



The UN Sustainable Development Goals = social, environmental, and business value

An Australian handbook with insights,
advice, and practical strategies

November 2021



United Nations
Association
of Australia
Victorian Division



Acknowledgement of Country

We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the Country on which we work, and recognise their continuing connection to land, waters, and community. We pay our respects to them and their cultures, and to Elders past, present, and emerging.





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Opening remarks

United Nations Association of Australia (Victoria Division)

If you've picked up this paper wondering whether it and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs or Goals) are relevant to you, consider the following: integrating the SDGs into your planning, reporting or operations provides an opportunity to clearly show your commitment to sustainable development and environmental, social and governance (ESG) principles. Applying the SDGs can help to accelerate business opportunities, identify strategic risks, and catalyse innovation. Aligning to the Goals can have flow-on benefits such as increasing trust among your customers and stakeholders and enhancing your position as an employer and partner of choice.

So hopefully you're now ready to read on too!



If you've decided to align to the SDGs, you've made a good decision"

– John Thwaites, Monash Sustainable Development Institute

Spark Strategy

With less than 9 years left to achieve the United Nations (UN) SDGs, there's no better time to support the global movement for greater peace, prosperity, and sustainability. The SDG summit in September 2019 called for a decade of action to help deliver the 17 interlinked goals of “ending extreme poverty, fighting inequality and injustice, and protecting the planet”¹. This paper is a practical guide to support Australian not-for-profits, corporates, universities, trusts and foundations, and government agencies to align to the Goals.

In developing this paper, we've been inspired by Australia's growing SDG momentum driven by the dedication and determination of many Australian SDG advocates and champions. But there is still a long way to go and a lot of work to do. We hope this paper inspires you to apply the Goals, either for the first time or building on your existing SDG work. We also hope it provides clear practical guidance and a strong foundation to support and strengthen your use of the SDGs.



This is a universal call to action. We need enormous change and must harness knowledge, expertise, finance, and technology at all levels at society. We can achieve change much faster when we work together.” – Ronni Kahn AO, OzHarvest



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¹ UN Global Compact. 2021, *The SDGs Explained for Business*, Available at: <https://www.unglobalcompact.org/sdgs/about>.





Introduction

THIS PAPER IS AN AUSTRALIAN HANDBOOK FOR:

- 1 Organisations who are starting from scratch with the SDGs and aren't sure where to start.** If this sounds like you, you might be interested to know more about the SDGs, why you should apply them and how to get going.
- 2 Companies who have been aligning to the SDGs** but are looking to learn more, do things differently (and potentially more holistically), and tap into the experiences and insights of others.
- 3 SDG leaders** who are committed to the Goals and leading the way in how Australian organisations implement them. You may read about your organisation here, find out how you can support others on their SDG journey or learn about what other SDG leaders are doing.

The following pages include key background information about the SDGs in the Australian context, the benefits of utilising them, and case studies and practical guidance. The development of this paper has been a collaboration between the United Nations Association of Australia (Victorian Division) and Spark Strategy, informed by Australian organisations from different sectors, geographical remits, industries and impact areas. We'd like to thank the individuals and organisations who shared their perspectives and insights relating to the UN SDGs.

Organisations varied in terms of their alignment to and experiences with the SDGs - some have been meaningfully applying the Goals for years, while others are fairly new to the SDGs. We also want to recognise that there are many other organisations across Australia that are doing amazing work with the SDGs.



SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS





What are the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals?

The SDGs, agreed by all UN Member States in 2015, are a set of 17 universal goals aimed at achieving significant social, economic, and environmental change by 2030. They provide a global blueprint to end poverty, protect our planet and ensure prosperity, guided by the premise that no-one should be left behind. Behind each goal, there are a series of targets to work towards and indicators available to measure progress.

The Goals can be viewed as a group, individually or in smaller sub-groups but they were designed to show the interconnectedness of the contemporary world. For example, sustainable cities and communities (SDG11) cannot be created without clean water and sanitation being available to everyone (SDG6).

It's important to note that the SDGs are not perfect. They were written for sign-off by all the countries of the world and contain some contradictions between targets, insufficient detail across some goals, and amongst others, and a lack of targeted focus on issues relating to First Nations people and homelessness.

This means, however, that you can play your part in picking up some of these shortfalls and bringing about the change needed to ensure that we continue to create greener, stronger, and more resilient societies.



The SDGs are an aspirational framework that paint a big picture transformative vision. I'm still in awe that there were 194 signatures."
– Jen Dollin, Western Sydney University

How are we tracking towards the Sustainable Development Goals in Australia?

In late 2020, the Monash Sustainable Development Institute's *Transforming Australia SDG Progress Report - 2020 Update* provided an independent and data-driven assessment of Australia's progress towards meeting the SDGs².

The report showed that while Australia is performing well on health and education, Australia is failing to reduce emissions, waste and environmental degradation, and address cost-of-living pressures and economic inequality. Of the 56 indicators examined, Australia is on track to achieve 12, off track in relation to 23 and needing significant improvement against the remaining 21. *Transforming Australia* also showed that the COVID-19 pandemic was exacerbating existing trends relating to employment and poverty.

Every year, the global Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) publishes an independent quantitative report on the progress of UN Member States towards the SDGs. In the 2021 *Sustainable Development Report*, Australia was ranked 36 of 165 Member States in progress against the Goals³.

This report showed that while Australia is on track to achieve SDG 3 - good health and wellbeing and SDG 6 - clean water and sanitation, and showing moderate improvement in nine other goals, it is stagnating against SDG 2 - zero hunger, SDG 13 - climate action and SDG 14 - life below water. The data also showed that Australia is going backwards in relation to SDG 10 - reduced inequality and SDG 15 - life on land.



It would be great if the SDGs were used more widely in Australia. We have a lot to celebrate, for example girls' education. And then they help us identify the weaker points requiring effort and collective action.” – Dr Catherine Brown OAM, Lord Mayor's Charitable Foundation

2 SDG Transforming Australia. *Sustainable Development Goals | Transforming Australia*. Available at: www.sdgtransformingaustralia.com

3 SDG Index. *Sustainable Development Report 2021 – Australia Country Profile*. Available at: www.dashboards.sdgindex.org/profiles/australia



What are the benefits of aligning to the Sustainable Development Goals?

THE BENEFITS OF ALIGNING TO THE SDGS ARE NUMEROUS AND INCLUDE:



INCREASING YOUR IMPACT

By aligning to the SDGs, communities, organisations, and governments can be confident that they are working towards meaningful social, environmental, and economic change.

- “The SDGs are a blueprint for creating a better future” – Ronni Kahn, OzHarvest
- “Goals and targets drive action across government, set benchmarks and mobilise communities” – John Thwaites, Monash Sustainable Development Institute
-



BOOSTING EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

Many people are actively seeking an employer with a clear purpose and strong values alignment. The SDGs have impact at their core so they can be a good way for organisations and leadership to prove their commitment to being ethical and purposeful to their teams.

- “We don’t leave our values at home when we go to work. A lot of staff now want to work for a company that has sustainability at its core.” – Helen Maisano, Optus
-



PROVIDING A COMMON LANGUAGE

The SDGs act as a common language, which is understood across the public, private and not-for-profit sectors. This means the SDGs can be useful in initiating conversations, demonstrating value and other forms of communication.

- “If we know an organisation is already committed to the SDGs, that’s a conversation starter for us.”
- Michael Joyce, Good Shepherd Australia New Zealand



ENHANCING HOW YOU COLLABORATE

As a global shared framework, the SDGs enable organisations to identify partnership opportunities and complement one another's work without duplicating effort.

“The SDGs are a reminder that we don't work in a bubble and need to collaborate.” – Kiam Yoong, Zoos Victoria



TAKING A HOLISTIC APPROACH

The 17 SDGs are global and universal. They move organisations beyond a siloed approach to think comprehensively about their role in the world and their organisational operations. As such, the SDGs can help organisations identify the benefits and disbenefits of different actions and interventions.

“The SDGs allow us to think, talk and take action in a holistic way that links up to our organisational mission.” – Emma Bombonato, Sydney Opera House

*“When it comes to strategy, the SDGs help us see if we've covered everything related to our Impact Areas and if there's anything we've missed.”
– Dr Catherine Brown OAM, Lord Mayor's Charitable Foundation*



IDENTIFYING OPPORTUNITIES AND RISKS

The SDGs reflect unmet needs and market gaps in Australia and around the world, which require new products and services. In addition to helping with opportunity identification and innovation, the framework can also be used to recognise current and future organisational risks.

“The SDGs will help leaders make better decisions as the world shifts towards sustainable development and help them identify risks around stranded assets and potential litigation if they don't act.” – John Thwaites, Monash Sustainable Development Institute

“As an organisation, if you think beyond short-term gains and acknowledge the need for change, you'll have an advantage in positioning the business for a sustainable future.” – Karnali Bose, Good Shepherd Australia New Zealand



STRENGTHENING YOUR BRAND

The SDGs are well recognised and respected around the world. Organisations that demonstrate a meaningful contribution to the SDGs can enjoy greater brand strength and credibility.

“Sustainability has become integral to building trust with your people, customers and wider stakeholders” – Helen Maisano, Optus



IMPROVING HOW YOU ATTRACT OR ALLOCATE FUNDS

The SDG agenda provides a ready-made framework for identifying how to allocate funding for the greatest impact. In return, as more funders use the SDGs as a decision-making tool, demonstrating a commitment and contribution to the SDGs can help organisations to secure funding and other resources.

“When we make a grant, we have a particular outcome that they’re working towards and we’ll agree on indicators for the grant. What we want to do more is to connect those indicators to an SDG and report on that.” – Dr Catherine Brown OAM, Lord Mayor’s Charitable Foundation

Source: Zoos Victoria





Applying the Sustainable Development Goals to your organisation

The SDGs can be applied to specific parts of your organisation and value chain, of which three common and key areas are: strategic planning; reporting and impact measurement; and procurement and supply chains. In this section of the paper, we explore key considerations and case studies for each of these three domains.



It is worth asking how you can make the SDGs meaningful for your organisation and people.” – Heidi Nash-Smith, Wotton + Kearney



The SDGs help us map what we’re doing well and what we could improve.”
– Kiam Yoong, Zoos Victoria

Strategic planning and the Sustainable Development Goals

When it comes to strategic planning, the SDGs can add significant value for organisations of all shapes, sizes, and sectors. There are two meaningful ways we’ve seen the Goals applied to strategy development. The first technique is for strategic planning to commence, with the SDGs overlaid mid-way through to see what parts of the SDG agenda are particularly pertinent and if anything has been missed in the strategic thinking to date. The second technique is for organisations to start with the SDGs and craft a strategy that is grounded in them. For both approaches to be effective and meaningful, the strategic planning process needs to go beyond the goal level to look at targets and potentially indicators too. As we explore later, any utilisation of the SDGs solely at the goal level is light touch, lacks substance and risks tokenism.



We didn’t start with the SDGs in our strategic planning process. We started with our own local information sourced through our needs analysis, Vital Signs, and then checked it against the SDGs.” – Dr Catherine Brown OAM, Lord Mayor’s Charitable Foundation



In our new strategy, SV2030, the goals are central. They are not a map or an overlay. The SDGs are at the heart of our new strategic direction.” – Suellen King, Sustainability Victoria

CASE STUDY:

Charlton Neighbourhood House

Charlton Neighbourhood House is a small organisation located in rural Victoria with a big local impact. In developing their second ever [strategic plan](#), they mapped all Goals against existing programs before reversing this process to map strategies and plans against the SDGs to identify gaps and opportunities. The relatable SDGs language helped the group work out how the goals could be localised to best support community impact.

It's also worth considering which strategy or strategies you'll start with when applying the SDGs. For example, the Lord Mayor's Charitable Foundation deployed the SDGs in their organisational strategic planning process and have subsequently looked at integrating the Goals into their grant-making and impact investing processes and strategies. The Sydney Opera House, on the other hand, decided to introduce its commitment to the SDGs in a phased approach. The first step involved the Opera House setting out clear objectives and actions in its environmental, reconciliation and accessibility action plans to support the Goals. This allowed for the project team to gain endorsement by the Opera House's leadership team and to demonstrate clear initiatives to staff and the community about how the Opera House could help tackle some of the Goals. Since then, the Opera House has taken many positive actions and embedded the Goals in other strategies and plans, most recently its new Diversity, Inclusion & Belonging Strategy.

Source: Sustainability Victoria



CASE STUDY:

QBE

QBE is an international insurance company headquartered in Sydney, Australia. Over recent years, QBE has undertaken analysis to align its sustainability agenda with the SDGs. This included a review in 2018, which was subsequently refreshed in 2020, to see which SDGs had the greatest relevance to the business and its stakeholders.

By considering alignment with their strategic priorities, business activities and product lines, QBE discovered that every SDG was relevant to their organisation in some way. They also found that they had greater ability to directly impact some of the Goals and, as such, identified five SDG priorities:

- SDG 1 – no poverty
- SDG 8 – decent work and economic growth
- SDG 10 – reduced inequalities
- SDG 11 – sustainable cities and communities and
- SDG 13 – climate action

QBE is also committed to SDG 17 – partnerships for the Goals as this underpins everything they do. They view collaboration as a core enabler in their business performance and SDG contribution.



The success of QBE's approach was driven by several factors, including effective internal stakeholder engagement across the organisation. In addition, a deep dive of the SDGs has been important for QBE. This involved identifying relevant targets and indicators and considering if other complementary measures would be valuable. QBE also translated each goal through a lens of what it meant for their business. The SDG deep dive unearthed key business opportunities and risks, which can now be capitalised on and mitigated respectively.

Source: QBE, *Our approach to sustainability: Sustainable Development Goals* <<https://www.qbe.com/sustainability/our-approach-to-sustainability/sustainable-development-goals>>



Reporting, impact measurement and the Sustainable Development Goals

Reporting can come in many forms, including tracking your organisational activities, monitoring financial performance (and, where relevant, returns to shareholders), and understanding your outcomes and impact. Effective reporting helps leaders make decisions and keeps teams and other stakeholders informed and engaged.

More and more customers, leaders, employees, investors, and other stakeholders are committed to ethical and purposeful businesses, initiatives, and solutions (and interested in identifying harmful or negligent actors). This means that the SDG agenda, and especially the targets and indicators, has an increasingly important role to play in reporting.

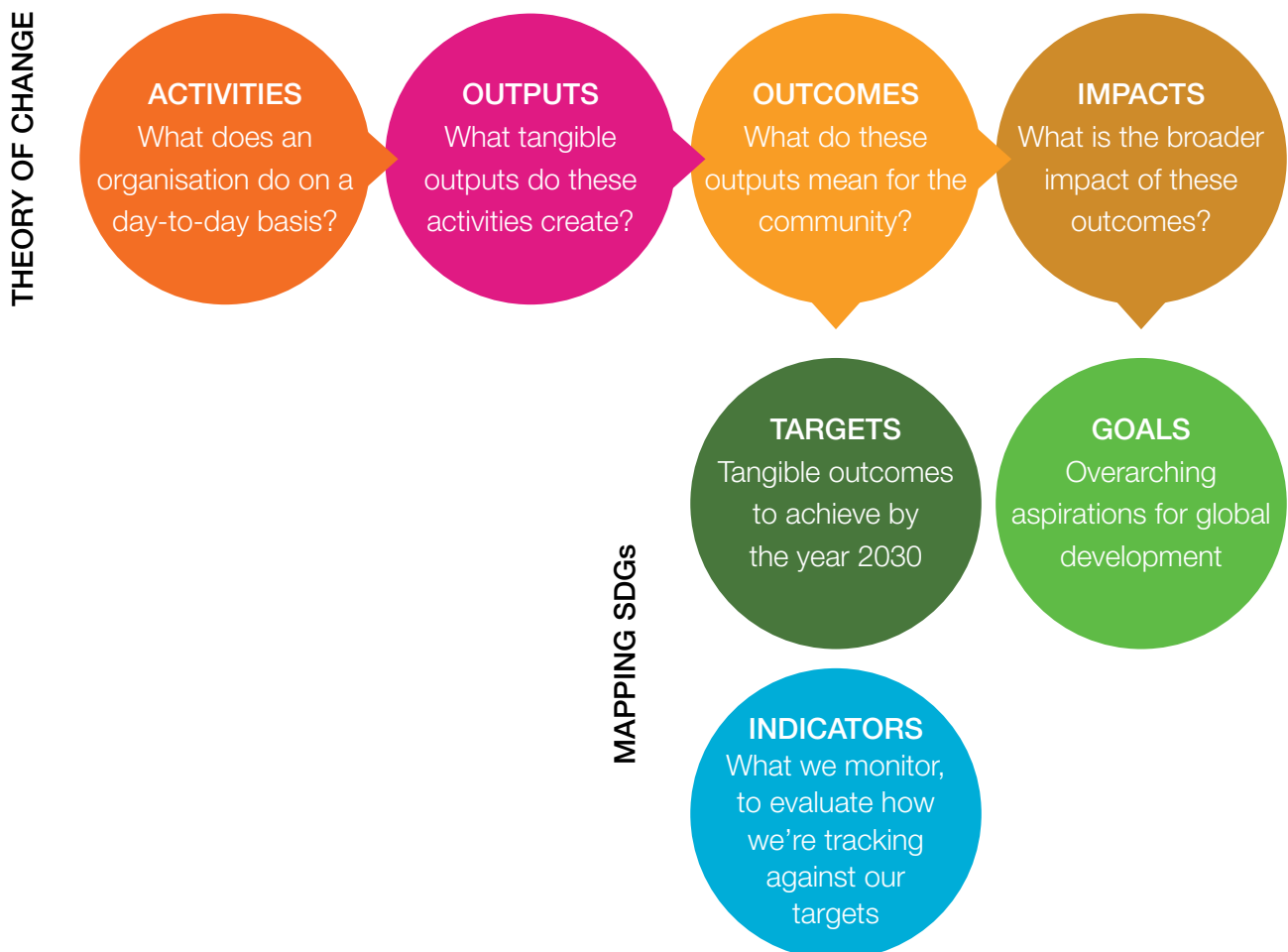
Impact measurement is the practice of defining and demonstrating the impact you seek. It is particularly relevant to not-for-profits, social enterprises, philanthropic trusts and foundations, and other for-purpose organisations who have impact at the heart of the work they do. We are seeing more organisations utilise impact measurement to develop strong narratives about how they create positive change or minimise harmful practices. To learn more, you can access Spark's theory of change [whitepaper here](#) and impact measurement [whitepaper here](#).



The SDGs can be helpful when it comes to quantifying impact. When we ask people to report on their work, we ask them to consider what they're doing and why they're doing it. The SDGs help them answer those questions and brings an extra level of accountability because when you get into the target and indicator level, you're forced to be more rigorous.” – Tracy Jackson, Sustainability Victoria

Impact measurement often starts with creating a theory of change. The SD goals generally align well with the long-term impact you seek, and the SDG targets and indicators can be helpful in understanding and unpacking your short- and medium-term outcomes. It's essential that the SDG targets and indicators you choose are meaningful to the work your organisation does or plans to do. You can also go one step further by identifying complementary or stretch targets and indicators to go beyond what the SDGs stipulate. Please refer to the diagram for a visual representation of how to align your theory of change to the SDGs.

Aligning the theory of change to the SDGs



Source: Spark Strategy

Of note, a number of interviewees emphasised that aligning the SDGs to their reporting and impact measurement is a work in progress or a future aspiration. While many felt strongly that the Goals added value to their reporting and impact measurement, they also noted they had or were facing challenges, and expressed an interest to hear what others are doing in this space.

In addition to the case studies featured in this section, the work of the Commissioner for Environment Sustainability Victoria provides some helpful insights and takeaways for reporting impact measurement. Michael Reid, Director of the Office of the Commissioner, shared how the SDGs have been central in developing a reporting framework for the five yearly Victorian State of the Environment Report. As part of the work for the State of the Marine and Coastal Environment 2021 Report, the Commissioner for Environmental Sustainability ran a co-design workshop with 79 stakeholders, who collectively agreed on a list of Uniform Local Indicators, linked to SDG targets, to apply uniformly, across all coastal local management authorities in Victoria. Relevant data is currently being collected and will be published in the State of the Marine and Coastal Environment 2021 Report. The Commissioner's experiences demonstrate the importance of meaningful stakeholder engagement and moving beyond the Goal level and theoretical concepts to support practical local reporting and impact measurement.

Collecting the right data is key to effectively demonstrating impact. For OzHarvest, data plays a significant role in the logistics of rescuing perishable food and delivering it to the community, yielding real time impact metrics. At the time of interviewing, CEO and Founder, Ronni Kahn AO was able to share the amount of food that had been rescued that same day and understand who it had gone to. Collecting food rescue and relief data allows OzHarvest to make operational decisions, inform partners of their impact, understand community needs and share frontline insights that influence decisions by government and stakeholders. "Measurement of data is part of our day-to-day business" – Ronni Kahn AO

Delta Goodrem performs at the Sydney Opera House as part of Global Citizen Live September 2021. Photo credit: Brayden Smith



CASE STUDY:

Australian Library and Information Association

The Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) is the peak professional organisation for the Australian library and information services sector. ALIA went one step further in their application of the SDGs. After carrying out a mapping exercise and identifying that they had a strong fit with the majority of the Goals, they developed a set of 10 stretch targets for 2030 together with reporting measures. An excerpt can be found here.



Target 1

Libraries' contribution to literacy in all its forms is recognised and libraries are embedded in national strategies for early language and literacy, digital inclusion and media literacy.

SDG alignment

SDG 4.6 Ensure that all youth and a substantial proportion of adults, both men and women, achieve literacy and numeracy.

Activities, measurement and tracking progress

EXTENSION

Advocacy to progress three national strategies, within which the role of libraries is recognised and embedded.

- Early language and literacy, through active membership of the National Early Language and Literacy Coalition, with a target date of December 2021 for a draft strategy, endorsed by the early childhood sector.
- Media literacy, through active membership of the Australian Media Literacy Alliance, with a target date of December 2022 for a strategy to be in place with the endorsement of the Australian Government.
- A digital inclusion strategy adopted by the Australian Government.

Advocacy for the role and value of school libraries, in partnership with state-based associations and other stakeholders, resulting in increased investment in well resourced school libraries, staffed by qualified professionals.

REPORTING

Progress towards publication and implementation of national strategies.

Advocacy achievements to be included in 2025 and 2030 reports.



Lead

ALIA
APLA
NSLA

Source: ALIA – Sustainable Development Goals: Stretch Targets for Australian Libraries 2020-2030 <<https://read.alia.org.au/sustainable-development-goals-stretch-targets-australian-libraries-2020-2030>>

**CASE STUDY:**

The Infrastructure Sustainability Council

The Infrastructure Sustainability Council (ISC) is a member-based peak body operating across Australia and New Zealand. Their Infrastructure Sustainability (IS) Scheme is a voluntary assessment which rates and promotes sustainability outcomes in infrastructure.

The IS Scheme is underpinned by the SDGs. ISC developed a theory of change for the IS Scheme, which was reviewed and iterated through wide scale stakeholder engagement with their members and team members. During the process, it became clear that the outcomes listed in their theory of change had strong alignment to the SDGs. It was with this groundwork that ISC was able to develop the IS Scheme which aligns to 15 of the 17 goals. For the two goals that the IS Scheme does not cover (SDG 1 – no poverty and SDG 2 – zero hunger), ISC donates charitable funds to relevant organisations. Through the IS Scheme, ISC has been able to demonstrate how the infrastructure industry is making considerable progress towards the Goals.

Supply chains and the Sustainable Development Goals

Integrating the SDGs into managing supply chains is increasingly becoming a feature of Australian organisations seeking to achieve social, economic, and environmental outcomes.

Organisations ranging across the businesses, government, community, environmental and university sectors are using the SDGs as a common language and framework to establish new collaborative partnerships with suppliers – driven by recognition that they will not be able to achieve major objectives such as reduced carbon emissions and modern slavery risks without suppliers also contributing to these efforts.



It's very important to integrate the Sustainable Development Goals across your whole value chain, including strategy, operations, supply chain, and what customers do with your products and services.” – John Thwaites, Monash Sustainable Development Institute

There's also an increasing appreciation of the power of social and sustainable procurement. Melbourne Water, for example, seeks suppliers who deliver an “enduring social benefit” in line with [Victoria's Social Procurement Framework](#). This policy is designed to use the significant public buying power of Victorian Government agencies to increase the value of public sector activities through such flow-on outcomes as suppliers adopting family violence leave or using recycled materials in construction.

Purchasing power and the SDGS are also being used to drive positive change in supply chains. Incorporating the need to meet SDG-related criteria in tenders and program delivery is leading to suppliers and potential suppliers improving their own practices.



Several of our suppliers have now grouped goals into their operations and a lot of them have developed strategies after seeing what we had done. We're keen to keep helping to grow and support what these organisations are doing.” – Matthew Brennan, Transurban

Large corporations such as Optus acknowledge that, if they want to get the best outcomes from their supply chains, they need to use their corporate resources to assist suppliers to become educated about the benefits of the SDGs and build the necessary capacity to meet new requirements. Optus Group Sustainability Director, Helen Maisano, believes in using the SDGs to assess prospective suppliers as well as working with suppliers to develop their capacity to integrate the Goals and human

rights principles. She noted that this sort of approach will “bring to life” goals like SDG 8 - decent work and economic growth and SDG 13 - climate action.

The SDGs have also enabled organisations to ensure their procurement is taking a holistic approach that goes beyond one dimension. For example, Zoos Victoria has had a strong focus on environmentally sustainable procurement for many years but have recently used the SDGs to broaden their approach.



When you look at the SDGs, you realise they map out the whole picture. We are now taking an environmental, sustainable and governance approach to procurement which more holistically aligns with the SDGs.” – Kiam Yoong, Zoos Victoria

CASE STUDY:

Melbourne Water

Melbourne Water committed in 2016 to align its strategy, culture, and day-to-day operations to the Goals. Responsible for managing waterways, sewerage, drainage and flood systems, Melbourne Water has a major capital works program of around \$400 million per year.

Melbourne Water quickly recognised that its buying power would enable the organisation to drive adoption of the SDGs through its supply chain. They spoke to suppliers about how the SDGs would be integrated into tendering and program delivery and told suppliers that Melbourne Water would be looking at how they could assist in contributing to the SDGs rather than just bottom-line prices.



It is not just about putting things down on paper... we needed to work closely with our supply chain so that they are financially viable and deliver on the SDGs.” – Niru Gosavi, Melbourne Water

Melbourne Water has now collaboratively developed a [Supplier Code of Practice](#) which calls on suppliers to help deliver progress against the SDGs relating to environmental protection, gender equality, reconciliation, family violence, diversity and inclusion.

Melbourne Water and its service provider, Aqua Metro Services, were recently nationally recognised for contributing to creation of a 100% Indigenous-owned civil construction business – made viable by Melbourne Water committing to provide its first contracts – [Wara Paring ‘Come Walk the Path’ Indigenous Civil Construction Project](#).





A checklist of key tips and things to remember when applying the Sustainable Development Goals

To ensure this paper is highly practical and action-oriented, we've developed a checklist with the key things to keep in mind when applying the SDGs. These aren't listed in order of importance or chronologically but are the top tips and best advice that have emerged in writing this paper.

1 Remember that not everyone knows about or values the SDGs.

As we noted earlier in the paper, the SDGs are relevant to all communities, organisations and countries and provide wide-ranging benefits. But some people don't know they exist or don't understand their value. For example, before the City of Newcastle embarked on the process to develop their Community Strategic Plan 2040, they discovered that only 34% of their municipality were aware of the SDGs. Sustainability Victoria inform and educate people about the Goals through the Premier's Sustainability Awards. In 2021, Neighbourhood Houses Victoria adapted its annual awards program to link to the Goals. The SDGs are used as criteria within these awards, which helps nominees, winners and attendees learn more about the Goals.



SDGs have relevance for all organisations and helps in building meaningful linkages between their internal and external ecosystems. We need to engage more and bring people along on the journey. We need to talk more about them because then others hear, learn and understand.” – Karnali Bose, Good Shepherd Australia New Zealand

“ You definitely need to link the Goals to your own strategy, market and where you operate” – Helen Maisano, Optus

2 Like with most things, internal and external stakeholder buy-in is vital.

Many interviewees emphasised the need to inform and engage your stakeholders to ensure ownership of your SDG work. This could include your board, executive, team, volunteers, partners, funders, suppliers, customers, service users and more. Some interviewees, including Sydney Opera House, noted the importance of SDG advocates and champions to catalyse the work and advance the cause. This buy-in and engagement needs to be followed up with ongoing action. The Sydney Opera House also told us about the importance of ongoing active communications driven by storytelling, including things like social media, annual reports and word of mouth that connects with people and regularly demonstrates the impact of your work.



It needs to be a top-down and bottom-up approach” – Jen Dollin, Western Sydney University

“ Speak with different people in your organisation at different levels as well as external stakeholders” – Suellen King, Sustainability Victoria

*“ Make sure there's buy-in and active participation at every level. It's an education process with a focus on what's tangible to individuals and to the business”
– Niru Gosavi, Melbourne Water*



3 If relevant, prioritise and reprioritise a subset of SDGs...

Lots of the organisations we spoke with started by deeply understanding the SDGs and then prioritising a subset of the Goals based on their core business and commitments. This can help minimise or stop individuals and organisations feeling (potentially) overwhelmed by the 17 goals, 169 targets and 232 indicators. For example, law firm Wotton + Kearney immediately saw a strong fit with SDG 16 – peace, justice, and strong institutions. They then identified three other SDGs aligned to their existing focus areas and future aspirations. The Australian Library and Information Association recognised their important role in advancing SDG 4 – quality education and have now identified a number of SDGs to prioritise and focus upon. It's important to regularly review your priority Goals and be open to these changing over time in light of organisational objectives and where you can have the greatest impact.



To get started, pick one SDG and focus your attention on measuring and reporting against one KPI. This enables you to compare your result against other organisations, to build confidence, and then expand your alignment to other SDGs”
– Claire Ferres Miles, Sustainability Victoria

4 ...while looking to use the SDGs to help you think and act holistically.

A core strength of the SDGs is that they are comprehensive and holistic. Applying the SDGs in totality means that governments and organisations take an approach that considers social, environmental, and economic impact, rather than prioritising one domain at the expense of another. This might sound contradictory to the above point but if organisations solely focus on one SDG or a subset of the Goals, some of their value is lost. For example, you might initially pick three SDGs that are central to your business and strategy while, over time, aiming to move to a more holistic approach. Alternatively, you might run through all 17 SDGs when you have a key strategic decision to make, a supply chain change to action or a new program to design. Another way to apply the SDGs holistically is to think about the different areas of your organisation. For example, if you've applied the SDGs to your procurement practices, could you now explore how the SDGs can add value for your strategic planning, reporting, performance development, governance, communications and engagement, curriculum or somewhere else?



Use them as a checklist for everything and be careful of cherry picking. The real value of the SDGs is holistic, systemic change that breaks down siloes. Try not to lose the view of the whole.” – Michael Reid, Office of the Commissioner for Environment Sustainability Victoria

5 Go beyond the goals to targets and indicators, or risk tokenism.

To put it bluntly, while better than nothing, only applying the SDGs at the goal level is pretty superficial. Aligning solely at the goal level risks “rainbow washing”, which is about conveying a false or misleading sense of SDG commitment or contribution. The targets and indicators are where the rich detail of the SDGs comes to life, providing clear guidance and focus areas. Several interviewees talked about the need to take time to delve into, understand, map to, and integrate the SDG targets and indicators.



You really need to look under the hood to deeply understand the targets and sentiments within the Goals” – Matthew Brennan, Transurban

“ Education was really important to make sure our efforts are not just a tick the box exercise. Working on a water project doesn’t mean we can tick off all of SDG 6 or are limited only to this SDG. You really need to dig down and work out how you can contribute, what the meaningful links are and where you can have greatest impact. It can be really exciting to take this journey.” –Michelle Cheah, Arup

6 Read up and learn from others rather than starting from scratch.

Avoid going it alone and reinventing the wheel. Instead, access existing resources (see appendix 1) and tap into the experiences of other organisations who have applied the SDGs. Many individuals, teams and companies already have experience navigating through and aligning to the SDGs so think about what they can teach you and help with.



Don’t try to reinvent the wheel. There are resources, like the Compass, and others have been through this process so learn from their expertise and journey.” – Heidi Nash-Smith, Wotton + Kearney

“ There is so much support and networking available. People who are working in the SDG space are very generous.” – Jen Dollin, Western Sydney University

7 Resource your SDG work appropriately.

As with any undertaking, having the required resources in place to deliver on your SDG work is key. In terms of human resources, this could be a dedicated role, responsibilities spread across multiple positions, a committee, or a series of working groups. It's also worth considering which other resources will enable and bolster your SDG work such as financing, digital systems, physical infrastructure, data and analytics, policies, communications and more.



It can be difficult when people are aligning to and implementing the SDGs on top of their normal day job” – Kelly Arnott, City of Newcastle

“ We had a very effective working group, which was small but included a range of people from the University. This group was pivotal in moving things forward” – Jen Dollin, Western Sydney University

8 Take a collaborative approach that considers your current and future partners as well as other policies and initiatives.

The SDGs are global, ambitious, and essential. They define aspirations and progress the wicked problems facing communities around the world. Unsurprisingly, this means the SDGs can't be delivered by working in siloes. Partnership and collaboration are vital if the SDGs are to be successfully applied and achieved. The SDGs also don't operate in a policy vacuum. There are local, state and territory, national and international frameworks to consider and integrate, including Doughnut Economics, and social procurement and human rights frameworks.



The SDGs are an exercise in collective impact.”
– Lauren Hicks, QBE

“ SDG 17 shows that partnerships are a powerful mechanism to create big change. Ultimately, it's clear that by working in partnership, the benefits to humanity will be magnified and we welcome this.” - Mollie Harriss Olson, CEO, Fairtrade Australia New Zealand⁴

4 <https://probonoaustralia.com.au/news/2021/09/fairtrade-and-b-lab-unite-to-advance-sustainable-development-goals>

9 Get stuck in and give the SDGs a red hot go.

Sometimes the anticipation of doing something new or different is prohibitive. For most of us, this is heightened when the scope is global peace, prosperity, and progress, as is the case with the SDGs. To combat this, many interviewees stressed the importance of getting stuck in, rather than over-thinking or procrastinating. If you're new to the SDGs, it might be helpful to understand them first, then identify a subset which you will predominantly focus your efforts on.



You really just have to get in there and give the SDGs a go. Get stuck in, get started and don't be afraid to set the level of ambition as high as you can"

– Michael Reid, Office of the Commissioner for Environment Sustainability Victoria

"Arup has made a strong commitment to the SDGs, and we are now getting a lot of traction within the organisation after several years of investment. It's still a journey though getting the systems in place to embed the SDGs in everything we do."

– Michelle Cheah, Arup

"It's never too late to start!" – Ainsley Simpson, Infrastructure Sustainability Council

Source: Good Shepherd Australia New Zealand



Concluding remarks

This paper was written in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, a global crisis and catalyst of disruption. Whether it's a time of crisis or not, the SDGs have a vital role to play in driving positive social, environmental, and economic change over the years ahead.



The SDGs are super relevant at this point in time. If everyone acts on the Goals, it will be good for humanity. – Kiam Yoong, Zoos Victoria

TO SUPPORT AND DRIVE PROGRESS, WE HAVE THREE TAILORED CALLS TO ACTION TO ROUND OUT THIS PAPER:

- 1 If you're new to the SDGs**, get stuck in! Start by reading about the Goals – see Appendix 1 for some helpful references and resources. Think about how the SDGs could benefit your community, organisation, stakeholders, and sector. Then commence internal discussions about your SDG priorities and next steps.
- 2 If you've started engaging with and applying the SDGs**, have you been talking with others to learn from them? Check out websites and annual or sustainability reporting of organisations in your sector or which are similar to you. This could also lead you to initiate conversations so that you can share insights and hone your SDG practice. Consider if your application of the SDGs is focussed on your strategy, reporting and impact measurement, or supply chain. If you are only applying the SDGs in one or two of these domains, you may want to broaden your approach to include the others.
- 3 If you're a leader when it comes to the SDGs**, share what you've done and what you've learnt thanks to the power of hindsight. This could include organising or participating in meetings, roundtables or informal conversations, and providing case studies and other information for the [United Nations SDG website](#) or [SDG Action Manager](#).

Whether you're new to the Goals, deeply invested in them already or somewhere in between, good luck with your SDG journey from here!



Do not let the perfect get in the way of the possible and practical
– Gillian Sparkes, Commissioner for Environmental Sustainability Victoria



Appendix 1:

References and resources

Wherever you are on your SDG journey, there are a whole range of SDG resources available. We've summarised a few of our top picks below, noting that this list is not exhaustive.

- If you're looking to learn about the SDGs, explore the targets and indicators, and see case studies of the Goals in action around the world, look no further than <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>.
- For businesses keen to better understand and apply the SDGs, the SDG Compass website and guide provides an overview of the Goals as well as practical implementation steps. It's relevant to for-profit firms and other organisations of all shapes and sizes and can be found at <https://sdgcompass.org/>. Philanthropic trusts and foundations can also access tailored information at <https://www.sdgphilanthropy.org>.
- In partnership with the United Nations Global Compact and other advisors and funders, the B Lab team have created the SDG Action Manager so that organisations can get started, understand, and share their impact with others, and set goals and track improvement. You can access this practical resource at <https://bcorporation.net/welcome-sdg-action-manager>.
- For Australian specific data and insights, the Monash Sustainable Development Institute (MSDI) has you covered. Their Transforming Australia 2020 SDG Update can be found at <https://www.sdgtransformingaustralia.com/> and other handy resources are available through <https://www.monash.edu/msdi/about/sustainable-development>.
- In September, the UN released a new [Global SDG Indicators Data Platform](#) which makes it possible to search and download data on 210 of the 231 global SDG indicators. The Platform also provides access to SDG profiles for 132 countries, which show trends on each SDG.

Please treat this list as a starting point because there are so many other fantastic resources out there.

Appendix 2:

Authors and contributors

Authors

This paper was co-authored by the United Nations Association of Australia (Victoria Division) and Spark Strategy.

United Nations Association (Victoria Division)

The United Nations Association of Australia (UNAA) works to inform, inspire, and engage Australians on the work, goals, and values of the United Nations to create a safer, fairer, more sustainable world. UNAA has active divisions in each State and Territory.

UNAA Victoria raises awareness of the UN and its programs and engages local communities in key UN issues such as human rights, gender equality and climate change. UNAA Victoria runs Model UNs in schools, universities and workplaces which debate SDG-related topics and organises events to increase awareness of the importance of the SDGs to Australia.



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Spark Strategy

Spark is an agency for strategic solutions and sustained action. As a trusted advisor, we help to inject creative ideas, challenge the thinking, and align the conceptual and practical. As a certified [B Corp](#), we stand for purpose, not just profit.

With offices in Sydney and Melbourne, we work with not-for-profits, government, social enterprises, and the private sector to unleash their potential, transforming their organisations and communities for the better. Our work is driven by concepts and approaches such as systems change, transformation, regeneration, and collaboration. Our services include strategic planning, business model design, government engagement, impact assessment, facilitation, co-design, and operating model development. We strive for meaningful relationships and high impact in everything we do.

We're for sparking brighter futures for our clients and the societies in which we live.

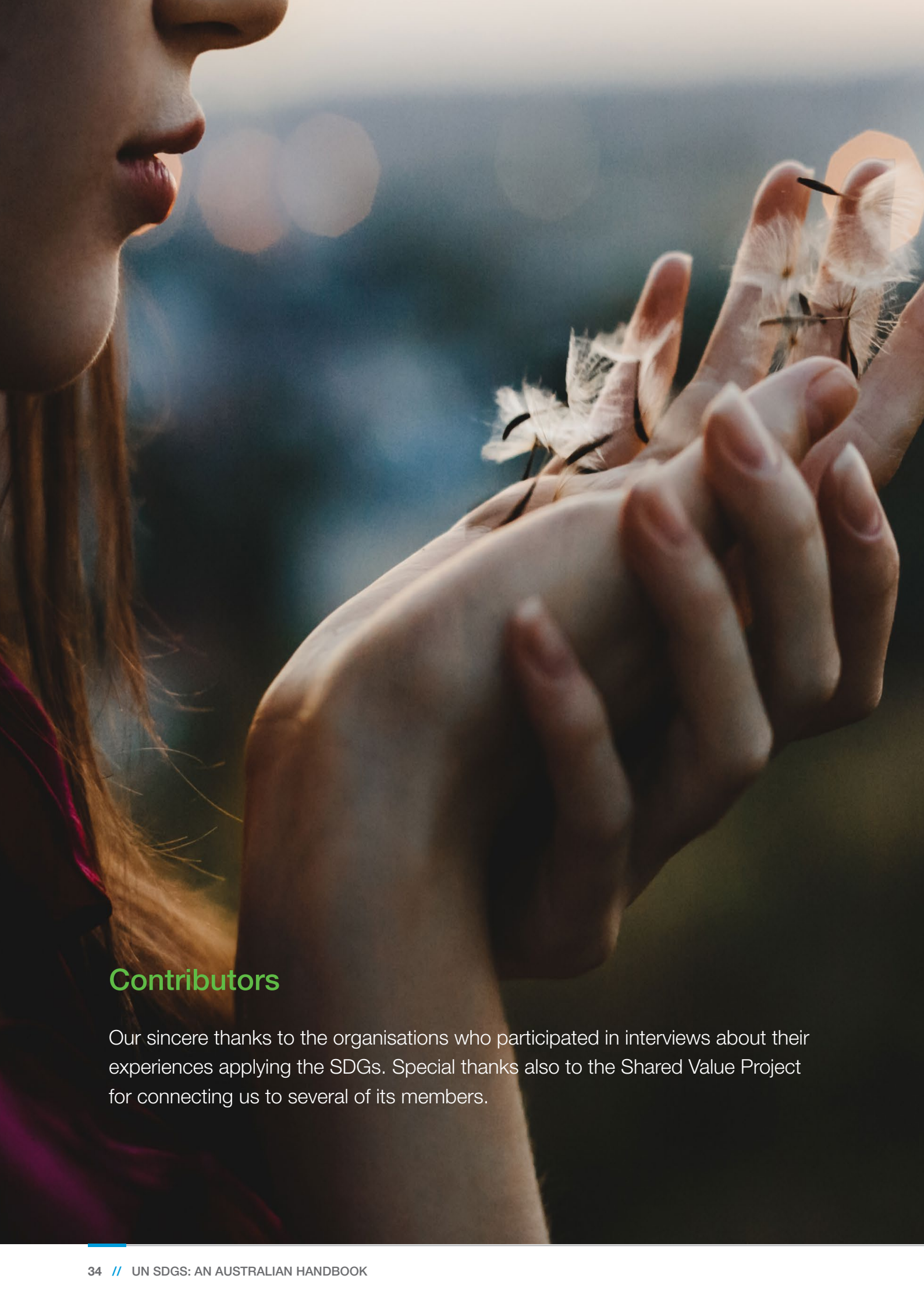


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Our sincere thanks to the organisations who participated in interviews about their experiences applying the SDGs. Special thanks also to the Shared Value Project for connecting us to several of its members.

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