

ESSENTIAL CONCEPTS FOR IMPLEMENTING THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS AN A-Z GUIDE



A-Z GUIDES FOR ENVIRONMENT AND SUSTAINABILITY

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Rainbow washing

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The term ‘washing’, in the context of implementing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), refers to the practice of making an institution, programme, practice or strategy *appear* more supportive of the SDGs than it actually is. Put another way, ‘to wash’ is to overstate commitments to implementing the SDGs. Washing may also be described as a ‘performative gesture’, ‘empty promise’, ‘symbolic commitment’ or ‘virtue signalling’. Those who engage in washing are at times said to be ‘talking the talk’ without ‘walking the walk’. Washing is often issue-specific. ‘Greenwashing’ overstates environmentalism, for example, while ‘fair washing’ suggests a trade relationship is more just or equitable than it actually is (Bennett 2020). ‘Blue washing’ – named for the colour of the United Nations flag – overstates alignment with United Nations programmes, such as the United Nations Global Compact for Business and Human Rights (Berliner and Prakash 2015), while ‘CSR washing’ refers to corporate social responsibility claims that overestimate potential outcomes. Finally, the term ‘brown washing’ refers to *down*-playing or *under*-reporting efforts to promote sustainable development. Institutions may do this to avoid being held accountable or identified as a target for activists (Kim and Lyon 2015).

The term ‘rainbow washing’ has several meanings. First, since the rainbow symbol is often associated with the LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer and questioning) movement, it commonly refers to overstating contributions to the LGBTQ+ movement. Second, since washing is sometimes linked to specific colours, ‘rainbow washing’ can refer to washing multiple issues at the same time. Finally, because the SDGs are often visually represented with many colours, ‘rainbow washing’ may refer to misleading claims about promoting the SDGs (Heras-Saizarbitoria et al. 2022).

Anyone can engage in ‘rainbow washing’, and there are many ways to ‘rainbow wash’ the SDGs. A company, for example, may claim to promote *all* of the SDGs, while in reality it only focuses on those that are most affordable. An NGO may claim to be deeply oriented around the SDGs, but only be marginally or superficially engaged. A government agency may highlight its positive contributions to the SDGs, while ignoring or obscuring how they cause harm (de Freitas Netto et al. 2020; Gutierrez et al. 2022).

On the one hand, rainbow washing presents a significant challenge to implementing the SDGs. Incomplete and inaccurate information about whether, how, when and to what

extent the SDGs are being implemented incumbents efficient resource allocation and effective policymaking (Lashitew 2021). At the same time, however, ‘aspirational commitments’ may also facilitate progress. Unsubstantiated claims may reinforce that SDGs are a priority, keep sustainable development on the agenda, invite pressure from external stakeholders or help attract the resources required for action.

Despite the potential benefits of aspirational commitments, rainbow washing is generally understood to impede – not support – global governance for sustainable development. Thus, several initiatives have emerged to encourage more accurate and credible claims. In global supply chains, for example, several non-governmental organizations have created standards for social, environmental, labour and governance business practices that align more closely with sustainable development than do legal regulations. Suppliers (for example, factories or farms) can voluntarily adopt these standards, hire an auditor to verify compliance and pay a licensing fee to have the non-governmental organization ‘certify’ that the product is sustainable. Although sustainability certifications and other credibility-oriented initiatives can, in some contexts, offer resistance to rainbow washing, they may also, at times, overestimate their potential or overstate their claims.

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