

SDG 17: The key behind ensuring our profession remains relevant

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Every professional, regardless of whether they are an engineer, lawyer, doctor or accountant, exists to serve society.



From the onset, we believe that professionals have a duty to serve society. This stems from the fact that, first of all, they are a part of the elite class and are in the very top echelons of leadership and, by the nature of their positions and knowledge, it is for the benefit of society to invest in their value. It may sound altruistic, but it is something we believe – that all professionals have a noble cause to bring to bear, a noble obligation to serve society. One that does not warrant non-payment of servitude.

For accounting professionals this mandate goes even deeper.

In its Constitution, the International Federation of Accountants (IFAC) stipulates that its mission is to serve the public's interest. This is a nobility that sometimes gets forgotten.

In fact, according to November 2020 research issued by IFAC in partnership with the Centre for Economics and Business Research (Cebr):

Professional accountants make a significant contribution to the economy at the local, national and global levels. In each measure reviewed, a greater number of accountants correlates to better economic performance. Moreover, professional accountants who are members of IFAC member professional accountancy organisations (PAOs), of which SAICA is one, correlate to even stronger performance on economic indicators.

If we think about SAICA, it is an institution that serves its members and associates, regulates their behaviour, delivers talent into the economy and society, upholds standards, but ultimately it serves and support members in fulfilling their duty of serving society. If SAICA and its members and associates do not serve society, the profession would lose its relevance.

Some query, for example, if it's reasonable for an accountant to serve as a Chief Financial Officer (CFO) and have the same obligation, and public duty, as a public auditor? Whilst the public auditor might certify accounts, this brings a different responsibility. In the same way as a CFO who provides information for decision making supports the entity that he/she serves so that it meets its own responsibilities, the entity has a responsibility to society. It has a responsibility to deliver financial or commercial returns to its investors, but it also has a duty to behave as responsible corporate citizens.

Serving society informs our sense of what SAICA should always be (inside that sweet spot of relevance where the organisation needs to find itself) as an important facet to help its members become more accustomed to what it means to serve the public interest while it offers support to this quest.

SAICA, therefore, must continue to create platforms for members to collaborate in delivering that value so needed by society. It has to be about dealing with the really pertinent questions of our time. In a nutshell, we are not going to be relevant as long as we don't help our members understand their public interest responsibilities while also failing to set up platforms for their efficiency. It isn't helpful for SAICA and the profession to have a narrow view of what society expects of its membership.

Ultimately, we should be aware that the profession doesn't exist for itself. It exists to serve society.

In 2015, world leaders gathered at the United Nations to adopt an ambitious framework of 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 169 associated targets to address the full range of social and economic-development issues facing people around the world. These goals included finding solutions for poverty, hunger, health, education, climate change, gender equality, water, sanitation, energy, environment and social justice. When bunched up, these goals provide governments, businesses and civil society with a universal roadmap to tackle urgent challenges, to meaningfully engage with emerging risks and discover new opportunities for creating value.

Whenever we think about the themes “a profession of national value”, the UN SDGs or nation building, we are reminded that it is imperative that we find a very good way to anchor all of this very good work in the idea that the profession needs to be in a position to be able to solve some of society’s most pressing problems. We are not going to do that by ourselves as SAICA. We can only achieve this by ensuring that our members understand their public duty. Of course, making sure that they have the technical competencies they need to have is also important and we shouldn’t take it for granted.

As the leading accountancy body in South Africa, SAICA has been calling on its members not only to “adopt” one of the SDGs, but also show the work that members do – in their personal and business capacity – in assisting to help the world reach the SDGs by 2030. SAICA has undertaken to track the manner in which its members are contributing to a better world and showcase this a special annual report. Through the voluntary contributions of our members and associates, SAICA has, for the third year running, extracted key learnings that can help build the momentum required across the sector. It is notable, for example, that quality education, poverty eradication and inequality remain top three concerns among both our individual member and company responses. This is no surprise when you consider that these areas remain the key priorities South Africa needs to focus on if we are to move our country forward.

We are encouraged by our profession’s commitment to the SDGs. However, the commitment and actions of individuals alone is not enough to see us deliver on the Global Goals. As Goal 17 outlines, it is the partnerships-based approach underpinned by collective actions that will truly see us reach the targets set in the 2030 Agenda.

As SAICA we have united around the SDGs to deepen the country’s understanding of the challenges, opportunities and dynamics that can be leveraged to accelerate and prioritise the delivery of the SDGs. It should be incumbent on all professionals – not just those in the accountancy profession – to rally behind these Goals for the greater good of our country and our planet.

SAICA’s 2020 2020 SA Chartered Accountancy Profession and the Sustainable Development Goals Report is available at <http://saicasdg.co.za/sdg-reports>.



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