

English summary
of Fafo-rapport 2021:31

Aiming for sustainability
Knowledge, efforts and attitudes
in three Unio-affiliated
trade unions

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This report attempts to ‘feel the pulse’ of the efforts related to the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in three professional unions affiliated with the Unio federation. The report is based on interviews with 23 representatives and regular members of the Union of Education Norway, Norwegian Nurses Organisation and the Norwegian Association of Researchers, meetings with the project’s reference group and various written sources (primarily information from the unions’ websites and reports from UN institutions, the Norwegian government and Norwegian public agencies). The interviews with the unions’ representatives and members are the main basis for the report. The questions we ask include:

- How familiar are the union representatives and members with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)?
- Do they take account of the UN agenda and the SDGs in their work?
If yes, how?
- What are their thoughts on how the efforts regarding the SDGs can be enhanced going forward?

First we give an account of «Transforming our world. The 2030 agenda for sustainable development» (UN 2015) and the importance of the professions for a knowledge-based implementation of the UN agenda. We highlight the way in which the 17 SDGs are intended to have a synergistic effect, meaning that if a single goal is pursued without considering the consequences for the other goals, overall progress may be jeopardized, weakened or eliminated. Furthermore, we describe the UN agenda as a coherent strategy for a so-called transformative change, locally and globally, which implies a new eco-social development model that gives precedence to social, ecological and environmental concerns above decisions based on the need for economic growth.

Thereafter we give a brief account of the sustainability policies of Unio and the three trade unions. We also describe the types of enterprises where our informants work before we turn to the analysis of the interviews.

We categorise the informants into four (ideal) types according to their commitment to the UN sustainability agenda, across trades/professions:

- Drivers: Some of them have a previous history of engagement with the environmental movement or social organisations, and have worked with issues that are now prominent sustainability goals. Others have developed their commitment to sustainability through their profession or engagement with their trade union. They are eager and impatient, with a focus on the social responsibility of the professions. The drivers emphasise the role of the unions as social actors and want the unions to assume a very active role, both nationally and locally, to achieve the SDGs and contribute to the changes that they require. They regard information and awareness-raising work as key instruments, and they believe that awareness of the global challenges will change the policies and practices of the unions.
- System adapters: These are informants who are especially concerned with ways to incorporate the work with the SDGs into existing strategies, activities and practices. They are far more concerned with how change will need to permeate 'the system' from above, rather than achieving this through the activities of professions and unions to influence employers, or coercing them if necessary. The responsibility for change and restructuring primarily rests with the politicians and the leadership. The professions exercise their influence through dialogue and partnership within existing frameworks and institutions.
- Pragmatists: These informants regard work with the SDGs in light of activities that are already ongoing, and tend to be concerned with adapting this work to other activities within the profession and in each individual workplace. Although the level of knowledge of the SDGs may vary and even be completely absent among the pragmatists, our impression is that their everyday efforts – as professionals – uphold many of the values that form the basis of the UN agenda. This applies especially to the social goals associated with taking care of those who are 'lagging far behind', combatting inequality and poverty, and promoting gender equality. In their opinion, such values are integral to the professions' ethical stance. The pragmatists believe that daily practical work is what counts.
- Critics: These are informants who deny that the SDGs entail anything new: the goals are of a general nature, anybody can agree to them and they have too little direction and content to affect or change anything. The critics associate the SDGs with politicians, business leaders and top-level bureaucrats who flaunt the SDG lapel pin in the media without explaining or informing anybody what the SDGs mean in practice. To the critics, sustainable development appears to be management or political rhetoric with few implications for working life, professional knowledge, research priorities and 'ground-level' interaction between different occupations. In addition, some researchers believe that the current emphasis on the SDGs could have considerable negative consequences by threatening academic freedom.

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There are elected union representatives and regular members who more or less fit these (ideal) types in all three professional unions. The interviews nevertheless indicate that the three unions are different in some respects. This may to some extent be due to conditions that are specific to the profession in question, but the differences may just as likely, or also, stem from the workplaces and the types of work performed there. The differences may obviously also be affected by the professional unions' respective 'profile' in their sustainability policies, but the report does not discuss this in detail. The report does not undertake a systematic comparison of the informants across the three unions, but a presentation of key features of their work and attitudes helps elucidate the specific nature of each profession.

Our meetings with trade union representatives and regular members from three unions affiliated with the Unio federation showed that the competence level regarding the UN's sustainable development agenda varied considerably. We found inadequate levels of knowledge even among some trade union representatives in enterprises and organisations that emphasise the SDGs. This indicates that there may be significant knowledge gaps among rank-and-file members. However, there are many who take a lively interest in the SDGs, the interrelation between them and the changes and restructuring it will require to reach them. Some have even placed the SDGs at the core of their activities. We found a considerable understanding of the SDGs and a wish that competence about them should be enhanced, that education programmes should be reformed, that the professional unions should engage vigorously in these issues both nationally and locally, and that interdisciplinarity and cross-sectoral cooperation should be included as key elements in the efforts to achieve the SDGs. Several informants called for increased local participation in the work with the SDGs and were concerned with ensuring that employees and local trade union associations be consulted when decisions about restructuring made necessary by environmental requirements and concerns for sustainability are made, or in other words, that the right to co-determination be given a specific content in this area.

The report submits some proposals for ways in which Unio and its member unions can bring their work with the UN agenda for sustainable development and the SDGs forward. These are:

- Engage in information and educational campaigns
- Collect, systematise and share examples of best practice
- Reinforce collaboration between local unions
- Draw on the knowledge and experience at the grassroots level in the federation's strategic work with the SDGs
- Incorporate further questions with relevance for sustainability in the bargaining arena

- Reinforce the participation of trade union representatives in matters related to sustainability
- Strengthen the role of safety delegates
- Enhance the professional knowledge base for interdisciplinary collaboration and understanding
- Participate actively in public discourse
- Strengthen confidence in professional discretion
- Increase knowledge about the need for national and global restructuring and the correlation between these

As a final note it must be underscored that the report is based on relatively modest underlying data. The findings in the report can therefore not be claimed to be representative or present a final word on what is underway in the professional unions and their memberships in the area of sustainability. We nevertheless believe that the interviews provide important insights into the level of knowledge and commitment to sustainability among elected trade union representatives and rank-and-file members, and that the various experiences and attitudes among our informants are common to the three unions.