

A freelancer's guide to reporting on the Sustainable Development Goals

The Sustainable Development Goals or SDGs are 17 global goals aimed at bringing "peace and prosperity" to people and the planet. They focus on the greatest crises and inequalities faced by society. All 193 member states of the United Nations have committed to them and each goal includes a series of targets to help measure progress towards a deadline of 2030.

For freelance journalists, the different topic areas covered by the goals, the rate of progress on their targets, how communities and governments are working on them, and the challenges on the path to 2030 present a wealth of reporting ideas. Specialising in a goal or series of interconnected goals could be a new career path, while **undercovered goals can offer fresh stories to pitch to development desks and news organisations.**



SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS



Why reporting on the SDGs matters



Rigorous coverage of the SDGs can help citizens understand urgent and important global issues from an everyday perspective and **encourage civic participation in progress to meet the goals;**



Journalists can find strong stories in monitoring countries and communities' progress towards the goals, **keeping decision-makers accountable** and influencing work towards meeting the goals;



A significant amount of money is being spent on achieving the SDGs. Journalists can ensure the public are aware of this, **encourage discourse about how that money is being spent** and hold those involved to account;

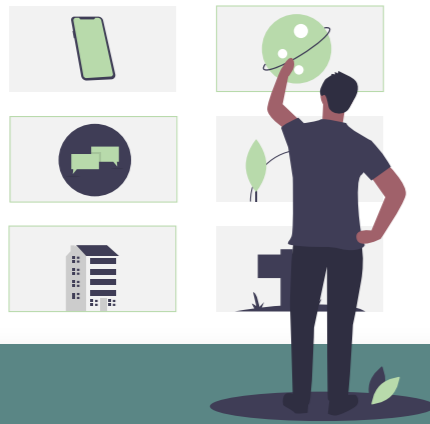


SDG 16 is a commitment to just, peaceful and inclusive societies, and effective, accountable and inclusive institutions. **Good journalism is both an indicator of success for this goal and crucial to achieving it,** whether that's by holding power to account or challenging restrictive media freedom laws.

What every freelancer needs to know

Sourcing stories

The global remit of the goals and the range of topics they and their targets cover mean there are multiple stories to be uncovered by freelance journalists. But that broadness can be overwhelming if unfamiliar with the goals and their aims – how can you source original ideas? What can help with your pre-reporting and where can you tap into the communities affected by or working on these goals?



Expert tip

Local media sources can be a good place to find ideas because they often cover stories that international media hasn't picked up, says Jessica Abrahams, freelance journalist and deputy editor of global development platform Devex.

Sign up for newsletters from NGOs and international development organisations to see what topics they are paying attention to. The UN sends a monthly tip sheet to journalists with the issues to look out for each month, for example. From the UN to the [Overseas Development Institute](#) and [Center for Global Development](#), there's a large industry and calendar of global development conferences with many offering online access. These can be a rich source of story ideas and contacts.

Build strong sources within the communities that you report on, says Abrahams: "Local reporters or those with local connections can raise an issue that's been completely off the radar for me as an editor."

Reporting on the SDGs can also provide a route into reporting on governments and their mandates. Covering how institutions are working towards or not meeting the goals can also provide story fodder, adds Will Worley, UK correspondent for Devex. Look at policy documents and pay attention to details in the "boring paperwork".

Report on solutions



The SDGs cover weighty and serious subjects – poverty, hunger, inequality, climate change – and involve reporting on people in "tough situations", says Abrahams. **Reporting on solutions** related to the goals can offer publications and editors something different for their audiences.

"Readers have been fed the same stories for decades about hunger and poverty and lack of access to water in certain parts of the world. When you keep repeating the same stories, there's a sense of 'nothing's going to change' and people disengage," she says.

More generally, solutions reporting on SDGs can help combat "doomism" and raise awareness of whatever particular solution or barrier there is, adds Worley.

Expert tip

Look for solutions-focused angles to stories or consider pitching solutions journalism-focused publications. Editors might want to hear about development success stories or individuals making a difference in their community, says Abrahams.

"Solutions often challenge a status quo or are themselves facing some sort of struggle which is in itself story-worthy," adds Worley. The "crisis of trust" around the UN climate change conference, COP26, is "a highly significant (and undercovered) story" relating to a crucial solution to the climate crisis.

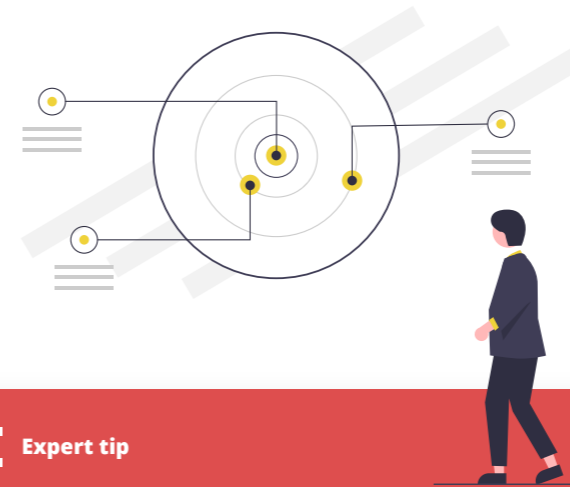
Covering the SDGs from a solutions perspective is important, says freelance journalist and founder of Solutions Journalism Without Borders, [Stephanie Capper](#), who tends to report on goals one to six in Asia and Central America: "It showcases responses and potential solutions to problems that may not just be working in one particular area with one particular community, but could benefit the global community on a much larger scale or apply to communities facing similar challenges."

Make a goal your specialism

While the goals themselves are broad, the reporting topics that they map to could provide a useful career plan for freelance journalists. If you're looking for a **new beat**, consider which goals have less coverage or which appeal to your interests or skills and make it your focus. Get to know sources, read policy documents and research that make you an expert on a particular goal.

"There are loads of different areas where there is going to be a gap in the journalistic market," says Worley.

More detailed knowledge of a specific SDG or policy area also means you can more clearly identify problems, solutions and the surrounding issues, and report them, he says.



Expert tip

There's so much research available on different goal areas and many think tanks and experts to get you started, says Worley: "There's so much knowledge there and it should be far better communicated. It's our job to make these things interesting and engaging for a broader audience."

Goal 7 (affordable and clean energy) and Goal 14 (life below water) strike Worley as goals that are not too nebulous in focus and "ripe for young, keen journalists or old, keen journalists to put a lens on" and make them accessible to a broader audience.

"The energy transition is the big industrial story of our time," he explains. "Freelancers who can begin to understand energy policy – it's extremely complicated – and tell stories about it in an engaging way will be able to do so regularly. They then become the go-to person on that topic."

"Once you've got a story on the ballot you can convince people that 'energy transition correspondent' is a valuable addition to the journalistic world."

Know your data



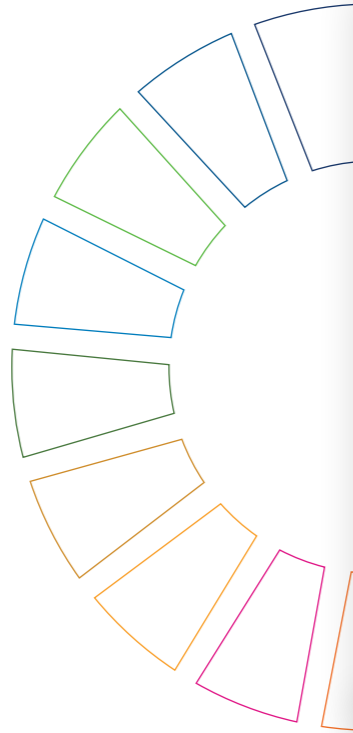
Whether reporting on the accountability of SDG funding or progress of SDG-related initiatives, there are stories to be found in the data surrounding the goals. Knowing where to look and building the **analytical skills** to parse this data, as well as the ability to translate it visually or narratively, could help set you apart.

Handle data relating to the goals with care: the collection process can often take a long time, especially for regional or global datasets, meaning seemingly up-to-date figures are already several years old when published. Data can also be patchy, making a direct comparison between communities or countries difficult.

Expert tip

To get started, there are many resources and databases freely available. The UN and World Bank hold data on indicators relating to progress on the goals, while national government data on the SDGs may also be publicly available. [Our World in Data](#) also curates and visualises data from multiple sources. Look for trends in the data, where progress is being made, targets exceeded or goals that aren't on track.

In such a data-heavy field, familiarity with tools such as Tableau or Flourish could be an asset for freelancers.



Keep it fresh

The deadline for the SDGs is 2030; they officially came into force in 2016 – it's a long time to keep coverage of them in the public eye and to find new stories. To hold both editors' and audiences' attention, it's crucial to **make your pitches original**.

One of the biggest challenges for freelancers covering SDG-related topics is to get good stories commissioned, says Worley, even if it's a strong pitch.

To overcome antipathy towards global development stories where it exists, show how your story interconnects with some of the goals that are attracting editors and audiences' interest right now, such as climate change or global health. The COVID-19 pandemic presents a timely example for news media of how interconnected some of these topics are, he says, so take advantage of this newfound awareness.

Expert tip

Angles that counter received wisdom around development or prevailing narratives can be of interest to editors. Try to unpick the causes of a problem, says Devex's Abrahams, who receives a lot of pitches that just describe a problem: "Give me original and practical stories – tell me something new, or tell me a story in a way we haven't heard before. Focus on what we can and are doing about these issues rather than just the problem by itself."

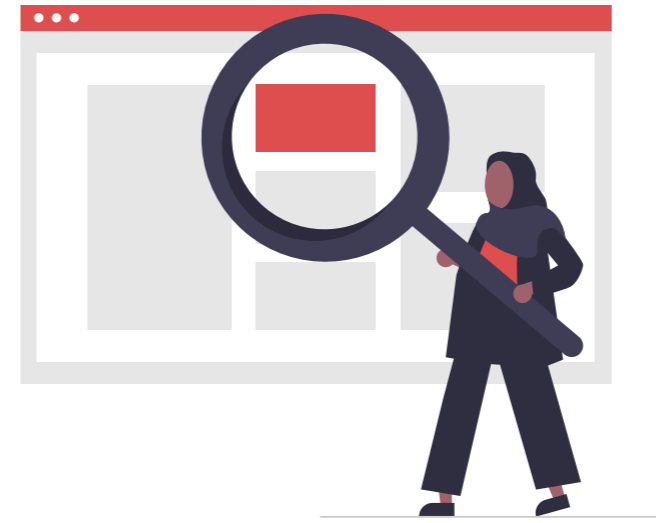
A strong intro to hook the reader is important and the more timely and unique the story, the more likely you are to gain an editor's interest, says freelance journalist Capper. If you're writing about a community that's not considered a country or community of interest in the media at that time, for whatever reason, creating a narrative feature is an effective way to land a pitch, she says: "With a main character in the story you'll be much more successful than with a hard news story that explains what's happening."

Editors need to give freelancers who are writing narrative stories on these issues a chance, she adds: "It might not be a traditional story for them, but by taking that risk they can see what interest these stories can generate especially amongst younger audiences, such as Gen Z, who tend to be quite progressive in what they want to read."

Go beyond the usual suspects when sourcing interviewees if the publication you're pitching to allows. High-level people who are frequently given a platform to talk on issues related to the goals are more likely to have to stick to certain talking points or present an official perspective. Think of who is closest to the work on the ground or the community you are reporting on and make it clear to editors in your pitch that they will hear these voices in the story.



Find accountability stories



Every year, a huge amount of **public money** goes into the SDGs, initiatives to meet them and related government policies and projects. Journalists need to encourage public awareness and public discourse of how that money is being spent, says Abrahams.

How progress on the goals is measured, who decides what matters in terms of the goals and how communities are asked to track this are all areas that journalists can interrogate and shed light on.

Expert tip

Remain sceptical. When reporting on development, you will cover charity work and organisations that are trying to make a difference in the world. "Those are good things but it's important that we're holding those organisations accountable and interrogating what they're doing, if it's working, and how we can improve the system," says Abrahams.

NGOs, development agencies and charities can hold a lot of data or access to sources relevant to reporting on SDGs. This can be incredibly valuable but it's also fair to challenge the data or narrative provided and not take it at face value.

"If they say, this project has had great success, ask them what does that success mean? What evidence is there? Where's the data? How do you define success?" she says.

Find ways to collaborate

Getting close to the story, especially during a time of pandemic-based travel restrictions, can be challenging for freelancers working independently but **local voices** are crucial in reporting on the issues raised by the SDGs. Working with experts and journalists local to a story can provide vital context and knowledge that ensures a community is represented fairly, through the right voices and the story reported well.

Building a network of freelance journalists who cover related goals or also working in this space can also be beneficial. The goals often overlap and sharing contacts, information or ways to solve reporting problems could be derived from such a community of peers. The focus required to report and land stories on specific SDGs means you may not be able to take on other story leads you encounter but could share them with colleagues.



Expert tip

Collaborations are something Devex does regularly, says Abrahams, who has also worked in this way on freelance pieces: "We'll have a reporter to cover a topic and then we'll get a freelancer in the local country to file colour and quotes and make sure that we're getting the local angle."

Consider collaborating with local journalists to ensure your pitch and reporting tells the story of the people most affected and draws on local expertise. Acknowledge this in your pitch if that's your plan of action to show editors you are aware of why this is important and what it will add to the story. If you are on the ground, consider partnering with journalists based in the countries of the publications you are pitching or making your location a focus of your pitch.

Go beyond the jargon

Information on the goals, especially that provided by the UN and other international bodies involved in setting them, frequently involves technical, policy-related language and sometimes jargon.

For journalists, being aware of how a story links to the goals may strengthen a pitch or add another angle, but, for general audiences, the technical framework of the goals is more likely to be context to your reporting rather than the focus. Audiences may not know what the SDGs are and while they may not be able to relate to target 6.1, access to safe and affordable drinking water is something with which everyone can associate.



Expert tip

If reporting for a non-specialist audience, **forget the technical language** and focus on how the goals relate to some of the most pressing and important issues of our time. From gender equality and access to healthcare to climate change, hunger and poverty, these are issues audiences and editors should care about. Generally, avoid leading with the relevant SDG in your pitch; lead with the issue that's relatable to the wider audience instead.

Find global relevance in local stories. The issues covered by the SDGs are often more pronounced in low-income countries, but there can be less of an appetite in Global North publications for reporting on these regions, says Abrahams. If you are finding this with your story pitches, try reframing them: "Try to connect a local story to global issues or think about how the audience you would be writing for could connect to this issue."

Seek out specialist titles and grants

Don't just pitch SDG-related stories to mainstream publications or international news desks. There is both an increasing number of **specialist desks** within newsrooms and a network of publications devoted to specific goals that you can tap into.

"If you're new to covering this topic, get familiar with the landscape of publications that are interested in these topics," says Abrahams. "Understand what each one does, because each approaches these topics differently and is interested in different themes."

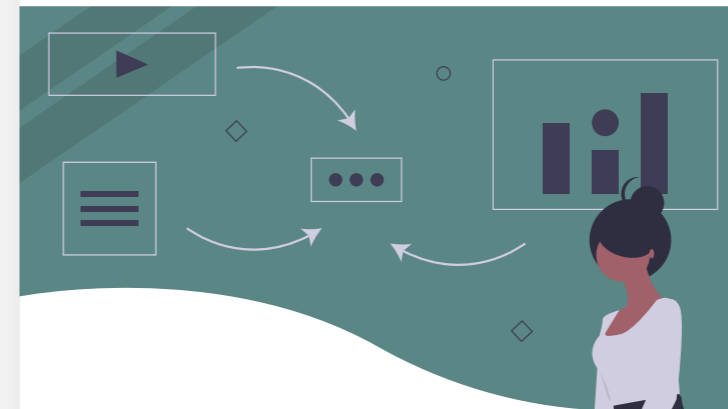
Understanding and covering the SDGs can be an advantage for freelance journalists when it comes to applying for grants. There are a number of grant programmes where the founders or application process are focused on the goals or related fields, such as global health or innovation in development reporting.



Expert tip

Few of these titles will cover all of the SDGs, so make sure you know which of the goals your story is most relevant to and match your pitch to the publications most interested in that angle. Remember that you will be reporting for a specialist audience and reflect this in your pitch and final submission.

Consider new formats



SDG-related stories lend themselves to a range of formats because they can be both very **complex** and, at their heart, very **human**.

Data-led reporting and visualisations that help tell a story over time and show how things have changed can work well, especially for goals or crises where the perception is that there's not been much change in 20 years.

Expert tip

Freelancer Capper suggests exploring multimedia formats as a way to "refresh" SDG reporting and bring coverage of long-standing problems to younger and social media news audiences.

"Capitalise on the popularity of Reels and TikTok. Think of more social media formats and creative ways to approach problems and conflicts that otherwise might appear tired from an editor's point of view," she says.

Resources

[The 17 SDGs](#) – UN >

[Global SDGs indicators database](#) – UN >

[SDGs data](#) – World Bank >

[SDG Tracker](#) – Global Change Data Lab >

[The Atlas of Sustainable Development Goals 2020](#) – World Bank >

[SDGs: open knowledge repository](#) – World Bank >

[Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#) – UN >

[Sustainable Development Goals backgrounder](#) – Committee to Protect Journalists >

[Reporting development: a guide for African journalists](#) – EJC >

[From traditional journalism to sustainable journalism](#) – GIJN >

[The Sustainable Development Goals and a new era of development journalism in Africa](#) – CIMA >

[How can journalists write compelling stories on the SDGs?](#) – Eco-Business >

[Role of media in the attainment of Goal 16 and the SDGs overall](#) – GNWP >