

UNITED KINGDOM

Only a drastic change in direction will bring about the SDGs

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Just Fair

This year the UK is one of 50 countries that will be submitting a Voluntary National Review to the United Nations (UN) on its progress in achieving the targets contained within the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Whilst we have yet to see the final report, the Government has made public the preparatory *Emerging Findings*.³ This document shows significant gaps in data collection, as well as lack of disaggregation of data. The Government has been highly selective in what it has included and omitted; the *Emerging Findings* does not represent an accurate portrayal of the reality in the UK.⁴

Put lived experience first

The Government says in the *Emerging Findings* they have “carried out wide-ranging outreach across different regions and sectors” and has “received 200 case studies from organisations, business and civil society”.

Just Fair representatives have attended several of these outreach and engagement meetings, and they are welcomed. However, the Government’s self-appraisal does not say how many of these events were specifically designed to listen to the testimonies and opinions of people with direct experience of poverty.

The outreach and engagement meetings were heavily focused on the capital, with five out of seven events being held in central London. This makes it difficult to consider the particular challenges faced by different regions, and between rural and urban areas. Austerity has been particularly damaging in the North East of England, with higher than average rates of child poverty and fuel poverty.⁵ Yet no meetings were held in this region.

Disaggregate the data

The choice of targets and numerical variables is not a purely technical matter. Measurement entails interpretation, which necessarily carries value judgment and assumptions. It is important to give indicators and benchmarks a human face with qualitative evidence and greater engagement with the people that would benefit or suffer the most from the relevant policies.

Human rights researchers and practitioners working in and on the UK generally have access to a large amount of

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³ UK Government, Voluntary National Review: Emerging Findings and Further Engagement, 4 March 2019; available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/voluntary-national-review-emerging-findings-and-further-engagement>

⁴ Just Fair, Submission to the Environmental Audit Committee Voluntary National Review of UK progress against the Sustainable Development Goals’ inquiry, April 2019, available at <http://justfair.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/JF-submission-EFFE-April2019-v2.pdf>

⁵ Newcastle University and Newcastle City Council, Written submission to the UN Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights, September, 2018, available at <https://research.ncl.ac.uk/article22/outputspublications/NCL%20submission%20to%20Philip%20Alston%20Sep2018%20final.pdf>

relevant and detailed data, at least when compared with other countries. That is why it is all the more surprising that the *Emerging Findings* fails to disaggregate the information. To ensure that nobody is left behind and to provide a truly meaningful picture, the Government must gather and present the evidence based on all the prohibited grounds of discrimination according to both international and domestic human rights law, and this includes income and wealth disparities.

Not everyone is affected equally by policy changes. Disaggregated household food insecurity figures from Scotland show that, while 8% of the overall population are food insecure, 21% of single parents experience food insecurity.⁶ The cumulative impact assessment of tax and social security reforms carried out by the Equality and Human Rights Commission shows, for example, that lone parents (nine of ten of which are women) will lose on average one fifth of their income (£5,250) by 2022.⁷

Growing problems within the food system (SDG2)

As the UK is a relatively food secure nation, the median amount of calories is not a good identifier for whether the UK is making progress on SDG2. Many of the issues with the food system are not caused by a physical lack of enough food in the country, but rather by issues around its production and accessibility, especially for those on low incomes. Undernourishment says nothing about the quality of the food consumed on a macronutrient level, nor where the food was obtained from, nor whether it was actually sufficient to the needs of the individual.

6 Scottish Government, The Scottish Health Survey, September 2018, available at <https://www2.gov.scot/Resource/0054/00540654.pdf>

7 Equality and Human Rights Commission, The cumulative impact of tax and welfare reforms, March 2018, available at <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/sites/default/files/cumulative-impact-assessment-report-executive-summary.pdf>

An estimated 8.4 million people are suffering from household food insecurity in the UK.⁸ They struggle to put food on the table, and they have to reduce the quantity or the quality of the food that they have predominately due to lack of money.

We welcome the frank admission from Government that childhood obesity is on the rise and that this needs to be addressed. However, the *Emerging Findings* does not mention some of the key causal factors of this rise. One such factor is a prevalent collocation of obesity and poverty,⁹ which can be partly explained by the fact that in order to follow the Government's own "Eat Well Guidelines" one in five families would have to spend 40% of their income after housing costs.¹⁰

Rising inequalities in income, wealth and health outcomes (SDG 10)

The UK is a highly unequal society. For example, life expectancy for women born in deprived areas has declined in recent years,¹¹ something utterly unacceptable in the fifth world economy. But the *Emerging Findings* does not reflect the rising inequalities in terms of income, wealth and health outcomes.

8 Food Foundation, Too Poor to Eat Food insecurity in the UK, May 2016, available at <https://foodfoundation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/FoodInsecurityBriefing-May-2016-FINAL.pdf>

9 Sustain: The Alliance of Better Food and Farming, Written Evidence submitted by Sustain to the Environmental Audit Committee inquiry on SDGs in the UK, September 2018, available at https://www.sustainweb.org/resources/files/responses/Sustain_Written_Submission_EAC_SDG2.pdf

10 Courtney Scott, Jennifer Sutherland and Anna Taylor, Affordability of the UK's Eatwell Guide, Food Foundation, September 2018, available at <https://foodfoundation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/FoodInsecurityBriefing-May-2016-FINAL.pdf>

11 Office of National Statistics, Health state life expectancies by national deprivation deciles, England and Wales: 2015 to 2017, March 2019, available at <https://www.ons.gov.uk/releases/healthstatelifeexpectanciesbynationaldeprivationdecilesenglandandwales2015to2017>

Closely connected with this, the Government's document does not give an account of the incompatibility of recent tax and social security reforms with the human rights principle of non-retrogression, which amounts to a breach of the human rights to social security and to an adequate standard of living.¹²

Poverty puts human rights at risk and rising inequalities are a missed opportunity to end poverty. The government would be sending a wrong signal if they did not address both poverty (SDG1) and material inequality (SDG10) in the Voluntary National Review.

The *Emerging Findings* asserts categorically that the UK has "some of the strongest equalities legislation in the world, including the Equality Act 2010". To be true to this commitment, the Government should implement the legislation in its entirety, including the socio-economic duty (section 1 of the Equality Act 2010). This duty would require public authorities to actively consider how their decisions and policies of the highest strategic importance could increase or decrease inequalities of outcome. Regrettably, successive governments have failed to issue the necessary regulation to trigger the socio-economic duty, which means that it is not technically binding on public authorities. It is encouraging that the duty was brought to life in Scotland in 2018 and the Welsh government has announced they will follow suit in 2019. The socio-economic duty is a powerful lever to address the structural causes of material inequalities and their negative effects on human rights and wellbeing. Enforcing it would be a positive sign of the Government's determination to reduce income and wealth inequalities and meet SDG10.

Conclusion: The state is the main duty-bearer

"We need to accept social rights! Surely the British electorate can be mobilised by a right to social protection!"
Professor Phillip Alston, UN Special Rapporteur on the poverty and human rights at a public event in London in April 2019.

The insufficient attention to lived experience, the disregard to rising inequalities, and the missing assessment of the impact of tax and social security reforms make us fear the UK's Voluntary National Review will be much ado about nothing.

As observed by the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, "by complying with the normative obligations of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, States will strengthen their ability to realise the SDGs and fulfil their pledge to leave no one behind".¹³

A significant change of course is required to meet SDG10 and internationally recognised socio-economic rights and to turn the UK into a fair society that does not leave anyone behind.

In reference to the necessary involvement of business and civil society, the Government argues in the *Emerging Findings* that they "cannot alone deliver" the SDGs. This is fair but at the same time it should not make us forget that the State is the main duty bearer. The Agenda 2030 cannot become an excuse not to make use of all available resources to advance progressively towards the realisation of all the rights proclaimed in international human rights law.

12 Just Fair and 15 other groups, Welfare Safety Net Inquiry Written submission to the HC Work and Pensions Committee, December 2018, available at <http://justfair.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Fothers-submission-WPC-Dec2018-FINAL.pdf>

13 CESCR, The pledge to leave no one behind: The ICESCR and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, April 2019, UN doc: E/C.12/2019/1, para. 18, available at <https://undocs.org/E/C.12/2019/1>

Recommendations

- Consider introducing a single measure of poverty based on the Social Metrics Commission, and measure food security.
- Restore the link between social security entitlements and the cost of living.
- Design and implement a comprehensive child poverty strategy and reinstate the targets and reporting duties on child poverty.
- Conduct an expert assessment of the cumulative impact of tax and spending decisions since 2010 and prioritise the reversal of particularly regressive measures, including the benefit freeze, the two-child limit, the benefit cap, and the reduction of the housing benefit for under-occupied social rented housing.
- Conduct an independent review of the effectiveness of reforms to welfare conditionality and sanctions, and explore more constructive and less punitive approaches to encouraging compliance.
- Ensure local governments have the funds needed to tackle poverty.
- Eliminate the five-week delay in receiving benefits under Universal Credit, separate payments to different household members, and facilitate weekly or fortnightly payments.
- Ensure that fiscal policy is adequate, progressive and socially equitable and improves tax collection so as to increase resources available to ensure economic and social rights.
- Bring to life all the outstanding clauses of the Equality Act 2010 and in particular the socio-economic duty (Section 1).