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The United Nations adopted the Sustainable Development Goals on September 25, 2015. What will you do about it?

This was the parting query from a closing speaker at an assembly that two of your UN representatives from the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology (SIOP) attended at the United Nations headquarters in New York City 6 weeks after the Sustainable Development Goals were formally established. As we ask ourselves this question, we also ask it of our readers.

What will you do about it? Maybe your answer will reveal itself in your next research project, internship, sabbatical, client engagement, undergraduate classroom exercise, graduate seminar, or grant application. Maybe you'll move the metaphorical needle within the context of your own organization by supporting corporate social responsibility or core business practices that better align with the principles laid out in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Maybe you'll get your employer to join the United Nations Global Compact or you'll help [a university's industrial-organizational \(I-O\) psychology program join the Global Compact](#). Maybe you'll identify a

pro bono opportunity in your local community or halfway across the world that would benefit from your skill set.

Whether you work in academia or are a practitioner working in a corporation, an applied research firm, a nongovernmental organization, or another setting, there is a role for you. If you are a faculty member or a student, consider the words of Ramu Damodaran, chief of the United Nations Academic Impact (UNAI) Secretariat. [He explains](#), "Any problem that the world has—and if the world has a problem, then the United Nations has a problem—can be brought closer to a solution by having the impact of academic research, academic scholarship, academic achievement, and academic integrity applied to it." Using such research for meaningful change is a value that SIOP and the United Nations (UN) have always shared. The UN's long history of working with nongovernmental organizations and the public sector clearly indicates the role for I-O psychology researchers and practitioners in such entities. And you private sector types are not off the hook either. There is an increasing emphasis on Public Private Partnerships at the UN. Moreover, the United Nations

Development Programme (UNDP) has created an entire center devoted to the private sector's role in addressing the types of challenges laid out by the SDGs (namely, the [Istanbul International Center for Private Sector in Development; IICPSD](#)). Of course, going to work for the UN is also an option. There are some great examples of people with backgrounds in or related to I-O psychology working for various UN entities and agencies, including the [United Nations Global Compact](#), the [International Labour Organization \(ILO\)](#), and [UNDP](#).

So, what will you do about it? Maybe you would like to contribute to the accomplishment of the SDGs, but you're not quite sure how. The purpose of this article is to broaden and deepen our collective thinking about ways in which I-O psychology science and practice can be developed and applied to advance SDG progress. After situating our discipline within the broader human development context, this article provides a primer on the recently established Sustainable Development Goals, which had not yet been adopted when our last article went to press. The goals are listed, followed by an elaboration of the "three pillar" model underlying them. This article then zooms in on one area generating a lot of discussion within UN agencies: skills development. Readers are urged to consider how I-O psychology can respond to the skills development challenges and opportunities at hand.

Altogether, the discussion laid out in this article is meant to accomplish four things: (a) increase readers' familiarity with the United Nations development agenda; (b)

raise awareness of some of the topics being discussed at UN agencies; (c) encourage critical thinking about I-O psychology's role in addressing the issues under consideration; and (d) stimulate action: increase I-O psychologists' engagement with the challenges at hand.

Unleashing Human Potential Through Work

We begin by juxtaposing two quotes. The first one comes from Selim Jahan, the director of the UNDP Human Development Report Office in the days leading up to the much-anticipated release of the 2015 Human Development Report focusing on "Rethinking Work for Human Development." The second quote comes from SIOP's home page.

Work is the means for unleashing human potential, creativity, innovation and spirits. It is essential to make human lives productive, worthwhile and meaningful. It enables people to earn a living, gives them a means to participate in society, provides them with security and gives them a sense of dignity. Work is thus inherently and intrinsically linked to human development. But it is important to recognize that there is no automatic link between work and human development. Nor does every type of work enhance human development. [Selim Jahan, <http://hdr.undp.org/en/rethinking-work-for-human-development>]

Industrial-organizational (I-O) psychology is the scientific study of working and the application of that science to workplace

issues facing individuals, teams, and organizations. The scientific method is applied to investigate issues of critical relevance to individuals, businesses, and society. [The Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology (SIOP), www.siop.org]

incorporated into projects with the [United Nations Global Compact](#), the [United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization \(UNESCO\)](#), [UNDP](#), [ILO](#), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), and other agencies as well.

Together, these two quotes clearly illustrate I-O psychology's importance to the broader development agenda, a point that is certainly not lost on the UN. Already, a number of United Nations agencies have tapped into SIOP expertise. For example, I-O psychology insights have recently been

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals

As shown in Table 1, there are 17 Sustainable Development Goals in all. Particularly notable is Goal #8, "Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth,

Table 1

Sustainable Development Goals

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- Goal 1. End poverty in all its forms everywhere.
 - Goal 2. End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture.
 - Goal 3. Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages.
 - Goal 4. Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.
 - Goal 5. Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.
 - Goal 6. Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all.
 - Goal 7. Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all.
 - Goal 8. Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all.
 - Goal 9. Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation.
 - Goal 10. Reduce inequality within and among countries.
 - Goal 11. Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable.
 - Goal 12. Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns.
 - Goal 13. Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts.
 - Goal 14. Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development.
 - Goal 15. Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss.
 - Goal 16. Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels.
 - Goal 17. Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development.
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From the Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 25 September 2015, "Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development": http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/70/1&Lang=E

full and productive employment and decent work for all.” However, this is not the only goal to pay attention to if you are an I-O psychologist. [As we have pointed out elsewhere](#), I-O psychology has a role to play in each of these SDGs. Why? For a couple of reasons. First, the accomplishment of each of these goals requires effective work, workers, and organizations. By using our science and practice to facilitate the well-being and success of leaders, workers, and organizations focused on each of the SDG areas, I-O psychology has an opportunity to contribute broadly. For example, imagine a team of engineers working together on Goal #6, “Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all.” Chances are, their work could benefit from principles from I-O psychology including but not limited to what we know about effective team composition, training, dynamics, conflict, performance assessment, feedback, and development.

The second reason I-O is relevant to many of the UN’s development goals is because a number of the issues addressed by the SDGs play themselves out in the workplace. The workplace, for example, can be a major barrier or solution to Goal #5, which emphasizes gender equality and the empowerment of women. Goal #4 seeks to promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. Again, the workplace can serve as a catalyst and conduit for such learning, and I-O psychology can contribute to ensuring its relevance and effectiveness as well as the degree to which such learning opportunities are engaging and aligned with individual and organizational needs.

One helpful exercise to develop our collective thinking on precisely how we, as a discipline, interface with the United Nations development agenda is to consider, within the context of each and every SDG:

- People you know of, who are doing work relevant to the SDG;
- Publications that relate to the SDG;
- Ongoing, upcoming, or past research projects related to the SDG.

Can you think of any examples? If so, we’d like to know. Your SIOP UN team has developed an interactive, online tool to generate critical thinking and information about how I-O psychology interfaces with the SDGs: tinyurl.com/siopun. The online tool comes with a short YouTube video introduction for those interested in learning more about it. In brief, we’re asking people who would like to contribute to select one or more of the SDGs listed in Table 1 and then provide “leads”; that is, list people, publications, and/or projects that relate to the SDG in question. The insights conveyed will help us more systematically identify areas in which I-O psychology is especially poised to contribute to discussions and solutions to challenges the UN and the world face as we collectively roll up our sleeves and work to accomplish these goals.

The Three Pillars of Sustainable Development

Look up the word “sustainable” in a thesaurus, and you’re likely to get two groups of synonyms: (a) “maintainable” and (b) “ecological” (environmental, green, etc.). Americans often hear the word “sus-

tainable” and quickly think of the latter connotation. However, even a brief glance at the goals listed in Table 1 reveals that the United Nations uses this word in the broader sense. Collectively, the SDGs aim for development that is “maintainable” and can persist over time, not near-term gains at the expense of longer term outcomes. This objective includes attention to ecological, environmental matters, certainly.

But it is not limited to them. According to the UN, development that is sustainable over time requires a broader focus.

The SDGs were founded on three pillars of sustainable development: social, environmental, and economic development. In other words, a concerted effort was devoted to taking all three of these imperatives into account such that one does not get achieved at the expense of the others. The challenge, as articulated by Achim Steiner, executive director of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), is “creating the conditions for enhanced prosperity and growing social equity, within the contours of a finite and fragile planet” (Fulai, et al., 2015).

For example, if economic growth is sought without considering its environmental or social implications, such growth or development is difficult to sustain over time. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) provides an illustration in its consideration of South Africa’s gross domestic product (economic) growth, which coexisted alongside high unemployment, abject poverty, inequality marked in part by large disparities in income distribution, and the social unrest that results.

The converse is also true: Focusing on the social (or environmental) pillar without due attention to economic considerations can also prove problematic. To this end, a recent UNESCO publication asserts that reducing inequalities through income redistribution and social safety net programs can be nonproductive and unsustainable in the long run (Marope, Chakroun, & Holmes, 2015). Although such support schemes may be necessary and helpful in the near term, longer term consequences can put them at odds with the goal of sustainable development. The authors of this publication continue, “Because labour is invariably the main asset of the poor, equipping them with skills, knowledge and technology not only improves the value and profitability of their main asset, but also enhances their contribution to and benefit from productivity and growth” (Marope et al., 2015, p. 18).

Skills Development Is Sustainable Development

In short, work skills development can be a major contributor to sustainable development. Why? Because when it happens strategically, work skills development bolsters the economic and social fabric of a community without depleting natural resources. “Strategically,” in this context, refers to skills development that aligns with labor market demands within the geographical area in question and factors in “fit,” taking individual differences such as vocational interests into account.

To help address the South African challenges described above, UNDP developed

a socially sensitive and inclusive skills development program aimed at economic growth with an eye toward reducing youth unemployment and stimulating rural development. The program integrates small and medium enterprises (SMEs) into the value chain of big corporations. Many SMEs are run by entrepreneurs who do not have a formal business background or an expansive professional network. This UNDP program pairs SMEs (in this case, suppliers) with a large corporation and provides 9–10 months of technical assistance and mentorship to help prepare the SME to work in this league. The assistance and mentorship includes a thorough diagnosis of the SME’s management practices. The knowledge and skills gained enables the SME to effectively supply to the corporation with which it was paired and expand to others, thereby increasing production volume and creating jobs for segments of the population previously excluded from employment opportunities. Indeed, results of an evaluation study indicate that SMEs going through this program, on average, increased sales by 12% and employment by 6% (United Nations Development Programme, n.d.).

Beyond reducing income inequality, work skills development can also be a powerful way to level the playing field with respect to intangibles such as technical, creative, innovative, professional, social, cultural, and political capital (Marope et al., 2015), again highlighting the interplay between the economic and social aspects of development. Perhaps this is why the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has asserted that skills have become the global currency of 21st

century economies, noting that “Without proper investment in skills, people languish on the margins of society, technological progress does not translate into economic growth, and countries can no longer compete in an increasingly knowledge-based global society” (OECD, 2012, p. 3).

UNESCO envisions “technical and vocational education and training (TVET) (as) the master key that can alleviate poverty, promote peace, conserve the environment, improve the quality of life for all and help achieve sustainable development” (UNESCO, 2004, p. 1). An informative book recently published by UNESCO covers a number of topics of concern to those working to turn this vision into a reality (Marope et al., 2015). These include, but are not limited to:

- Skills gaps wherein unemployment coexists with unfilled jobs due to unmet demands for skills;
- Youth unemployment;
- Improving skills development in the informal sector, including among entrepreneurs leading small and medium enterprises (SMEs);
- Meeting the skills demands of the rural economy;
- Investing in green skills;
- Creating pathways to higher education;
- Gender disparities in learning opportunities and earnings;
- Making workplaces more inclusive for marginalized groups, including those with disabilities;
- Expanding and improving work-based learning opportunities, including apprenticeships;
- Reskilling existing employees;

What Is the Role for I-O Psychology?

- Developing continuing technical and vocational education and training in workplaces;
- Developing specialist skills, while also:
- Developing broader skills including employability skills (e.g., teamwork, communication, adaptability), professional skills (e.g., reliability, punctuality), and job search skills that allow people to move between jobs and industries as the economy changes over time.

Thus far, we have not said much about the environmental pillar, which is also clearly represented in the SDGs. The many complex aspects of this topic are beyond the scope of the current article, but it is worth pointing out that they represent both challenges and opportunities for the workplace and thus the psychology of work. One challenge and opportunity in the context of work skills has to do with the development of “green skills,” noted in the list above (Strietska-Illina, Hofmann, Haro, & Jeon, 2011). Transitions to green economies and societies require skill development as new jobs emerge and as job requirements shift due to changing modes of production. This can have positive social and economic implications if such learning opportunities and jobs are widely available. Indeed, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) emphasizes the centrality of jobs in uncovering pathways towards an inclusive green economy, noting that “Whilst social security and income support schemes can and do help, the only lasting solutions are new jobs, the so-named ‘green and decent jobs’ that the new economic model will generate” (Fulai et al., 2015, p. 20).

Certainly, work skills development isn’t the only aspect of the United Nations development agenda that warrants attention from I-O psychology. But it is a significant area that cuts across multiple SDGs as well as multiple domains of I-O psychology. For example, it calls for job analysis to identify the “human capital” needed in the labor market. Job analysis can help identify green skills, entrepreneurial skills, and other critical skills needed to transition from one job to another. Those working in the training sector have a clear role to play as well in the design and evaluation of efficient, effective, relevant training programs for youth, rural populations, people with disabilities, the long-term unemployed, adult workers who need reskilling, workers in the informal sector, entrepreneurs, and others. Entrepreneurs will especially benefit from leadership development as well as a knowledge of best practices in human resource management as they scale up, create jobs, and hire people. Performance measurement and management will be needed for a variety of purposes—for example, to evaluate training programs and to enable worker feedback and development. A scientific knowledge base in mentoring is equally critical, given the powerful role that mentorship can play in skills development, such as in the South African example described earlier. The rise of apprenticeship programs both in the informal economy and the formal labor market raises many questions about how to maximize the effectiveness of such programs. In addition, many people will be required to work in teams in the days to come, sometimes for the first time in their lives. Applied

research in team selection/composition, dynamics (conflict, communication, roles, etc.) and team training will be beneficial to skills development. Meanwhile, deep knowledge of work motivation, work–life conflict, absenteeism, counterproductive work behavior, organizational citizenship behavior, equity, justice, and job satisfaction will all be useful. Our research base on discrimination and the work experience of marginalized individuals can inform interventions to smooth the integration of groups that have not historically worked together. These are just a few of the I-O psychology topic areas that are relevant to the challenges and opportunities United Nations agencies face as they endeavor to build and leverage skills to achieve sustainable development.

Our working hypothesis is that I-O psychology has expertise to contribute, and to gain, as we move forward in the directions described in this article. Already we have a tremendous base of scientific knowledge, relevant tools, methods, and interventions that can be applied. In addition, working in the United Nations sustainable development space will likely push us to ask new questions and consider old ones differently. And as Albert Einstein has famously said, “To raise new questions, new possibilities, to regard old problems from a new angle, requires creative imagination and marks real advance in science.”

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