

ACHIEVING THE UNITED NATIONS SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

LATE OR TOO LATE?



JOHN URE

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NATIONS SUSTAINABLE
DEVELOPMENT GOALS

“John Ure is one of the leading lights in the field of socio-economic development at the international level, and with this thoughtful book, he addresses some of the key challenges facing humanity, specifically in achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals. John goes back to basics in explaining the underlying concepts in a textbook fashion that will help those unfamiliar with the topic, but also inform development specialists.”

—Dr Tim Kelly,
Lead Digital Development Specialist, World Bank

“This is a smart book on an urgent topic. SDGs can seem overwhelming. To some, their intrinsic genius is a weakness – everyone can commit to at least one of them, but does that not make them too broadly spread and unfocused? John Ure has spent his career as an academic, consultant economist, and policy advisor in many of the domains covered by the SDGs and is exceptionally well placed to deliver a frank appraisal of what’s going on. Reading like something between a development economics primer, a multi-lateral agency state of the globe report, and a frank briefing from an insider expert to senior decision makers, this short and pithy book will leave you much better informed. In an unexpected way, it may also leave you more optimistic. Greenwashing and other platitudinous writing and platforming kills optimism. The better way is to have an intelligent conversation about what really can and cannot be done. To talk in terms of what economists call ‘second best’ solutions. To demand action that has some chance of delivering outcomes though they may involve tricky trade-offs. This book really does cut to the core to reveal some of the sharper edges of the SDGs and explains how to sharpen them further and use them more effectively.”

—Chris Webster,
Chair Professor of Urban Planning and Development
Economics, The University of Hong Kong

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BY

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

To the memory of Phoebe



A dog and a half

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PREFACE

The existential threat of climate change has to be averted. It signals ongoing disaster for humanity, and for all living things on Earth. Of all the 17 United Nations' *Sustainable Development Goals*, No. 13 'combatting climate change' overshadows them all. Of the others, perhaps only SDG No. 5 'gender equality' should be ranked alongside it as fundamental to the achievement of the SDGs. Not only because women constitute 50% of society,¹ although that alone is sufficient reason, but because gender equality is cross-cutting in its impact upon all social and cultural as well as economic and political issues.

Achieving the SDGs would without question make the world a far better place for current and future generations and give rise to a better stewardship of the planet. Yet most people have either never heard of them or would be hard-pressed to name them, and the widespread concern is that it is too late to achieve the SDGs, especially by the target date of 2030. Hence, the title of this book: 'late or too late'. Yet 'too late' applies literally if it implies one of two things: first, irreversible existential crisis due to global warming, or second, unfortunately but less seriously, missing the target date of 2030. This book is designed to address these issues in two ways: by examining the evidence underlying the SDGs, and the various ways that evidence can be interpreted, and by offering 'Ways Forward'. So, the title is not chosen to promote pessimism but rather rationalism. With a grip of rationality, humanity should be able to succeed, but that is not guaranteed. When we come to a Precipice, it is time to stop and think and then to act rationally.

This book arose from a presentation I gave at the University of the Philippines in 2022 which looked at the ways in which society could contribute to the SDGs despite yawning gaps in

policy-making and environmental responsibilities. A special thanks is due to my long-standing collaborator Dr Jenny Wan who double-checked my text throughout. Jenny worked with me when I was an Associate Professor at the University of Hong Kong in the 1990s and when I was a government and industry consultant in Singapore up to 2023.

I would further like to thank for their support in various ways Jhona Bordey, Meisan Mak, my precious Golden Retriever Phoebe who sadly passed away before she could get to chew the pages, and my wonderful supporting wife Charleth Luna. Thanks to them all and others unnamed.

NOTE

1. NED. (2020). *Are there more men or women in the world?* https://www.ined.fr/en/everything_about_population/demographic-facts-sheets/faq/more-men-or-women-in-the-world/