

April 2019

Submission to the Environmental Audit Committee

‘Voluntary National Review of UK progress against the Sustainable Development Goals’ inquiry

1. Just Fair works to realise a fairer and more just society by monitoring and advocating for the protection of economic and social rights. Just Fair is committed to increasing public awareness of international human rights law and the capability to use it, and is devoted to the advancement of high-quality thinking, training and practice to ensure that economic and social rights are respected, protected and fulfilled.
2. Just Fair is a member of UKSSD, UK Stakeholders for Sustainable Development. This submission should be read together with UKSSD’s written evidence; ours focuses only on a small number of important issues that stem from the Government’s “Voluntary National Review: Emerging Findings and Further Engagement” report (Emerging Findings, hereafter).¹
3. The Commons Select Committee is interested in learning about the effectiveness of the Government’s engagement with stakeholders in the voluntary national review process, in particular people in vulnerable groups.
4. The Government says they have “carried out wide-ranging outreach across different regions and sectors” and has “received 200 case studies from organisations, business and civil society” (p. 6, Emerging Findings). Just Fair representatives have attended several of these outreach and engagement meetings, and they are welcomed. However, the Government’s self-appraisal does not say how many of these events were specifically designed to listen to the testimonies and opinions of people with direct experience of poverty. We think the Government should put **lived experiences first in its consultations about the progress in the implementation of the SDGs.** Knowledge is power. The choice of targets and numerical variables is not a purely technical matter. Measurement entails interpretation, which necessarily carries value judgment and assumptions. It is important to give indicators and benchmarks a human face with qualitative evidence and greater engagement with the people that would benefit or suffer the most from the relevant policies.
5. The Select Committee asks if the Government’s Emerging Findings document reflects the progress that the UK has made domestically on implementing the SDGs.
6. **The State is the main duty bearer.** The SDGs provide measurable targets and benchmarks for the progressive realisation of the economic and social rights recognised in international human rights law, namely, adequate housing, health,

¹ DFID, [VNR: Emerging Findings and Further Engagement](#), March 2019.

education, social security and food. As observed by the UN Secretary General, “virtually all of the Goals correspond to the contents” of these rights.² While it is true that the Government “cannot alone deliver such an ambitious and comprehensive agenda” (p. 4, Emerging Findings), this should not serve as an excuse not to make use of all available resources to advance progressively towards the full satisfaction of economic and social rights, as required by international human rights law.³

7. **Data must be disaggregated**, as highlighted by the Select Committee in its 2017 report.⁴ To ensure that nobody is left behind and to provide a truly meaningful picture, the Government must gather and present the evidence based on all the prohibited grounds of discrimination,⁵ the protected characteristics of the Equality Act 2010 and income and wealth disparities.
8. Finally, the Select Committee enquires to what extent the Government’s Emerging Findings document builds on and develops further existing published analysis of the UK’s performance in implementing the SDGs domestically.
9. As pointed out by the UN Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights, Philip Alston, “the experience of the United Kingdom, especially since 2010, underscores the conclusion that poverty is a political choice”.⁶ The evidence is clear and it is shown in the UKSSD’s *Measuring Up* report (Chapter on SDG10):⁷ We live in a highly unequal society. Recent ONS data shows that life expectancy for women born in deprived areas has declined in recent years,⁸ something utterly unacceptable in the fifth world economy. Yet, **the Emerging Findings document does not reflect the rising inequalities in terms of income, wealth and health outcomes.** Poverty puts human rights at risk and rising inequalities are a missed opportunity to end poverty. The government would be sending a wrong signal **if they did not address both poverty (SDG1) and material inequality (SDG10) in the Voluntary National Review.**
10. The Emerging Findings document does not give an account of the incompatibility of recent **tax and social security reforms** with the human rights principle of non-retrogression. This incompatibility constitutes a **breach of the human rights to social security and to an adequate standard of living**, as pointed out by several

² UN Secretary General, [Question of the realization in all countries of economic, social and cultural rights](#), 2016, UN doc : A/HRC/34/25, para. 8.

³ Article 2(1) of the [International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights](#).

⁴ HC Environmental Audit Committee, [Sustainable Development Goals in the UK](#), HC 596, April 2017, p. 19.

⁵ UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, [General Comment No. 20: Non-discrimination](#), 2009, UN doc: E/C.12/GC/20, para. 41.

⁶ UN Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights, [Statement on Visit to the United Kingdom](#), November 2018.

⁷ UKSSD, [Measuring Up: How the UK is performing on the UN Sustainable Development Goals](#), July 2018.

⁸ ONS, [Health state life expectancies by national deprivation deciles, England and Wales: 2015 to 2017](#), 27 March 2019.

international human rights bodies.⁹ These reforms have not been justifiable in terms of the goals they were meant to achieve, they have not been proportionate and the effects have been discriminatory, the weight of local government funding cuts has fallen on people at risk of harm, discrimination and disadvantage, and benefit sanctions have been harmful and largely ineffective.¹⁰

11. It is true that the UK has “some of the strongest equalities legislation in the world, including the Equality Act 2010” (p. 30, Emerging Findings), but the Government must implement the laws in their entirety and **bring the socio-economic duty to life** (section 1 of the Equality Act 2010), as was done in Scotland in 2018 and the Welsh government intends to do this year. Even though Section 1 is technically not in force in England, Just Fair has documented that some local authorities are showing what the duty could look like in practice.¹¹ The duty is a powerful lever to address the structural causes of material inequalities and their negative effects on human rights and wellbeing. It would require public authorities to actively consider how their decisions and policies of the highest strategic importance could increase or decrease inequalities of outcome. We recommend that the Select Committee urges the Government to issue an order of commencement to trigger the socio-economic duty.

⁹ UN Special Rapporteurs on Housing, on Rights of Persons with Disabilities, on Extreme Poverty, and on the Right to Food, “[Joint letter to the UK Government](#)”, UN doc. AL GBR 1/2016, April 2016, p. 12; CRC, [Concluding Observations: UK](#), July 2016, UN doc. CRC/C/GBR/CO/5, para. 66 and 69-70; CESCR, [Concluding Observations: UK](#), July 2016, UN doc: E/C.12/GBR/CO/6; para. 40-42 and 47-48; CRPD, [Inquiry concerning the UK](#), 2016, UN doc. CRPD/C/15/R.2/Rev.1; ECSR, [Conclusions XXI-2 \(2017\) United Kingdom](#), January 2018.

¹⁰ Just Fair and 15 other groups, [Welfare Safety Net Inquiry: Written submission to the HC Work and Pensions Committee](#), December 2018.

¹¹ Just Fair, [Tackling socio-economic inequalities locally: Good practices in the implementation of the socio-economic duty by local authorities in England](#), June 2018.