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Localizing the 2030 Agenda With Community Data: Lessons From the Community Foundations of Canada's Vital Signs Program

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Introduction

Communities around the world are turning to the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development to contribute to a global movement toward sustainability and equity. The 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that make up the 2030 Agenda provide a shared global framework to gauge the progress communities are making on complex, intersecting challenges, including poverty alleviation, climate action, and social justice (United Nations, 2015). As much as the SDGs are useful to gauge communities' progress on sustainable development, measuring and tracking progress can be challenging for communities and community-level philanthropic organizations.

In this article, we demonstrate how community foundations across Canada are localizing the 2030 Agenda and measuring and inspiring progress toward the SDGs using community indicators that have both local and global meaning. Community Foundations of Canada's (CFC) Vital Signs® program is the country's most extensive community-driven data program, and a useful tool for funders to galvanize SDG localization at the community level (CFC, 2021). This article shares experiences based on interviews conducted with Canadian community foundations as they embarked on an SDG localization process between 2017 and 2021 through their respective Vital Signs endeavors.

Using a data initiative like Vital Signs helped community foundations localize the SDGs in

Key Points

- Drawing on case studies in Canada, this article analyzes the critical role that community indicators can play in philanthropy's ability to localize the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the associated Sustainable Development Goals to address complex societal and environmental challenges.
- Measurement is an integral component of Agenda 2030, and communities are increasingly using indicators to align their plans, inform granting decisions, and track equity and sustainability outcomes. Canada's most extensive community-driven indicator program, Vital Signs, uses different types of data to measure the vitality of a community and support action toward improving collective quality of life; and data gathered through the program is used to support evidence-based, locally relevant philanthropy. This article highlights case studies from three community foundations in Canada that have successfully localized the 2030 Agenda by aligning their Vital Signs data and associated programming with the SDGs to coordinate community action.

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ways that suited their communities, and each experience yielded positive results. Altogether, localizing the SDGs using community data brought significant value to community

Altogether, localizing the SDGs using community data brought significant value to community foundations, helping to shift their organizational priorities, create new partnerships, tackle inequalities, raise local awareness, increase cross-sector collaboration, and track progress[.]

Key Points (continued)

- This article details the technical challenge of localizing the SDGs through community indicators and demonstrates how the localization process itself can help foundations achieve desired outcomes and drive progress at the community level. Altogether, community indicator initiatives like those used in Vital Signs research are useful tools to help philanthropic organizations accelerate community-level SDG implementation and tackle complex, intersecting challenges related to sustainability, equity, and justice. In turn, a data-driven approach to localizing the SDGs can strengthen the philanthropic sector's ability to target its impact on the issue areas and populations that need it most.

foundations, helping to shift their organizational priorities, create new partnerships, tackle inequalities, raise local awareness, increase cross-sector collaboration, and track progress toward achieving the SDGs. This article shows the critical and meaningful roles that local data can play to achieve a shared, sustainable, and just future using the framework of the 2030 Agenda.

The 2030 Agenda and the Role of Community-Scale Measurement

The United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was established in 2015 to guide the nations of the world in realizing a set of 17 goals designed to encapsulate equity, justice, and environmental sustainability (United Nations, 2015). The SDGs, successor to the Millennium Development Goals (2000–2015), broadened the scope of an international development agenda that focused on eight goals, primarily targeting low- and middle-income countries, to a multi-scale, comprehensive approach that now spans all countries around the world (Sachs, 2012). The 17 SDGs encompass interlinked priorities on topics as diverse as ending poverty (SDG 1), achieving gender equality (SDG 5), and creating sustainable communities and cities (SDG 11) (United Nations, 2015). The Agenda emphasizes that achieving the SDGs requires all countries to define national priorities around the goals and then measure progress, with data and indicators playing a key role in tracking success.

As implementation of the SDGs gained momentum, it became clear that cities and communities are at the forefront of delivering change (Oosterhof, 2018; Pipa, 2019). In turn, local and regional governments are increasingly using the SDG framework to align municipal plans with equity and sustainability outcomes. Nongovernmental organizations and private-sector businesses are also adopting the 2030 Agenda to highlight their work related to the SDGs. These efforts are known as localizing the SDGs; localization refers to “the process of designing (or adjusting) national and sub-national government development plans, strategies and/ or policies to adapt the SDG targets to the local context and priorities” (Oluoch-Olunya, Butwega, & Onysis Abebe, 2017, p. 6).

The process of localization benefits communities in many ways. Mayors, municipal governments, and other local authorities are embracing SDG localization as a way to leverage the 2030 Agenda's common language for sustainable-development planning that enables cities to define and monitor progress toward local goals while

also sharing lessons on overcoming common challenges with other communities (Pipa, 2019; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2020). Localization also provides an opportunity to implement new governance structures, such as SDG-aligned municipal planning initiatives, that are meaningful to citizens in their everyday lives (United Cities and Local Governments, 2020). Oosterhof (2018) notes that localization can help create synergistic actions, bringing together stakeholders from local and regional governments to work with national governments and other actors. Case studies from American cities including Baltimore, Maryland; Houston, Texas; and Santa Cruz, California, show that the SDGs can be very useful for city planning, with clear, communicable goals that can have influence across sectors and impact all citizens (Abraham & Iyer, 2021). The process of localization will necessarily be different across different places, but overall it can help cities and communities diversify their planning efforts to encapsulate social and environmental priorities, as well as those related to economic growth. While the process of localizing the SDGs can provide many benefits, localization also requires cities and communities to embrace a new set of challenges to measure and communicate progress.

Data and indicators are a crucial part of the 2030 Agenda to ensure the world is on track to achieve the SDGs (Sustainable Development Solutions Network, 2014). Each of the 17 SDGs are associated with specific targets and indicators; there are a total of 169 targets and 232 indicators to track progress (CFC, 2020). National governments are primarily tasked with measuring progress toward achieving the SDGs through reports called Voluntary National Reviews. However, as cities and communities take a more prominent role in localizing the SDGs, they must also embrace local reporting as an essential part of demonstrating the progress they are making toward the Agenda.

Reporting progress on the SDGs is no small task, especially at the local level. It necessitates coordination with organizations that might hold data, as well as those that are responsible for

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polymaking on any issue related to well-being and sustainability. In many cases, official data, which include data from national statistical offices, is not disaggregated at a geographic level useful for monitoring local progress; rather, it only paints a picture of national or regional trends. Measuring progress can also be prohibitively expensive. While large cities are better positioned to address measurement challenges by funding data or tracking initiatives, smaller communities are often excluded from such processes due to a lack of available funds. In this article, we offer a solution for communities to monitor progress toward the SDGs in an accessible way: through the use of community-level data in the form of community indicator systems.

Using Community Indicators to Track the SDGs

Community indicators are locally relevant measurements that enable communities to track progress, set targets, and inspire action on objectives that matter to a particular place. Wray, Stevens, and Holden (2017) document how communities began initiating their own local data projects as early as the 1960s, then gradually developed data initiatives into web-based portals, referred to as community indicator systems (CIS). These systems track different priorities

Community indicator systems are a natural fit for localizing the SDGs, giving communities the opportunity to define what matters across the spectrum of themes of sustainability and form the basis for establishing a measurement system.

that suit each community's local context. A CIS makes relevant data available to a wide range of users and can be used to inform local-decision making, and provides a high-quality measurement framework that allows communities to report their progress in a way that is both comparable and verifiable.

Community indicator systems are a natural fit for localizing the SDGs, giving communities the opportunity to define what matters across the spectrum of themes of sustainability and form the basis for establishing a measurement system (Temmer & Jungcurt, 2021). Temmer and Jungcurt suggest leveraging existing community-driven data programs to interpret local data in the context of the SDGs to reduce the costs associated with SDG implementation. Communities around the world embrace CIS as a way to measure the SDGs locally, such as the Aloha+ Challenge in Hawaii (Hawaii Green Growth, 2018), the city of Los Angeles (2021), and the Voluntary Local Review for Shimokawa, Japan (Institute for Global Environmental Strategies, 2018).

In this article, we draw on interviews conducted with staff from Canadian community foundations to show how CIS tied to the work of foundations can be a useful tool to help localize the SDGs. Alongside an online survey, we interviewed three community foundations, in Victoria, British Columbia; Whistler, British Columbia; and Prince Edward County, Ontario. The interviews are documented in this article

to share several lessons on localizing the SDGs using community data through the Vital Signs program. It shares the impacts of SDG localization, which include shifting priorities and granting decisions to directly impact local progress toward the SDGs, and creating new opportunities for equity and sustainability programming in the community.

Canada's Vital Signs and SDG Localization

Vital Signs is spearheaded by CFC and led by a global network of community foundations working locally (CFC, 2021). Originally a project of the Toronto Foundation, the CIS was shared with CFC and the Canadian community foundation network in 2006. As of 2021, over 65 community foundations in Canada have published *Vital Signs* reports and, through the global network of community foundations, reports have been published in at least 10 other countries.

Vital Signs uses data collection and local knowledge to measure well-being linked to common thematic areas, including education, health, housing, employment opportunities, sustainability, crime and safety, equity, and sense of belonging. CFC provides participating foundations with a set of over 80 indicators each year, with disaggregated data (by geographies, age, and sex) whenever possible (CFC, 2021). Community foundations complement national datasets with local research, surveys, and *Vital Conversations* — community consultation events that are designed to foster dialogue and knowledge sharing to help identify the most urgent local priorities. The research process gathers evidence about community conditions and identifies the most prominent barriers to community well-being. Community foundations share their research findings, typically in a report format bolstered by public education activities, to educate the community, inspire civic engagement, provide focus for public debate, and help local organizations and decision-makers take concrete actions and direct resources where they are most needed. The goal of this work is to support evidence-based, locally

relevant solutions to improve the quality of life at the community level.

In 2017, CFC identified that the SDGs aligned well with pre-existing Vital Signs common thematic areas (CFC, 2021). The SDGs were appealing because they offered a global framework and benchmarks for tracking progress, with a deadline to accomplish the ambitious goals. In addition, the SDGs offered a new language for speaking about Vital Signs data, and opportunities to partner with organizations working toward similar goals. The mandate to “leave no one behind” was an especially appealing call to action, as the Vital Signs program had been focused on the concept of belonging for the previous three years. Adopting this mandate encouraged Vital Signs participants to deepen their understanding about who in their community might be “left behind,” and identify how to eliminate systemic barriers to reduce inequities at the community level. In 2017, CFC began offering training to community foundations about how to integrate the SDGs into their local Vital Signs work, and officially aligned the Vital Signs program with the goals in 2018 by aligning its national data collection with the SDGs.

Vital Signs Goes Digital to Help Localize the SDGs

The SDG localization process for Canadian community foundations participating in Vital Signs is currently being accelerated by the adoption of a digital data platform. In 2021, CFC offered a digital platform to community foundations as an opportunity to display Vital Signs data in a new way. The platform, called Tracking-Progress, is a tool developed by the International Institute for Sustainable Development (2021) to make local data accessible and seamlessly integrate with the SDGs. An online CIS template that is based on open-sourced software through WordPress, Tracking-Progress is an affordable, customizable digital tool that communities use to showcase local data, and it can help to can track outcomes that matter locally.

Tracking-Progress can help users localize their data according to the SDGs with a few simple clicks and minimal statistical knowledge. Users

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attend a six-hour training to understand the basic elements of the website, and sites can begin running with a few days of preparation. The community foundations that were the initial adopters of Tracking-Progress began launching their platforms publicly in the fall of 2021. The foundations anticipate the opportunity to host and share real-time, up-to-date, and downloadable data that relate to the most urgent community priorities in alignment with the SDGs.

Case Studies From Canadian Community Foundations

As of 2017, community foundations across Canada are increasingly aligning their community indicator work with the SDGs. More foundations are working to localize the goals each year through Vital Signs initiatives, with an increasing focus on equity and building new relationships and partnerships to ensure that no one is being left behind. This section highlights case studies from three community foundations in Canada that have successfully aligned their Vital Signs community indicator programs to the SDGs to coordinate community action.

We solicited perspectives from community foundations that participate in the Vital Signs program, and aligned their work to the SDGs in two ways. First, we contacted foundations

The SDGs were attractive to the foundation because they presented a specific call to action with measurable targets and a deadline, which would help with setting goals and tracking progress on identified community issues.

through the Vital Signs listserv, seeking volunteers for an online survey. In June 2021, nine community foundations completed the survey, which included questions related to their work integrating the SDGs and the associated impacts. The foundations were given the opportunity to include their own responses and detail obstacles that they faced.

To gather more information, three additional community foundations were interviewed in greater detail to inform the case studies included in this article. Whistler Community Foundation, The County Foundation, and Victoria Foundation were invited to participate due to their demonstrated leadership in the Vital Signs network and efforts to align their Vital Signs work with the SDGs. Each selected foundation represented a different size and level of capacity in order to underscore how community foundations can use a right-sized approach and leverage varied strategies to align their work with the SDGs. Every foundation contacted for an interview agreed to participate, and five individuals participated in the interviews across the three organizations. Interviewees were provided with the questions in advance, so it is possible that, in some cases, additional staff helped to produce speaking notes with content for the interviewees.

The Whistler Community Foundation submitted responses in writing, and CFC and Whistler Community Foundation corresponded virtually through email and written comments in an

online document. The County Foundation and Victoria Foundation were interviewed virtually via Zoom, and CFC transcribed their responses. CFC compiled all notes and responses into a draft of the current summary and format, and provided the draft case study to each foundation for review and editing to confirm accuracy. The case studies were updated with additional context and information and ultimately included in this article. Similar to the online survey, the interview questions allowed the opportunity for community foundations to discuss not only the benefits, but also the challenges associated with localizing the SDGs.

Time constraints limited the scope of this study. The authors were not able to conduct in-depth interviews with all community foundations that are in the process of aligning their Vital Signs with the SDGs, and not all community foundations have time to commit to such a study. Further, the study does not consider the impacts or perceptions of SDG alignment in the wider community, only from staff working at community foundations. A subsequent study on the impacts of SDG localization through local indicators within the broader local community would be a useful next step in this research area.

The results of the case study interviews are presented in the next section, followed by an analysis of the wider impacts of using a CIS for SDG localization. For each case study, we provide some background details on the community and outline the localization process, the results of localization, key lessons learned, and each group's next steps.

Victoria Foundation

The Victoria Foundation has been collecting data for 16 years on community vitality in the capital region of the province of British Columbia, an area that includes 13 municipalities and three electoral areas, and sits on the territories of approximately 20 First Nations on the southern tip of Vancouver Island. The foundation has published annual *Vital Signs* reports dating back to 2006 (Victoria Foundation, 2021). The information in this section draws from

one interview with staff at the foundation, conducted in 2021.

At the time of their introduction, the SDGs appealed to the Victoria Foundation as a useful framework to guide its work. Staff report that the foundation was an early adopter of the SDGs as they recognized the potential benefits of aligning local Vital Signs research with a similar but broader set of priorities recognized nationally and globally. The SDGs were attractive to the foundation because they presented a specific call to action with measurable targets and a deadline, which would help with setting goals and tracking progress on identified community issues.

Staff report that the Victoria Foundation introduced the SDGs in its 2017 *Vital Signs* report by aligning each Vital Signs theme area to the related goals. The report represented a call to action for more education on the SDGs, for both the community and the foundation (Victoria Foundation, 2017). As a first step, the foundation prioritized educating its staff and board, and then embarked upon a learning journey with the community. Through its community engagement activities, the foundation learned about community priorities, raised awareness of the SDGs, and also brought organizations and individuals on board with implementing the 2030 Agenda locally.

The next step was to localize the SDGs by aligning the targets and indicators with Vital Signs issue areas. The team drew on resources including Statistics Canada's SDG Data Hub (2021) and a Brookings Institute working paper, *Who and What Gets Left Behind: Assessing Canada's Domestic Status on the SDGs* (McArthur & Rasmussen, 2017). The Victoria Foundation's 2018 *Vital Signs* report featured a six-page article on the SDG framework, with a focus on SDG 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities. The report identified the actions needed to drive local progress (as identified through community engagement), and flagged which Vital Signs indicators were aligned to the SDGs (Victoria Foundation, 2018a). In its 2019 and 2020 *Vital Signs* reports, the foundation linked the issue areas with specific SDG targets and included

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more SDG-related indicators that were identified throughout the report (Victoria Foundation, 2019; 2020). The theme of the 2019 *Vital Signs* report, *Vision 2030: Taking Action Today to Build an Even Better Tomorrow*, localized the Agenda 2030 to the region (Victoria Foundation, 2019).

Staff at the Victoria Foundation noted that they realized the important role the charitable sector and community would need to play to help drive progress on the SDGs. They conducted additional research to assemble the *Civil Society Impact* report (Victoria Foundation, 2018b), which identified how the charitable sector could play a vital role in driving progress toward the SDGs. In 2020 and 2021, the foundation followed up with two reports, *No Immunity* (Vantage Point, Vancouver Foundation, City of Vancouver, & Victoria Foundation, 2020) and *Unraveling* (Vantage Point, Vancouver Foundation, & Victoria Foundation, 2021), both of which examined the impacts of COVID-19 on the charitable sector in British Columbia. These reports look at key components of the sector that need to be viable in a post-pandemic environment to help meet the global SDG targets at a community level.

The Results of SDG Localization

As a result of its decision to integrate the SDGs into its Vital Signs work, the Victoria Foundation further aligned its community consultation and engagements with the SDG framework. Tying the successful Vital Signs work to the SDGs helped the foundation to strengthen relationships with other groups

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working toward the SDGs as well as those working on the ground in the community.

The most fundamental shift at the foundation that has resulted from its alignment with the 2030 Agenda and new approaches to community engagement has been a transition toward trust-based philanthropy, where the foundation listens to community needs and trusts those with lived experience to prioritize grant dollars to where they are needed most. The foundation now works with groups it previously did not have relationships with, funding organizations with exactly what they ask for, and trusting community members to design their own impact. Not only does this empower the grantee organizations, but it also leads to demonstrated positive impacts for the community. A key component of this process is conversations about common goals, including the actions taken in the community to implement the SDGs.

Increased trust and stronger relationships with community groups have led to other positive impacts. In response to COVID-19, the foundation created a Rapid Relief Fund to provide nimbler support to the community and brought together community leaders to provide input each week into where the funding would go and to raise awareness of gaps to ensure that the \$6 million in relief grant money went where it was most needed in the first six weeks of the pandemic. The relationships the Victoria Foundation established through its SDG work enabled this community-led rapid response to provide crucial aid effectively in the early days of the COVID-19 outbreak. This community advisory work also strengthened

existing relationships with community leaders, whose input has been woven into subsequent grantmaking.

The shift to the foundation's way of working and resulting community relationships has also attracted new donors. It has become clear that it is appealing to donors to know their support is directly responding to community needs. Sandra Richardson, chief executive officer of the Victoria Foundation, says this funding model has a ripple effect: "Funding follows us once we take brave steps." There have been increases in younger donors creating funds within the foundation, including through the Gadsden Initiative, which framed a learning agenda around the 17 SDGs and identified four priority goals. Other donors are also keen to see global issues addressed locally. As a result, the foundation's alignment with the SDGs led to an increase of support that directly allows for further, targeted progress on SDGs at the community level.

Lessons Learned and Next Steps

The key to the Victoria Foundation's success was to recognize at the beginning of the process that the foundation did not hold all the answers and highlighting the importance of being humble, teachable, and able to educate itself. Educating foundation staff and the board were among the first steps, to more deeply understand the SDGs and why they are important on an individual and community level. It was important to also recognize how the SDGs could be integrated into the foundation's existing work by drawing connections between Vital Signs, *Vital Conversations*, and the SDGs.

Community engagement is integral to the Victoria Foundation's success and will be a key component of its ongoing strategy. The foundation plans to continue to engage the community and gain input on priorities for Vital Signs issue areas tied to the SDGs, including through the Vital Community Network, with subject-matter experts from each of the core areas of the report. In 2021, the foundation worked within the SDG framework with a specific focus on inclusion and equity. In addition to a *Vital Signs* report, it

launched a digital Tracking-Progress platform, aligned with the SDGs and targets. It is anticipated that this platform will provide greater public access to community-level SDG data.

Whistler Community Foundation

The Whistler Community Foundation (WCF) serves the Resort Municipality of Whistler, a small community of 11,600 located in British Columbia. The foundation released its first *Vital Signs* report in 2016, and in 2019 engaged in aligning its Vital Signs work with the SDG for the first time. The SDG localization process led by WCF was initiated following CFC's biennial conference, which offered training on localizing the 2030 Agenda. The WCF focused primarily on community engagement and consultation processes to learn about community needs and how they align with the SDGs. This section draws on the virtual interview process conducted with staff at the foundation in 2021.

Education was a major component of localizing the 2030 Agenda in Whistler. The foundation initiated efforts to educate the community and raise awareness about the SDGs through a series of nine Vital Cafés and a podcast series. Each Vital Café event and subsequent podcast episode was tied directly to an SDG and featured a community expert who would discuss the goal, associated local priorities, and potential solutions. The SDGs selected for programming were related to the foundation's key priorities that had been previously identified as pressing community issues. This localization process ultimately informed the foundation's 2019 *Vital Signs* report (Whistler Community Foundation, 2019).

The 2019 *Vital Signs* report was broken into three thematic areas relevant to the wider community: Mindfulness, Belonging, and Understanding (Whistler Community Foundation). Each area was aligned with relevant SDGs: for example, the Mindfulness theme includes SDG 12, Responsible Consumption and Production; SDG 13, Climate Action; SDG 14, Life Below Water; and SDG 15, Life on Land. The WCF incorporates concepts related to Indigenous Reconciliation, an established societal priority in Canada (Truth and Reconciliation

Commission of Canada, 2015), to activities related to SDG 10, Reduced Inequalities, and other goals. The way that the SDGs were aligned with each theme in the report represented priorities that are relevant to the community.

In addition to its educational and reporting activities, the foundation also updated its grantmaking practices to require each applicant to identify how their request for funding aligns with the SDGs locally. This process helps the foundation prioritize projects that are driving progress toward the goals and ensures grantees are considering the SDG integration in their own work.

The Results of SDG Localization

The WCF staff reported two significant outcomes of aligning the Vital Signs program with the SDGs: greater community awareness and engagement around the 2030 Agenda, and new opportunities for collaboration between the foundation and community organizations. Through this work, the foundation developed a partnership with the Whistler Public Library, which provided in-kind support to help facilitate the Vital Cafés, and shared SDG-related resources with community members. The foundation also developed a new relationship with the municipal government's Environmental Stewardship department, which supported a Vital Café on the climate conversation with resources and experts for the discussion. This marked the first time the foundation received this type of support for its Vital Café work.

Lessons Learned and Next Steps

The WCF recognized that in order to play the role of community convener and educator, the first and most important step was for the members of the foundation's Vital Signs committee to educate themselves on the SDGs and how they were applicable within the community context and with Vital Signs. Through this process, the team learned that localizing the SDGs was not as complicated as they had expected.

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foundation to understand not only each SDG, but also the implications within the community and the systemic barriers that are encountered by certain community groups but not others. The foundation learned it must be willing to listen, learn, and work across cultures to better understand community issues and how they vary among groups. Understanding inequities and building relationships is vital to the success of localizing the 2030 Agenda and achieving community engagement and buy-in. The foundation's community engagement practices were crucial to establishing participation in events, partnerships with like-minded organizations, and collective community action to drive progress on the SDGs. The WCF plans to continue to host educational events to spark deep conversations with stakeholders, including businesses, nonprofits, and policymakers, to continue to push for greater progress on the SDGs locally.

The County Foundation

The County Foundation serves the Prince Edward County (PEC) region of southeastern Ontario. The region is an island community, featuring low density with a population of approximately 25,000. The foundation benefits from strong local brand recognition and has been conducting Vital Signs research in the area since 2013 (County Foundation, 2013).

The foundation's team became interested in localizing the SDGs after realizing how well aligned the goals are to their ongoing Vital Signs work. This section draws on the interview conducted with representatives of The County Foundation's staff and board in 2021.

The County Foundation team recognized that the SDGs were appealing as a strong, internationally recognized standard that represented a shared vision, goals, and measurements to track progress and could easily be communicated across organizations and governments. The aspirational goals and associated deadline for achievement could allow the foundation's stakeholders, partners, and donors to see how the work of the local community foundation connects to a broader, global agenda. The foundation found the shared language offered by the SDGs presented an opportunity to raise further awareness of its efforts to drive local progress on the community's social and economic development.

As a first step to localize the SDGs, the foundation's team sought to increase their own knowledge and capacity regarding the 2030 Agenda. They reviewed resources from CFC and the community foundation network, including the Community Foundation of Greater Peterborough's (2021) digital data platform based on Tracking-Progress software that is currently in development and will feature Vital Signs data aligned to the SDGs.

In April 2021, The County Foundation released a COVID-19 Social Impact *Vital Signs* report that featured an introduction to the SDGs and incorporated related goals into each Vital Signs theme area (County Foundation, 2021). The foundation used this report and the associated promotional activities, which included public Zoom sessions, radio interviews, and other media-related activities, to introduce the community to the SDGs and to highlight their local relevance.

The Results of SDG Localization

The County Foundation's team reported that they raised significant awareness in the community of the SDGs as a result of the alignment

to its well-established Vital Signs program. By linking its Vital Signs reporting to the SDGs, the foundation was able to educate important stakeholders and decision-makers, including municipal government, service clubs, nonprofit organizations, and the general public and potential donors about the 2030 Agenda and its local relevance.

An unexpected result of aligning with the SDGs was the foundation's own exploration of the meaning behind the term "sustainability." While some community partners in PEC define sustainability in strictly economic terms, the foundation identified its unique role in the community as an advocate for the importance of driving progress toward social dynamics related to sustainability. The SDGs presented an opportunity to clearly articulate the importance of looking at sustainability more holistically.

Lessons Learned and Next Steps

Adopting the SDG framework was a gradual process that required patience as The County Foundation educated its own staff, board, and members of the PEC community. It involved a shift in mindset within the foundation team that directed strategic thinking toward the longer-term impact of local actions. As a result of this process, the foundation finds itself now asking questions such as this one posed by Anne VanVlack, Vital Signs coordinator and community engagement at The County Foundation: "How will [our] decisions impact future generations? Will this leave the environment and community better than we found it?"

Aligning the Vital Signs programming with the SDGs also led to a shift in perspective within the foundation about its role in the community. The foundation no longer simply reports on local issues, but instead will now also track progress and work toward ambitious goals for improvement. As a first step, the foundation team indicated that they are creating a Sustainability Index, a tool that will be incorporated into upcoming *Vital Signs* reports that identifies clear goals and tracks progress. A tool like this will

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help to inform grantmaking and conversations with potential donors and partners.

Creating strong linkages between The County Foundation's *Vital Signs* reporting and the SDGs lends credibility to partnerships with other area organizations. Measurement of local data is a key consideration in a new national pilot involving the PEC region along with four other Canadian communities. The concept of the Community Economies Pilot, led by the Shorefast Foundation,¹ is based on integrating three pillars — government, markets, and community — to create local capacity for impact investment funding opportunities to develop social enterprises at the community level. The County Foundation's *Vital Signs* alignment with the SDGs adds considerable value and credibility to its role.

As a next step, The County Foundation is developing a Tracking-Progress digital platform, where it will publicly share *Vital Signs* data

¹ See <https://shorefast.org/our-activities/>

The branding and simple messaging associated with the SDGs are helpful in communicating the work of a community foundation locally and in identifying opportunities for impact.

aligned to the SDGs. This platform intends to act as a repository for data to be used by the municipal government and the community. Through its ongoing Vital Signs activities, the community foundation will continue to raise awareness of the SDGs and drive progress toward their achievement in the community.

Opportunities for Impact

These case studies are just three examples of how community foundations can align their Vital Signs with the SDGs to generate positive impacts at the foundation and within the community. The three foundations interviewed for this article all indicated that as a result of aligning Vital Signs with the SDGs, they are able to identify both community progress toward meeting the ambitious SDGs and clear priorities to drive progress on the most pressing local issues. The foundations reported that they updated their strategic communications, grantmaking activities, partnership development, relationship building, and advocacy in order to drive local progress toward the SDGs.

As discussed in the case studies, educating the community and raising awareness about the SDGs is often the first step for community foundations when localizing the 2030 Agenda. Strategic communications help philanthropic organizations like the foundations included in this article with raising awareness about the goals, while also creating an opportunity to clearly communicate priorities for community progress. The branding and simple messaging associated with the SDGs are helpful in

communicating the work of a community foundation locally and in identifying opportunities for impact.

As community funders, another fundamental step for foundations to take action is to update and align grantmaking activities to ensure funds are supporting organizations that will drive progress on the most pressing priorities. Some community foundations create a new funding stream that responds directly to the SDGs, while other foundations incorporate the SDGs into their existing grant programs through updates to criteria and application forms. This approach encourages community organizations to consider how they can help to drive progress on the most pressing community issues in ways that make sense. Community foundations are then able to better evaluate requests for funding in light of how the applicant organization may assist with driving local progress on the SDGs. Community indicators that track SDG progress can lead to increased funding directed where it matters.

Through a CIS like Vital Signs, community foundations can monitor progress toward the SDGs to see the real impact of its grantmaking. A foundation may choose to reallocate funds internally so that they support more SDG-related projects, and may also apply for funding from external sources, such as the federal government, that are actively trying to encourage community-led progress on the SDGs.

Localizing the SDGs through a community data initiative gives communities a shared language to forge partnerships, both with cross-sectoral partners in the public, private, and nonprofit sectors, and also with other communities facing similar challenges. Organizations that are familiar with Vital Signs and the work of a community foundation often decide to prioritize their own action and resources to respond to the data and identified priorities. Opportunities to connect with new organizations and to shift existing partnerships are other common impacts that result from aligning with the SDGs. Like-minded organizations will work together to drive a community response to improve

community well-being, and foundations have reported receiving new funding as a result of their alignment with the 2030 Agenda.

Opportunities for community foundations to connect with new population groups in the community are another common outcome of SDG localization. The SDG's mandate to "leave no one behind" has encouraged foundations to deepen their examination of inequity in the community. Localizing the 2030 Agenda through Vital Signs has encouraged foundations to push for disaggregated data, conduct community consultations, and build new relationships and/or strengthen existing relationships that will help to identify gaps in community services and opportunities. The community foundation can then better address the needs of equity-deserving groups through partnerships and grantmaking. Community foundations are taking it upon themselves to push for increased awareness of inequity, and are diverting their grantmaking to groups that they are beginning to learn from.

Vital Signs has always been a tool for advocacy, and alignment with the SDGs provides the opportunity for community foundations to continue to push with established SDGs in mind. Having clear priorities linked to a global agenda can encourage community leaders to have informed opinions and arguments when it comes time for municipal government plans to be revealed (i.e., city master plans). It can be a tool for sparking conversations in electoral debates, and can help to ensure future public officials are just as committed to driving progress on the SDGs to ensure their communities are healthy and that no one is left behind.

Localizing the SDGs through a CIS has a range of positive implications for foundations and their communities. Altogether, localizing the SDGs creates a shared language to forge partnerships with partners in the public, private, and nonprofit sectors and with other communities facing similar challenges.

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Conclusions

This article shows that localizing the U.N. Sustainable Development Goals is a context-specific process that can reshape the way community foundations orient and attract funding, build meaningful partnerships, and use evidence to inform decision-making. For the philanthropic organizations included in this article, community indicators played a crucial role in the process, helping to track and communicate progress within and between community foundations. Localization, while dynamic and unique to each place, can also help communities speak to each other as they face shared challenges using the global language of sustainable development. The 2030 Agenda offers a meaningful framework for diverse communities to tackle broad, complex challenges such as sustainable development, poverty alleviation, and racial justice, but requires traceable indicators to demonstrate progress and accountability.

The 2030 Agenda charts a comprehensive and ambitious path for our future. Community foundations and philanthropic organizations more broadly play a crucial leadership role in spurring action within communities, with a range of stakeholders, and between communities. While the challenge of measurement and tracking progress is great, especially for smaller communities, local data can help to spur action that holds global meaning. For foundations that already have data or indicator work embedded in their organizations, this article outlines a strategy to harness the power of local data to improve grantmaking and impact.

For foundations that have yet to embark on measuring the progress of their grantmaking with local data, our hope is to inspire them to allocate resources toward measurement and tracking that makes sense in their own context. Community indicator programs can be a transformative tool for community foundations to bring the aspirational goals outlined in the U.N. 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development to a local level with global relevance.

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