

Social marketing and the United Nations sustainable development goals: I, We and All of Us

Sustainable development is a critical challenge for many countries worldwide. Indeed, humanity is confronting a range of overlapping sustainable development challenges. These include environmental challenges such as climate change and environmental degradation, and broader humanitarian challenges such as poverty, disaster, social injustice, inequalities, unsustainable consumption and production and human rights violations (Truong, 2017).

To address these challenges, in 2015, the United Nations (UN) adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as a call for action “to achieve a better and more sustainable future”. The SDGs include ending poverty, ending hunger, ensuring health and well-being, ensuring quality education, achieving gender equality, ensuring access to water and sanitation, ensuring affordable and clean energy, promoting decent work and economic growth, building sustainable industry, innovation and infrastructure, reducing inequalities, making sustainable cities and communities, ensuring sustainable consumption and production, taking climate action, conserving marine resources, halting biodiversity loss, promoting peace, justice and strong institutions and revitalising partnerships for sustainable development (UN, 2015). These goals have captured widespread attention, raised public awareness, promoted political accountability and increased social pressures to address them. They have also been embraced by global, national and local institutions and organisations, become a research rubric in many disciplines, and have been widely taught at schools and universities (Sachs *et al.*, 2019).

Yet, it is somewhat surprising that the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the SDGs have attracted relatively limited scholarly attention in the social marketing field. This is despite social marketing being successfully applied in many areas of practical application that are relevant to the SDGs. For example, many public health initiatives have relied on social marketing to address SDG 3 (ensuring health and well-being) by promoting health education, adopting family planning, using modern contraceptive methods, and tackling HIV/AIDS (Truong, 2017). Nevertheless, despite the limited scholarly attention, the social marketing discipline has continually expanded its areas of practical application, from public health to poverty alleviation, environmental protection, healthy lifestyles and sustainable consumption and production (Truong *et al.*, 2021). It has also shifted from its primary focus on individual behavioural change (i.e. downstream) towards exploration of its potential in influencing institutional and organisational change (i.e. upstream) and more recently addressing broader macro-level or systemic challenges (Domegan, 2008; Truong *et al.*, 2021). On the one hand, this shift in focus reflects an increased recognition within the social marketing discipline (and beyond) that beneficial change needs to take place at the individual, organisational and systemic levels (Carvalho and Mazzon, 2019). On the other hand, it challenges the social marketing discipline to directly address broader ranging sustainable development challenges – particularly those that aim at achieving “transformative” change for the greater good (Saunders *et al.*, 2015).

It was for this reason that we put forward a special issue in the *Journal of Social Marketing* that aimed to share interesting, meaningful and theoretically grounded social marketing research papers that placed the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the SDGs at its heart, and that clearly focused attention on the UN “urgent call for action” in



the developed and developing world. Over a period of seven months, from March to October 2020, we received a total of 22 manuscripts. All manuscripts underwent an initial screening by the two guest editors. Those that passed the screening process were then sent out for peer-review. The blind peer-review process involved two or three referees who were recognised social marketing academics. At the end of the peer-review process, four papers were accepted for publication.

In the first paper, Desiderio Gutiérrez Taño and his colleagues explore factors that determine the intentions of Tenerife residents in the Canary Islands, Spain to use bioplastic as an alternative to conventional plastic, which were having a detrimental impact on the environment. They find that the variables “attitude toward bioplastic”, “subjective norms” and “activity to reduce plastic use” have a significant influence on intentions to use bioplastic. Despite its strong focus on individual behaviour change, this study also suggests that the involvement of broader stakeholders is required if bioplastic is to be used widely within the case study context. For example, governments could promulgate concrete regulations in relation to the production and use of conventional plastic, as is the case in Italy where the use of non-reusable plastic bags has been banned. Incentives may also be offered for the use of biodegradable plastic. On a wider scale, countries in Europe and beyond may reach an agreement on, and put in place, standards with regard to the labelling system for different types of plastic. Such measures, combined with awareness campaigns aimed at individual consumers, would contribute to the increased use of bioplastic in the future. The authors contend such behaviour and system change would contribute to promoting sustainable consumption and production, which relates to SDG 12 – ensuring sustainable consumption and production (Gutierrez *et al.*, 2021).

In contrast, in the second paper, Adriana Bastos and her colleagues employ a macro-social marketing approach to tackle the wicked problem of obesity in Brazil. They demonstrate that the intervention programme was successful in effecting systemic change by covering multiple-level audiences to promote active participation and interaction in a range of sectors at the macro, meso, and micro levels. It fostered the related behaviours of physical activity and healthful eating through the use of a complementary range of tools such as events, mass and digital media. Given that obesity not only deteriorates health conditions but also prevents individuals from performing their functional capacity and living a meaningful and quality life, the prevention of obesity arguably helps ensuring health and well-being (SDG 3) for individuals and societies at large (Bastos *et al.*, 2021).

The remaining two papers address partnerships that have been part of behavioural change strategies since the social marketing concept was first formalised, which relates to SDG 17 – revitalising partnerships for sustainable development. Sinead Duane and her colleagues extend Morgan and Hunt's (1994) Trust and Relationship Commitment model into the social marketing domain. The authors claim that more effective and smarter collaborations amongst a range of stakeholders at different levels and networks are needed, given the accelerating complexities in the social problems challenging the multifaceted world we live in. They encourage social marketers to listen to their commercial marketing counterparts and position trust and commitment as an essential part of any change strategy (Duane *et al.*, 2021).

Meanwhile, Chiara Hubscher and her colleagues investigate a postgraduate study programme to identify factors relevant to educating sustainable-development change agents that can serve as a foundation for social marketing intervention programmes. Drawing upon multiple sources of qualitative data, this study shows that when interdisciplinarity and a project-based approach are organised to create a meaningful learning environment wherein the SDGs are guiding principles, students as change agents can potentially generate

beneficial and influential impacts at the individual, organisational and institutional levels. Within the social marketing discipline, this study is perhaps the first to examine how higher education institutions can partner with social marketers to educate and nurture future generations of sustainable-development change agents (Hubscher *et al.*, 2021). Their idea seems to resonate well with that of the famous development economist, Jeffrey Sachs, who holds that we can use the global network of universities around the world “to be an active “solution network” to help governments, business and civil society to chart out the pathways to successful sustainable development, and also to be the incubators for the rapid development and rapid fusion of sustainable development technologies. Universities around the world should be in the lead of helping society to find the technical solutions to achieve these goals [SDGs]” (Sachs, 2015, p. 61).

The modest number of articles addressing the SDGs may be attributable to their newness within the social marketing discipline. It may also be due to the COVID-19 pandemic that has continued to impact our lives on a global scale. Yet, it is for these very reasons that the SDGs remain a potentially significant avenue of research for social marketers. This is particularly important, given the increased scholarly debates within the discipline over the need to explore the role of social marketing in addressing complex (and sometimes wicked) social problems confronting contemporary societies. Such debates have led to the emergence of social macromarketing (Lefebvre, 2013), macro-social marketing (Domegan, 2008; Truong, 2017) and systems social marketing (Domegan *et al.*, 2016) as we have seen. Furthermore, embracing the SDGs may also help demonstrate the wider impact of social marketing on the quality of life of individuals, communities and societies, if social marketing is to become a force of social change and an academic discipline, and be recognised as an influential institution in society (Dietrich *et al.*, 2019; Truong *et al.*, 2021). In short, the question of whether the Agenda for Sustainable Development and the SDGs can be achieved depends on the efforts and commitment of many individuals and organisations who are working to make the world a better place for all. It depends on “I, We, and All of Us”.

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Further reading

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