

Situating the SDGs in the Work of Community Foundations

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Abstract

Close to the midpoint of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, local communities and other sectors are becoming more aware of their role in the achievement of the SDGs and have taken the challenge to localize, implement, and report on their actions and progress (IISD, 2022). Within the civil society sector, more evidence and research has been developed on the role of philanthropy in localizing and achieving the SDGs. In this regard, Community Foundations (CFs) and Community Foundations Support Organizations (CFSOs) mostly in Europe and North America (Canada and the US, specifically) have developed a set of tools and frameworks to ensure that the SDGs relate to local realities (DiSabato, 2017; Leone & LeSage, 2021; UKCF, 2021). Meanwhile, CFs and CFSOs in Latin America and the Caribbean are leading diverse paths and efforts toward sustainability within the SDG framework that need to be showcased. This paper explores the relevance of framing the SDGs into the work of community foundations and compiles localization approaches and strategies being used by CFs around the world, providing examples with a focus in Latin America and potential next steps for the second half of the journey toward 2030.

Introduction

We are at a tipping point where the aspirations set out in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted in 2015 by 193 countries at the UN General Assembly as a universal call to action for a better future for all people and the planet, are far from being achieved. While some progress has been made across several areas, decades of development efforts are being reversed or halted as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The world we are living today is facing multiple crisis such as the energy crisis, the triple planetary crisis¹ and an increased polarization due to war, conflict, and misinformation (UN, 2021, 2022b). Not to mention trends of rapid urbanization worldwide increase the local urge for sustainable development (Pipa & Bouchet, 2020). In this regard, a growing body of evidence show that human degradation and destruction of ecosystems are also exacerbating people's vulnerability to climate change, in which very localized effects will require localized solutions (IPCC, 2022; Pipa & Bouchet, 2020). The severity and magnitude of the challenges not only remind us of the interlinkages of these issues, but the necessary demand of profound changes in the coming years on a scale never seen in human history (Rockström, 2020; UN, 2022b).

Next year (2023) marks the midpoint of the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and with less than eight years to go, we must commit to sustainable, innovative, ambitious, affordable, and practical solutions to reimagine and build a better future for our communities (Pipa & Bouchet, 2022; Rockström, 2020; UN, 2022a). Today more than ever, the SDGs² should serve as a guiding "*Global To-Do List*" for cooperation and decision-making to bring the world on track to sustainability (CFC, 2020; Fugiel, 2021, p. 16; Schnurr, 2021; UN, 2022b). In order to achieve this global agenda, it is imperative to move beyond fragmented efforts and meaningfully engage community-led efforts to pursue human security with "the eyes of humankind" (UNDP, 2022; White, 2022). Now is the time to bring attention to solutions being developed at the local level, where people and organizations from all sectors are taking part in transformative change in their communities (Garza, 2021; LeSage, Timur, Pawlicki, 2021).

¹ Triple planetary crisis refers to climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution. For more information: <https://unfccc.int/blog/what-is-the-triple-planetary-crisis>

² The SDGs framework include 17 global goals, 169 targets, 232 indicators. For more information on the SDGs: <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>

Purpose of the paper

Local communities, and other sectors, including academia and businesses, are becoming more aware of their role in the achievement of the SDGs and have taken the challenge to localize, implement, and report on their actions and progress (IISD, 2022). Within the civil society sector, more evidence and research has been developed on the role of philanthropy in localizing and achieving the SDGs.³ Particularly, Community Foundations (CFs) and Community Foundations Support Organizations (CFSOs) mostly in Europe and North America (Canada and the US, specifically) have developed a set of tools and frameworks to ensure that the SDGs relate to local realities (DiSabato, 2017; Leone & LeSage, 2021; UKCF, 2021). Meanwhile, CFs and CFSOs in Latin America and the Caribbean are leading diverse paths and efforts toward sustainability within the SDG framework that need to be showcased.

This paper is an opportunity to feature examples of SDG localization approaches that CFs are undertaking in the Latin American region and to situate the power of context-driven and community-led efforts to promote sustainable communities. Initially the main questions I tried to answer in this paper are: how are community foundations localizing the SDGs, and how can the sector measure progress at the local level? Due to time constraints and the scope of the project, this paper focuses on the first question while touching lightly on the second. To begin, I will expand on the relevance of framing the SDGs into the work of community foundations and the added value CFs bring when contributing to the SDGs. Then, I will compile localization approaches and strategies being used by CFs around the world, and provide examples with a focus in Latin America, particularly Mexico. Lastly, I will share some concluding remarks and learnings, as well as potential next steps for the coming months of preparation to the SDG Summit in September 2023.

Regarding the methodology, this paper includes desk analysis and expert consultations of what has been developed on philanthropy and the SDGs. Desk analysis include reviewing documents, reports, blogs, articles, and academic papers. In terms of the SDG localization approaches described in this paper, examples and other insights were gathered through informal conversations, webinars, and discussions in person and over Zoom with people working within the philanthropic sector, mainly community foundations.

³ Some of the research that addresses the connection between philanthropy, community foundations and SDGs can be found in: Böllhoff, et al., 2019; CFC, 2020; Këruti, 2020; Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors, 2019; UKCF, 2021; *The Foundation Review*, 2021, 13(4); Philanthropy Impact Magazine Issue 25, Summer 2021.

Framing the SDGs into the work of community foundations

Civil society is a pivotal part of all types of development efforts. Particularly, community foundations⁴ (CFs), as vehicles for philanthropy, are relevant to supporting community-led development and lasting solutions in their territories, where sustainable development begins to be built (Timmers and Sidney, 2021). The ability of CFs to scale local collective impact through grantmaking, leadership, flexibility, and capacity building gives them the opportunity to best contribute to the SDGs for the sake of those they serve (Bellegly, et al., 2019; LeSage et al., 2021). These qualities make CFs a platform to activate community for exchange, synergies, and collaborative action between people and institutions in favor of influencing sustainable and resilient development processes (Böllhoff, et al., 2019; Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors, 2019; UKCF, 2021).

The SDG framework present an opportunity for CFs to consider sustainability more holistically, connecting local priorities, resources, and solutions. Without taking away the nuance of place, it is vital that community foundations understand how they fit into a broader effort to contribute to sustainable development (Leone & LeSage, 2021; Timmers & Sidney, 2021; UKCF, 2020). To illustrate that, *Table 1* frames the SDG core principles with the potential and actual community foundation work. For the purpose of this paper, transversal to all other principles is **local action** with the aim of **leaving no one behind**.

In conversation with Julie Kofoed – United Nations Foundation’s Senior Director of Sustainable Development Initiatives –, she mentioned that the SDGs resemble a wish list that provides a global framework for development that all world leaders agreed to be important. On the **universality and interconnectedness** principles, not only do the SDGs bring a common narrative and shared vision for helping CFs to feel connected to the rest of the world, regardless of the approaches and paths taken to get there, but they encourage deep thinking on connections between local issues beyond the boundaries of the communities. In the long run, this helps frame a broader conversation about system change and collective impact. In terms of collective impact, building new innovative forms of collaborations to leverage local solutions and expertise of multiple stakeholders, community foundations need to articulate and **cultivate partnerships** by regularly scanning and considering “which local governments,

⁴ A Community Foundation (CF) is a civil society organization that seeks to contribute to the solution of problems in a given territory; it works with the community and groups of stakeholders, through alliances, articulation and mobilization of resources, to enable sustainable development based on the strengths of that community (Comunalia, 2022).

institutions, and community advocates are working to improve environmental, social and economic outcomes” (Leone & LeSage, 2021, p. 49).

Table 1. Relevance of the SDG Framework for Community Foundations

SDG core principles	Framing the CFs work	Relevance and actions for CFs
Local level action and knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community-based focus. • Bottom-up approach. • Agency of local communities to be implementers and decision-makers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CFs as conveners, partners, advocates, promoters, grantmakers, implementers, and capability builders. • Knowledge of local needs and assets.
Leave no one behind	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pursue inclusion, give voice and power to the most vulnerable. • Participatory processes. • Consider using Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, Belonging (DEIB) frameworks. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Belonging. • Prioritize local needs of diverse groups. • Gather people to have honest, hard and open conversations. • Build trust.
Universality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Global shared vision and purpose. • All-of-society approach. • All countries and stakeholders share responsibility to implement this vision. • Approaches and implementation paths may differ, the outcome and vision remain the same. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local communities contribution. • Gather communities on a common cause and language. • Reach new audiences, donors, partners and peers.
Interconnected and indivisible	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interconnected at different scales. • Interdependence of problems and solutions. • Consider the 5 pillars: people, planet, prosperity, peace and partnerships. • Working on one SDG, impact others. • Systemic thinking, focus on systems change, rather than individual issues. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deep thinking on connections and local issues, as well as the global, regional and local factors. • CFs work to achieve economic, social and environmental goals.
Multi-stakeholder partnerships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Importance of partnerships. • Leverage local expertise. • Build and maintain strong relationships on shared values, being intentional. • Collaboration is key for localization. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expand current partnerships by mapping out actors and assets of the community (who is doing what). • Well-positioned to connect with multiple stakeholders.
Ambitious and aspirational	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SDGs are aspirations for how humanity has to adapt for a sustainable future. • Move beyond the status quo and conventional approaches. • Social investment and philanthropy could be essential to fuel development innovations with evidence-based solutions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community foundations need to be bold, ambitious and innovative. • CFs as think tanks, using the SDG framework for innovations labs (invest in social innovation) to see what works and where. • Pool funds to deliver tried and tested solutions that can drive impact across the SDGs.

Source: Inspired by Community Foundations of Canada (2020); complemented with other authors: Bernasetti, et al., (2021); Garza (2021); Rehse (2021); Ward (2021).

The growing interest of CFs to align their efforts to the ***ambitious and aspirational*** SDG framework and the actual work being done on the ground reflects the added value CFs bring to move from crisis to innovation toward a more sustainable and resilient future in their communities. In this sense, community foundations can become think tanks to understand complex issues from a systemic vision, and social innovation hubs to implement and support evidence-based solutions that work in a particular context. And, perhaps, expand the pool of resources to invest in initiatives that contribute to the sustainable development of communities using the SDG framework. An example of this is the *Active Community Fund* developed at the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic by Comunalía – the alliance of Mexican community foundations –, in partnership with Coca-Cola Foundation, the Inter-American Foundation, and the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation. The fund’s purpose is to contribute to the economic and social recovery of communities in 14 states, where 15 CFs in Mexico developed 42 initiatives with a local leadership approach, impacting 35,000 people, in the areas of Humanitarian Aid, Access to Water, support of Small Enterprises and Empowerment of Youth and Women (Comunalía, 2021).

With its respective challenges, taking action on the SDGs can still be attractive, and most definitely necessary, for the broad scope of shared community challenges. In this regard, the potential benefits of the full realization of the SDGs far outweigh the downsides (CFC, 2020). In the following section, I address localization approaches and the value that community foundations bring in the delivery of the SDGs.

SDG localization approaches

Cities and communities are at the frontline of transformative change. In this sense, development that emerges out of “transformative change addresses the social and economic structures and relations that drive unsustainable practices” (as highlighted in an online presentation by Shaun Samuels from SGS Consulting). Local and regional governments are increasingly using the SDG framework to align municipal plans, strategies, and policies with sustainability outcomes (Timmers & Sidney, 2021). Framing common objectives between the city and local actors enables work toward a common purpose (Garza, 2021). For the SDGs to be locally relevant, they must be tailored to the needs of the community (LeSage, Timur,

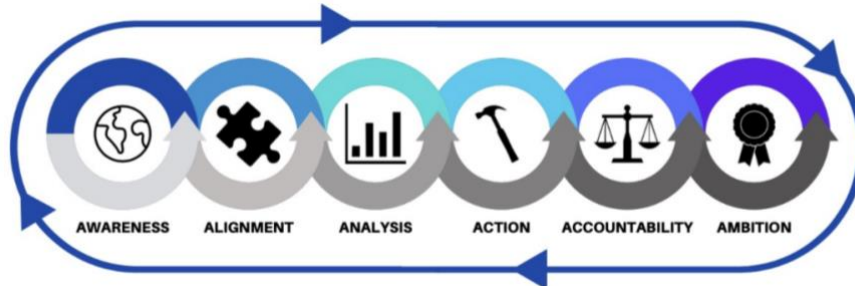
Pawlicki, 2021). This entails integrated local-action and community-level collaboration across sectors to advance the SDGs (Garza, 2021; LeSage et al., 2021). In this sense, community foundations are a small but crucial part of the puzzle to work towards these goals, and “their efficacy also largely depends on national and local governmental policy and the adoption of the goals within other main sectors” (McGrath, 2021, p. 35). In short, “SDG adoption does not happen in a vacuum; rather, it needs fertile ground to take root, emerge and time to evolve” (Rey-García & Dal Magro, 2021, p. 43).

The process of localization support cities and communities in their efforts to build on local strengths and assets in order to shift priorities, resources, and plan efforts towards social, environmental, and economic local priorities (Rehse, 2021; Timmers & Sidney, 2021). For the purpose of this paper, **localization** refers to the process in which subnational governments and non-state actors, including civil society and grassroots organizations, adapt the SDGs targets to local contexts and needs (Rehse, 2021; Timmers & Sidney, 2021). Therefore, the process of **SDG localization and adaptation**, “enables local communities to take SDG implementation into their own hands and report on local action and progress” (IISD, 2022, p. 1). And most definitely these processes will look different according to the local context, enabling environment, and infrastructure set in place to embrace the SDGs (Këruti, 2020; Pipa & Bouchet, 2022; Timmers & Sidney, 2021). In other words, community foundations are able, and should be encouraged, to customize the SDGs in a way that makes them more tangible and relevant to the local context, while recognizing the power of their communities to find solutions of their problems with their own resources. “With this flexible approach, SDG adoption may start from almost any of the many facets of the work of community foundations: from communication to granting; from investing to convening” (Rey-García & Dal Magro, 2021, p. 40).

In order to situate the SDG localization processes of community foundations, for this paper I will use the six-step *cycle of local SDG adaptation* of Pipa and Bouchet (2022, p. 5), shown in *Figure 1*. Even though it was developed with a focus on cities, it makes sense to use it given that community foundations are mostly located in cities and metropolitan areas (at least in the context of Mexico). It should be noted that the following six steps not only comprise similar ideas developed in other guidelines and tools, such as the SDG Compass of the UN Global Compact (2016) or the Community Foundations of Canada (2020) SDG Guide

and Toolkit, to name a few, but are more or less a suggestion to consider each step as a point of departure for the community foundations' SDG localization process.

Figure 1. Cycle of local SDG adaptation



Source: Pipa & Bouchet (2022, p.5)

1. **awareness** of the SDGs to “create a common sense of understanding across sectors and layers of governance” (Pipa & Bouchet, 2022, p. 5); using the SDGs as a **common language** bring the opportunity to consider the interdependence of problems and solutions. For instance, there is no doubt that the climate crisis, “is as much a question of social inequalities as it is of environmental factors. This analysis is deeply relevant to local people, who live these interconnections every day” (Rehse, 2021, p. 22).
2. **alignment** that defines and amplifies existing priorities or exposes gaps; assessing the positive and negative impact of actions, programs, and projects (Red Española del Pacto Mundial, 2019);
3. **measuring progress** at the outcome level with **evidence-based analysis** to inform decisions and actions (Pipa & Bouchet, 2022);
4. **commitment to take action** on the SDGs, or to a particular set of Goals, within the organisation encourages cooperation across sectors on shared issues; this means linking efforts while demonstrating the organization’s internal and external commitment to sustainable development (Rey-Garcia & Dal Magro, 2021; Red Española del Pacto Mundial, 2019);
5. using data and metrics for **reporting** builds the basis for transparency and **accountability to inform decisions** (Bersanetti et al., 2021; Pipa & Bouchet, 2022, p. 5); it is also important to carefully consider which data sources will provide accurate information on the SDGs (Rey-Garcia & Dal Magro, 2021);

6. **connect local efforts to global progress to raise ambitions** for collective impact (Pipa & Bouchet, 2022); for instance, the advantage of philanthropy is that it fosters experimentation and discovery of what could work, supporting risk-taking search for diverse solutions while working closely with other stakeholders and organizations (Bellegy, et al., 2019).

Drawing on these steps, community foundations can spot the value the SDG framework brings to their work. With the principle of leaving no one behind in mind, CFs are able to identify the complexity of global problems felt at the grassroots level and address them with locally-led solutions using the SDGs as a guide. In the following section I delve into the different paths taken by several Mexican community foundations in their journey towards SDG localization and provide some examples of what this looks like.

Situating the work of community foundations toward SDGs

The process of working toward the SDGs can make local philanthropic work more coherent, relevant, and adaptable over time (Leone & LeSage, 2021). Integrating the SDGs into the work of community foundations allows them to find common language not only to clearly communicate how their actions and resources make a difference for sustainable development, but also to find future collaborations while using resources effectively and where it makes the most sense for the community (MacDonald, 2022; Timmers and Sidney, 2021; UKCF, 2021). Nevertheless, a number of systemic issues remain around the integration of the SDGs, “including understanding how they relate to localized priorities” (Allison, Benson and Jones, 2021, p. 31). In the case of the philanthropic and social sector, integrating the SDGs into community foundations’ strategies can be a daunting task due to the fact that SDG targets and indicators are often measured at a country level, adding “a layer of intimidating complexity to the inherent intricacy of strategic foundation management” (Rey-García & Dal Magro, 2021, p. 34).

According to Grainger-Brown and Malekpour (2019, p. 15), a myriad of tools and frameworks have been developed to support organisations in their SDG action and engagement, “but that there is a significant absence of tools and frameworks for strategic—and therefore transformational—change.” The authors categorized these tools and

frameworks, mostly for the business sector, into three types: mapping, reporting, and aligning (Grainger-Brown and Malekpour, 2019, p. 9):

- **Mapping tools/frameworks:** to help organizations with mapping their existing programs, initiatives, and value chains against the SDGs.
- **Reporting tools/frameworks:** to help organizations with performance benchmarking against the SDGs and include the SDGs into their sustainability reports.
- **Aligning tools/frameworks:** to help organizations utilize the SDGs for competitive advantage and to align their business activities with this opportunity.

Furthermore, Rey-García and Dal Magro (2021) applied this typology of existing tools/frameworks to the context of community foundations' action on the SDGs. Most of the tools and frameworks identified are mainly applicable for mapping and reporting SDGs against existing initiatives and their activities/outcomes, "which means that SDG adoption occur after organizational strategies have been developed and even implemented" (Rey-García & Dal Magro, 2021, p. 34). Still, a small number of tools and frameworks were found to align the SDGs with the early stages of strategy development by organizations, ambitious enough to foster transformative change (Grainger-Brown and Malekpour, 2019). Hence, there is a need to support and guide civil society organizations, community foundations and support organizations in re-defining, adapting, and building a narrative of the progress and impact of their work, while also sharing their value in advancing the SDGs (Grainger-Brown & Malekpour, 2019; Serino, 2017).

To this end, additional resources and SDG expertise have been developed in recent years within the philanthropic and social sectors for organizations and philanthropists starting their SDG journey and helping to enhance their impact (Reed, 2021). To more easily align with developed typologies, the **European Community Foundation Initiative** (ECFI) suggests developing a more comprehensive understanding of the SDGs adopting a **whole-of-organization approach**, which has been used in the process of SDG alignment across Europe (Böllhoff, et al., 2019). Moreover, **Community Foundations of Canada** (2020, p. 24) developed an SDG Guidebook and Toolkit where they identified "entry points where community foundations can integrate the SDGs." In adopting a *whole-of-organization approach*, or finding entry points for SDG alignment, a community foundation will need to work at the level of the core principles, pillars, and dimensions of the 2030 Agenda for

Sustainable Development, as well as looking at specific SDGs, targets, and indicators (Böllhoff, et al., 2019; CFC, 2020). For a particular CF, this might entail:

- reframing their **organizational planning** and **culture** (vision, mission, and values, strategic and operational planning, special SDG committee within the organization);
- considering their **operations** and SDG footprint (think of staff, board, committees and vendors; think of other frameworks and policies, such as the International Human Rights Declaration; Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI); create a sustainability plan).
- adjusting (impact) **investment** strategies and **grants** (prioritizing SDGs, fund innovative solutions that have the potential to unlock systemic change);
- designing and implementing **strategies and programmes** (based on community data, better if it is co-created with local actors);
- using a common language in **communications** and **knowledge sharing** (this include planning and reporting on community data through Vital Signs, annual reports, social media, targeted SDG campaigns, storytelling, and/or adding SDG wording to the CF's website);
- building and deepening **partnerships and convening** (engage with citizens and relevant stakeholders in the community using a common language, facilitate a Vital Conversation to listen and identify community's local priorities);

Integrating the SDGs into the mission and work of community foundations can be a powerful tool to draw attention to the need for transformative change based on community priorities. In this regard, interesting cases which are evolving across the world within the community foundations movement need to be explored and documented even further. Therefore, my intention at this point is to build from Grainger-Brown and Malekpour (2019) and Rey-García and Dal Magro (2021) research to showcase the localization approaches and processes being developed by community foundations in general, to then move to particular set of examples in the Americas, with a special focus on Latin America and Mexico.

For the purpose of this paper, the three types of tools/frameworks are renamed as approaches to best situate the work of CFs using the SDG framework (as shown in *Table 2*). Also, it is important to emphasize that these approaches can be found interchangeably in some of the examples outlined in this section, regardless that most of them lie under the reporting approach. Among the three approaches, mapping and reporting usually come hand

in hand, leading the way towards a more strategic SDG integration with a vision for the whole organization.

Mapping means matching existing activities against the SDGs and identifying local actors and assets to understand who is doing what. At this level, engaging in SDG action comes from the local actors redefining the value and meaning using the vocabulary and tools provided by the SDGs, as well as identifying connections between long-range sustainability challenges in order to define priorities and action plans.

Table 2. Approaches to situate the work of community foundations toward SDGs

	Purpose	Process and Context	Effects
Mapping	Matching existing activities against the SDGs and mapping out local actors and assets to understand who is doing what.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No one size fits all. • Translate and simplify the SDGs into the local context using existing frameworks, like the Social Determinants of Health (SDoH). • Identify and prioritize needs and goals. • Community conversations and awareness raising. • Cultivate partnerships. 	Identify connections between local activities and long-range sustainability challenges through a shared language to guide the work of CFs and other stakeholders to set the right priorities of their community.
Reporting	Measuring, communicating and reporting performance and progress of intended contributions against the SDGs.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sustainability reporting. • Vital Signs Reports. • Annual Reports. • Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs). • Community needs assessments. • Podcasts, blogs, social media, webinars. • Communicating the work of CFs in diverse media outlets. 	Evaluate the current state of the community and pave the way for new partnerships to advocate and build a common agenda for local sustainable solutions.
Aligning	Devise, imagine and define new programs or redefine existing ones to achieve the SDGs.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Integrate the SDG framework into strategic planning, management, budgeting, and granting for a greater scale. • Develop a Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning System with the SDGs. • Theory of Change with a focus on Sustainable Development or SDGs. • Committing publicly on taking action on issues related to the SDGs. 	SDGs provide a coherent planning framework at a community level and strategic focus on project funding.

Inspired by Grainger-Brown & Malekpour (2019) and Rey-García & Dal Magro (2021), expanded using examples drawn from SDG communities of practice, conversations, and webinars.

Due to the fact that community foundations are as unique as the communities they serve, approaches to alignment with the SDGs might be specific to each community foundation and context (CFC, 2020), but at the same time useful to share and learn from. In other words,

“there is no *‘one size fits all’* approach to achieving the SDGs. Each context is unique and every activity should consider the system, people and goals it serves” (MacLean, 2021, p. 11). Therefore, to make the translation easier, some CFs are taking existing frameworks, but adapting them in ways that make more sense in their particular community. This enables a CF to implement more integrated approaches to solve complex issues and connect with other partners using a simplified or known language. Under the mapping approach of SDG localization, the case of **Central Florida Foundation** is a good example. Recently, the CF launched a framework called *Guide to Thrive*⁵ that condenses the SDGs into five areas of impact by mapping the 17 SDGs into the six Social Determinants of Health pillars. They then mapped out sub-areas of interest within each pillar to identify stakeholders and communicate to them how their priorities align with Thrive. For this particular case, the mapping prepared the ground for setting a 10-step system aimed at creating a stronger Central Florida and, also, intentionally moving towards reporting and aligning with the SDGs to solve complex issues with an integrated approach (Central Florida Foundation, 2022).

Beyond mapping comes **reporting**, which means measuring, communicating, and sharing performance and progress of intended contributions against the SDGs. In practice, CFs continue to do their work using some of the SDGs, targets, and indicators for accountability. At a much deeper level, reporting may have the intention to evaluate the current state of the community and pave the way for new partnerships to advocate and build a common agenda for local sustainable solutions. In terms of evaluating the current state of a community, community foundations in Mexico⁶ and Brazil⁷ are adopting the community-driven data program *Vital Signs*⁸, spearheaded by Community Foundations of Canada, to convene community conversations and civic engagement. The goal is not only to identify needs and priorities in order to support evidence-based locally-led solutions, but to empower local actors to take part in solving their problems. Since 2017 Vital Signs reports globally have been pegged to the SDGs, giving community foundations the opportunity to customize and align this framework into their local actions and context.

⁵ To learn more about the Guide to Thrive: <https://cffound.org/2020/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/CFF-Guide-to-Thrive-Final-October-2022-Digital-3.pdf>

⁶ In 2021, the first three Vital Signs reports developed in Mexico with CFs are from Fundación Comunitaria Punta de Mita, Fundación Internacional de la Comunidad, and Fundación Comunidad. To know more about them: <https://comunalia.org.mx/hacemos-frente-a-los-desafios-globales-asumiendo-los-retos-locales/>

⁷ In the case of Brazil, Instituto Comunitario Grande Florianopolis (ICOM) has developed Vital Signs reports since 2007. To know more about their program: <https://www.icomfloripa.org.br/sinais-vitais/>

⁸ To learn more about Vital Signs program: <https://communityfoundations.ca/initiatives/vital-signs/>

For instance, **Fundación Comunidad**, a community foundation located in central Mexico in the state of Morelos, began their Vital Signs process with the purpose of exploring the paths that can lead them to food sovereignty, climate justice, and child development and participation. Vital conversations, in their different formats, are spaces for dialogue with the community to respect the perspectives and feelings of the community. Using hard data to show the state of poverty and deprivation in their state, the CF invited adults and children into the Vital Conversations to “feel the data.” This involves filtering the hard data through the heart of each participant in order to observe latent problems that are experienced by people in the community, such as the pain of hunger and its consequences in their nutrition and development; and with that sensibility to then exchange ideas about causes and possible solutions. The concept of feeling the data and using these vital conversations to find people who can work together to define solutions was described by Isabel Hernández, director of Fundación Comunidad, and Violeta Cordova, Independent Researcher at a webinar on SDG integration co-hosted by the Dorothy A. Johnson Center and Comunalia. With a sense of shared responsibility and recognizing the importance of community participation, the conversations with grassroots groups, organizations, associations and individuals continue to this day (Dorothy A. Johnson Center, 2022). In short, the approaches used by this CF are mapping and reporting. At present, they are expanding their SDG awareness along with their local partners and are still in the process of defining the best ways to integrate the SDGs into other areas of the foundation and the grassroots groups, mainly with young people, while also aiming to further engage with local government in SDG implementation.

In terms of paving the way for new partnerships to advocate and build a common agenda for local sustainable solutions, community foundations have also taken more advanced leadership alongside local governments in an effort to contribute to development policy that aligns with the SDGs. In some cases, CFs’ efforts can “catalyze and inspire municipal action, creating new norms and expectations” (Pipa & Bouchet, 2021). For example, **Corporativa de Fundaciones**, a community foundation located in Guadalajara (the second largest city in Mexico), after acquiring Special Consultative Status at ECOSOC signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the United Nations SDG Action Campaign (former UN Millennium Campaign) to implement “MY World 2015”, ‘the UN Global Survey for a better

world⁹, in which 255 institutions and 500 young volunteers participated to collect the voices of the residents of the state of Jalisco for input into defining which of the SDGs are most relevant. The survey was implemented from December 2014 to May 2015, a process that gathered 400,000 voices in more than 70 municipalities, with the support of dozens of organizations from the public and private sector, as well as civil society organizations. Then a report¹⁰ was developed and sent to UN officials, state governors and municipal officials. After the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs were adopted, the data collected was used to update the State Development Plan for 2013-2033, thanks to political buy-in and local structures set in place at the time to commit to the SDGs. In 2016, Corporativa de Fundaciones established *MY World México* to follow up on the SDG implementation process in Mexico. At that point a second survey collected 30,000 votes in support of the presentation of the first Voluntary National Review at the High Level Political Forum (Corporativa de Fundaciones, 2017). Later on, *MY World Mexico* became an independent initiative that continues to mobilize and accelerate action for sustainable development.

Another example on advocacy and building common agendas is the case of ***Fundación del Empresariado Yucateco (FEYAC)***, a community foundation created by businessmen from the state of Yucatan in southeast Mexico. FEYAC has played a key role in the promotion of sustainable development in the Yucatan Peninsula, serving as a coordinating organization and promoter of the *Alianza Peninsular 2030*¹¹. This initiative is a multi-stakeholder alliance that allows companies and civil society organizations from the states of Quintana Roo, Campeche, and Yucatan, to show the important action they carry out around the SDGs, becoming outstanding examples and promoters of the 2030 Agenda, climate change mitigation, the preservation of their ecological environment, and the sustainability of their communities (López Osorio, 2022). In addition, FEYAC has also participated in different multistakeholder structures set in place to promote the 2030 Agenda in Yucatan, presiding over the Sustainable and Inclusive Economic Development Committee within the State Council on the 2030

⁹ During the post-2015 process, this survey was one of the largest citizen consultation processes carried out by the UN which aimed to know what issues mattered the most to people.

¹⁰ The report “Nosotros las y los jaliscienses. Celebramos 400 mil voces” comprises the survey results in the state and storytelling of the people involved in the process: <https://www.cf.org.mx/publicaciones/nosotros-las-y-los-jaliscienses-celebramos-400-mil-vozes>

¹¹ The Peninsular Alliance 2030 is an agreement for the sustainability of the Yucatan Peninsula as a result of the joint vision and co-responsibility of the region, which emanates from the desire of companies, academia and civil society, to move towards a responsible operation with the environment and communities, to the extent of their areas of action and in response to the call of the UN to join the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs. For more information, here is their latest report 2021: <https://feyac.org.mx/Quinto-Informe-Peninsular.pdf>

Agenda, which is the monitoring and implementing body on SDG progress and alignment with development plans. In 2020, the state of Yucatan presented their Voluntary Local Review on the progress towards the 2030 Agenda, where FEYAC participated on behalf of the business sector, showcasing their program and leadership in promoting corporate social responsibility and sustainability in the state (Government of Yucatan, 2020).

The last example in this regard is the case of **Fundación Comunitaria Puerto Rico** (FCPR), which is working on a Voluntary Local Report (VLR) for the ECOSOC, as well as to other national and international bodies, while documenting the role of community organizations in the process. In conversation with Mary Ann Gabino (VP Senior, FCPR) and Palmira N. Ríos (Independent Researcher), they pointed out that for the CF it has been a great opportunity to identify priority and urgent areas to address. The initial steps for the Puerto Rico VLR included collecting data and reports from various sources, multi-sectoral meetings and focus groups, as well as the implementation of a survey for community organizations in order to identify if they are really aware of the SDGs and if their actions are intentional in integrating them into their work. During this process, the CF recognized that many organizations, including faith-based organizations, are advancing issues related to the SDGs, even when they are not aware of them, and that they often work on issues that governments do not fully address, such as poverty, hunger, housing, and inequality. Also identified in this process is the need to have access to valid, reliable and longitudinal statistics necessary for the present and continuous analysis of inclusive sustainable development. Additionally, a podcast was developed with GFR Media entitled "Towards a Sustainable and Inclusive Puerto Rico" with a series of 10 episodes¹². As a result, the CF is aiming to increasingly involve the press and the media to spark conversations about the country's major challenges. Finally, with this VLR – expected to be released in early 2023 –, the CF is also seeking to continue the formation of national and regional alliances to push for an agenda that comes from various sectors and stakeholders.

Last but not least is **aligning**, which implies processes to devise, imagine or define new programs, or even redefine existing ones to achieve the SDGs. It also means considering integration of the SDGs into other areas of the community foundation work, such as strategic planning, management, budgeting, and granting for a greater scale. This process also

¹² The podcast "Hacia un Puerto Rico Sostenible e Inclusivo" can be found here, comprising 10 episodes starting on September 6th until November 22nd: <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/en-pr-con-luis-alberto-ferr%C3%A9-rangel/id1447302306>

connects to the reporting approach by developing Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning systems to measure progress using logical frames such as the Theory of Change, but with a focus on sustainable development or SDGs. In this sense, reporting is a transversal step to communicate the progress and public commitment taken by CFs to advance on issues related to the SDGs. Hence, SDGs provide a coherent planning framework at a community level and strategic focus to the whole organization. An example developed to facilitate the use and application of the SDGs is the case of **AFE Colombia** – the association of family and business foundations in Colombia –, which designed a guide¹³ to provide practical tools to their partners to encourage the integration of the SDGs into their projects and interventions. This particular guide provides two approaches that are consistent with each other: design and implementation. The design approach considers the SDGs core principles and dimensions of sustainable development – social, economic, and environmental –, into the overall purpose of the foundation, including mission, vision, strategic objectives, and lines of action. The implementation approach is linked to the course of action or the execution of the activities, projects and interventions, including the definition of the target groups, delimitation of the population, the area of operation, budgeting, and delivery of the services and programmes. In both approaches, it is important that CFs consider the possible tensions and trade-offs of certain activities or lines of action, in order to make the best choice at hand when delivering a particular project that addresses a specific social, economic or environmental issue. According to the guide, an effective alignment with the SDGs will need to comprehensively consider the decision making process of the foundation, including governance, management and operating mechanisms (AFE Colombia, 2018).

In practice, some community foundations are not only integrating the diverse areas within the organization and their boards, but are also considering the community's capital as they define their development agendas and strategies in alignment with the SDGs. An example of this is the case of **Fundación Punta de Mita**, a community foundation located on the west coast of Mexico. There, the vital conversations were a cornerstone to identifying the most relevant points to address both in the community and the main input to build into its social intervention model through four pillars: Education, Environment, Health, and Community Development. In the webinar co-hosted by the Dorothy A. Johnson Center and

¹³ To know more about the Practical Guide for Foundations on the use and application of the SDGs: https://rutasparafortalecer.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/guia_uso_aplicacion_ods_fundaciones_afe.pdf

Comunalía on SDG integration, Alejandra Rivera, director of Fundación Punta de Mita, mentioned that Vital Signs allowed the CF to generate an assessment, and to know the real needs of the community as narrated by its inhabitants, with the goal in focusing efforts and generating real long-term change in the communities of Punta de Mita and Bahía de Banderas (Dorothy A. Johnson Center, 2022). In this regard, the CF is transferring the knowledge and community data gathered in their Vital Signs report to operationally connect the SDGs into their new intervention model and strategic plans for the coming years. In this process, Fundación Comunitaria Punta de Mita is building methodological consistency and integrating the MEL System into their programs with the SDGs.

In essence, the different examples described in this section show how community foundations are situating the SDGs into their work using three approaches: mapping, reporting, and aligning. Naturally, community foundations can embrace the SDGs fully in their work only if this framework is relevant. First of all, when considering the adoption of the SDGs, it is important that CFs reflect on the *why* and the relevance of using them (Rey-García & Dal Magro, 2021). And if they do move forward, they need to make sure that grassroots communities are engaged and heard in SDG processes. As seen in the examples of community foundations implementing Vital Signs, this also brings the opportunity to activate community, and to adapt and reframe what sustainable development means and what success looks like in different contexts, particularly the hyper-localized communities.

Conclusions and possible next steps

The SDG localization efforts of community foundations are varied. In many cases, they have been built on the mapping of actions, specific community priorities and existing strategies. Based on the examples presented above, I propose some general conclusions:

First, the SDGs are not only a common language that allows local communities to connect with the rest of the world, but also helps build understanding of the various intersections between the problems we share as humanity in the face of the complex landscape we are currently living in. However, the commitment to take action in favour of the SDGs implies a process of reflection whereby local actors redefine the value and meaning that the SDGs provide for their context. Thus, for the SDGs to be relevant at the local level, they must be adapted to the needs and present realities of the community. To facilitate this

process, some community foundations have conducted community consultations and vital conversations, which aim primarily to diagnose the state of a community and map stakeholders in order to strengthen partnerships and encourage collaboration across sectors for local sustainable development.

Second, the alignment to the SDGs from a whole-of-the organization perspective has allowed community foundations to have greater institutional coherence across all programs, initiatives, projects and strategies, as well as to build a common vision of where collective efforts should be directed to generate transformative change in the community. In this sense, CFs have the ability to facilitate collective efforts of local impact aimed at promoting a sustainable and co-responsible community by recognizing and leveraging community assets to solve local priorities and needs.

Third, the success and effectiveness of community foundations and supporting organizations towards achievement of the SDGs depends largely on local and national government policies and infrastructure, as well as the level of adoption and awareness of the goals in other sectors. As detailed in the case of FEYAC or Corporativa de Fundaciones, an enabling environment that facilitates collaborative processes with local governments allows for advocacy work focused on the development of plans and strategies in favour of sustainable development at the municipal, state, and even national levels. Given the growing loss of trust in government institutions and the shrinking civic space globally, community foundations have the opportunity to serve as a platform for activating collaborative actions and building strong relationships between people and institutions to influence sustainable development processes at the local level.

Finally, in various conversations with community foundations and organizations in the philanthropy sector, it has been highlighted that there is still a lack of knowledge about the SDGs and their application at the local level, despite the fact that many community organizations are working to solve related issues. A next step for community foundations is to continue educating and raising awareness of the SDGs, so that community organizations have the tools and partnerships in place to ensure a role in the upcoming discussions of the framework at the midpoint assessment of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The SDG Summit is coming up in the next few months, so having a seat at the table is essential to making more visible both local leadership and innovative solutions close to the grassroots.

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