

The Sustainable Development Goals and Climate Change

Ahead of the COP26 climate conference in November 2021, the IES is setting out the synergies and challenges which exist in our work towards sustainable development while also pursuing robust climate action.



In November 2021, COP26 will bring together experts and world leaders to discuss progress towards combating climate change, set ambitious targets for climate action, and agree coordinated efforts to reduce carbon emissions. It is now widely acknowledged that climate action and the wider sustainability agenda must work cooperatively, with a number of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) needing to be addressed in tandem if they are going to be successfully met. The road to achieving the SDGs requires significant climate action, and the road to fighting climate change requires an understanding of the bigger picture of sustainability.

It is therefore crucial to understand the ways that climate change and sustainable development intersect and the benefits which can be achieved for both agendas if they are approached from a systems perspective. This briefing provides a quick overview of the SDGs, how they relate to climate action, and some of the synergies and trade-offs which will need to be considered as discussions about COP26 continue to develop over the coming year.

SDG13 – Climate Action

Goal 13 is directly focused on action to address climate change and its impacts. A changing climate poses a significant threat to the long-term sustainability of the planet, and the systems of consumption and production which are responsible for driving climate change also present challenges for the wider sustainability of society. SDG13 covers action to mitigate climate change, as well as adaptation efforts, and the promotion of resilience and institutional capacity to address issues relating to changing climates. Each of the targets under Goal 13 will be crucial to creating a global community which seriously addresses climate change and its effects (see **Box 1**).

Key SDGs for climate-sustainability synergy

SDG7 – Affordable and Clean Energy

One of the key areas of synergy between the SDGs and climate action is the transformation of our energy systems. Energy inefficiency is not only a problem for sustainability and access to electricity, it also leads to increased resource usage and subsequent consequences for the climate. This is particularly true for carbon-intensive electricity production and unsustainable sources of energy such as fossil fuels. Making progress towards SDG7 has a natural synergy with our work to make global energy sources carbon neutral and as efficient as possible.

Box 1: SDG 13 Targets

The first fundamental aspect of this is set out in SDG Target 13.1, which focuses on the need for greater capacity to adapt and strengthen resilience to climate-related hazards. Target 13.3 relates this specifically to the development of institutional capacity through education, awareness, and human development.

In particular, SDG Target 13.a reiterates the need for developed countries which have signed the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) to mobilise funding for ‘meaningful mitigation actions and transparency on implementation’, drawing on capacity where it does exist to ensure all countries and communities are able to develop sustainable responses to climate change. COP26 brings together the UNFCCC member parties, so these targets will be fundamental to the success of the Conference.

Crucially, SDG Target 13.2 highlights the importance of integrating climate change measures into national policies, strategies and planning. This addresses an important perspective: if we are going to succeed, either in promoting global sustainability or in the fight against climate change, then we need an integrated approach which deals with unsustainable systems and climate risk factors on the scales at which they arise.

SDG11 – Sustainable Cities and Communities

SDG11 focuses on the impact of cities in creating or mitigating challenges for sustainability, and there are clear areas of synergy between that agenda and the goal of making our communities more climate-friendly, particularly when it comes to issues such as the sustainability of transport and per capita environmental impacts, both of which are addressed in targets under SDG11.

SDG12 – Responsible Consumption and Production

Both consumption and production systems have significant impacts on our ability to reach carbon neutrality and consequently to combat climate change. The production, use, and consumption of material resources is deeply embedded in the global economy, and untangling unsustainable resource use will pose a significant challenge which may mean trade-offs between livelihoods and environmental outcomes. Inevitably though it will be necessary in order to reduce our global carbon and material footprints.

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In particular, fossil fuels are identified in SDG target 12.c as a key resource to be addressed in the move towards less wasteful resource consumption, which means that there are natural synergies with the climate agenda and COP26. A transition to a circular economy will be necessary to eliminate waste and allow for the sustainable and continual use of limited resources. It will also be fundamental to meeting international climate targets like the Paris Agreement and other sustainability targets such as those covered by SDG8. These efforts will naturally depend on the rollout of renewable energy and a subsequent reduction in carbon emissions.

SDG14 – Life Below Water and SDG15 – Life on Land

There are deep and comprehensive links between the climate crisis and the crisis facing biodiversity. Similarly, there are significant opportunities to address both crises simultaneously. This will be particularly important in 2021 as we prepare not just for COP26 on climate change, but also COP15 for the Convention of Biological Diversity. Ecosystem loss is directly linked to changing climates, and there are also significant opportunities for synergy between ecosystem restoration and nature-based solutions to climate change, where multiple benefits can be pursued simultaneously for climate and biodiversity.

Reforming the economy (SDG1 – No Poverty, SDG8 – Decent Work and Economic Growth, SDG9 – Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure, SDG10 – Reduced Inequalities)

One of the major challenges for sustainable development and the SDGs is the complex relationship between systems which are unsustainable and the global economic structures which are essential for the livelihoods and development of communities around the world. The same is true for climate change, which is inextricably linked to the ways that economic growth, infrastructure development, and employment have historically been pursued. To the extent that sustainability demands an appropriate restructuring of these aspects of the global economy which are unsustainable, the opportunity to simultaneously ensure we are removing climate pressures from those systems cannot be ignored.

Transforming unsustainable systems while achieving multiple benefits

SDG2 – Zero Hunger

Global hunger is intrinsically linked to the food systems which are also responsible for entrenching agricultural practices which significantly contribute to unsustainable environmental outcomes in general and climate change more specifically. As we move towards reforming our food systems to achieve global food security, there is a crucial opportunity to reform the practices which are also contributing to climate change.

Box 2: Importance of a global ‘just transition’

We must take opportunities to support just transitions which move communities away from unsustainable systems while giving them the skills and abilities they need to support themselves. By doing so, there are tangible opportunities to seek economic growth and development which is decoupled from climate pressures and unsustainable practices. This approach recognises how deeply intertwined climate change and development are, with the most economically vulnerable being disproportionately affected by climate-related impacts.

Not only are poverty and rising inequality exacerbated by climate change, they also contribute to environmental degradation through links to deforestation and the consequent reduction of the natural carbon sink. Where harmful use of natural resources such as forest wood and soil become a means of livelihood, it can entrench unsustainable economic systems, reducing buy-in for change and exacerbating barriers to action which already exist where there is a lack of knowledge in sustainable techniques, resulting in air and water pollution.

Greater effort needs to be made to enable communities to adopt more sustainable production techniques, especially in areas such as agriculture, energy, and the management of other natural resources which are essential to livelihoods. Crucially, sustainable production techniques should be developed in collaboration with local communities, to increase buy-in and ownership over sustainable livelihoods, and with the recognition that local communities often hold important traditional knowledge and techniques applicable to improving sustainable practice.

SDG6 – Clean Water and Sanitation

Water systems play a fundamental role in regulating other natural systems. The careful management of water resources will be especially important in the context of adaptation, where changing climates increase system vulnerabilities associated with water, such as increased flood risk and the associated increase in human exposure of pollutants.

Reforming society (SDG3 – Good Health and Well-Being, SDG4 – Quality Education, SDG5 – Gender Equality, SDG16 – Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions)

The sustainability agenda faces many additional challenges across social spheres which require further transformation to take place. Again, this will provide many opportunities for synergistic progress towards combating climate change. For example, SDG4 focuses on

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giving everyone access to a quality education, including relevant skills for employment under SDG target 4.4 and the knowledge necessary for sustainable development under target 4.7. Both processes provide opportunities to provide skills which are not just broadly sustainable, but which provide direct access to the skills and knowledge needed to address the climate crisis.

Necessary for success: SDG17 – Partnerships for the Sustainable Development Goals

Climate change and the wider sustainability agenda are both global challenges which require global solutions. The same partnerships which are crucial for achieving the SDGs are also necessary for fighting climate change, and there will be significant opportunities to utilise these same global partnerships to achieve mutual progress towards both goals.

Conclusion

The need for coordinated action to address climate change while progressing the SDGs cannot be overstated. Work must be less fragmented at all levels of society, from intergovernmental bodies and government departments to third sector organisations and businesses, in order to take full advantage of the synergies between climate action and sustainable development and to manage the conflicts that may arise between them. Only through systems thinking can these global challenges be addressed to secure an equitable and habitable planet for all.

Sources and further information

- UN, “Sustainable Development Goal 13: Climate Action” - <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/climate-change>
- IISD, “Climate Action and Sustainable Development are Inseparable” - <https://sdg.iisd.org/commentary/guest-articles/climate-action-and-sustainabledevelopment-are-inseparable>
- International Council for Science, “A guide to SDG interactions: from science to implementation” - <http://pure.iiasa.ac.at/id/eprint/14591/1/SDGs-Guide-to-Interactions.pdf>

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