



A CANADIAN NORTH STAR:

CRAFTING AN ADVANCED ECONOMY APPROACH
TO THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Canada enjoys some of the world’s highest average living standards and Canadians are rightly proud of the society they have built. But Canada, like other countries around in the world, faces profound challenges, most critically the need to advance prosperity that is both socially inclusive and environmentally sustainable. This common challenge unites developed and developing countries alike and led Canada, along with all other 192 U.N. member states, to adopt the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as universal objectives for 2030.

WHY DO THE SDGs MATTER TO CANADA?

Like other advanced economies, Canada is not accustomed to tracking progress against international benchmarks like the SDGs. It already has many expert communities and policymakers working on the economic, social, and environmental problems embedded in the goals. But the SDGs offer something that Canada and other countries urgently need—a multidimensional definition of societal success—one in which the benefits of economic progress are broadly shared and environmental sustainability is safeguarded.

The SDGs offer a tool for putting everyone on the same page, literally and figuratively. This “North Star” function offers a unique opportunity—a common guidepost that everyone can see, regardless of initial vantage point. The 2030 horizon can serve as a guiding light that endures beyond short-term headlines and political cycles. In public debates, this offers a neutral, non-partisan set of outcome metrics against which everyone can assess progress.

The goals also offer a common framework for connecting actions across Canada’s domestic, external, and collective objectives, the latter meaning those where domestic actions contribute directly to global outcomes. Their multidimensional nature helps specialist communities map their priorities, ranging from healthy aging to quality jobs to biodiversity to sustainable infrastructure, as part of an interconnected agenda. In this respect, the goals allow diverse constituencies—from business, civil society, academia, and government—to compare approaches, align efforts, and monitor outcomes. In turn, the SDGs’ increasingly common usage around the world empowers Canadians to compare performance, learn from peers, and hold decisionmakers accountable.

Crucially, the SDGs’ focus on “leave no one behind” speaks to the needs of millions of Canadians struggling with poverty and exclusion. This is particularly salient in light of the challenges faced by many of the country’s approximately 1.7 million indigenous people. The norms and human rights standards embedded in the SDGs alongside the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples provide a basis for moving forward.

Ultimately, Canada’s approach to the SDGs will affect the country’s standing on the world stage. To be credible and have influence, Canada needs to demonstrate progress on its own internal challenges, while carrying an adequate share of the burdens of global problem-solving.

HOW IS CANADA DOING ON THE SDGs AT HOME?

Surprisingly, Canada is not yet wholly on track to achieve any of the SDGs at home.¹ The country has been successful in many areas, ranging from eliminating dollar-a-day-type extreme poverty (SDG target 1.1) to reducing child mortality (SDG 3.2) and premature mortality from cardiovascular disease (SDG 3.4). But more than half of recently assessed SDG indicators—44 of 73—are either moving backward or need a breakthrough. Increasing rates of food insecurity, child

obesity, and substance abuse all represent major challenges, as do gender inequality and environmental concerns. It is not that Canada cannot achieve the goals, but that breakthroughs are needed to meet the needs of people or issues that are systematically getting left behind.

Importantly, Canada's SDG trajectories need to be unpacked—by province, municipality, gender, age, indigenous status, disability status, immigration status, and so forth. On many indicators, some groups in Canada are on track while others are not. For example, women register higher estimated food insecurity than men in almost all regions, and food insecurity is highest in Canada's northern territories, in which the majority of the population is indigenous. Indeed, Canada's indigenous people are most likely to be falling behind across the board.

How then should decisionmakers in Canada focus their efforts? The operative question is not whether any single goal is more important than another. The key question is which issues are already on track for success and which require accelerated trajectories or breakthroughs—to tackle systemic gaps or key populations being left behind. An assessment of domestic SDG trends and inter-connections can help identify where to focus attention and drive action. We suggest six questions to guide this strategic process (see Box 1).

HOW CAN CANADA BEST SUPPORT THE SDGs GLOBALLY?

Countries have a duty to ensure all their own citizens and communities can achieve all the SDGs, but countries need to make strategic choices on external issues. In this regard, Canada needs to consider where global needs are greatest and decide how its resources can best be deployed. We suggest another seven questions to help steer international strategies (see Box 1).

Box 1: Guiding questions to inform domestic and global SDG strategies

Domestically

- Where are breakthroughs needed?
- Where could other countries' experiences inform Canada's breakthroughs?
- Where will near-term decisions drive outsized long-term effects?
- Where are innovations required, because current approaches won't solve the problem?
- What actions could have big multiplier effects across issues, positive or negative?
- Where are current trajectories most at risk of disruption?

Globally

- Where do domestic actions disproportionately affect global outcomes?
- Where are "fair share" commitments most crucial?
- Where do collective outcomes disproportionately affect domestic interests?
- Where do external outcomes disproportionately affect domestic interests?
- Where could national assets make distinctive global contributions?
- What is an objective standard of burden sharing?
- What issues remain unaddressed or loom on the horizon?

This framework can be applied at any scale—by all levels of government and equally across business, civil society, or the scientific community—and equally by actors in all countries.

MOVING TO ACTION

To achieve the breakthroughs and accelerations required for SDG success, Canada will need many actors to adopt new roles, new actors to be brought into problem-solving processes, and new ways of working together to find solutions and accelerate progress. This will hinge on active experimentation and engagement between scientists, companies, indigenous communities, civic leaders, and people from all walks of life. It will require the active engagement of multiple levels of government and indigenous people and communities. In essence, Canada’s “national approach” to the SDGs will need to be a constellation of approaches—a “whole of Canada approach.” The glue can be the SDGs themselves—a common set of outcome measures against which all actors can track progress.

Indigenous people and communities: Front and center. A cornerstone for Canada’s SDG success will be to ensure the engagement and leadership of indigenous people and communities, and for indigenous community outcomes to improve dramatically across a wide range of indicators—from access to clean water, to child health, to productive employment, and more.

Federal government: Leader, convener, and catalyst. The federal government can play a pivotal role as “systems architect” that leads by example and facilitates connectivity and capacities across other actors. The SDGs offer an opportunity for the government to break down silos—across ministries and between domestic and external policies – and task multiple ministers and departments to take responsibility for delivery. Government can also provide a unified national SDG database and spur innovation on grand challenges at home and abroad.

Provincial and territorial governments: Leaders across the full SDG landscape. Many of Canada’s most important SDG decisions will be taken by provincial and territorial policymakers and regulators within their areas of responsibility—such as education, health care, natural resource management, environmental management, and securities regulation. Provinces and territories therefore have a special role to play in addressing the goals, breaking down their own silos, setting targets and reporting within their areas of responsibility.

Cities and communities: Front lines for citizen feedback and solutions. Cities and communities are the front lines for many critical challenges, from sustainable infrastructure to housing, healthy aging and more. They have a direct interface with citizens on the ground and the ability to form purpose-built global alliances, as have taken shape around climate change. Communities need to integrate the SDGs into their own strategic plans and accountability frameworks. To this end, the Federation of Canadian Municipalities could work with its member cities to establish a common suite of SDG-relevant indicators and outcome targets for 2020, 2025, and 2030.

Business: Leading the shift from compliance to performance. Absent the crucial drivers of private sector investment, innovation, and advocacy, SDG efforts will fall short, so market actors need to be part of the SDG solution at every step. National SDG business efforts will require a constellation of actions, including personal leadership from corporate chief executives, strong demand for SDG-consistent performance metrics from major investors, and a clear commitment to industry-smart scorecards from industry regulators.

Universities and colleges: Hubs for intergenerational collaboration. Tertiary institutions are where young people learn about the world’s challenges and researchers create innovative solutions. Scholars across multiple institutions can work together on issues of common

concern, potentially by collaborating through purpose-built research collaborations or new joint ventures sponsored by the research granting councils. Educational institutions could also prioritize global research networks and developing students' global competencies.

Philanthropy and community-level action: Kick-starting collaboration and innovation. Many of the most important innovations for the SDGs will be initiated through direct community-level work, social entrepreneurship in the private sector, or new efforts that provide proof of concept for the public sector to take up at scale. Philanthropy can play a crucial role in all of these processes. The Community Foundations of Canada (CFC) has already taken the SDGs on board as a central pillar of its work. CFC members could partner with local officials, universities, and businesses to generate community-level reporting and problem-solving initiatives across the country.

SDG forums: Convening practitioners and problem solvers. Canada's success in achieving the SDGs will not be via a single national plan but rather through the concerted efforts of diverse actors, problem-solving at all levels—community, national, and international—and new solution-focused partnerships. An annual pan-Canadian SDG forum could provide a much-needed focal point to draw the country's disparate sectors and regions together. Each province and municipality could convene similar forums of its own, perhaps feeding into the national forum. An annual Canadian SDG forum could also expand to include a complementary global SDG practitioner forum, taking advantage of the country's unique convening ability and geographic proximity to U.N. headquarters.

CONCLUSION

The SDGs' foremost offering is a shared sense of direction, a North Star around which disparate constituencies can rally collective efforts. The goals represent the best means the world has yet crafted for defining successful societies in which no person or major issue is left behind. If Canadians embrace them as an outcome framework for measuring success—compared to both local benchmarks and global standards—they can help ensure Canada achieves the social, economic, and environmental breakthroughs that it and other countries need most. Done right, Canada can frame a model approach for the world.

¹ John W McArthur and Krista Rasmussen. 2017. "Who and what gets left behind? Assessing Canada's domestic status on the Sustainable Development Goals." Brookings Global Economy and Development Working Paper 108.

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