

The expert view: Accelerating Action using the SDGs

Interviewer: [Gareth Byatt](#) – Principal Consultant, [Risk Insight Consulting](#)
 Interviewee: [Tom Lindsay](#) – Co-Founder, [Accelerating Action](#) and [Accelerating Change Together](#)

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Tom,

Thanks for making the time to talk with me about the [UN Sustainable Development Goals \(SDGs\)](#) and how they're a useful framework to improve our urban environments. Can we start with an overview of your background and your professional activities?

Tom: Thanks Gareth. I'm Co-Founder and Director of [Accelerating Action](#), which was created to help local actors achieve the SDGs by 2030 at the pace and scale required.

I've been working in the field of sustainable development and urban resilience for more than 10 years, initially in the private sector but mainly for philanthropic foundations and NGOs, including [100 Resilient Cities](#) (a [Rockefeller Foundation](#) programme which has since evolved into [the Resilient Cities Network](#)), as well as an initiative between the [C40 Cities network](#) and [the World Resources Institute](#).

I'm also Director at [Accelerating Change Together](#) (ACT), a social enterprise of architects, urbanists and policy specialists. ACT was set up to accelerate the Green Transition across the island of Ireland.

Gareth: Thanks for this overview and background about your businesses and professional ventures, Tom.

In terms of your work in and for urban environments, I've seen on [the ACT website](#) some compelling visualisations of changing city and town centres to be greener and more societally-focused – which is something I am also focusing on in my own urban resilience work.

I noticed a link to a good piece on the ACT website [published in The Irish Times](#) about how, with the right thought and planning, city and town centre living can attract people back from the suburbs to live in the centre. I look forward to seeing how your work for the town that is profiled in this article – Ballina, in County Mayo – evolves.

Tom: *What we're trying to do through ACT is deliver local scale projects that are strategically important. So, when we deliver even a single house, we design it in a way to respond to local and also regional and national needs. We've been starting to define this method as 'impact architecture'. It's not just about creating beautiful buildings, although that's important – it's about designing buildings with the knowledge that what we create has multiple direct and indirect impacts on our built environment, people and the planet. Because of the in-house expertise, we're able to draw down policy and big picture strategy into all our architecture and urban design.*

Gareth: Thanks for this context about ACT. I'd like to focus now on your [Accelerating Action solution](#), which I saw you present at the UN-Habitat [World Urban Forum 11](#) in June 2022 (held in Katowice, Poland and also online). What is the purpose of the Accelerating Action tool, how did it come about, and who it is designed for?

Tom: *The original idea for creating the Accelerating Action tool came about because, like many of us in the sustainable development sector, I wanted to understand how my work could contribute to achieving [the SDGs](#). After years of searching, I couldn't find a helpful tool to do this - so I built my own. I think it's fair to say that a lot of solutions arise from "building solutions for ourselves" (the "practising what we preach" philosophy). When I realised that what I had built was useful for my work I naturally thought it could also be useful for others. This was the genesis for the creation of Accelerating Action.*

Through this tool, we have sought to develop a solution that allows people use the SDGs to improve their impact in a way that wasn't previously possible. The unique value of the tool is that it's faster, more accurate and, perhaps most importantly, user friendly.

This last aspect is so important, and I feel is the key to the tool's real success - sustainable development is difficult enough, so why make it more difficult by having to use tools that are hard to use?

This tool can be used by anyone – because the foundations it is based on, the SDGs, are applicable to everyone. A large part of what the tool does is to translate the technical language of the SDGs to make them accessible for anyone, regardless of whether they are a sustainability expert or not. Language should never be a barrier.

In terms of our initial audience focus, we are supporting environmental and sustainability consultants and sustainability leads in organisations (in both the public and private sectors). We've also made our first steps into the higher education sector: we're providing the tool to students at Queen's University Belfast's Leadership in Sustainable Development course. By training them on the tool the students are able to apply the SDGs in their work placements.

Other tool users include [Arup engineering](#) and [the Dutch architecture firm MVRDV](#). The tool has also, excitingly, been adopted by our first national government client! It's a real form of validation to know there's such a need for the tool and we're really solving a problem that others are experiencing.

Gareth: A quick question, if I may – what made you decide to make the cornerstone (if I can call it that) of the tool the SDGs?

Tom: *Personally, I think the SDGs are the best framework we have for what a good sustainable future looks like. I think most people, however, haven't seen them as a great decision-making framework - which is such a missed opportunity.*

By putting the SDGs at the heart of the tool, we allow our users to assess, communicate and improve what they do towards sustainability (I should also mention that a cross-cutting theme of the SDGs is resilience).

The interconnectedness of sustainability is key, and one of the main reasons I'm a fan of the SDGs. Every SDG in this group of 17 goals is "integrated and interconnected", to use the words of the UN, with each other. This is an aspect of sustainability I've experienced myself through the work I have done, from [the City Resilience Framework of the 100 Resilient Cities initiative](#) to working on public sector and private sector projects.

Built environment professionals often refer to cities as 'systems of systems' to recognise their complex nature. We should do the same with sustainable development.

Gareth: I'm an advocate of the SDGs – I find them applicable to and beneficial to a lot of my work. What convinced you to use the SDGs and not another sustainability framework?

Tom: It's worth considering for a moment how successful the SDGs have been on a global level since they were introduced in 2015. They are, in my view, the best framework for "what good looks like" for sustainable development today, in just about any way that you can think of. The 17 SDGs have been agreed and championed by all UN member states. Their scope and coverage is deliberately broad because sustainable development encompasses so many things. The SDGs are also meant to be achieved by everyone: from national and local government to businesses and civil society. If anyone has heard of any sustainability framework, it will most likely be the SDGs.

The SDGs are sometimes described as "[the 5Ps](#)" (People, Planet, Prosperity, Peace and Partnership). Embedded in them are three cross-cutting themes: eliminating poverty and improving people's lives; advancing the cause of sustainability; and achieving resilience in all its forms. The biggest criticism I've heard of them is that they're complex: but that's because sustainable development is complex! Oversimplify what sustainable development and we risk losing the nuance that is needed to deliver meaningful impact.

Some tools in the field of sustainability (e.g. Environmental Impact Assessments) help people to assess the impact of what they are doing or planning on doing.

*We have focused the Accelerating Action tool on helping people to work out how to **improve and maximise** their impact, not just assess it. For example, we have designed the tool to help people build better briefs, improve policies, and influence project concepts and write better bid applications.*

The founders of Accelerating Action are all designers, and we place emphasis on the tool's ability to help make better decisions on an action (through design and implementation) rather than using it only to retrospectively assess your work. Sustainable development is not an add-on; you're more likely to deliver impact if you're thinking about it from the beginning and throughout a project.

Gareth: Bearing in mind your point about the challenge to identify SDG impacts at a local / specific level, can you describe how the Accelerating Action tool helps people to achieve this?

Tom: The business model is Software as a Service (SaaS) and to offer the tool as a subscription basis. We also offer training, but you don't need any intensive training to get started. The tool builds the capacity of anyone to be able to understand the environmental, economic, political and social value of their action (from policies to projects) in line with the SDGs.

There are three key steps in the tool:

- *Step 1 is inputting whatever information you have on your action*
- *Step 2 is when you're asked to select certain 'tags', preset themes and topics related to sustainable development that you think are relevant to your action. Tags could include for example 'poverty', 'climate change adaptation' to 'participation'. All of these terms come with simple definitions as we don't assume a user will necessarily know them all.*
- *Finally, Step 3 focuses on the tags you select: you are then presented with a shortlist of the 169 SDG Targets. This is a shortlist of only the most relevant Targets specific to your action. This helps speed up the entire process plus it makes the whole exercise more accurate since we're helping users map their work to the more detailed Targets rather than just the 17 high-level Goals (which is more common).*

Outputs of the tool include pdf action plans, spreadsheets and infographics to help you communicate your impact.

The final output, an assessment showing the specific SDG Targets your action contributes to gives you an advantage you wouldn't previously have. Armed with this knowledge you can improve your action by embedding these Targets into your action's own brief as targets.

You can use the assessments to better articulate the value of your action to others as happened in the case of a Northern Irish council who used the tool's results to successfully apply for national funding for their project.

Gareth: Do you publish any case studies of how the tool has been applied and specific benefits that have been realised, be they for cities or towns, and/or businesses?

Tom: We've just released an [interview with one of our users, MVRDV](#) explaining how and why they've adopted the tool. MVRDV are one of the largest architecture firms in the Netherlands and they've rolled the tool out across their teams. They've found the tool and SDGs incredibly useful for creating a shared vision on what they want their projects to achieve. By communicating their projects in terms of SDG impact they're able to get the buy-in from the specialist teams they work with as well as their clients. It really is a useful way to get broad alignment and agreement on what the economic, social, environmental and political benefits of a project should be.

If readers are interested in more case studies, they can [subscribe to our newsletter](#) which covers the tool as well as sustainable development more widely.

Gareth: You have mentioned that one of your goals with the solution is to overcome the “unnecessary barrier” of people having to try and work out how to apply the SDGs in a way that makes sense and relates to what they are doing with their specific work.

I am wondering if the unnecessary barrier of the SDG Targets being hard to interpret is why we tend to see that businesses and public sector bodies link their detailed, comprehensive and well-thought-through plans to the main SDGs (i.e. SDG 6, SDG 11, SDG 12 etc.), and not to any targets or indicators that exist below them – because it is too time-consuming and not straightforward either, since the language they use is not often a clear match to detailed “on the ground” actions?

Tom: Yes, I think you’ve already answered the question. It tends to be the case (with exceptions, I do want to say) that generally most organisations and institutions only link to the high-level 17 Goals and not the 169 Targets which is where the detail is. In fact, an exercise, the next time you see a corporate plan or maybe government strategy say it is helping to achieve the SDGs (usually signifying this with the SDG icons) see if they make any mention of the Targets or even the methods they applied to come to this conclusion. I’ve found little to none. For organisations they could be at risk of greenwashing or ‘SDG washing’ but perhaps even worse is if none of us are treating the Targets seriously what are the chances, we’ll actually achieve the 17 Goals that they sit on top of?

Gareth: Are you looking at the linkages between the SDGs and ESG (Environment, Social and Governance) and much-discussed aspects such as climate risk? I’m just wondering this, since ESG receives a lot of press coverage nowadays (positive and negative).

Tom: We are keeping our eye on how ESG evolves. One thing we are finding is that the news and the situation about ESG is evolving fast, and different groups have different opinions about it. There are, for sure, linkages between the SDGs and core aspects of ESG – we will continue to keep our eye on it.

Meanwhile, SDGs are a ‘safer bet’ in that all UN countries have signed up to them and they have the momentum and long-term vision all the way to 2030. Sadly, I don’t see that clarity in the ESG space - yet.

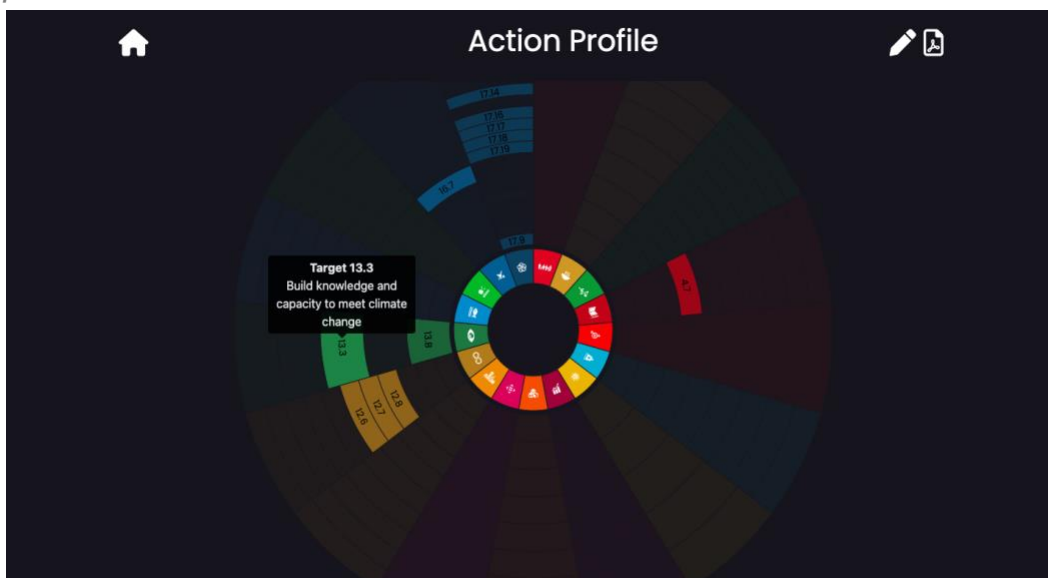
Gareth: I imagine that you are always looking to improve the “SDG translation engine” (if I can call it that) in the tool, and that user feedback helps to shape future enhancements?

Tom: Absolutely. We are continuing to evolve the tool with feedback from our user base (which is key to our success). We very much appreciate all feedback from users to help us continually improve their experience. Indeed, when I look back at the last 12 months, we have made a lot of improvements. We know they're improvements because the requests come directly from those using the tool.

We also continue to use the tool on our own projects. Perhaps it's uncommon for a tech firm (which is what we technically are, I suppose), to be able to use your own software. Our social enterprise ACT is almost a 'laboratory' for the tool: if we find it useful to improve our own projects there's a good chance it will help others too.

A key point I would like to stress is that, often, the best ideas are the simple ones. Working out how to take something that is complex and make it simple is often (perhaps usually) challenging and it requires continual focus. Remember the point we discussed earlier about "unnecessary barriers" like technical language making important issues incomprehensible – we are always focused on removing them.

The Accelerating Action tool is updated throughout the year based on users' feedback and requests such as the latest feature: infographics to communicate impact.



Gareth: Have you had any reviews and discussions with UN bodies about the tool? Is it something that they are endorsing? I know that the tool is listed on the UNDRR (the UN Disaster Risk body) MCR2030 (Making Cities Resilient 2030), and that it has been nominated in 2022 for digital innovation by the UN Climate Change body and the European Commission.

Tom: Yes, and they're ongoing. Due to its size, the UN moves more slowly than other smaller bodies can. We have patience and hope as every interaction we have with the UN is always positive. It's great to know we're providing a solution that they really need and can make a difference on a global scale.

Gareth: On your point about simplifying things, I wonder if there might be scope to provide an app solution in due course. For sure, it would need looking at in detail to see if it may be worthwhile (I know that the current tool “right sizes” on a screen on a browser, so it can be used on a mobile device if a user wants to do so). One of my thoughts is that it might link into an overall urban app, which is something I have been looking into recently...

Tom: As you say, we would need to look at the value of creating an app. It always comes back to what users would find useful. If we had enough demand for it, we would absolutely consider it. At present we are looking at it as a desktop type of tool, but maybe things could change.

Gareth: Am I right in thinking that as the tool becomes more widespread in use, you may be able to use the data (in a carefully de-identified way) to see cumulative impacts of the efforts of public and private sector organisations towards the SDGs, and also gaps and areas of weakness that need to be focused on? At the moment, it seems very hard to truly measure the impact of the SDGs, because they are linked to the efforts of cities, towns and organisations in different ways. Do you see potential for use by certification agencies and maybe government agencies?

Tom: That is our longer-term intention for the tool, yes. Your point about ensuring data is de-identified is very important. This is not about benchmarking one organisation or project against another; it is about collective efforts to achieve the 2030 Agenda with the SDGs.

It's an interesting question regarding certification agencies and government agencies. What keeps us so motivated about growing the tool is that what we're providing is essentially useful any time the SDGs are applied to anything, anywhere. Our tool makes the SDGs quicker and easier to accurately apply. When you consider the wide global uptake and application of the SDGs (from national governments, to rating agencies to community groups and individuals), the scale and reach of what we're doing is really exciting.

Gareth: We know that the SDGs have a “limited lifespan” ahead of them – indeed, they are at the mid-way point at the moment, and they will run until 2030 before they are replaced by something else. I read the sixth annual [“Goalkeepers Report” on the SDGs](#) by the Gates Foundation recently (published in September 2022), which noted that every SDG is off track at present, but there are still opportunities to accelerate progress toward ending poverty, fighting inequality, and reducing the impacts of climate change. I wonder if a consolidated way of understanding and applying the SDGs can play a part in improving the efforts required to apply them?

Tom: *I think a consolidated way of understanding and applying the SDGs is already being implemented. It's also important to remember that different contexts radically change how the SDGs are applied: how a fishing company in Vietnam contributes to them will vary widely to how a community group in Belfast applies them.*

On your point about the SDGs lifespan, it's important to have an endpoint otherwise we would feel like nothing is accomplished. Just like the SDGs are the successor of the Millennium Development Goals, there will be new goals for a new era.

Accelerating Action is also thinking long term: our plan is by 2030 to be in a position to be THE service provider to the UN itself, helping to make the 'new' Global Goals from 2030 be accessible and applied by everyone at the pace and scale required.

Gareth: I know that you allow people [a 14-day trial of the Accelerating Action tool](#) and that you focus on getting people set up in just one day. Whilst your initial user groups are environmental and sustainability consultants, and sustainability leads in public and private organisations, are you seeing a variety of people signing up for a trial?

Tom: *The tool is as applicable as the SDGs themselves – i.e. it can be used by anyone on any kind of action. I would encourage people to sign up and try the free trial - or better yet contact me directly (tom@acceleratingaction.com) first to have a chat and see how it can help their organisation / team deliver better sustainable impact.*

Gareth: Thank you very much for your time, Tom. I look forward to seeing how your work to help people connect with and use the SDGs continues to develop.