

AMERICAN LEADERSHIP  
ON THE **SUSTAINABLE**  
DEVELOPMENT GOALS



# The State of the Sustainable Development Goals in the United States

Tony Pipa, Krista Rasmussen, and Kait Pendrak



**Tony Pipa** is a Senior Fellow in the Center for Sustainable Development at the Global Economy and Development program at the Brookings Institution.

**Krista Rasmussen** is an Officer of Policy and Research in Policy Planning at the UN Foundation.

**Kait Pendrak** is an Associate of U.S. SDGs in Policy Planning at the UN Foundation.

The authors acknowledge the significant role of **Kaysie Brown** who contributed to the writing and research of this publication when she was Vice President of Policy and Strategic Initiatives at the UN Foundation through January 2022.

## Acknowledgements

The authors extend our sincere appreciation to Max Bouchet, Paulina Hruskoci, Oneika Pryce, Sarah Siddiqui, and Zoe Swarzenski for invaluable research assistance and support.

We are grateful for the many colleagues who strengthened this research through their ongoing guidance and careful review and feedback, including Erin Bromaghim, Elizabeth Cousens, George Ingram, Homi Kharas, John McArthur, Sarah Mendelson, Rachel Pittman, and Peter Yeo.

We thank Aissata Camara, Chris Castro, Jeffrey Costantino, Dana Gunders, Chris Herbert, Svetlana Hutfles, Jennifer Rupert, and Sandi Vidal for sharing their insights and expertise throughout the research process. Many thanks to Daniel McCue and the Harvard Joint Center for Housing Studies for tabulations of U.S. Census data on housing burden that are used in the report.

We also thank David Batcheck, Melanie Charlton, Lianna Serko, Zenia Simpson, and Sueann Tannis for their messaging, communications, and outreach support.

The Brookings Institution is a nonprofit organization devoted to independent research and policy solutions. Its mission is to conduct high-quality, independent research and, based on that research, to provide innovative, practical recommendations for policymakers and the public. The conclusions and recommendations of any Brookings publication are solely those of its author(s), and do not reflect the views of the Institution, its management, or its other scholars.

Support for this publication was generously provided by the UN Foundation. Brookings is committed to quality, independence, and impact in all of its work. Activities supported by its donors reflect this commitment.

The United Nations Foundation is an independent charitable organization created to work closely with the United Nations to address humanity's greatest challenges, build initiatives across sectors to solve problems at scale, and drive global progress.

This report is a part of American Leadership on the Sustainable Development Goals, a partnership between the UN Foundation and the Center for Sustainable Development at the Brookings Institution. UN Foundation is grateful to the Verizon Foundation, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation for their generous support of this effort.

# Executive Summary

President Biden entered office in January 2021 with the promise to end the COVID-19 pandemic and facilitate an economic transformation to “build a better America.” But what, exactly, does “better” mean? Answering that question in specific ways means establishing explicit benchmarks for progress, analyzing current trends, and identifying their impact and on whom.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) can help with the answer. **These 17 comprehensive, interconnected goals offer a set of metrics and evidence to better understand where the U.S. is on a set of critical economic, social, and environmental dimensions, and how far it needs to go in its quest to build a better America.**

The U.S. itself played a central role in shaping these benchmarks, which all countries adopted in 2015. Importantly, in a first, the goals recognized that “sustainable development” is a continuum of progress that no country has fully attained, making the goals applicable to all countries, regardless of income level.

Grounded in human rights, fairness, opportunity, and justice, the goals reflect American values and anticipate the governing vision and key priorities articulated by the Biden administration. Measuring its ambitions against the targets and metrics of the SDGs provides an empirical, transparent, and accountable way to define what it means to build a better America and demonstrate progress.

A commitment to the SDGs offers the administration an opportunity to reinforce and accelerate its domestic agenda while reestablishing U.S. global leadership with credibility and confidence, advancing shared global aspirations at home and abroad.

## What the SDGs help reveal within the U.S.

The analysis of 49 SDG targets using 56 indicators based on data through 2019 shows that **even before the pandemic, the U.S. was not on track to fully achieve a single SDG.** For 75 percent of the trajectories analyzed, the U.S. must completely reverse trends that were moving in the wrong direction or greatly alter its approach to cross the relevant threshold by 2030.

**Flashing red warning signs suggest the future status and well-being of America’s youth, women, and minority racial and ethnic groups require urgent attention.** Too often disparities proved stubbornly durable, and gaps persisted on basic measures of human development. For example, 6.6 million people lacked access to safe sanitation—a population roughly equal to the entire state of Indiana.

More positively, **the U.S. made promising gains toward decoupling economic growth from environmental degradation,** offering a strong rationale for pursuing its ambitious new emissions targets with firm resolve.

## Advancing U.S. global leadership through the SDGs

**A public recommitment to the SDGs offers the opportunity to rebuild the credibility of the U.S. within the multilateral system and, as the world’s largest bilateral donor, exercise a collaborative model of leadership** to advance emerging priorities such as global health security (with a top priority to stop COVID-19), climate action, democratic governance, corruption, and localization.

## Summary of U.S. domestic trajectories on 56 SDG-related indicators before COVID-19

	Sustainable Development Goal	Moving Backwards	Breakthrough Needed to Meet Target	Acceleration Needed to Meet Target	On Track to Meet Target
1	Poverty		•		•
2	Hunger & food systems	••	••		
3	Good health & well-being	••••	••••	•	•
4	Quality education	•••	•	•	•
5	Gender equality	•	••••		
6	Clean water & sanitation		••	•	•
7	Affordable & clean energy		••		•
8	Decent work & economic growth		•	••	•
9	Industry, innovation & infrastructure		••	•	
10	Reduced inequalities	•			
11	Sustainable cities & communities	•	•		•
13	Climate action		•		
14	Life below water		•		
15	Life on land		•••		•
16	Peace, justice & strong institutions	••••	•		
	<b>Total</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>8</b>

**Note:** Each dot represents one indicator. Seven targets are assessed using two indicators to capture different dimensions: 2.2, 3.4, 4.5, 4.6, 5.2, 9.5, and 15.1.

**Source:** Authors' calculations based on methodology in McArthur and Rasmussen, 2019.

The SDGs are now firmly established as the lingua franca of the global development community, including the business community and private investors. The U.S. stands out for its notable absence in integrating the SDGs into its international assistance frameworks.

In a study of the 20 principal OECD-DAC donors, the U.S. was the only one that did not incorporate the SDGs into policies guiding their international development investments and strategy.<sup>1</sup> The ability of the U.S. to establish partnerships and catalyze

investments through major initiatives, such as the Build Back Better World partnership, will depend in part on its ability to demonstrate how they make progress on the SDGs.

The global prominence and stature that U.S. subnational domestic leaders have earned through their leadership on the SDGs also provide an opportunity for the federal government to leverage and build on their credibility, partnerships, and alliances.

<sup>1</sup> Ingram and Hlavaty, 2021.

## Embracing a whole-of-society approach to progress

Segments of American society, including cities and states, businesses, philanthropies, universities, and civil society, have embraced the SDGs as a way to advance social, economic, and environmental priorities, creating an environment for cross-sector collaboration.

These bright spots of American leadership showcase the potential of widescale use of the SDGs in the U.S. They highlight the opportunity for the federal government to elevate and engage with these stakeholders and their actions to maximize impact. **The U.S. government has the ability to tap into this momentum, and, by leveraging its bully pulpit, its convening power, and its example, it can broaden the reach and impact of this existing American leadership.**

The Biden administration's governing vision for both its domestic and foreign policy reflects the multi-disciplinary approach and the focus on equity that are fundamental to the SDGs. By situating its objectives within the commonly accepted language and measures of the SDGs, the administration opens up significant opportunities for partnership, investment, and collaboration with a wide range of domestic and international stakeholders.

## Recommendations

Key recommendations to enable the U.S. to embrace the SDGs and support its ambitions, both globally and domestically, include:

### **Project strong political commitment to achieving the SDGs from the highest levels of the U.S. government.**

- **Join all other G7, G20, and OECD countries in conducting and presenting a Voluntary National Review (VNR) at the U.N.** A U.S. VNR would build on existing local efforts in the U.S. to track progress and offer a “unified, measurable vision” of U.S. development priorities, both at home and abroad. This process will reinforce

global momentum for U.S. foreign policy and global development priorities, connect domestic interventions with U.S. global leadership, and provide another entry point for U.S. reengagement in the global multilateral community.

- **Embrace the global *lingua franca* of development to recognize areas of domestic achievement and maximize U.S. influence and leadership at important global moments, which often integrate the SDGs.** By connecting domestic objectives with global ambitions, the SDGs offer the U.S. an affirmative agenda that can bolster the administration's “foreign policy for the middle class.”

### **Design effective and enduring institutional arrangements to accelerate progress on the SDGs.**

- **Establish a cabinet-level SDG Council to strengthen internal coordination between domestic and U.S. foreign policy leadership.** Combining the domestic and international policy prowess of the U.S. will ensure regular assessment of progress, enable identification of medium-term priorities, and concretize the commitment between local progress and global leadership.
- **Create a national roadmap for achieving the SDGs, to help align and integrate existing strategies and efforts, and commit to a regular cadence for reporting SDG progress at both the domestic and global levels.** This can lower the barrier for U.S. communities and organizations to align with national priorities and encourage coordinated efforts outside the federal government to fill gaps and reach key targets. An open data platform would also aid in building accountability and measuring progress.

**Elevate and strengthen partnerships among local and sectoral stakeholders to maximize impact.**

- **Host a U.S. SDG Summit that draws partners from across sectors and reinforces the strong leadership on the SDGs already in action throughout the country.** Hosting a summit in the lead-up to the second head-of-state level SDG Summit planned for 2023 offers a significant opportunity to catalyze partnerships and investments.
- **Use the political recommitment to the SDGs to catalyze innovation on areas where breakthroughs are needed.** This can be accomplished by setting research agendas and working with research partners such as the National Academies of Science.
- Engage civil society to establish a shadow VNR to highlight the needs and priorities of communities that are most impacted by gaps in SDG efforts. Findings from this process can feed into the setting of national priorities and reinforce the reporting advanced by the U.S. government.

**Catalyze innovation throughout the federal government through education and professional development.**

- **Incorporate the SDGs into onboarding and training, as well as make them a standard element in position mandates and performance reviews, to help spur innovation and ensure that U.S. leaders are measuring their success against global standards and ambitions.** Fluency in the SDGs will help government officials and leaders use its common language as the basis for internal and external collaboration and evidence-based policymaking. It will further encourage innovation on unsolved problems and offer the basis for new tools, training, and communications that can inspire efforts resulting in greater return on investment of U.S. financial and political capital.