

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS



United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals offer funders a shared framework for systemic change

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As philanthropy in the U.S. deepens its focus on systemic issues like structural racism, social determinants of health, the climate crisis and more, funders of all types can benefit from aligning their work with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The [U.N. SDGs](#) are a set of 17 ambitious, interconnected goals informed by decades of international work and adopted by all U.N. member states in 2015 as part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The SDGs address issues impacting the wellbeing of people and the planet, promoting equitable health, prosperity and opportunity for current and future generations.

Since joining the Cleveland Foundation one year ago, I have been working with international partners like the United Nations Sustainable Development Solutions Network (UNSDSN), which operates under the auspices of the UN Secretary General to promote the SDGs. I serve as co-chair to a SDSN working group focused on equity across the SDGs. I have also been exploring the advantages of using the SDG lens with colleagues as well as local, national and international partners – Kent State University, the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, The Brookings Institution, the Central Florida Foundation, The Collaboratory, and the Ministry of Ghana to

name a few. My colleagues and I have learned a great deal from these partners and have begun to incorporate SDGs into our work at the Cleveland Foundation. In this article, I will share some of the benefits of aligning with SDGs from a funder's perspective.

Why is the SDG framework useful?

Systemic issues can only be solved by working together across the people, organizations and sectors that comprise the system; the UN SDGs provide a common playbook – including shared language, metrics and resources – designed for collaboration on long-term change efforts. In addition, the U.N. offers a robust collection of marketing and educational resources to support organizations in their work to achieve SDGs.

How can my organization use the SDG framework?

Today, a growing number of U.S. funders – including private, family and community foundations – are aligning their work with the UN SDGs, and many more can benefit from joining them.

- Adapt the framework for your priorities and geographic footprint: Adopting the SDG framework doesn't require your organization to focus on all 17 goals – you can decide which goals fit your existing priorities and focus on those. It also doesn't require an international scope of work. Though the SDGs were developed with a global perspective, the framework can easily be applied at a local scale – while connecting those local efforts to a much broader global movement and impact.
- Advance inclusion, equity and justice: Whether you are supporting quality education (goal 4), decent work and economic growth (goal 8), or climate action (goal 13), equity and inclusion are throughlines of the SDG framework.
- Track progress on long-term goals: The SDGs are each accompanied by a set of metrics, including targets and indicators. At the Cleveland Foundation, we have begun to code our grants against relevant SDGs at the target level to understand how our grantmaking aligns with these goals.
- Tap into a network of thought partners and collaborators: By adopting the SDG framework, you are plugging into a growing network of leaders and organizations across the public, private and nonprofit sectors who share a commitment to a healthier, more sustainable, prosperous and equitable future. The shared set of goals and language offer a platform for connection, learning between organizations and collective impact. Thanks to support from the Mott Foundation, the Cleveland Foundation is now spearheading the development of a regional learning cohort this fall that will bring together community foundations across Northern Ohio to explore the use of SDGs in local efforts to solve complex issues.

The UN SDG framework offers many benefits for organizations working to solve complex, long-term social challenges. There is a tremendous opportunity for U.S. funders in particular to

adopt SDGs as a lens to understand, analyze and communicate their work. If you are interested in learning more about the UN SDGs, please visit sdgs.un.org. I also invite you to [contact me](#) directly if you are interested in learning more about our SDG journey at the Cleveland Foundation or the work of the UN SDSN Diversity, Equity and Justice for Sustainable Development (DEJ4SD) Working Group.