

# Your firm is interested in the SDGs – now what? Strengthening pro bono technical assistance through behavioural change

16 May 2019

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Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are no longer the new kid on the block. Agreed in 2015 as a successor to the Millennium Development Goals, the SDGs set 17 interrelated thematic priority areas to address the world's economic, social and environmental challenges. The year 2020 will be their five-year anniversary and mark a third of the way to 2030, when the SDGs are meant to be achieved. Ambitious, yes, but not impossible.

## *Can lawyers help to deliver the SDGs?*

The SDGs are designed for *all stakeholders* to work towards their achievement. Many global multinationals have undertaken sophisticated processes of mapping the impact of their operations, policies and supply chains against the SDGs, and integrated working towards their realisation not only in their corporate social responsibility (although they may also be doing this), but as part of their business operations.

Lawyers and the legal profession can contribute their expertise to help the global community meet the SDGs. They can also ensure their operations are, if not furthering the aims, at least compliant with the SDGs.

Advocates for International Development (A4ID) is a global charity that works to inspire and enable lawyers to join the global fight against poverty. A core focus of our work is helping lawyers to engage with the SDGs. [In a previous article for the Pro Bono Committee](#), we outlined the broader case for law firms to engage with the SDGs and called for pro bono services to take an SDG-centric approach.

This article continues the dialogue. It assumes that law firms understand the business case for meaningful engagement on the SDGs. The question then becomes the process that may be used to guide lawyers to engage meaningfully with the SDGs.

## *Strengthening pro bono technical assistance*

A4ID's [Rule of Law Expertise programme](#) (ROLE UK) helps legal experts consider better ways of designing, delivering and monitoring their technical assistance pro

bono work. The key insight that ROLE UK brings is that tools typically used in the NGO and international development sector can be extremely useful to improve international pro bono technical assistance.

In 2018, ROLE UK published a report showing how Clifford Chance [used a programme tool called 'theory of change'](#) to ensure their pro bono support can contribute to the SDGs. In this article, we introduce another insight that the ROLE UK programme is putting into practice and suggest how law firms might use it.

## *Arriving at meaningful change often means changing behaviour*

Genuinely driving culture change within a law firm requires people to do things differently, that is, to change their behaviour. For firms that want to further the SDGs, these behaviours might include lawyers actively talking about how their practice areas engage the SDGs, undertaking pro bono matters that explicitly work towards achieving the SDGs, or changing institutional practices that make the firm more SDG-friendly. There are nine identified ways that firms can drive change:

1. Education: by increasing knowledge or understanding
2. Persuasion: using communication to induce positive or negative feelings or stimulate action
3. Incentivisation: creating expectation of reward
4. Coercion: creating expectation of punishment or cost
5. Training: imparting skills
6. Restriction: using rules to reduce the opportunity to engage in the target behaviour (or to increase the target behaviour by reducing the opportunity to engage in competing behaviours)
7. Environmental restructuring: changing the physical or social context
8. Modelling: providing an example for people to aspire to or imitate
9. Enablement: increasing means and reducing barriers to increase capability or opportunity.<sup>[14](#)</sup>

## *What does it mean to actually change behaviour?*

A team led by Professor Susan Michie at University College London, has developed a theory of behaviour change that the ROLE UK programme is actively promoting. It posits behaviour change as a combination of capabilities, opportunities and motivation. Behaviour change may be difficult because of gaps in any or all of these. Equally, any effort to change behaviour is likely to require targeting one or more (and most likely all) of these components:

- capability gaps may require new knowledge or skills;

- opportunity gaps may require new physical opportunities to undertake the behaviour, but also may require social opportunities by opening up the social context for individuals to feel comfortable making the behaviour change; and
- motivation gaps may require reasons for individuals to change behaviour that are worthwhile to them.

### ***How can this be applied to increasing lawyers' SDG and pro bono engagement?***

It could be argued that all three gaps exist with respect to the SDGs and legal practice:

- Capability: lawyers may not even know about the SDGs, besides have a deep understanding of their content or how the law interacts with the SDGs.
- Opportunity: few firms explicitly design pro bono projects and business operations through the lens of the SDGs, and of those that do, few do so in any systematic or strategic way.
- Motivation: lawyers do not see any reason to start thinking about the SDGs in their daily work or in their pro bono practice.

### ***How can firms address these gaps?***

A starting point is to inquire about what type of projects a firm can develop to address these gaps. Ideally this is a process that should be undertaken with the consultation and buy-in of the firm's lawyers, but we can offer a number of suggestions:

- Capability: A4ID is launching a comprehensive legal guide to the SDGs that educates lawyers on the content of each goal, international and domestic regulation and litigation that directly or indirectly furthers the SDGs and concrete steps that lawyers can take to work towards achieving them. Firms can use this guide, due to be published in 2019, to address lawyers' knowledge gap.
- Opportunity: A4ID's ROLE UK programme can work with firms to think about how they can align their pro bono practice to the SDGs. A4ID's pro bono brokerage service tracks projects against the achievement of the SDGs so firms can undertake new pro bono work that is aligned to one or more SDGs. Equally, the guide will inspire ideas for how firms can undertake SDG-centric projects and pro bono work.
- Motivation: A4ID has convened law firms, corporations and NGOs to discuss how firms can better engage the SDGs in their pro bono work. Firms (and their lawyers) can see the benefits of engaging with the SDGs as current (and importantly) future corporate clients are engaging with the goals and looking for value-aligned legal service providers. Equally, it may provide opportunities for

firms to develop relationships and deliver projects with NGOs that working towards achieving the SDGs.

This is a snapshot of how firms can start to take a systematic approach to start mainstreaming the SDGs. Focusing efforts on the capabilities, opportunities and motivation of staff can mitigate the risk of attempts to onboard the SDGs that are perceived to waste time or money or that lawyers see as irrelevant to, unable to take forward or beyond their skillset. Key allies in this journey are a firm's senior partners, who can drive firm-wide policy change, and the learning and development team, which may have ideas and insights on how to encourage SDG thinking among lawyers. Perhaps, after reading this article, send them an email.

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[11](#) Susan Michie et al (2011), 'The Behaviour Change Wheel: a new method for characterising and designing behaviour change interventions', 6 *Implementation Science*, p42.