

The Foundation Review

Volume 13

Issue 4 *Community Leadership and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG)*

12-2021

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Recommended Citation

Leone, K., & LeSage, T. (2021). Where to Start? A Tool for Thinking about the SDGs and Community Foundation Work. *The Foundation Review*, 13(4). <https://doi.org/10.9707/1944-5660.1590>

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Where to Start? A Tool for Thinking about the SDGs and Community Foundation Work

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Keywords: *Sustainable Development Goals, community foundations, LEED for Cities and Communities, 2030 Agenda, trust-based philanthropy, grantmaking, donor engagement, Collaboratory*

Introduction

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) offer a global blueprint for tackling intersecting social, economic, and environmental challenges. The 17 interconnected goals address global challenges such as poverty, inequality, and the depletion of environmental resources, and each has targets and thresholds to be met by 2030 (United Nations, 2015). Unanimously adopted by the United Nations in 2015, the SDGs offer a universal language for the global journey to sustainable development and a North Star to guide it. The SDGs can be applied to map solutions, track results, and make systemic challenges visible; they set a common agenda and present a holistic approach to confronting humanity's most daunting challenges.

While the SDGs are global, change happens in local communities and within industries. Therefore, both widespread SDG adoption and site-specific adaptations are necessary. Regions and communities face common challenges and opportunities, and there is a dialectical relationship between the local and the global. Industry- and community-specific frameworks with corresponding key performance indicators (KPIs) have been established for local governments, corporations, higher education, and other important stakeholders to align their work with the SDGs, among them Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) for Cities and Communities (formerly the STAR Communities Rating System).¹ Yet there is not a widely agreed upon and highly utilized

¹ Among other frameworks with similar objectives are those created by the Global Reporting Initiative, Sustainability Accounting Standards Board, and the Association for Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education.

Key Points

- The merits of advancing the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals are widely agreed upon by the global community, but designing and applying strategies to do so at the local level can be challenging. This article aims to support community foundations in moving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development forward in practical ways by exploring the use of a point-of-entry wheel to create a shared language that can help community foundations align their local efforts with the global goals.
- Since 2012, Collaboratory has been exploring the potential for integrating sustainability — encompassing economic, social, and environmental pillars — as a strategic framework to advance its mission in a five-county region in Southwest Florida. The article examines how the foundation developed the wheel and applied it to its philanthropic work, presenting examples of success and failure and discussing where the tool has been most helpful and has added undue burdens. It also suggests modifications to the tool for other community foundations seeking to use the Sustainable Development Goals to prioritize, administer, and assess their own work.
- Collaboratory found that the process of SDG alignment made its local philanthropic work more coherent, relevant, and adaptable over time. The SDGs can help community foundations leverage assets and showcase impact, demonstrating efficacy to current and future stakeholders. The foundation also identified areas where further peer-learning between practitioners in the field is needed to refine approaches and processes and to build philanthropic capacity around the global goals.

Community foundations need to show current and future stakeholders, such as board members, donors, nonprofits, and community partners, that they are effective institutions, and the SDGs can help them leverage assets and showcase impact.

framework for community foundations to apply the SDGs to their work.

This is problematic because these foundations can be pivotal in advancing the SDGs. They serve as important leaders and funders of efforts to improve the quality of life in communities around the world. Their broad missions, service to targeted geographic areas, and connection with other foundations make them key infrastructure for advancing sustainable development. They steward and safeguard financial resources, networks, and partnerships, and can play a critical role in convening stakeholders while building trust throughout a community. But the degree to which they can successfully coordinate community assets to overcome challenges and seize unrealized opportunities depends on a variety of factors. Doing so at the speed and scale needed for making a deep and broad impact remains elusive for most community foundations.

Collaboratory, founded in 1976 as the Southwest Florida Community Foundation, cultivates regional change for the common good through collective leadership, social innovation, and philanthropy to address community needs in Florida's Lee, Collier, Charlotte, Hendry, and Glades counties. Since 2012, Collaboratory has been exploring the potential for integrating

sustainability — encompassing economic, social, and environmental pillars — as a strategic framework to advance the organization's mission.

Our journey began in 2012 by partnering with the largest local government in our region in developing and implementing a sustainability plan. When that government stepped away from leading those efforts, Collaboratory hired a sustainability professional to guide regional sustainable-development endeavors. This community leadership and public engagement initiative relied on the LEED for Cities and Communities framework to assess needs, prioritize goals, and track progress. When the SDGs were adopted in 2015, Collaboratory worked with partners at the national level to understand how the local indicator data that the community had already been tracking aligned with the SDGs. Mapping these indicators helped the community begin to place its work within a greater global context.

At Collaboratory, our hypothesis is that the SDGs can provide a technical blueprint that is robust and customizable so that community foundations can more effectively propel their mission and improve their impact. Since the foundations' missions do not typically specify a particular issue or cause, the SDGs can improve their understanding of the interplay, trade-offs, and synergies between issues and causes. Additionally, the goals can be aligned with existing local performance indicators, support the development of relevant metrics, or be tied to common frameworks like LEED, the Social Progress Imperative,² the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Social Determinants of Health, and the Community Foundations of Canada's Vital Signs data program.

The SDGs' ability to make Collaboratory's work more coherent, relevant, and adaptable over time became quickly apparent. Community foundations need to show current and future stakeholders, such as board members, donors, nonprofits, and community partners, that they

² See <https://www.socialprogress.org>

are effective institutions, and the SDGs can help them leverage assets and showcase impact. Simultaneously, a community foundation can find it daunting to apply global goals to a specific region or local industry. We found that developing a local lexicon is required to do this successfully.

To utilize the SDGs in practical ways, Collaboratory developed a highly customizable tool — a point-of-entry wheel to guide community foundations in aligning with the goals — that can be integrated with the metrics, frameworks, and technological systems that these foundations are already using. Since no two community foundations are alike, each spoke of the wheel serves as a potential point of entry to get started or a next step to pursue as opportunity and resources allow. This article illustrates Collaboratory’s experience with the SDG wheel, elaborating on successes, failures, and lessons learned. It offers suggestions for how community foundations can apply the wheel to their work and identifies barriers and opportunities. Finally, it suggests the next steps and modifications to spur widespread action by community foundations toward achieving SDGs targets.

Getting Started

Most communities are not highly coordinated to work collectively on achieving audacious goals on a set timeline (Pallotta, 2020). Community foundations can help with that by synchronizing work among various individuals and community groups. Alignment with the SDGs can enhance these efforts, and developing a shared local lexicon is paramount to developing interim targets and KPIs relevant to the community.

Integrating the SDGs into the work of a community foundation requires an understanding of the indivisible nature of the goals and a shared language that enables the right-sizing of global targets for the community. Take, for example, Target 1.1 of the SDGs: “By 2030, eradicate extreme poverty for all people everywhere, currently measured as people living on less than \$1.25 a day” (United Nations, 2015, p. 17). In U.S. communities, it is safe to say that everyone is living above that target, but that a

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significant portion of the population still lives in poverty. Therefore, a community must consider other targets, such as a living wage, attainable housing, affordable transportation, and college completion rates, to set goals for decreasing local poverty. Practitioners must also understand that the SDGs are a holistic framework designed for harnessing synergies and managing trade-offs between intersecting social, economic, and environmental issues (Independent Group of Scientists appointed by the United Nations Secretary-General, 2019). As such, it is not advisable for community foundations to pick them apart and work with only a handful of goals. Such an approach could make sense for certain nonprofits or businesses with a narrow focus, but it is not a good tactic for broadly focused institutions.

Finally, it is important for community foundations to understand how they are situated within the ecosystem of organizations contributing to sustainable development. It is important to regularly scan the community and consider which local governments, institutions, businesses, and community advocates are working to improve environmental, social, and economic outcomes. Are they working in silos, or coordinating their efforts? If there is coordination, who plays the role of lead convener? Are there turf wars between agencies? What shared outcomes and community needs-assessment frameworks or data do they rely on? Are there clear deadlines and interim targets defined to produce a road map for achieving their common goals? Does

FIGURE 1 Applying LEED Framework to Translate SDGs to Regional Causes



the group reflect the broader community in terms of age, race, ethnicity, gender, ability, and income, and represent a diversity of lived experiences and disciplines? All these questions are worth reflecting upon as a community foundation gets started with the SDGs.

Collaboratory’s Experience in Southwest Florida

Our region’s local lexicon and KPIs are based on the indicators from LEED for Cities and Communities, a certification program of the U.S. Green Building Council (USGBC) that assesses key features of sustainable development and quality of life in cities and counties. According to the council’s website,

[LEED] encompasses social, economic and environmental performance indicators and strategies with a clear, data-driven means of benchmarking and communicating progress. The program is aligned with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and is influenced by [LEED’s] engagement with hundreds of cities and communities around the globe. (USGBC, 2021, para. 2)

We adopted these indicators because they were the basis of a sustainability plan adopted by the region’s largest county, so key stakeholders were familiar with their core features and metrics. The county conducted a communitywide LEED certification review in 2014 as a component of the plan, and sunset its sustainability program shortly thereafter (Batlle, 2014). Collaboratory developed a memorandum of understanding with the local government to recertify in 2019.

Due to the unique situation in our community, where no local government or entity was willing to facilitate sustainable development for the region, Collaboratory took the leadership role and, collaborating with the USGBC, began adapting the LEED metric and indicators to support a robust menu of relevant local KPIs that were aligned to the SDGs and targets as well as philanthropic Collaboratory Causes. (See Figure 1.)

Each of the eight LEED pillars is underpinned by thresholds and leading indicators that can be assessed using local data. For example, the Built Environment pillar includes thresholds for

FIGURE 2 Community Foundation Point-of-Entry Wheel to Integrate SDGs

transportation safety and affordability, such as year-over-year pedestrian and motorist fatalities and the percentage of median income spent on transportation needs. We then used the pillars and associated KPIs to create our own lexicon of Collaboratory Causes that would fit the needs of the donors and nonprofits we serve in better understanding impact. Many of our causes, such as Education and Economy & Jobs, were an ideal fit. For others, such as Animals, the LEED KPIs were insufficient and required further customization or development.

To integrate our causes with the 17 SDGs and their supporting targets, Collaboratory applied our local lexicon to specific aspects of our work strategically, as resources and staffing allowed. To do this, we defined our portfolio of work to include collective impact; entrepreneurship; public engagement; business strategy and operations; grantmaking and community impact;

nonprofits and capability building; communications, media, and public relations; board development; donors and funders; and impact investment. These key components of our day-to-day business and overall approach outline the various points of entry where we could apply the SDGs to our work. (See Figure 2.)

Ideally, we would have embarked in this exercise to compartmentalize the various facets of our work at the onset of our work with the SDGs. Doing so would have helped us prioritize and create a planned sequence to integrate the SDGs across our business strategy. Alas, we embarked on this journey before the SDGs were ratified, and the need for a tool to better articulate community foundation work became clear only after years of work and experimentation. We hope readers can learn from our experience and use the wheel to accelerate their adoption of the SDGs.

By illustrating the points of entry for community foundations to work with the SDGs, we aim to provide a potential model for other foundations to experiment with integrating the goals throughout their portfolios. As a part of our learning process, we wrote brief case studies for each spoke of the wheel where we had deeply applied the SDGs to our work. Our journey began along the Community Leadership spoke, and then, as chronicled in this issue's *A Case Study on the Use of the SDGs With a Collective Impact Initiative in Southwest Florida*, we applied the SDGs to the Collective Impact point of entry. Most recently, Collaboratory investigated its application of the SDGs to the Grantmaking & Community Impact and the Donors & Funders spokes.

Case Study: Grantmaking & Community Impact

Field of Interest Fund Grants

Each year, Collaboratory awards grants of between \$700,000 and \$900,000 to nonprofits from field of interest funds. In 2016, we began to consider how we could incorporate the SDGs into our grantmaking processes as well as our nonprofit capacity-building programs, and designed a pitch day for finalists clustered by Collaboratory Causes in alignment with the SDGs. Those awarded grants were given technical assistance and access to a peer-learning community, where they networked with other grantees and attended sessions on strategic communication, fundraising, and how they could tie their work to the SDGs.

Based on program evaluation in 2018, we discovered that, for most grantees, we did not accomplish our learning objective of increasing SDG understanding and integration. So, we worked with graduate students at the University of Michigan School of Information (UMSI) to redesign the curriculum, breaking the cohort of grantees into smaller, thematic groups. We also shifted from one broad, high-level learning session on the SDGs with all grantees to small, segmented groups where we could dive more deeply into local indicators most relevant to their work. Feedback surveys found greater

satisfaction and success with this approach: Grantees reported being pleased with the SDG content, and a few documented how that content enhanced their program evaluation, storytelling, or fundraising skills.

However, we must also acknowledge the inherent power dynamic that exists between the funder and grantee. It is often difficult to evaluate what grantees are getting out of content designed and delivered by funders, because grantees want to make funders happy. To shift this dynamic, we are currently incorporating into our funding strategy the six principles of trust-based philanthropy (Trust-Based Philanthropy Project, 2021):

1. granting multiyear, unrestricted awards;
2. putting the onus on the funder to get to know grantees;
3. streamlining application and reporting processes;
4. employing transparent communication;
5. seeking and listening to feedback; and
6. providing nonmonetary support.

This process will also address the fact that the number of staff hours required for our competitive grantmaking program outweighs the program's impact.

Specifically, the SDGs made it possible for us to focus on principle No. 2 — doing our “homework” — and from there develop a strategy to fund more minority-led nonprofits. Our traditional call for competitive grant applications has not attracted the diversity of organizations we seek to fund, and the failure of many funders to apply a racial equity lens to their funding strategies has drawn national attention. A recent analysis by the Bridgespan Group and Echoing Green found “that on average the revenues of the Black-led organizations are 24 percent smaller than the revenues of their white-led counterparts” (Dorsey et al., 2020, p. 11).

To develop a new approach, we began by mapping the entire nonprofit ecosystem in our five-county region using our local targets and the SDGs. This exercise enabled us to filter by LEED indicators, Collaboratory Causes, the SDGs, and agency demographics when identifying organizations outside our network, and complemented our community leadership efforts in making us more successful at coordinating key stakeholders around particular issues and connecting stakeholders through issues where collaboration is needed. It also supported efforts to engage donors with the SDGs. In other words, this exercise was used to advance our work along multiple spokes of the point-of-entry wheel.

Another key takeaway from integrating the SDGs more fully with our grantmaking is the importance of coordination between development and program teams at community foundations. When field of interest fund (FIF) agreements are overly specific, or when key issue areas lack those funds, it can be challenging for community foundations to invest in areas of greatest need. To advance the SDGs, strong partnerships with professional advisors are necessary, as well as strategies to gain the trust of donors for support in responding to changing community needs. Strategies to reimagine donor pathways via SDG engagement will be explored later in this section.

When experimenting with how the goals could be applied to FIFs, we considered aligning the fund agreements to the SDGs and categorizing everything funded from those FIFs accordingly. This proved to be impossible, since FIFs tend to be broadly written and can often align with a variety of SDGs. We determined it was better to make the alignment of the competitive or invitation grant awards to the SDGs based on the program outcomes or the overall mission of the organization. However, community foundations might consider strategies that create unrestricted FIFs by cause or SDG, leveraging multidonor funding programs to create greater impact.

Donor Advised Fund Grants

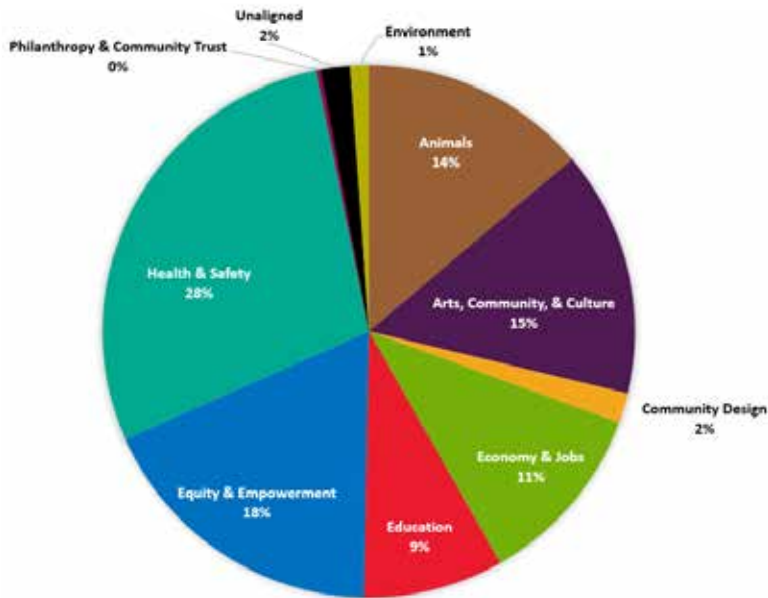
Our grant awards through donor advised funds (DAFs) are three to five times larger in scale on

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an annual basis than those that are supported by FIFs. Therefore, we wanted to take the SDG alignment work we were already doing with our FIF-funded grants and see how we might apply it to DAFs. In April 2020, we worked with UMSI graduate students to analyze over 1,500 DAF awards from the past four years.

We used the LEED indicators as a type of translation device that allowed us to align the SDGs to our Collaboratory Causes. We aligned grants from DAFs to the SDGs using a two-pronged approach. First, funding for overhead, general operations, or capital expenses was aligned based on each grantee’s overall mission and key information available on its website. For example, one nonprofit’s mission — “helping youth develop into responsible and productive citizens and protect public safety” — is accomplished through programs aimed at keeping young people out of the criminal justice system. This most clearly connects to LEED local indicators for reducing school violence and the community crime rate, which are aligned with our Health & Safety cause and SDG 16, Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions. Next, grants made to specific programs were aligned based on the outcomes of those programs. For example, a DAF grant to the same nonprofit earmarked for their afterschool program to increase graduation rates would be aligned with the local LEED indicator for high school graduation rates, to our Education cause, and to SDG 4, Quality Education.

We typically worked from the bottom up, first identifying the relevant LEED local indicators or Collaboratory Causes that most logically

FIGURE 3 Donor Advised Fund Giving by Causes in Alignment with SDGs

connected to the mission or program outcomes, and then followed those to the relevant SDGs. However, there were cases where starting with the SDGs made it easier to determine the best cause or local indicator. In other words, an ambidextrous way of working both top-down and bottom-up proved useful. We estimated the magnitude of the impact by SDG or cause based on the dollar amount of the award. In instances where an organization or program was impacting multiple causes or SDGs, we would divide the grant award accordingly. For example, a \$10,000 DAF grant to a program with local outcomes tied to both Quality Education (SDG 4) and Reduced Inequalities (SDG 10) included a \$5,000 allocation to each of those SDGs.

For both general operating and specific programs funds, the SDGs receiving the most money included Good Health and Well-Being (SDG 3), Quality Education (SDG 4), Life on Land (SDG 15), and Partnerships for the Goals (SDG 17). No grant funds were awarded to Affordable and Clean Energy (SDG 7), Responsible Production and Consumption (SDG 12), and Climate Action (SDG 13). Funds for specific programs, but not general operations, were

awarded to Clean Water and Sanitation (SDG 6) and Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure (SDG 9). The highest quantity of grants went to Zero Hunger (SDG 2), Good Health and Well-Being (SDG 3), Quality Education (SDG 4), and Partnerships for the Goals (SDG 17). Goals relating to climate, clean energy, and other environmental issues received grants less frequently than other SDGs.

We use Collaboratory Causes as our local language to communicate such findings. For example, from fiscal years 2017, 2018, and 2019 and the first three quarters of 2020, approximately \$8.2 million from DAFs was awarded to our causes. No grants were awarded to our Climate Change cause, and places of worship were included in our Arts, Community, & Culture cause. (See Figure 3.)

We derived key insights about our work from this process. First, we were able to identify areas where most awards were going and where there were gaps in funding. For example, in addition to no money being awarded to the Climate Change cause, little was awarded to Environment and Community Design (referred to as the Built

FIGURE 4 Reimagining the Donor Journey Via the SDGs: An Overview

Compiled by Thais Gonzalez, University of Michigan School of Information.

Environment in many communities), which are closely related issues. We were also able to see where donors' intentions may not have aligned with their impact. For example, a small group of donors interested in investing in climate granted to organizations doing sustainability education, as opposed to those working on outcomes specifically tied to climate change.

Additionally, we were able to see a few places where donor giving was antithetical to our mission. Our "unaligned" category represents grants to nonprofits doing work that undermined the SDGs. Those included anti-LGBTQ organizations, groups intentionally spreading misinformation, mission trips focused on religious or cultural conversion, and campaigns that would decrease women's access to health care. Community foundations need to perform stringent due diligence to avoid mission drift and reputational harm. Relying on compliance screens that are built into software packages used by community foundations ensures only that nonprofits are in good standing with the IRS; they do not catch known hate organizations, for example. Therefore, SDG alignment based on the National Taxonomy of Exempt Entities codes may also prove insufficient for community foundations to achieve their desired impact.

Ongoing Engagement for Impact: Donors and Funders

The insights gained from analyzing the potential impact of awards from FIFs and DAFs and mapping the nonprofit ecosystem in our region created a foundation for better engaging donors around how they can make their greatest impact. To connect these insights to an engagement strategy, we interviewed donors and did user experience research to redesign engagement vis-a-vis the SDGs. We defined a three-part journey in which prospective and current donors would travel from awareness to engagement with SDG-aligned social impact making. In the awareness phase, donors are introduced to the SDGs indirectly by taking a quiz that allows them to interact with various LEED recertification data. This helps development and program officers learn about donors' interests and desired impact. Next, during onboarding, donors are formally introduced to Collaboratory Causes and learn how to connect with nonprofits that are making a positive impact on the outcomes that matter most to them. Finally, ongoing engagement is sustained through a tailored communication strategy, sending the most relevant content to donors based on findings from quizzes and surveys in the earlier phases of the journey. (See Figure 4.)

We determined that the SDGs are useful for communicating with external communities of practice, but the Collaboratory Causes were more easily understood by existing donors. In other words, the SDGs serve as back-end logic and, in most cases, are not forward-facing. New tools, such as quizzes, can be used to learn more about donors' philanthropic interests and segment them into marketing clusters. These user interactions can be designed for prospective and long-time donors alike. Additionally, we learned that our portal software could be enhanced to improve donor stewardship through the SDGs. Currently, donors can see financial data, such as how their funds are invested, and we are working to build ways for them to see nonfinancial information, such as the causes that will be impacted by their giving.

Our work mapping the nonprofits and aligning grant-award impact with the SDGs also showed us the importance of building a technology stack capable of sustaining this work. For example, we need the ability to tag grants with our local indicators, Collaboratory Causes, and the SDGs as checks are being processed. To successfully connect both sides of our business (raising money and awarding money), this would need to be integrated with a customer-relationship management system capturing donor interactions.

Conclusion and Next Steps

To effectively transform their communities by concurrently advancing social, economic, and environmental outcomes, community foundations need tools and frameworks beyond the wheel presented in this article. Unlike higher education, corporations, and governments, community foundations do not have a set of metrics and standards specifically tailored to their mission and business practices. Lacking a shared framework diminishes their agility in advancing the SDGs.

By developing a local lexicon and applying the wheel, foundations can accelerate communitywide SDG adoption, especially when done in conjunction with other community foundations. This illustrates the importance of our Sustainable Development Goals Learning

Community for Community Foundations in sharing and growing best practices collectively so that foundations can co-create a customizable framework that enhances their ability to rapidly deliver high-quality programs that produce the size and scale of change necessary to impact outcomes.

Based on the work we have completed to align competitive grant awards and DAF grants to the SDGs with the LEED framework serving as our local translator, we concluded that the framework would need to be simplified, right-sized, and embedded into workflows to be more accessible for community foundations wanting to enhance donor and grantee experiences while increasing community impact via the SDGs. For example, we only used about 30% of LEED outcomes; the others were too specific to the work of local governments and not a great fit for what we were trying to accomplish. On the other hand, many outcomes that we relied on heavily were not closely matched with our work, such as Collaboratory grants to a number of organizations serving immigrants and people with disabilities. There are no LEED Key Performance Indicators that match closely with the desired outcomes for these organizations. Additionally, we grant to many organizations serving domestic animals, and LEED indicators addressed only biodiversity and habitat space of wild animals; we had to develop our own local indicators and SDG alignment in a handful of instances like this.

Through Collaboratory's SDG learning community, we heard from community foundations around the country using such frameworks as Vital Signs, the Social Determinants of Health, and the Social Progress Imperative to support their work; other frameworks, such as the Hawai'i Green Growth Aloha+ Challenge, have been built from grassroots engagement and community conversations. Further exploration and support for this network would be useful for community foundations. For instance, Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design for Cities and Communities integrates complementary standards from relevant professions and

industries to enhance collaboration between local government and planning professionals. This approach could be replicated within a community foundation-specific framework to enhance community-based collaboration.

Acknowledgments

We accelerated our progress and learning thanks to some key ongoing partnerships. The first critical partnership is between our organization and the University of Michigan School of Information. Student groups complete projects with us as a part of class assignments during the fall and winter terms as well as during the UMSI's summer Global Engagement Information Program. In addition, undergraduates from various Florida institutions served as interns to support a variety of Sustainable Development Goal projects. The students offered fresh perspectives and helped us apply

design thinking and human-centered design to our work.

Another critical partnership was with the Central Florida Foundation (CFF) and other community foundations integrating the SDGs into their work. We collaborated with our peers at the CFF to launch a learning community for community foundations engaging with the SDGs, which enabled us to learn alongside a community of practitioners and external experts to whom we otherwise would not have had access. The group's collective investigation and learning can benefit the field by offering a space to share best practices and test our assumptions.

Finally, our partnership with the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation provided us with the resources to further our work with the SDGs. The findings and conclusions of this article were largely made possible thanks to their support.

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