

THE SDG SECOND HALF

IDEAS FOR DOING THINGS DIFFERENTLY

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ABOUT CENTER FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Launched in 2020 by the Global Economy and Development program, the Center for Sustainable Development (CSD) generates leading research and insights to advance global sustainable development and implement the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) within and across all countries.

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THE 'SECOND HALF' OF THE SDG ERA

IDEAS FOR DOING THINGS DIFFERENTLY

John W. McArthur, Senior Fellow and Director
Center for Sustainable Development

This September, the U.N. will convene a [midpoint summit on the Sustainable Development Goals](#), halfway between their 2015 launch and 2030 deadline. For many leaders gathering in the General Assembly, the mood might be somber. Stark global tensions alongside inadequate SDG progress make for a tough outlook. But a successful summit will need to focus on pragmatics more than sentiment: What has gone well, where could a burst of effort tackle gaps, and—perhaps most importantly—what needs to be done differently?

The spirit of doing things differently is central to the purpose of the SDGs. The title of the all-country agreement establishing the goals was nothing shy of “[Transforming our world](#).” It emphasized the “universal, integrated, and interrelated nature” of the goals, which “seek to realize the human rights of all.” Societies were not signing on to cherry-pick goals here and there. A hundred and ninety-three countries committed to transformation across all the goals, everywhere.

But how much has actually changed in the ensuing years? Or more plainly, how many changes have turned out to be for the better?

Fortunately, there are success stories. Compared to 2015, for example, [a million fewer children](#) under five are dying every year. India has [extended basic sanitation](#) access to more than 165 million additional people. Amid the pandemic, Togo deployed [frontier digital technologies](#) to deliver rapid cash assistance to nearly a quarter of its adult population, with [priority to informally employed women](#). Since the SDGs were adopted, more than [200 legal reforms](#) have been enacted across more than 100 countries to address domestic violence, penalize sexual harassment, and prohibit gender discrimination in employment. The United Kingdom’s [greenhouse gas emissions](#) dropped by [roughly a fifth](#), despite the country’s remarkable political travails. Between 2015 and early 2023, Canada jumped from protecting around 1 percent to [nearly 15 percent](#) of its marine and coastal areas.

A growing range of constituencies are engaging on the SDGs too. More than [60 local government entities](#) have [crafted “Voluntary Local Reviews”](#) of their SDG progress since New York City pioneered the first one in 2018. Almost [three-quarters of the world’s 250 largest companies](#) by revenue now report against some dimension of the SDGs. Times Higher Education’s “[Impact rankings](#)” have prompted huge numbers of universities to benchmark efforts against the SDGs. The Nature family of journals has [intentionally expanded their range of outlets](#) to heighten SDG-related scientific debates, most recently including [Nature Water](#), launched earlier this year.

But despite these successes, [empirical assessments](#) draw attention to widespread SDG shortfalls. Our own [previous work](#) shows the huge number of people’s lives and basic needs at stake around the world, [in addition to the](#)

[planet itself](#). On many measures of SDG 5 for gender equality, current trends imply [waiting decades if not centuries](#) for targets to be achieved. Too few trendlines have changed, and in several areas the world is moving in the wrong direction.

The bottom line is that the world has not been doing enough things differently enough to be on course for SDG success. One [2022 meta-study](#) soberly assessed that the SDGs' impact on institutions and policies "has been largely discursive," with limited "institutional impact, from legislative action to changing resource allocation." Other studies have shown similar [gaps in the private sector](#), where SDG rhetoric still doesn't translate enough to action.

At the [Brookings Center for Sustainable Development \(CSD\)](#), we confront such findings with both clear-eyed rigor and determination. Our scholars and scholar teams work within their respective domains of expertise to distill challenges into component parts and distinguish between which pieces need reinforcement, which merit targeted innovation, and which need wholesale renewal. We draw inspiration from one another's commitment to improving understanding and recommending better paths forward.

In that spirit, this short compendium captures a cross section of SDG-focused insights and recommendations from CSD-affiliated scholars. Each brief essay describes something with the potential to be done differently during the second half of the SDG era. Across a dozen contributions, topics range from [reframing media coverage](#) of the SDGs to measuring and elevating [the role of the private sector](#); from participatory approaches to [transforming education systems](#) to [new learning paradigms](#) for human rights; from [better risk-taking](#) in fragile countries to improving [infrastructure and services for care](#); from fit-for-purpose [multilateral development banks](#) to a purpose-driven fund to [end extreme poverty](#); from turbo-charged [Canadian SDG approaches](#) to renewed [American SDG leadership](#); from breakthroughs in [digital public infrastructure](#) to innovative frontiers in the digitally empowered methods of [collective behavior science](#).

We hope these essays can help spark bigger, broader, and bolder public debates on things to be done better during the second half of the SDG era. The world needs to keep ramping up critical keystones to success—the policies, institutions, technology, data, business innovations, government actions, and multistakeholder consortiums that will help do things differently. Shallow either-or arguments about opportunity versus failure are of little use when many ingredients for SDG success are increasingly in place. The practical challenge lies in fostering the complementary ingredients required to achieve breakthroughs.

Over the coming months, CSD scholar teams will continue to push forward on specific challenges at the heart of the "second half" agenda for the SDGs. These vary from renewing multilateral financing for climate and development to reframing fiscal policies for gender equality to reimagining policy for rural America. Through the [17 Rooms initiative](#), we will continue to innovate around diverse forms of "next step" group actions, both internationally and at the community level.

Across all 17 goals, individual countries and communities deserve to have their own debates on what they'd like to do differently. Where the evidence suggests things haven't yet been done differently enough, the looming 2030 deadline can help renew motivation to spark change.

The pledge of a world transformed will boil down to people coming together in groups of all scales to drive better actions together. Doing so with urgency can still deliver an inclusive world of sustainable prosperity for all.

"The bottom line is that the world has not been doing enough things differently enough to be on course for SDG success."



HEY JOURNALISTS, WE HAVE A STORY FOR YOU

Matthew Bishop, Nonresident Senior Fellow
Center for Sustainable Development

“Boring U.N. stuff,” the global journalistic profession seems to have collectively concluded early on about the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), before moving swiftly on to more interesting fare—of which, it is true, the past few years have offered a plentiful supply, what with Trump, COVID-19, Ukraine, Harry and Meghan, and other surefire headline grabbers.

Yet the media will likely have far more to say about the SDGs as the 2030 end date approaches. Any race against the clock generates tension, drama, and big decisions to report on as the deadline draws near.

More subtly, the COVID-19 pandemic has provided tangible evidence of why taking the sort of broad approach adopted for the SDGs makes sense by highlighting how thoroughly interconnected are issues of personal and planetary health, exclusion, and inequality. Reporting on the interconnections between the various problems the world faces during this era of polycrisis should be far easier for a journalist to pitch to an editor post-pandemic. The smarter newsroom bosses are more likely to recognize that their writers should look beyond their narrow domain expertise to see the bigger picture. Asking a writer “how does your story relate to the SDGs?” could become a useful shorthand for editors wanting to encourage the use of a more panoramic reporting lens.

Business journalism may lead the rest of the profession in doing this kind of reporting, as the transformation demanded by the SDGs is becoming increasingly material to the companies and investors they write about.

During last year’s 17 Rooms flagship process, hosted by the Center for Sustainable Development at the Brookings Institution and The Rockefeller Foundation, leading business media editors gathered in “Room 12,” a working group focused on actionable next steps for SDG 12 centered around responsible consumption and production. All of the editors said their organizations are now taking the SDGs—and their parallel yardstick in the business world, ESG (environment, social, governance)—far more seriously than they used to, and they expected their interest to keep growing. They also increasingly see a need to upgrade their newsrooms with the expertise needed to cover this story in a sophisticated way.

Business pressures from content consumers, advertisers, and conference sponsors are all helping push things in the right direction, but the biggest motivator is that this is no longer “boring U.N.

stuff.” There is now a real story to report on, with real CEOs and successful investors wanting to talk about the profits, opportunities, and risks that abound on the road to SDG world.

Business editors first started to get it when companies started pledging to become carbon “net-zero.” What could be more natural for an editor than to have reporters look into how exactly these companies proposed to make this transformation, whether their strategy made any sense, and whether they were actually implementing it.

As ESG now moves center stage politically in the U.S. and globally, serious media, especially those with decent business coverage, will likely do what it does best: report, inform, educate, and hold decisionmakers to account.

However superficial the Punch-and-Judy political debate about ESG may seem compared to the seriousness of underlying environmental, social, and economic challenges of global sustainable development, it does stem from serious questions about the extent to which business should, can, and does make genuine efforts to improve the state of the world. Mobilizing the media to answer these questions is just what the SDGs need.

Indeed, a more engaged media will increase general awareness of why the Global Goals are needed, and what will be required to get the job done. It will highlight what is working, and more painfully, highlight failures and a good deal of humbug in private-sector ESG/SDG initiatives. If that latter part hurts, it should also inspire learning and a determination to do better in future. For the SDGs, it will certainly beat being ignored.



CARING ABOUT CARE

AN SDG-5 PRIORITY

■ Caren Grown, Senior Fellow, Center for Sustainable Development

Goal 5 is an ambitious and expansive approach to reducing gaps between males and females and enabling women and girls to live their lives to the fullest. It proposes a multidimensional definition of, and comprehensive set of indicators for, tracking gender equality and women's empowerment, complemented with targets and indicators across other goals. While advances have been made toward many aspects of Goal 5, the U.N. estimates that at the current rate, it will take nearly 300 years to meet all targets. A high priority for accelerating progress is Target 5.4, which seeks to equalize the time that women and men spend on unpaid care and domestic work, including care for children, the elderly, the sick, and those with disabilities. Available data suggest [this target is seriously off track](#).

Even before COVID-19 exposed glaring gaps in the infrastructure, systems, and services for care, inequality between males and females in unpaid care and domestic work were stark, with women providing the bulk of care worldwide. At the same time, the need for more and better care is urgent. [Many countries will experience an increased demand for care, especially elderly care, over the next 7 years](#) considering demographic trends and climate-related events. Fertility remains high in several countries in sub-Saharan Africa, which will require care for children, while several countries in Asia, the Middle East, and Europe face high growth rates of the elderly population, with [many countries expected to turn greyer](#) by the end of the SDGs in 2030. Conflict also increases the need for care, especially for those with physical and emotional disabilities. Unless the supply of publicly supported care for children, the elderly, and those with disabilities increases, and men take up more caring labor, women of working age will face pressure to drop out of the labor force to take on this role.

"By 2030, there is a major opportunity to advance SDG 5.4, and ensure the world is on the way to building quality systems to support caregivers and those who receive it."

There are currently no international legal standards for the provision of care. Nonetheless, the global community has adopted the “Five R” framework for care: recognize, reduce, and redistribute unpaid work, and reward and represent paid caregiving. Comprehensive and coordinated policies, investments, and actions are needed to implement this framework. National governments play a key role in setting policies, including for parental leave and long-term care services¹; occupational, safety and other regulations for public and private care providers; and financing through public expenditure or tax credits. Governments can also incorporate care as an economic sector in industrial planning and job creation strategies. As they do so, more investment and better regulation to assure the quality of care services will be critical.

Since care provision largely takes place at the local level, municipalities also play a key role—delivering or contracting out public services; issuing building codes, licensing requirements, and standards for care facilities; inspecting facilities to ensure standards are met; and providing financial support to families, to name a few functions.² Bogota is a shining example of a municipality that has adopted a comprehensive care framework, centered around CARE blocks that currently operate in 10 areas of the city, providing a range of quality services for caregivers and recipients.

But there is more to do. For instance, mayors, city councils, and urban planners can incorporate care services and infrastructure into city master plans. Collecting and analyzing data on the demand for care and the supply of care services is a first step. Planners can also link care diagnostics to strategies for housing, transport, land use, energy, water and sanitation, and food security. Meanwhile, cities can begin incorporating care provision into planning for climate risks and adaptation in response to climate shocks. Employer-supported child care can be particularly impactful in low-income and post-conflict contexts where fiscal space may be constricted and publicly provided services are limited. The needs of unpaid and informal caregivers should be at the heart of these efforts.

All individuals require care and provide care at some point throughout their lives, many without the support they need. Continued inaction and lack of investment is no longer an option. By 2030, there is a major opportunity to advance SDG 5.4, and ensure the world is on the way to building quality systems to support caregivers and those who receive it. National- and local-level leaders working together can help pave the way forward.

1 Only 53 countries have adopted parental leave—that is, leave available for either parent. Currently, 118 economies grant paid maternity leave of at least 14 weeks to working mothers. However, of these, only 80 provide maternity benefits through public funds such as social security. Although job-protected maternity leave of adequate length and pay is critical, offering leave for mothers only, especially above a threshold of 30 weeks, can be correlated with fewer women in the workforce (Del Rey, Kyriacou, and Silva 2021). Studies show that a smaller gap between mothers’ and fathers’ leave is associated with a higher female labor force participation rate, suggesting that women’s participation in the workforce could be increased by shrinking the leave gap between parents (Hyland and Shen 2022).

2 In the U.S., initiatives are underway to establish free or widely expanded childcare in California, Washington, D.C., Georgia, Maine, and Colorado. Multnomah County in Oregon passed a ballot measure in 2020 with 64 percent of the vote, approving a tax on the wealthy to fund preschool for all 3- and 4-year-olds. Funding is the biggest obstacle to local and state child care efforts. While taxing the wealthy was palatable to Portland voters, the New Mexico initiative relies on a different funding source, a land grant fund.

PARTICIPATORY POLICYMAKING TO TRANSFORM EDUCATION SYSTEMS AND MEET SDG 4

Rebecca Winthrop, Senior Fellow and Director, Center for Universal Education
Senior Fellow, Center for Sustainable Development

Still reeling from the COVID-19 pandemic, education systems around the globe are facing a myriad of challenges. The world did not have enough teachers before the pandemic, but today the crisis is even worse. Overwhelmed, exhausted, underpaid, and unappreciated, teachers (like nurses in many places) are [leaving the profession](#). [UNESCO estimates](#) tens of millions more are needed globally—from roughly 9,000 more in the Netherlands to 16.5 million in sub-Saharan Africa. Children’s well-being has also suffered drastically. Child marriage is on the rise in countries in the Global South with [UNICEF estimating](#) 10 million more girls at risk of child marriage due to COVID-19. In the Global North, especially, the pandemic has created a mental health crisis with the American Academy of Pediatrics [declaring it a U.S. national emergency](#) in October 2021.

Unsurprisingly, the pandemic’s lasting impacts also reach academic learning. Many children, especially those with learning differences and from the most marginalized communities, are being further left behind on mastering essential skills like literacy and numeracy. In low- and middle-income countries, learning poverty (the percentage of 10-year-olds not able to read a simple text) has [increased](#) due to the pandemic, rising from 57 percent pre-pandemic to an estimated 70 percent in 2022. In the high-income country context of the United States, [equity gaps widened](#) with math proficiency scores for eighth-graders falling to levels not seen since 2000.

Given what educators and systems leaders face, many argue that dialing back our ambition and focusing on closing the learning gaps on essential academic skills, namely literacy and numeracy, should take center stage rather than maintaining our collective focus on developing the lifelong learners envisioned in SDG 4. However, dialing back ambition is not the answer. Finding new and transformative ways to tackle the suite of problems is. The risk of replacing the SDG education goal with a more focused objective on, say, literacy and numeracy is that even though it would be framed as a floor to build on, education systems will orient around it and ultimately treat it as the core objective. It will unwittingly become a ceiling. One has to look no further than the United Nations Millennium Development Goals that focused on access to primary school for boys and girls as the starting point for a quality education, assuming quality teaching and learning would follow. Instead, it became the end goal with millions of children entering new schools and no learning taking place.

What is needed is a serious attempt to meet SDG 4 not by tinkering on the margins but by transforming systems so that they address the deep gaps in equity and relevance simultaneously.

One approach to doing this is to harness innovation and bring it to the center of systems as we argued in 2018 in [Leapfrogging Inequality: Remaking Education to Help Young People Thrive](#). The COVID-19 pandemic showed that education systems can indeed innovate in their core business. Several important pandemic-era innovations have the potential to deeply transform systems. For example, schools meaningfully sharing power with families on how to best collaborate to educate children is one important innovation that would transform systems. As our work in the Brookings Center for Universal Education highlighted, [schools with deep relational trust between families and teachers are 10 times more likely to improve students' academic and well-being outcomes](#). Maintaining this shift alongside other new practices such as effectively [harnessing technology](#) and integrating a focus on student well-being and mental health can help reach more children and provide them with the support and skills they need.

Ultimately, developing and stewarding education system transformation requires a participatory approach that puts those inside the system at the center. Government leaders, teachers, students, and communities need to develop a shared vision of the purpose of their own education systems. Too often, essential actors feel [left on the sidelines](#) with too little space made for their involvement by those with power. Engaging in participatory policymaking approaches is essential to sustain the commitment needed to accompany transformation over time and has been done in contexts ranging from British Columbia, Canada to Bogotá, Colombia. As [David Sengeh of the government of Sierra Leone and I wrote together last year](#), education system transformation hinges on refreshed local assessment of goals—“are they meeting the moment that we are in, are they tackling inequality and building resilience for a changing world, are they fully context aware, are they owned broadly across society”—and then aligning action around shared answers. With common purpose, education systems can be transformed to dramatically reduce inequalities and produce lifelong learning for all.

THE NEED FOR MORE RISK-TAKING

SDG IMPLEMENTATION IN FRAGILE COUNTRIES

Naheed Sarabi, Visiting Fellow, Center for sustainable Development

In 2023, concurring economic, social, and environmental crises are [disproportionately affecting fragile states](#), creating a grim outlook for achieving the SDGs by 2030. The [Global Peace Index Report](#) for 2022 indicates deteriorating global peacefulness since 2014, with a growing gap between the most peaceful and least peaceful countries. SDG [progress](#) has been either stagnating or declining in more than half of the fragile states. Poverty and insecurity are on the [rise](#) in conflict-affected and fragile countries, where 20 percent of the global share of those in extreme poverty live; this is expected to rise to more than 50 percent by 2023. In addition, fragile countries are not on track with [SDGs](#) related to hunger, good health, and gender.

During the second half of the SDG era, the international community must take more risks than it does in traditional development processes if conflict-affected and fragile countries are to make more SDG gains.

A traditional economic development agenda in developing countries focuses on interdependent issues like growth, governance, poverty reduction, better services, and infrastructure. However, development is reversible and fragile in the occurrence of shocks. Resilience depends largely on the strength of the [institutions](#). The [g7+ group of conflict-affected countries](#) advocated strongly, and successfully, for the [New Deal principles](#), established in 2011, to be incorporated into the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs: peace-building and state-building goals (PSGs), engagement to support country-owned and -led pathways out of fragility, and commitments to results.

What does constructive risk-taking look like in fragile countries? Three steps can help drive better progress:

- 1. Strengthen emphasis on SDG 16.** Peace, reconciliation, and political stability—foundational elements of SDG 16—must be given stronger political weight in both international and country-level SDG discussions. In my own conversations with the g7+ secretariat, they insist that without a stronger commitment to peace, achieving SDG targets will be a challenge. Multi-year development planning needs farsighted and stable political environments that provide a smooth transition from quick response to long-term development efforts. To level the foundations, the international community must put more emphasis on both peace-building and peacemaking efforts. Addressing horizontal inequalities and keeping closer

watch on drivers of internal conflict and community-level peace-building are essentials for the way forward.

2. **Build ownership and institutions in a more measurable manner.** Donors need to channel more funds through government systems to build trust and ownership in fragile countries. The SDGs represent an enormous undertaking for fragile countries with low spending capacities. Building institutions and capacities takes time. Where the risk levels for corruption and misuse are extremely high, there is a need for joint program implementation between the government and donors. Multi-donor trust funds that channel money and decisionmaking power through government systems can be good models.
3. **Strengthen the basics for data, planning, financing, and expenditure.** There should be an expedited effort to coordinate data systems, integrate SDGs into the national planning and budgeting process, and link plans to government and donor expenditure systems and reports. Lack of access to data is a pressing problem in fragile and conflict-affected countries. Governments are constrained by data deprivation due to the flow of funds outside government systems that in turn shape development plans. SDG targets should be translated into realistic multi-year projects through an inclusive approach. Experts in development cooperation need to undertake simple exercises to align SDGs into national data collection, planning, and budgeting cycles.

SDG implementation in fragile countries needs much more partnership and trust between the development partners and host countries. While the international community must harbor more risk in implementing the above actions, host countries must show the commitment to execute and take ownership.



A PACT TO SUSTAIN DIGITAL PUBLIC INFRASTRUCTURE FOR THE SDGs

Priya Vora, Nonresident Fellow, Center for Sustainable Development
George Ingram, Senior Fellow, Center for Sustainable Development

Digital technologies can accelerate achievement of the SDGs but only if governments act now to make trusted digital infrastructure universally available. For years digital capabilities have been described as enablers of progress; they are a key reason [seven indicators across four SDGs](#) relate to digital capabilities. But here at the halfway mark, meeting the SDGs remains elusive. Digital must again be put forward as an important means to fast-track progress.

With 2030 in sight, governments must find pathways to creating foundational digital infrastructure that can be repurposed for a variety of uses—therefore obviating the need to “reinvent the wheel” and massively improve the return on initial investment.

There is reason to be excited about foundational infrastructure designed for multiple uses. India is efficiently extending government services to over [93 percent](#) of its population enrolled in the Aadhaar identity platform. That same tool is used for banks to extend financial services to millions of unbanked families. In the midst of war, the government of Ukraine is using its e-government portal to ensure displaced citizens can access proof of identity, health care records, and much more. The same underlying system is the basis for government agencies to share data to better understand the needs of citizens and identify how best to service those needs. However, the picture of digital infrastructure is not always rosy. These powerful systems are accelerators of intent, whether good or bad. Since the consensus on the SDGs was secured, the world has witnessed a range of harms resulting from digital technologies—in the form of exclusion; data misuse and abuse; and monopolistic tendencies that squash competitive markets.

The goal therefore is to expand digital infrastructure but ensure the public (state) response is strong enough to maximize participation, agency, choice, and trust (PACT). When digital assets are either publicly owned, publicly regulated, or publicly designed through open protocols, digital infrastructure can be realized for the public good. In other words, digital public infrastructure (DPI) is secured.

While the return on investment for foundational digital infrastructure is high, foreign assistance for DPI remains inadequate. The bulk of donor digital investments are in one-off siloed solutions designed for a specific program or activity, undermining the hope of infrastructural investments that can serve many purposes. Moreover, investment in public sector institutions to regulate and oversee the digital economy is woefully low in most countries.

This must change. Donors need to jointly commit to invest over the long-term in DPI solutions—and the necessary institutional safeguards around them—that will serve nations and maximize digital participation, agency, choice, and trust in the quest to achieve the SDGs.

This opportunity is not out of reach. As an example, India spent just over [\\$1 per person to deploy its digital identity system](#). The figure could be lower for others using open code, which allows low-resource states to leverage the talents of coders around the world who contribute to open-source digital infrastructure solutions. More importantly, because DPI is relevant to most SDG goals, meeting the resource gap may not require new funds. Instead, through a strategic approach to digital public infrastructure and the institutional safeguards, funding intended for siloed technology investments could be redirected to underpin widely available digital infrastructure assets for all.

SCALING PRIVATE SECTOR ENGAGEMENT IN THE SDGS

Jane Nelson, Nonresident Senior Fellow, Center for Sustainable Development
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Private sector investment and innovation are essential to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). A vanguard of companies is making public commitments and taking action. Yet, business engagement and impact are far from becoming mainstream. A concerted effort is required to scale the quantity, quality, and accountability of private sector activities that could have a measurable impact on supporting the SDGs.

In the [12th U.N. Global Compact-Accenture CEO Study](#), released in 2023, 98 percent of more than 2,600 chief executives across 18 industries in 128 countries agreed that sustainability is now core to their role. While 87 percent warned that current levels of geopolitical and economic disruption are limiting the delivery of the SDGs, 51 percent believe they could play a critical role to help achieve the goals with increased commitment and action.

In many cases, however, implementation is lagging behind public pledges and ambition. [KPMG's 2022 Survey of Sustainability Reporting](#) found that 74 percent of the world's largest 250 companies by revenue are reporting on the SDGs. Yet, only 10 percent are reporting on all 17 Goals, and only 6 percent are reporting on their negative as well as positive impacts. Another study by the [Global Reporting Initiative and Support the Goals](#) found that 83 percent of 206 companies surveyed in 2021 said they support the SDGs, but only 40 percent set measurable commitments and only 20 percent included evidence to assess their impacts.

What needs to change? Three areas of collective action will be essential.

- 1. Standardize and require measures of corporate accountability:** The time has come to put public disclosure of a company's material, social, and environmental risks and performance on a par with corporate financial reporting.

Among voluntary reporting initiatives, the [International Sustainability Standards Board](#), created in 2021, is on track to issue its first two standards on [General Requirements and Climate](#) by mid-2023. Last year, the [Global Reporting Initiative updated its guidance for companies to report on the SDGs](#). In 2022, the [Task Force for Climate-related Financial Disclosure](#) reported that more than 3,800 organizations across 99 countries have become supporters of its recommendations, including over 1,500 financial institutions responsible for assets of \$217 trillion.

But beyond such voluntary efforts, it is time to make this reporting mandatory, independently audited, or assured in accordance with international auditing and assurance standards, and based on comparable, relevant, and reliable metrics. A variety of non-financial reporting requirements and directives are being spearheaded by the European Union, the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission, and other government entities. Such policy efforts need to find efficient paths to implementation, to scale the experience and lessons of voluntary reporting by some companies to mandatory reporting for all companies.

2. **Leverage investment in innovation accelerators and collaborative platforms:** Companies should invest more strategically in research, development, and innovation partnerships. Individual company investments in new technologies, products, services, and business models to deliver specific SDGs are necessary but not sufficient. There is untapped potential to leverage different combinations of public, private, and philanthropic finance and undertake joint efforts to accelerate or scale progress in crucial sectors and systems. Recent alliances such as the [Breakthrough Energy Network](#), the [First Movers Coalition](#), the [Energy Transition Accelerator](#), and the [Zero Hunger Private Sector Pledge](#) point the way, alongside more established platforms such as [GAVI](#), the Vaccine Alliance.
3. **Advocate for enabling policies through business coalitions:** Corporations must speak out more ambitiously and transparently on the need for smart public policies and regulations. In the absence of policy reforms and market incentives, business action for the SDGs will never scale beyond the leading companies. At a global level, organizations such as the [World Business Council for Sustainable Development](#) and [We Mean Business Coalition](#), alongside some established industry groups, are increasing their public advocacy. More needs to be done at the national level. The [Keidanren](#) in Japan, [National Business Initiative in South Africa](#), and [Confederation of Danish Industry](#) are three examples of business associations advocating for government leadership on the SDGs.

In summary, the first seven years of the 2030 Agenda have seen growing business engagement, but not at the speed and scale that are necessary—or possible. The second half of the SDG era needs to capture and catapult private-sector contributions to the 2030 goals.

PARADIGM SHIFT

CREATING MORE JUST SOCIETIES WITH THE SDGs, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND INNOVATIONS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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A large share of the human rights community does not yet embrace—let alone know about—the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Ambivalence is driven in part by the voluntary nature of the SDG agenda, as opposed to one shaped by [legal requirements](#). At the same time, however, a downbeat cottage industry has developed around pessimistic themes such as the “end times” of human rights and a failed, last “[utopia](#).” The pessimism stems from what appears to be overreliance on these same legal remedies that in so many cases fail to stem impunity or address inequality.

A new approach requires a paradigm shift in the frameworks that currently dominate human rights.

Innovations in higher education offer a pathway to advance the closely aligned endeavors of creating peaceful, just, and inclusive communities. Universities have a critical role to play in generating a refreshed approach to human rights that includes SDG literacy, helping to grow what I call [Cohort 2030](#).

What would such a paradigm shift look like?

1. The SDG watchwords “Leave No One Behind” (LNOB) should be embedded in human rights education. LNOB is fundamentally a call for human rights to be respected universally; the SDGs apply everywhere to everyone. The SDGs help broaden attention beyond political rights and elevate socioeconomic ones, which [during the Cold War](#), became enmeshed in East-West power struggles and were subsequently downplayed, at least in the United States. The pandemic has laid bare the urgent need to address social justice gaps and socioeconomic inequities in the Global North as well as in the Global South. In fact, these issues are bound up with tackling much of what imperils democracy in the United States today.
2. Human rights education should focus on SDG localization and translation in specific contexts (sometimes referred to as “[vernacularization](#)” in the rights literature). The general lack of localization has been diagnosed by human rights [scholars](#) as a significant barrier to the realization of rights. When viewed as global and abstract rather than local and experienced by people, the disconnect contributes to both the need to “rescue” the SDGs and the end-times-for-human-rights zeitgeist. Localizing the SDGs, as has occurred in a [number of cities](#) around the world, has resulted in innovation and practical applications that directly and positively impact communities.

3. Related to both LNOB and localization, human rights and sustainable development research and coursework should increasingly incorporate and generate [people-centered data ecosystems](#), including community data portals that use open-source software and are derived with the input of local community members. During the 2021 flagship [17 Rooms process](#), co-hosted by the Brookings Center for Sustainable Development and The Rockefeller Foundation, this was a distinct recommendation from rights experts focused on advancing SDG 16. Disaggregated data that reveal local communities' social justice gaps are necessary (along with policies and funds) to enable more just transitions post-pandemic—which to date, based on [research](#) in several North American cities, has not occurred. In the United States, the [White House](#) executive order on equity and data that recently went into effect could be a game changer helping generate such ecosystems.

These three steps would link the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#), now in its 75th year, with the SDGs, in addition to the numerous subsequent treaties and laws which students still need to learn. The idea of combining the SDG and human rights agendas has already been highlighted, for example, by the United Nations in its [Fourth Phase \(2020-2024\) of the World Programme for Human Rights](#), albeit with scant specificity. It would also be fully consistent with a recent study by the U.S. [National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine](#) on higher education and the SDGs, which recommends “field building” regarding sustainable development. Best of all, it would drive demand for progress not only on SDG 16 (justice) but on the other people-focused SDGs too. The second half of the SDG era needs to create a sustainable future in which rights are realized for all.¹

1 Disclosure: The author was a peer reviewer for the study and has previously advocated this approach in an article in SSIR available at https://ssir.org/articles/entry/foundations_should_invest_in_building_the_field_of_sustainable_development#

HOW TO MAKE MDBS FIT FOR PURPOSE TO SUPPORT SDG IMPLEMENTATION

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“Through collective and individual actions, initiatives and additional steps to enhance extensive work already underway in our organizations, the MDBs, and the IMF will help countries, partners, investors, and the global community move [from billions to trillions](#) as we take up the challenge of achieving the SDGs.” Upon the adoption of the SDGs, the World Bank recognized that the transformative vision embodied in the SDGs would require a vastly higher level of resources to be successfully implemented. This never happened. MDB net flows averaged [\\$25 billion](#) in 2013-15 (in constant 2012 dollars) and \$41 billion in 2021, an increase driven by the cyclical response to the COVID-19 pandemic, rather than by the structural needs for building the SDG economy.

Shareholders are again asking the MDBs to up their game. The Italian G-20 tasked an expert committee to review the capital adequacy frameworks of the banks. U.S. Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen and other shareholders called for an evolution roadmap for the World Bank. The Indian G-20 is setting up an expert group to advise on MDB reform.

Three elements of MDB reform would significantly enlarge their contributions to SDG achievement:

1. The MDBs should embrace and drive the new growth story for the 21st century, one based on [innovation and investment in green technologies](#), and on adaptation and resilience to accelerating climate change. A number of new technologies in electricity production, light road transport, fugitive emissions, building heating, and food and agriculture are reaching a point within the next five years that would make them price-competitive on a mass-market scale. The potential for cheap power can accelerate growth and make access to modern electricity easier for the 775 million people who currently lack it. It avoids the negative local effects of fossil-fuel-sourced pollution on health and education. Yet there are holdouts among MDBs and their clients that view the green transition as potentially holding back the reduction of poverty and social progress. The MDBs should provide the empirical evidence in support of the new growth strategy that is inclusive, sustainable, and resilient, and draws lessons on how to manage the transition.

2. Achieving a green transformation will require investments at scale. Recent granular estimates suggest that emerging markets and developing countries other than China must increase spending on climate investments fourfold by 2030 to **\$2.4 trillion**. MDBs must play a much more purposive and proactive role in helping countries identify, enable, and foster green investments, moving beyond a project-by-project approach to support system change. Country-led and country-owned coordination mechanisms around priority objectives have to become the norm for scaling up investments and mobilizing the necessary support. For this MDBs have to be able to work much more effectively as a system and with the private sector.
3. MDBs also have a central role to play in securing the scale and affordability of finance that will be needed. Private capital can meet the largest share of the \$1 trillion in external finance needed by 2030. In the current context of debt overhangs and rising interest rates on capital markets, however, little private capital is flowing to developing countries. MDBs can create a new highway for private finance through partnering with and reducing risks for the private sector. They can use guarantees and insurance products to take risks that the private sector cannot mitigate, such as policy risk, and reduce the cost of capital through blended finance. MDBs must also increase their own direct finance for the large complementary public investments in both the physical and social infrastructure required and where private capital may not be forthcoming. MDBs are unique in that they can scale up financing at affordable terms without relying heavily on contributions from the budgets of major shareholders, although for the poorest shareholders, it will be important to continue to provide them with concessional aid.

In taking these steps, MDBs must take to heart the universal character of the SDGs and the spillover benefits that come from coordinated action. They must serve all clients, low-income and middle-income alike. They must pursue sustainable development as an integrated and interwoven package of economic growth, human capital development, gender equality, urbanization, jobs, nature conservation, and biodiversity preservation. Fit-for-purpose MDBs would provide an accelerant for the second half of the SDG period and for keeping global climate targets in reach.

Goal 1:
No poverty

SDGs

A PURPOSE-DRIVEN FUND TO END EXTREME POVERTY BY 2030

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Ending extreme poverty by 2030 is first among equals within the Sustainable Development Goals. When [SDG target 1.1](#) was formally adopted in 2015, the number of extremely poor people was thought to be around 730 million globally and was falling by roughly 65 million a year. Continuing that trend would have cut poverty rates to zero by 2030. But progress has slowed instead. [Recent projections suggest 570 million people might still be poor in 2030, far short of elimination.](#) At the SDG midpoint, rebooting efforts to ending extreme poverty could re-energize the world like nothing else.

First, what went wrong? Much early optimism rested on the World Bank's prominent ownership of the poverty reduction target. In 2013, the organization [adopted the end of extreme poverty as one of its two headline goals](#), alongside reducing inequality. It promised to operationalize the twin goals through tailored country strategies and transformational forms of engagement. Further, in the 2015 [Addis Ababa Action Agenda on Financing for Development](#), all U.N. member states agreed to a new social compact to end poverty, with fiscally sustainable and nationally appropriate income floors. They vowed to explore funding modalities for such systems.

Unfortunately, these promises lacked follow-through. The shortcomings culminated last October, when the World Bank admitted premature defeat on its own goal, with a statement that ["the global goal of ending extreme poverty by 2030 would not be achieved."](#)

The bumpiness of the path to ending extreme poverty should motivate renewal, not resignation. Fortunately, improvements in technology, policy, and evidence over the past decade make the goal more solvable today than it was in 2015, not less.

"The bumpiness of the path to ending extreme poverty should motivate renewal, not resignation."

As particular inspiration during the strains of COVID-19, [widespread country breakthroughs in social protection](#) highlight frontier opportunities for direct income support through cash transfers. Evidence of these and other cash transfer measures is [reassuringly positive](#): A strong reduction in poverty rates and spillover benefits into other SDG areas, mostly education, health, and nutrition. Evidence of the practicalities of implementation has also accumulated. For instance, Togo, a low-income country, was able to build its Novissi digital platform to reach almost [1 million beneficiaries within a year, distributing around \\$20/month](#) (30 percent of the monthly minimum wage). During the first six months, [nearly two-thirds of the beneficiaries were women](#).

The digital and mobile technology revolutions have transformed the speed and costs of hyper-targeted transfers to poor people. Transaction costs are now down to [single-digit levels](#) as a share of funds for beneficiaries. Dramatic advances in [targeting methods, thanks to machine learning and more granular poverty data](#), have radically improved efficiency and efficacy.

For sure, cash transfers are a policy tool, not a panacea. They require a long-term strategy, and a majority of extremely poor people still live in rural areas, where investments in agriculture, infrastructure, and human capital are all key to long-term economic growth. Each country should be empowered with vigorous debate on how to sequence and scale such investments. But cash transfers can serve as a [best alternative to a negotiated agreement](#) in these debates. Whenever a better alternative to ending extreme poverty by 2030 cannot be found, cash transfers offer a powerful device for getting the job done—as a ladder out of poverty, not a permanent dependency.

Embedding this logic into a [purpose-driven global funding instrument](#) could transform progress on SDG 1. One option would be to encourage the [International Development Association \(IDA\)](#) to orient its operations around the explicit purpose of ending extreme poverty, proactively supporting targeted cash transfer systems in every country that wishes to use them. With an incoming new World Bank president and a request from shareholders to follow through on its existing headline goal, IDA would be ripe for innovation. An alternative would be to build a new purpose-driven multilateral fund to end extreme poverty, with a technical focus on sustained cash transfer systems for extremely poor people. Such a targeted instrument would be consistent with, while much more specific than, calls for a global fund for social protection.

The implied financing needs for such a funding instrument are substantial but realistic. At about \$100 billion, the global extreme poverty gap is equivalent to only 0.1 percent of global GDP, its lowest relative size ever, and slightly more than half of total official development assistance. An initial funding modality could start where the needs are greatest, with focused support to the five countries on course to account for [more than half the world's poor in 2030](#): Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Madagascar, Tanzania, and Angola.

The time is ripe for a purpose-driven fund to end extreme poverty. The targeting can be surgical, costs are modest, and implementation is now feasible. Doing so to achieve SDG 1 within the coming seven years would mark a historic global achievement and help renew momentum for the SDGs overall.

TURBOCHARGING CANADA'S APPROACH TO SDG IMPLEMENTATION

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Since they were first adopted in September 2015, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have provided Canadians with a uniquely universal, non-partisan opportunity to tackle intersecting challenges like social exclusion, climate change, economic prosperity, and reconciliation with indigenous people. Conceptually, they offer a unifying “[North Star](#)” that speaks to the wellbeing of the entire society, from coast to coast to coast. In practical terms, they offer a common framework for disparate sectors, communities, and levels of government to jointly track progress and galvanize actions at home and abroad.

As the world marks the midpoint to the 2030 SDG deadline, Canada can take advantage of renewed attention to the goals to turbocharge its approaches.

For its part, the Canadian federal government has taken a range of steps toward implementation. Ottawa produced a first Voluntary National Review in 2018, a National Strategy in 2021 with a whole-of-society focus, and the first annual national progress report in 2022. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau now co-chairs the U.N.'s SDG Advocates group. Key issues like child poverty, climate policy, and ocean protection have registered important national gains.

In parallel, the SDGs have gained bottom-up traction in a growing number of constituencies across the country. Community foundations are using the [SDGs to track progress on quality-of-life indicators](#). Cities have started to adopt “[voluntary local reviews](#)” of progress. Universities and colleges, spurred in part by SDG “[Impact Rankings](#),” have embraced the goals to shape research, teaching, and cross-disciplinary efforts.

Overall, however, the SDGs remain under-leveraged, under-powered, and under-reported in Canada. The goals are often mentioned in policy announcements but not embedded in plans. Provinces and territories are largely missing in action on the goals, and private sector attention remains limited. There are no clear mechanisms for citizens to track how their own community is doing, let alone figure out how to contribute. These gaps are consistent with the Auditor General's 2021 finding that “[much work remained to be done to enable national collaboration](#)” on the goals.

Five practical actions could help the Government of Canada play a catalytic role in renewing national SDG ambitions:

- 1. Deploy the federal government's unique abilities to convene and connect diverse national actors.** To start, the Prime Minister can mirror his global SDG champion role with a parallel advocacy effort at home. The government could appoint a cross section of respected societal leaders as Canada's own SDG Advocates. It could further convene, in conjunction with indigenous community and other leaders, an annual Canadian national SDG summit, with the first one held in the lead up to the U.N.'s official SDG midpoint summit this September. Such a convening could use a [17 Rooms](#) format to forge "next step" action coalitions across the country.
- 2. Drive attention toward results by integrating SDG metrics into all major policy initiatives and launching a high-profile, citizen-friendly, online SDG data dashboard.** Public sector initiatives need clear yardsticks to measure contributions toward national and global SDG progress. An overarching SDG benchmarking interface is essential to inform media scrutiny, public engagement, and research mobilization. Every ministry, business, household, and school classroom should be easily able to track SDG progress and gaps in their own communities.
- 3. Create sustained public spotlights on SDG debate, learning, and accountability.** The Parliament of Canada could create an official SDG Committee or set a yearly dedicated week for SDG debates. Each year, this could highlight a different cross-cutting constituency or nexus issue. The federal government could sponsor regular SDG-focused, problem-solving sessions in collaboration with the Federation of Canadian Municipalities. The Auditor General could be asked to table an annual SDG report card, all the way out to 2030.
- 4. Focus on course corrections where Canada needs acceleration or breakthroughs.** [Canada is succeeding on some SDGs while lagging on others.](#) The government can help drive attention to where the country is off track domestically (e.g., clean drinking water for all); where domestic actions disproportionately affect global outcomes (e.g., coastal marine conservation); where the country is off track to meet global commitments (e.g., greenhouse gas emissions); and where Canada can make a distinctive global contribution (e.g., [indigenous-led natural climate solutions](#)).
- 5. Prioritize global public investments and policy leadership.** Canada's investments in global sustainable development [fall below its peer country average](#). At a time when [needs are urgent and growing](#), Canada can scale up investments through official development assistance, promote other forms of development finance through [FinDev Canada](#), and target actionable research innovations through [IDRC](#). Policywise, a leadership stance on public investments can position Canada to play an outsized role in budding efforts to revamp major multilateral institutions, including the World Bank.

These concrete actions could quickly help empower the societal leadership and collaboration Canada needs to make a step change in SDG progress. When Canada falls short on the SDGs, it is both the country's loss and the world's loss. Raising Canada's SDG ambition can help forge a better path to sustainable development for all.¹

¹ Disclosure: Both authors are former board governors of IDRC. Margaret Biggs is a member of FinDev Canada's Advisory Council.



HOW TO RENEW AMERICAN LEADERSHIP ON THE SDGS

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In September 2015, [in stirring remarks at the United Nations](#), President Barack Obama unequivocally committed the United States to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The U.S. government had played a critical role in shaping the agenda and in generating substantial international support. Yet the U.S. government has been mostly missing in action ever since. A clear, official recommitment to the SDGs by the U.S., manifested by a set of concrete, practical actions, would be an important catalyst in reigniting global progress on Agenda 2030.

Select Biden administration officials have embraced the goals, primarily for foreign policy purposes: For example, the SDGs were mentioned in the recently released [National Security Strategy](#). But integration of the SDGs into global and domestic policy initiatives is unmistakably inconsistent, even where they are significantly aligned. The SDGs were wholly absent, for example, from the president's recent [summit committing to end hunger in the U.S. by 2030](#) – i.e., SDG 2.

Fortunately, the U.S. government has much to leverage, due to leadership that has emanated from numerous segments of American society over the past seven years. Many U.S. cities, states, universities, businesses, philanthropic foundations, and youth organizations have [been at the forefront](#) of demonstrating innovation and commitment. Initiatives such as the administration's [action plan on climate change](#) and its implementation of the [executive order on advancing racial equity](#) clearly reflect the objectives of the SDGs.

Three major commitments would signal a renewal of American leadership on the SDGs and help drive global action and progress:

- 1. Issue a Voluntary National Review (VNR) in 2024 and 2028.** Countries use VNRs to communicate their progress on the SDGs and outline their plans for accelerating their efforts both nationally and globally. [Only five U.N. member states have not submitted nor have committed to release a single VNR](#): Haiti, Myanmar, South Sudan, Yemen, and the U.S. By the end of this year, most countries that the U.S. considers peers will have issued multiple VNRs.

An American VNR could integrate the innovations already advanced at local and state levels such as the Voluntary Local Reviews issued by [New York](#), [Pittsburgh](#), and [Orlando](#);

data dashboards created by [Los Angeles](#) and [Hawaii Green Growth](#); and the Voluntary University Reviews issued by [Carnegie Mellon](#). A VNR would also highlight the importance young people place on this framework as well as analyze how the implementation of the legislative agenda approved in the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, the CHIPs and Science Act, and the Inflation Reduction Act will all contribute to progress.

2. **Establish a cabinet-level interagency group responsible for SDG implementation.** A serious commitment will require a whole-of-government approach, given the SDGs pertain to domestic as well as global priorities and include interdependencies that cut across departments and agencies. The U.S. could model [the bureaucratic structure in place to combat human trafficking and modern slavery](#), which includes the President’s Interagency Task Force and the Senior Policy Operating Group.¹
3. **Integrate SDG standards into signature initiatives.** Departments and agencies should explicitly align their key domestic and global initiatives—such as the president’s [campaign to end hunger by 2030](#); the [U.S. strategy on countering corruption](#); and the president’s [Summit for Democracy](#)—to the SDGs and use SDG standards and metrics to rigorously measure their contributions to national and global progress. Executive branch reports to Congress on numerous initiatives ought to do the same.

A basis for hope

During much of the first half of the Millennium Development Goal era from 2000 to 2015, the U.S. remained on the sidelines. The tone shifted through [formal and explicit commitments](#) in 2009, and its leadership was central to accelerating progress on several fronts, such as maternal health, child survival, and smallholder agriculture, before 2015. A similar opportunity awaits the U.S. at this halfway point to 2030. At the core of the SDGs is the concept that the well-being of all citizens is interconnected. Attending to the well-being of all Americans—rural and urban, young and old, no matter where they sit on the political spectrum—will require bipartisan leadership and help make democracy stronger in the U.S. and worldwide. A unified recommitment to the SDGs would be a major step toward advancing U.S. interests, both at home and abroad.

¹ Note also that targets and indicators to combat human trafficking appear in several different SDGs and ought to be reflected in the annual Trafficking in Persons Report to Congress.

FROM NUDGING INDIVIDUALS TO STEWARDING COLLECTIVES: HOW TO BOOST COLLABORATION FOR THE SDGS

■ Jacob Taylor, Fellow, Center for Sustainable Development

A prominent group of behavioral and social scientists recently proposed human collective behavior as a "crisis discipline" to join the ranks of medicine, environmental conservation, and climate science to support planetary sustainability and societal well-being. Increasingly well-equipped with data and tools to interpret behavior of groups of individuals—from [collective intelligence in teams](#) to community [management of shared resources](#), or responses to the [spread of information across digital social networks](#)—researchers are beginning to draw links between patterns of collective behavior and global-scale environmental, social, and economic processes in real time. Much like the role of environmental scientists [expanded over the course of the 20th century](#) from specific research agendas to global-scale policy advice, the role of behavioral and social scientists is set to expand beyond designing incentives or "nudges" targeting individual behavior for single priorities (e.g., vaccine adherence or consumption choices) to helping steward communities of all scales toward a range of intersecting priorities over time.

Elevating collective behavior to a crisis discipline would be a welcome development for leaders everywhere seeking to advance the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)—a comprehensive set of global ambitions that demand unprecedented levels of collaboration within and across communities of all scales. For these leaders, often the question is not just what are the best ways to collaborate to preserve life below water (SDG 14) or increase gender equality (SDG 5), but how new approaches to collaboration can advance environmental, social, and economic issues all at once. To adhere to the core SDG principle of "[Leave No One Behind](#)," communitywide collaboration needs to be matched by coordination across scales, so that local priorities and problems discussed in town halls are directly reflected in agendas for global-scale action and vice versa.

This implies a complex matrix of actions. The bad news is that, at the midpoint of the SDGs, there is still no clear set of evidence-based strategies or institutions to enable such elaborate global-scale collaboration. Existing research and funding efforts are [uncoordinated and shared ambitions and incentives remain poorly defined](#). Crucially, researchers need to access, share, and develop models for time-series data that can map [change in collective behavior](#)—including variables such as group size and composition, priorities, actions, and group cohesion—to changes in environmental, social, and economic outcomes over time.

The good news is that the SDGs themselves offer a ready-made framework to help align key stakeholders. Researchers and funders can use the SDGs to define measurable priorities. They can also use the SDGs to organize and incentivize research streams. The SDGs allow researchers to advance specific SDG issues (e.g., [communitywide strategies for climate adaptation](#), SDG 13, or [gender equality](#), SDG 5) in parallel with research at the intersection of multiple SDG issues (e.g., strategies to address climate adaptation, gender equality, and poverty reduction) and strategies for moving all issues forward at once, like building a movement for [planetary-scale altruism](#). In a similar way, the SDGs can be used to organize emerging data and AI ecosystems that aim to align collective behavior with planetary sustainability and societal impact.

Using the SDGs as a coordination device, researchers, funders, and communities of all scales can commit to three actions in the second half of the SDG agenda:

- 1. Coordinate a global collective behavior research network using the SDGs.** Modeled on [Future Earth](#), a “network of networks” for global environmental change research, a global collective behavior research network organized around the SDGs could adopt a [17 Rooms](#)-style process to curate 17 parallel transdisciplinary working groups (one per SDG) that meet once annually to integrate insights across SDGs and disseminate learnings to policymakers and regulators.
- 2. Convene a global “funders roundtable” for collective behavior science and the SDGs.** The goal would be to gather representatives from a cross section of major funders of collective behavior and sustainability research such as the NSF, NIH, ERC, and philanthropic donors; research agencies such as DARPA and ARIA (the UK’s new high-risk, high-reward interdisciplinary research agency); innovation funds like XPrize; and other [SDG-focussed initiatives](#). Early outputs might include a landscape analysis linking collective behavior science and global sustainable development and a funder’s toolkit for organizing efforts around the SDGs and building SDG-focused consortia.
- 3. Develop a collective behavior data and AI ecosystem using the SDGs.** The data methods underlying artificial intelligence can be used to fast-track collective behavior research for the SDGs. One promising proposal would entail communities of all scales creating data-driven models of themselves—aka, “[digital twins](#)”—that can capture collective-level behavior (composition, priorities, approaches, and impacts) and progressively surface best shared actions for the SDGs by communicating and negotiating with other digital twins over time. Given that so much of the data and AI tools relevant to collective behavior exist behind the “walled gardens” of big tech infrastructure firms, these firms have a [responsibility to join policymakers and regulators](#) in proactive efforts to democratize data and AI tools for broader public good. What would it take for Alphabet, Amazon, Microsoft, Meta, Tencent, Alibaba and other major global data players to work with governments, facilitating organizations like [U.N. Statistics](#), the [Global Partnership](#), [Data.org](#), [3ie impact](#), [Social Science One](#), and other [technical and thought leaders](#) to co-develop a platform where communities of all scales can partner with researchers to create digital twins that link collective behavior to SDG outcomes?

The integrated, indivisible shared ambitions embodied by the SDGs will only be achieved through breakthrough innovations in our capacities for global-scale collaboration. If adequately coordinated, incentivized, and empowered, collective behavior science can play a crucial role in surfacing new strategies for SDG success. The SDGs themselves provide the scaffolding for collective action.

CONTRIBUTORS

THE SDG SECOND HALF
CONTRIBUTORS



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GEORGE INGRAM

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