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**Barcelona's local museums and the Sustainable
Development Goals: a blueprint for a better future**

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Biography

Henry McGhie has a background as an ecologist, museum curator and manager. He set up *Curating Tomorrow* in 2019 to support museums and similar institutions, and their partners, to accelerate their support for sustainable development agendas, including Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), climate action, biodiversity conservation, Disaster Risk Reduction, and human rights.

Introduction

This article is based on a talk I gave for the Barcelona Local Museums' conference in November. In it, I will explore some of the principles of sustainable development, and how museums can both draw upon sustainable development perspectives, and contribute to sustainable development, by connecting their work with Agenda 2030 and the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Agenda 2030 and the SDGs were adopted by the international museum community at the ICOM triennial conference in Kyoto in September 2019, but the Agenda and SDGs can be used by all museums, everywhere, of every kind and in every country: their universality is one of their great strengths.

Sustainable development

Sustainability in a narrow sense means the ability to last or continue for a long time ('maintainable' and 'tenable' are similar in meaning). It has come to have a broader sense, which is around the connections between the environment, society and the economy. Environment, society and economy are often referred to as the three pillars or three dimensions of sustainability.

The concept of sustainable development largely grew from the work of the Brundtland Commission (1987), established by the World Commission on Environment and Development, and was defined as "sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs".¹

The concept has developed over time, and has been the subject of criticism as some so-called sustainable development was not sustainable. Increased [economic] growth at the expense of the environment or that drives inequality and exploits disadvantaged people is not at all sustainable, nor is it sustainable development. Despite this criticism, the concept is still widely used, and it can be profoundly positive. In this article, 'sustainable development' is used to mean focused activity (development) that seeks to achieve a more harmonious balance of social, economic and environmental considerations, ensuring that development in one dimension of sustainability is not having negative impacts on other dimensions

¹ World Commission on Environment and Development. (1987). Our common future. Oxford: Oxford University Press. <http://www.un-documents.net/ocf-02.htm#IV>

and is preferably having positive impacts. It is about achieving a future where people, communities, society and nature better support one another in a balanced way (accepting that the division between society and nature is not a straightforward or clear-cut one). That makes ‘sustainability’ the destination, and ‘sustainable development’ activity that helps achieve ‘sustainability’. ‘Sustainable development’ can be summarised as working to ‘do more good, and do less harm’.

Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals

The main current programme to support sustainable development is called Agenda 2030, supported by 17 SDGs that aim to address a wide range of social and environmental challenges in order to set the world on a path to a sustainable future by 2030. The Agenda and SDGs were unanimously agreed to by the 193 Members of the United Nations in September 2015. They are explained in ‘Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development’.²

In ‘Transforming Our World’, the current global situation was described in the following terms:

“Billions of our citizens continue to live in poverty and are denied a life of dignity. There are rising inequalities within and among countries. There are enormous disparities of opportunity, wealth and power. Gender inequality remains a key challenge. Unemployment, particularly youth unemployment, is a major concern. Global health threats, more frequent and intense natural disasters, spiralling conflict, violent extremism, terrorism and related humanitarian crises and forced displacement of people threaten to reverse much of the development progress made in recent decades. Natural resource depletion and adverse impacts of environmental degradation, including desertification, drought, land degradation, freshwater scarcity and loss of biodiversity, add to and exacerbate the list of challenges which humanity faces.

Climate change is one of the greatest challenges of our time and its adverse impacts undermine the ability of all countries to achieve sustainable development. Increases in global temperature, sea level rise, ocean acidification and other climate change impacts are seriously affecting coastal areas and low-lying coastal countries, including many least developed countries and small island developing States. The survival of many societies, and of the biological support systems of the planet, is at risk.”

Acknowledging the progress that was made in reducing poverty in the Global South through the Millennium Development Goals (2005-15), ‘Transforming Our World’ notes that previous attempts to address challenges one at a time have not made sufficient advances:

² United Nations. (n.d.). Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. <https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda>

“A new approach is needed. Sustainable development recognises that eradicating poverty in all its forms and dimensions, combating inequality within and among countries, preserving the planet, creating sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth and fostering social inclusion are linked to each other and are interdependent.”

The 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) aim to address the greatest challenges facing society and the environment by 2030, including ending poverty and bringing prosperity (in all its forms) to all, social inclusion, environmental sustainability, and peace and good governance to all countries and all people. The 2030 Agenda is “a plan of action for people, planet and prosperity. It also seeks to strengthen universal peace in larger freedom.” The 17 SDGs, and 169 targets that contribute to them, are a blueprint for addressing the world’s most pressing challenges. They came into effect on 1 January 2016 and will run until 2030. ‘The SDGs’ doesn’t just mean the goals and targets themselves, but is often used as a shorthand and so should include the background, vision and implementation of the 17 Goals.

The UN’s vision for 2030, and the role of the SDGs, is set out in ‘Transforming Our World’ as follows:

“OUR VISION

In these Goals and targets, we are setting out a supremely ambitious and transformational vision. We envisage a world free of poverty, hunger, disease and want, where all life can thrive. We envisage a world free of fear and violence. A world with universal literacy. A world with equitable and universal access to quality education at all levels, to health care and social protection, where physical, mental and social well-being are assured. A world where we reaffirm our commitments regarding the human right to safe drinking water and sanitation and where there is improved hygiene; and where food is sufficient, safe, affordable and nutritious.

A world where human habitats are safe, resilient and sustainable and where there is universal access to affordable, reliable and sustainable energy.

We envisage a world of universal respect for human rights and human dignity, the rule of law, justice, equality and non-discrimination; of respect for race, ethnicity and cultural diversity; and of equal opportunity permitting the full realization of human potential and contributing to shared prosperity. A world which invests in its children and in which every child grows up free from violence and exploitation. A world in which every woman and girl enjoys full gender equality and all legal, social and economic barriers to their empowerment have been removed. A just, equitable, tolerant, open and socially inclusive world in which the needs of the most vulnerable are met.

We envisage a world in which every country enjoys sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth and decent work for all. A world in which consumption and production patterns and use of all

natural resources — from air to land, from rivers, lakes and aquifers to oceans and seas — are sustainable.

One in which democracy, good governance and the rule of law, as well as an enabling environment at the national and international levels, are essential for sustainable development, including sustained and inclusive economic growth, social development, environmental protection and the eradication of poverty and hunger. One in which development and the application of technology are climate-sensitive, respect biodiversity and are resilient. One in which humanity lives in harmony with nature and in which wildlife and other living species are protected.”³

It is rather common to hear the SDGs referred to as if they are the same thing as Agenda 2030, but that is not really true: the Agenda itself includes the analysis of our world today, the vision for a better pathway, the description of the means for implementation based on partnerships, the description of the follow-up and review, and the SDGs themselves. The goals and their targets can be thought of as the results framework for the Agenda. The goals and targets are a tightly interconnected set, rather than a pick list, and the aim is to deliver activity that helps achieve them – all of them – rather than to pick of the items we are more familiar with, best at and comfortable with.

Agenda 2030 as a rights-respecting and rights-based programme

Agenda 2030 and the SDGs are anchored in the following principles:

- 1) protecting and promoting human rights and environmental rights, which underpin the possibility for dignity, peace and sustainable development;
- 2) equality, as reducing inequalities is essential for protecting and promoting human rights, and tackling discrimination and exclusion;
- 3) sustainability, through a long-term perspective to accommodate intergenerational equity, justice and a world fit for present and future generations.
- 4) universality, in that they apply everywhere and to all sectors.
- 5) Importantly, the SDGs follow a principle of ‘leave no-one behind’.

The SDGs can be summarised as being made up of ‘five Ps’: People, Planet, Prosperity, Peace and Partnership. The first three relate to the three traditional dimensions of sustainability (social, environmental and economic respectively), while peace and partnership enable and support the pursuit of sustainability:

³ Paragraphs 7–9. United Nations. (n.d.). Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. <https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda>

People: to end poverty and hunger, in all their forms and dimensions, and to ensure that all human beings can fulfil their potential in dignity and equality and in a healthy environment.

Planet: to protect the planet from degradation, including through sustainable consumption and production, sustainably managing its natural resources and taking urgent action on climate change, so that it can support the needs of the present and future generations.

Prosperity: to ensure that all human beings can enjoy prosperous and fulfilling lives and that economic, social, and technological progress occurs in harmony with nature.

Peace: to foster peaceful, just and inclusive societies which are free from fear and violence. There can be no sustainable development without peace and no peace without sustainable development.

Partnership: to mobilise the means required to implement the 2030 Agenda through a revitalised Global Partnership for Sustainable Development, based on a spirit of strengthened global solidarity, focused in particular on the needs of the poorest and most vulnerable and with the participation of all countries, all stakeholders and all people.

The 17 SDGs are most familiar as the colourful grid of the 17 icons, but it is very important to understand them in the context of the vision, principles and aims of Agenda 2030. Secondly, the colourful icons are only a shorthand visual representation of the goals: they have to be understood in more detail to make sense.

Sustainable Development Goal	Description and key challenges
SDG 1: End poverty in all its form everywhere	Expand support for the poor and address the root causes of poverty. Developing countries will need special support.
SDG 2: End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture	Ensure everyone has access to safe, nutritious food on a regular basis and a healthy diet; and that agriculture is resilient and operates in harmony with nature.
SDG 3: Ensure healthy lives and promote wellbeing for all at all ages	Ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health services, prevent infectious diseases, and tackle public health issues.
SDG 4: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all	Everyone has good-quality education that enables them to participate fully in society, achieve their potential, and live in harmony with other people and with nature.
SDG 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls	Eliminate all forms of sexual discrimination, violence and harmful practices against women and

	girls, and uphold sexual and reproductive health and rights, so they are able to participate fully in public, economic and political life.
SDG 6: Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all	Ensure everyone has a reliable, safe water supply and good quality sanitation, managed in harmony with nature, in the context of climate change and competition for water.
SDG 7: Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all	Ensure everyone has access to electricity, clean fuels and technologies for cooking, and increasing the use of renewable energy everywhere.
SDG 8: Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all	Protect employee rights and promote safe and secure working environments for all workers, especially those in precarious employment. Support the development of economies where everyone benefits, and that operate in harmony with nature.
SDG 9: Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation	Develop good-quality, sustainable and resilient infrastructure. Foster innovation and research that will advance sustainable development.
SDG 10: Reduce inequality within and among countries	Reduce inequalities in income and opportunity between and within countries, linked with gender, age, disability, ethnicity or other shared characteristic.
SDG 11: Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable	Develop cities, towns and communities that are sustainable as places for people and communities to live and work in, and in harmony with nature, in the context of rapid social change and a changing climate.
SDG 12: Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns	This Goal is key to achieving a wide range of other Goals, embracing the challenge of producing and consuming less, encouraging reuse and reducing waste, reducing pollution and using natural resources in sustainable ways.
SDG 13: Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts	This Goal will require both 1) the incorporation of measures to fight climate change into national planning, strategies and policies and 2) greater

	public awareness and education on reducing climate impacts and finding ways to live with climate impacts.
SDG 14: Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development	Enhance scientific research, and reduce the impacts of human activity on the oceans and marine life.
SDG 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	Sustainably manage land-based habitats and natural resources such as forests, restore damaged landscapes and halt the spread of deserts. Safeguard biodiversity and ecosystems.
SDG 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	Ensure everyone has access to justice and information. Transparent and accountable institutions are necessary for achievement of this and other goals.
SDG 17: Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalise the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development Finance	Partnerships within and between communities, sectors and countries are essential to achieving the SDGs.

Using the Sustainable Development Goals in museums

The SDGs are not just for governments: they are an invitation to all sectors of society, in all places, to collaborate and participate in the achievement of the 2030 Agenda. The SDGs are an incredible opportunity for anyone, any organisation, and any sector to collaborate in pursuit of common goals, leveraging their skills, capacities and unique resources.

Museums are relevant to Agenda 2030 and the SDGs in many ways. The UNESCO 2015 ‘Recommendation concerning the Protection and Promotion of Museums and Collections, their Diversity and their Role in Society’ sets out a range of ways that museums can contribute to sustainable development: ”Museums have great potential to raise public awareness of the value of cultural and natural heritage and of the responsibility of all citizens to contribute to their care and transmission. Museums also support economic development, notably through cultural and creative industries and tourism.”⁴

⁴ UNESCO. (2015). Recommendation concerning the Protection and Promotion of Museums and Collections, their Diversity and their Role in Society. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000246331>

In Museums and the Sustainable Development Goals I set out a framework of seven ‘key activities’ that museums already more or less do, that can be directed towards supporting the goals and targets.

The seven activities are as follows:

1. Protect and safeguard cultural and natural heritage, both within museums and more generally.
2. Support and provide learning opportunities in support of the SDGs
3. Enable cultural participation for all
4. Support sustainable tourism
5. Enable research in support of the SDGs)
6. Direct internal leadership, management and operations to support the SDGs
7. Direct external leadership, collaboration and partnerships towards the SDGs

The first of these emphasises that museums are not separate from the world around them. For example, there is no point in protecting and safeguarding cultural heritage if it comes at great cost to the natural environment – although we do see this as a common problem in museums, as standards may require a heavy environmental cost, through the use of energy and production of greenhouse gas emissions as a consequence. Museums should collect cultural and natural heritage in ways that promote their wider protection and safeguarding in the wider world. The first activity also doesn’t specify precisely where cultural or natural heritage are protected and safeguarded, as they may be more effectively moved from one museum to another, or even out of museums altogether. The classic example here would be in relation to cultural heritage belonging to Indigenous people’s groups that was taken without their active, free, informed consent. This activity relates to a number of SDG targets, notably a specific target in goal 11 on ‘strengthen efforts to protect and safeguard cultural and natural heritage’, but also other targets such as 1.4, on ensuring everyone has equal rights to access all forms of property, which includes cultural and natural heritage.

The second point aims to encourage museums to adopt educational approaches that foster sustainable development – so supporting the aims of the SDGs and Agenda 2030, rather than just being about them. There are a number of well-developed learning approaches, notably Education for Sustainable Development, and Global Citizenship Education, that are excellent frameworks for learning programmes. In the SDGs, SDG4 is dedicated to quality education, and includes education and learning experiences throughout life. There is a specific target, 4.7, dedicated to education for sustainable development: “By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture’s contribution to sustainable development”. This is an expansive programme for museums to support, and they are very well placed

to do so. The target can be interpreted both in terms of the content of learning, and whose learning is supported.

Enabling cultural participation for all recognises that the right to participate in cultural life is a well-recognised right, from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. That right gives everyone the right to take part in cultural activities, to know their own culture and that of other people, and to contribute to the cultural life of the community. As with rights generally – as with the SDGs – the right should not be seen in isolation, but as an opportunity to support other rights. Enabling cultural participation requires museums to recognise that they should be supporting all of society, not just serving a section of society. This is important as museums can be associated with elitism and middle classes, who are ‘over-served’ by museums, while people of other social groups – including minorities, disabled people, immigrants, and poor people – are under-served. Enabling cultural participation for all is not intended to be seen as a separate programme or activity from the other six activities, but an on-going programme to ensure that core programmes and activities genuinely serve all of society.

Supporting sustainable tourism is an important activity for museums to consider. Sustainable, or responsible, tourism aims to maximise the positive aspects of tourism, but not to ignore its negative impacts. This is important as tourism is rapidly growing, is responsible for enormous greenhouse gas emissions that are responsible for climate change, and because museums are often implicated in the reasons that people travel to different places. Responsible tourism supports local economies, creates markets for local products, and values the peace and stability of the local community. Badly managed tourism creates great disaster risk for museums when they are over-reliant on tourist income to balance their books, creates tension with local communities or erodes communities when cultural districts become gentrified, and is very harmful for the environment through high levels of rubbish and the greenhouse gas emissions mentioned above.

Museums can support sustainable development by providing effective research collections, that can be explored and used by a wide variety of researchers, from professionals to amateurs and independent researchers. For example, natural history collections are an important window into the diversity of nature today and in the past, and are an important tool that could be made more use of if the data associated with specimens was digitised and shared online in aggregators such as GBIF. This could be an important contribution that museums could make more effectively, supporting the conservation of biodiversity in the tropics through greater sharing of data.

Sustainable development can become everyone’s job, every day, in every museum. Some examples can include: the way that people are hired to do which jobs, and ensuring fair and equal pay; choosing renewable energy and moving to energy efficiency to reduce the negative environmental impact of energy use; using water efficiently; preventing the creation of waste and minimising its flow into the

natural environment; and ensuring management and leadership decisions are all contributing to a better future, and not a worse one.

Museums also have a lot of freedom in terms of who they work with, and they can bring together very diverse partners. Decision-making regarding how museums are run can be thought of as a form of partnership with society, providing inclusive institutions that properly serve the public interest. Museums can connect people with the aims of international, national and local initiatives, for example international years and decades dedicated to particular sustainable development themes.

These seven activities can be thought of as a framework of the main opportunities that museums have to contribute to sustainable development and the SDGs; incidentally, they are also the seven main ways that museums can impede action for the SDGs, where they are not followed or, worse still, museums' activities work against them. In *Museums and the Sustainable Development Goals* I map these seven activities onto roughly one third of all 169 targets. Whether you use the SDGs and targets more concretely or not, if you follow this framework of seven activities, you will be helping achieve the SDGs. It is also worth saying that a museum is operating at full capacity when it is supporting all seven effectively, and I suggest that a museum that is not supporting one or more of the activities could provide better, more transformative public services by developing the 'missing' activities. The seven activities are not to be seen in isolation, but are complementary, and in acting to support one of them, you should just check that you are not inadvertently undermining activity in support of the other activities.

In *Museums and the SDGs*, I also suggest a simple six-step programme for you to use to make use of these activities.

- Firstly, you should acknowledge that the SDGs are a connected framework, and that museums contribute to all of them (more or less), both positively and negatively. Sustainable development requires this acknowledgement: we accept we do both positive and negative things, and we plan activity to manage those impacts.
- Second, you should look at your organisation's mission and vision, to see what role it should be playing in sustainable development. Perhaps it intends to be a leader, or a follower, or a partner. You should clarify where your work aims to make a difference.
- Third, you should explore the 17 SDGs to have a very rough overall understanding of how your museum contributes to each, both positively and negatively. Which activities are most positive? Which activities create the greatest negative impacts?
- Fourth, you should explore the seven key activities, described above, to begin to select which areas you are going to focus on.
- Fifth, develop a focussed plan including one or more of the key activities, to manage both positive and negative impacts. To be realistic, and to make a real difference, you should aim to

address your most negative impacts in any plan of action. With a plan in place, now you just have to deliver it, so make sure it is realistic. Monitor and evaluate your progress as you go.

- Lastly, report your activity to your stakeholders. You can also use this stage to set new goals for the next cycle of activity.

After I wrote *Museums and the SDGs*, I realised that many people still need support to go beyond aligning their work with the SDGs. I wrote *Mainstreaming the SDGs* in 2021, and it came out at the time of COP26, the climate change conference. *Mainstreaming* is an approach to make the SDGs part of everyone's work, every day. The Mainstreaming guide is set out as a kind of action planner, to help you explore the seven key activities already mentioned, and to ask yourself which SDG targets you are, or want to be, committed to. If you have a commitment, it will be more likely to be successful if you have an end goal: what is it, when should it be, is it realistic? Then you also need to be able to know how you are getting on with your activity, so you need to know what success looks like and what activities are involved in achieving the goal, so you need to know what to monitor and measure. Lastly you will need to have a plan in place. The action planner helps you ask yourself how you are getting on with each of these aspects, to help you plan really concrete action that achieves particular SDG targets. This approach helps to focus on the action, and get beyond some of the issues I see when people want to support the SDGs and achieve them, but don't know how to. It is important that I don't just try to provide you with a tick list of answers, as the SDGs have to acknowledge the many different local realities and challenges, and solutions and responses should be locally owned and include the participation of those who will be responsible for delivering them.

I would also like to mention two other aspects of sustainable development. The first of these is called *Disaster Risk Reduction*, which is an approach to managing the recovery period following a disaster, to take advantage of the period to not only try to get back to where you were before the disaster, but to make changes so that you are more resilient for the future. I wrote this in the context of COVID-19, in 2020, as this is a time of both great risk and great opportunity: great risk, because decisions taken now with only short-term interests in mind could close off avenues and possibilities that are desirable in the future; great opportunity, because we have a chance to steer away from the course of the unsustainable past. *Disaster Risk Reduction* is a well-developed management approach, that museums can draw upon both in terms of contributing to the sustainable development of their community, and in terms of making themselves more resilient. *Disaster Risk Reduction* aims to strengthen our capacities (knowledge, skills, possibilities, opportunities) and resilience (which is an expression of our capacities), and to reduce and minimise the hazards we are exposed to (sources of risk), our exposure to these, and vulnerability to these. Successful *Disaster Risk Reduction* is an important part of successful sustainable development.

The other sustainable development approach I would like to briefly mention is a focus on human rights. If human rights are the 'moral minimum' that each of us should expect to receive in society, then they

are an excellent blueprint for museums to consider, asking whose rights are they supporting, and whose rights are they ignoring. Museums can help people understand their own rights, the rights of others, and to support a fair, tolerant society where everyone can enjoy their basic rights – which should not be too much to ask, but which is certainly not a description of the societies we have today. Combining sustainable development, the SDGs, Disaster Risk Reduction, and human rights as a set of complementary programmes for a better future and a sustainable society will provide museums with a very sound framework from which to provide services for society. As society regroups from the COVID-19 pandemic, I encourage you to embrace these approaches, for the benefits of museums, society, and those who work in and with them. Good luck, the future needs you!

Further reading

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