



# Fulfilling the promise

Best practices for UN Advocacy  
to promote implementation of the  
2030 Agenda

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This document provides guidance on how to create and implement a strategy for UN advocacy. For purposes of this guide, advocacy means working with civil society, the media, the private sector, social movements and the public to help build the political environment for progress on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

An advocacy strategy may include a lot of technical details and logistics, but it must be based on a larger vision of where a country is at, where it wants to go, and a path of action to get there. In order to connect an advocacy strategy to this larger vision, readers should take advantage of other UN resources, including:

- > [UN Global Communications Strategy](#)
- > [Guidelines for communications and advocacy strategy for the Cooperation Framework.](#)
- > [The UNCTs Style Guide](#) **Creating and implementing an advocacy strategy requires much coordination, and that means regular meetings with colleagues at all levels, planning grids, and the use of tools such as Trello.**

A first version of this guideline was written under the guidance of the UNDG Communications and Advocacy Working Group in 2017. An updated version was finalized in January 2022, under the guidance of the Development Coordination Office and the Department of Global Communications, in consultation with UNSDG and UNCG members.

This guideline is divided into two parts:

①

Part one looks at the work of UN advocacy for the 2030 Agenda.

②

Part two dives into the elements of an advocacy strategy and the steps involved in planning an advocacy effort on the SDGs.

The 2030 Agenda represents an historic commitment not just to those living on our planet today but to the generations that will follow. Less than 10 years remain to achieve the 2030 Agenda. In this, the Decade of Action, effective advocacy is more important than ever to accelerate progress to realize the vision of the SDGs.



# 1

## The work of joint UN advocacy for SDG implementation



UN agencies have long seen the value of working together on shared goals. Such collaboration has increased when UN teams came together across the globe in an unprecedented way to support authorities to deal with an unprecedented global pandemic and its multiple health, humanitarian and social and economic impacts, particularly in the most vulnerable groups. Under stronger and more impartial leadership, including with a boost for the independent Resident Coordinator function<sup>1</sup>, the UN development system approached the COVID-19 crisis in emergency mode with a commitment to respond and recover better to advance on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) during this Decade of Action.

The SDGs are an ambitious agenda that call UN agencies to a much higher level of coordination on advocacy. All 17 of the SDGs involve crossover between UN agencies. Whether it is gender equality, poverty, climate action or other areas, each SDG requires the work of many or all UN entities. It's a whole of UN approach for a whole of society engagement.

In addition, because the SDGs represent a set of commitments that are bound together, UN teams on the ground are also bound to advocate for their implementation as a whole package. That makes advocating together essential.

For example, in Kuwait, the UN Resident Coordinator's Office organized a series of talks in 2020 for people from diverse fields and UN agencies to discuss how to achieve the SDGs during the Decade of Action; these talks helped clarify how interconnected all the SDGs are, and how the UN can best support them as a whole package.

The UN team in Uruguay partnered with universities to translate the SDG Primer into Spanish and introduce a basic course on SDGs in all private and public universities. That sets up a common base of understanding of our joint approach for the SDGs.

<sup>1</sup> As per DESA government survey 2020, 91% of programme country Governments indicate that the UN is more relevant to their country's development needs when compared to three years ago, 88% indicate that RCs effectively lead UNCTs, up from 79% only a year before, and 92% report that RCs have ensured a coherent UN response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

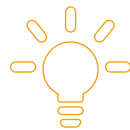
## The Power of Joint UN Advocacy

At the country level, UN staff point out a set of big advantages to advocate together for the SDGs.



### **Speaking with one voice**

When all UN entities at the country level speak together with a coherent message, we make a strong case for SDG implementation while still amplifying the power of every agency in their specific mandates. This is far stronger than a set of competing agency voices that make agendas within sustainable development appear as trade-offs rather than synergies.



### **Pooling the strengths of multiple UN agencies**

Like a potluck meal where every guest brings their special dish to the table, joint UN advocacy allows agencies to pool their strengths. Those strengths include relationships (one agency may have strong connections to the Finance Minister, another to a daily newspaper, etc.), credibility with different audiences (government, youth groups, religious communities, etc.), as well as their expertise in their respective issues.



### **Giving the government a single point of contact**

When five different UN agencies approach a Finance Ministry, for example, each asking for competing budgeting considerations, the request of each one is weakened. UN country-level staff have observed that governments want to deal with the UN through one clear point person (or office). At the same time, there are challenges in doing joint advocacy. Each UN agency has its own mandate, needs, and identity. A joint UN approach to advocacy means that UN Country Teams need to think through the intersectoral components of their agendas. They come with one voice for the SDGs, one that repeats and reiterates rather than distracts and fragments; such a coordinated approach is more likely to lead to transformative change.



## Coordination: The “Glue” That Makes Joint Advocacy Possible

Coordination is the “glue” between agencies that makes joint advocacy possible. What should that coordination look like and how should it operate? Each country and each context are different and there is no one-size-fits-all approach. There are several models for joint advocacy, including:

### **UN agencies work together on a joint initiative**

In this model, representatives of different UN agencies work together from start to finish, on design, planning, and implementation. Such an advocacy initiative is jointly owned. For example, the UN Country Team in Indonesia has taken a firm pledge to not participate as a speaker in any so-called “manels” – public meetings, conferences, or webinars where there are no women on the panel. They invited partners and the diplomatic community in country to join them, and many have taken this pledge as well. The “no manels” pledge is a way of advocating for gender equality in public discussions about UN issues such as poverty, economics, or climate.

### **UN agencies may carry out their advocacy work separately but harmonize their efforts around a larger theme or issues**

This approach was taken by the UN in Colombia, which has some 2,000 staff at 23 UN agencies, each of which worked to support aspects of the peace process that were most relevant to their individual missions. Throughout, they coordinated their efforts to be most efficient and have the biggest impact possible.

### **When applicable, one agency leads on advocacy and others connect for specific advocacy activities**

An example of this model was the Pacific Free and Equal Campaign aimed at building public support for LGBTI people in the region, an effort led by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). In a region where UN staff are spread out across thousands of miles, the campaign allowed other UN agencies to join in for specific activities, such as reaching out to potential allies in civil society and government. A variation on this model is when agencies rotate the responsibility for coordination; this may distribute responsibility more evenly, but it has less commitment and accountability overall.

### **No matter your model for joint advocacy, it is more likely to succeed if two conditions are fulfilled.**

- > **First, responsibility must be designated and financed.** Effective advocacy coordination doesn't happen when it is just added on to someone's already heavy job description. It must be designated as a job responsibility, and the position must be financed.
- > **Second, coordinators must be impartial.** Effective coordination relies not only on skill and capacity but on trust. All the agencies must see the office and the people in charge of coordination as being dedicated to every agency's advocacy interests and work and not biased for or against any one agency.

## Engaging Different Constituencies for Joint Advocacy on the SDGs

For effective advocacy, the UN must engage with different constituencies or audiences. Developing a strategy for engagement and messaging is the topic of the second chapter of this guide. These constituencies include:

### **Government**

Engaging governments is at the core of UN advocacy for the SDGs, as UN Member States bear primary responsibility for implementing the 2030 Agenda. This means engaging with governments at all levels, and with multiple actors in the various branches of government. All of this requires an understanding of the dynamics of governments in the country in question. Government engagement will include a mix of approaches both formal (such as the UN Cooperation Framework, the multi-year plan jointly agreed with host governments that outlines UN partnerships and commitments in each country) and informal (building relationships with and supporting key allies in government).

### **Civil society**

Outside of government a whole host of actors will have deep influence on the fortunes of the 2030 Agenda, and UN engagement with these actors is also an essential advocacy element. UN Country Teams should look at the country's NGOs, social movements,

women and youth organizations, private sector, academia, mass media, community, traditional and religious leaders and other influencers to see where it can find allies for advocacy work on the SDGs. Such explorations also yield valuable information about possible challenges and how to address them. In addition to tapping into the partnerships expertise and network in the UNCT, the Partnerships officers in RCOs should also support outreach endeavors.

### **The public**

Building public support for the 2030 Agenda is a key element of advocacy. The UN began this process even before the SDGs were approved, with a historic global citizen consultation about what the 2030 Agenda should include. In each country, that process of engagement and ownership should continue as part of an advocacy strategy. This includes effective messaging strategies, direct outreach to specific populations such as youth and women, and other methods.



### UN staff

UN staff are both an important target audience and a connection to external audiences. Particularly at country level, UN staff work on the frontlines interacting with key audiences – the government, civil society and the public – in a variety of forums. When UN staff are well-informed and engaged in promoting the 2030 Agenda, they support transformative change. Staff should be supported through training and other means to enable them advocate for the SDGs as related to the work of their particular UN agencies. UN staff are key role models to engage with the wider audience, for example in a national vaccination campaign, or wider efforts to support human rights, curbing the spread of hate speech and/or sharing messages aligned to the core UN values, including in social media.

All UN staff – no matter what type of contract or nationality – should play a key role as UN “ambassadors”, advocating and carrying the messages that help the UN convey its work. That could mean, for example, sharing the Secretary-General’s Verified campaign to promote science-based information, boosting COVID-19 vaccine confidence, or sharing a UNCT campaign on personal social media accounts.<sup>2</sup>



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2 For more guidance on do’s and don’ts of personal use of social media, aligned to the SG’s bulletin on institutional and personal use of social media, please see [UNSDG Knowledge Platform](#)



# 2

## Designing a strategy for SDG advocacy



Too often we define our advocacy in terms of our tactics, the specific actions and activities we undertake to move our goals forward and UN advocacy plans are full of such deliverables – a report, public testimony, meetings with officials, a news event, etc. Strategy, however, is something different. Strategy is the wider view that brings together all those elements into something coherent and powerful. It is a roadmap that plots out a route from where you are to where you want to be.

The more strategic you are, the more successful you will be in advocating for the UN and the SDGs. An advocacy strategy revolves around five basic questions:

### Goals

#### What are your objectives?

Advocacy is a process of identifying a problem and setting out to solve it by engaging with different constituencies.

In the 2030 Agenda, those problems are already laid out at a very high level – poverty, gender inequality, climate change and so on. The 2030 Agenda also outlines solutions in broad terms, such as women’s empowerment, education and jobs.

The task for UN Country Teams is to communicate about these larger problems and solutions in specific, local and compelling ways. What does gender inequality look like

and how does it harm women and girls? What is the impact of climate change in the region and what does that mean in concrete terms such as drought and food access? These concerns must be articulated by UN Country Teams in ways that are rooted in local conditions and stories.

The larger goals of the 2030 Agenda will not be achieved quickly or easily. Instead, progress will be made step by step, over time. An advocacy strategy must identify the small steps on the road to the final destination. Doing so achieves two vital things: it lays the policy, political and programme groundwork for progress and they also deliver something concrete and valuable in people’s day-to-day lives.

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## 2

**Audiences****Whom will you engage?**

In an advocacy effort, in between the place where you begin and the goal you are trying to achieve lies a path filled with obstacles to be overcome, opportunities to be seized and – most important – people and organizations you will need to engage. Mapping those actors and those dynamics is a critical step, just as important for a chess player planning her next move.

There are two categories of people you will engage in your advocacy strategy: those who have authority and those who have influence with authority. Those with authority can enact your goals: maybe that's a Minister of Finance or a local official. Those with influence on that authority may include voters, citizen groups, corporations, political donors or others. At the start of their advocacy planning, UN Country Teams need to identify all these key actors

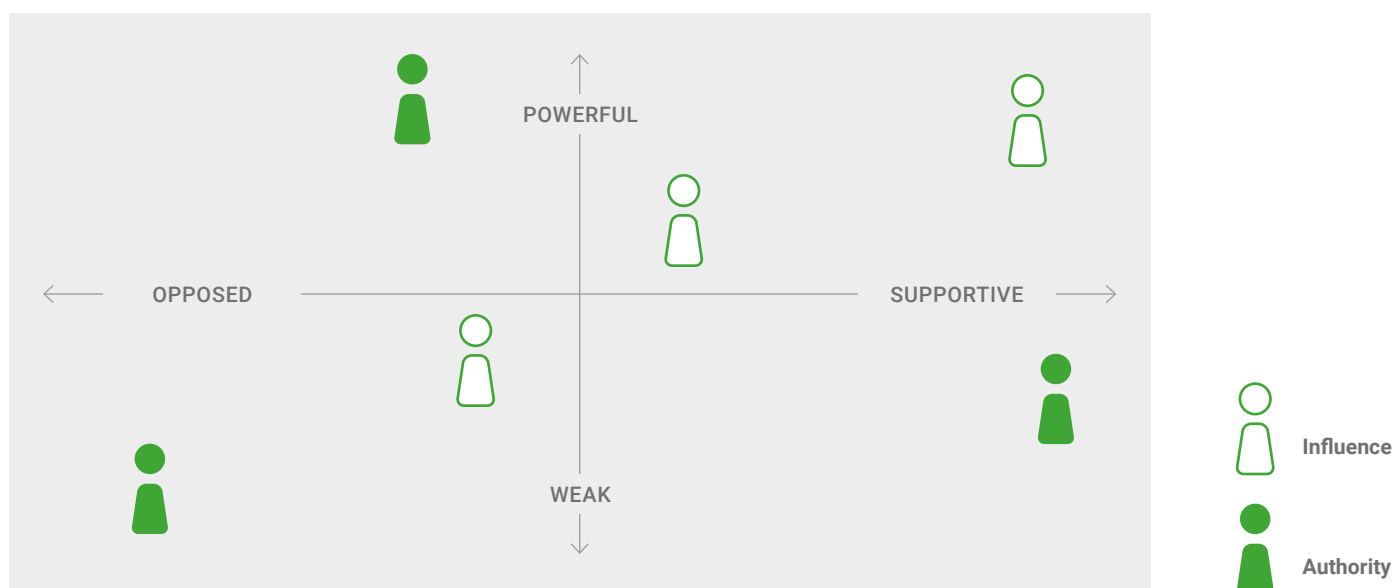
and place them on a grid like the one below, according to whether they are supportive or opposed, and whether they have much power or little power.

Once you have filled in your map, it is time to define your strategic priorities. What mix of people will help you achieve your goals? You might identify people you need to persuade to support your work, or allies whose influence or power you can build, or opponents you want to deal with in a strategic way. For example, a Finance Minister might have the power to fulfill your objectives but might not support them because she has competing demands, in which case your task might be to persuade her directly or to leverage the support of community groups that can influence her decisions.

A mapping exercise like this offers a way to set your priorities and develop the most effective advocacy strategy possible.

**The art of advocacy strategy**

Where do these actors stand in terms of both their position and their power?





## 3

**Messages****How will you talk about your issue?**

Few things are as central to the UN's efforts to advance the 2030 Agenda as effective messaging, and yet many UN offices and staff struggle with it. UN entities and staff have deep expertise and often discuss the SDGs in technical language and acronyms that few outside the UN system would ever understand.

When doing advocacy, UN staff must, when necessary, be able to translate this technical language into the compelling language of their target audiences, be they policymaker, donor, issue expert or the community group. Among the most compelling language for advocacy is the language of stories. Effective advocacy messages from the UN blend information and human stories together into something compelling.

Often, the best messaging works on two levels at once: the historic aspiration for a peaceful and prosperous world as described in the 2030 Agenda, as well as the more concrete terms of the national or local level—what does this future look like in concrete terms?

Whatever the message, it is not always the UN that should deliver that message. The power of the SDGs will depend on how deeply they are owned by the public and by specific constituencies such as young people, women, poor people and others who are their chief recipients and need to also become their visible advocates. Thinking strategically about who the best messenger is as important as strategically crafting the message.



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## 4

**Means****How will you work with your target audiences?**

Once you have identified your goals, audiences, and messages, it is time to determine how you will reach or work with your target audiences.

There are many channels or means through which to advocate for 2030 Agenda. These may include public forums to build support, social media campaigns, meetings with government officials, working with local news media to produce broadcasts, helping catalyze a civil society coalition that will take

the lead on the SDG agenda, or any number of others. A UN Country Team might also want to seek out non-traditional advocacy partners who add diversity and community roots.

UN Country Teams should take care not to fall back on the actions that are institutionally familiar, as in issuing another report, for example. What is familiar may not necessarily be the thing that makes most sense to do. Publishing a report, for example, is fine, so long as it serves your stated purposes and engages your target audiences and sends your intended message. Your primary criterion for determining your actions should be that it is strategic.



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## 5

**Evaluation****How can you tell if your strategy is working?**

Even the most adept advocacy strategy does not guarantee success. A strategy must be evaluated continually to make sure it is always in tune with current conditions. Did you hit a wall that you didn't anticipate in advance? Has some new opportunity presented itself that is a surprise? Does your strategy still hold? Are your tactics having the impact you hoped? What mid-course corrections can you make along the way?

Measure results with Key Performance Indicators to see if your strategy is on track and tweak as necessary.

Evaluation is already an important element of UN programme work, as it should be for UN advocacy as well. Programmes are often easier to evaluate than advocacy. For example, an immunization programme can point to how many people it immunized and how much longer they are likely to live.

Advocacy is harder to evaluate because it takes place in a complex environment with many contributing factors. If a government entity formally adopts a change in policy, various people and organizations other than the UN likely contributed to that change. Still, UN Country Teams should measure what they can—statements of support, media spots, research or other resources given to policymakers, social media reach, and so on—to assess their contribution to progress towards stated objectives, and how they can be ever more effective in their work.



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The United Nations Sustainable Development Group (UNSDG) unites the 37 UN funds, programmes, specialized agencies, departments and offices that play a role in development.

At the country level, 132 UN Country Teams serving 162 countries and territories work together to increase the synergies and joint impact of the UN system.

The UN Development Coordination Office (DCO) serves as the secretariat for the UN Sustainable Development Group (UNSDG) at the regional and global levels. DCO provides managerial and oversight functions for resident coordinators. Its activities are advanced through collective ownership by the UNSDG.

The Office acts as a key conduit for supporting the UN's activities for sustainable development, which inform policy, programme and operations on the ground.

For more information or queries, please contact:  
the DCO Communications and Results Reporting Team  
([dcocommunications@un.org](mailto:dcocommunications@un.org)).