

The Foundation Review

Volume 13

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

12-2021

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Anna Wasescha

West Central Initiative

Christa Otteson

Vela Strategy

Sarah Casey

West Central Initiative

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Recommended Citation

Wasescha, A., Otteson, C., & Casey, S. (2021). The Transformative Power of the 2030 U.N. Sustainable Development Goals. *The Foundation Review*, 13(4). <https://doi.org/10.9707/1944-5660.1592>

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The Transformative Power of the 2030 U.N. Sustainable Development Goals

Anna Wasescha, Ph.D., West Central Initiative; Christa Otteson, M.A., Vela Strategy; and Sarah Casey, West Central Initiative

Keywords: *Sustainable Development Goals, SDGs, United Nations, community foundation, regional development organization, rural, Minnesota, West Central Initiative, resiliency, sustainability*

Introduction

West Central Initiative (WCI) is one of six independent community foundations created by the McKnight Foundation in 1986. At the time, Minnesota was facing a historic crisis in the farming and mining sectors. The disruption was so great that it threatened to break the backbone of the rural economy. The primary purpose of the foundations was to empower rural Minnesotans to overcome the economic fallout and subsequent hardships. McKnight supported the six Minnesota Initiative Foundations at their founding, and continues to do so through general operating grants. The support enabled the foundations to establish region-specific programs and projects and build a reputation for reliable and responsive place-rooted grantmaking. (See Figure 1.)

Since WCI's founding 35 years ago, we have funded local and regional projects to help meet basic needs, launched and funded significant work to expand early childhood resources throughout Greater Minnesota, and shepherded more than 200 affiliate funds to strengthen the communities we serve. We are a small but growing organization with 24 staff members working in fund development and philanthropy, early childhood, economic development, transportation planning, communications, and administration.

In addition to our designation as a charitable organization, WCI is one of 10 regional development organizations (RDOs) in Greater Minnesota outside the Twin Cities metropolitan area that the federal Economic Development Administration designates as Economic

Key Points

- West Central Initiative, a mostly rural community foundation and regional development organization in Minnesota, integrated the United Nations 17 Sustainable Development Goals into its strategic plan in 2019. This article explores how aligning the U.N. goals with the foundation's "nested strategy" of local, regional, and global goals has aligned and energized the disparate functions of the organization.
- This article describes the strategic planning process that led to adoption of the goals, articulates how they have helped evolve the interplay of economic development and philanthropy, and identifies lessons learned from the first two years of working with the goals.
- Focusing on the strong and undeniable connections between the local and the global has crystalized West Central Initiative's higher purpose. The new, transformative vision for the foundation centers diversity, equity, and inclusion as essential building blocks of both successful regional development and place-based philanthropy. Any region — anywhere — with a successful regional economy that also is supported by effective community philanthropy would look like the Sustainable Development Goals, realized.

FIGURE 1 Map of the Minnesota Initiative Foundations’ Service Areas



Development Districts (EDDs).¹ The 10 RDOs collaborate on a document titled *DevelopMN* that aggregates all the comprehensive economic plans across the regions into one economic development framework. As our region’s RDO, we obtain and administer state and federal grants, provide technical assistance to local units of government, and work in partnership with various local and state agencies to understand and support the economic development of our region. Most of this economic development

work falls under the mantle of “planning,” including helping communities with housing and transportation plans, offering gap financing for businesses that might otherwise fall short with traditional lenders, and supporting local communities to create comprehensive plans. The EDD board oversees activities and reports to and advises the WCI board on matters related to the district. Regionally elected officials, WCI board members, and other EDA-required interest groups compose the advisory board.

¹ The U.S. Department of Commerce houses the Economic Development Administration, which oversees EDDs across the nation. It defines the districts as “multi-jurisdictional entities, commonly composed of multiple counties and in certain cases even cross-state borders. They help lead the locally based, regionally driven economic development planning process that leverages the involvement of the public, private and non-profit sectors to establish a strategic blueprint (i.e., an economic development roadmap) for regional collaboration” (Economic Development Administration, 2019, para. 1).

FIGURE 2 West Central Initiative's Service Area

The service area of our community foundation is coterminous with our regional development district: nine counties in west central Minnesota and a portion of White Earth Nation. (See Figure 2.) The district's population is approximately 230,000; of the 82 communities within our mostly rural region, the majority have populations of less than 1,000. We have an abundance of uninhabited public and private spaces, with just 27 people per square mile compared to 2,111 people per square mile in Hennepin County, home of Minneapolis, approximately 200 miles southeast of us.

We characterize WCI as a “unicorn” because it is extraordinarily rare for a nonprofit entity to serve as a regional development organization and, vice versa, for an RDO to be a community foundation. The unique composition of our organization has challenged

stakeholders — both internal and external — to fully integrate our regional development and philanthropy functions into a cohesive whole. We used our strategic planning process to better understand the crossroads of philanthropy and planning and, ultimately, to merge the two identities within the framework of the United Nations 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Now, two years into our strategic plan and the adoption of the SDGs, we are realizing the benefits of this singular focus, with an aligned and energized staff, an expanding network of partners and allies, and a renewed philanthropic purpose that centralizes community well-being within a global context.

Building a New Framework

Every newly minted strategic plan aims to sharpen an organization's mission and improve alignment with current conditions while

building a vision for the future. Strategic planning processes, usually structured in three- or five-year cycles, are an opportunity to reflect on the past, assess possibilities, and project future action based on the dynamic interplay of organizational and community readiness.

In 2019, WCI embarked on a strategic planning process for 2020 through 2022. At that time, we were operating in three silos: community development (grantmaking), economic development (lending and planning), and philanthropy, defined in the way that community foundations traditionally operate, as managers of affiliate funds. Preliminary meetings with board and staff resulted in a draft plan that resembled the existing plan, with updates. The steering team was concerned because the draft’s almost exclusive focus was on “what we do well (and have always done well) in our region.”

We took a step back and considered the metachallenges we were trying to address, chief among them the perceived rural–urban divide, the miasma that had formed around discussions of climate change, and the sense that diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) were not rural issues. Yes, we were successful working on specific projects: early childhood, transportation planning, affordable housing, and workforce recruitment. But these projects were functioning as discrete, fragmented interventions, as we lacked a clear, cohesive throughline to our purpose.

In addition to a lack of clear shared purpose, we could feel that we were not getting to the root of seemingly intractable problems. We knew we were doing good work. Our stakeholders trusted us; our EDD and WCI boards were confident that we were bringing value to the region and making good on our mission. But our work was focused on the manifestations of much larger systemic imbalances, and we felt an emerging sense that we could — and should — do more. We wanted our strategic plan to foster a holistic view of our work that fully tested our hunch that the value of our combined efforts was greater than the sum of our parts. We were looking for a map of the interdependent network

Early in our strategic planning process, we arrived at three priorities: invest in local; reimagine regional; and educate, activate, and celebrate.

of systems that have the greatest influence on the quality of life in our region.

A Rural Foundation Goes Global

Early in our strategic planning process, we arrived at three priorities: invest in local; reimagine regional; and educate, activate, and celebrate.

The first, invest in local, was an affirmation of our role as a regional community foundation and an RDO. We needed to assert that our primary focus is, was, and always will be local. The second priority, reimagine regional, was a reckoning with the realities of the global economy that we all knew and experienced every day, whether we were selling soybeans to Asia, buying school clothes for our children at Walmart on the edge of town, or wiring funds to relatives in Somalia. We are globally connected by virtue of the internet, our transportation systems, the flows of people into and out of our region, and our buyers and sellers who operate everywhere. The call to educate, activate, and celebrate was a rejection of our previous role as a “neutral convener” and an embrace of our responsibility to act with all that we know from our planning work and hear from our community partners. This priority was a step toward claiming a meaning-making role in our region.

These three priorities expressed what we knew, but had yet to express, about systems change. More than 35 years of experience in our region had taught us that the success of any endeavor relied upon an abiding commitment to the well-being of our region. We also knew that our experiences had positioned us to deliver

Localizing the Global SDGs Exercise

We placed the 17 SDG icons around our large conference room and put Post-it notepads on the table. The Economic Development District group and our West Central Initiative board members began writing down the work in their community or county or region that related to each of the sustainable development goals. As they began pasting the Post-it notes to the wall, we could see which goals were receiving a lot of attention and which ones still needed work. More importantly, it was clear we were already working on achieving the 17 SDGs because each goal had at least one and often many Post-it notes on it.

studied advice and to use our credibility, longevity, and unique position in the region to create insight, devise strategy, and advocate for new approaches. And, finally, we knew that our region's well-being was anchored in global well-being.

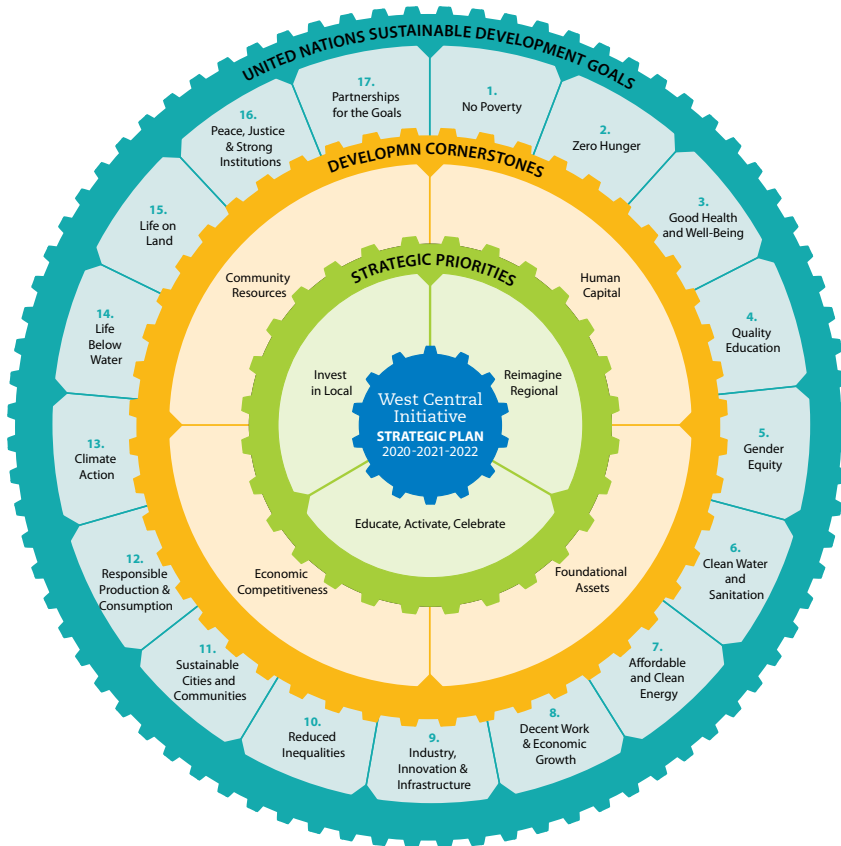
While we were working to identify our strategic priorities, we also were grappling with the integration of our regional development plan. The Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) guides our region's economic development efforts for a five-year period.² This document is the repository for a regional dataset, related goals, and attendant plans. We knew that it should play a greater role in defining our programmatic investments, as well as informing the priorities of partners and stakeholders around our region. Better use of the CEDS by bringing this regional plan into dialogue with the aspirations of our philanthropic partners seemed to be a powerful and necessary step toward sparking the "magic" of our unicorn organization — aligning and integrating our planning and philanthropic functions to produce insight and advance the region.

A set of organizational priorities emerged that opened the door to greater influence, a broader global perspective, and a more data-driven approach. But we were struggling with the arrangement of these parts, especially as we realized that the CEDS might pull us into work that was different from that to which we were accustomed. The idea of bringing in an extra organizational set of goals was foreign to how we (and so many of our regional community foundation colleagues) had approached strategic planning in the past. Strategic plans were born of internal processes that represented the organization's unique and timely disposition. Strategic plans were an expression of our strengths, an affirmation and reiteration of the work for which we were known. Adopting a set of goals, such as those represented in the CEDS, that were not uniquely our own seemed to threaten the validity of our planning process and, worse, call into question our tried-and-true programs and interventions. We couldn't just cut and paste from a plan, developed without the input of our staff, that was designed to serve as a road map for cities and counties throughout the entire region, could we?

As we were working through the question of how to integrate the CEDS, we began considering the SDGs. WCI's president, Anna Wasescha, had been following the United Nations' reporting on the SDGs and brought them to the organization's leadership team for consideration as we were pulling together the many strands of our strategic plan. All 193 member states of the United Nations adopted the SDGs in 2015, but they were virtually unknown in west central Minnesota in 2018. The beauty, relevance, and comprehensiveness of the SDGs were undeniable. But we now were considering the incorporation of a globally conceived set of goals, of introducing a framework developed by the United Nations, of moving from a traditional organizational plan focused on economy, community, and philanthropy to a complex web of organizational, regional, and global goals. The

² Each Economic Development District develops a CEDS as part of its contract with the Economic Development Administration. These documents may be described differently outside of Minnesota, but the basic requirements are the same across the nation's vast terrain of EDDs.

FIGURE 3 The West Central Initiative’s Strategic Framework



prospect of introducing a road map for development that claimed to be both “global” and “sustainable” amid the rising populism of 2018 was a risky proposition for our organization — unicorn or not.

As we sat with these lists — three strategic priorities, four regional cornerstones, 17 SDGs — sorting out a hierarchy simply was not working. Should we move from the top down? Which set of goals should be at the top? How could we translate between “levels” of the plan? How could we claim the SDGs as our own? Should we select just a few of the goals — those that best fit with what we already were doing? How could we possibly represent so much content in a way that would be digestible by our staff, our board, our donors, our partners, our region?

And then, the systems lens came into play. We saw these elements as nesting gears, or the lenses of a camera. They became different ways of seeing, of bringing things into focus. Each layer — local, regional, global — helps us understand the others. And, like the gears of a bicycle, they are all parts of a whole, working together as a system to optimize performance, adjusting and maneuvering as needed to tackle changing terrain. We were not choosing a set of regional or global goals over our own, we were nesting our organizational objectives within — and testing them against — regionally and globally focused gears. (See Figure 3.)

When we joined the local, regional, and global gears in a new strategic framework, we shined a bright light on our place within a larger landscape of interdependent systems. Nesting our

FIGURE 4 The New Strategic Framework: Spreading the Word



Rebecca Petersen, WCI's development director, holds a placemat that illustrates the foundation's new strategic framework.

organizational priorities within the context of our region's economic development goals (the CEDS) helped leverage our joint role as a regional community foundation and an RDO. Nesting both organizational and regional plans within the context of the SDGs helped align our work with that of organizations around the world. And sharing our framework with local donors, communities, and elected officials would open doors we never would have imagined. (See Figure 4.)

What We've Done

Over the past two years our organization has been a living, breathing experiment in localizing the SDGs in a mostly rural context. Change has come in fits and starts, leaps and bounds. As we reflect on our progress since first conceiving our "nested strategy" in 2018, we realize that the culture of our organization and our identity is evolving into something bigger, broader, and more integrated with the systems at work across our varied region.

First Steps

Our first step in adopting the SDGs was to engage our boards in localizing them. We

introduced the 17 goals to our WCI board and, upon approval, our EDD board. We engaged our leadership by sharing ideas about relevant partners and efforts. Through a naming and framing exercise, we used the SDGs to understand the good work that already was underway in our region. This demonstrated the utility of the goals while diminishing the skepticism that we might expect when introducing rural leaders to a matrix of 17 globally conceived goals.

We also adopted a "DEI in everything we do" strategy. During the last two years, we have been learning about DEI principles, growing our understanding of DEI in terms of systems change, and beginning to advance our individual and organizational cultural competence. We included equity as a "metagoal" that cuts across all 17 SDGs, and we are beginning to develop related metrics for economic development (e.g., assessing distribution of small business loans in terms of demographic characteristics, setting benchmarks, refining lending eligibility).

We also began to operate from the understanding that cultural diversity and biodiversity are vital measures of sustainability because, as Capra and Jakobsen (2017) explain, conditions

of diversity ensure resilience and resilience is a corollary to sustainability. We are using board and staff vacancies as opportunities to reassess our priorities, choosing quality of process over expediency, and working to redesign job descriptions, board recruitment materials, and other informational assets to attract people who are excited about and committed to sustainable, equitable development.

We have also joined the expanding conversation about how to use the SDGs to localize sustainability efforts and foster systems change. In 2019, 11 members of the WCI staff and board attended the Canadian Community Foundation Conference and pre-conference focused on the SDGs. We also have joined a host of conversations related to the SDGs and sustainability generally, as well as individual goal areas. We are now at the table for conversations that stretch our understanding of sustainable development and offer new opportunities for partnership and collaboration. We have presented at the Minnesota SDGs Roundtable, participated in the Climate Donor Roundtable, shared our work with the other Minnesota Initiative Foundations, partnered with other RDOs and community foundations on SDGs-related projects, and connected with foundations across the country to explore possibilities for linking and leveraging our respective efforts.

SDGs and Regional Needs

We are working on integrating the SDGs into how we assess our regional needs and, ultimately, how we articulate our economic development strategy. In addition to introducing our EDD board to the British Columbia Council for International Cooperation³ Movement Map philosophy, we developed a regional dashboard that measures progress across the 17 SDGs. This mapping project was inspired by the Aloha+ Challenge Dashboard,⁴ which links to available data sources to produce autogenerated updates to regional measures. We plan to introduce this dashboard as a public resource, while also using it internally as a key driver of organizational

planning and prioritization. We hope that the dashboard will be a highly visible way for stakeholders throughout our region to collaboratively plan, prepare, and pivot.

The SDGs are making their way into our region's economic development plan as well. The latest iteration of our region's CEDS included a broadened and intentionally more diverse community engagement process to identify regional trends and priorities. Our team of community planners focused on the SDGs when rewriting the region's CEDS and kept measurements in line with SDG indicators. Our aim is to use the SDGs to integrate sustainability into all our activities — and to bring our experiences to the table we share with our other regional development organizations across the state.

Realigning Grantmaking and Evaluating Progress

Over the last two years, on the heels of integrating the SDGs into our strategic plan and in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, our grantmaking has looked considerably different than in the past.

Since our inception, we had been seen as a reliable source of small grants for nonprofits across our region. In recent years, our grantmaking lacked a clear direction, strategy, or focus — and our grantmaking strategy was due for an overhaul. When the pandemic hit, we responded quickly by shifting internal funding into a new Resiliency Fund. The fund application afforded us the opportunity to introduce the SDGs to our nonprofit applicants and to gently guide them into seeing their work through the lens of the SDGs. The first grant round focused on addressing the immediate COVID-19 needs of our region, including personal protective equipment, cleaning supplies, food, household goods, and more. The second round pivoted to sustainable and equitable recovery and included a participatory grantmaking process with a goal of power equity in our grantmaking decisions.

³ See <https://map.bccic.ca>

⁴ See <https://aloha-challenge.hawaiigreengrowth.org/dashboard/>

FIGURE 5 Modeling Sustainability: Native Ecosystems



Native prairie projects, like the one above, surrounding its building, are part of WCI's incremental steps to model sustainability.

As we continue to center equity and sustainability as our organization's core "why," we are considering how grantmaking will look for our organization beyond the needs associated with COVID-19. We anticipate further shifts to align grantmaking with economic development, while also supporting equitable and sustainable efforts within our affiliate funds.⁵

We also are evaluating our progress. We hired a consultant to help us assess our first two years of implementation, and learned that our progress over that time and within the context of COVID-19 has brought uneven internal investment in the SDGs. Some of our staff and board members use the SDGs to understand and advance everything they do in their role. Others — two years in — still struggle to understand

the relevance of this global framework and are stymied by the complexity of the 17 goals and more than 300 targets and indicators.

Essential to bridging this gap and improving our approach across the board is continued assessment and reporting. We plan to use our evaluative processes to further engage stakeholders both inside and outside our organization, fostering transparency and increased engagement in all that we do. We will continue to evaluate our efforts and share our findings internally and externally through papers, presentations, and frequent conversations.

Internalizing the SDGs

We are doing our best to model sustainability in incremental steps in our own backyard (quite

⁵ Affiliate funds are restricted field-of-interest funds designated for specific geographic or interest areas within our region. WCI partners with communities, families, and interest groups to design, develop, and manage these funds.

FIGURE 6 Modeling Sustainability: Green Transportation



To encourage more sustainable commuting for staff, WCI installed two artist-designed bike racks in front of its headquarters, shown here with Director of Transportation Planning Wayne Hurley, and added a new locker room space with a shower.

literally) with native prairie projects on the site surrounding our building. (See Figure 5.) We also are replacing our heating, ventilation, and conditioning system with a geothermal system and have reduced the use of disposable products in our facility. To encourage employees to consider other modes of transportation to work, particularly biking, we installed a new locker room space with a shower and two artist-designed bike racks at the front of our building. (See Figure 6.)

In the wake of COVID-19 and after almost two years of remote work, we are reconsidering how we work, the need for travel, and the potential to reduce our carbon footprint. We have aligned our investment portfolio with our commitment to sustainability, examining the foundation’s investments in 2019 and using the environmental, social, and governance (ESG) model

to ensure positive returns beyond the financial bottom line.

What We’ve Learned

West Central Initiative is two years into the three-year strategic plan. Our stated goal for the region is a vibrant, inclusive, and sustainable world. The SDGs, regional development cornerstones, and our own organizational priorities have been our road map for moving into a more integrated way of operating with equitable, sustainable development as our core driver.

When we adopted the 17 SDGs, we also adopted 169 targets and 232 indicators. This complex web of globally imagined directives for a healthier planet was a reach for our rural place-based organization. For the last two years we have focused on digesting the richness of the SDGs framework, experimenting with ways to integrate the goals into our regional and

For the last two years we have focused on digesting the richness of the SDGs framework, experimenting with ways to integrate the goals into our regional and organizational plans, and testing methods of communicating our still-unfolding approach to sustainable regional development within a global context.

organizational plans, and testing methods of communicating our still-unfolding approach to sustainable regional development within a global context.

While we have much to learn and discern, we offer five lessons regarding the utility of the SDGs for community foundations and RDOs, particularly those serving rural populations.

1. *Identify what's already working.* Work in partnership with local units of government, community groups, and internal leadership bodies to identify SDG “wins” or those efforts already in place. This can be a positive entry point to the goals in the earliest phases of adoption, and also lays the groundwork to bring disparate interests together in affirmation of sustainability as a relevant standard for local units of government. Highlighting the positive norms related to sustainability that already are present in a community can help center community well-being and move constituents into alignment. We expect this approach holds the added benefits of building good will, cultivating community pride, and fostering civic engagement.
2. *Use the SDGs to find common ground.* The SDGs offer a meaningful entry into conversations about sustainability — particularly climate change and equity, which can be difficult territory for a place-rooted foundation, especially in rural America. The SDGs are helping us educate people throughout our region on the fundamentals of healthy communities while illuminating shared values that transcend the deep political divide that characterizes present-day small-town life. The SDGs provide a common language and framework to understand what we need to prioritize, to share what we are doing with others within and beyond our region, and to understand measures of well-being across dimensions of difference. And the SDGs, presented in concert with our regional development cornerstones and organizational priorities, allow us to localize seemingly insurmountable global problems, finding ways to leverage our local and regional strengths in service to the problems that most affect west central Minnesota communities.
3. *Gather and leverage data.* Foundations engaging with the SDGs soon will discover the potential — and the challenge — to get serious about data collection. For us, this has meant investing in data infrastructure by refocusing staff positions, hiring more community planners, working with a consultant to evaluate our efforts, and contracting with outside firms to develop a customized regional dashboard. Growing our capacity to work with regional data is changing who we are as an organization and greatly increasing our potential for impact, partnership, and donor education. Organizations considering integration of the SDGs should plan to invest in customized systems that use existing data and find ways to fill gaps where data is of low-quality or nonexistent.
4. *Link organizational strategy to external frameworks to catalyze growth.* Adopting “someone else’s” framework helped stretch our organization beyond what we thought we could — or should — do. Further, the correlation between our organizational and regional

goals affirms the credibility of the SDGs for our region, as well as the credibility of our organizational and regional priorities for the planet. We suggest foundations embrace existing models and frameworks as they envision new territory and prepare for evolutionary leaps. The directions suggested by a well-vetted framework, such as the SDGs, also will foster growth by linking geographies, leveraging resources, and fostering cross-sector collaboration and partnership.

5. *Consider equity as an SDGs metagoal.*

Organizations and communities aiming to make progress on the SDGs should assess the goals through a DEI lens. More specifically, evaluating progress with an aim of equity⁶ calls upon communities and organizations to engage deeply with data that compare progress across demographic categories and to devise strategies that address the unequal distribution of resources, influence, and outcomes among populations, sub-geographies, and identities. Working to embed reduced inequalities (SDG 10) into the way a foundation understands its impact is vital to devising truly sustainable futures for the global community.

How We've Changed

Since adopting the SDGs as part of our strategic framework, we have undergone significant changes as an organization. We have welcomed a new generation of community planners and philanthropy professionals. We have made sweeping reviews of our budget and related processes. Perhaps most significant, we have weathered the storm of COVID-19, testing the strength of our systems to respond to regional crises and maneuver during times of uncertainty, economic stress, and social isolation. Through all of this, the SDGs have afforded our team a stabilizing central focus, as we were pulled into unfamiliar territory, together. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, we had already begun to expect the unexpected, and had started

Since adopting the SDGs as part of our strategic framework, we have undergone significant changes as an organization.

to rearrange our internal ways of being to support shifting priorities by reconfiguring organizational structure.

- *We are now more strategic and intentional, rethinking how and why we are doing things.* We are engaging with our strategy and philosophy like never before. We have learned to use opportunities as they emerge to rethink and recraft our policies and practices to better align with our commitments to sustainability and equity. For example, when the federal government recapitalized our loan fund last year, it was an opportunity to rewrite our loan guidelines, expanding the prospective pool of loan recipients to businesses that would promote sustainable development. As we prepared to redraft our CEDS, which guides our economic development activities, we revamped our approach to be more inclusive and democratic, drawing a much broader contingent of voices and perspectives to shape the final plan. We also reconsidered what economic development is, raising our own awareness about the lens we had used in the past, and widening that lens to include sustainable and equitable development in our goals for the region.
- *We have a sense of urgency in our work.* Adopting the SDGs has mobilized us as an organization to recognize the historic moment in which we exist. We have a newfound sense of urgency in our work and an awareness that the way in which we operate must change in order to meet the challenges

⁶ The Annie E. Casey Foundation defines equity as “the state, quality or ideal of being just, impartial and fair.” The concept of equity is synonymous with fairness and justice. It is helpful to think of equity as not simply a desired state of affairs for a lofty value. To be achieved and sustained, equity needs to be thought of as a structural and systemic concept” (2021, para. 6).

of this pivotal decade. The SDGs have made our organization more future-focused and future-relevant. We have attracted new staff who are bringing fresh ideas and enthusiasm; we have new partners and collaborators; and we have new funding opportunities. Our community and economic development planning work is evolving toward a more ecological perspective. Our philanthropy work is evolving to be more inclusive and democratic, as we shift grantmaking into the hands of stakeholders through participatory approaches and work in closer partnership with donor advised funds, equipping donors to make better informed grantmaking decisions. Our Era to Act virtual speaker series brings leaders from around the country into conversation with regional influencers. Our staff, donors, board members, and allies are learning and aligning through “glocal” conversations about sustainability and equity.

- *We are leaving behind the notion that rural has been left behind.* With the SDGs, the promise is to “leave no one behind.” We have known for some time that we have many home-comers and newcomers in our region. Ben Winchester (2012), a research fellow with the University of Minnesota Extension Center for Community Vitality, documented a “brain gain” of 30- to 49-year-olds moving or returning to rural areas in Minnesota to work, buy homes, raise children, and participate in the life of small-town communities. We knew that our rural region was making gains as a result of our increasingly digital and global economies, putting small towns across our region on equal footing with other communities around the globe. And yet, despite evidence of a resurgence of rural strength and innovation, the self-image of rural as “behind” persists. We are working to change that through our Live Wide Open campaign, which highlights the stories of newcomers and homecomers in our region and the ways that they contribute mightily to our quality of life. We also are bringing our rural voice into conversations within state, national, and global networks, representing “rural” as innovative, relevant, and future-focused.
- *We found traction in claiming our role as a regional leader.* The SDGs have challenged our “think small” mindset and helped us claim a point of view, stepping into leadership within and beyond the region we serve. We are dislodging old ways of thinking and moving forward with a clear, new voice within a larger global movement. The SDGs not only recognize the importance of what we do within our service area, but they also reflect the importance of our region in a global context. Both inside and outside our region, we have influence and make a positive difference. Our notion of stakeholders has stretched far beyond our geography to include people, partners, and networks around the globe. By linking organizational and regional development goals to the SDGs, we are expressing the reality that sustainable, systemic change only is possible when working both within and beyond our region.
- *We are starting to realize the true power of our “unicorn” organization.* As Markley, Topolsky, Macke, Green, and Feierabend (2016) assert, the integration of “place-rooted” philanthropy with economic development efforts represents a uniquely powerful alignment. For WCI, our economic development or “planning” work helps us analyze community needs as they relate to economic prosperity and community vitality. This knowledge inspires our philanthropic work, helping us to focus our fundraising and grantmaking to best serve our region for maximum impact. As we continue to advance and refine our “nested strategy,” we will be considering ways to engage our donors more effectively in the burgeoning sustainability and resiliency movement. We also will strengthen the connection between the SDGs and our EDD partners (government agencies and elected officials), prioritizing equitable development and working to restore the harmonious interdependence of the land, water, and people of our region.

Conclusion

We have just eight years to achieve the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals — and many

signs point to our collective planetary efforts falling short by the time the U.N.’s “Decade of Action” draws to a close. We will continue to work toward the SDGs, but we also will track development of the next plan, set for unveiling in 2030. Regardless of what lies on the horizon for the United Nations, we expect the cross-cutting goal of partnership (SDG 17) will remain a key strategy. As our “unicorn” organization demonstrates, bringing economic development work into dialogue with community philanthropy helps to strengthen local and regional advocacy, while illuminating an awareness of each community’s interdependence with larger global currents. Our unique composition as both a community foundation and regional planning organization offers a case study in the power of partnership between private and public organizations and, specifically, the potential for community foundations to tap economic development agencies for data and direction.

Further, our work with the SDGs is replicable for foundations of all kinds, as a way to link mission, geography, and donors to a larger global framework for community well-being. Our organization’s experiences with the SDGs over the last two years demonstrate the potential for a

framework of well-crafted global goals to foster shared purpose and accelerate change within an organization. And, perhaps more importantly, we have learned that looking beyond our defined geography has helped affirm and improve our local interventions. Finally, we are beginning to unlock the potential of regional and community foundations, such as ours, to engage with, inform, and support economic development efforts by linking the aspirational power of philanthropy with the planning muscle and resources of economic development districts.

We hope that as organizations large and small, and nation-states and geographies across continents, begin seeing their work through a global lens that our collective consciousness will be raised to understand prosperity as a measure of community and planetary well-being, rather than purely financial growth. Our experiences over the span of just two short years have demonstrated to us — and, we hope, to our allies across the field — that the only development worth our investment is that which advances equity across and within communities and guides us toward a future that is better than our past.

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- Anna Wasescha, Ph.D.**, is president of West Central Initiative.
- Christa Otteson, M.A.**, is owner and principal of Vela Strategy.
- Sarah Casey, B.S.**, is director of strategic communications for West Central Initiative. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Sarah Casey, West Central Initiative, P.O. Box 318, Fergus Falls, MN 56538-0318 (email: sarah@wcif.org).