Understanding SDG-speak

If the SDGs are to mean anything they must be translated into solid benefits for communities in all countries. How are local organisations mapping their work onto them?

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Know your audience
The SDGs continue to attract negative and positive commentary in almost equal measure

The SDGs suffer from a problem of scale - or rather of how to mesh two scales, the grand and the miniature. The breadth of their vision, not to mention the prescriptive language they and their targets are couched in can be daunting for the ordinary mortal. For the small NGO, community foundation or local government official, coming up against the SDGs must feel like someone who lives in a small apartment contemplating the Empire State Building; you might find the architecture breathtaking, but you’d struggle to see how you could live and work there.

And yet, as the contributors to this special feature write and as the UN itself is acutely aware, ‘the creativity, know-how, technology and financial resources from all of society is necessary to achieve the SDGs in every context’ and ‘while the SDGs are global, their achievement will depend on our ability to make them a reality in our cities and regions.’ As the contributors also show, it’s a struggle.

Perhaps worse still, there are some who see the SDGs as misconceived or irrelevant. For some, they impose a conceptual straitjacket, not very different from the one they have worn throughout the history of ‘development’. One African foundation finds ‘the SDGs reflecting the Global North concepts and definitions of development. They basically frame development in their thinking and ways of working, which advance their interests and agendas.’

So the goals continue to divide opinion, producing a mixture of optimism and scepticism. At one extreme, they impose a template based on the assumptions and preconceptions of the developed countries, without regard for particular circumstances. They oblige NGOs willy-nilly to make their projects conform to the pattern the goals lay down. At the other extreme, they are helping an assortment of actors align their activities in pursuit of highly desirable aims. Generally speaking, the contributors to this special feature are aware of this divide, though generally looking to the positive elements of the goals.

Time is moving rapidly on: ‘We don’t have a second to lose! We must rally our forces and react to the crises currently piling up!’ as Maimunah Mohd Sharif, executive director of the UN Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat) reminded the Council of Europe’s conference of regional and local authorities earlier this year. We’re roughly halfway through the allotted span of the 2030 Development Agenda. Ambivalence about the goals remains and will very likely become more marked as we near 2030 and goals are not met.

How should we think about them? Neither friends nor enemies seem entirely resolved about this question. The UK’s All-party Parliamentary Group for the UN Global Goals for Sustainable Development talks of the SDGs as a ‘roadmap for recovery’ from the pandemic. The metaphor seems inappropriate. Roadmaps conventionally show... well – roads. The SDGs offer a set of destinations, but little much information about how to get there. As the lead article in this feature remarks, not achieving the goals is not necessarily grounds for despair. Maybe we should see the glass as half-full rather than half-empty, and start looking for ways to top it up with something everyone feels happy to drink.

INTRODUCING...
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The SDG framework, adapted with the support of local philanthropy, gives local relevance to the global agenda, builds local capacities and allows for a sense of urgency and collaboration.
Philanthropy for an uncertain future
A study of Latin American responses to the SDGs provides a microcosm of attitudes to be found globally

During the late 1990s, a group of experts started using the acronym VUCA to describe the increasing pace of change in our society. The 21st century was to be marked by volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity more than any other era before. Today, this seems almost tautological. On several fronts of our daily lives, we see a deep and fast transformation unfolding in the ways in which we learn, work, eat, collaborate, build our families, organise our cities, communicate with each other and so on. We have seen drastic improvements in access to information, consumption and urbanisation, all markers of the traditional ways of economic development, and we have been presented with evidence that suggests that it is impossible to sustain this model for seven-plus billion people worldwide, unless we change not only our economic behaviour, but also the ways in which we include the most vulnerable groups of our society.

But there’s no easy way to replace elements of our economic system to make it more sustainable. We have grown increasingly aware of the interconnected nature of the problems we face as a society. Questions about gender, racial and social equality cannot be separated from the climate crisis, nor can the advancement of AI and biotechnology be isolated from democratic crisis and geopolitical instability. As we think of ways to move forward and tackle these complex problems, philanthropy is challenged to adapt to remain a relevant actor. As WINGS stated in The Philanthropy Transformation Initiative Report (2023), ‘there is a serious risk that if philanthropic organizations do not take these issues into consideration, the sector will find itself unprepared and increasingly unable to deliver on its mission as global contexts rapidly shift’. In this context, the Center for Philanthropy and Social Investments at Universidad Adolfo Ibáñez, in Chile, has been researching the ways in which Latin American philanthropy has incorporated the Sustainable Development Goals framework to respond to some of these challenges, aiming to understand the drivers and inhibitors to this adoption.

Links between the 2030 Agenda and the challenges of philanthropy

The 2030 Agenda aimed to address the challenges we face by setting Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) on 17 topics, linking them to each other and offering a set of metrics to keep track of progress. The main principles behind this agenda are:

- a multisectoral approach, where all agents are part of the solution: governments, business, civil society and individuals
- a multtopic approach, understanding that all goals are intertwined in the 5Ps of the SDGs: People, Planet, Prosperity, Peace and Partnership
- a firm reliance on data to drive decisions and measure progress, through a set of 17 goals, 169 targets and 232 indicators.

This framework offers a chance to positively transform philanthropy, as it provides a context to move towards new ways of work. To begin with, it offers a systemic perspective, allowing for foundations to better connect the issues they work directly with to those around them, and to have greater comprehensiveness in the interventions carried out. For those that are not directly targeted, it provides clear paths for collaboration, to move beyond working in silos and truly integrate actions that affect the same population. In order to understand these interactions and to prioritise efforts, the SDG agenda pushes for a participatory approach, where diverse voices, from different stakeholders and perspectives, are included. This is not guaranteed, but is implicit in the ways in which the goals were set. Finally, the SDGs are a
In making the agenda locally relevant, there is the possibility to better connect with a territory’s real, most pressing problems, and to draw a roadmap to their solution.

The issue of localisation
Built through a broad citizen and private sector participation and signed by 193 countries, the SDGs offer a long term, large scale agenda that carries more local legitimacy than one set by a private local agent (a foundation). For all its potential benefits, the 2030 Agenda is too big to assimilate and define on a global scale. It must be translated and adapted to be locally relevant. Philanthropy can play the role of an intermediary that facilitates localisation, and this has been what we have observed in Latin America.

We have observed, particularly in Mexico, Colombia and a few places in Chile, how philanthropic organisations have led participatory processes to prioritise issues and adapt the agenda to local needs. In making the agenda locally relevant, there is the possibility to better connect with a territory’s real, most pressing problems, and to draw a roadmap to their solution.

As we observed in an early stage of the study we are conducting with the CS Mott Foundation, where this applies, the results are very good. The SDG framework, adapted with the support of local philanthropy, gives local relevance to the global agenda, builds local capacities and allows for a sense of urgency and collaboration. FEYAC, a community foundation in the Yucatan Peninsula in Mexico, partnered with corporations to build capacities, diagnose and prioritise the most pressing goals, committing resources to advance them, and agreeing on a monitoring, reporting and communication strategy to the community. ProAntioquia, a business association in Colombia, incorporated the SDGs to align the public, private and social sectors to promote shared visions of sustainable communities and create partnerships to implement them. Finally, PLADES in Chile challenged the small southern city of Frutillar to become a beacon for sustainable development, using the SDGs as a template, incorporating new, more sophisticated aspects of development into their plan and influencing other communities to become agents of change.

To get a sense of how prevalent these cases are, we are developing a survey in which more than 100 foundations from over 10 countries have participated so far. Through this questionnaire, we seek to understand the motivations and inhibitors to integrate the framework of the 2030 Agenda in their operation. The data to which we will refer is partial, and self-selection bias might be reflected among the earlier respondents, but the results still allow us to shed some light on the phenomenon of the SDGs’ adoption.

What are Latin American philanthropic organisations telling us?
The first element to come up is awareness. Virtually everyone knows of the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda, and as many as 75 per cent of the respondents say they are integrating the framework in some way. Sixty-six per cent of these are integrating them in more than five aspects of their operation (diagnosing, planning, communicating, implementing programmes, collaborating, funding, M&E and others), but only 20 per cent are integrating the SDGs as a measurement and reporting strategy. This may seem counterintuitive, as the framework already provides metrics and indicators, but can be explained by the fact that while awareness and relevance of the goals is high, the indicators are not so well known. It is difficult to find an organisation that does not identify with some of the challenges, such as ending poverty or ensuring quality education, but the way to give them local content might be very different to that enunciated in the goals’ indicators.

For those organisations that have done so, the declared value of integrating the SDGs in their work is mainly concentrated in diagnosing, prioritising and planning their areas of intervention, and collaboration with others. Deeper involvement, such as funding through an SDG lens or aiming to influence public policy is often not there yet, but all of those who say they are including the SDGs in planning express a willingness to continue deepening the integration.

Regarding the motives for integration, organisations in Latin America are adopting the SDGs as part of their strategies and actions due to the direct
connection between their work, their principles and objectives of sustainable development. Remarks include, ‘The organisation’s institutional strategic plan promoted integration’ and ‘It is connected to our work on sustainable development’.

A lot of valuable information is also available from the 25 per cent of non-integrators. About 60 per cent of them show interest in including the SDGs, but cite among the two key impediments a lack of knowledge to give them a concrete grasp of the 2030 Agenda and an inability to see its application to their work. Limited internal capacity to understand and apply the framework are the most recurrent reasons for non-integration, but this also refers to institutional capacity to adopt a new paradigm generally. The role of organisations such as Comunalia, an umbrella organisation of community foundations in Mexico (see p62), which has devoted the last five years to train, support and accompany community foundations in their SDG adoption process, becomes very relevant if we are contemplating a 2050 Agenda.

The other recurrent answer is the perceived lack of interest or appreciation for the use of SDGs in their environment. Failure to see the value of the SDG framework also offers an opportunity for

The 2030 Agenda is too big to assimilate and define on a global scale. It must be translated and adapted to be locally relevant. Philanthropy can play the role of an intermediary that facilitates localisation, and this has been what we have observed in Latin America.
Finally, a minority, but not a small enough one to be disregarded, perceives the 2030 Agenda as an imposition or irrelevant to their mission. Among this group, there are those who believe the SDGs are too little, too late: the planet is beyond the point of sustainability and requires regenerative efforts. There are others suspicious of global powers, such as the UN, and their ability to effect any change in the lives of common citizens. These criticisms are valid and reflect deep levels of concern for the pace in which we are moving to solve humanity’s problems.

We are now seven years away from the deadline, and it does not look auspicious. The ECLAC Report on the Advancement of SDGs (2023) shows that it is very unlikely that more than 25 per cent of the goals will be met by 2030. We are losing this battle. Does it mean that we should abort the mission? We don’t think so. We have to learn what worked for us and what didn’t. The basic problems that triggered the 2030 Agenda are still here, and there are already voices talking about a 2050 Agenda, of regenerative development and community-based economies to counter the climate crisis. If we understand the process by which we have been too slow or unable to align our global and local efforts, and we better understand what roles philanthropy can play to fill those gaps, then we’ll be better prepared for the next round.

Left: Community sustainability ambassador in Antioquia, Colombia.

The SDG framework, adapted with the support of local philanthropy, gives local relevance to the global agenda, builds local capacities and allows for a sense of urgency and collaboration.
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A city affair

Above: The city of Manizales in Colombia is incorporating the SDGs into its development plans.
The Cómo Vamos model, established in 1998, has been replicated in 42 municipalities in Colombia and in 14 cities in other Latin American countries. It has three pillars designed to help them achieve the SDGs. The first pillar of the Cómo Vamos model is to evaluate the quality of life and the fulfilment of the goals proposed in the cities’ development plans. The second is to communicate and disseminate the results of this evaluation to citizens. And the third is to encourage the active and informed participation of citizens in the cities’ development plans. In 2016, the network incorporated the 2030 Agenda to promote sustainable cities and since that year has been developing a strategy of localisation of the SDGs. Under this strategy, it created a tool for measuring the SDGs at the city level, a toolkit for the localisation of SDG 11 (make cities inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable) and a guide for the preparation of voluntary local reports in Colombian cities.

**Rodrigo Villar:** María Fernanda, what is the importance of the 2030 Agenda for cities and what are the reasons that drove the Corona Foundation to support both the incorporation of the SDGs and localisation strategies through the Red de Ciudades Cómo Vamos?

**María Fernanda Cortes:** The Cómo Vamos model seeks to monitor the quality of life in cities. In this concept of quality of life, the idea of sustainable development makes sense and fits very well and we have found in the SDGs a close relationship with quality of life and in that sense it has become an extension of the action framework for the How We Go (Cómo Vamos) exercise. In addition, we have found in the SDGs a means of giving a more national and global sense to our work.
RV: So you decided that the SDG measurement tool for cities should be the first step in the territorialisation (localisation) strategy. Tell us about the tool.

MFC: Some of the SDGs at the global level propose goals and targets that, although they are intended to mobilise the entire population and all governments worldwide, probably don’t suit the context of territories that are behind in terms of development, which is the case for most of Colombia. Considering the importance that cities have in the achievement of the agenda, we realised that we must find a way in which the goals proposed at the global level and adopted at the national level by the government can be acted upon and promoted at the local level.

RV: The tool is visual isn’t it? How do you view these goals in relation to the tool? Are there different ranges?

MFC: Yes, our tool is not limited to proposing territorialised goals for 2030, but also proposes paths from 2015 to 2030. In other words, it tells the municipality which indicator it should aim at year by year to achieve that goal. And along with these pathways, it proposes traffic lights that show the municipality how it is performing against the proposed goal. The paths do not lead to a single goal, but to three: the initial goal, as the most ambitious goal, then a slightly less ambitious but more realistic goal, and then the non-optimal goal. The different paths tell the municipality how it is progressing towards these three goals and that progress is what is ultimately reflected in the traffic light. In the tool's visualiser, you can see it’s green if the city did very well, yellow if the city is within an acceptable range of performance, and if they are within a desirable but not optimal range of performance, it’s in red.

RV: You decided that the measurement tool was a necessary but not sufficient condition for your purposes and created a toolkit for cities to territorialise the goals, and a guide, for the elaboration of voluntary reports at the city level. Tell us what the toolkit and the guide are and the reasons for developing them.

MFC: The initial reflection that the tool left us with is that we need territorialised goals, that is, we need goals that correspond to the reality and the capacity of the location. But after we'd generated these goals, our next reflection was that a city, beyond having these goals, having a traffic light and the pathways,
needs to be able to generate actions and to have measurement tools that not only help it to adapt or align itself to the goals, but also to be able to measure the actions it is taking in relation to them.

So, according to this logic, we first developed a guide for the generation of voluntary local reports, so that the municipality that is generating actions around an SDG and wants to report them, can do so. This promotes evaluation, monitoring and encourages the recognition and visibility that cities can get at a global level by reporting. This also allows them to access global examples that they probably had not thought of or had not been able to access through other mechanisms.

Just to make it clearer, we were and still are proposing goals, which they can follow, but we were not telling them how to generate actions around these goals. So, with this in mind, we proposed a toolkit that the municipalities can use to turn these goals into actions.

So, the municipality receives not only goals, paths, traffic lights and a guide for monitoring or reporting, but also other tools to help it understand what the agenda is about, which SDGs are priorities for its actions, and to help it understand how it is aligning with them and how it can plan around the actions it has prioritised.

**RV:** Several cities in Colombia have incorporated the SDGs in their development plans and have prepared voluntary local reports, based on the work you have done. And, in addition, the Cómo Vamos programmes have been central for these cities. I am thinking of cities such as Manizales and Pereira. How have these cities implemented the Cómo Vamos programme and how successful has it been?

**MFC:** I’m delighted that you have brought these two cases into the conversation, because they are two cases that make us particularly proud. In the case of Manizales, the city’s planning director, the one who started the whole territorialisation strategy and put Manizales on the SDG track, was the director of Cómo Vamos. And through Cómo Vamos and all the exercises she did around territorialisation, she was the one who began to identify the potential of the 2030 Agenda in terms of planning. She adopted this idea in the Manizales municipal plan, and she not only generated a whole development plan for Manizales around the SDGs, but the city has already produced a local report and a whole general strategy around the SDGs.

And it is the same with Pereira. We approached the mayor’s office to try to motivate them to report, to begin to generate an agenda aligned with the 2030 Agenda, and we met several people who had the same intention. As in the case of Manizales, where a mayor’s office that sees the value is crucial to local buy-in, we found in Pereira many people involved in territorial governance who see the value of aligning around this agenda. That was crucial in motivating them to generate an alignment with the SDGs and then to devise actions accordingly.

We realised that we must find a way in which the goals proposed at the global level and adopted at the national level by the government can be acted upon and promoted at the local level.
RV: What’s your assessment of the work you have done so far and what’s next?

MFC: In terms of assessment, I think it has been a work that has borne fruit and is growing more and more. I mean, at the beginning we thought we were probably crazy talking about an agenda that many people were not interested in or even did not know about. Now that we are making a lot of noise with all this, we realise that we are not crazy, that we are all talking about this agenda, generating actions and that what is missing is that we get together and manage to find a common point, to generate further actions from there.

This not only motivates me, but it also generates a lot of enthusiasm in the network for this approach and the next thing is that we are currently seeking to update all our products. For example, since a new cycle of local elections is on the way, the territorialisation tool needs to be updated so that the goals, etc., it sets correspond to the realities that the new local governments are going to face. And to that extent, we see it as a very powerful means of influencing the planning instruments that will come out of these new government cycles.

In the case of the guide, we are trying to update it so that it not only begins to guide cities in how to report, but also contains a systematisation of good practices, that is, reporting cases that can serve as a reference for them when it comes to identifying themselves in terms of the agenda.

At the beginning we thought we were probably crazy talking about an agenda that many people were not interested in or even did not know about. Now... we realise that we are not crazy.

In the case of the toolkit, we want to expand it not only to SDG 11, but to make it a pool of tools for the 17 SDGs, because in the end, territorialisation is not only for SDG 11 on sustainable cities and communities, but territorialisation is for the 17 SDGs. So, now we are aiming to expand this toolkit to the 17 so that we can ultimately generate a hub of tools that can enable governments to generate actions against the 2030 Agenda itself.

Above: Community members in Antioquia, Colombia, take part in SDG prioritisation exercises.
ADVERTORIAL

What impact can good governance have on returns in endowment and foundation investment portfolios?

Michael Lauer, Senior Principal, US Wealth, Mercer

The policies and frameworks for managing decisions, investments and risk within portfolios can help make a difference to their performance and resilience.

Investment committees and boards managing endowment and foundation portfolios may be focusing much of their energy on the ‘return on investment’ that careful portfolio construction and asset allocation seeks to deliver.

In their bid to maximize returns into market headwinds, however, organizations risk overlooking the potential ‘return on governance’ that can be delivered by strong frameworks for managing allocations and decision-making, which could reduce the risk of being caught off guard by adverse events, and help organizations capture investment opportunities in periods of market upheaval.

Where governance makes a difference

We ran an analysis on the expected returns of model portfolios based on our long-term (10-year) capital market assumptions. Our analysis suggests that, in aggregate, three core components of good governance could contribute 115 bps to annual performance.

Relative to an annual return target of 6-7% (and a 4-5% spending rate for an unmodified model portfolio, on top of long-term inflation) 115bps annually is potentially significant. For a $100 million portfolio, such a boost would be in excess of $1 million in value per year. Compounded over the course of 10, 20 or 30+ years, this annual ‘performance buffer’ becomes even more so.

This is not to say that plans and organizations with strong governance policies and frameworks in place could expect to achieve an additional 115bps each year. Rather, organizations that are yet to implement these frameworks risk potentially missing out.

First, by allocating a portion of portfolios to illiquid assets, we believe that investment programs could access better risk-adjusted returns, improve diversification, benefit from illiquidity premia and build protection from public market shocks. Here, the model gained an estimated ‘return on governance’ of 90bps.

Three core components of good governance could contribute 115 bps to annual performance.

Expanding diversification programs to incorporate a broad range of asset classes may help organizations reduce risk across portfolios. We estimate a ‘return on governance’ benefit of 10bps, with more potential benefits delivered through material risk reduction across allocations.

Finally, we believe that effective rebalancing can help deliver both long-term return and risk benefits for portfolios. In an increasingly complex market environment, flexible asset allocation targets and policies that enable nimble, timely rebalancing have become key tools for organizations dealing with unexpected market changes. Our return on governance estimate here is 15bps.

An approach for the long-term

In establishing a policy, many organizations seek our guidance on translating asset allocation decisions into policy ranges. Once these ranges are established, however, it is simply not a case of ‘set and forget,’ particularly over extremely long-term investment horizons.

During strong markets, good governance helps ensure the program does not leave ‘money on the table’ in the form of portfolio returns. Through market downturns, good governance models can help to ensure market value protection and provide all parties with peace of mind that the program has the appropriate level of risk to weather storms.

Building good governance policies into the investment process, then allows endowments and foundations to spend more of their time concentrating on what really matters – investing in the causes and the communities that they support.

If you would like to read the full paper or speak to one of Mercer’s NFP specialists, please get in touch or visit www.mercer.com/NFP

*Expected return, volatility, and correlation throughout this piece are derived using Mercer’s forward-looking Capital Market Assumptions methodology. There can be no assurance that any of these results can be achieved. Actual results are likely to vary. Please see www.mercer.com/en-gb/solutions/investments/important-notices for further information on Risk and Return Expectations.

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A series of innovative tools are at hand to assist philanthropic organisations in their quest to help build a sustainable future.

Entering the SDG framework is not always easy, and can leave foundations and other philanthropic organisations struggling to find a way to incorporate the SDG lens into their daily activities. Fortunately, help is at hand.

The tools described below can provide philanthropic organisations with an overview of the SDGs and 2030 Agenda, help to localise them, and integrate them into their projects and programmes. They can be adapted for organisations of a wide variety of type, and can also help in setting up local coalitions to advance some or all of the goals, enabling them to drive meaningful change towards a sustainable and equitable future.

**Getting Started**

**Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors**

Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors offers two initial guides to the SDGs. The first, *Philanthropy and the SDGs: Getting started* introduces the goals and explores how philanthropic organisations can align with them to increase their impact on the causes they care about. The second, *Philanthropy and the SDGs: Practical tools for alignment* provides tools for planning, measuring progress, reporting and taking concrete action on the SDGs. These guides are very useful for organisations looking to join the SDG conversation.

[rockpa.org/project/sdg](http://rockpa.org/project/sdg)

**Getting others to join the quest**

**SDG Partnership Guidebook**

This guide from The Partnering Initiative is a valuable tool for building strong and effective partnerships to work towards achievement of the SDGs. It provides the building blocks of successful collaboration and the underlying processes needed to articulate, strengthen and implement SDG-related actions. The guide offers practical advice for philanthropic organisations on how to collaborate with other key stakeholders and maximise their collective impact in achieving the SDGs.

[tinyurl.com/sdg-partnership](http://tinyurl.com/sdg-partnership)
Getting into a strategic mindset

SDG Compass
The SDG Compass is a guide that explains how the SDGs influence businesses and provides a clear path for incorporating the goals into business strategies. Although it is designed for a business context, it can also be easily adapted to community-based organisations looking to strengthen and plan the implementation of the SDGs. By adopting the SDG Compass, philanthropic organisations will be able to work together with the business sector to achieve sustainable development.

[link to SDG Compass]

Getting the team ready

United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG)
UCLG offers two courses that provide working tools to acquire practical skills in measuring, reporting and implementing the SDGs (tinyurl.com/localising-sdgs1 and tinyurl.com/localising-sdgs2). They provide concrete examples, case studies and interactive exercises that allow philanthropic organisations to apply theoretical concepts in real situations. Organisations wishing to implement these two courses in their communities can do so through the Localizing the SDGs training which includes presentations, manuals and working tools. Although aimed at local governments, it can also be adapted to other organisations.

[link to localising-the-sdgs]

Getting local

Local 2030
The Local 2030 toolkit is a website containing materials and resources to facilitate the localisation of the SDGs and support local actors and their networks. It aims to strengthen organisations through practical resources for SDG implementation.

[link to local2030.org/discover-tools]

Getting together

Global Map of SDG Actions
This is an interactive platform where organisations can share their experiences and best practices in implementing the SDGs. It provides a space for collaboration and mutual learning, allowing organisations to access innovative ideas and establish connections with other actors committed to the SDGs.

[link to act4sdgs.org/global-map]
Little by little... might just do the trick

Community Foundation, one of the CFs under the umbrella of the Tanzania Community Foundation Network. The fees paid for garbage collection by respective households are used to pay labourers who collect and sort the garbage, then process it into organic fertilisers and pesticides to be used in tree nursery projects and gardens. The initiative speaks specifically to target 1.4: By 2030, ensure that all men and women, in particular the poor and the vulnerable, have equal rights to economic resources, as well as access to basic services, ownership and control over land and other forms of property, inheritance, natural resources, appropriate new technology and financial services, including microfinance.

Through its community endowment fund, the Community Foundation for the Western Region of Zimbabwe assisted a local community in Bulilima District to acquire and repair a defunct grinding mill from the local council. The community was then able to purchase a new and more advanced grinding mill which processes fodder into a more refined feed for cattle. This contributes to Zimbabwe’s efforts on SDG 2 (zero hunger).

Through the savings and lending scheme, the intervention is promoting sustainable livelihoods through microfinancing and enterprise development.

In 2020, the Nkhorongo health centre in Malawi received a grant of $10,000 from World Connect Malawi for the construction of the new, client-centred Nkhorongo antiretroviral therapy (ART) centre. As a result, more than 200 clients now access the services per month and the ART default rate has drastically decreased to less than 4 per cent. The intervention is aligned to SDG 3 (good health and well-being), speaking directly to target 3.3: By 2030, end the epidemics of AIDS, tuberculosis, malaria and...
neglected tropical diseases and combat hepatitis, water-borne diseases and other communicable diseases.

For approximately five years, the Uluntu Community Foundation in Zimbabwe has worked closely with communities, making them aware of the importance of building the necessary infrastructure to provide early childhood development (ECD) classes (SDG 4: quality education). Communities pledge skilled and unskilled labour towards the construction of classroom blocks and ECD play centres, preparation of meals for learners’ feeding projects, and income generation projects in the garden.

The Zambian Governance Foundation (ZGF) has supported two savings and lending groups in the rural community of Namanongo. The female-dominated groups meet monthly and have a six-month cycle for the scheme. Through the savings and lending scheme, the intervention is promoting sustainable livelihoods through microfinancing and enterprise development. In this way, ZGF can potentially contribute to SDG target 5.2 (Eliminate all forms of violence against all women and girls in the public and private spheres, including trafficking and sexual and other types of exploitation) in line with research on women’s economic empowerment and gender-based violence which demonstrates that women with greater economic power may be at a lower risk of experiencing these types of violence.

In South Africa, the Initiative for Community Advancement via its community affiliated fund programme has to date supported nine individuals. Through these grants, the recipients have established fitness centres in the community, barber shops, and catering businesses, among other enterprises. This has helped reduce unemployment and inspired the individuals to give back to the community (for example, one barber shop owner offers free haircuts for children prior to the start of the school term). The initiative contributes directly to South Africa meeting SDG target 8.3 (Promote development-oriented policies that support productive activities, decent job creation, entrepreneurship, creativity and innovation, and encourage the formalisation and growth of micro-, small- and medium-sized enterprises, including through access to financial services).

It is imperative that such rich information finds its way to governments so that reporting on the SDGs is comprehensive and reflective of the community experience. The work of community foundations may seem like a drop in the bucket but with more support and recognition from governments and from the development community generally, these drops could turn into gushing taps.

Africa can serve as the example: community practices such as Gogolela, which is popular in Zimbabwe, translates as putting together, little by little and inspires giving at the most local level, giving which may help transform the rhetoric of the SDGs into practical benefits where they are most needed.

1 sdgfunders.org/home

Above: Zambia community savings group.
Left: Antiretroviral therapy centre in Malawi.
Chew with caution

A new report issued this year by the UN says: ‘At this midpoint on our way to 2030, the Sustainable Development Goals are in trouble.’ The report reveals that 48% of the goals are either off track or severely at risk. A further 37% have either stagnated or regressed. Only 15% are on track to be achieved in 2030.

How do we interpret this in the local context? Much has been said about the need to localise the SDGs and many countries now include the targets and their monitoring mechanisms in their national development plans. Localisation of the SDGs makes sense since the goals must be relevant to the lives of the people in their everyday lives. It also helps to distinguish various levels of progress at national and community levels. But that is not enough. To achieve the desired results, drastic systems change is needed.

In 2020, in an address to the Impact SDG Accra Summit, I raised questions about the global system within which the SDGs had been produced: ‘The SDGs on poverty, hunger, inequality etc are well and good. But these issues are effects. The underlying cause is the international system. Without addressing these underlying issues of international political economy, power relations etc, the SDGs will be meaningless to the lives of the majority of the world’s population by 2030.’

The debt and climate crises perhaps illustrate these systemic and structural issues more clearly. We are in such a huge debt crisis in 2023 that calls for debt relief are being made once again to give countries in the developing world a fiscal chance. But debt is not an innocent transactional outcome. It is a deeply political issue that oils an unfair international financial system. African countries, for example, borrow at high interest rates that end up trapping us in debt cycles where more money needs to be borrowed to pay off past debts. In many cases, more is spent on repaying debts than on critical services including health and education, which are key parts of the SDGs. Many countries in the South are now in debt distress and calls are being made for debt relief much like the Jubilee 2000 campaign. Twenty years after debt forgiveness, most of the countries whose debts were forgiven are back at the same point, if not worse off. What happened? There is an African proverb that says that ‘until the rotten tooth is pulled out, the mouth must chew with caution’. The same economic model that produced the stark poverty and indebtedness was maintained, if not reinforced, over the 20 years of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)-SDGs.

At the same time, poverty has worsened in some communities. One of the sectors which very visibly bears the brunt of this model is agriculture, yet it is a sector that holds the key to the achievement of many related goals including ending severe poverty, hunger, achieving good health, etc. Small-holder farmers in communities account for a huge chunk of world food production but their livelihoods are constantly threatened by massive corporate land grabs, commercialisation of seeds, genetically modified organisms, and high doses of chemical fertiliser application rather than ecologically friendly farming inputs and practices that have served local communities and the environment. Hence farming communities are ironically the poorest and the hungriest in many countries.

Meanwhile the same system has plunged the world into a massive climate emergency that threatens the existence of humanity. Local communities are bearing the brunt of aggravated climate events. This year alone, floods have destroyed communities and killed hundreds in Nigeria, South Africa and Malawi (to name a few), while droughts have caused famine and severe food insecurity in the Horn of Africa and the Sahel. It is therefore fitting that it is one of the SDGs. But once again, its root causes are not addressed. A neo-liberal, extractivist economic model that prioritises profits over people, rights and the planet is at the centre of it. North America and Europe have...
produced more climate pollutants than other regions, with the top 10 per cent responsible for half of all global emissions. Again, a few multinational fossil fuel companies are responsible for nearly 36 per cent of global carbon emissions. These companies are liable to pay reparations to repair the damage that they have caused for which local communities are bearing the brunt. Yet the SDGs hardly take into consideration how the extractive behaviours of these companies affect the lives of the people. Rather, the global community has received promises from culprit nations to support Global South countries to repair climate damage, adapt and build resilience. However, most climate finance is in the form of loans, which will ultimately push us into more debt, more debt servicing and less money to provide the basic needs central to the SDGs. At the same time, the destructive activities continue unabated, in some cases encouraged by the same frontliners of the SDGs such as the World Bank in its financing of fossil fuel projects. How can we achieve ‘sustainable development’ if those who are still causing devastation to livelihoods and communities are not held accountable?

The revelation in the SDG special report as noted above should be a clarion call. The only thing that can rescue the SDGs, to make them truly meaningful for vulnerable communities, cities and nations is systems change. Hopefully, the SDG meeting in September addresses that.

1 tinyurl.com/sdgs-special-report

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Mixed reactions from Africa

Alliance asked a number of African organisations how the SDGs inform their work and how useful they found them as a means of determining their own priorities. Here are the responses, in their own words.

**Distant from realities on the ground**

‘The SDGs affect our work because they provide a global framework on development which our countries have aligned with their development and humanitarian work. For Tilitonse Foundation to operate in Malawi, our interventions should be aligned to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) that are derived from the SDGs. We have to make sure that our activities are within the MDGs, and even the support we get from development partners in Malawi is dictated by the MDGs.

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**We find SDGs reflect the Global North concepts and definitions of development. They basically frame development in their thinking and ways of working, which advance their interests and agendas.**

Robert White, CEO, Tilitonse Foundation

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**Framework is key to development priorities**

‘Without any modicum of doubt, the SDGs inform our programming and project design to ensure that our programmes are in tandem with the SDG priorities. Through tracking the SDGs, we are able to identify the gaps in the different goals that need to be fast-tracked to enable the realisation of sustainable development.

Therefore, this helps us design programmes aimed at providing solutions to deal with the existing development challenges and dilemmas. Additionally, the SDGs provide a framework that is key in designing development priorities at all levels and in all sectors. The goals provide an opportunity of ensuring the necessary collaboration and alignment as we implement global approaches to achieving sustainable development. The SDGs facilitate platforms for dialogue, exchange and peer learning. To implement the SDG goals and targets, there is a need for governments across the world, international and local NGOs, and the private sector to grow and nurture strong collaborations and partnerships. Working together provides the scaffolding for unlocking the necessary financial resources.’
The goals provide an opportunity of ensuring the necessary collaboration and alignment as we implement global approaches to achieving sustainable development.

Through data availability and strengthening capacity for data generation on tracking progress for the different goals, the SDGs are able to provide evidence on the different realities in the country and hence inform decision-making. Lastly, the SDGs aim at improving policy coherence because of their multi-dimensional nature which linkages across policy areas.

Moses Isooba, executive director, Uganda National NGO Forum

Helping to build partnerships

‘At Nguzo Africa we align our programme strategies to fit county government, national government and the international development plans. For instance, our three strategic pillars try to respond to one or two SDGs.

Pillar one: in our governance and citizen engagement pillar we strive to ensure that citizens get quality services from government. The same pillar addresses goals 5: gender equality, and 16: peace, justice and strong institutions.

Pillar two: food security and nutrition – we try to address SDG goals 2: zero hunger; and 3: good health and well-being.

Pillar three: environment conservation and climate – we strive to contribute to address SDG goals 11: sustainable cities and communities; 13: climate action; and 15: life on land.

We believe in building strong partnerships in all the goals (SDG 17).

The use of SDGs has helped us to focus, iterate and build informed partnerships that contribute to our priority programmes. When we influence policies at county and national levels, we base our arguments on the country’s commitments towards achieving the SDGs and other international commitments. This has helped us in advocacy and mobilising for support actions. It has also helped us to track how the country and the world is moving towards achieving the SDGs.’

Elizaphan Ogechi, executive director, Nguzo Africa Community Foundation

We align our programme strategies to fit county government, national government and the international development plans.
Join our online course

**Climate + Philanthropy**
A compact learning journey

This course supports philanthropy professionals to

- increase confidence on climate philanthropy
- plan their next steps to integrate climate into their work
- build meaningful connections with a community of like-minded peers

“\textit{This course had just the right mix of climate research, data and funder case studies to make it one of the most comprehensive and practical programs I’ve ever undertaken. Grantmakers need to think critically about how climate intersects with their work and the organisations they fund. In the words of one of the presenters – “this fight is not an abstract fight.”}"

\textbf{Anne Long} – CEO, Greater Charitable Foundation

Join us now! Our last course of 2023 starts on 16 October.

Sign up before 31 September and receive a 20% discount by entering the code ‘alliance_earlybird’ at checkout.
A blueprint for peace and prosperity

Jan Sahas, a community and survivor-centric NPO working across India has embraced the SDGs not because it has been forced to by donor demands, but because they are proving a useful way to organise and communicate its work.

Even before the inception of SDGs, social movements worldwide have long been dedicated to achieving similar development goals, and India is no exception to this development. Therefore, the journey towards aligning our work with the SDGs was underway even before the formalisation of the goals.

From its inception, Jan Sahas’s work on addressing structural reasons for poverty, exclusion and violence through the lens of gender, caste and class inequality and inequity has been guided by the values enshrined in the Indian constitution. Our work closely associates with the SDGs, which act as a shared blueprint for peace and prosperity for people and planet.

Jan Sahas’s work primarily connects to a few specific SDGs. Its Migrants Resilience Collaborative is deeply committed to SDG 8, which promotes decent work and economic growth. Recognising that a significant part of the workforce in India operates in the informal sector, we have partnered with industry stakeholders to raise awareness among workers, facilitate access to social security, and provide response and rehabilitation services. Our comprehensive approach creates an enabling environment where workers can exercise their rights, ensuring economic stability and social well-being. We firmly believe that system-level changes are essential to protect workers’ dignity and rights. Collaboration between the government and civil society is crucial to achieving the goals of decent work and sustainable economic growth.

Empowering the marginalised

Inspired by the vision of Indian women reformists Savitribai Phule and Fatima Shaik and in line with SDG 4, Jan Sahas recognises the transformative power of education in empowering marginalised groups. Our mission is to provide free education and holistic development through initiatives such as the Dignity Centre, Bal Panchayat (children’s council), and support for pre-primary education in Anganwadis. These inclusive spaces empower children to raise their voices against discrimination.

Even before the inception of SDGs, social movements worldwide have long been dedicated to achieving similar development goals, and India is no exception to this development. Jan Sahas also supports women’s access to higher education, assisting survivors of sexual violence in overcoming stigma and ensuring safety and empowerment. Our programmes instil constitutional values and cultivate responsible citizenship among children. The establishment of numerous Dignity Centres and Bal/Balka (boy/girl councils) Panchayats exemplifies our commitment to providing equal educational opportunities.
opportunities and fostering independent, empowered lives for women and children. As of June 2023, we have established 102 Dignity Centres and formed 940 Bal/Balika Panchayats, with the number of enrolled members being 5,436 and 13,594, respectively.

Jan Sahas has worked consistently on helping the most excluded communities for over two decades, organising initiatives like the Dignity March and supporting survivors of sexual violence. Our PR3 Model of Prevention, Response, Rehabilitation, and Reform aligns with SDGs 5 and 10, promoting holistic development and dignity for survivors. Through our dedicated team’s tireless efforts, we empower women and survivors, promoting social-behavioral change among men and boys, capacity building and dialogue.

**Communicating the value of the SDGs**
As an organisation that works across multiple regions in the country and with a wide diversity of stakeholders, including governments, the private sector, and our supporters, communication about our work is an essential means through which we share the essence and results of the work on the ground. The Jan Sahas monthly newsletter chooses one SDG every month and does a deep dive into how the work is helping achieve this goal. We do this not because of any donor suggestion or external compulsions but because the SDGs are a helpful way to communicate our work and explain how the goals are interconnected and how the innovations from the field drives solutions. For example, using the power of technology, our team, partner organisations and volunteers have enrolled more than five million migrant worker households on our web-based app to ensure that three million migrant workers have been able to access 3.5 million entitlements and make their contributions to building India’s economic growth visible. Similarly, we work with multiple state governments to strengthen the implementation of the provisions of the law against trafficking and labour exploitation and have helped 21,000 workers through the helpline and legal aid.

Some recent reports on the SDGs paint a gloomy picture. As the impact of climate change intensifies, we explore the relevance of SDG 13, which focuses on how to combat climate change and its effects, and have realised that the lives of the marginalised continue to become more vulnerable to hunger, large-scale joblessness, violence and conflict. The indicators presented in reports are valuable markers to be able to understand the present state. However, amplifying practical and relevant solutions is urgently required to address the complexity of the large-scale problems facing us.

**Top:** Jan Sahas’s Migrants Resilience Collaborative is committed to SDG 8, supporting workers’ rights.

**Above:** More than five million migrant workers are registered on the Jan Sahas app.

**Left:** Community members with material on migrants’ needs.

**Far left:** A family of Jan Sahas beneficiaries.
More than rhetoric

The concrete results of the SDGs may be disappointing, but they remain an important attempt to align disparate development attempts around a set of common aims.

Summing up the analysis of over 3,000 studies of the SDGs, one recent report concludes: "Our findings suggest that the goals have had some political impact on institutions and policies, from local to global governance. This impact has been largely discursive, affecting the way actors understand and communicate about sustainable development. More profound normative and institutional impact, from legislative action to changing resource allocation, remains rare."

All in all, such an assessment appears correct, if a bit gloomy, at least from the point of view of an institution such as the Compagnia di San Paolo Foundation, Italy’s largest foundation in terms of grantmaking in recent years. When Compagnia di San Paolo made the decision, in 2019-20 to adopt the UN 2030 Agenda SDGs as one of its strategic pillars, it did so because the SDGs’ outline and analytical tools seemed to offer at least two important cognitive resources: first, the idea that any public-good oriented policy-making requires a complexity-based approach; this principle suited both Compagnia’s modus operandi and its mission which is devoted to sustainable development (understood as a holistic concept – human, social, cultural, educational, environmental, scientific and economic development) of Turin and the northwestern area of Italy. Secondly, it was felt that the SDGs could provide a powerful language not only to improve transparency with Compagnia’s stakeholders, but also to find common terms of understanding with other like-minded players. Following a ‘glocal’ approach (in which both the local and the global dimensions are inextricably interlinked), Compagnia is active in networks and programmes that go well beyond its apparently limited geographical boundaries, and manages a plurality of relationships with different partners (Philae, NEF and the European Union itself, to name a few).

The SDGs provided a valuable standard to show what Compagnia was committed to being. Adopting the SDGs framework required an enhanced sensitivity for a quantitative and data-driven approach, both in terms of context analysis and of goal setting and impact evaluation, with their accompanying systematically collected sets of data and KPI. Compagnia reshaped its functional architecture, organising its grantmaking units into three thematic cores (People, Planet, Culture) whose very names resonate with the SDGs’ terminology. Each of these goals – as they are called in Compagnia’s parlance – is in turn organised into SDGs-related mission units, whose task is to develop projects consistent with that mission, either by funding third-party proposals or running projects directly. This goals-missions-projects pattern is intentionally shaped along the lines adopted by some EU action plans, once again in order to align with the current policy-making discourse. Action to support energy efficiency in the third sector’s buildings and technical aid for local communities to take advantage of the soon-to-be launched self-consumption and renewable energy legislation are examples of this approach.

Since 2019, considering the possible impact on one or more SDGs has been one of the criteria that Compagnia’s project managers and selection commissions use to adjudicate grants to applicants. This is made clear in all our
Compagnia reshaped its functional architecture, organising its grantmaking units into three thematic cores (People, Planet, Culture) whose very names resonate with the SDGs’ terminology.

calls and in general in our rules of engagement. Among other things, this has led us to the adoption (and occasionally, creation) of SDGs-pertinent metrics in the evaluation process and has also spread knowledge and application of the SDGs among groups who naturally want to increase the chances of success when applying to Compagnia for financial support. In this sense, Compagnia has become a beacon of SDG culture, and we have witnessed some ripple effects in the Italian philanthropic scene. A group of funders belonging to ASVIS (Italian Alliance for Sustainable Development, which includes different types of sustainability-minded institutions), has made the 2030 Agenda their standard and acts together in terms of advocacy and standards setting. Other Italian funders have followed Compagnia’s example in requiring applicants to describe their proposals in terms of the SDGs framework.

There are also internal effects. Our general grant expenditure is publicised in terms of the SDGs in our Annual Report. Each year, we look at where our efforts are being concentrated in terms of SDGs and, if any course correction is indicated, we carry it out the following year. If the strategy of Compagnia is to be focused – as is the case during the current planning cycle – on education and poverty relief, it is important that such decisions are taken using the SDGs as a template. With seven years to go before 2030, some are already talking about the likely failure of the Sustainable Development agenda. Some even maintain that the very philosophy of SDGs had logical flaws in it. All considered, this is not unlikely and, in addition, unanticipated events like the invasion of Ukraine are affecting the environment severely. Of course, all of us, as members of humankind, should be concerned about the possibility that the SDGs will not be fulfilled. Yet, even though ‘normative and institutional impact remains rare’, and therefore concrete effects are insufficient, the SDGs remain more than a mere rhetorical declaration emerging from the alignment of 150 odd nations in New York. From the point of view of a civil society organisation like Compagnia di San Paolo, it has been, and continues to be, both an opportunity and a tool to move sustainability and justice concerns from the theoretical to the terrain of real things to be done together at all levels. It is a hard (and long) lesson to learn, but a necessary one: future-minded philanthropy should be at the forefront of this endeavour and of those, we hope, that will follow.

1 Frank Bierman et al. Nature Sustainability, 20 June 2022

Far left: Earth Day 2023.
Left: Beauty or bust? Achieving the SDGs may well be the deciding factor.
The SDGs push philanthropy to be more disciplined, more focused on making measurable progress. Yet the interdependencies of the SDGs also force strategic philanthropists to grapple with complexity, looking for ways to multi-solve on a set of issues and affect population-level outcomes. This presents challenges for measuring cause and effect, and often requires building trusting relationships and wide-ranging collaborations.

That challenge is accentuated when trying to connect domestic strategies with international support and leadership, a difficult task for philanthropies and governments alike.

The interdependencies of the SDGs also force strategic philanthropists to grapple with complexity, looking for ways to multi-solve on a set of issues and affect population-level outcomes.

While most donor countries are integrating the SDGs into their international development strategies, achieving what the OECD describes as ‘policy coherence for sustainable development’ has been prioritised by only a handful of countries. The Biden administration’s push to create a ‘foreign policy for the middle class’ offers an opportunity to use the SDGs as a connective tissue that enables both domestic and global progress – otherwise such a policy risks becoming self-centered.

Partnerships and collaboration

While the SDGs were agreed by national governments, their achievement clearly will depend on efforts across all segments of society: state and local governments, philanthropies, businesses, universities, civil society and citizens themselves. Models of governance and collaboration that maximise such collective action successfully are the exception rather...
than the rule, and expanding their application to new places and stakeholders has been inconsistent. City and local governments and community foundations have been in the forefront of innovative cross-sector collaborations, but creating and managing such ventures at scale requires commitment and political focus.

**Economic growth still dominates discourse**

Expanding gross domestic product (GDP) remains the centrepiece of most fiscal and monetary policies for high-income countries, and national economic growth has traditionally been viewed as the best path to reduce poverty. The connection between economic progress and the average well-being of families, however, has weakened considerably, and the SDGs demand a perspective that accounts for ecological and human dimensions as well. While a small group of high-income countries have created the Wellbeing Economy Alliance based on the recognition that development in the 21st century must improve both human and ecological well-being, there is still a long way to go to put sustainability and well-being on par with GDP.

> While the SDGs were agreed by national governments, their achievement clearly will depend on efforts across all segments of society: state and local governments, philanthropies, businesses, universities, civil society and citizens themselves.

**Political climate discourages innovation**

The SDGs are a set of goals, not policy prescriptions. Indeed, with aspirations that are hard to argue against – who’s not in favour of ending hunger? – presumably they would be useful in setting the stage for debates and experimentation on the policies and philanthropic experimentation that will most effectively accelerate progress. Yet the current political environment in some high-income countries has made advancing new ideas risky. For example, commitments by businesses to stakeholder capitalism and ESG reporting have come under attack. The urban planning concept of a 15-minute city is now seen by some people as a plot to constrain individual freedoms. Such an environment significantly increases the difficulty for philanthropy to catalyse new thinking and new partnerships.

The breadth and ambition of the SDGs pose a serious challenge to all countries of the world, but for those with significant resources, the looming question is ‘what must we do differently?’ As the world approaches the mid-point to 2030, high-income countries must make changes to enable a trajectory that will ultimately lead to success. The urgency of the moment is palpable – and future generations are depending on us.
Know your audience

The SDGs can provide a valuable means of aligning and measuring efforts towards sustainable development – even more so when they are customised to local circumstances.

Comunalia is the Alliance of Community Foundations of Mexico, made up of 17 members, with a presence in 16 of the country’s 32 states. We aim to be a social innovation hub to support locally led solutions that help community foundations have a greater impact and reach in their programmes.

In 2018, at the first North American Community Foundations (CFs) Summit, 100 CFs and civil society organisations (CSOs) from Mexico, the US and Canada, created a written commitment to continue working with the SDGs. Since then, Comunalia has committed to deepen collaborative efforts to promote sustainable development and contribute to improve the quality of life in the localities we serve.

This commitment prompted the design and implementation of two initiatives that are linked to the SDG framework: Vital Signs, and Building a Sustainable Future with community foundations in Mexico.

Vital Signs programme
In 2021, we began the implementation of Vital Signs, a community-driven data programme pioneered by Community Foundations of Canada that measures the vitality of a community. Its methodology encourages the participation of local actors in defining the issues and challenges of their territory. The knowledge gathered supports locally relevant, evidence-based solutions that promote actions to improve the quality of collective life.

In collaboration with Community Foundations of Canada, the C S Mott Foundation, and the Inter-American Foundation, we supported six of our community foundations to measure the current social, environmental or economic state of their territories. Through a series of conversations and data analysis, foundations in Punta de Mita, Morelos, Tijuana, Coahuila, Puebla, and Queretaro are rethinking the way they work on issues like education, gender equality, climate justice, food sovereignty, child development, health, youth employment and immigrant children. Vital Signs reporting has given these six CFs the opportunity to understand the interconnections between the issues identified in their communities and the SDGs.

Building a Sustainable Future initiative
Supported by C S Mott Foundation, the Building a Sustainable Future initiative aims to deepen the knowledge and integration of the SDGs into the agendas of community...
foundations in Mexico. The project had four main components: knowledge, practice, awareness and partnerships to accelerate progress on the SDGs.

From March to August 2022, nine CFs participated in awareness training on issues related to the 2030 Agenda. The training comprised issues ranging from an overview of the 2030 Agenda to the way CFs can communicate the SDGs to their communities. We combined the training with peer learning sessions called SDGs in Practice, inviting organisations whose local actions contribute to sustainable development.

The SDG integration process was further enhanced by the provision of financial support and one-to-one mentoring. In September 2022, we awarded over $43,000 in grants to six CFs for initiatives focused on disseminating the SDGs in their communities, creating a matrix of indicators linked to the SDGs for CSOs to keep track of their activities, promoting networks to share local and regional challenges on SDG implementation, or aligning organisational processes with the SDGs. Together the CFs also co-invested in cash and in kind around $38,000.

**Framing their work around the SDGs**

The CFs of Comunalia found that the SDG framework helps them think strategically about the connections between local issues and a global vision.

**Integrating the SDGs into their work** gave them greater clarity on the activities they should be promoting and the type of local development they should facilitate. On another note, the SDGs bring value to the CFs in creating new partnerships by aligning their efforts with initiatives in other regions.

From these two projects, we have distilled a number of lessons:

**Collaboration is key to SDG localisation.** Collaborative action between CFs and community foundation support organisations (CFSOs) builds strong relationships between people and institutions to influence sustainable development processes at the local, national, and regional level.

**SDG adoption of each CF is unique and will only happen if it makes sense to them.** Initially we thought that CFs should adopt the SDGs based on a roadmap we designed for them. However, we realised early on that the way each CF integrates the SDGs into their work varies. Not all the CFs will get on board, but the ones that do customise the SDGs according to the needs of the communities they serve.

**SDGs are a set of aspirations that are inherently place-based and have an expiration date.** The SDGs only provide a framework and language for comparison of progress over the next seven years.

To inform strategic planning and granting for sustainable local development over the longer term, CFs need other tools like the Vital Signs methodology.

*CFSOs, such as Comunalia, serve as a platform to accelerate the achievement of the SDGs. CSOs, CFs, and support organisations need support in redefining, adapting, and building a narrative of the progress and impact of their work, while also sharing their value in advancing local sustainable development strategies. Comunalia’s support in promoting SDG localisation through flexible funding, tailored mentoring, and peer learning revamped our member organisations’ efforts in their sustainability journey.*

**Using the SDG framework facilitates fundraising strategies and partnership creation.** As donors and social investors are demanding clearer contributions to the 2030 Agenda, CFs and CSOs must know how, and how much, they are impacting the SDGs. CFs are key players in the decision-making of private initiatives, as their projects and local work contribute to social investment and collective impact in the territories.

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*Above and left: Students taking part in an SDG schools project near Malinalco, Mexico.*