



CHAPTER 5

Aligning Toward a Sustainable Future

Harnessing the Power of the SDGs

In 2015, the member states of the United Nations (UN) came together and signed on to a historic agreement called “Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development,” which outlined 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The SDGs were created to chart a way toward a just, secure, and sustainable future for people and the planet. This chapter introduces the SDGs and explores why and how philanthropic funders might want to align with them.

What Are SDGs?

As described by the United Nations, the SDGs are a “universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet, and improve the lives and prospects of everyone, everywhere.”¹ Numbering 17 goals, the SDGs span various aspects of social, economic, and environmental sustainability. They can be broadly categorized into five key areas:

¹ The Sustainable Development Goals were born at the United Nations Conference in Rio de Janeiro in 2012. The objective was to produce a set of universal goals that meet the urgent environmental, political, and economic challenges facing our world. Read more about how the goals were created and who was in the room [here](#).



People

With a focus on human well-being, these goals aim to end poverty and hunger, ensure health and dignity, provide quality education, achieve gender equality, and promote social justice.

Planet

Dedicated to protecting the continuity of life on this planet, these goals focus on sustainable management of natural resources, climate change mitigation, and preservation of ecosystems.

Prosperity

Aiming to ensure inclusive and sustainable economic growth, these goals are centered on productive employment, decent work for all, and robust infrastructure development.

Peace

These goals promote peaceful, inclusive societies, providing access to justice for all and building effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions.

Partnership

By advocating for a revitalized global partnership for sustainable development, these goals aim to foster collaboration at all levels.

The SDGs’ Role as a Common Framework for Philanthropy

The SDGs are more than just a collection of lofty ideals; they provide a structured framework that systematically addresses social, environmental, and economic challenges. Within this global framework, philanthropists and funders find the means to harmonize their strategies and interventions with internationally recognized targets. By doing so, they can elevate the effectiveness and relevance of their programs and employ universally accepted data collection methods to assess program impact.

The SDGs’ ambitious nature challenges funders to transcend short-term thinking, encouraging them to explore enduring solutions that tackle the root causes of problems. This perspective is rooted in a systemic approach that sees social issues as interconnected, acknowledging that progress in one area can influence others. While the 17 SDGs may initially appear as distinct, each addressing a range of issues such as poverty, inequality, education, health, and climate change, they are intricately intertwined, often sharing common origins and consequences. This interdependence underscores the importance of understanding issues on both a global and local scale in our highly interconnected world.

The SDGs serve as a compass for this endeavor. They remind us that global efforts should not overshadow the need for local interventions. Additionally, they shed light on the limitations of linear progress and the potential unintended consequences of our solutions. In light of these considerations, the value of embracing a more complex, systems-oriented approach becomes clearer.

Moreover, the SDGs emphasize that progress towards their attainment benefits everyone, irrespective of location--whether it be at the

local, national, or global level. In this sense, the SDGs represent an opportunity to contribute to positive change that reverberates throughout our interconnected world. By understanding, embracing, and aligning with the SDGs, funders can unlock the potential for transformative change within their organization—and maximize their impact on some of the most pressing challenges facing our world.

Advantages to Aligning with the SDGs

Society benefits from all actors—philanthropic, governmental, corporate, and others—aligning with the SDGs. In addition to society benefitting, philanthropic funders may find that this alignment helps them to:

- **Foster collaboration between diverse stakeholders.** The SDGs provide a platform for diverse actors from governments, nonprofits, and the private sector to collaborate and work towards shared objectives, fostering multi-stakeholder partnerships.
- **Promote accountability and transparency.** By creating universal measurement framing, the SDGs encourage organizations to be transparent about their progress, facilitating learning and improvement.
- **Enhance credibility and reputation.** Alignment with the SDGs signals commitment to addressing global challenges, thereby enhancing their credibility and reputation in the eyes of partners, communities benefitted, and the public.
- **Gain better access to resources and expertise.** The global nature of SDGs connects funders to an international network of experts, knowledge sources, and potential partners, thereby broadening their resource base.
- **Amplify funding opportunities.** By helping to identify the areas of greatest need, SDGs have the potential to unlock more government funds because work is in the same “language” and aligned with the same priorities. This can help open additional sources of funding for supported initiatives, organizations and causes.
- **Facilitate impact measurement.** SDGs offer a universally recognized set of targets and indicators that funders can use to track progress and measure the impact of their initiatives.

Myth Busting Around Working on SDGs



As with any global initiative, there are misconceptions surrounding the SDGs that need to be addressed.

Myth 1: The SDGs are only for large organizations.

The SDGs are relevant for organizations of all sizes. Each entity, regardless of its size, can play a crucial role in addressing global challenges and contributing to achieving the SDGs.

Myth 2: The SDGs lack focus.

While they cover many issues, their interconnected nature reflects the complex and interrelated challenges they aim to address.

Myth 3: The SDGs are too ambitious.

While the goals are indeed ambitious, they serve as a call to action. They were created to encourage a collective effort toward realizing a vision of a sustainably working world.

Myth 4: The SDGs distract from an organization's core mission.

Rather than detracting from its mission, aligning with the SDGs can help refine and enhance it, ensuring that the organization's efforts contribute to a more sustainable and equitable world.



Incorporating SDGs into Philanthropic Strategies

Incorporating the SDGs into your philanthropic strategies can be a pivotal step toward driving meaningful and lasting change. Below are steps that can be taken to align your organization's mission with the SDGs can enhance your impact and help you contribute to global sustainability.

1. Ensure an Understanding of the SDGs

Funders interested in aligning with the SDGs should understand the specific issues and areas addressed by each goal, as well as the interlinkages between them. For example, the lack of access to quality education (SDG 4) can perpetuate poverty (SDG 1) and hinder economic growth (SDG 8). Conversely, addressing one issue can have a multiplier effect on others, creating positive ripple effects across multiple goals.

For some organizations, adopting the SDGs requires a shift in organizational culture, necessitating buy-in from all staff members and support from key figures, including management and the board of trustees. Foundations who are serious about aligning their work with the SDGs should be prepared to commit additional resources to this endeavor. Be cognizant that organizational change is a long process, and it may take significant effort to get internal staff and partners on board with this change. It may help to use messaging to connect the SDGs to known and loved initiatives.

2. Map Existing Programs and Initiatives to Relevant SDGs

One of the initial steps in embracing the SDGs is mapping your existing philanthropic programs and initiatives to the relevant SDGs. This process helps you identify potential synergies, overlaps, and gaps in your

efforts, streamlining your philanthropic endeavors. Here's how to go about it:

- Assess your current initiatives. Begin by evaluating your organization's existing programs and initiatives. What are the key goals and focus areas of each initiative?
- Evaluate for commonality with SDGs. Examine the SDGs and their associated targets with an eye for finding overlaps with the goals and objectives of your programs. Keep in mind that many initiatives may contribute to multiple SDGs.
- Identify synergies: Look for opportunities where your programs can create synergies by addressing multiple SDGs simultaneously. Recognize that addressing one issue can have a cascading effect on others, contributing to a holistic approach.
- Streamline efforts: Once you've identified the relevant SDGs, consider how to streamline your efforts to maximize their impact. Are there opportunities for collaboration or resource-sharing among your programs or collaborators to better address these goals collectively?

3. Integrate SDGs into Organizational Strategies

To ensure that your philanthropic organization aligns effectively with the SDGs, it's essential to integrate them into your organizational strategies. This step enables you to synchronize your goals and actions with the global agenda for sustainable development, by focusing on the following areas.

- Strategic planning: Incorporate the SDGs into your strategic planning process. Align your organization's long-term goals and objectives with the SDGs that are most relevant to your mission.

- **Monitoring and reporting:** Embed the SDGs into your monitoring and reporting processes. Develop key performance indicators (KPIs) that reflect your progress toward achieving specific SDG targets. However, it is important to be realistic when starting, so consider keeping it simple at first. One approach is to identify two or three main goals for each grant or program that align with the SDGs, simplifying the process of assessing progress. And be patient: Understand that this adjustment may take time and encourage open communication about any concerns.
- **Capacity building:** Ensure that your staff members have the necessary knowledge and skills to work effectively with the SDGs. Provide training and resources to support their understanding of how your organization's work contributes to the broader global goals.

4. Engage in and Encourage Cross-Sector Partnerships

Understanding the interconnectivity of the SDGs is crucial for philanthropic organizations aiming to make a meaningful and lasting impact. The SDGs' framework encourages collaboration, knowledge sharing, and joint learning among organizations, promoting synergies that can amplify the impact of their work. By working together and leveraging the strengths of different partners, funders can accelerate progress toward the SDGs and contribute to transformative change. Initial steps are to

- **Identify potential partners.** Explore potential partners from government agencies, nonprofits, private sector companies, academia, and civil society organizations that share a common interest in the SDGs related to your work.
- **Establish common goals.** Clearly define the shared objectives and goals of your partnerships. Ensure that these objectives align with the SDGs and that all partners are committed to contributing to their achievement.
- **Leverage expertise.** Capitalize on the unique expertise and resources that each partner brings to the table. Collaborative efforts should harness the strengths of each stakeholder.
- **Foster communication.** Establish open lines of communication and regular meetings to ensure that all partners are aligned and informed about progress, challenges, and opportunities.

5. Communicate in SDG Terms and Report on SDG-Aligned Efforts

Transparent communication and reporting are vital components of your philanthropic organization's journey toward SDG alignment. Sharing your progress, challenges, and lessons learned not only promotes accountability but also inspires others to join the collective effort. Here are key considerations for effective communication and reporting:

- Publicly communicate your organization's commitment to aligning with the SDGs. This sends a powerful message about your dedication to global change and encourages others to engage.
- Ensure that SDG language becomes a common thread within your organization. It should be integrated into internal communication, enabling all staff members to understand and contribute to your SDG-aligned goals.
- Use SDG language to frame proposals, reports, and other communications. This makes your work more understandable and relatable to a global audience, including potential partners and funders.
- Leverage the universal nature of the SDGs to build global partnerships across sectors and borders. Shared goals can be the foundation for collaboration and collective action.
- Emphasize the interconnected nature of global challenges in your communications. Highlight how addressing one SDG can have ripple effects across multiple goals.

Adopting SDG language is more than just a communication strategy; it's a commitment to a global vision of a sustainable and equitable future. By speaking the language of the SDGs, your words can contribute to further drive your impact.

By incorporating these strategies into your philanthropic organization's approach, you can effectively align your work with the SDGs, maximize your impact, and contribute to a more sustainable and equitable future.

What is the SDG Philanthropy Platform (SDGPP)?

A global and national facilitator supported by WINGS and the United Nations, the SDGPP helps optimize resources and efforts to achieve the SDGs by enabling effective collaboration within the broader ecosystem. This online collaboration platform provides access to information on partner engagement, real-time data, and events and solutions that funders and others support on each SDG.

The SDGPP seeks to unlock philanthropy's potential through multi-stakeholder partnerships including all types of social innovations, financial tools, and stakeholders. The potential is huge, according to the SDGPP, \$651 billion in philanthropic giving for the SDGs could be unlocked by 2030. One example of how the SDGPP supports philanthropy is its "collaborative pathways" approach that utilized cooperation between different institutions and sectors within a country to achieve a sustainable impact on one or more SDGs by:



Mapping the SDG Ecosystem to find essential navigation and entry points, and understanding national priorities, policies, stakeholders, processes, and challenges to be tackled.



Reaching out to the broader philanthropy sector to raise awareness of ongoing SDG processes and create multi-stakeholder collaboration.



Facilitating design/system-thinking workshops with broad groups of stakeholders to co-create a shared vision of success, identify accelerators and bottlenecks, analyze dynamics, and agree on joint interventions.



Setting up and running innovation challenges to find small organizations with promising innovative solutions which may be scaled through collaboration with governments and funders.



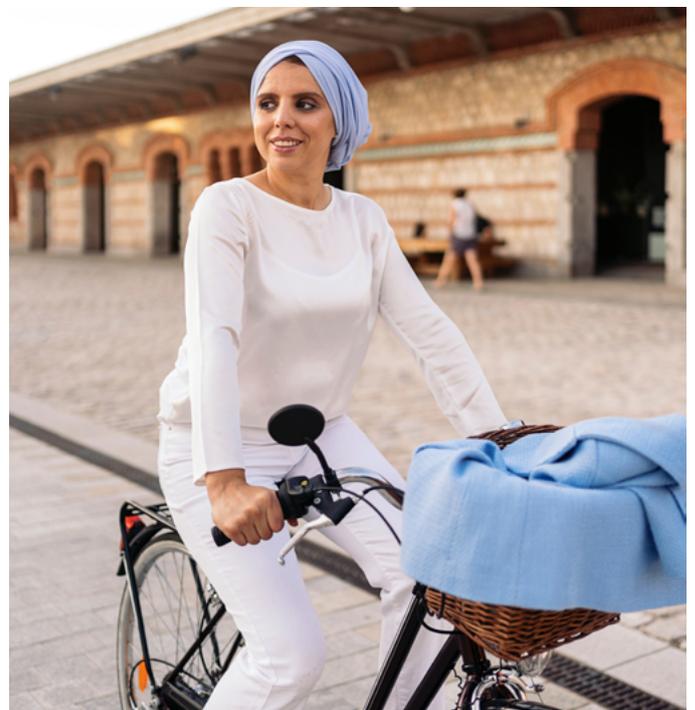
Documenting and sharing approaches, best practices, challenges, and lessons learned to enhance the capacities of local foundations for greater engagement in the SDG implementation.

Funders can further their understanding of and more deeply engage through collaboration on the SDGs by joining the SDGPP's global network.

Impact Investing in Support of SDG-Aligned Philanthropy

Impact investing is another mechanism for achieving SDGs. It's a way for funders to use their financial resources to drive change, aligning their investments with their mission. By embracing impact investing, philanthropic organizations can actively contribute to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, ensuring their resources have a broad and lasting impact. Funders can leverage impact investing to:

- **Support SDG-aligned projects.** This approach ensures that investments contribute to achieving the SDGs. Organizations can amplify their positive impact on global challenges by strategically selecting projects that align with one or more of the goals.
- **Drive social and environmental benefits.** Impact investments aim to generate positive, measurable social and environmental impact alongside a financial return. This dual focus enables organizations to make a tangible difference in addressing pressing issues while maintaining financial sustainability.
- **Encourage innovation and collaboration.** Impact investing can foster innovative solutions by supporting social enterprises, startups, and other ventures that work toward the SDGs. It can also facilitate cross-sector partnerships, bringing together different stakeholders to address complex challenges collectively.
- **Influence market behavior and corporate practices.** Funders can encourage adopting ethical practices throughout the market by investing in companies that prioritize sustainability and social responsibility. This can lead to more responsible business models and strategies, ultimately contributing to realizing the SDGs.
- **Diversify philanthropic portfolios.** Incorporating impact investing into a philanthropic strategy allows organizations to diversify their approaches to creating change. By combining traditional grantmaking with impact investments, such as PRIs, funders can leverage various tools to maximize their overall impact on the SDGs.



Overcoming Challenges in SDGs Implementation

While the Sustainable Development Goals provide a comprehensive and ambitious roadmap for addressing global challenges, their implementation is not without obstacles. This section will focus on some common challenges philanthropic organizations face in SDG implementation and explore potential solutions to overcome them.

Challenge:

Limited resources and capacity.

Many organizations, particularly smaller ones, may struggle with limited resources and capacity to address the wide range of SDGs.

Solution:

Funders can consider pooling resources with other organizations, forming partnerships, or focusing on specific goals that align with their mission and expertise.

Challenge:

Insufficient data and monitoring systems.

Effective SDG implementation requires robust data collection, monitoring, and evaluation systems. Organizations may face challenges in establishing these systems due to a lack of expertise or resources.

Solution:

Partnering with external experts, leveraging open-source tools, and investing in capacity-building initiatives can help address these challenges.

Challenge:

Fragmented efforts and lack of coordination.

The broad scope of the SDGs can lead to fragmented efforts and a lack of coordination among various stakeholders.

Solution:

To enhance collaboration and synergies, actively participate in multi-stakeholder networks, share best practices, and engage in joint initiatives.

Challenge:

Challenges in communicating impact and progress.

The impact and progress of SDG-aligned initiatives is crucial information for garnering support and fostering partnerships.

Solution:

Develop compelling narratives, utilizing data visualization tools and leveraging digital platforms for sharing updates and successes.



By addressing these common challenges, philanthropic organizations can enhance their effectiveness in implementing the SDGs and contribute more significantly to local, national, and global efforts in achieving these ambitious goals.

Additional Barriers to Funders Working on the SDGs

Funders may discover other types of resistance on their path to alignment with the SDGs such as:

- Skepticism toward the United Nations and multilateral initiatives.
- The misconception that the SDGs are only relevant for international, not local, work.
- Resistance to government involvement in philanthropic work.
- Reluctance to adopt externally imposed goals.

To shift the narrative to highlight adopting the SDGs and build coalitions between funders and other allies, funders may benefit from emphasizing the expertise behind the SDGs, demonstrating their relevance to local and global efforts, and explaining how a systems-thinking approach can enhance their impact and effectiveness.

Digital and Other Tools for Reporting and Measuring SDGs Impact

Reporting and measuring progress on SDGs are crucial components of achieving these global goals. This is where philanthropy can make a significant contribution, as SDG reporting and measurement allow funders to:

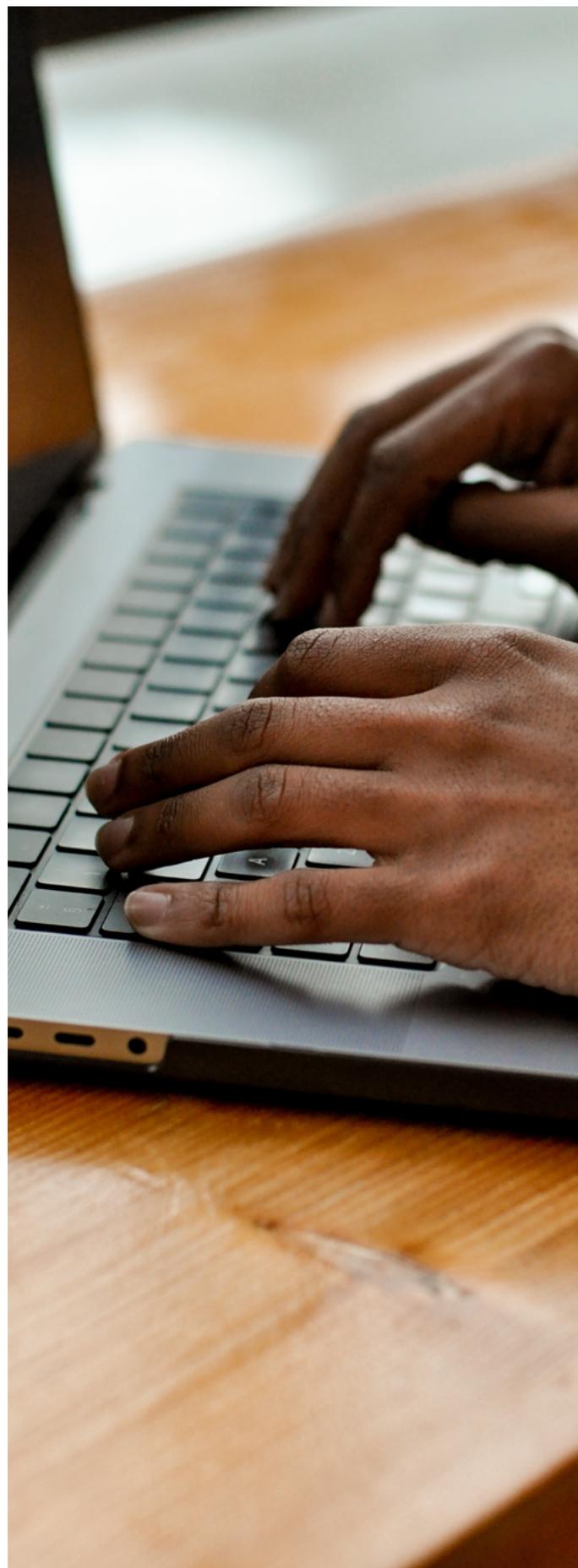
- **Track progress.** By adhering to SDG reporting standards, funders can systematically track the impact of their efforts.
- **Showcase impact.** SDG-aligned reporting is an effective way to communicate the impact of initiatives to stakeholders.
- **Inform decision-making.** Regular measurement and reporting can help funders identify areas that need attention and inform strategy adjustments.

Digital tools and platforms have revolutionized the way organizations track, report, and measure the impact of

their SDG-aligned initiatives. This section deals with the role of technology in facilitating effective SDG reporting and impact measurement, and how it can enhance the efforts of philanthropic organizations toward achieving these global goals.

- **Data collection and analysis.** Advanced data collection and analytics tools enable organizations to gather, store, and analyze vast amounts of information related to their SDG-aligned initiatives. This data-driven approach allows funders to monitor progress, identify trends, and assess the effectiveness of their programs in real time. Moreover, the availability of open-source tools and platforms democratizes access to these resources, making it easier for organizations of all sizes to harness the power of data.
- **Visualization and communication.** Data visualization tools and software allow organizations to present complex data in an accessible and visually appealing manner. By transforming raw data into easily understandable charts, graphs, and maps, these tools help organizations effectively communicate their progress and impact to various stakeholders, including donors, partners, and the general public.
- **Collaboration and knowledge sharing.** Digital platforms, such as online repositories and collaborative workspaces, facilitate knowledge sharing and collaboration among organizations working on similar SDG-aligned initiatives. These platforms enable stakeholders to exchange best practices, lessons learned, and other resources, fostering a collaborative ecosystem that drives collective progress toward the SDGs.

Incorporating technology in SDG reporting and impact measurement is becoming increasingly essential for philanthropic organizations. By leveraging digital tools and platforms, funders can improve their ability to track, analyze, and communicate the progress and impact of their initiatives, ultimately contributing more effectively to the achievement of the SDGs.



Conclusion

This chapter has underscored the pivotal role that the SDGs play in shaping philanthropic efforts, offering a robust and globally recognized framework for addressing the world's most pressing challenges. By aligning with the SDGs, philanthropic organizations can engage in a shared language, leverage global connections, and work within a unified structure and already created taxonomy. This alignment not only increases organizational impact but also contributes to the broader, collective effort to build a sustainable, equitable, and prosperous world by 2030.

Calls to Action for Philanthropy

- **Seriously consider aligning with the SDGs.** Explore the potential benefits of aligning your organization's work with these global goals. Recognize that there is an urgent need.
- **Look for existing synergies with SDGs.** When reviewing your current programs and goals, you could find that your work is already contributing to one or more of the 17 goals laid out by the UN. Use this information to identify areas where you could increase your impact even more.
- **Collaborate with other stakeholders.** With its emphasis on a systems-thinking approach, successfully achieving the SDGs requires collective action. Look for opportunities to partner with other sectors, not only businesses, governments, and civil society, but also communities directly affected.
- **Communicate your commitment.** Make your commitment to the SDGs known, both internally and externally. This can inspire others to join the cause and contribute to the global vision of ensuring a collective—and therefore sustainable—impact.

By understanding and implementing the SDGs, philanthropic organizations can maximize their impact, foster global partnerships, and contribute to a sustainable and equitable world. With only a limited number of years left to achieve these goals, and scientific evidence showing us the tangible issues around environmental concerns, now is the time to seize this opportunity and make a lasting difference.

Additional Resources

Philanthropy and the SDGs: Getting Started and *Philanthropy and the SDGs: Practical Tools For Alignment*, two donor guides created by Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors.

A Systematic Study of Sustainable Development Goal Interactions: A study that offers a deep dive into the interconnections among the SDGs. Understanding these interactions is crucial for developing comprehensive and effective strategies for SDG implementation. Prajal Pradhan, Luis Costa, Diego Rybski, Wolfgang Lucht, and Jurgen Kropp, *A Systematic Study of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) Interactions*, *Earth's Future*, 5 (2017).

Shifting Systems Initiative: This multiyear initiative led by Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors explores how funders can support systems change, a critical approach for achieving the SDGs.

Duncan Green, *How Change Happens*: This book provides a thorough understanding of the dynamics of change, offering valuable insights for organizations working towards the SDGs.

"Foundations and the SDGs: Gulbenkian Finding the Fit," an article in *Alliance* magazine that illustrates the path one foundation took to SDG alignment.



SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

17 GOALS TO TRANSFORM OUR WORLD



This article was originally published in [Alliance Magazine](#).

Case Study: Sustainable Development Goals

For many foundations, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide a means to direct their efforts according to a larger, internationally recognised development framework, potentially increasing the value of those efforts by dovetailing them with those of others.

Portugal's Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation (CGF) saw in the SDGs an opportunity for the Foundation to be clearer in communicating its intentions and more focused on its mission, while at the same time providing a coherent basis for collaboration with other sectoral and non-sectoral institutions. Internally, too, the SDGs offered an opportunity for cohesion and the strengthening of a sense of common purpose. CGF engaged Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors (RPA) to help align its work more closely with the SDGs. RPA worked with CGF on a foundation-wide analysis, devising metrics to assess progress and developing implementation and communications tools for both internal and external use.

The means used in the analysis are at least as interesting as the results and might help other organisations navigate similar exercises. Given the complexity of a large foundation with many areas of interest, some of which weren't an obvious fit with the SDGs (for example, the work done on arts and culture), RPA met with each department to understand their priorities and goals and assess current activities and programs. This enabled RPA to help map key programs—including the more difficult-to-align arts and culture initiatives – to specific SDGs.

What came out on top for CGF's work on arts and culture were targets that focused in on education, sustainable cities and communities, enhancing scientific research, and empowering youth. Specifically:

- SDG 4.7 – Education: "By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to (...) appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development"
- SDG 11.4 – Sustainable Cities and Communities: "Strengthen efforts to protect and safeguard the world's cultural and natural heritage".

- SDG 9.5 – Enhance scientific research, (...) encouraging innovation and substantially increasing (...) public and private research and development spending
- and SDG 4.4 – Increase the number of youth and adults who have relevant skills.

So far...

What advice do CGF and RPA have as a result of this process so far? Internally, while the SDGs provide a valuable core around which to rally, the process of identifying common themes, and evaluating and reporting on the extent to which they are being addressed may require a culture shift within an organisation. All staff need to be brought into discussions about this and key figures, from management to board of trustees, need to support it.

Second, staff who are unused to looking at their work through an SDG lens will need time and support to adjust. Listening to their concerns and having templates, for instance, for report writing may help.

Third, this adjustment is likely to require additional resources which foundations should be ready to commit if they are serious about aligning their work with the SDGs.

Finally, CGF and RPA say “keep it simple”. Based on the organisation’s main purpose, identify two or three main goals of each grant or programme, which will help to identify any fit with the SDGs and to come up with ways to assess progress.

Dissemination of what CGF is learning will have implications for other foundations within and outside Europe, and the Foundation has already begun reporting on SDG alignment in its [Annual Report](#) and, since late 2020, has been sharing its results with the European Foundation Centre and the Centro Português de Fundações (Portuguese Foundation Center) as well as with RPA’s [Theory of the Foundation](#) initiative.