, to be fair both that in the previous one, the timeline is slipping um and that's you know, hugely problematic and in particular, and here is a connection across to health as well, all of these got worse over the pandemic

Paul: Mhmm.

Jan: Particularly the developed ones and the human health ones, but also so the amount of forced labour increased enormously over the pandemic because of economic insecurity. So again we're back to that whole thing, there are social and environmental outcomes,

but the economic conditions that might realize them are part of that as well.

Paul: That's something I hadn't realized, because obviously the talk during the pandemic was 'oh, not as many planes are flying' and 'not as many people are traveling', that's great, we're not releasing as much carbon into...but that gets

back to an issue which I know is something that Pentland Centre members are very keen on emphasizing sustainability - is more than just Net Zero, it's more than just carbon being released into the atmosphere.

Jan: It is, and and, that whole sort of work insecurity and the extent to which, when you get economic disruption you get livelihood disruption as well, and it's always the vulnerable that that really hit the worst in that process. But then, the final one I want to sort of say something about is is an economic focus one. So target 16.5, and that sits in Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions, because it's more than, um strong institutions matter as well as peace and justice. So this target is looking at how you might substantially reduce corruption and bribery in all its forms, and business is at the heart of that because businesses are operating all over the world, and may be exposed from time to time with people seeking bribes, and how they guard against that and how they make sure that their employees don't get caught in a bribery situation is very important. So the the measure of that is a proportion of businesses that have had at least one contact with a public official and that paid a bribe to a public official, so that is a very strong, economic governance aspect, but again it's one that if you've got bribery in a system you're going to get poor social and environmental outcomes as well, it's one of those sort of gateways into you know, bad stuff being able to happen.

Paul: And again it's showing this broad spectrum of sustainability there and how this fits in and I guess what I want to ask you now is how does this fit in with the work of the Centre? Have you got some examples some work that takes place within the centre that ties in with some of these Sustainable Development Goals?

[Jan Bebbington] For sure and um, Decent Work and Economic Growth and particularly that target in and around um forced labour is a big theme within the Centre. We've got colleagues who work in Management Science and um supply chain management but also colleagues in Accounting and Finance looking at how organizations report on their modern slavery performance. So that if you like is quite a single issue in a way, but it's looked at and examined from many different points of view. Other things that are going on, we've got a lot of people who are working on circular economy and particularly looking at Plastic Packaging in People's Lives, there's a big funded study on in that area, so that's about Responsible Consumption and Production, but at the same time you need to design your cities and um towns to be able to deal with recycling,

so you're looking at Sustainable Cities and Communities, but also Innovation Infrastructure Industry, so that's SDG number 9, is also tied in there as well so the whole circular economy, plastic packaging, how you might um prevent it, recycle it, how people think about, what they buy and what they put in their bin has got those three SDGs at the heart of it. Am I allowed one more example is that, is that two examples?

Paul: Well if you have to if you have to [Jan laughs] let's have number three.

Jan: Number three is that whole biodiversity piece, so if you like it's underpinned by um the ecology, so understanding climate change, biodiversity loss, whether it be on the land or in the water um is important, but at the same time that work is premised then on supply chains. So where does um you know my case given my my um interest where does the fish come from? You know where does the soy that's fed to salmon come from? If it's coming from South America has deforestation preceded the production of that soy? If it has, and a company wishes to be proactive, how might they remediate that impact and revitalize the ecosystem from which they they drew that material?

So in that respect if you like that, and this is where you the doom and gloom thing also has to be sort of pushed back, in that it's not too late to fix the things that the damage that we've done, and so quite a bit of aspects within this this whole SDG piece is also about restoration, creating resilience, and also then looking for livelihoods. So if you are in a...a rural community and the work is about deforestation then you'll be doing that because you don't want to be hungry, you want to have opportunities, you want clean water, but could you have a better livelihood um with a more renewable set of activities?

So certainly some of our colleagues look at family businesses in the coffee supply chain, that's a really good example of how do coffee how does coffee come to us, a vital material in my mind, but how does that come to us and what are the communities, and producer communities in particular getting from that activity?

Paul: Linda Henry who will be joining us for a future episode has done work on that including as well on certifications around sustainability. Why these firms are approaching certifications, sustainability standards, etc. Some really interesting work demonstrating that what we think in Western society might be the reasons for companies in Brazil, South America, other parts of the Global South adapting sustainability regulations and, and certifications, why we think

they do it might be different to why they're actually saying they do it, so there's some...

Jan: Yes indeed.

Paul: ...really interesting work there...

Jan: ...and that's, that's you know coming down to number 17, the nice prime number, so the Partnerships for the Goals - so these partnerships can be businesses working with other businesses um who operate at the same level in a supply chain, so all the, the salmon producers together, it can be people on a vertical axis so people that are sourcing raw materials, processing it, packaging and selling it, but then it also can be what we call multi-stakeholder partnerships which will include some business some governments some NGOs and getting together to create devices that will help them do better, and certifications which you just mentioned, is an example of that. So certifications are private governance, they're not something that companies that countries, sorry, require but it's something that companies and NGOs and governments collaborate on, in order to be able to provide providence for goods.

Paul: Let's stick with SDG number 17 and partnerships and because there are a lot of partnerships that take place within the Pentland Centre with external bodies, your work on SeaBOS with ocean stewardship is a prime example, but there's others as well, we are working with organizations, regulators, businesses, the Plastic Packaging in People's Lives project you talked about.

Jan: Exactly.

Paul: There's an example there we've got lots of those here, so there's there's the practical input, it's not just academic theory but the practical input there.

Jan: And I think the, the best theory is built from the best practice. So, there's a temptation um for people to imagine that you in some sort of ivory tower, I've never managed to be in an ivory tower personally, sounds rather cold and a bit bright and white, um so, for myself and across my whole career I really like collaborating with people that have practical problems. And then I do a lot of reading as well, and sort of search the literature for, for clues and hints about how we might be able to help them, and I think it's that exchange that, that is a really important part. So we are a Research Centre, but we're researching impact, and that impact side has to to be there as well.

And in particular, you need to think about who you're going to have that partnership with because it can be at all sorts of layers it can be a single company, could be an industry, um it could be somebody, you know, it could be the local community in which we operate, which is really important for a Civic University agenda. But it may also be a professional body, so I do a lot of work with the Institute of Chartered Accountants of England and Wales. They have the SDGs at the heart of their mission, which is to enable a world of strong economies, which is what they hope their accounting members are doing.

And our view, and why we work with them very closely, is that if all of their professional members, all the professional accountants become literate at sustainable development, then they will add that to every organization that they interact with. So in some ways, I mean this feels a bit sort of front of house to be on a podcast, but I spend a lot of my time in the back of house you know trying to change rules and regulations, you know really boring things, but things that do make a difference, and working with qualified professional accountants to provide continuing professional development, that makes them understand sustainable development, and not to be experts, but to know what the issues are at stake and who to ask to help them, is also part of our mission.

Paul: We've come to accountancy, I knew accountancy would fit in here Jan [Jan laughs] and I'm proud of you for making sure it does.

Jan: Thank you, thank you.

Paul: We also work, of course, when it comes to modern slavery, another aspect of modern slavery, on reporting modern slavery reporting, we work with the Financial Reporting Council here in the UK. Some of our researchers, Mahmoud Gad, Steve Young, work with them on the standards of reporting, what can be read into these reports, how reporting could be improved and regulation could be improved, so that's partnerships that ties in again with other SDGs because it's all there and it, it's you see that interconnectedness anytime you talk about an example of work that's done, you see how it's not just one SDG and that's it, it's so many of them.

Jan: Yeah, and I hope that we'll have both um Steve and Mahmoud on a future podcast 'cos their work is absolutely fascinating and absolutely essential, and the reason why it's essential, if we can stay on accounting for a bit longer Paul [Paul laughs], if you can indulge me in this.

Paul: Well, we've only got so long Jan, we've only got so...

Jan: Well I'll make it a short thing about accounting and reporting. So the the reporting itself is just a report, but the reason why governments ask companies to report things rather than to, well they ask them to do things as well, but they're really quite focused on that reporting function, is that if you're a regulator you can't specify everything you might want a company to do, but if you ask them to provide a report on what they've done it does two things.

Firstly it causes the organization who's writing the report to think about, well what is it that we do? And through that process they'll learn and they will definitely get better at managing um you know risks of modern slavery or, or whatever it is they've been asked to report on. But then there's an outward facing one as well, is that if you don't know about an organization and what it does, you've got no chance to um offer help, or to protest about what they're doing, or to be involved in some ways, so reporting also has this external focus whereby people can go I didn't know that um, I'm going to find out more or, I didn't know that I'm cross I'm now going to write to my, you know, the producer of electricity and say 'I don't like what you're doing', and so if you like that information flow is at the heart of a democratization process, as well as focusing in on, you know, well what financial risk does that arise.

So again it's back to you know there's a financial end but there's also like a social democratic end of requiring large organizations, that have a big influence over our lives, our products, our local communities, to be transparent, and to be accountable about what they do. So now, if I can throw it forward, by throwing it back to something you said earlier in the episode, which...the deadline so to speak for the SDGs 2030. Seven years away, not everything is going to be achieved perfectly, nothing ever happens in the world like that. What do you see coming next after the SDGs, are there already areas you think that maybe aren't covered by these 17 that maybe are going to be brought in next time?

I think these 17 are pretty complete. I mean if you wanted to say what kind of world would we want to live in, then you would, you would run through these headings, you know we would like to live in a world with Quality Education, with Gender Equity with No Hunger and No Poverty, which is also why they're set up that way, because they're quite, they draw you towards them, you know, who says 'oh no I'm quite happy to have a bit of hunger in the world'? Nobody likes it so, so they're really good way of drawing people together into common

purpose. I don't think the categories will change, but I think some of them will become more um critical.

Paul: Would the targets and indicators change then? I, I dare say some of the indicators will have to change because of what's happened in the world as a whole, thereby asking it to match an indicator from 5, 10 years ago is impossible because it's already been surpassed.

Jan: Yes, and I think also um you know the covid pandemic made a much stronger link for us between Good Health and Well-being and Decent Work and Economic Growth, for example, so I think some of these crosscutting themes will become much more important. And also I fear, oh my goodness you've got me on the gloomy trail again, you know, the, the extent to which we have to move on the climate emergency faster than we maybe thought we had, but likewise the biodiversity crisis faster than we the time that we thought we had, so I think there will be an intensification, but I, I don't well I it's hard to know what's in everyone's minds, but I don't think these 17 will be surpassed with a brand new set.

Paul: We went gloomy, let's end on a positive then Jan.

Can you see that things have already been achieved towards these, both globally, and can you see that the work of the Centre is having a positive impact on partners that we're working with towards these goals?

Jan: For sure, and, and it and it feels they these achievements will feel big for us, but they're very small on the overall scheme of things, but small things add up. And, particularly as we communicate more about our work, as we promote it with other communities that might be interested in what we do, then then it adds up into a cascade.

And I know that I'm, I'm sure to want to tell you know people listening to our podcast about um the the Seafood Business for Ocean Stewardship at some stage, but the key behind that is the key behind our future as well. What we're trying with that is to get some really big corporate players to change what they do. And our theory of change is that if they change, everyone they interact with changes, so it's a systems view. So the people that supply them with fish and fish meal and other raw materials, people that buy from them, which tend to be the supermarkets as opposed to the final end consumers, if this group of companies change, then their change is propagated throughout the system.

And it's the same with the SDGs. All of the experimentation and all of the hard work that's going on globally, but also within the Pentland Centre, will lead to cascades of that sort, and being able to cascade good practice to more people [theme music starts softly] to better practice, to great outcomes is what we're all about.

[Theme music]

Paul: And we'll includes links to things such as your Keystone Actors work within the description for the podcast that you can find on the podcast homepage. I think that's a good time to wrap up for this episode Jan, so next time we'll be inviting our first guest on to the series, someone who you share train rides with on a regular basis.

Jan: Yes, indeed.

Paul: Duncan Pollard who will be here to talk to us about Business and Biodiversity. Thank you very much Jan. So, you've been listening to Transforming Tomorrow, a Pentland Centre for Sustainability in Business podcast, and we'll see you next time.

[Theme music]