



SDG 12: Progress, gaps and recommendations for the UK

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As the world's economy and population continue to grow, and with it the subsequent demand for resources, to achieve sustainable development by 2030 requires drastic changes in the way we consume and produce both goods and resources. Decoupling economic growth from resource use and environmental degradation is one of the most critical and complex challenges facing humanity today. It requires political leadership that will effectively transform business practices and individual consumption. The Covid-19 pandemic caused a decline in economic activity, and with it the impact of pollution²⁵⁹, but it also demonstrated the scale of change needed to mitigate the detrimental effects of climate change.

Covid-19 has increased awareness of the need for sustainability – panic buying of fuel and other household essentials has made people more aware of the scarcity of resources and has moved the issue into the public consciousness. Additionally, the conflict in Ukraine has increased public awareness of countries' dependency on the export of natural resources. In the UK, people have become more attentive about what and how they consume.²⁶⁰ The Covid-19 pandemic has also highlighted the interconnectedness of the global production network, reviving discussions about the risks and instabilities associated with the international fragmentation of production.²⁶¹ These disruptions have reinforced calls for greater self-sufficiency and reshoring of production.²⁶² If reshoring takes place, it is critical that it is accompanied by targeted strategies to ensure that effective transformations benefit people with the fewest resources.

But it is not just the pandemic and the Ukraine crisis that will have long-term impacts on supply chains. The demand for minerals could have many adverse effects, including economic crimes, environmental harm and human rights violations. Minerals needed in the UK and elsewhere must be sourced responsibly in a manner that promotes the rule of law, protects human rights, the environment and frontline communities. It is critical that the UK government takes an integrated approach to ensure minerals are sourced responsibly in order to support a just and rapid transition away from fossil fuels and towards renewable energy.

259. Chemical and Engineering News (25 September, 2020), '[COVID-19 lockdowns had strange effects on air pollution across the globe](#)' [online article, accessed June 2022]

260. Deloitte, '[The Climate Change Pandemic: How COVID-19 could accelerate our engagement with sustainability](#)' [online article, accessed June 2022]

261. OECD (2021), [Global value chains: Efficiency and risks in the context of COVID-19](#)

262. Brenton, P et al. (2022) [Reshaping Global Value Chains in Light of COVID-19: Implications for Trade and Poverty Reduction in Developing Countries](#), Washington, DC: World Bank

Target 12.6:

Encourage companies, especially large and transnational companies, to adopt sustainable practices and to integrate sustainability information into their reporting cycle; and Target 12.a: Support developing countries to strengthen their scientific and technological capacity to move towards more sustainable patterns of consumption and production.

People around the world are experiencing human rights abuses, environmental destruction and the impacts of the climate crisis, driven by global demand for crops, minerals and energy. British businesses are linked to these abuses through their supply chains, subsidiaries and investments, yet complex corporate structures allow them to evade accountability. Responsible companies are undercut by firms operating to lower standards, and there is a lack of clarity and certainty on business responsibilities. Voluntary measures taken by business to address their social and environmental impacts have failed to tackle the problem sufficiently, and reporting and transparency measures, while important, are often insufficient on their own to incentivise businesses to act.²⁶³

The UN Working Group on Business and Human Rights stresses that unless business contributions to the SDGs are based on accountability and respect for human rights, 'the private sector risks undermining rather than supporting sustainable development'. National plans to implement the SDGs should align with national action plans to implement the UN's *Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights* and the *OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises*.

To date, the UK government has failed to adopt a comprehensive approach to tackling negative business impacts on human rights, the environment and climate change. A supply chain transparency provision in the Modern Slavery Act 2015 is limited to modern slavery and only requires corporate reporting, rather than action. The deforestation due diligence legislation in the Environment Act 2021 is a step forward as it requires businesses to ensure their supply chains are deforestation-free. However, its commodity-focused, sector specific approach risks being less effective than a more comprehensive and consistent approach contained within a single piece of legislation.

Civil society groups are calling for a Business, Human Rights and the Environment Act to hold companies to account when they fail to prevent human rights abuses and environmental harms.²⁶⁴ The Joint Committee on

263. OHCHR, '[Key recommendations for connecting the business and human rights agenda to the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals](#)' [web page, accessed June 2022]

264. Corporate Justice Commission, '[A "Business, Human Rights and Environment Act" – Principal Elements](#)' [web page, accessed June 2022]

Human Rights recommended²⁶⁵ that such legislation be brought forward to impose a duty on all companies to prevent human rights abuses along the lines of the relevant provisions of the Bribery Act 2010, and the British Institute of International and Comparative Law found the model to be legally feasible.²⁶⁶ Public opinion also supports new rules to punish companies that do not act responsibly, with research by Onward finding that two-thirds of people across all ages favour 'tackling companies that behave badly' over 'helping companies in the private sector to succeed'²⁶⁷. Businesses have also expressed support for greater regulation to ensure clarity and level the playing field for all companies.

Target 12.7:

Promote public procurement practices that are sustainable, in accordance with national policies and priorities.

In May 2022 the UK government brought forward a Procurement Bill. This aims to develop a procurement regime that is simple, flexible and takes greater account of how social value can play a big role in contributing to the government's 'levelling-up' goals.²⁶⁸ Value for money remains the highest priority in procurement, but the Bill will also require buyers to take account of national strategic priorities, such as job creation potential, improving supplier resilience and tackling climate change.²⁶⁹ The government has also published its *Greening Government Commitment 2021 to 2025*²⁷⁰, which sets out the actions UK government departments and their partner organisations will take to reduce their impacts on the environment. The UK government should take further action to ensure both human rights and environmental due diligence are central in public procurement. Some positive steps have been made on tackling modern slavery in government supply chains.²⁷¹ But a more comprehensive strategy is needed, one which goes beyond an issue-by-issue or sector-by-sector approach.

265. House of Lords, House of Commons Joint Committee on [Human Rights \(2017\), Human Rights and Business 2017: Promoting responsibility and ensuring accountability](#)

266. BI ICL (2020), [A UK Failure to Prevent Mechanism for Corporate Human Rights Harms](#)

267. Onward (2019), [Generation Why?](#)

268. Cabinet Office (2021), [Transforming Public Procurement: Government response to consultation](#)

269. UK Government, Cabinet Office (12 May 2022), '[Simpler, more flexible and transparent procurement](#)' [online article, accessed June 2022]

270. DEFRA (28 October, 2021), '[Policy Paper: Greening Government Commitments 2021 to 2025](#)' [online document, accessed June 2022]

271. UK Government, Cabinet Office (18 September, 2019), '[Procurement Policy Note 05/19: Tackling Modern Slavery in Government Supply Chains](#)' [online document, accessed June 2022]



Target 12.8:

By 2030, ensure that people everywhere have the relevant information and awareness for sustainable development and lifestyles in harmony with nature.

The Environment Act 2021 grants powers relating to product information which will introduce labelling and information schemes so that consumers are more informed in their choices. Although it is important to empower individuals to make more sustainable and ethical consumption choices, it should not be up to consumers alone to make responsible decisions. Rather, the government should take action to guarantee consumers can buy products that are free from abuse. This could include securing a global ban on cosmetics animal testing, promoting sustainable palm oil options in UK supermarkets, providing greater funding to Fairtrade-certified farmers and playing its part within the UN Environment Programme’s 10YFP’s²⁷² sustainable lifestyles and education programme.

To achieve SDG 12, the UK government should:

1. Bring forwards a Business, Human Rights and the Environment Act to hold companies to account when they fail to prevent human rights abuses and environmental harms
2. Take further action to ensure both human rights and environmental due diligence are central in public procurement.
3. Take action to guarantee consumers can buy products that are free from abuse. These could include securing a global ban on cosmetics animal testing, promoting sustainable palm oil options in UK supermarkets and providing greater funding to Fairtrade certified farmers, as well as taking a leading role within the 10YFP’s sustainable lifestyles and education programme.
4. Ensure robust implementation of its new policy on ending overseas support for fossil fuels (see more in Goal 7). There must be no new fossil fuel investments, and all existing fossil fuel-based investments must be reviewed and divested from as soon as possible.
5. Increase engagement with, and build the strength of, the 10YFP as a convening platform for stakeholders to share innovative solutions towards greater sustainable consumption and production.

272. 10YFP stands for the 10-Year Framework of Programmes on Sustainable Consumption and Production