



## Industrial-Organizational psychology and the United Nations sustainable development goals

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**Abstract.** How can industrial-organizational (I-O) psychology science and practice assist with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)? This review follows an earlier report (Sall, Clayton, & Scott, 2014) and has three purposes: first, to explore how I-O psychology as a discipline is collectively considering and engaging with the SDGs; second, to understand the relevance of I-O psychology research and practice areas to the SDGs; and third, to make suggestions for how I-O psychology can more robustly and effectively engage with and support the SDGs.

**Keywords:** industrial-organizational psychology, SDGs, sustainability, United Nations.

### Introduction

In 2015, the United Nations' Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the world's first prominent set of global goals meant to promote and coordinate international development work will come to an end. The MDGs are due to be replaced by the world's second set of global development goals. These new goals focus upon creating a world "that is just, equitable and inclusive" through sustained and inclusive economic growth, social development, and environmental protection (UN, 2014a, para. 4). These new goals are known as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). An outline of these goals is

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already emerging through preliminary drafts (UN, 2014a) and it is readily apparent that the world of work and I-O psychology has an important role to play in promoting them. The list of draft goals has been included in Table 1. This article: gives examples of ways that the discipline of I-O psychology is working to engage with the SDGs, reviews the ways that research and practice in I-O psychology is relevant to the priorities likely to be included in the SDGs, and provides recommendations for how I-O psychology's relevance to and support of the SDGs can be strengthened.

### **I-O psychology's engagement with the SDGs**

As further detailed in Sall, Clayton, & Scott (2014), the discipline of I-O psychology is increasingly working to engage with the international development community and issues of global human development. For example in 2011, the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology (SIOP) worked to, and succeeded in gaining, official consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC; Scott, 2011). By doing so, an organization focused on I-O psychology made up of over 8,000 members from a diverse set of countries — from the Russian Federation to the Republic of Ghana — gained greater influence at the United Nations. SIOP joined a handful of non-governmental organizations focusing on psychology with this status; other organizations include: the International Association of Applied Psychology, the International Council of Psychologists, and the International Union of Psychological Sciences (ECOSOC, 2013). SIOP's consultative status gives additional importance to its ongoing efforts to map out the research and practice domains within I-O psychology that are of relevance to the SDGs; these efforts are being undertaken by the team of representatives from SIOP to the United Nations.

Efforts by professional associations to raise awareness of, and to increase an engagement with international development goals have been paralleled by the diverse efforts of the members of those professional associations. Many of these efforts are explained in greater depth in a recent article highlighting issues in the emerging sub-field of humanitarian work psychology (HWP; Thompson & Gloss, 2014). HWP focuses on the synthesis of I-O psychology and issues of international development and humanitarian work ([www.gohwp.org](http://www.gohwp.org)). Of note, a "global special issue" involving special issues or sections in nine psychology journals focusing on the intersection of poverty reduction and psychology was completed in 2013. A review and synthesis of the global special issue's content was recently published and it provided numerous examples of how I-O psychology is engaging with international development priorities — from studying ways to promote effective humanitarian work to understanding the ramifications of income inequality at work (Carr et al., 2014). In addition to the global special issue, an upcoming book is set to directly address the ways in which the discipline of I-O psychology has engaged with the MDGs (McWha, Maynard & Berry, in progress). Finally, SIOP, in conjunction with other partners including the European Association for Work and Organizational Psychology, has released a number of white papers on important issues relevant to the SDGs — from youth unemployment to the emergence of HWP (Carr et al., 2013; Searle, et al., 2014).

### **The relevance of I-O psychology research and practice to the SDGs**

As a way to continue to understand and promote I-O psychology's engagement with and support of the SDGs, a recent article by SIOP's UN team in *The Industrial-Organizational Psychologist* (TIP), detailed four conceptual linkages between the SDGs and I-O psychology (Gloss et al., 2014). This article expands and elaborates on these four linkages. Moreover, in light of the discipline of I-O psychology's infrequent consideration of research and practice issues outside of Western

settings (see Gelfand, Leslie, & Fehr, 2008), we attempt to cite, I-O psychology research from authors in non-Western settings or from research considering issues outside of the West. Deliberately considering non-Western research has the potential to help moderate problematic biases in not only I-O psychology, but all of the social sciences (Henrich, Hein, & Norenzayan, 2010).

First, I-O psychology is relevant to the SDGs because despite their global focus, the SDGs are *goals* and as goals they relate to the large body of research within the discipline on goal setting and evaluation (e.g., Locke & Latham, 2013). This highlights how, more broadly than just the particular targets of the SDGs, I-O psychology has an important role to play in assessing the outcomes of actors like non-governmental organizations within the international development community (Takooshian, 2008). Indeed, there have been recent efforts to incorporate monitoring and evaluation tools and theories developed and/or used by I-O directly into deliberations regarding the monitoring and evaluation of the SDGs (Husch, Saner, Yiu, & Zeitz, 2014; UN, 2014b).

Beyond goal-setting and the evaluation of outcomes toward goals, I-O psychology is also of relevance to the SDGs because many of their priorities involve an intimate consideration of positive, productive, and healthy working arrangements and conditions. Within the United Nations framework, working conditions are often thought of under the International Labour Organization's Decent Work Agenda (Anker, Chernyshev, Egger, Mehran, & Ritter, 2002) which seeks to promote freedom, equity, security, and human dignity by promoting positive working arrangements (e.g., voluntary versus forced labor) and working conditions (e.g., safe working conditions). Thus, a diverse array of research and practice in I-O psychology that is tied to worker health and well-being is of direct relevance to many of the SDGs — for example, research into the connections between worker motivation and aspects of psychological well-being at work including job satisfaction and satisfaction with life (Osin, Ivanova, & Gordeeva, 2013).

Third, in addition to its relevance to goals and working conditions/arrangements, I-O psychology is relevant to the SDGs through its consideration of a wide range of issues relating to the effectiveness of non-profit and public-sector employees. This includes professionals in occupations that have obvious relevance to global development priorities — from doctors, nurses, and community health workers to teachers. However, the SDGs will likely include priorities for a wide range of issues that rely upon less-obvious professions. For example, the draft SDGs' focus on issues of environmental stability and energy (Table 1) brings questions of the long-term effectiveness and wellbeing of professionals like geologists into question. Research in I-O psychology has deliberately addressed a wide range of these professions — including geologists (see e.g., Shun'kova, 2012).

Fourth and finally, I-O psychology is relevant to developmental goals through its engagement with the promotion of worker wellbeing and effectiveness in the private sector. The productivity of and working conditions in the private sector are some of the chief determinants of personal income, economic growth, and broader wellbeing across the globe (UNDP, 2014; World Bank, 2012). It is hard to overstate the diversity of ways in which I-O psychology is engaged in research and/or practice regarding the long-term prosperity of private-sector organizations and workers. For example, research has explored everything from the role of trust in the development of business partnerships (Stroh, 2012), and the dynamics of developing employees through coaching (Klarin, 2014), to the use of assessment centers to reliably and accurately hire the best workers (Vuchetich et al., 2013) and dealt with issues of managing employees across large geographic distances — including assessing their managerial potential (Popov & Lurie, 2012). Yet beyond this general and widespread relevance, I-O psychology has also deliberately considered a range of issues that are of particularly great importance to private-sector workers and organizations involved in international development. These issues include private-sector organization's efforts to benefit broader society through corporate social responsibility (CSR; Ishikawa, 2013) and the characteristics of potential entrepreneurs (Korsun,

2014). The relevance of both CSR and entrepreneurship to global development were prominently highlighted by a report from the United Nations Development Programme (2014) focusing on the barriers to and opportunities for the private-sector's abilities to reduce global poverty.

Table 1

*Draft Sustainable Development Goals as of 14 September 2014*

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Goal 1. End poverty in all its forms everywhere;

Goal 2. End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture;

Goal 3. Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages;

Goal 4. Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote life-long learning opportunities for all;

Goal 5. Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls;

Goal 6. Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all;

Goal 7. Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable, and modern energy for all;

Goal 8. Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all;

Goal 9. Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation;

Goal 10. Reduce inequality within and among countries;

Goal 11. Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable;

Goal 12. Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns;

Goal 13. Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts;

Goal 14. Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development;

Goal 15. Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss;

Goal 16. Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels;

Goal 17. Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development.

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*Note.* These draft Sustainable Development Goals are contained in an outcome document from the United Nations Open Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals (UN, 2014a).

## Future Steps

As illustrated in the previous section, I-O psychology is relevant to the SDGs, and to global development more generally, because it considers four important issues, namely: goal-setting, working conditions/arrangements, public sector effectiveness and worker wellbeing, and private sector productivity and worker wellbeing. Yet there is arguably a great deal of work left to do to

help ensure that the tools and theories from I-O psychology assist both the efficacy of work toward current goals, and to ensure that work toward those goals takes into consideration important issues of human psychology in the workplace. In particular, we highlight two issues that will be especially important to further explore, develop, and prioritize in the future.

The integration of tools, theories, and perspectives from I-O psychology into international development work, and in particular with the work of the United Nations is not new. Often, as expanded upon by Lawrence, Thompson, & Gloss (2014), aspects of this integration have flown under the banner of “human resources development”. The term “human resources development” was used as early as the 1980s by the UN General Assembly but consideration of importance of the development of human resources on a national and global scale was referenced by UN bodies as early as 1965 (UN, 1989; 1965). A great deal of insight from research and scholarship has been generated by efforts toward human resources development on a national/international level, or as we refer to it here, “national human resources development” (NHRD) — either from academics (e.g., Cunningham, Lynham, & Weatherly, 2006; Lawrence, 1990), by national governments like that of the Republic of South Africa (HRDC-SA, 2010), or by international development actors (USAID, 1988), and I-O psychology should be sure to fully consider, engage with, and build from this work. For example, without a full appreciation of the past struggles and themes within NHRD literature and work, important lessons and insight might be lost, including: the necessity of breaking with human-capital theory’s tradition of considering people’s individual differences (e.g., knowledge, skills, and abilities) as economic commodities meant to be traded and instead of appreciating those differences as important aspects of people’s human individuality and capabilities (United Nations, 1995); the benefits of both appreciating and prioritizing the development of “human resourcefulness”, that is, people’s capacities for resilience, initiative, and ingenuity in response to livelihood opportunities and challenges (Lawrence, 2013); and the necessity of integrating and coordinating a diverse array of development efforts due to their joint consideration of human resources (e.g., actors in the public health field with experts in business development (Lawrence, 1992; UN, 1994).

The specific insights from efforts in NHRD help to highlight broader insights regarding work and scholarship in the relationship of work to global human development. For decades starting in at least the 1960s, a prominent if not the major focus of the international development community was on economic growth and modernization. However, other trends and emphases have always been present and much of current thinking regarding human development emphasizes a different ultimate goal — that of individual freedom, or more precisely people’s capabilities to accomplish their goals in life (Sen, 1999). Perhaps most prominently, scholarship regarding the capabilities approach led to the development of the “Human Development Index” which included a country’s level of financial prosperity alongside other ingredients for having the freedom for determining one’s one life – namely educational attainment and health standards — as a measure of overall human progress (UN, 1990). When it comes to major issues in the world of work, for example the issue of developing people’s work skills, the emphasis has often been on how skills are the ingredients for private-sector financial and employment growth. These are critically important outcomes, but as with questions of broader human development, skills development and other major issues in the world of work should ultimately be understood in their relationship to human capabilities. An emphasis on capabilities shifts a focus toward the role of work as a core component of human wellbeing – even outside of work’s economic and financial benefits. Empirical research has demonstrated that work is an important way in which fundamental psychological needs can be fulfilled (Deci & Ryan, 1985); moreover, scholarship in the capabilities approach has highlighted that the opportunity to engage in work that honors human dignity is a fundamental human capability (Nussbaum, 2003). In recognition of the multifaceted importance of work to human wellbeing, we call for research into



factors that support and define people's work-related capabilities. This might include the creation of a work-capabilities index (WCI) which could move beyond traditional conceptualizations of economic and workforce development (e.g., firm productivity, wages, and unemployment) to directly evaluate people's and organization's abilities to accomplish their work-related goals. A WCI would likely consider the psychological and interpersonal nature of work and would require appreciating and measuring the priorities and perspectives of organizations and individual workers from settings around the world.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, practitioners of I-O psychology are responding to the emergence of the SDGs — in part, because of the relevance of research and practice in I-O psychology to fundamental issues in global development, namely: goals, working arrangements/conditions, and the effectiveness and wellbeing of workers in the public- and the private-sectors. As I-O psychology and I-O psychologists continue to increase their engagement with and support of the SDGs<sup>2</sup>, it will be important to draw insight from work in national human resources development and to prioritize people's work-related capabilities.

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<sup>2</sup> Some SDG resources:

- Sustainable Development Goals: <http://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/>
- SIOP Pro-Social Resources and Links: <http://www.siop.org/prosocial/>
- National Human Resources Development: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National\\_human\\_resource\\_development](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_human_resource_development)

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