



Sustainable Development Goals and Facility Management

Initiatives for a more accountable sector

Foreword

The most common definition of sustainable development is “a global development model that meets the needs of the present without compromising those of the future”. In other words, a model that promotes the prosperity and well-being of the community, while at the same time obliging us to take into account the limited resources of our planet.

The only problem with this definition is that it gives us no indication of how to apply the concept of sustainable development. Probably most of us associate “sustainability” with small mundane gestures like “recycling”, or “saving water”. We rarely think of steps we can take in a structured way that extends far beyond what we do individually — like **what to do for sustainable development at work.**

What does facility management (FM) have to do with all this? Apparently, very little. Digging deep, quite a bit. Ultimately, FM ranges from more general tasks, such as equipment maintenance, to specific details about the building’s catering or housekeeping. There are hundreds and hundreds of decisions every day that can have a **huge impact on the company’s environmental and social footprint.**

Therefore, and so that sustainable development ceases to be an abstract expression, we will be guided by the list of 17 United Nations Development objectives — applicable to any industry or business. After explaining to you what each one of them consists of, we will be able, perhaps, to uncover the secret identity of facility managers as invisible superheroes.



What are the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals?

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were defined by the United Nations (UN) in 2015 to set an agenda by 2030. These goals take into consideration three axes — **social, economic, and environmental impact** — always from a human rights perspective.

It is a holistic vision for the future of humanity that combines financial prosperity with peace, justice, equality, and transparent institutions. SDGs unite governments, citizens and organisations around common and global goals, whilst guiding them on what to do at the local level.

1. Eradicate Poverty

There can be no sustainable development as long as 25% of the world's population lives on less than \$1.25 a day. In the EU, 21.8% of the population lives at risk of poverty and social exclusion, whilst 5.8% live in extreme poverty. Eradicating extreme poverty is the first condition for ending food insecurity and social inequality.

2. Eradicate Famine

Most people in situations of exclusion and extreme poverty find it difficult to feed themselves adequately. Once again, we cannot fall into the error of thinking that this is only a problem for developing countries: in Portugal, 7% of children in primary schools say they feel hungry "every day". The UN goal #2 is to end famine and ensure a varied and nutritious diet throughout the year, to everybody.



3. Health & Quality

The UN has set very specific goals: to reduce the maternal mortality rate, promote family planning and vaccination, end preventable newborn deaths, eradicate waterborne diseases, and end HIV, tuberculosis, and malaria epidemics. Besides, the UN aims to lessen lifestyle-related problems, such as alcoholism and road accidents, by 2030.

4. High-Quality Education

Access to high-quality education is directly related to reducing conflict, better pay in adulthood (especially for women), and more sustainable lifestyles. By 2030, the goal is to ensure free access to education and eliminate illiteracy, whilst providing affordable vocational education and higher training.

5. Gender Equality

71% of victims of human trafficking are women and girls. Every minute, 23 girls around the world are forced to marry (12 million a year). By 2030, 68 million women can be victims of female genital mutilation. In Africa, 1 in 10 girls stops going to school when they menstruate. In the United States, 1 in 5 have already missed school because they do not have adequate intimate hygiene products. Globally, women earn 23% less than men. Some 40–50% of women in the EU say they have experienced sexual harassment at work. How can we narrow down this list? By giving equal opportunities, pay, and rights to people of all genders.

Extra resource 

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6. Drinking-Water & Sanitation

World, 2020: 1 in 3 people have no access to drinking water. About 2 billion people only have access to faecal water, which is associated with diseases such as diarrhoea, cholera, dysentery, typhoid fever, and polio. The goal could not be clearer—to ensure safe drinking water and universal sanitation.

7. Renewable & Affordable Energy

It would be impossible to talk about targets for 2030 without mentioning universal

access to renewable energies. Producing more affordable renewable energy reduces our dependence on fossil fuels and will double our global energy efficiency.

8. Decent Work & Economic Growth

Developing countries should grow at least 7% per year, with diversified economies and a skilled workforce (a glimpse into goal #4). All workers are entitled to full employment and decent pay — equal pay for equal work. Entrepreneurs, micro, small and medium enterprises must be supported to foster local business. And, of course, child labour and precarious work must end.

9. Industry, Innovation & Infrastructures

Progress alone is not sustainable. Sustainable industrialisation, based on small industries and clean technologies, boosts the economy and the well-being of communities and less developed countries. Resilient, cross-border infrastructures are the last piece to generate international cooperation and work in the same direction.

10. Reducing Inequalities

2,153 billionaires have more wealth than 4.6 billion people combined (60% of the world population). The redistribution of wealth is even more severe when we consider gender, ethnicity, origin, religion, and other factors — the 22 richest men in the world have more wealth than all women in Africa. Therefore, one of the UN's major goals is to ensure equal opportunities and social protection for vulnerable groups.

11. Sustainable Cities & Communities

The technological advance at our service: ensuring access to decent (and robust) housing, sustainable transport systems, and inclusive urban planning. The smart cities of the future will have less traffic, better air quality, careful management of municipal waste, and green spaces for all.

12. Sustainable Production & Consumption

Our planet is running out of resources, yet populations are continuing to grow. Goal #12 is about ensuring sustainable consumption and production patterns, which is key to sustain the livelihoods of current and future generations.

13. Climate Action

Implement measures for mitigation, adaptation, impact reduction, and early warning of climate change. Increase our capacity to adapt to natural disasters and extreme weather events.



14. Protecting Marine Wildlife

End overfishing, destructive practices such as trawling and illegal fishing, to preserve marine biodiversity. Eliminate discharges of debris and pollutants from land-based activities into watercourses.

15. Protecting Terrestrial Nature

Suppress soil desertification and restore degraded areas (due not only to lack of rainfall but also to excessive agricultural practices). At the same time, ensure the conservation of ecosystems and its biodiversity through reforestation and an end to illegal hunting.

16. Peace, Justice & Effective Institutions

Goal #16 is all about the promotion of the Rule of Law, with transparency and strong anti-corruption measures, to end armed conflict, human exploitation, weapons trafficking, organised crime, bribery, and nepotism.

17. Partnerships for the Implementation of Goals

No man is an island and the UN is proof of that. Partnerships between governments, businesses, and members of civil society are fundamental to achieving all these goals as quickly as possible. We have just a few more years to fulfil our vision of progress!

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From the moment there are elements such as diversity on the executive board, companies are compelled to leave their single centre of productivity to broaden the spectrum, and reach out to all the people and businesses that are impacted by their existence. By generating positive effects on the society, a company is seen more favourably, possibly practising better remuneration, and there is a much healthier give-and-take dynamic.”

– Alice Khouri, Founder of Women in ESG Portugal

Why should companies be concerned about sustainable development goals?

It is impossible to ignore the role of the private sector in maintaining jobs, GDP growth, and technological innovation. It is up to companies to give equal opportunities to all candidates, refuse child labour, and stop resorting to precarious work, to give some examples.

But why should you reassess your company's position based on the 17 SDGs? Let's start by being pragmatic: **social responsibility increasingly affects consumers' purchasing intentions**. This may be a reason to adopt these 17 objectives — although it is far from being the last. **Promoting justice and equity** within your own company makes it a more pleasant place to work, with all the advantages that this brings. You can attract the best talent, motivate your employees, and have a healthy, productive environment.

On the other hand, if you fight for fair trade, decent work, and a more prosperous world, your **purchasing power increases**. By aligning facility management practices with the SDGs, organisations can **enhance operational efficiency, reduce environmental impact, and contribute to the global agenda for sustainable development** — some kind of corporate karma.

7 ways facility management can contribute to a holistic sustainability

After getting to know the 17 SDGs, you may have thought that this is a challenge for Human Resources. It's not totally wrong, but it goes way beyond HR. As we said at the beginning, facility management is responsible for hundreds of actions every day and it's the small daily changes that will enable us to achieve these goals.

By aligning with the SDGs, facility managers can demonstrate their commitment to creating value beyond traditional metrics of success, driving positive social and environmental outcomes for stakeholders. Several key **areas of alignment between the SDGs and facility management practices** can be identified, including:

- Energy management: Goal #7 calls for ensuring access to affordable, reliable, sustainable, and modern energy for all. Facility managers can contribute to this goal by implementing energy-efficient technologies, reducing energy consumption, and investing in renewable energy sources.

- Sustainable infrastructure: Goal #9 emphasises the need for resilient infrastructure and sustainable industrialisation. Facility managers play a critical role in designing and maintaining sustainable buildings and infrastructure that minimise environmental impact and enhance resilience to climate change.
- Waste management: Goal #12 encourages sustainable consumption and production patterns. Facility managers can adopt waste reduction strategies, and implement circular economy principles to minimise waste generation and maximise resource efficiency.

1. Facility Design and Construction

As the built environment continues to expand, embracing principles of sustainability is essential to mitigate environmental impact, enhance occupant well-being, and promote long-term resilience. From energy-efficient buildings to eco-friendly infrastructure, sustainable facility design and construction offer a pathway towards a more sustainable future.

Sustainable facility design aims to minimise environmental impact, maximising resource efficiency, and promoting occupant health and well-being. Key principles include:

- Energy efficiency: Incorporating energy-efficient technologies and passive design strategies to reduce energy consumption and minimise greenhouse gas emissions.
- Water conservation: Implementing water-saving fixtures, rainwater harvesting systems, and efficient irrigation practices to minimise water use and preserve freshwater resources.
- Materials selection: Choosing environmentally friendly materials with low embodied energy,



recycled content, and sustainable sourcing to minimise resource depletion and pollution.

- Indoor environmental quality: Enhancing indoor air quality, natural daylighting, and thermal comfort through proper ventilation, daylighting strategies, and non-toxic building materials.

Incorporating SDGs into Facility Design

Strategies for incorporating SDGs into facility design include:

- Designing buildings and infrastructure that promote inclusive and sustainable urbanisation, enhance resilience to climate change, and improve access to affordable and sustainable housing (Goal #11).
- Integrating renewable energy systems, energy-efficient technologies, and carbon-neutral design strategies to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and mitigate climate change impacts. (Goal #13)
- Preserving biodiversity, protecting natural habitats, and promoting sustainable land use practices through green infrastructure, habitat restoration, and ecosystem conservation. (Goal #15)

Green Building Certifications and Standards

Green building certifications and standards play a crucial role in promoting sustainable facility design and construction practices. These rating systems provide benchmarks for performance and recognition for projects that meet specific sustainability criteria. Some green building certifications include:

[BREEAM \(Building Research Establishment Environmental Assessment Method\)](#): Widely used in the UK and Europe, BREEAM assesses the environmental performance of buildings across various categories, including energy, water, materials, and ecology.

[WELL Building Standard](#): Focused on enhancing occupant health and well-being, the WELL Building Standard addresses factors such as air quality, lighting, and mental well-being to create healthier indoor environments.



2. Energy Management

Numerous strategies can be employed to improve energy efficiency in facilities, ranging from low-cost behavioural changes to investment in energy-saving technologies.

- **Lighting upgrades:** Retrofitting inefficient lighting fixtures with energy-efficient alternatives such as LED bulbs can significantly reduce energy consumption and lighting costs.
- **HVAC optimisation:** Implementing HVAC system upgrades, regular maintenance, and temperature setback schedules can enhance energy efficiency and occupant comfort.
- **Building envelope improvements:** Enhancing insulation, sealing air leaks, and upgrading windows can minimise heat loss and improve the thermal performance of buildings.
- **Energy-efficient equipment:** Investing in energy-efficient appliances, machinery, and office equipment can yield long-term energy savings and reduce environmental impact.
- **Behavioural changes:** Encouraging energy-saving behaviours among building occupants through awareness campaigns, training programmes, and incentive schemes can help foster a culture of sustainability.

Renewable Energy Integration

Integrating renewable energy technologies into facilities can further enhance energy resilience and environmental sustainability. Some common methods of renewable energy integration include:

- Solar photovoltaic (PV) Systems: Installing solar panels on rooftops or open land areas to generate electricity from sunlight, offsetting conventional energy consumption and reducing utility bills.
- Wind turbines: Harnessing wind energy through the installation of wind turbines to generate electricity for onsite use or feeding into the grid.
- Biomass heating systems: Utilising biomass fuels such as wood pellets or agricultural residues to generate heat and power for heating, cooling, and electricity generation.

3. Water Management

Water conservation in facilities is not only an ethical responsibility but also a practical necessity. By minimising water usage, organisations can reduce operational costs, alleviate pressure on water resources, and demonstrate environmental stewardship. Furthermore, water conservation promotes resilience to water scarcity and regulatory compliance, enhancing the long-term sustainability of facilities and surrounding communities.

Sustainable water management practices include the following:

- Water audits and leak detection: Conducting regular water audits and leak detection surveys to identify inefficiencies and prioritise areas for improvement.
- Water-efficient fixtures and appliances: Installing water-efficient fixtures such as low-flow toilets, faucets, and showerheads, as well as energy-efficient dishwashers and washing machines, to reduce water consumption without sacrificing performance.
- Landscape watering techniques: Implementing efficient irrigation systems, drought-resistant landscaping, and rainwater harvesting to minimise outdoor water usage and promote landscape sustainability.
- Greywater recycling and reuse: Treating and recycling greywater from sinks, showers,

and laundry facilities for non-potable uses such as irrigation, toilet flushing, and cooling systems, reducing demand for freshwater resources.

- Water-efficient practices: Promoting water-saving behaviours among building occupants through education, awareness campaigns, and incentive programmes, encouraging responsible water use and conservation habits.

What	What for?
Smart Water Metres	Track water usage, detect leaks, and identify opportunities for efficiency improvements.
Water Recycling Systems	Treat and reuse wastewater for various applications, reducing reliance on freshwater sources.
Sensor-Based Irrigation Systems	Use weather data, soil moisture levels, and plant water requirements to optimise irrigation schedules and minimise water waste
Low-Impact Plumbing Fixtures	Reduce water consumption and enhance efficiency in restroom facilities.
Water-Efficient Cooling Technologies	Minimise water usage in HVAC systems and industrial processes.





4. Waste Reduction

Effective waste reduction strategies aim to minimise waste generation at its source, diverting materials from landfill and promoting resource efficiency. You can do so by:

- Identifying opportunities to reduce waste generation through product redesign, packaging optimisation, and material substitution, minimising unnecessary consumption and waste.
- Implementing waste segregation programmes to separate recyclable, compostable, and non-recyclable materials at the point of generation, facilitating proper disposal and recycling.
- Establishing composting programmes for organic waste such as food scraps, yard trimmings, and biodegradable materials, diverting organic waste from landfill and producing nutrient-rich compost for soil enrichment.
- Encouraging the use of reusable containers, packaging materials, and pallets to minimise single-use packaging waste and promote closed-loop supply chains.
- Collaborating with suppliers to reduce packaging waste, optimise material usage, and implement sustainable procurement practices, fostering a culture of waste reduction throughout the supply chain.

Circular economy principles in facility management

1. Design for disassembly

Designing facilities and products with disassembly and recyclability in mind, facilitating easier separation of materials and components at the end of their life cycle.

2. Material reuse and repurposing

Identifying opportunities to reuse and repurpose materials and assets within facilities, extending their useful life and reducing the need for virgin resources.

3. Closed-loop systems

Implementing closed-loop systems for resource recovery and material regeneration, where waste materials are reintroduced into the production cycle as feedstock for new products or materials.

4. Product life extension

Extending the life cycle of products and assets through maintenance, repair, refurbishment, and remanufacturing, reducing the demand for new resources and minimising waste generation.

5. Collaboration and innovation

Collaborating with stakeholders across the value chain to drive innovation, share best practices, and develop circular economy solutions that promote resource efficiency and waste reduction.



5. Procurement Policies

Procurement policies can set the framework for integrating sustainability considerations into purchasing decisions and supplier relationships. Facility managers should be able to:

- Incorporate environmental criteria such as energy efficiency, resource conservation, and pollution prevention into product specifications and procurement requirements to minimise environmental impact.
- Ensure suppliers adhere to ethical labour practices, human rights standards, and fair labour conditions, promoting social equity and responsible business conduct throughout the supply chain.
- Balance sustainability goals with economic considerations, seeking value-for-money solutions that deliver long-term benefits and support local economies and communities.
- Establish mechanisms for transparency, accountability, and stakeholder engagement in procurement processes, promoting integrity, trust, and public confidence in procurement practices.
- Commit to continuous improvement through performance monitoring, supplier assessments, and feedback mechanisms, driving innovation and progress towards sustainability goals.



5 initiatives to ethical sourcing and supply chain management

1. Conducting thorough due diligence assessments to evaluate supplier compliance with ethical and sustainability standards, including site visits, audits, and risk assessments.
2. Engaging with suppliers as strategic partners, fostering dialogue, capacity building, and collaboration to address sustainability challenges and drive continuous improvement.
3. Promoting transparency and traceability throughout the supply chain, providing visibility into sourcing practices, production processes, and supply chain risks to stakeholders and consumers.
4. Partnering with certified suppliers and adhering to internationally recognised standards such as Fair Trade, Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), and Responsible Business Alliance (RBA) to ensure ethical sourcing and supply chain management.
5. Avoiding sourcing from conflict-affected regions and implementing measures to prevent the use of conflict minerals and other materials associated with human rights abuses and armed conflict.





6. Healthy Indoor Environments

One of the biggest trends in infrastructure management is smart workplaces. Comfortable workplaces ensure decent working conditions, which is our goal #8. And when we say comfort, we mean spaces that are not overcrowded, ventilated and air-conditioned, with plenty of light, ergonomic furniture, governed by proper hygiene and safety procedures. Other measures for promoting a healthy indoor environment and employee well-being include:

- Providing access to health promotion initiatives, wellness workshops, fitness classes, and counselling services to support employee health.
- Offering mental health resources, employee assistance programmes, and confidential counselling services to address stress, anxiety, depression, and other mental health concerns in the workplace.
- Encouraging boundaries between work and personal life, promoting self-care practices, and fostering a culture of empathy, inclusion, and support among colleagues and managers.

Additional reading 💡

ESG, FOMO and FM: interweaving the acronyms without desperation

[Read now](#)

7. Community Engagement and Social Responsibility

Community engagement and social responsibility demand active participation in and contribution to the well-being of local communities and stakeholders. One can do so by promoting diversity and inclusion, creating a space where all individuals feel valued, respected, and empowered; or even supporting grassroots initiatives, community-led projects, and local empowerment efforts that empower communities to identify and address their own needs, priorities, and aspirations, fostering ownership, resilience, and sustainability.

Furthermore, integrating social and environmental considerations into business operations, decision-making processes, and stakeholder engagement efforts also create shared value and contribute to sustainable development goals.

Tip 💡 Foster social enterprise partnerships

Partner with social enterprises, impact investors, and mission-driven businesses to support innovative solutions, business models, and technologies that address social and environmental challenges whilst generating financial returns.

The elephant in the room: where are the women in facility management?

A study published in 2017 concluded that 9 men are working in FM for every woman. A ratio that would make even IT companies blush, and we remember that it is still necessary to talk about “women in tech”. Why is FM a boys club? This reflection needs to be done within each company, but we dare to outline an action plan to change this reality and fulfil SDG #5:

1. Make sure that the acquisition of talent is not biased: that is, that you are not (even subconsciously) putting more trust in people like you.
2. Avoid nepotism. Call for tenders or publish job advertisements that different companies and professionals can apply for—in an industry with so few women, relying on networking creates a vicious circle.
3. Provide a safe working environment wherein women feel comfortable (remember the percentage of women who have been harassed at work?).

Reporting on sustainable development initiatives in facility management

If you're a facility manager or maintenance professional who want to start a transition process towards more sustainable practices, start by **reflecting on the current impacts** of your professional activity and industry; then, **map out the sustainable development measures** and practices identified by other companies in the sector, and, finally, get to a concept of sustainability that **can be measured and analysed**, establishing parameters for action.

Establishing clear goals and targets aligned with relevant SDGs and indicators, providing a framework for measuring progress and identifying areas for action, is crucial when implementing a sustainable development initiative.



1. Collecting relevant data and information on SDG indicators, including baseline data, performance metrics, and progress reports, from internal and external sources.
2. Analysing performance data to assess progress towards SDGs, identify trends, and evaluate the effectiveness of sustainability initiatives and interventions.
3. Engaging stakeholders, including employees, customers, suppliers, and community members, in the monitoring process to gather input, share information, and foster collaboration.
4. Reporting on progress towards SDGs through regular sustainability reports, stakeholder communications, and public disclosures, demonstrating transparency, accountability, and commitment to sustainability.

Use established sustainability reporting frameworks, such as the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI), the Sustainability Accounting Standards Board (SASB), and the Task Force on Climate-related Financial Disclosures (TCFD) to structure and standardise sustainability reporting practices.

Last, another good practice is to highlight your own case studies and success stories to illustrate the positive impacts of sustainable development initiatives, and thus inspire action and replication.

By doing so, we prove that facility management can, indeed, contribute to a more equitable and equal world, promote the use of sustainable energy, reduce waste of resources and improve the quality of life for all of us — now and in the future.

Are we superheroes? Sometimes.

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