



# Social Marketing to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2030 Agenda by the United Nations

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## 1 Introduction to SDGs and social marketing

In 2015, the United Nations adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development,<sup>1</sup> “*a plan of action for people, planet and prosperity, intended to strengthen universal peace and access to justice*” and with the purpose of “*improving the lives of all, leaving no one behind*” (The United Nations, 2022). Integrating different perspectives (economic, social, and environmental), the 2030 Agenda was intended to be a framework for global development programs until that year (Galan-Ladero & Alves, 2023). It included 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs),<sup>2</sup> to build a better world (The United Nations, 2023):

Goal 1 – No Poverty.

Goal 2 – Zero Hunger.

Goal 3 – Good Health and Well-Being.

Goal 4 – Quality Education.

Goal 5 – Gender Equality.

Goal 6 – Clean Water and Sanitation.

Goal 7 – Affordable and Clean Energy.

Goal 8 – Decent Work and Economic Growth.

Goal 9 – Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure.

Goal 10 – Reduced Inequalities.

Goal 11 – Sustainable Cities and Communities.

Goal 12 – Responsible Consumption and Production.

Goal 13 – Climate Action.

<sup>1</sup> The UN General Assembly on September 25, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> More detailed information in <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>

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Goal 14 – Life Below Water.

Goal 15 – Life on Land.

Goal 16 – Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions.

Goal 17 – Partnerships.

The 17 SDGs are integrated, making the whole greater than the sum of its parts. But, in order to achieve these SDGs, raising awareness, changing attitudes and, above all, changing certain behaviors, are fundamental, and this is where social marketing has a key role to play. There is consequently a natural connection between social marketing and SDGs, as social marketing knows how to apply marketing techniques and approaches to social causes. However, despite the growing literature on this topic (e.g., Galan-Ladero & Alves, 2023; Truong & Saunders, 2021), academic research on the direct contribution of social marketing to the SDGs is still limited.

And while progress is currently being made on each of these SDGs, it is not happening at the desired level and pace (Galan-Ladero & Alves, 2023) and “*we need to rescue the SDGs and get them back on track*” (The United Nations, 2022). The health crisis caused by the global pandemic of COVID-19, which also led to a major global economic and social crisis that has shaken the foundations of our present world and changed everything forever (the way we live, work, study, purchase, and relate to each other), was a major setback for the 2030 Agenda and diverted attention from the SDGs (Galan-Ladero & Alves, 2023). And when it seemed that, in 2022, the most critical phase of the pandemic had been overcome and the SDGs were going to be taken up and promoted again, the armed conflict in Ukraine, which has had great international repercussions due to the serious humanitarian, economic, social, and political consequences it is causing, has once again threatened the 2030 Agenda and its SDGs (especially SDG 16 which promotes peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development—GRI, 2022).

SDGs provide a common language about sustainable development, making an impact on political discourse, media, and communication. However, they still have limited transformative political impact (Biermann et al., 2022) and, for a vast majority of organizations, engagement with SDGs remains superficial (Heras-Saizarbitoria et al., 2022). However, there is still time to try to accelerate and, if in the end, the 17 SDGs cannot be fully achieved, at least they can be partially achieved as much as possible. But a true collective effort and solidarity are necessary for this (The United Nations, 2022). And once again, social marketing emerges as a fundamental instrument for engaging all stakeholders (individuals, communities, governments, companies, NGOs, etc.) in the challenge of achieving the SDGs (Galan-Ladero & Alves, 2023).

Social marketing was first defined by Kotler and Zaltman in 1971 as “*the design, implementation and control of programs calculated to influence the acceptance of social ideas and implies considerations of product planning, price, communication, distribution and marketing research*” (Kotler & Zaltman, 1971, p. 5). Later, the Boards of the International Social Marketing Association (iSMA), European Social Marketing Association (ESMA), and Australian Association of Social Marketing (AASM) also defined it in 2013 and established that “*Social Marketing seeks to develop and integrate marketing concepts with other approaches to influence behaviors that benefit individuals and communities for the greater social good. Social*

*Marketing practice is guided by ethical principles. It seeks to integrate research, best practice, theory, audience, and partnership insight, to inform the delivery of competition-sensitive and segmented social change programs that are effective, efficient, equitable and sustainable.*" (Boards of the International Social Marketing Association [iSMA], European Social Marketing Association [ESMA], and Australian Association of Social Marketing [AASM], 2017).

Throughout these decades, social marketing has evolved from being considered a simple operational concept to become a more strategic, holistic, and interdisciplinary concept (French & Gordon, 2020). And nowadays, the world faces so many complex, complicated and intractable social problems (synthesized in the SDGs) that, more than ever, demand a critical, connected, and systemic approach (Gordon et al., 2022; Hastings & Domegan, 2023). Consequently, social marketing is in a unique position not only to critique but also to provide intelligent solutions (Hastings & Saren, 2003).

Thus, social marketing has proven its usefulness in solving problems related to public health (e.g., prevention and fight against certain diseases, healthy lifestyle habits, etc.), environment (e.g., global warming, pollution, responsible consumption of natural resources, waste reduction, etc.), education (e.g., for gender equality and fight against harmful cultural practices, such as child marriage, dowry, sexual harassment, female genital mutilation, etc.; for equal opportunities to access to education, to the labor market; to create more inclusive societies, etc.), territory (e.g., depopulation of rural areas, promotion of local development and consumption of local products, development of sustainable tourism, etc.), among others (Galan-Ladero & Alves, 2023).

Combining different complementary approaches (legal, technological, informational, economic, and relational—Alves et al., 2021), using different strategies (reinforcement, induction, rationalization and/or confrontation—Santesmases, 1999) and harmonizing downstream, midstream, and upstream approaches, social marketing has been adapted to the different cultures and degrees of development of the different countries (giving priority to the most relevant issues and problems in each society). Currently, its importance is recognized worldwide, and it is used by all types of organizations, from public administrations and nonprofit organizations to private companies.

Facing the challenge of achieving the SDGs from the perspective of social marketing can be very positive for the pursuit of social good and improving the quality of life of people around the world (Alves et al., 2021), although social marketing interventions should be adapted to the needs of each society, depending on their level of development (whether they are part of developed, developing, or underdeveloped countries). Thus, for example, and considering the results of the study by Schmidtke et al. (2021), in less developed countries, social marketing interventions should focus on solving the most basic human needs (e.g., combating hunger and poverty, improving health, family planning, sanitary conditions and hygiene measures, gender equality, environmental protection, etc.), while in more developed countries, social marketing interventions should focus more on responsible consumption, healthier living habits, reducing waste and pollution, or saving water and energy—Galan-Ladero and Alves (2023).

## 2 The content of this special issue

Following on from the previous argumentation, this Special Issue of the International Review on Public and Nonprofit Marketing is devoted to exploring in greater depth the relationship between social marketing and the SDGs. In addition to the original articles selected for the issue, some position papers were included. In these position papers, relevant international researchers in this field were invited to contribute their particular vision on how social marketing can help to achieve the SDGs. The combination of these two types of articles, i.e., empirical research / review papers and position papers, provided a broader dimension to the reflection on the topic of this Special Issue, not only by characterizing the existing knowledge but also by critically discussing recommendations to guide researchers and practitioners.

Common to the four position papers in the special issue is: i) the recognition of the difficulty in achieving the SDGs in the defined timeframe due to several factors (including the ones related to social marketing implementation); and ii) the authors' advancement of ideas and proposals that can reverse this situation, particularly through adequate social marketing interventions.

Starting with a broader and critical analysis, Wymer (2023) discusses the relevance of social marketing to help the United Nations achieve the SDGs. In his opinion, there are many socio-political barriers within and between nations that make it difficult to achieve the SDGs, highlighting that the protection of individual interests, rather than the defense of the common good stands out. Thus, he suggests that the restructuring of the United Nations is a necessary precondition for the full achievement of the SDGs, with social marketing playing a key role in this process.

From a different perspective, Vilmar (2023) also refers to the delay and difficulty in achieving the SDGs in most countries, emphasizing the fact that, despite the campaigns and efforts to inform people about the SDGs, knowledge about the subject remains very low in broad sections of the population. This author also states that, given this situation and the inability to achieve the SDGs in the pre-established timeframe, it is essential to promote the necessary courage to find creative solutions, especially in sustainable communication, capable of overcoming these weaknesses and promoting a quick reverse of the situation.

On the other hand, Rivera (2023) also brings his insights into how social marketing can contribute more effectively to the achievement of the SDGs. He suggests approaching social change through a human-centered perspective, which is particularly effective to solve complex social problems. The proposed Human-to-Human Social Marketing Model builds upon the combination of Service-Dominant Logic (SD-L), design thinking, service digitalization, 360-Degree impact, and service value co-creation. He considers that this human approach should guide future social marketing programs and projects tackling poverty, hunger, access to education, gender equality, and other key sustainability and developmental issues.

Likewise, focusing on the factors that can contribute to the achievement of the SDGs, Rodríguez Sánchez (2023) discusses the need for a change in citizens' behavior toward sustainability. She highlights the importance of social marketing

along this path. After a critical analysis of earlier studies focusing on social marketing approaches to motivate citizens towards environmental sustainability, she discusses directions and recommendations for future interventions, emphasizing the role of communication. She also notes that, although the reasoning of her discussion was at the citizen level, further debate should involve other stakeholders and their interrelationships to fully understand the complex phenomenon of citizen motivation towards environmental sustainability.

While the position papers discussed barriers and facilitators to achieve the SDGs, the original articles in this Special Issue can be divided into two groups: the first one includes two papers based on scoping and systematic literature reviews, and the second one includes empirical papers—a descriptive study combining data mining techniques and content analysis, and a research based on the case study methodology.

To evaluate if the field of social marketing is contributing to achieving the SDGs by 2030, Delvaux and Van den Broeck (2023), present a scoping review. The scoping review mapped the social marketing literature from 2013 to 2021, aligning the SDGs and looking at the topical evolution. The study shows the topical dominance of public health (SDG 3: Good health and well-being) while showing a decreasing tendency. It also shows that the least studied topics were SDG 1 (No poverty), SDG 9 (Industry, innovation, and infrastructure), SDG 4 (Quality education), and SDG 14 (Life below water). The relevance of the study is highlighted since it might help to achieve the SDGs on time, guiding social marketers' future research and practitioners' interventions.

Regarding the systematic review, Pinto and Casais (2023) analyzed the relationship between public policy and anti-consumption in the context of SDG 12 – Responsible Consumption and Production. The analyses were based on 42 articles up to 2021. The paper bridges the gap between individual analysis of anti-consumption and its impact to address sustainability challenges, advocating the assessment of different stakeholders: individuals, organizations, governments, researchers, and the media. The authors show how anti-consumption is linked, via mechanisms of environmental sustainability, to social marketing and sustainable consumption and production, arguing that the impact of anti-consumption on macro and structural changes should not be ignored.

In a different approach, but also to map SDGs messages from the perspective of social marketing, Galiano-Coronil et al. (2023), analyzed 2,433 tweets from the UN's SDGs official account. Using artificial intelligence techniques, such as classification trees, the study proposes segmentation profiles of the messages that promote a more significant impact from the perspective of social marketing and happiness. The study shows that the most published SDG was Goal 13 (Climate Action), while Goal 3 (Health and Well-being) has obtained the most significant reaction from the public.

Combining secondary data and two case studies, Aya Pastrana and Obregón (2023), discussed the relevance of social marketing to organizations devoted to advancing sustainable development. After a description of the positioning of social marketing within these institutions, the authors present two case studies that illustrate the relevance of social marketing in practice. One of the case studies addresses female genital mutilation and cutting, and the other summarizes a program focused on food systems to tackle malnutrition and climate change impacts.

### 3 Final reflections

In short, we can say that the process of preparing this Special Issue has been complex and stimulating. The main purpose was to provide a global and transformational vision built from different realities, with different challenges and geographical diversity.

We hope that the articles that are part of this Special Issue help to reflect on the importance of linking social marketing and the SDGs, provide new insights in this field, and open new lines of research and debate on how to achieve the 2030 Agenda from the perspective of social marketing.

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