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Contextualising the SDGs in North West England: Findings from a multi-method and multi-year approach to relational bottom-up partnering

by David F. Murphy and Joanna Stanberry, Initiative for Leadership and Sustainability (IFLAS), University of Cumbria, Ambleside.

This paper presents the key lessons of a multi-year, multi-method action research endeavour in North Lancashire and South Cumbria in North West England. Our findings contribute to the literature contextualising the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) towards local implementation. Collaborating for societal transformations in communities is fraught with challenges often obscured by the discourse of formal partnerships evident in regional, national and global governance conversations. We find that navigating the tensions of inclusivity, sharing of resources, and co-determining results benefits from a ‘relational’ framing. This contributes both to bottom-up actions to achieve the SDGs (in particular SDG 17) and to the coproduction of knowledge.

The novel goal-setting approach of the SDGs highlighted a new approach to voluntary governance structures among state actors. At the same time, the means of implementation of the Goals formalised agreement that a host of multi-sector actors would share knowledge, share technology, and share resources in ‘Partnerships for the Goals’ (SDG 17). The result is that contextualising the Global Goals for *local* implementation faces complex hurdles on the journey to ‘fit for purpose.’

Previous studies on implementing the SDGs in the UK concluded that they must be made real, relevant, relatable, and relational to find local translation and adaptation. With the absence of a statutory framework for localising the SDGs, no clear responsibilities or resources devolved to local authorities, and ambiguities in multi-level governance—the implementation of the SDGs has stalled post-Covid. Though some see solutions in top-down approaches to coordinating strategies, our research reveals linkages among actors, relationships beyond locality, and collective action obscured by higher level constructions of partnerships.

We will briefly describe the context and methods of the study, and proceed to draw out the key lessons for scholars and practitioners working to contextualise the SDGs. With funding from UKRI, four formal projects were completed between January 2021 and March 2023. The work included nine university-based researchers and seven recognized community partners, for 16 co-researchers in total. Through partnership with local authorities, organisations, and businesses we pursued a broad agenda of policy support and knowledge exchange around contextualising the SDGs, and in particular SDG 17. The discrete activities included public events, targeted World Cafe workshops, development of localised online content, a web directory of local organisations mapped to the SDGs, a partnering skills course, Q Methodological Studies, and key informant interviews. Participants came from a wide range of local contexts, including government (local authorities as well as NHS and law enforcement), the voluntary, community, faith, and social enterprise (VCFSE) sector, micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs), and academia.

This research uncovered a complex kaleidoscope of work contributing to the SDGs, as well as surprising roadblocks. In the literature a ‘human-centric’ lens is increasingly interested in the relationships between humans, their connections to constructed social institutions, and to the ecological environment. Our findings support this framing with useful methodological and programmatic outcomes. We advocate for a deeper appreciation and recognition of the importance and value of interpersonal collaborative relationships and less formal deliberative strategies. We argue that a more inclusive emphasis on relational competencies, approaches, and dynamics (including reflective and integrative values) is needed for systemic transformation in localised diverse multi-stakeholder collaboration contexts.

Author Bios

Dr David F. Murphy is Associate Professor of Sustainability & Collaborative Leadership and Academic Lead of the Initiative for Leadership & Sustainability (IFLAS), University of Cumbria. David has extensive international experience of working on multi-stakeholder engagement and collaboration with senior leaders and change agents in business, government, NGOs, universities, and the United Nations system, including related teaching, applied research and consultancy on partnerships for sustainable development. Recent research and knowledge exchange projects include: 'Partnering Capacity Building for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)', 'Empowering Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises for the SDGs' and 'Netmakers: SDG Partnering Capacity Development for the Voluntary, Community, Faith and Social Enterprise sector in Lancaster District'.

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Joanna Stanberry is a postgraduate researcher at the Initiative for Leadership and Sustainability at the University of Cumbria, Ambleside, UK. Her research and practice explore localised contextualisation of the SDGs in participatory cross-sector settings. Her doctoral research explores pathways for reframing leadership for sustainable futures through the Victorian educationalist Charlotte Mason's (1842-1923) emancipatory pedagogy of self-education. Previously, she worked for 15 years in New York City in non-profit marketing, tech, finance, and philanthropy. She has an MA in Organizational Leadership from Eastern University, Pennsylvania, and conducted her initial field research with an NGO serving the Aymara and Quechua peoples in Chilimarca, Bolivia and an organisational study in five regions of Brazil.

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