



## Yasmin Batliwala MBE reports on the growing need for legal professionals to familiarise themselves with the Sustainable Development Agenda

Legal professionals play a key role in the administration of justice and, through their advisory roles, encourage the observance not just of direct law, but also the growing body of regulatory guidance and other 'soft laws' that exist. In 2022, much of this landscape is being increasingly shaped by the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs); not just at an international level, but at a domestic one too.

2021 saw the passing of the Environment Act, the Competitions and Markets Authority Green Claims Code checklist, and even new policies and regulations for promoting roll out of electric vehicles in England and Wales. Further afield, South Africa has been progressing its own Climate Change Bill, the EU Commission recently presented its long awaited new Green Deal, and President Biden has just restored environmental safeguards under the National Environmental Policy Act 1970.

Notably however, whilst 'sustainability' might evoke memories of COP 26 and other critical developments taking place in the environmental justice sector; there is often little engagement from the legal profession on the wider focus of 'sustainability' beyond just planet. The need to focus efforts towards the advancement of peace, people, prosperity, partnerships and no poverty is frequently overlooked.

It might surprise people to know that many regulations and laws surrounding anti-money laundering, modern day slavery, workplace protections and more, all have their bearings in sustainable development; resonating closely, clearly and most certainly with the SDG goals and targets. Indeed, the SDG Agenda contains 17 Goals in total, focused on ending poverty, protecting the planet, and ensuring all

people can enjoy peace and prosperity. Many of these fundamental values underpin the day-to-day work of legal professionals across all practice areas.

And commercial clients are recognising it too.

Richard Phillips, Managing Director, Accenture Legal Group, shares his observations that sustainability affects every part of what it means to be a responsible business - not only precautionary environmental principles and net zero goals, but also human rights and ethical business practices. The role of lawyers in this arena, he notes, includes supporting businesses to really incorporate sustainability and human rights compliance into both their culture and their operational practices.

It is no secret that lawyers hold a highly influential role in the social and business environments of their jurisdictions. As specialists in the art of advocacy, they not only possess key skills in navigating complex landscapes, but are also able to balance competing interests, exercise judgement and identify issues in a way that has been expertly learnt and lived through practice. The 'sustainable development' agenda is reliant on these skills in achieving its full potential, as the issues of today and tomorrow navigate a complex web of challenges, policies and laws. And yet, legal professionals have been missing from this conversation for far too long.

There are many changes taking place to the fabric of the legal profession of England and Wales. The growth of legal-tech, increased scrutiny for greater diversity and inclusion, and a focus on wider commercial skills are all reshaping and rethinking the role of lawyers, and bringing with them new opportunities for growth. Clients are

increasingly expecting their law firms to provide a 'horizon scanning' function to give insight not just on current issues but future ones too, and the role of modern legal professionals is extending to risk management and robust due diligence process.

It is no doubt therefore that legal professionals would stand to benefit from the wider discourse of the SDG Agenda; a universal blueprint for White Papers, Green Papers, policy development, regulatory requirements and corporate strategies for future growth.

Looking inwards, the benefits of this extend to the problems faced in the aftermath of COVID-19 in securing a healthy pipeline of talent for incoming lawyers. It is no longer enough for legal practices and in-house legal departments to be able to offer competitive rates of compensation and interesting work in order to attract and retain professionals of the highest calibre. Rather, there is little doubt that those entering the profession today also look for employers that exhibit values beyond technical excellence and client service. And as many clients become increasingly invested in building their commitment to support sustainability as part of their mission and strategy, firms must themselves commit to engaging in the SDG agenda in order to harness the law and work alongside their clients to meet these needs.

At Advocates for International Development, we have witnessed this need directly as many of our partner firms speak to the increased interest from legal professionals, at all stages of their career, to get involved with value-driven work. The remarkable benefits of these engagements are clear, as is the potential and capacity for the legal community to work together in a way that results in hugely significant change on a global scale. With fewer than ten years remaining to achieve the SDG goals, agreed by all member states of the United Nations, there is some urgency to this work: but name me one legal professional who hasn't had to turn around a deadline at the very last minute?



Yasmin Batliwala MBE, CEO, Advocates for International Development. A4ID is currently running a training programme to equip legal professionals with the tools to improve the advice given to their clients on issues relating to the SDGs. More information can be found here: <https://a4id.learnworlds.com/> You can also get in touch with Naomi Cantor at [naomi.cantor@a4id.org](mailto:naomi.cantor@a4id.org) for further information on the programme.

