Working with the UN SDGs – a toolkit of activities

This toolkit brings together activities, which use the UN Sustainable Development Goals to generate discussion, encourage team working, fosters value-creation and sense making. Whether you are familiar with the UN SDGs or this is your first time using them there is an option that you can try.

Where do I start?

As a facilitator you can familiarise yourself with the background of the SDGs on the United Nations SDGs website: https://sdgs.un.org/goals

Each goal has an associated icon; this icon links through to a regularly updated infographic overview panel, which acts as a useful talking point. Reports and news items provide useful facts and discussion points. https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/news/communications-material/

How to?

You can either use a hard copy of the goals (printed off and cut into the 17 goal icons, or drawn out instead), or you could use them digitally and display on screen. For sustainability print on card or waterproof paper to re-use, and to save on printer ink use the inverted icon options. SDG icon sets are available here: https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/news/communications-material/

Facilitator to lead a session, sets the ground rules first:

- respect each other's right to their personal views and opinions
- communication is an exchange of listening, verbalising, writing, drawing and body language
- equity amongst members – everyone should have the opportunity to, and feel comfortable to contribute
- Respect participants cultural diversity and neurodivergence
- be aware that participants may have unconscious bias (it may be worth considering this early on)
- set the expectations; time allowed, 'how to', objectives, end point

Who can use them?

The different options depend on the participants involved and objectives of the sessions:

PLAY   For ice breaking activities, any age suitable, these options are more suitable

GROW   For multi-disciplinary groups or teambuilding, try these options

CHANGE   For problem solving and ideas generation these use divergent and convergent activity

VALUES   For educational gains or embedding the goals then values based options work well

How can I evaluate the impact?

Whichever option you choose try to incorporate a mechanism of feedback or reflection or call to action;

- Scoring awareness of/familiarity with the SDGs at the start and end of the activity (numerical, descriptor, drawing, SDG wheel to indicate pre- and post- activity awareness)
- Encouraging a pledge to take away; one thing the person or group will do because of better understanding of the SDGs
- 'One thing I…' statements that have changed perspective or mind-set
- Visual records – take a photo or sketch the key learning gains

Can I use these in a virtual environment?

Yes, each activity has suggestions for how to adapt the method for use in multiple sites and online.

1. Personal values

This activity allows participants to question what they value and the impact they could have by making or driving change. Encourage thinking which considers the global picture (e.g. food miles).

How to - Participants collect three SDG cards per group (or they are provided these at random). They must decide amongst the group, which SDG they value the most and what they can actually change in their daily lives. Starter questions:

- What do I know about this SDG?
- How relevant is it to me?
- Why was this defined as a goal?
- What are the outcomes if the goal is not met?
- How can I make a difference?

Note - value is subjective and a discussion point; current personal value, context of employment, future value etc.

Resources –a mood-board/flipchart paper for the collation of ideas. Ranking of value of the SDGs could use a scoring system/notes – paper or digital.

Timing – flexible from 15 - 45 minutes, depending on whether feeding back to other groups.

Virtual – use breakout rooms online or in multiple site activities then groups in the same room with access to online meetings software/conference-type facilities to feedback.

2. Cohesive connections

Points based game to consider all the SDGs and how they might be linked or grouped. Facilitator to provide the initial idea/concept related to a relevant/meaningful subject/problem.

How to – Process mapping activities. Points-based game, the facilitator gives participants the concept or problem related to their studies/of interest to them (discipline specific or general if mixed disciplines). Groups map SDGs onto or round this using a large sheet of paper (like a mind map/spider diagram).

Draw connector lines between the SDGs and linking information – brief notes/drawings. Groups then share their interpretations of the same idea; facilitators award points for cohesive connections. Facilitator to keep the groups to time and encourage broad base thinking.

Resources – Large sheet of paper (flipchart size) to map and connect the SDGs. Pens/pencils. Alternatively use white/blackboards and draw the SDG symbols and connectors. Access to UN SDG web pages can help groups develop connections.

Timing – 1 hour ideas generation and decision-making. 15 minutes to prepare the key points to pitch. 30 minutes for groups to pitch to each other and have discussion.

Virtual – same format, groups at remote locations should ideally be in the same room (for sustainability by limiting the number of electronic devices). This requires a method to display the results (slide sharing if digital), or a camera if working on paper.

This is a relaxed and creative activity, which encourages divergent thinking and use of drawing or building to create a more informal approach.

How to – participants sort into groups by picking from a bag, or dealt a:

- coloured Lego® block
- group number
- SDG tile

If you want to guarantee diversity and equity then a facilitator can allocate people to groups. Choose your range of SDGs according to the participant range they suit

Provide a scenario or starter idea for the groups and get them to work in their teams to generate ideas and suggestions for what they could contribute towards achieving the SDG. Use divergent thinking; anything is possible, infinite finance etc. As the ideas start to converge, encourage them to start building or drawing a metaphor for their idea.

Optional concluding activity: they can either present back to the facilitator/another group/all groups using the build/drawing as a prop, or the 'prop' (drawing/build) can be displayed with the SDG card and other groups ask questions to work out how the prop relates to the SDG.

Resources – assortment of Lego®/Play-doh® or plasticine /pens /pencils and papers or similar

Timing – flexible from 45 min – 1.5 hour depending on whether feeding back or using display and question to other groups.

Virtual – if you have access to virtual whiteboards/slide sharing in breakout rooms or Padlet/similar then this can be a good method for everyone to chip in their ideas and co-create. Encourage two 'divergent ideas' slides before encouraging convergence to an idea or concept.

The display and question approach works well here; participants can use the chat/Q+A function to post questions and the team members can reply direct to the question on chat or verbally.

This tool consider how AI and social media can influence decisions and perceptions.

How to – Facilitator should set the boundaries for the session based on search parameters. For example type of information searched for, reputable websites which are age-appropriate to the participants.
Participants should think in terms of the community, regional, national and international contexts. Choose an SDG per group and find out what is online already (start with the recommended UN SDGs website), then diverge. Online research digs in the search data and determines which type of digital approach would raise the profile of the SDGs for the demographic of the participants
This session is similar to a context-café style activity, to present back an overview (paper/pin-board/Prezi about the most impactful initiatives

Questions posed:
- Can AI and social media be utilised to promote and enhance the rate of action for achieving SDGs?
- What can a web-search tell us about what is currently happening around an SDG
- how do we know the information it is reliable
- what information should be disseminated and in what format (discussion points)
- speed-searching resources in the session; which seem to give the most traction in terms of 'likes/reposts' in a positive way

Resources – requires access to Wi-Fi for researching examples (snip and paste information for a memory board; digital capability)

Timing – 2 hours total. The first 30 minutes establishes the approach to online searching and considers some of the questions above. The second hour

Virtual – same format, groups at remote locations should ideally be in the same room (for sustainability by limiting the number of electronic devices).

Note: Be aware of cultural sensitivities and observe appropriate space for freedom of speech whilst maintaining respect for opinions. Awareness of the flaws in information in AI generated searches and the impact of algorithms in diverting/influencing search results in social media.

Role-play for ethics, logistics, and understanding whereby participants take on different roles to consider an SDG. Useful for positioning participants to the mind-set of a customer or stakeholder (profit, cost, jobs, geography etc.), rather than on the side of their personal values and beliefs. Seeing things from a different perspective allows greater objectivity.

How to – Each group is allocated or picks an SDG. Use the 'think, pair, share' approach to come up with problems or issue related to the SDG that affects your region or country (location you are taking part).

Once you have identified one issue to work on, then consider who all the 'stakeholders' are around making a change to achieve the SDG; for example; government, wildlife, educators, children, farmers, fishermen/women, energy companies, healthcare providers, manufacturers etc. Select or allocate a role per person or in pairs and use 'think, pair, share' again to work on your arguments for or against taking action on the SDG.

Encourage use of SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) in the 4 square grid where different roles can plot key points for or against. Alternatively, you can use PESTEL headings (Political, Economic, Social, Technological, Environmental, Legal) to record key points. Each pair should come up with a few key points around their stakeholder and the effect that tackling the SDG issue would have upon them/their area.

Resources – paper for recording SWOT / PESTEL, or electronic devices/boards. Facilitator to keep the groups to time and manage the pitches and debate. Access to online resources (AI to question understanding, access to UN SDG info etc.)

Timing – 1-1.5 hours total. 15-20 minutes to 'think, pair, share', 5-10 minutes to select roles. 20-30 minutes to prepare and question with AI the key points of your position. 20-30 minutes to record key points as SWOT/PESTEL and feedback your stakeholder position about what impact would/could happen if progress was made on that SDG regionally.

Virtual – same format, groups at remote locations should ideally be in the same room (for sustainability by limiting the number of electronic devices).

Note: Be aware of cultural sensitivities and observe appropriate space for freedom of speech whilst maintaining respect for opinions. Some people may find the negotiation and discussion elements difficult so facilitators may need to ensure that every person is heard.

This Toolkit is part of a larger toolkit project, which will contain 17 ways to use the UN SDGs and will be available in all six formally recognised UN languages. The full toolkit will be available free of charge and as creative commons licence for non-profit purpose uses as per UN SDGs conditions. This ETC How to Guide will be updated with the full toolkit access details once available.

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