

# USING THE SDGS FOR REAL CHANGE

## EXPERIENCE AND LEARNING FROM FIVE DANISH ORGANISATIONS

**KVINFO, DANMISSION, OXFAM IBIS, GAME AND DIGNITY  
WITH FUNDING FROM GLOBAL FOCUS**



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UN Sustainable Development Goals

# SUMMARY

With funding from Global Focus, five Danish organisations have jointly been implementing the *Strengthening partnerships and organisational capacity to contribute to and apply the UN Sustainable Development Goals in programming and advocacy* project in 2019-2021 aiming at strengthening their capacity to work strategically with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The five organisations are KVINFO, Danmission, DIGNITY, GAME, and Oxfam IBIS. This publication conveys experience and learning from the project.

Adopting an iterative process, the organisations aimed at integrating the sustainable development goals framework into expected results, programming, implementation, and reporting. The organisations also wished to communicate the knowledge acquired to ensure that civil society organisations have increased awareness about how they may embed the SDGs even more in their work.

## THE 2030 AGENDA FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT



The Sustainable Development Goals are a universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet and improve the lives and prospects of everyone, everywhere. The 17 Goals were adopted by UN Member States in 2015, as part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which set out a 15-year plan to achieve the Goals.

All stakeholders – governments, civil society, the private sector, and others – are expected to contribute to the realisation of the new agenda.

**Read more:** <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/development-agenda/>

Aiming at shared learning with the participation of a minimum of two key persons from each organisation, the project builds on external input and facilitation from experts, workshops, and learning meetings.

The project also focused on how the five organisations may support local partners in the Global South, with Jordan as an example, in engaging more

effectively in advocacy by, for example, the collection of data on SDG indicators, the use of existing data for SDG reporting as well as input to and monitoring of country plans of action and reporting on the SDG progress.

Prior to the project, most of the five organisations were using the SDGs as an opportunity to legitimise their existing strategies. During the project, one organisation initiated a change process with point of departure in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and all organisations have been looking into how they could embed the SDGs meaningfully in their organisation.

Probably the most important learning from all organisations is the importance of management ownership. If the willingness to apply the SDGs is not anchored in management, it is unlikely that the SDGs will become and remain part of the organisational strategy. If the 2030 Agenda is not an integrated part of the strategy, it will not trickle down into other areas of the organisation.

Another important learning is that organisational structures influence if and how fast an organisation may apply the SDGs. Being an independent younger and smaller organisation with a relatively flat structure helped one organisation adjust easily to the sustainable development agenda and ultimately decide to use the SDGs as a framework for innovation, theories of change, design, monitoring, evaluation, learning and communication



**“We did this out of interest and curiosity.  
We were not driven by donor requirements.  
We wanted to explore and learn more.”**

**LENE STEFFEN, INTERNATIONAL DIRECTOR, KVINFO**

Another organisation realised that it is virtually impossible to embed the SDGs in the organisational framework if you are part of an international organisation with autonomous country offices focusing on other agendas.

While many of the SDG indicators are ambitious, several participants realised through the process that some countries chose to collect data and report on indicators they are already fulfilling rather than using the SDGs to challenge themselves in achieving additional sustainable development.

Finding reliable statistics at country level is, however, a challenge. For example, a mapping of the Jordanian government and civil society organisations' implementation of the SDGs in Jordan exposed that the work in some cases was superficial without employees salaried.

This SDG project has also reminded participants that they have to work across all goals rather than focussing on one or two goals, targets, or indicators only.

It is implicit in the SDG logic that the goals and targets relate to and depend on each other. The participants realised that they also have to think about climate, poverty and inequality, although the organisation's focus is different. Using the SDGs for tick marking only will not make a difference.

Many, but not all of the respondents, have been contemplating the risk of the unbinding SDGs undermining the human rights-based approach. Some participants have experienced that SDGs create space for dialogue and break down barriers between actors in situations where one or more stakeholders are cautious about the human rights-based approach.

One organisation is challenged by the fact that none of the goals, targets and indicators cover its thematic area of work directly.

Only one of the organisations has not used the human rights-based approach as part of its official strategy. The respondents from the organisation found that while human rights appeared to be more difficult to relate to for their project participants, they easily relate to the SDGs, which they have heard about in school.

Many of the organisations found that it initially requires a lot of footwork and organisational change to begin applying the SDGs: organisational change does not happen overnight, and the agenda is not well known and understood by colleagues outside the programme departments.

The participants also concluded that when donors do not request inclusion of and reporting on SDGs, the framework is unlikely to become part of the overall civil society approach, because it is time consuming and resource demanding to embed an additional international framework into the organisational framework.

In spite of this, and in spite of COVID-19, the five organisations have managed to implement this project without being forced to do so because of donor demands.

"We did this out of interest and curiosity. We were not driven by donor requirements. We wanted to explore and learn more," says Lene Steffen, International Director, KVINFO.

Many of the participants indeed appreciate the rare opportunity to meet with and learn from colleagues in other organisations, and the SDG project has helped the organisations become more profoundly aware of their organisational identities.

This project was launched in 2019 and planned to run through 2020. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, a no-cost extension was granted until 31 December 2021.

# THE AIM OF THIS REPORT

The aim of this report is to document and facilitate sharing of experiences, learnings and recommendations generated through the five organisations' implementation of the *Strengthening partnerships and organisational capacity to contribute to and apply the UN Sustainable Development Goals in programming and advocacy* project.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To ensure a coherent gathering and documentation of experiences, the five organisations decided to engage an external consultant to compile this report. KVINFO was lead in the documentation process.

The consultant undertook a desk study of all relevant materials, developed a semi-structured questionnaire, and carried out one-hour interviews with representatives from each of the five participating organisations. All organisations could opt for an additional hour, which KVINFO did. None of the interviews followed the semi-structured questionnaire slavishly, but rather focused on the specific interest of the interviewed organisation.

Based on initial input from KVINFO and the interviews, the consultant developed a draft report structure which was shared and approved by KVINFO. After submitting the draft report, the consultant twice received comments from all five implementing partners.

All meetings and interviews took place online.

## RESPONDENTS

**Cecilia Flomo**, Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning Manager, GAME

**Cecilie Olivia Buchhave**, Programme Assistant, KVINFO

**Cecilie Poulsen-Hansen**, Senior Programme Advisor, KVINFO

**Jeanette Rung Kørner Kolding**, Senior Regional Manager, DIGNITY

**Kirsten Auken**, Programme Director, Danmission

**Lene Ingvarsten**, Gender Technical Advisor, Oxfam IBIS

**Lene Steffen**, International Director, KVINFO

**Marie Traasdahl Staal**, Executive Director of Innovation & Programs, GAME

**Thomas Nixon Hvas**, former Partnership Advisor and Funding Manager, Oxfam IBIS

# ORGANISING FOR THE SDGS

The five participating organisations have worked both practically and analytically in analysing their own commitment to the Global Goals and to prepare for and undertake this project.

## OVERALL APPROACHES, CHALLENGES, AND EXPERIENCES

The five organisations began by mapping how each of them was already working with the SDGs. Subsequently, they developed organisational plans of action for further SDG application.

Unfortunately, 2020-2021 became gradually more unpredictable and difficult to navigate due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the impact of political changes and disasters affecting the Global South.

Danmission's plan of action did, for example suggest embedding the SDGs in all of the organisation, in programming, communication and second-hand shops as part of a sustainability agenda. The partners in Jordan and the regional office in Beirut were very keen on implementation.

### TOOL FOR ANALYSIS: HOW AND HOW MUCH ORGANISATIONS APPLY THE SDGS



**Watchdog:** the SDGs are used as an advocacy tool nationally or internationally to hold governments to account. A central point is that by adopting the SDGs, leaders pledged to improve the situation of their people and the planet.

**Co-worker:** the organisation works independently and with other actors directly to strengthen the sustainable development agenda either nationally or in partner countries by. It could for example be working for women's rights or poverty reduction.

**Communicator:** the organisation works to raise awareness about the SDGs and to mobilise pressure on e.g. governments and private sector to work towards the implementation of the SDGs.

**Source:** Mapping of how the participating organisations work with the Global Goals.

Then the Beirut Port blast happened on 4 August 2020 killing 217 people, injuring thousands, and devastating parts of the capital. The explosion also affected Danmission staff and the regional office, and many plans had to be changed.

In Denmark, all second-hand shops were closed for several months due to Corona restrictions. This resulted in big financial insecurity, which led to cuts in staff, budget, and activities. Internally, Danmission had recently appointed a new secretary general, and restructuring took place. The SDG project and the many competing agendas incited reflections on the *raison d'être* of Danmission leading to realisations about the organisation's values and identity.

"We have been undergoing an internal strategy process and we realised that the most important for us is to stand by our values and our reasons for being. These cannot be substituted by the SDGs, although, as part of some of our projects implemented with the support of the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, we do analyse which indicators we are contributing to. We also realised that the SDGs often match some of our thematic areas, yet we do not have to relate all our communication and programming to the SDGs. That realisation has been a great help," says Kirsten Auken, Programme Director, Danmission.

GAME, on the other hand has fully implemented its plan of action on the SDGs and the organisation has realised that the SDG indicators are highly relevant in Jordan's challenges. Contrary to many other organisations with a human rights-based approach, GAME did not to the same extent have an overall framework. "We really appreciate this opportunity to learn more about the SDGs as a framework and it was not very demanding to formulate a plan of action for relevant areas of communication, implementation, monitoring, evaluation, and learning," says Marie Traasdahl Staal, GAME Executive Director of Innovation & Programmes.



**"One of the new things we did was to look at GAME internally and focus on our climate footprint . This made us revise our travel policy and develop policies for sustainable purchasing and for food consumption. For almost two years we have been meat free in the office. Those were all relatively low-hanging fruits."**

**MARIE TRAASDAHL STAAL, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF INNOVATION  
& PROGRAMMES, GAME**

Initially, GAME discussed internally how to really embed the SDGs and to map what was already taking place and how everyone could do more.

"The easiest part was to look at GAME internally and focus on climate action. Quite quickly we worked out policies for travelling by air and for food. For almost two years we have been meat free. We joined the capacity building network.

Those were all low-hanging fruits. We had a workshop on selected targets to figure out what we could do concerning environment, the green agenda, thematic focus areas such as sexual and reproductive health and rights as we would like to become even better at engaging with girls,” says Marie Traasdahl Staal.



**“We did use the principles, especially the Leaving No One Behind principle, in our dialogue with partners.”**

**JEANETTE RUNG KØRNER KOLDING, SENIOR REGIONAL MANAGER, DIGNITY**

GAME, however, is critical of the indicators not being very powerful at country level, which makes it difficult to push development.

“When the indicators are not that strong, people prefer to talk about goals and targets, but they are so broad that they may be applied to almost anything. And no one is really pushing from above, including the donors, for us to relate to the SDGs in our proposals and reporting. The SDGs have not really become a part of the civil society approach. It is easy to use the SDG icons, and the goals resonate well with many people. However, the decision-makers have not seen the SDG agenda through,” says Marie Traasdahl Staal from GAME.

Danmission’s and DIGNITY’s efforts were hampered severely by COVID-19, and everyone had to prioritise in order to bring the organisation safely through the pandemic and lockdowns.

“We did use the principles, especially the leaving no one behind principle, in our dialogue with partners. Depending on the recommendations from this report the project may or may not have any impact on future planning,” says Jeanette Rung Kørner Kolding, Senior Regional Manager, DIGNITY.

Staff turnover has impacted the implementation in DIGNITY.

“Unfortunately, the project was driven by mainly one person, and dissemination of knowledge gained through the project was not prioritised,” says Jeanette Rung Kørner Kolding.

Oxfam International has clear strategies and policies focussing on the inequality agenda. This has overshadowed the SDGs.

“For Oxfam IBIS, Goals 1, 4 and 5 are spot on with very good indicators as we focus on education and advocacy, but we are part of a large international organisation and Oxfam IBIS is not as agile as smaller independent organisations,” says Lene Ingvartsen, Gender Technical Advisor, Oxfam IBIS.

“Thanks to this project, we became SDG ambassadors in the organisation, so it has not been in vain. But the process has also been somewhat frustrating because of COVID-19 and the enormous backlog due to the pandemic. The project and the SDGs were overshadowed. We did what we could, which is better than nothing and the more I read about the SDGs, the more positive I become,” Lene Ingvarsten says.

Lene Steffen, International Director, KVINFO, was very enthusiastic about the project as she had already been deeply engaged in the development and implementation of the SDGs in her previous job with Save the Children.

“We did have many intentions with the SDG project, although we did not manage to prioritise all of them. That is only human. Now, I have lost the sense of progress of the SDG agenda a bit because I do not follow the implementation closely any longer, but I have the feeling that the sustainable development agenda has failed to develop a solid accountability mechanism, despite the good intentions,” says Steffen.



**“For Oxfam IBIS, Goals 1, 4 and 5 are spot on with very good indicators as we focus on education and advocacy, but we are part of a large international organisation and Oxfam IBIS is not as agile as smaller independent organisations.”**

**LENE INGVARSTEN, GENDER TECHNICAL ADVISOR, OXFAM IBIS**

The project helped staff and management reflect on how KVINFO could make a difference and the idea of a mapping of the application of the SDGs in Jordan was very positively received by partners.

“Everyone knows the SDGs as they are very popular in the private sector. The SDG project provided an opportunity for further reflections. When you have a language for the challenges, changes may happen and many appreciate that the SDGs may be described with just one word,” says Steffen.

In KVINFO, the project has pushed forward a plan of action for a climate policy, including procurement, and travel policies, and ideas about future policies such as pension and internet provider, which are more complicated but important in relation to climate consciousness.

### **CAPACITY BUILDING**

All of the five organisations appreciate the learning meetings, and many found that it was very useful to meet and seek inspiration from the other organisations involved in the project.

## CAPACITY BUILDING ACTIVITIES IN THE SDG PROJECT



The five organisations engaged in this project did a series of activities strengthening their own capacity to work with the SDGs. Activities include:

- A learning meeting about the Danish sustainability indicators in the mapping phase with presentations by Statistics Denmark, Global Focus, and the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs.
- An open learning meeting with colleagues and presentations by Deloitte, Chora2030 and the Danish Institute for Human Rights.
- A learning meeting in the project group on the Voluntary National Review (VNR) process with presentations by Danish Family Planning Association and Global Focus.
- A meeting with colleagues from the five organisations focussing on communication, fundraising, programme design and M&E. Presentation by iLoveGlobalGoals.
- A meeting with ActionAid

**Source:** Status report for the *Strengthening partnerships and organisational capacity to contribute to and apply the UN Sustainable Development Goals in programming and advocacy project*, 31 December 2020.

“We rarely cooperate so closely, and we are grateful that such an project may happen with the support of Global Focus,” one respondent from Oxfam IBIS says.

A learning meeting with Statistics Denmark, Global Focus, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark took place in 2019 ahead of the United Nations High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF).

“The meeting added to Danmission’s understanding of how the organisation may – or may not – contribute to the SDGs. For example: We are not supposed to become the national bureau of statistics, but we may be able to contribute some statistics,” says Kirsten Auken, Programme Director, Danmission.

A meeting with ActionAid Denmark also created reflections in Danmission on how the organisation is holding duty bearers to account rather than contributing directly to the SDGs as an organisation.

“It inspired the thought that we might have to become a watch dog and that led to discussions about how we may play that role. ActionAid Denmark has a campaign and policy agenda while Danmission has other reasons of being. We may contribute and we have to be able to justify our approach to the SDGs, but our organisation does not have to deliver on the indicators,” Auken says.



**“The meeting added to Danmission’s understanding of how the organisation may – or may not – contribute to the SDGs. For example: We are not supposed to become the national bureau of statistics, but we may be able to contribute some statistics.”**

**KIRSTEN AUKEN, PROGRAMME DIRECTOR, DANMISSION**

Danmission experienced one meeting on communication as less relevant as it came across as an advertisement for iLoveGlobalGoals and provided no tools on how to sustain the SDGs in the organisations.

GAME participated in all learning meetings and carried out a capacity building workshop in Denmark with partner representatives from Jordan. According to the GAME respondents, capacity building is an inherent part of what GAME is doing, which is why there is less need for explicit capacity building.

But the GAME respondents underline that they would have liked to participate in more meetings and workshops – which were cancelled or postponed due to the pandemic.

Already in 2019, GAME prioritised a day to look into the SDGs and innovation, because the management found that the SDG agenda was gaining momentum and that it was time to do things differently.

GAME had a presentation about the SDGs and the participants selected targets for idea development. This resulted in eight to ten new workgroups each promoting their SDG goal, for example food, ecological merchandise, and ideas for sustainable programming.

Before joining the SDG project, KVINFO carried out its own capacity building and established a reading club with four or five meetings across the organisation introducing the most important SDG documents, presentations, and discussions.

KVINFO, amongst others, invited Kirsten Brosbøl, Member of Parliament for the Social Democratic Party and chair of the Parliamentarians for the Global Goals network, as a prelude to the SDG project.

“When the SDG project began, we had a very long list of relevant goals and targets. We wanted to make it easy for us and others to see what we contribute. Our signature is the Goal 5 on gender equality icon, but the SDG project has reminded us that we have to work across all goals. All external presenters underlined that we also have to think about climate and poverty and inequality. That is an important learning from the capacity building. The presenters



**“The presenters emphasised that the sustainable development agenda may be used to challenge ourselves, and that it does not make any sense if you only use the SDGs as a kind of tick mark.”**

**LENE STEFFEN, INTERNATIONAL DIRECTOR, KVINFO**

emphasised that the sustainable development agenda may be used to challenge ourselves, and that it does not make any sense if you only use the SDGs as a kind of tick mark,” says Steffen.

### **THE IMPORTANCE OF MANAGEMENT INVOLVEMENT**

All organisations mention the importance of management ownership. If the willingness to apply the SDGs is not anchored in management, it is unlikely that the 2030 Agenda will become and remain part of the organisational strategy. If the SDGs are not an integrated part of the strategy it will not trickle down into other areas of the organisation.

In GAME, the management took the lead in the implementation of the SDG project and that has led to a very strong SDG focus within the organisation and continued prioritisation of applying the SDGs in GAME’s work with social change, peace building and social cohesion.

On the other hand, Oxfam IBIS was already busy advocating that the federation focus more on education within a federation focussing on inequality. This was probably why the management prioritised to engage less in the SDG agenda.

### **THE SIZE AND AGILITY OF THE ORGANISATION MATTERS**

An important learning is that organisational structures influence if and how fast an organisation may apply the SDGs. Being an independent and fairly young organisation that had not already committed to other international instruments helped GAME adjust easily to the sustainable development agenda.

Oxfam IBIS was also very keen on the project from the beginning. The respondents explain that they were hoping that the project could strengthen Oxfam IBIS’ reporting on the SDGs if necessary.

Oxfam IBIS already had a chapter on the SDGs in its reporting which was used as a starting point for a larger report with the SDGs as the common thread.

“The Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs was excited. We carried out interviews with team leaders to understand the needs for capacity building in different countries. Oxfam IBIS cannot take such a decision on its own as we are part of Oxfam International, which has very autonomous country offices. If these offices do not specifically request an increased SDG focus there is very little scope for

strengthened focus on the SDGs, the team leaders concluded. If the donors do not ask for inclusion of and reporting on the SDGs no one will do this as it is just another layer of requests that the countries have to live up to on top of what they already do,” the respondents explain.

#### **DIFFERENT DEGREES OF SDG APPLICATION**



Organisations apply the Sustainable Development Goals differently. This project identified three different kinds of application:

**As an opportunity:** The SDGs present an opportunity to communicate and further legitimise existing strategies.

**As a tool for adjustment:** The SDGs function as a tool, which continually adjust the existing strategy, so it is aligned with the SDGs.

**As a vision for transformation:** The SDGs are understood as a vision to change towards. The SDGs are used to re-think the strategy and activities of the organisation.

**Source:** Mapping of how the participating organisations work with the Global Goals.

# STRATEGY

GAME has used the SDGs and the inspiration from the project for transformation. A concrete example of this is the organisation developing a graphic model shaped as a football that presents its Sport for sustainable development work and is used in the selection and deselection of the organisational focus.

Other organisations have used the opportunity approach to further legitimise their strategies.

Danmission, for example, has approved a new programme strategy in 2020, including a chapter on the SDGs and mention of SDGs 1, 4, 5, 10, 13, 15, 16 and 17. The strategy does not specify how Danmission is going to work towards these goals.

At the request of the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Danmission has also included some SDGs in brackets in its new strategic partnership proposal and in recent reporting to the Ministry. Other proposals include the SDGs ad hoc, meaning that they are added depending on explicit demands from donors, but Danmission's work is not strictly aligned with the SDGs, although it could be seen as contributing to several SDGs.

DIGNITY refers to the SDGs in its programme strategies, projects, and reporting. However, DIGNITY has focused more on linking the SDGs to the organisation's existing work rather than using them to guide the work in a more holistic manner beyond the programme work. The COVID-19 pandemic has forced DIGNITY to focus on risk mitigation strategies and reprogramming. Therefore, the work related to adopting the SDGs more holistically and across the organisation has not been prioritised.

KVINFO mentions the SDGs as a framework on the first page of its strategy 2021-2024 and in its theory of change.

# DESIGN AND PLANNING

Most of the organisations use the hook model in proposals. DIGNITY uses it in designing and planning programmes and find that using the indicators are more challenging.

KVINFO, for example has not used the SDGs as a part of programme design. The Goals are, however, used in proposals where Goals that are important to partner organisations are mentioned. This happens either on the request of donors or because it is relevant and in line with human rights. It is almost always possible to relate to both, according to KVINFO respondents.

“We also raised the question internally in the organisation and a climate policy was mentioned as a must. It is a complex issue for us as gender is important in every goal,” one KVINFO respondent says.

KVINFO and other project organisations have been planning for new programmes under the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ Danish-Arab Partnership Programme (DAPP) in the late half for 2021. In this programme, partners will examine Universal Periodic Review (UPR) observations and comment for each country that DAPP works in. The UPR is a unique process involving a review of the human rights records of all UN Member States.



**“We used the SDGs and this project as an engine for innovation. We managed to work out a model for how street sport may contribute to the sustainability agenda.”**

**CECILIA FLOMO, MONITORING, EVALUATION AND LEARNING MANAGER, GAME**

“But we could also look into the status of the SDGs in each country. As it is, we usually only do this in our policy work. We detect statistics, for example concerning the status of underage marriages and use the goal as part of infographics. We could also look into the latest reliable statistics globally from, for example Girls Not Brides. That might strengthen our SDG approach. It is difficult to find reliable statistics in many countries, but we could ask our partners if they are following the implementation of the SDGs in their countries. We could do that concerning the next DAPP proposal,” respondents from KVINFO suggest.

However, finding reliable statistics at country level is a challenge. A mapping of the Jordanian government and civil society organisations' implementation of the SDGs in Jordan exposed a house of cards without salaried employees.

For GAME, the SDG process was more about innovation than designing and planning programmes.

"We used the SDGs and this project as an engine for innovation. We managed to work out a model for how street sport may contribute to the sustainability agenda," the respondents say.

"The targets work surprisingly well as a framework for innovation, and they are appreciated by many young people. They have heard about the SDGs at school, and it is a relevant agenda. Our participants may react with a, 'Wow, this is exactly what I do in GAME with children in my residential area and I can do even more.' The SDGs carry meaning and purpose, and it is the same with our programme and partner in Jordan," the respondents say.

# MONITORING, EVALUATION AND LEARNING, INCLUDING INDICATORS

GAME has included the SDGs in its quality standards and programme cycle. Initially, GAME worked out an evaluation framework evolving from the SDG goals, targets, and indicators and, whenever feasible, most staff still use it.

All GAME projects have to aim at relating the activities to the SDGs. The project documents called log frames include SDGs and how they relate to the outcomes. Generally, the SDGs are also part of GAME's theories of change, unless it does not make sense. This has led to lots of reporting on the SDGs and according to respondents it has become part of how people are thinking in GAME.

KVINFO's International Department has included the SDGs in a large programme in the Middle East when designing the results framework, and KVINFO includes a table with targets and indicators at outcome level in the annual reporting. Likewise, the Leave No One Behind principle is also reflected upon in the annual reporting.

"It is relatively easy to use the SDGs in programming and design, and you may easily fit them into reporting. The challenges are the indicators and evaluation," says Jeanette Rung Kørner Kolding.

## LEAVE NO ONE BEHIND



Leave No One Behind (LNOB) is the central, transformative promise of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

It represents the unequivocal commitment of all UN Member States to eradicate poverty in all its forms, end discrimination and exclusion, and reduce the inequalities and vulnerabilities that leave people behind and undermine the potential of individuals and of humanity as a whole.

**Read more:** <https://unsdg.un.org/2030-agenda/universal-values/leave-no-one-behind>

# SDGS, HUMAN RIGHTS AND ADVOCACY

Many, but not all of the respondents have been contemplating the risk of the non-binding sustainable development agenda undermining the legally binding human rights-based approach (HRBA).

“The human rights agenda at times become very fiery which may counteract our intentions. The SDGs may actually cause change. The United Nations High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) requires volunteer reports only at the risk of becoming a beauty contest between states. But if the SDGs create space for dialogue they may lead to change and work to break down barriers between actors. The SDGs may work as a Trojan Horse for human rights,” says Kirsten Auken, Programme Director, Danmission.



**“If the SDGs create space for dialogue they may lead to change and work to break down barriers between actors. The SDGs may work as a Trojan Horse for human rights.”**

**KIRSTEN AUKEN, PROGRAMME DIRECTOR, DANMISSION**

Danmission and its partners have worked with dialogue between Danes and Arabs concerning freedom of religion and belief (FoRB) and the establishment of an alliance between human rights actors and faith actors. Since FoRB is a sensitive topic, it was much easier to talk about selected SDGs.

All of the five organisations participating in this project work in the MENA region, i.e. the Middle East and North Africa. In the MENA region, personal status law affects women's freedom of belief. Danmission tried changing the focus to SDG 5, which eased the dialogue. Danmission applied the same approach later when changing the dialogue from human rights to SDG 16 and the theological foundation for peace.

Danmission is an active member of the International Partnership on Religion and Sustainable Development (PaRD), an international forum for states, multilateral actors, and faith-based civil society actors on the role of religion in sustainable development. Denmark, represented by the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, is also a member. PaRD is itself an expression of SDG 17 on partnerships for the goals and the work is centred around selected SDGs.

Danmission is engaged in workstreams focussing on SDG 16. During the PaRD General Assembly of Members in 2019, Danmission initiated dialogues on SDG 16.

The universal SDG principle of leaving no one behind is related to the human rights-based approach, but less sensitive than human rights, according to Kirsten Auken, Programme Director, Danmission.

Danmission had planned a mapping with partners and, for example, an advocacy voluntary review shadow report, but both have been delayed due to COVID-19.

KVINFO has used the principle of leaving no one behind to raise questions regarding its next DAPP proposal.

“We saw that the next round of the so-called Danish-Arab Partnership Programme is focussing primarily on privileged and educated youth, but it doesn’t make sense when you apply the principle of leaving no one behind. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs mentioned the trickledown effect, but there is no evidence that it happens. Some of our concerns may have been taken into consideration, or at least they may have increased awareness about the principle ahead of the call for the next programme,” says Lene Steffen, International Director, KVINFO.

KVINFO has used both human rights and SDG references and in particular data from SGD indicators in its advocacy for gender justice, for example when preparing recommendations to the Danish mission in Geneva in preparation for sessions in the Human Rights Council.

### **THE HUMAN RIGHTS GUIDE TO THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS**

The Human Rights Guide to the SDGs is developed by the Danish Institute for Human Rights.

It is a tool that illustrates how the 17 Sustainable Development Goals are anchored in human rights anchorage of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It does so by making concrete links between the 169 targets of the SDGs and the relevant range of –

- International and regional human rights instruments
- International labour standards
- Key environmental instruments, some of which have human rights dimensions

**Read more:** <https://sdg.humanrights.dk/en>



However, KVINFO is mainly focussing on human rights, as conventions are legally binding when ratified. The human rights are also a principle in the SDGs.

“We are in doubt: is that the way to go? The SDGs are not legally binding like the conventions. Ought we to be super pragmatic or maintain that we are rights-based? We list the SDGs in our reporting and the partners’ reporting, but we are not following up with the partners or analysing. We only analyse human rights violations and gaps in terms of implementation of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and ILO conventions as they relate to gender justice,” says Steffen

“There are three tiers of indicators and for tier three there is yet to be developed methodologies to collect data. I wonder how much is actually happening. If you could collect data at all three indicator levels, we would suddenly have brand new sets of data to base our dialogue on. As it is, there are several Goal 5 indicators without data collection. But the SDGs are fantastic as they express all our dreams for a better world,” says Lene Steffen, International Director, KVINFO.



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**LENE STEFFEN, INTERNATIONAL DIRECTOR, KVINFO**

DIGNITY is the Danish institute against torture. The organisation is challenged by the fact that torture is not directly covered by the Global Goals. Torture is only part of the SDGs in relation to children in SDG target 16.2.

“We could advocate for torture being included in the development of goals to come, but as per now, we cannot use the SDGs as our framework for accountability, and our partners are in the same situation. We have to be realistic and consider the context,” says Jeanette Rung Kørner Kolding, Senior Regional Manager, DIGNITY.

She does not find a clash between human rights and the SDG Agenda as the SDGs are grounded in international human rights law and many of the principles are the same.

“But there is no common agreement on how to follow up and how we may use existing human rights instruments as part of the follow-up. It requires a lot of resources to evaluate against both human rights and SDGs, hence the SDGs maybe lose their value when we already have and use existing mechanisms,” says Jeanette Rung Kørner Kolding.

The Oxfam IBIS respondents suggest that since states are supposed to report on the SDGs, partners could advocate for this to happen.



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**JEANETTE RUNG KØRNER KOLDING, SENIOR REGIONAL MANAGER,  
DIGNITY**

GAME has never officially worked with a human rights-based approach and finds that the SDG agenda is more known and well received by their participants who are usually between eight and 25 years of age.

GAME only engage in advocacy to a limited extent. However GAME does run programs that focus on advocacy for public space in Lebanon as part of the SDG 11. GAME is also training youth in advocacy towards local decision-makers.

“We have realised that we have to do something else if we are to push the agenda beyond do-good. During the People’s Meeting we had a workshop with youth from various youth organisations and schools providing input to the health targets and early intervention. Our point of departure was target 3.4 aiming at reduction by one third premature mortality from non-communicable diseases through prevention and treatment and promotion of mental health and well-being. We were focussing on how youth thrive in schools, social life, and school satisfaction measurements. We presented the input to Statistics Denmark, but we do not know if they have used it,” say the GAME respondents.

# COMMUNICATION

Ahead of the SDG project some of the organisations already used the SDG icons in their communication materials to further legitimise their work.

Oxfam IBIS suggested that the communication department use the SDGs to reach beyond its existing audience. The head of the department argued that Oxfam IBIS already communicates the SDGs sometimes, but they are not part of Oxfam International's framework. Therefore, the organisation's own strategy focusing on inequality is the main point for communication.

DIGNITY is focussing on rights and refers to the SDGs and how the organisation's work contributes to them.

"The SDGs are global and take businesses into consideration. Therefore, they are more useful when aiming at reaching target groups beyond our traditional audience, for example the private sector," says Jeanette Rung Kørner Kolding, Senior Regional Manager, DIGNITY.

In GAME, they found evident links between the SDG framework, programme, monitoring, evaluation and learning, and communication, and these links have enabled GAME to integrate the SDGs in its communication.

# CHALLENGES

This chapter provides a quick overview of the most important challenges to consider before embarking on SDG projects and SDG application.

## ORGANISATIONAL CHALLENGES

Staff turnover and limited handover of knowledge and subsequent lack of institutional memory have challenged some organisations.

**It requires a lot of footwork initially and organisational change** to apply a new international framework. Organisational change does not happen overnight as most people are conservative.

“I wish I had been more aware of how complicated and time consuming it is to change organisational culture and direction,” a respondent from KVINFO says.

**Additional resources are required** if the organisations are going to fully apply the SDG’s and add additional indicators.

**Some staff outside international departments consider it hard to understand** the importance of the SDG agenda.

## EXTERNAL CHALLENGES

**There is little donor demand** for SDG application, which makes it unlikely that hard-working managements, staff and partners are willing and able to report on SDGs if they already work with a human rights-based approach.

## SDG CHALLENGES

**The excessive number of indicators are overwhelming**, and some of them appear to be random, which makes it challenging to tap into them and to make them appealing to a larger audience.

**The lack of reliable statistics** in many countries is a major challenge.

**No nations report on other nations’ progress.** Part of the SDGs is national progress reporting. This implies that Danish organisations are only supposed to report on Denmark’s progress. This puts organisations’ international departments’ in a sometimes difficult position as their work takes place in other countries. It is not clear to the participating organisations in this project how to report on Denmark’s contribution to other countries and there seems to be little demand or ambition for this.

“This is very surprising as we are told that it is important to work with the SDGs, but no one seems interested in us reporting on them,” says one respondent.

During the course of this project, the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs launched a call for a new round of its Danish-Arab Partnership Programme (DAPP) for a number of countries in the MENA region. The DAPP is an example of a programme that does not require application of the SDGs. Interestingly, this very project and this report is financed by Global Focus as part of Global Focus' DAPP work. This puts participating organisations in a position to share their SDG capacities with the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs.



**“I wish I had been more aware of how complicated and time consuming it is to change organisational culture and direction.”**

**RESPONDENT, KVINFO**

Another call was made during the time frame of this project: The Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs called for strategic partnerships for its Strategic Partnership Agreement concept for 2022-2025. Contrary to some donors, this framework does to some extent require that programme interventions relate to the Global Goals.

#### **LOST MOMENTUM DUE TO COVID-19 AND THE LACK OF ACCOUNTABILITY MEASURES**

As the Corona pandemic put a lot of plans and work to a standstill and required adaptation to new circumstances, momentum was diverted away from the SDGs and this project in some of the participating organisations. Also, part of this very project was changed to cater for the pandemic caution. E.g. the workshop linking the five Danish organisations with the work in Jordan was conducted online rather than in Jordan as was originally planned.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

These recommendations are based on reflections and realisations from the five organisations. Many of the recommendations are cross-cutting and some overlap as each organisation has its own experiences and specific take on what it requires to work with the 2030 Agenda.

## **AT ORGANISATIONAL LEVEL**

**Ensure that the management is fully committed** to exploring the opportunities and to embedding the SDG Agenda in the organisational strategy, programme design, advocacy, communication and monitoring, evaluation, and learning.

**Involve everyone in the organisation** as a successful adoption of the SDGs across the organisation requires that you from the beginning involve all departments and ensure that everyone has their capacity built.

The 2030 Agenda comes across as very abstract for many, so capacity building of the entire organisation is a must. Otherwise, the SDG application may depend on one or two persons, and the SDGs risk becoming an annex rather than an integrated part of the organisational strategy.

The process has to be driven by the management and the SDGs have to be embedded in all strategies, work plans and project designs, which is time-consuming. Doing this is not possible for a small work group in the programme department.

**Consider if you are willing to adapt or transform your organisation** or at least to which degree you can adapt to the 2030 Agenda without losing your organisational identity: Are you able and willing to use the opportunity approach to the SDGs, or would the adjustment or transformation approach work better for your organisation?

**Consider carefully which framework makes most sense in your organisation.** The phrasing of the SDGs reflects that it has been challenging to agree on one global agenda. Some countries have set aside very little funding to accomplish their plans of action on how to achieve the goals, targets, and indicators.

The United Nations High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development is a huge mechanism, and you have to consider carefully if your organisation can afford to engage in a UN process with Voluntary National Reviews, shadow reports and advocacy.

Do you have the time, human resources, and funding to influence decisions? Do your partners? Some partners are already working to change national law which is also time-consuming. If you chose to engage fully in the SDG agenda, something else will probably have to be de-emphasised.

**Beware that all SDGs are part of a package from which you cannot cherry pick goals.** Application of the SDGs entail that you do not just use the SDGs to illustrate what you do. You have to use them as an actual tool for organisational change. You cannot just select the five goals that directly fits your work if you really want to transform your SDG approach.

Although you work with, for example gender, you are also obliged to consider climate if you are to do more than use the SDGs as a hook. You will have to allocate resources and the management has to take the lead. The SDGs have to be included in the organisational strategy, as a part of quality standards, HR, and HR policies, as a screening tool, and as a climate policy. Then, the SDGs automatically will become part of programming and evaluation.

**Prepare a response to resistance to change** within your organisation as the SDG agenda requires that everyone is on board. Kick-off like any other project is necessary. A lunch meeting hosted by the management could be a starting point to ensure that everyone at least is aware of where your organisation is heading.

**Create space for cross organisational learning** as many of the participants found the rare opportunity to meet with and learn from colleagues in other organisations very rewarding. It is recommended that organisations put more emphasis on cross organisational learning as it is cheap and relatively easy to organise.

## **APPLICATION OF SDGS**

Dig into the pool of indicators. While the goals and targets are using broad wording you may find useful and spot on indicators that you may use when you are designing programmes.

Be inspired by others, especially the private sector and possibly the climate organisations. Many of them are much more experienced in working with the SDGs than civil society rights organisations and the public sector.

## **PARTNERSHIPS AND INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

**Investigate the progress in each of your partner countries.** Be sceptical and pose questions, for example: How do you collect and verify data in countries where the population figure is uncertain and where there is no register of where people live? How is the country planning to achieve the goals before 2030?

**Consider whether you really want to push your partners to work with the 2030 agenda.** Every time you bring new requests to partners, they are diverted from their main focus and their core tasks. Rather give them the option of joining based on an informed choice and a real option to say no thanks. Otherwise,

there is a risk that they will just accept your agenda – like we as organisations accept and adjust to donor agendas.

### **ADVOCACY**

**It is time to initiate the planning of the advocacy for the next development agenda.** The development of new global agendas is a multi-stakeholder process which takes years, lots of planning and resources. If your organisation wants to influence the post 2030 agenda, it is time to adapt your organisation and start planning now.

### **BE REALISTIC**

**Lower your ambitions when you prepare learning proposals** for donors as project implementation and partnerships will always be prioritised over a learning project.

### **Do not automatically apply project cycle approach to learning initiatives.**

The five organisations participating in this project have asked themselves whether they actually needed to work out plans of action? Maybe simply meeting, listening, talking, reading and learning from each other would have worked just as well. In your organisation's planning for working with the SDGs, you may consider the same questions.

**Do things differently.** The project included consultant support for internal mapping, but eventually the organisations ended up doing their own mapping of the SDGs' role in bylaws, strategy, etc. It did not take a long time, and everyone involved learned a lot about their own organisations, and learning was the objective of the project rather than the production of documents.

### **CREATING SPACE FOR LEARNING**

**Consider how you may create space for learning in your organisation** when there are so many competing agendas.

**Focus on what you actually have learned** from external presenters and other organisations rather than focussing on what did not work out. The actual learning is of great value in itself.

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