

Localizing the SDG Framework for Effective Multisectoral Regional Partnerships: An Institutional Roadmap for Cleveland, Ohio

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Introduction:

Today's cities face increasingly complex challenges.¹ These challenges, in turn, require a dedicated, well-coordinated effort for successful collaboration. This article will present clear arguments and justifications to demonstrate that the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide a readily available and solid framework for multisectoral regional collaboration.

Cleveland's Contextual History:

Cleveland is one of the most prolific American rust belt cities. During industrialization, the strategic location of Lake Erie propelled the city's economic prosperity. The city's population peaked in the 1950s at 915,000, and by the later 1960s, as de-industrialization started to take hold in the rust belt cities, structural and economic shifts began a downward trajectory.² As a result, there were numerous job losses and population declines during the following decades, with the most recent census revealing a population of roughly 370,000 in 2020. While the city's population and households decreased between 1950 and 2010, Cuyahoga County, which is home to Cleveland, saw an increase of 118% in households due to urban sprawl.³

The city governance of Cleveland devised many targeted place-based strategies to focus on routing specific neighborhoods toward growth. Many of those efforts were supported heavily by local philanthropic local institutions.⁴ Examples include Strategic Investment Initiatives (SII), a targeted investment approach within neighborhoods to spur catalytic effect, downtown development for the Republican National Convention, Greater University Circle Initiative (GUCI) to improve the images of the communities around the University Circle area that is home to several world-class institutions like Cleveland Clinic, University Hospitals, Case Western Reserve University, and others.⁵ Additional creative strategies include the Pop-Up City efforts by the Cleveland Urban Design Collaborative and the creation of the Cuyahoga County Land Bank to strategically reduce blight by acquiring them and increase property value by putting the properties to productive use.⁶

After the initial years of funding support through the targeted investment, these strategies brought additional obstacles and risks of gentrification in the focused neighborhoods. Researchers argue that when a coordinated public funding mechanism is not in place, and the support is mainly through private investment interests, it will likely bring challenges.⁷ Some

¹ Abraham and Iyer, *Promoting the Sustainable Development Goals in North American Cities*.

² Pallagst et al., "Shrinking Cities."

³ Ibid.

⁴ McShepard, Stewart, and Brown, "Resetting the Table An Urban Agenda for Cleveland."

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Pallagst et al., "Shrinking Cities."

current structural challenges that Clevelanders face include income and wealth inequalities, blight, unemployment, community health, disparities in criminal justice, educational attainment, and air and land pollution.⁸

In 2021, when the region gained numerous new leaders in multiple sectors, the city welcomed its most recent mayor after 16 years of the previous administration, underscoring the need for a contemporary shared vision and collaboration framework. The "Resetting the Table - An Urban Agenda for Cleveland" report was released by the Cleveland-based non-profit PolicyBridge around the same time, advocating for a modern and enhanced urban agenda and unified goals to strengthen collective action to overcome crises. The report highlighted seven recommendations for an inclusive and integrated approach necessary for transformation.⁹ One of the mentioned recommendations that guide this article's premise is to reimagine philanthropy by encouraging funding local institutions to unite behind an urban agenda and challenge charitable communities to be nimble and bold in making concerted strategic investments.¹⁰

Elevating the SDGs for Collective Work:

The combination of the SDG-aligned approach will enable local institutions to actively communicate in internal and external settings, develop partnerships around common goals, provide resource support for the targets and goals achievement, and monitor progress.¹¹ The alignment of the SDGs will enhance the institution's progress toward long-term social impact goals with clarity and ensure they are compatible with the needs of the geography served and the organization's purpose and values.¹²

Additionally, by communicating the value of aligned goals, local institutions can leverage their role as trusted partners and facilitators in bringing together stakeholders such as local government, non-profits, and institutional partners to align around a common SDG framework. The timing is critical with new leadership at the city and county levels. A regional effort focused on established impact areas and the alignment towards shared goals will position the city nationally to procure federal funds while utilizing local philanthropy partners and their respective donors to assist alignment around the impact areas. There is also an opportunity to amplify partnerships with local institutions to provide additional support in the form of capacity or resources. Additionally, as this year marks the commencement of the second half of the SDG era, there will be bolder, broader discussions globally about issues addressing the 17 goals that need to be discussed at the national, sub-national, regional, and local levels. This year remains pivotal to making those breakthroughs while the rest of the world works on them.¹³

This paper makes the case that connecting local institutions' initiatives to the SDGs and creating a common language for communication could deepen multisectoral partnerships by identifying what success looks like in the region. This step-by-step process could help accelerate regional progress toward shared goals.

⁸ McShepard, Stewart, and Brown, "Resetting the Table An Urban Agenda for Cleveland."

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Abraham and Iyer, *Promoting the Sustainable Development Goals in North American Cities*.

¹² Jackson-Harman et al., "Thinking Globally, Acting Locally: How Community Foundations Are Contributing to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals."

¹³ Biggs and McArthur, "Turbocharging Canada's Approach to SDG Implementation."

Overview of the SDGs and Their Universal Relevance:

The UN Sustainable Development Goals were adopted in 2015 as a global accord. With a fundamental transformative agenda to "To Leave No One Behind" and 193 countries committed to all 17 goals, the transformative goals have a deadline of 2030. The goals are global, integrated, and connected in character. It is essential for the United States, one of the five nations that have not conducted a voluntary national review, to evaluate the progress of implementing the goals and its pledge to leave no one behind. The U.S. Government played a critical role in shaping the agenda and garnering international support for the framework; 14 however, implementation of the self-created targets and metrics has not been a priority at any governance level.

The SDG framework is a universally relevant starting point for productive conversations about strategy, internal coordination, impact assessment, and partnerships. Brookings 17 -rooms model is a uniquely designed tool to enable coordination and partnerships internally within an organization or with the community served. The model invites all community stakeholders, from residents to governance, to discuss SDG-relevant policies and solutions to societal ills.

Relevance of the SDGs for Local Institutions:

The SDGs are familiar domains of focus for local institutions; instead, they are an unfamiliar vocabulary to describe the work of the foundations and their various areas of impact. The goals present an opportunity to amplify impact and improve efficiency and effectiveness in philanthropic support when localized within the grantmaking process by integrating sustainability and collaboration.¹⁴ The SDG framework can draw attention to the foundation's efforts to unite community partners for need-based social transformation.

The numerous economic, social, and environmental concerns at the community level are impacted by the charitable giving of local institutions. Solving these social issues requires systems thinking and cannot be accomplished by any organization alone. It would take concerted efforts by the philanthropic local institutions of the region, in partnership with other stakeholders, to address the social challenges, and the SDG framework can lay the ground for effective partnerships around shared goals. The model of the collective approach is familiar to philanthropic local institutions, particularly local institutions. However, a collaborative approach using the SDG framework as a shared language would likely be unfamiliar in the US.

Local institutions enhance local networks by using a collective approach to address problems, inspire innovation, impact scale, and elevate local challenges regionally to find solutions.¹⁵ There are multiple roles the local institutions play in several collective initiatives.¹⁶ In some, the institution takes a lead role, some as a supporter of the effort. The realization that there are no quick fixes or shortcuts to solving the problem other than working side by side with the community to achieve shared goals of equity and fairness and involving the population most affected in the problem's solution identification leads to the emergence of brilliant ideas.¹⁷

The SDGs are increasingly common outside of the US, especially in local institutions in the UK and Canada, with Canadian localization of the SDG framework being a model prototype. The

¹⁴ LeSage, Timur, and Pawlicki, "A Case Study on the Use of the SDGs With a Collective Impact Initiative in Southwest Florida."

¹⁵ LeSage, Timur, and Pawlicki, "A Case Study on the Use of the SDGs With a Collective Impact Initiative in Southwest Florida."

¹⁶ Cleveland Foundation, "Funders Collaborative on COVID Recovery."

¹⁷ Ibid.

Canadian government developed a national strategy with a whole-of-society focus in 2021, and the country published its first national progress report in 2022. It has achieved substantial bottom-up traction as local institutions across the country use the SDG indicators to monitor progress, and the federal government has also provided financial commitments to the SDGs, allowing the countries to work with total momentum. Canada's foundation and government approaches amplify the national agenda and the local collective work toward implementation.¹⁸

Institutional Collective Action:

To develop a shared regional vision for collaborative work, greater Cleveland philanthropic institutions are part of a regional SDG learning cohort to explore SDG adoption in grantmaking and across the foundation's efforts. For regional and national funders seeking to progress on complex issues, working with local institutions is a strategic way to make local investments.¹⁹ Within this SDG learning cohort, a collective impact initiative plays a specific role in the process of active collaboration, and the roles are as follows:²⁰

- **Activator:** A catalyst for engagement that advances a creative idea or initiative.
- **Enhancer:** Provide knowledge and resources to expand the initiative's effectiveness and scope.
- **Supporter:** Offers resources, funding, and visibility to other local institutions to enable them to accomplish objectives or implement projects.
- **Driver:** Other foundations drive the group's collective work, a valid model for the cultivation approach towards collective impact.

There is value in articulating an institution's operations to the SDGs for a greater scope for local, sustainable partnerships. Doing so would enable other partner local institutions to see how they are also helping to achieve the goals in our shared interest and the region's needs.²¹

Shared Vision and Action Through Multisectoral Partnership:

The local institutions' long history of community impact work within the region and its solid partnerships over time are critical to act as a convenor and facilitator in the dialogue around SDG alignment across multiple sectors toward collective impact. The leadership at the local government plays a crucial role in prioritizing, managing, measuring, and accessing progress on social, economic, and environmental issues.²² Collective impact activities will fail if city leadership does not support SDG framework alignment. Cities such as New York and Los Angeles have succeeded in their localization initiatives, while Baltimore and San Jose, CA, were unsuccessful after the initial few years.²³

In 2022, local institutions supported the City of Cleveland's efforts to accelerate decarbonization and just transition efforts by bringing specialists from the UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network USA (SDSN) and the Deep Decarbonization Pathways Project (DDPP). A conference of city officials followed to establish pathways for strategic localization for

¹⁸ Biggs and McArthur, "Turbocharging Canada's Approach to SDG Implementation."

¹⁹ Haynes and Patel, "Community Foundations: Drivers of Inclusive and Meaningful Local Change."

²⁰ Easterling et al., "The Cultivation Approach to Place-Based Philanthropy."

²¹ Jackson-Harman et al., "Thinking Globally, Acting Locally: How Community Foundations Are Contributing to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals."

²² Abraham and Iyer, *Promoting the Sustainable Development Goals in North American Cities*.

²³ Ibid.

Cleveland's Regional Decarbonization Framework (RDF). It was during engagement with local institutions already integrating the SDG framework into their culture that the city of Cleveland started to integrate the language of the SDGs in their work around SDG 7- Clean and Affordable Energy and SDG 13 - Climate Action, with a focus on SDG 10- Reduced Inequalities.

The Mayor's Office of Sustainability and the UN SDSN USA hosted the city's inaugural Decarbonization Summit in April 2023, attended by approximately 300 people. For the first time since the SDGs' adoption, the city of Cleveland included an overview of the SDGs and their alignment of objectives at the goals and indicator levels. A half-day conversation on activating universities around the SDGs and decarbonization was held as part of the ongoing efforts, with roughly 30 university leaders from six regional universities. The discussion centered on how colleges and cities may collaborate to localize SDGs, specifically SDGs 7, 10, and 13. This was a historic milestone in the city for activating talks about the SDGs and moving the sectors toward localization, with local institutions acting as activators and enhancers.

Roadmap to Multisectoral Collective Action:

Mayoral leadership is critical to mobilizing the city's institutions to adopt the SDG framework and align themselves with it.²⁴ Because understanding of the SDGs is low in the United States, international local institutions such as ICLEI and local governments for sustainability provide leadership cohorts to help cities and counties advance on the localization of the SDGs through three topics: whole of government planning, data-driven impact, and impact-aligned budgeting. The commitment to creating collaborations inside and among local governments, local institutions, foundations, the commercial sector, and academic institutions is underlying.

Moving beyond collective intelligence to collective action necessitates developing integrated strategies, social ecosystems, and a structure to address complex social problems.²⁵ Collective adaptation necessitates research in each impact area since members of collectives typically have their own beliefs and operating systems, understanding the components, dynamics, and evaluation of concerns, preferences, and goals. Collective adaptation necessitates the integration of relevant results and methodologies.²⁶

To maximize the value of the SDG alignment process, the gaps in intersectionalities, opportunities, policy, programmatic, and resources must identify key targets metrics to define success, indicators to access progress across local and regional governments, a common data platform for the coordinated effort, and identify opportunities to engage communities.²⁷ Exploring financial alternatives to finance the SDGs remains challenging in the United States, owing to the need for national adoption. Cleveland's coordinated regional efforts serve as a national model for bringing together financial institutions, academia, local governments, private sector social giving, local community institutions, and other institutions around a standard agreed-upon framework to connect with financing opportunities related to the SDGs.

The SDGs alignment roadmap can advise the institution on areas of activity adjacent to their undertakings but are still critical for success. This raises the probability of identifying and developing powerful partnerships. Intersections can be identified using the SDG framework to

²⁴ Abraham and Iyer, *Promoting the Sustainable Development Goals in North American Cities*.

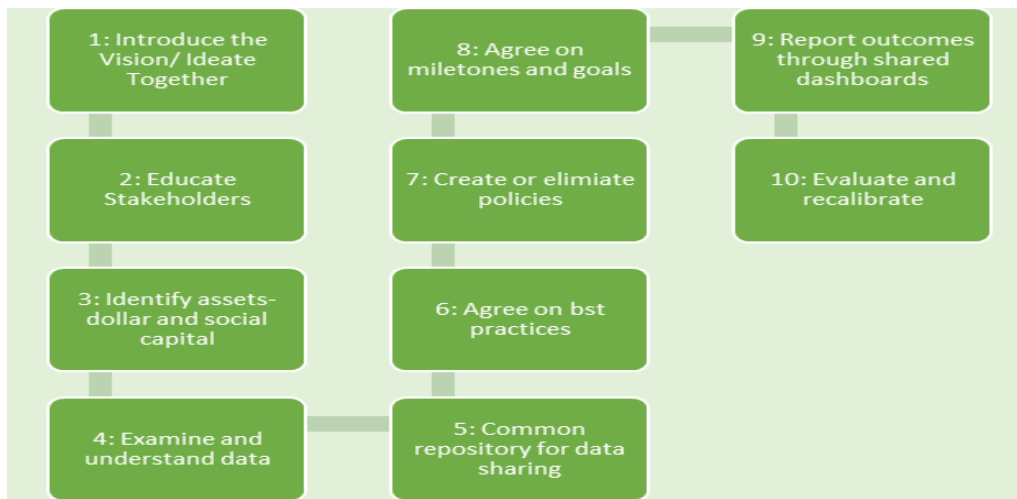
²⁵ Galesic et al., "Beyond Collective Intelligence."

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Abraham and Iyer, *Promoting the Sustainable Development Goals in North American Cities*.

create a road map for collective action. The SDG framework helps local institutions make sense of these intersections and determine how to organize best and prioritize operations to achieve impact in the face of adversity. Moreso, the SDGs allow us to build on the work that other institutions are already undertaking. The framework enables breaking down silos internally and amongst other institutional partners. An example framework is shown below in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Roadmap for Implementation



Note: This illustration shows the tentative roadmap of community foundations toward SDG implementation. Adapted from Vidal, S. (2023). Steps for a Thriving Community [PowerPoint Slides]. Thrive Central Florida.

Multisectoral Policy Alignment:

Every sector will play a role in policy alignment. For businesses, an example of a policy alignment under SDG 9 industry, innovation, and infrastructure policies would be to make institutional commitments paralleled with the city's Deep Decarbonization Pathways Project, which is linked to SDG 7 as well. The measurements for institutional alignment and policies should be based on a clear grasp of the target and defined regional success. For local governments, mapping the existing efforts, strategies, and policies to the SDGs would create clearly defined targets and goals, making it a continuous process within the city's comprehensive approach.²⁸

For local institutions, aligning giving areas to foster coalition building is essential. Philanthropic institutions, in alignment with the city of Cleveland's initiative to diversify the climate and clean energy movement, enabled the formation of local institutions, such as the Power Clean Future Ohio, to assist local governments in building a clean future for their communities by committing to reducing carbon emissions throughout Ohio in ways that make sense for the specific locale. In most circumstances, local institutions will be the intermediary and enabler, where policy will be pushed and aligned through an intermediary.

²⁸ Abraham and Iyer, *Promoting the Sustainable Development Goals in North American Cities*.

Multisectoral Data Sharing and Collection:

Under President Obama's administration, the Chief Statistician kept data collection and voluntary reporting at the forefront of the data revolution. However, national agencies that interact with cities, such as the HUD, EPA, and DOJ, were not conveying the message locally due to little clarity and direction on how to align the SDGs to local priorities from a local regulatory perspective, funding, and resource allocation from the national level.

Existing networks promoting urban sustainability in cities and regions will be included in quantifying the SDGs. Mapping and developing explicit connections between existing local institutions, priorities, and buy-in from stakeholders participating in grassroots sustainable development must be involved. The SDGs build on existing data, reporting systems, niche government frameworks like LEED for Cities and STAR Cities, and publicly announced benchmarks. An example of a shared language for data, dialogue, and decision, a side-by-side comparison of seamless alignment of existing benchmarks, language, and frameworks to the SDGs, is shown below in Figure 2.

Data sharing and collection are essential to tracking the SDGs and collectively assessing local progress. The US cities that successfully publish Voluntary Local Review (VLR) and manage a dashboard for collective action have strong partnerships with their local educational institutions. Case Western Reserve University's Center on Poverty and Community Development and the CSU Levin College of Public Affairs and Education will be engaged early in the process.

Figure 2: Shared Language for Data, Dialogue, and Decisions

Cleveland Climate Action Plan	LFC/STAR Targets	SDG Targets
Improved access to affordable clean energy for residents and small local institutions.	Transition the local energy supply for both transportation and non-mobile sources towards renewable, less carbon-intensive, and less toxic alternatives.	By 2030, increase the share of renewable energy in the global economy mix substantially.
By 2030, reduce residential and commercial energy use by 50% and industrial use by 30%.	Demonstrate incremental progress towards achieving an 80% reduction by 2050 in energy use by community buildings or industrial processes.	By 2030 double the global rate of improvement in energy efficiency.
Develop a plan to continue and extend work under the Climate Resilience and Urban Opportunity Initiative, including the role of neighborhood climate ambassadors.	Demonstrate a measurable reduction in vulnerability and/or increase in resilience to three communitywide risks and one at-risk population group.	Strengthen resilience and adaptive capacity to climate-related hazards and natural disasters in all countries.

Note: This illustration shows the similarity in languages and targets for city, national, and international clean energy targets. Adapted from: *The Cleveland Climate Action Plan* (2018 Update).; STAR Communities. (2016). *Technical Guide to the STAR Community Rating System Version 2.0.* ; U.S. Green Building Council. *LEED v4.1.* U.S. Green Building Council.; United Nations General Assembly. (2015). *The Sustainable Development Goals.*

Defining Multisectoral Success and Potential Challenges:

For a multi-sector approach, success occurs when each sector brings together its critical assets to solve social challenges through partnerships. In each of the five sectors, the strengths would be as follows:

- Philanthropy is more than just a source of funding; it is also a thought leader and a reliable partner. Community foundations provide SDG integration expertise and understanding, a vast and connected network, convening capacity, flexibility, visibility, and capital.

- The government provides leadership and a voice to align the SDGs through regulatory and policy power, public awareness and knowledge, citizen responsibility, and institutional, financial, and human resources.
- The private sector contributes efficiency in decision-making, financial sustainability incentives, expertise in essential sectors, and scalability through networks, technology, and financial resources.
- Civil society contributes sector-specific skills, regional expertise, credibility, community relationships, implementation experience, and community power.²⁹

All institutions serve society, and involving them in the process is vital. At the same time, while SDG alignment and vocabulary are necessary for institutions to understand, SDG literacy is not widely disseminated at the societal level; it would make the community members shy away from engagement when there is unfamiliar vocabulary. The onus will be on the institutions to communicate with the community members in simple terms. Once the public feels the impact and benefit of the alignment, the buy-in for the terms will develop.

Currently, non-commitment to the SDGs at the national level has a trickle-down effect on the slow adoption of the SDGs. A strong national commitment and renewed American leadership around the SDGs will accelerate development and have a multiplier impact at the subnational and local levels in organizing local and regional networks toward SDG localization.³⁰ Three commitments are underlined in the recent Brookings paper on the revival of American Leadership on the SDGs:

- The US completing its Voluntary National Review (VNR) and integrating all local initiatives. When the VNR is completed, it will most likely indicate that the large federally approved grants and legislations centered on the Jobs Act, Infrastructure Investment, Inflation Reduction Act, Justice 40 initiatives, Science Act, and others will contribute to the nation's progress toward meeting the SDGs.
- Creating a national cabinet-level group to implement the SDGs; and
- Integrating the SDGs into signature programs by unifying national, state, and local departments around issues such as democracy, eradicating hunger, and other SDGs.³¹ While doing so, find ways to measure and track SDG progress.

Conclusion:

The localization effort lies not with the city governance or city foundations alone but with the agreement and alignment of all local stakeholders. No one entity has the capacity to progress all 169 targets within the SDG framework successfully. Without collective action, overlapping efforts and underfunded societal needs are normative in undertaking a national or international framework, defeating the very purpose of united efforts.

Models provided by Baltimore's and Los Angeles' efforts to align existing plans, frameworks, and initiatives to the SDGs have provided excellent best practices for Cleveland's burgeoning collective action network. Both cities stressed that messaging must start at the governance level, with most responsibility on executive offices and agencies.³² But without the established

²⁹ Philanthropy University, Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, and GSV Labs, "SDG Partnerships Agenda 2030 Accelerating Progress."

³⁰ Mendelson and Pipa, "How to Renew American Leadership on the SDGs."

³¹ Mendelson and Pipa, "How to Renew American Leadership on the SDGs."

³² Abraham and Iyer, *Promoting the Sustainable Development Goals in North American Cities*.

networks of local foundations and the data from local educational institutions, the road to implementation for governance alone is difficult, at best, impossible for most.³³

By working through a clearly defined framework, specific success criteria, and indicators, local institutions can tap into the untapped potential for collective action across sectors. The 17 goals, 169 targets, and 232 pertinent indicators are time-bound and outcome-oriented.³⁴ Sharing the collective effort of involved institutions via a public dashboard or data-sharing tool would reveal both wins and deficits regarding the goals.³⁵ Multiple Cleveland elected members, government officials, and a 40-member stakeholder committee collaborated on the Urban Agenda in 2021, a robust collective action framework for the region, and integrating the SDGs framework with the existing work would make the effort effective.³⁶

Moreso, by leveraging the power of each sector to expand knowledge and involvement within the network, acquiring a collective awareness of the social concerns, precise actions that benefit the community can be carried out. While issuing this collective call to action, the local institutions must maintain sight of truth-telling, accountability, and transparency.³⁷

³³ Abraham and Iyer, *Promoting the Sustainable Development Goals in North American Cities*.

³⁴ Abraham and Iyer, *Promoting the Sustainable Development Goals in North American Cities*.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ McShepard, Stewart, and Brown, "Resetting the Table An Urban Agenda for Cleveland."

³⁷ Abraham and Iyer, *Promoting the Sustainable Development Goals in North American Cities*.

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