

# The role of community foundations in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals

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## 1. Abstract

Community foundations worldwide are working to address immediate and long-term pressing issues within their communities. In light of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development—which calls individuals, communities, and public and private institutions to action—community foundations are important players that fully embrace the concept of “leave no one behind”.

This research paper intends to answer two key questions:

- (i) Are community foundations embracing in their work the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) framework?
- (ii) What is the role of community foundations in education and engagement of the local community to contribute to SDGs?

**Key words:** community foundations, SDGs, institutional framework, partnerships, local community, local assets, Community Foundations Support Organizations.

## 2. A note on methodology

The methodology employed in this research paper includes desk analysis and consultations with experts. A collection of secondary data from available documents, reports, studies, articles, blogs, etc., related to community foundations and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were subjected to desk analysis. Conversations with experts were conducted to obtain more information and learn more about the practices of community foundations in achieving the SDGs. They also served to narrow the gap between the literature on the role of community foundations in achieving SDGs, since this issue has developed more only in the last three years; the research to date on this topic has been limited; and ‘schools of thought’ have yet to be developed. With this mindset, this research paper analyses only community foundations and community foundation support organizations (CFSOs) that are working to address the SDGs and not the entire universal ecosystem of community foundations.

### 3. Introduction - Why Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) matter? Why community foundations and SDGs?

About 193 countries have endorsed and adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, thereby expressing their commitment and engagement to incorporate them in their policies and strategies. Replacing the Millennium Development Goals, Agenda 2030 is a comprehensive framework which contains 17 Sustainable Development Goals, associated with 169 targets and 232 indicators, all of which are interconnected to reduce poverty, inequality and climate change bring about social justice, etc. For more information about Agenda 2030 see Appendix 1.<sup>1</sup>

Being that it is a universal agenda, the SDGs framework requires lawmakers and decision-makers to have evidence-based strategies and policies, and most importantly policy coherence, since they affect all sectors within a society. Also, pledging to “leave no one behind”, the SDGs require inclusive processes and participation from all actors, be they individuals, public civil society sector or private institutions. At a time when the COVID-19 pandemic is adversely affecting more than 200 countries, and—based on data provided in the last report of the United Nations Secretary-General on progress achieved towards the sustainable development goals—implementation of this Agenda becomes more urgent and necessary.<sup>2</sup> As CEO and President of Silicon Valley Community Foundation Emmett D. Carson said, *“The SDGs set forth a bold agenda... These goals act as a call-to-action for both the public and private sectors to help address crucial challenges such as ending poverty, ensuring access to high-quality education, and protecting national resources [emphasis added].”*<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> United Nation Development Program, <http://www.un.org.cn/info/6/620.html#:~:text=Sustainable%20Development%20Goals%20Officially%20Adopted%20by%20193%20Countries,-Sustainable%20Development%20Goals> [Accessed: 16 October 2020].

<sup>2</sup> United Nations Economic and Social Council, “Progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals- Report of the Secretary - General”, 2020. <https://undocs.org/en/E/2020/57> [Accessed: 19 November 2020].

<sup>3</sup> Natalie Ross, “Local leadership, global impact”, Council of Foundations, pg. 5 <https://www.cof.org/sites/default/files/documents/files/local-leadership-global-impact.pdf> [Accessed: 16 October 2020].

From the other side, community foundations are local grant-making organizations that embody the very essence of “leave no one behind”. They have a deep knowledge and understanding of the communities which they serve; have the capacity to access local assets, develop human resources, and maximize local capital; and contribute to increased collaboration and networking for community development by initiating and fostering local partnerships among public and private institutions. Community foundations can be pioneers in achieving the SDGs since they are community-driven organizations and play an important role in identifying local challenges and finding local solutions. This paper intends to explore more the role of community foundations in working to achieve the SDGs. Firstly, I will identify whether community foundations are embracing the SDGs framework within their work. Secondly, I will investigate their role in educating and engaging their local communities to contribute to the SDGs.

## **4. Findings**

### **Community foundations and SDGs – A global glance**

This section intends to answer the first key question: Are community foundations embracing in their work the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) framework? Research shows a growing trend in the last two decades of new community foundations being established and continuity in evolution and development. Community foundations are diverse in terms of their internal management, operation, local leadership, grantmaking strategies, local interventions, community tools utilized to support inclusiveness and participation, and the shaping of local context to address a complex array of issues. Also, since 2017, more community foundations have been working to embrace the SDGs as an institutional framework that guides their operation and activity. The local context and the existence/development of ‘local infrastructure’ have shaped how community foundations embrace the SDGs framework in their work. To illustrate this, let’s have a global look at how and the extent to which community foundations are embracing the SDGs framework.

## North America

Since 2016, community foundations in Canada have been embracing the SDGs framework in their operations by strengthening education about the SDGs through public awareness activities with local communities; by generating public debate and advocating at the municipality level for putting in place local strategies and policies that are guided by the 2030 Agenda; and using SDGs for monitoring and evaluation through a measurement tool known as Vital Signs. According to the vice president of the Community Foundations of Canada (CFC), community foundation embracement of the SDGs has contributed to the improvement and strengthening of community knowledge and data; has increased learning opportunities not only locally, but even globally; and has fostered collaboration and engagement of local communities.<sup>4</sup>

What distinguishes Canada from other countries is the fact that the SDGs framework is not only integrated with strategies at the national and local policy levels, but that there is “a system of alignment” and coordination in place to help integrate the work of different institutions and networks established to support the achievement of SDGs. An illustration of this is the creation of Alliance 2030, a national network of organizations, institutions, and individuals committed to achieving the SDGs by the year 2030.<sup>5</sup> It currently has over 2,500 members, and the network is working to create physical and digital spaces for the public and private sectors and civil society to align their efforts in achieving the SDGs. Community Foundations of Canada is another important network organization that supports the work of community foundations in this field.<sup>6</sup> Together with 191 community organizations across the country, Community Foundations of Canada strives to find local solutions for issues that matter most to society.

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<sup>4</sup> The information is retrieved from a webinar organized by Community Foundations of Canada at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HMOFUCDpkP8> [Accessed: 16 October 2020].

<sup>5</sup> The information is retrieved from the Alliance 2030 website, <https://alliance2030.ca/about/> [Accessed: 16 October 2020].

<sup>6</sup> The information is retrieved from the Community Foundation of Canada website, <https://communityfoundations.ca/> [Accessed: 4 November 2020].

As for other countries in North America, it is only in the last year that community foundations have begun embracing the SDGs. Previously community foundations had resisted because they perceived the goals as focusing solely on pressing global problems, and not issues in their local community. According to recent news published by the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, practitioners in the field argue that the response of foundations in the United States to achieving the SDGs has been slower than in other countries, because they saw the 2030 framework as one that is “applicable abroad”.<sup>7</sup>

## Europe

Community foundations in Europe are becoming important vehicles that are institutionalizing SDGs as part of their strategy and programmatic work. In a recent report issued by European Community Foundations Initiative (ECFI)<sup>8</sup>, sixty percent of community foundations polled indicate that they are aware of the SDGs and recognize that their work is related to these goals. There is evidence that a small number of organizations are following an approach to SDGs that involves the whole organization, by taking into consideration the mission, strategies, operations, communications and investment. Bearing in mind that community foundations in Europe are about 800 in number, this figure shows an increased awareness among community foundations in Europe on SDGs and an institutional commitment to contribute to the 2030 Agenda.

Increasing awareness and public education is a main focus of community foundations. In Italy, 270 members from civil society organizations (associations representing social partners, such as businesses, trade unions and third sector associations); networks of civil society associations pursuing specific goals, such as health, education, employment, environment quality, gender

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<sup>7</sup> Deychakiwsky, N. Rebound specialists: How community foundations can pave the road toward local post-pandemic recovery <https://www.mott.org/news/articles/rebound-specialists-how-community-foundations-can-pave-the-road-toward-local-post-pandemic-recovery/> [Accessed: 12 November 2020].

<sup>8</sup> Böllhoff, A., Dicks, A., Kleinbrod, A., Magowan, J., Petryka, K., “*Connecting Community Foundations with the SDGs*”, European Community Foundations Initiative, 2020, p. 11, [https://www.communityfoundations.eu/fileadmin/ecfi/knowledge-centre/ECFI-guide-Connecting\\_Community\\_Foundaitons\\_with\\_the\\_SDGs\\_-2020.pdf](https://www.communityfoundations.eu/fileadmin/ecfi/knowledge-centre/ECFI-guide-Connecting_Community_Foundaitons_with_the_SDGs_-2020.pdf) [Accessed: 16 October 2020].

equality, etc.); associations of local public administrations; public and private universities and research centers; associations of stakeholders working in the fields of culture and information; foundations and networks of foundations; and Italian organizations that are members of international networks dealing with the SDGs have established the Italian Alliance for Sustainable Development (AsviS).<sup>9</sup> The Alliance aims to raise awareness in Italian society and among economic stakeholders and institutions about the importance of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and to mobilize them to pursue the SDGs. In addition, based on discussion with experts, community meetings have been organized by community foundations to increase awareness on the importance of SDGs.

An important factor in community foundation embracement of the SDGs framework is the work European support organizations are doing. To illustrate, ECFI has been very vocal, consistently emphasizing to community foundation support organizations (CFSOs) and to community foundations the importance of addressing SDGs and embracing the SDGs framework. Community foundation support organizations play an important role in shaping local actions towards achieving SDGs through ongoing network-wide discussions and debate, and by aligning their grant schemes towards the 2030 Agenda. Another example is offered by the Academy for the Development of Philanthropy in Poland, which provides a program named, Global Challenges Local Solutions, that supports communities and organizations in Europe that try to find solutions to global problems at the local level.<sup>10</sup> The program supports ideas that produce tangible contributions toward a specific SDG and SDG target; implement SDG-related learning and capacity-building activities in the community; and that embrace a combination of the above. Between 2017 and 2019, the program provided 29 grants with a financial budget of approximately USD 500,000.

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<sup>9</sup> The information is retrieved from the Italian Alliance for Sustainable Development website, <https://asvis.it/#> [Accessed: 21 December 2020].

<sup>10</sup> The information is retrieved from the Global Challenges Local Solutions website at <http://www.localsolutionsfund.org/> [Accessed: 16 October 2020].

## Asia

Community foundations in Asia are engaging in public education on SDGs. An important part of this development is connected with the role of community foundation support organizations (CFSOs) in the region, especially in the area of utilizing digital tools to increase awareness on SDGs. Indeed, the infrastructure in place is contributing to education on SDGs. In this context, it is important to mention the Asia Foundation. With over sixty years of expertise, the foundation aims to strengthen governance, empower women, expand economic opportunity, increase environmental resilience, and promote international cooperation. The foundation provides resource information on the development of community foundations working to achieve SDGs in 18 countries in Asia,<sup>11</sup> and is part of the Partnership for Online Platforms & Sustainable Development (POPS). This partnership supports the use of digital technologies especially in the education and entrepreneurship field. In the latter instance, POPS supports financial inclusion of disadvantaged communities.<sup>12</sup>

In addition, the China Foundation Centre in partnership with the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) launched the Philanthropy for Sustainable Development in China Program<sup>13</sup> in 2017, aiming to highlight the contribution of the philanthropic sector in achieving the SDGs. In a recent report published in 2020,<sup>14</sup> we find that Chinese foundations tend to concentrate on reducing poverty (SDG 1), well-being and ensuring good health (SDG 3), education (SDG 4), and sustainable cities and communities (SDG 11). An important finding was related to the fact that SDGs are recognized by foundations, but that only some of these have incorporated them into their operations. Based on a conversation held with a Chinese expert on community foundations, community foundations in China are of two categories: (i) government-affiliated,

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<sup>11</sup> The information is retrieved from The Asia Foundation, <https://asiafoundation.org/tag/sustainable-development-goals/> [Accessed: 18 November 2020].

<sup>12</sup> The information is retrieved from the SDG Knowledge Hub website, <https://sdg.iisd.org/news/escap-and-asia-foundation-leverage-online-platforms-for-sustainable-development/> [Accessed: 18 November 2020].

<sup>13</sup> The information is retrieved from the UNDP in China website at <https://www.cn.undp.org/content/china/en/home/library/poverty/philanthropy-for-sustainable-development-in-china.html> [Accessed: 19 November 2020].

<sup>14</sup> United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), "Philanthropy for Sustainable Development in China 2020", 2020, [https://www.cn.undp.org/content/dam/china/docs/Publications/UNDP-CH-Philanthropy%20For%20Sustainable%20Development%20in%20China\\_en.pdf](https://www.cn.undp.org/content/dam/china/docs/Publications/UNDP-CH-Philanthropy%20For%20Sustainable%20Development%20in%20China_en.pdf) [Accessed: 19 November 2020].

public community foundations, and (ii) independent, private community foundations. The prevalent model is the top-down model and is perceived as a vehicle for community foundation development. In line with China's National Plan on Implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, most community foundations in the last years—especially during the COVID-19 pandemic—have been supporting local communities through education, particularly increasing their entrepreneurship skills.

## Africa

Multi-stakeholder dialogue and partnership is important to achieve the SDGs. In Africa the focus is on raising public awareness, adapting SDGs in line with local context and following a multi-stakeholder dialogue and partnership to advance them.<sup>15</sup> The research to date shows that online platforms, particularly in Africa, contribute to increasing awareness about SDGs and engagement to achieve SDGs.<sup>16</sup> Several digital platforms<sup>17</sup>, including the South Africa-based SDG Philanthropy Platform<sup>18</sup>, increase incentives and partnerships that bridge the philanthropic and private sectors that are working towards achieving the SDGs, particularly in three African countries—Kenya, Zambia, and Ghana. In addition, the Global Fund for Community Foundations (GFCF) is playing an important role to advance SDGs framework within community foundations.<sup>19</sup> It is contributing via an online library that provides information on community foundations and country publications and reports on how community foundations are reaching the SDGs framework.

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<sup>15</sup> UN Women Eastern and Southern Africa, “The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) And Africa’s Agenda 2063 Convening Report”, <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/2441UNWomenSDGReport.pdf> [Accessed: 19 November 2020].

<sup>16</sup> Ross, Natalie. “Local leadership, global impact”, Council of Foundations, p. 16, <https://floridacommunity.com/local-leadership-global-impact.pdf> [Accessed: 16 October 2020].

<sup>17</sup> SDGfunders.org aims to make data on philanthropic investments more accessible while enabling data to track the progress of and tell stories about effective collaboration. For more information visit <https://sdgfunders.org/home/lang/en/> [Accessed: 19 November 2020].

<sup>18</sup> The information is retrieved from the SDG Philanthropy Platform at <https://www.sdgphilanthropy.org/> [Accessed: 17 October 2020].

<sup>19</sup>The information is retrieved from the Global Fund for Community Foundation’s website at <https://globalfundcommunityfoundations.org/> [Accessed: 16 November 2020].

## 5. The role of community foundations in education and engagement of the local community to contribute to SDGs

This section intends to answer the second key question: What is the role of community foundations in education and engagement of the local community to contribute to SDGs?

Based on the facts to date, the role of community foundations in education and of local communities to contribute to SDGs is focused on three main pillars.

### 1. Community foundations are contributing to community knowledge and data

Community foundations worldwide are increasing their impact through the Vital Signs tool, by using data and feedback from community members to provide data for strategic planning and the drafting of evidence-based policies. London Community Foundation (United Kingdom),<sup>20</sup> Berks County Community Foundation (Reading, Pennsylvania, United States)<sup>21</sup>, and Fondazione Comunitaria Nord Milano<sup>22</sup> (Italy's North Milan Community Foundation) are some of the many community foundations that are using the Vital Signs tool. They are contributing to a constructive dialogue and bringing together to the table different actors to strategically support communities and their constituencies.

Bearing in mind that the implementation of SDGs has been happening for four years, many community foundations and CFSOs are only now using educational tools, via promotional materials, research, webinars and libraries focusing on community foundation work to achieve SDGs. European Community Foundation Initiative (ECFI), the Knowledge Hub of the Academy for Philanthropy in Poland, Assifero<sup>23</sup> and The Asia Foundation are some of the CFSOs that are contributing to increasing knowledge about and an understanding of community foundation developments. The Centre on African Philanthropy and Social Investment (CAPSI)<sup>24</sup> was

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<sup>20</sup>For more information on London Community Foundations and Vital Signs, <https://londoncf.org.uk/> [Accessed: 20 November 2020].

<sup>21</sup> For more information on Berks County Community Foundations and Vital Signs, visit <https://bccf.org/> [Accessed: 20 November 2020].

<sup>22</sup> For more information on Fondazione Comunitaria Nord Milano and Vital Signs, <http://www.fondazioneordmilano.org/comunita-vitali/> [Accessed: 20 November 2020].

<sup>23</sup> For more information on Assifero, visit <https://assifero.org/en/> [Accessed: 20 November 2020].

<sup>24</sup> For more information on the Centre on African Philanthropy and Social Investment, visit <https://capsi.co.za/> [Accessed: 20 November 2020].

established to bridge the gap between the study and practice of and research on philanthropy and social investment in Africa. The Centre is working to finalize and obtain accreditation for an elective curriculum on African Philanthropy and SDGs.

**2. Many CFSOs and community foundations are aligning their grantmaking schemes, social financing, impact investment and programmatic development in line with SDGs**

There is global evidence that CFSOs and community foundations are aligning their grant making strategies, social financing, impact investment and programmatic development with the SDGs framework. Examples of organizations that are aligning their strategic interventions and grant making programs to ensure that they work towards achieving SDGs are the Global Fund for Community Foundations in Africa, Assiferro in Italy, and Tuzla Community Foundation in Bosnia and Herzegovina.<sup>25</sup> These are just some of many examples identified around the globe.

**3. Community foundations are bringing local access and local reach to increase partnership and networking to achieve SDGs**

So far evidence shows that community foundations globally are contributing to the (i) provision and access to data on how the government, businesses, and civil society organizations are addressing SDGs, and (ii) increase in community understanding of and knowledge about the Sustainable Development Goals, why they are important and ways to address them. In addition, community foundations are contributing to increasing partnerships and networking among different stakeholders and philanthropic institutions to advance the 2030 Agenda. Research supported by and the experiences of community foundations at the global level show how important is the role of community foundations in building bridges among and between individuals, communities, academia, public, private institutions, and media to better the constituencies which they serve.

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<sup>25</sup> For more information on Tuzla Community Foundations, visit [ehicl](#) [Accessed: 20 November 2020].

## 5. The development of community foundations, SDGs and Albania

Civil society organizations in Albania act as community foundations. Though not yet understood nor developed, this phenomenon represents a big opportunity for the involvement of citizens and other local interest groups in the development of their locality and improving the life of local communities. Acting for and in the community, they have the potential for a greater impact in addressing community needs and priorities, as well as increased fundraising from local donors.

Even though community foundations are not yet developed, empowerment of civil society is evident in Albania. Institutionally, they have increased their capacities in management, leadership role, fundraising campaigns and in the last four years many local organizations have coordinated and managed the sub-granting schemes by becoming supportive to community-led actions. On the exterior, the civil society sector is growing, and civil society organizations are not only increasing in numbers but are also shaping and influencing local policies that respond to community needs and priorities as well as increasing their public trust and impact on society. Based on the annual monitoring report conducted by Partners Albania on philanthropic activity in the country, a growing trend of philanthropic activity is evident. The last year saw an increase of approximately fifty percent in calls for donations and campaigns organized by individuals and institutions.

There are examples in the country of small-scale efforts that employ the spirit and principle of community foundations mostly in their work towards mobilization of local resources, even though they are unaware that they are acting as community foundations. Their role is important because they are addressing one or more of the seventeen SDGs. This observation becomes important, as Albania has endorsed Agenda 2030 since 2015 and embarked upon a comprehensive implementation of the agenda throughout the country with the support of United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). As part of the implementation, a working inter-sectorial group was created with the aim of advancing actions for implementing and

achieving the 17 SDGs. Involvement and cooperation with the civil society sector remains at a low level and is undetermined.

These are reasons why CFSOs in the country, such as Partners Albania for Change and Development, are important institutions that will contribute to a wider awareness of and educating the public about the community foundation concept and model. If promoted and properly organized, community foundations could play an important role in supporting community initiatives and non-profit organizations in the country through funds generated by local donations.

## 6. Conclusions

Based on the facts and evidence mentioned, the main conclusions are as follows:

- **It is evident that many community foundations are embracing the 2030 Agenda and are important promoters that ensure the meaningful participation of various stakeholders (public and private sectors, civil society, local government, development partners, academia, etc.) by involving them and engaging with them in the design, implementation, and monitoring of national strategies and policies for achievement of SDGs.**

Community foundations are addressing the SDGs and contributing to achieving SDGs framework. Nevertheless, there is evidence a growing trend of community foundations that are institutionally embracing SDGs framework as part of their strategic interventions and area of work. This is more evidence in Europe where sixty percent of community foundations recognize the connection between their programs and the 2030 Agenda. They can ensure the effective participation of stakeholders and provide space and room for contribution in the design, implementation, and monitoring of national strategies and policies for achievement of SDGs.

- **The role and contribution of community foundations should be recognized, promoted and supported by public and private institutions.**

Regardless of the many challenges faced, community foundations are actively responding to the needs of the communities they serve by developing alternative approaches to delivering

their services to people, families, and groups in need. They are partnering and cooperating with central and local governments (as in Canada and Italy, for example) to address SDGs, as well as to shape better policies in line with the nations. Considering the close connections of community foundations with their beneficiaries, as well as their capability to engage in awareness raising and community mobilization, the role of community foundations should be recognized and promoted by different actors, especially in terms of designing strategies and policies.

- **Bringing power to the people.**

Community foundations are also addressing this important element through methodologies and tools in place to empower community members. They have an important role as local philanthropy developers and community leaders, which they can achieve by inspiring cross-sector cooperation, community-led actions, joint solutions and, perhaps, "bringing power to the people".

## Appendix 1

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was adopted in 2015 at the United Nations Development Summit. It includes 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 169 targets to meet by 2030 worldwide. The 2030 Agenda is a globally shared vision that pledges to eradicate poverty and achieve sustainable development on a global scale.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development consists of four sanctions:

1. A political declaration
2. Set of 17 SDGs
3. Means of implementation
4. A framework mechanism for follow up and review of the 2030 Agenda

It integrates the economic, social, and environmental dimensions, and it is an integrated framework, when different sustainable development goals are closely interlinked with each other. The 17 SDGs are:

SDG 1: End poverty in all its forms everywhere.

SDG 2: End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture.

SDG 3: Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages.

SDG 4: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.

SDG 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls

SDG 6: Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all

SDG 7: Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all

SDG 8: Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all

SDG 9: Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization, and foster innovation

SDG 10: Reduce income inequality within and among countries

SDG 11: Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable

SDG 12: Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns

SDG 13: Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts by regulating emissions and promoting developments in renewable energy

SDG 14: Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development

SDG 15: Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss

SDG 16: Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels

SDG 17: Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development