

Sharon Lee: Hi, welcome to Brotherhood Talks.

John Thwaites: By world standards on SDG 3, which is health, and SDG 4, education, we are doing outstandingly well. When things like our life expectancy, our education opportunities are really right at the top. At the other end of the scale on climate, we're actually probably just about at the bottom of the world.

Conny Lenneberg: The opportunity for the SDG is to really be a catalyst to action and for us to organise around to start speaking the same language to start measuring our contributions and measuring our successes and failures as a nation against these common indicators is a really important way in which we can strengthen that public debate and public awareness.

Sharon Lee: Are we giving the next generation of fair go? For professor John Thwaites, that's what the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, or SDGs, are all about. John Thwaites is a professorial fellow at the Sustainable Development Institute at Monash University in Melbourne. He was also deputy premier of Victoria from 1999 to 2007. He joined Brotherhood Executive Director Conny Lenneberg at Brotherhood Talks.

John Thwaites: I've been asked to talk about the Sustainable Development Goals and I'll try to do so with a particular lens of the Brotherhood of St Laurence, and the mission of the Brotherhood to work with and partner with low-income Australians for a better and more prosperous future. Now, the Sustainable Development Goals were agreed by all countries at the United Nations in September 2015. And they cover economic prosperity, social justice and environmental sustainability.

John Thwaites: And there are 17 goals and underneath each goal there are a number of targets. And the point about that is to give countries specific targets to achieve by 2030, and all up there are 169 targets. And if you look at those goals, going from poverty through hunger and health and inequality to partnerships, actually the Brotherhood deals with just about every single goal.

John Thwaites: And I guess historically the Brotherhood was less focused on the environmental goals, but as you said, for the last nearly decade I've been working with Damien and the team here on ensuring that low-income Australians involved in the debate about climate change. And the solution to climate change and that any that are introduced take account of the particular vulnerability of low-income Australians to climate change, not the least around poor housing.

John Thwaites: So as temperatures rise heat waves occur. It's people in poor housing without insulation who are most effected. So, I think that's an important starting point that the Brotherhood has a real interest in supporting a set of goals that all countries in the world have agreed to, to achieve sustainable development by 2030.

John Thwaites: And particularly the principle that underpins the goals is “Leave no one behind”. And that's for a very good reason, because if you look at development in the world for the last 30 years, there has actually been extraordinary wealth creation. Poverty levels globally have reduced dramatically from around 50% of people in developing countries in extreme poverty in 1992 to around less than 10% today.

John Thwaites: So, there's been an incredible development but two big things that have probably gone backwards. The first is climate change and second is inequality within countries. And I was at another presentation someone gave on this, and I highlighted it: eight men in the world have as much wealth as the bottom half of the population of the world. And so, when all countries agreed to these goals, there was a recognition that we have to do something about that gross inequality within countries, and the concept of “Leave no one behind” as an underpinning principle was formed as part of the goals.

John Thwaites: And once again for the Brotherhood that is a driving principle. I suppose more generally why the goals are more important, I think because they address these huge challenges we face, first massive urbanisation. It's hard to get your head around the number of people that are moving into cities every week, but by 2050 there's going to be another two billion people in the world and all of those people are going to be in cities. The growth is all in cities, the size of cities, the physical footprint is more than doubling. So I think that's a huge challenge.

John Thwaites: Another big challenge, as I said, that hasn't been met is the challenge of climate change and environmental degradation, where we're going backwards. And climate change will have a greater impact on poor people than on the rest of the community. Poor people who are least able to afford ways to adapt to climate change or to protect themselves from the impacts of climate change. But we have other challenge: the challenge of providing good jobs for this growing world population, and jobs that are now increasingly requiring knowledge and skills.

John Thwaites: And the challenges around IT and artificial intelligence. So these are the big challenges and this is style development goals help us meet those challenges. And I suppose the other thing that they do, which is important, they do it in the frame of a connected world. Now, remember these were agreed in 2015 we've probably gone backwards in terms of our connections. If you look at the conflicts now, we're seeing the US, China, a lot of populism and nationalism now creeping into Europe and other countries.

John Thwaites: And one reason I think we've got to grab the goals is that they were a time in history when all countries agreed that we had common problems and common solutions. And so that connectedness that the goals promote is something that we at the Brotherhood and those of us who support system development should really be supporting and promoting.

John Thwaites: Now, I do want to focus on this “Leave no one behind”. A number of goals really relate to this principle of “Leave no one behind”. And the first is the goal of ending poverty in all its forms everywhere. And there are two aspects of this, there's ending extreme poverty and people living on less than \$2 a day, but there's also relative poverty that is within countries, people living on less than 50% or 60% of the median income.

John Thwaites: And for Australia, obviously that's still a challenge that we have, but there are other goals that are important when we're looking at leaving no one behind. Goal number two, which is ending hunger and achieving food security. And importantly also improving nutrition. And if you're looking at Australia one of the big health risks we face is obesity from poor nutrition and disproportionately that's affecting lower-income families. Goal four, ensuring inclusive and equitable education. The aim is that everyone should have access to a high quality education.

John Thwaites: And once again, in Australia, we know that the difference depending upon the postcode that you happen to be on in, the difference in your educational opportunities can be quite marked. SDG 5, achieving gender equality, once again for Australia, a big challenge. It's something I might say when I've looked at this, I've been quite shocked at about how little improvement there is on certain indicators, despite all the talk of the last 30 years in certain areas there has been not much improvement at all in gender equality. And finally SDG 10, which is reducing inequality within and among countries. And just to give you an example of a specific target under SDG 10, which is worth looking at, the first one is that the incomes of the bottom 40% of the population should rise at a higher rate than the overall average of income increase. So that's actually a specific target which the current Australian government signed up to, which is quite ironic. I'm not sure that they looked at the small print.

John Thwaites: So, you can see within the goals there are a number of very clear benchmarks for us as we seek to leave no one behind and reduce inequality. Now, the first thing you've got to do if you're going to achieve those goals is to measure how you're going and report on it, and last year the Australian government under its agreement at the UN produced what's called a voluntary national review. That is a review of how we're performing on the goals, and I produced a SDG data platform, which you can find on the web, which is the government's collection of how we're going.

John Thwaites: It's not a bad start. It's worth looking at. But I was concerned, as were a number of others who have been involved in this area, that they really needed to be some independent assessment because, having been in government myself, I know that governments aren't always best at highlighting the areas where they're doing badly. And then it doesn't need to be some independent assessment. And so, we set up something called the National Sustainable Development Council and produced this report last September called SDG Transforming Australia.

John Thwaites: And what we did in that report was gather the best data we could on all of the 17 goals - how we're performing in Australia. The Brotherhood actually did the work on SDG number one. And Tony Nicholson, who is the previous Executive Director before Conny, was on the council and helped. And Damien did quite a lot of work as did others at the Brotherhood on this.

John Thwaites: Now, how is Australia performing? Well, what we did was we looked at some 86 targets under the goals, and in summary 35% were on track, 23% needed improvement, 18% were a long way behind that we'd made a breakthrough and in 24% we were right off track. And the why we assessed that, we looked at Australia's performance in the year 2000 on each of these targets, these indicators, things like the level of poverty. We then looked at where we are in 2015 and from that, we made an assessment as to where they were on track to achieve the target by 2030, because we're sort of halfway between that 2000 to 2030 period. And that's how we came to these assessments.

John Thwaites: What was more interesting now is where we're doing well and where we're doing badly. Now, by world standards on SDG 3, which is health and SDG 4, education, we are doing outstandingly well. When things like our life expectancy and education opportunities are really right at the top in the world. At the other end of the scale on climate, we're actually probably just about at the bottom of the world. And when you add in our exports of coal to the emissions we produce here in Australia, there's probably per head, the worst contributor to climate change in the world.

John Thwaites: And then in most of the other SDGs, it was really a mixed performance. We're doing quite well in some ways and not in others. Good news. We're a wealthy nation with many years of strong economic growth. Productivity is pretty good. We're a leader in a number of industries. As I said, we're healthy, we're skilled and we're a pretty open dynamic and diverse society.

John Thwaites: But the assessment did show some really big challenges. So overall in poverty, the rate of poverty actually decreased from 2000 to 2015, and the rate of exclusion, which the Brotherhood calculates, decreased. So, I think the poverty on the 50% scale, 50% of the median, went down from about 13% of the population to 10%. But in two areas we've gone way backwards. And the first is obviously very well known in the community, is Newstart. Where in 2000 people on Newstart were actually on the poverty line, now, they're more than 20% below it.

John Thwaites: But the other one of course is indigenous poverty where around Australia, around 30% of the indigenous community is living in poverty and higher rates in some remote areas. I talked about SDG 5, gender equality, and two areas where there are challenges, one is domestic violence. And a second: it surprised me how little much of a dent we've made on reducing the gender pay gap in the last 25 years.

- John Thwaites: Other challenges: energy and water costs going up, household debt has increased very substantially, we've had stagnant wages growth and underemployment inequality, I'll talk more about in a moment, housing affordability and homelessness. And another one which we don't hear enough about is the prison population. Interestingly, under SDG 16, which is justice, we looked at crime in Australia. Crime has gone down substantially, the fear of crime has gone up and imprisonment rates and the total number of people in prisons has skyrocketed.
- John Thwaites: I spoke to someone from the Victorian Government the other day who said, "We're on track to have 8,000 people in prison in Victoria," and you know, that's not sustainable. So just to look at a few of these in a little more detail and what you can actually do is go onto the website, SDG Transforming Australia, and see this data, and the idea is to be interactive and for people to be able to see that. But first income inequality, and there's been a lot of debate about this in Australia and certainly if you read The Australian newspaper it'll tell you there's no problem because inequality has not got worse in the last 20 years.
- John Thwaites: Now, you can debate that issue around the edges but the reality is even if it hasn't got worse, Australia's inequality on income sits towards the higher end of other OECD countries. And given that we've just had nearly 30 years of economic growth, wouldn't you have hoped that that's an issue that we might have really addressed and reduced inequality? Are we happy with keeping it flat? I mean, if you look at wealth equalities and not income, not what people are getting, but their wealth, what we've seen in recent years is an increase in inequality.
- John Thwaites: So, if you go back to 2010, you'll see that the top 10% of wealth, the people that were in the top 10% owned 8.5 times more than the poorest 40%. So, the top 10% owned 8.5 times more, but in 2014 that increased to 10 times more. So, in the politics of this argument about inequality, I think it is reasonable to say there hasn't been a massive increase in income inequality, but we haven't done very well in reducing it, given our economic growth that we probably should've, but wealth inequality has got worse.
- John Thwaites: And then that's that point I was talking about the gender pay gap, which if you go back to the 1990s was around 16% and today it's not very much different. And another figure that we had there was the superannuation gap for women and men, which is why women retire with just a fraction of what men retire with.
- John Thwaites: Now, the issue which has got quite a lot of political focuses, unemployment, has come down which is great, but underemployment, that is people who are working less hours than they would like to, has gone up. Cost of living pressures I think a well-known, and this is something I've worked very closely with the Brotherhood on, electricity prices particularly increased 200% in that period

from 2000 to today, much greater than the wage index or the consumer price index.

John Thwaites: A really good bit of news, and something that I think we can be proud of in Australia, is the huge increase in people with tertiary qualifications, both vocational and university.

John Thwaites: Now, why is that an essential policy? It was the policy of governments in Australia, and Bryan Howe, here today, in the Hawke government, I think take a lot of credit to increase the proportion of people that finished high school, so massively within a decade. It went from around 30% to 80%-90% - massive policy change. And that's why we're now seeing the payoff, the benefit of that in the working age population, getting tertiary qualifications.

John Thwaites: The one challenge which is also something that Brotherhood has been a pioneer in where we're not doing so well in education is early childhood education. And this is investment: there's Australia investment and there's the OECD average. So we've still got a way to go in early childhood. And I think when you look at all of this, you look at climate change, you look at early childhood, you look at housing affordability, these are the challenges. I think there is a question that the Sustainable Development Goals raises for us: are we giving the next generation a fair go?

John Thwaites: And that's what sustainability is all about. It is about ensuring that the people who come after us have as fair a go as we had, whether it's in terms of getting good jobs or houses or a safe environment and healthy environment. And the final point I'd make is this: that the Sustainable Development Goals are only meaningful if they're more than a set of pretty pictures.

John Thwaites: Now, you've all seen those icons, but they're not going to be achieved by business as usual. The only way we're going to give the next generation a fair go and make those goals is by some big changes and transformations. And that's why increasingly, I think certainly at Monash and in the Sustainable Development Solutions Network, we're looking at trying to identify what are the big transformations that are needed to achieve the goals.

John Thwaites: So inclusive growth, so a growth that doesn't increase inequality but actually provides more opportunity to everyone, for example, or sustainable food and land. So instead of the food system leading to more emissions and less biodiversity actually is healthy for the planet as well. So the final thing I do is ask you in your own mind to think, "What are the big changes that you think we need if we're going to achieve those goals?" Thank you.

Sharon Lee: This is Brotherhood Talks, a podcast by the Brotherhood of St Laurence. We've been listening to Professor John Thwaites talking on the UN Sustainable Development Goals. Next at the podium was Brotherhood Executive Director Conny Lenneberg, who sees the goals as an important shared vision.

Conny Lenneberg: When I think about the Sustainable Development Goals, they grow out of the Millennium Development Goals, and that was something that came to an end in 2015 when these goals were then devised. And it was a long process that led to devising them. But part of the reason why they went beyond the Millennium Development Goals, which if you remember that eight goals focused on the poorest countries to reduce extreme poverty.

Conny Lenneberg: That was about a small proportion of the planet, the Sustainable Development Goals that in response to a hunger and yearning that was felt much more broadly about the kind of community that we are doesn't really represent what we ourselves feel should represent: a just outcome and a fair and sustainable future for our children and our grandchildren.

Conny Lenneberg: So, it was really that the Millennium Development Goals develop into a broader change in all parts of the world, including Australia, about wanting to re-envision what the good life is. If you think about that global vision we had the United Nations Human Development Report was born 50 years ago, so that's an old conversation where we said GDP is not enough to capture what we mean about a good life. And 40 years later, we now thankfully have a much more articulated vision of what that future looks like and one which does have global endorsement.

Conny Lenneberg: We are one of the most prosperous countries in the world, yet one in eight Australians live in poverty, 17% of our children live in poverty, 40% of children in single parent households, the overwhelming majority of which are single mother-headed households, live in poverty. And the evidence about the impact of that, not just for the individuals but also for children in the long-term and the life chances that they will have is indisputable. It is simply poor economics if we're just going to go with economic indicators to not invest in ensuring that people do not live in disadvantage, but beyond that, we know that we care about more than just the economic figures.

Conny Lenneberg: We know that 15% of people in Australia have identified themselves as food insecure. And sadly, the most extreme measure of poverty, those living on less than \$2 a day, Professor Peter Saunders recently said that 40,000 people in Australia live on less than that mark of extreme disadvantage. And that's simply not good enough when you look at the political conversation we're currently in, in the middle of an election. When there's a lot of talk about what a fair goal means, and we know that these are the realities that people live in and there's been so much in the press in recent weeks from all kinds of sources that really unpack what it means to live in poverty.

Conny Lenneberg: It is not some sort of relative poverty of not having a flat screen television, it is people not knowing where they're going to get the next meal from, foregoing meals so their children can eat, foregoing opportunities and really being placed under desperate stress every minute of every day and knowing how they're going to meet the next challenge that their basic living needs present them.

- Conny Lenneberg: So, this is a vision for people on the planet, and I wish in this beautiful graphic, there was a picture of an animal because they are part of this story as well. The planet is not just plants and oceans, it's about other life, other animals, on this planet. And it's about sharing that prosperity and thinking about what it means to be prosperous. So it's that global vision.
- Conny Lenneberg: It's also universal integrated and indivisible, and I think that's really critical. The days of trading offers saying, "Oh, well we'll have to have this coal mine because it creates jobs." You can't think that you can do that and not pay the price for the overall vision: it's a critical part of what this means. It also really demonstrates this critical underpinning of partnerships which John spoke about and the critical nature of working collaboratively. And it's the critical nature of peace. There are 70 million people in the world today who are displaced by violent conflict, and I was astounded as someone who spent almost the last decade living overseas, working on international humanitarian issues that any political leader in this country could imagine that Australia's prosperity should be built on becoming one of the major arms exporters.
- Conny Lenneberg: And yet that was stated as a goal, these things are indivisible and peace is an essential foundation and requirement for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. I've read when I was at university many years ago Garrett Hardin, who put out a book called Lifeboat Ethics. And in some sense as Australia has been pursuing that path, that sense of we're okay, we can just protect our borders and we'll be okay. Well, we're not, we're part of the oceans, we're part of a global climate, we've got 80 million refugees displaced people in the world. We can't maintain our prosperity without seeing our future inextricably linked to others.
- Conny Lenneberg: The learnings from the MDGs, John touched on this, we have more than half in poverty, 1.9, really two billion people living in poverty and now it's about 800 million. That is a massive difference. In 1990, 33,000 children died each and every day of preventable causes. And that I think in 2015 was about 16,000, which is a massive change but still hardly anything that I think we'd be happy to say, "Job done, we're finished, we've got a way to go". I actually think it's about 11,000 today and it's a demonstration of the strength of a rallying cry of government, business, not for profits, the public sector, academia swinging behind that vision, measuring our progress and not just letting us have the nice speech but actually coming along behind and saying, "How well have we done?"
- Conny Lenneberg: And it also becomes a real moral suasion in the world where you shift people's overall thinking about what is good and what is good enough. It has enormous value to social justice agencies because it allows us to swing behind the global ambition. And the work that the Sustainable Development Council has done has been really critical here in promoting the SDGs. So, we have businesses - where are they? CBS Super looks at the Sustainable Development Goals and measures its progress against them.

- Conny Lenneberg: The Green Building Council of Australia, Good Shepherd Microfinance links its financial inclusion as contributions to a global goal. The City of Melbourne is reframing its work in terms of contribution to the SDGs and even philanthropic foundations, the Morris Group Foundation, is doing that. So, it's the work of these groups and particularly the Sustainable Development Council that is giving the impetus to that, but we've got a long way to go.
- Conny Lenneberg: So just quickly, the ones that I love this 1.3 we need to implement, this is the measure of target one. We need to implement nationally appropriate social protection system and measures while Newstart's got to increase and not by just \$70 a week. It needs to be increased and its adequacy needs to be taken out of this political space into a separate space which looks at what it means to be adequate. 4.2: all boys and girls have access to quality early childhood development care and pre-primary education.
- Conny Lenneberg: 8.5 which is one that's very close to the Brotherhood's heart as well, full and productive employment and decent work, decent work as defined by the ILO, which is regular, sufficient, well-paid and regulated with fair working conditions for all, including young people and people living with disability. We need to sustainably reduce the proportion of youth not in education, employment and training.
- Conny Lenneberg: 10, which I love, this one really flips the chart completely. The goal requires us to measure our progress by ensuring that the bottom 40% of our community benefits more than the top. And as John said, that is not happening at the moment. And if you think about policy makers measuring their success on that measure, it will substantially change the kinds of policy decisions that we have. And finally, 10.4, adopt policies, fiscal wage and social protection to achieve greater equality and ensure access for all to adequate safe and affordable housing and basic services. You can see there's many specific elements that are very relevant.
- Conny Lenneberg: For the Brotherhood, we're just signing off. It'll go to our board within 10 days' or two weeks' time and a new strategy, and we're measuring our overall contribution of our strategy to the Sustainable Development Goals. First goal number one, but then first, as John painted the picture, there are many elements of the SDGs that apply to our work and we'll be holding ourselves accountable for being able to focus on and measure our contributions towards that. Thank you.
- Conny Lenneberg: So I just wanted to start just asking John a question and then I'll open up to questions from the floor. John, what makes you confident that we're on the right track with Australia really starting to swing behind these SDGs? And where do you see the greatest opportunities going forward?
- John Thwaites: Well I wish I could say I was confident, I'm not confident, we are. I think we are addressing as a country many of the issues, I don't think at a national level the

SDGs have a lot of influence. They haven't to date. When Australia reported on the voluntary national review last year, it did actually stipulate departments to look at what was happening. And that was a positive thing, we actually had more discussions with departments, there was a lot of interest. It's the old thing: when you've got an exam, you study for it.

John Thwaites: Now, I think some of that interest seems to have waned again. And I think it is a challenge for Australia politically to really embrace the goals. And when you talked about that Lifeboat Ethics, I think that's part of it. I do think as a country we do tend to look at ourselves not nearly as much as we might in terms of our global connections.

John Thwaites: And I think one of the challenges of the goals is that they were great at the United Nations, and I think a lot of the political process as well that's at the UN, that's not here in Australia. So I think that's a problem. On the other hand, we are seeing a lot of other organisations embrace the goals in their planning. So actually business is doing more than government. A lot of businesses are superannuation funds and some of the big industry superannuation funds are using the goals, as they look at assessing their investments, and a number of businesses are doing it.

John Thwaites: A number of organisations - I'm actually chair of Melbourne Water and Melbourne Water is using it now to really frame a lot of our activities, as are many of the water authorities all around the country. So, I think this is something that's building, but I'd be I think misleading to say that this is a huge national priority.

Conny Lenneberg: Thank you. One of the things I noted when the MDGs started that Australia similarly said, "Oh, well, yes we signed on, but we're going to measure our progress and we're going to make our decisions about our overseas development assistance according to our own measures, different measures." It was interesting after a few years, there's more people globally swung behind the MDGs and other countries and major donors started using that. It put a lot of pressure on Australia to rethink its position and to start adopting that universal language.

Conny Lenneberg: So hopefully that'll be part of it, it's interesting to see that business is getting so far ahead. How far do you think business commitment to the SDGs will actually make a difference to policy choices nationally?

John Thwaites: Well, I think it's too early to say and it will depend upon the federal election too. I think a federal Labor government will naturally be more inclined to a multilateral global agreement like this than the current federal government. Having said that, there's not a lot about the SDGs in Labor's federal policies. There's some reference, but there's not a lot.

John Thwaites: And I think it is because politically there's a bit of a fear that if we do this, it'll look like we're doing this UN thing and we're going to get stuff for you in your town, your local community and that drives a lot of politics. Whereas my view: this is all about local development, this is all about having gender equality and a healthy environment and no poverty in the places you live.

John Thwaites: And the fact that all countries in the world have this commitment makes it a pretty good thing to sign up to and understand we're all in this together. So that political argument though hasn't been sufficiently successful, so that's possibly partly my fault. But organisations like the Brotherhood and ACOSS and other organisations, I think have a key role in promoting the use of the goals because it can hold government to account. It sets a level of benchmarks which government can be assessed against.

John Thwaites: And because it's a common global framework, Australia will be examined compared to other countries. There are indexes looking at all countries and Australia is well down the index and that affects our global reputation. So I can see over time that there's going to be more and more incentive for Australia political leaders really act on the goals as well.

Conny Lenneberg: It really bewilders me that this sense on the one hand we embrace being in a globally connected world. On the other hand, the UN's become a bit of a dirty word along with a few others. And so we see for some people signing onto something global and UN driven is not something to really want to connect to.

Conny Lenneberg: I wonder though, where the opportunity is to start using these frameworks in a legal way. And could you imagine a time when there'll be a class action on behalf of Australian government. You signed up to these SDGs and we're living on less than \$2 a day out here in a regional area or perhaps in a remote indigenous community that children who've missed out on early childhood maybe would take a class action. Can you see them becoming a way in which rights can be claimed in a different way?

John Thwaites: Really interesting question, but my answer will be no. I don't see the goals as being some sort of quasi-legal document. And to be honest, I think that's for a good reason that we wouldn't have the goals if they were a treaty like the human rights treaty. If you look at the history of the world when most of those treaties were agreed in the washup of the Second World War, that was a very different global environment and I don't believe we would get global sign up to things that would have legal implications. Having said all of that, I think the very power of the goals is that they're not about legal obligations. They're about social norms. That is, what the countries say is the proper thing to do.

John Thwaites: And if a country has signed up to say this is the right thing to do and it appears that they're not doing it, then they will be held to account for that. And I actually think that does motivate change. There's nothing like lists and measures to stimulate action. So, I don't think the pathway is legal and similarly in climate

change there are some legal cases, but I think the real push in climate has been social norms and I think that's what we've got to rely on: people understanding that if other countries are doing it, we should be doing it also.

Sharon Lee: Conny opened the floor for questions with the first question about how SDGs can be translated to a local context and how we deal with a lack of available data.

John Thwaites: Great question. Well on the Productivity Commission, I had exactly the same experience with the Productivity Commission and water, where they were viewing the national water initiative and what policy should be adopted, what reform. And despite the fact that basically the water industry, the Water Services Association who represent the water industry, said that they believed the SDGs are really important frame, the Productivity Commission really weren't interested.

John Thwaites: And it's the culture, the culture is not to talk about sustainable development in that sense. They tend to follow where society goes, though if you look they've moved: 30 years ago, they probably wouldn't have been talking about disability in the same way they are now. So I think they're not going to be leaders. The change will need to occur bottom up to a degree and that's from NGOs and community and also from business saying, "No, this is a sensible framework that we should be adopting." You can't manage what you don't measure. It's the most basic thing and yet how poorly do we often measure the very issues that we are trying to improve.

John Thwaites: Now, if there's one thing that stands out in our performance, it is how good health is. And the health system manages its data amazingly well. Like when we sought the data from the health system, all the data is there: the hospitals all have it, the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, it's all there, fantastic data. And yet in most other areas we have terrible data: biodiversity, try and get some data on that in Australia.

John Thwaites: So, data is absolutely fundamental. Of course, the other thing you need is evidence as to what works with the data and we don't do that particularly well either. And I would hope that this process which sets a target to achieve, says you've got to measure and report on that will stimulate better recording of the data. Final thing I'd say is this, is that the ABS is very, very good organisation. They actually had a whole lot of data that they were reporting called measures of Australia's progress, which was reporting on all those issues before the goals.

John Thwaites: This was in the 2009, '10, '11, '12 period. When the current federal government, when Abbott got in, he abolished that - terrible decision. And it meant that we don't have the data on all of these wellbeing statistics that we need.

Speaker 1: The idea that the SDGs is just a sequence or the lack of an opportunity foundation. So let's call it universal opportunity foundation. So there's four

cornerstones, universal liberal democracy, which we have. Universal education, which we have. Universal healthcare, which we have. But a universal basic income which we haven't.

John Thwaites: You've got to understand these development goals are not handed in stone from above. They are political agreement based on what all the negotiations from 173 countries came up with. And they were also a product of quite an extensive community engagement in that discussion, which didn't occur with the MDGs.

John Thwaites: And so there was a lot of pressure from interest groups and NGOs for what should be in them. And that's really how we've come to have 17 goals, and some people say that's too many but the reality is we wouldn't have had political agreement if we didn't have all of those goals. And it's also interesting when you look at the goals, I pretty much reflect what our Cabinet has. I mean, if you look at the goals, there's just about a minister for every one of those. And Cabinets are about that size because that's about what's in government.

John Thwaites: Now you highlighted health and education which are clearly there. You didn't highlight the environment in your four and I would certainly say that if we don't have a safe environment, we might not have humans to get education and to get jobs. You also highlighted minimum income, that is, sorry?

Speaker 1: Universal.

John Thwaites: Universal income. Some people argue with that, without getting into debate about that, that's not part of this political settlement. What is part of it though is good jobs for all and fair income and ending poverty. So what you've said could be encompassed in that but this doesn't come up with particular policy solutions, it gives outcomes that we're seeking to achieve.

Speaker 1: So, when you talk to that, how it hasn't really come up in the current election, so I was just wondering about what is the next step to get it [inaudible] to that sort of a political discussion? Yeah, we talked about grassroots candidates [inaudible] you know advocated within political parties to sort of get the message across that.

John Thwaites: So, so one thing I should highlight: it's that the Senate did have an inquiry into the SDGs, which reported late last year, which did in fact recommend that the national government report regularly on the SDGs, coordinate policies to ensure that we can achieve the SDGs, and a number of other really good recommendations. So there's some support but it needs a lot of bolstering that support. And I would say that NGOs, ACOSS, and business and academia together need to, I think, show government at a political level why this is going to be in Australia's interest.

John Thwaites: And as a starting point, I think it should be about regular reporting. If there was a regular report to parliament every year or every two years on how we're going, that at least would raise the issues. What government's concerned about, I understand this in government is being required to do a grand plan on this. I don't think any government in Australia, Liberal, is going to do the grand SDGs plan, but they should be held to account for how with their various policies and any new policies that they need to introduce, they're going to achieve the goals.

John Thwaites: And so I'd be saying number one, we should be looking for regular reporting on how we're going and two for the government, just to answer the question: "You've signed this agreement. How do you propose to achieve it?"

Conny Lenneberg: Thank you. I think if you look at this election, what are the key areas of debate and which of the areas where Australia has performed worst against the SDGs, climate action and inequality. And it'd be fair to say that there's an alignment with an increasing public awareness and concern about that, making it an election issue in a way that it's probably never been before. The other two that are really critical issues and we're seeing more public debate on is poverty in general and hunger.

Conny Lenneberg: And I think the opportunity for the SDGs is to really be a catalyst to action and for us to organise around to start speaking the same language, to start measuring our contributions, and measuring our successes and failures as a nation against these common indicators is a really important way in which we can strengthen that public debate and public awareness around what is and what does it really need to be, because that's what the SDGs are about in the end. There's nothing inevitable about any of these disadvantages, and in fact our future sustainability and existence is under threat if we don't take the action to address these goals at an urgent level.

Sharon Lee: This talk took place in May 2019, just before Australia went to the polls. Brotherhood Talks is a podcast by the Research and Policy Centre of the Brotherhood of St Laurence, working towards in Australia free of poverty. Find us online at bsl.org.au/brotherhoodtalks and join the conversation on social at #BSLTalks. Production by Aysha Zackariya and myself Sharon Lee. Music by Lee Rosevere. Join us again for another episode of Brotherhood Talks, conversations that matter.