

A compassion narrative for the sustainable development goals: conscious and connected action



At the midpoint of the 15-year timeline for achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs),¹ the world is unprepared. The global community arguably has the scientific, technical, and political tools needed to achieve most, if not all, of the 169 SDG targets, yet we are far from the finish line. In 2019, UN Secretary General António Guterres warned that global efforts were insufficient and called for radical change.² Such change never materialised. The COVID-19 pandemic shocked many of the systems needed to achieve the SDGs, revealing deep inequities and the inadequacy of siloed approaches to health and false divides between the education, health, environment, energy, and economic sectors.

In 2014, Richard Horton, the Editor-in-Chief of *The Lancet*, noted that the concept of sustainability embedded in the SDGs was flawed, given the failure to connect physical systems with human systems.³ The human dimensions of sustainability, such as wellbeing, capability, intergenerational equity, and socioeconomic and cultural systems, determine our capacity to adapt and thrive. How societies treat all peoples, and how we honour the past and care for the future, matter.

The 2022 UN Development Programme (UNDP) Special Report⁴ describes an existential human crisis, with fear, mistrust, and apprehension rising globally. Achieving the SDGs seems unlikely. We need to redefine

what progress actually means, said Achim Steiner, Administrator of the UNDP.⁴ We need to radically reposition values as the drivers of the SDGs. Could compassion sit at the centre of this repositioning?

Compassion facilitates cooperation and protection of the vulnerable in a world that requires social connection for survival.⁵ Compassion is about coming together to alleviate suffering and nurture human flourishing. These two ideas—of intentional togetherness and of suffering—are at the heart of the SDGs. Under each of the SDGs lies an abyss of suffering. The economic, social, and political costs of this suffering are laid out in myriad statistics, but the faces of the people who suffer remain hidden. The crises societies face are human in origin.⁶ Monica Worline and Jane Dutton⁷ describe compassion as a four-part process of noticing pain and suffering; interpreting suffering; feeling empathic concern; and acting to alleviate suffering. Compassion asks that the human suffering that lies beneath each SDG is recognised and that we acknowledge our part in contributing to it. The experience of a common humanity leads us to compassion and creates a space for trust and care. Most importantly, compassion demands action—not the action of “doing to” or “doing for” someone, but action that arises from “being with”—coming together to alleviate suffering and promote flourishing. Compassion leaves no one behind.

Panel: A framework to support compassion-in-action

- 1 Urgently identify compassion as a key social determinant of human survival and flourishing, not just in an evolutionary sense but now and in the future
- 2 Explicitly recognise in key policy frameworks the essential role of compassion in bringing the SDGs to fruition
- 3 Incorporate a clear compassion-in-action approach to support its operationalisation—acting in compassion is a choice, not a by-product
- 4 Recognise the human dynamics and complexities of the global context and the importance of strong relationships based in care of each other to make progress for the SDGs
- 5 Nurture, recognise, and harness mutual respect through co-design and side-by-side action in all aspects
- 6 Educate leaders and emerging leaders about compassion-in-action, emphasising human-centredness and sustained, courageous decision making that challenges inequities
- 7 Triage SDG failures or stalemates through a compassion-in-action lens, both to learn from mistakes and to reset a sustainable trajectory towards success
- 8 Create pathways for compassion-in-action incorporating practices that include careful listening, commitment to equality in partnerships, endurance in overcoming obstacles, and being patiently present in addressing conflict that is inherent in navigating global challenges
- 9 Develop and share the narratives of successful examples of compassion-in-action
- 10 Develop language for policy and practice that reflects compassionate principles
- 11 Build systems that support intergenerational transmission of compassion for future generations—from early childhood throughout the lifespan

The actions needed to achieve the SDGs are inherently complex: they must align multiple international standards and regulatory frameworks to promote technological, economic, health, and political advances, and they must be premised in human rights, inclusion, and equity. Achieving the SDGs requires active accompaniment in relationships of trust. Compassion encourages solidarity, humility, transparency, stability, service to each other, a sense of the greater goal or good, and an investment in equity as the platform upon which humanity's survival depends. The late Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu (1931–2021) spoke of compassion “not just feeling with someone, but seeking to change the situation...If you are going to be compassionate,

be prepared for action!”⁸ Navigating challenging conversations, bridging cultural divides, empowering others (sometimes at the cost of individuals’ and organisations’ own power), and managing complexity require courageous compassion.⁹

There is a need for an understanding of how to achieve compassion-in-action in the context of intractable, complex global challenges. Such expertise exists but is rarely foregrounded in global health. We propose a compassion-in-action framework that prioritises ethical principles and is driven by values (panel).

A final reason why compassion may help us regain momentum lies in the formation of the SDGs. Echoing the preamble to the UN Charter, We the Peoples of the United Nations,¹⁰ the 193 countries who came together to sign SDGs into action signalled partnership. Compassion is embodied in partnerships. Partnerships that are premised on compassion provide the strongest systems, services, and communities for humanity. If SDG17—the goal of partnerships—can bring the goals together, compassion can enable the relationships needed for delivery to flourish.

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