

# The Sustainable Development Goals and the United States

*Turning U.S. commitments on sustainability and equity from rhetoric to action*



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**I**N September 2015, in stirring remarks at the United Nations (U.N.), Pres. Barack Obama committed the United States to achieve by 2030 the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), an interrelated set of goals that comprise the core of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development agreed to by all 193 U.N. Member States.<sup>1</sup> Granted, much of his speech focused on the importance the United States places on supporting development internationally, emphasizing its commitments to stop the “grinding poverty that so many experience every day around the world.” Yet he also embraced the universality of the SDGs, conceding the implications of growing inequality in the United States and stressing that “all of our nations have work to do.”<sup>2</sup> Even if most of his insights were weighted toward global issues, the message was still clear: the SDGs also apply to us.

However, since the countdown to 2030 started in January 2016, multiple events have complicated and compromised this commitment. The 2016 election of President Donald Trump and his “America First” foreign policy threw multilateral solutions into disfavor. Without disavowing the goals completely, the Administration basically ignored them as having any meaning for the United States, especially in domestic policy. As the Biden Administration seeks to engineer an economic transformation during the recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, it has doubled down on far-reaching federal leadership but has yet to express interest in, or align its objectives to, the SDGs.

The SDGs have a low level of awareness by the general public, and also suffer from a perception in some policy circles that they represent a feel-good global agenda with limited ability to impact U.S. problems and history. At the same time, many U.S. corporate leaders, investors, mayors, university and foundation presidents, and advocates have embraced the SDGs as a blueprint for action on social issues. Yet, at least within the federal government, the SDGs are still receiving limited attention as a policy framework with relevance and value for shaping and driving its response to U.S. domestic challenges.

Adopting the common language of the SDGs, and transparently measuring U.S. progress toward

the Agenda 2030 targets, could provide the basis for mobilizing wide-ranging partnerships and attracting additional policy attention and allies for the Administration’s domestic objectives. It could also help rebuild U.S. credibility on the global stage as the Biden Administration reenters and seeks to reestablish U.S. engagement within key international alliances. This overview explores the stance of the United States regarding the SDGs and its domestic policy priorities, and provides a set of policy recommendations for making the SDGs meaningful for U.S. domestic progress.

## **The United States and the Creation of the SDGs: A Brief History**

It took the United States some time to warm to the idea of the SDGs and especially their universal application, but eventually it actively engaged and sought to be a constructive force in the negotiations. Despite President Obama’s commitment in September 2015, the United States has yet to fully implement this commitment.

The administration of George W. Bush had mostly ignored the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), a set of commitments launched in 2000 that preceded and set the stage for the SDGs. Those goals were directed at poverty and related issues in developing countries, setting benchmarks for reaching a basic level of human and social well-being by 2015.<sup>3</sup> The MDGs were seen by donor and recipient countries alike as a blueprint for foreign aid—how it should be directed and spent, and how its results should be measured—but even so, they still proved too doctrinaire for the Administration. Thus the United States, while not opposing their aspirations, remained mostly on the sidelines through the first eight years of the MDGs’ 15-year tenure.

By the time of Obama’s presidency, however, the characteristics that had come to define U.S. international development assistance aligned quite well with the approach of the MDGs. For example, the President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief and the President’s Malaria Initiative, both signature Bush initiatives, set precise quantitative targets, emphasized rigorous data collection and measurement, and stayed narrowly focused on one particular issue.<sup>4</sup>

1. G.A. Res. 70/1, Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, U.N. Doc. A/RES/70/1 (Oct. 21, 2015), [https://www.un.org/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/70/1&Lang=E](https://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/70/1&Lang=E).
2. Press Release, The White House, Remarks by the President on Sustainable Development Goals (Sept. 27, 2015), <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/09/27/remarks-president-sustainable-development-goals>.

3. G.A. Res. 55/2, United Nations Millennium Declaration, U.N. Doc. A/55/L.2 (Sept. 18, 2000), <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N00/559/51/PDF/N0055951.pdf?OpenElement>.
4. Fact Sheet, The White House, The President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (Jan. 29, 2003), <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2003/01/20030129-1.html>; U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), *U.S. President’s*

The Obama Administration used the same playbook in launching its own major global initiative on food insecurity, Feed the Future.<sup>5</sup> Given that all these U.S. priorities were reflected in the MDGs, and that both the United States and the U.N. emphasized quantitative, time-bound targets, the formal commitment by the Obama Administration in 2009 to have the United States explicitly support the MDGs was natural—and noncontroversial.

While not all the MDGs were achieved by their end date of 2015, the world did indeed meet several ambitious targets—a 50% reduction in extreme poverty among them—and made significant progress on several others. After 2009, the newfound U.S. seriousness about the MDGs served as an accelerator on several targets. For example, once the United States homed in on reducing preventable child mortality as a particular priority, it led a charge to analyze where the global burden was heaviest and organized a call to action coled with India and Ethiopia, in collaboration with the U.N. Children’s Fund (UNICEF).<sup>6</sup> It changed its own strategy, focusing its efforts in 24 priority countries that together accounted for more than 70% of child and maternal deaths.<sup>7</sup> Later estimates would suggest that these efforts resulted in more than 500,000 extra lives being saved over two years.<sup>8</sup>

Amid this backdrop the United States entered into discussions at the U.N. to define the successor set of goals, sensing an opportunity to continue to elevate quantitative targets, regular and transparent measurement of outcomes, and time-bound end dates as powerful tools to mobilize coordinated global action on its own global development priorities.

Preliminary processes at the U.N. added new considerations and requirements that required a shift in the U.S. mindset. In the 1992 U.N. Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro, also known as the Earth Summit, nations had unanimously agreed for the first time to work for and achieve sustainable development, a framework for reconciling economic and social development with environmental protection. Their basic objective was to foster so-

cial well-being for present and future generations in all countries. Many Member States made a push out of the Rio+20 Conference in 2012 to develop goals that more intentionally and robustly integrated issues of environmental sustainability. Thus momentum began to include goals related to issues that were under consideration, such as climate change, biodiversity, oceans, and sustainable production and consumption (and these were ultimately added). The impetus to elevate environmental issues created momentum to add other considerations that were absent from the MDGs, including a stronger focus on economic issues, inequality, peace, and justice.

The United States raised some concerns regarding the impetus to widen the agenda. With the addition of new issues related to sustainability and inequality, the goals overall, and in particular those related to global poverty and other dimensions of basic human development, risked becoming broad and imprecise. From the U.S. perspective, this could dilute their mobilizing capability and overall impact.

The sequence of U.N. processes also created a larger political challenge. With negotiations on the new global development goals set to achieve resolution just months before the much-anticipated Conference of Parties on climate change in Paris in December 2015, the United States was determined that nothing in the SDG process or negotiations would jeopardize its diplomacy and ambitions for Paris, which took precedence for the president and the Administration.

Yet, as the process evolved, it became clear that a consensus was emerging that the new goals should define a broader and more ambitious set of goals that represented a level of well-being to which any society aspires—and that none had fully yet achieved. Thus many Member States began advocating for these to be considered “universal” goals, to be applied and achieved by developed and developing countries alike.

Similar to many other high-income countries, the orientation of the United States during its engagement in these negotiations was decidedly international, led by the State Department in conjunction with the National Security Council (NSC). The bulk of the primary inputs for U.S. positions came from evidence collected by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and other U.S. government global development programs, reflecting lessons and experience from U.S. investments overseas. The primary objective of the United States was to ensure the goals would be useful tools to mobilize collective action on its global development priorities.

Once it became clear that a commitment to universal application had gained momentum among major coalitions within the U.N., the NSC engaged the leadership at the White House Domestic Policy Council

*Malaria Initiative*, <https://www.usaid.gov/global-health/factsheets/malaria-announcement-february-2016> (last updated Feb. 22, 2016).

5. Fact Sheet, The White House, President Obama’s Commitment to Global Development (July 20, 2016), <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2016/07/20/fact-sheet-president-obamas-commitment-global-development>.
6. G.A. Res. 55/2, *supra* note 3.
7. USAID, ACTING ON THE CALL 2016: ENDING PREVENTABLE CHILD AND MATERNAL DEATHS: A FOCUS ON EQUITY (2016), [https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1864/AotCfact-sheet\\_online\\_print.pdf](https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1864/AotCfact-sheet_online_print.pdf).
8. *Ambassador Power: Remarks at Negotiations on the Post-2015 Development Agenda*, U.S. MISSION INT’L ORGS. GENEVA, Aug. 2, 2015, <https://geneva.usmission.gov/2015/08/02/ambassador-power-remarks-at-negotiations-on-the-post-2015-development-agenda/>.

(DPC). The DPC undertook an analysis to ensure that the SDG targets were in line with domestic aspirations and did not represent any reputational risk to the United States, based on current baselines and benchmarks. It also identified signature domestic initiatives that could benefit from additional public attention. The DPC, however, never became a full partner in the interagency process that brought the different parts of the U.S. government to consensus on positions.

After several interagency discussions, key leadership at the White House came around to the idea of universality. It helped that the vehicle for adoption of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs would be a U.N. General Assembly resolution. By definition, such a resolution is a voluntary commitment that “reflects the views of Member States [and] provides policy recommendations,” and does not have the binding force of a treaty.<sup>9</sup>

In addition, making the SDGs universal created a precedent that would enable the climate agreement at Paris to work the same way: that is, structuring the climate agreement so that, for the first time, it would entail commitments from all Parties—including developing countries—to undertake nationally determined contributions. (Previous climate agreements had put binding commitments on developed countries only.)<sup>10</sup> For U.S. policymakers, this was a positive development and a good set up for the U.S. position for Paris. In addition, they questioned the degree to which progress in developed countries would receive much attention during the official follow-up and review processes for the SDGs, anticipating continued focus on developing countries and giving the United States some perceived leeway to keep its primary focus on international investments and global priorities.<sup>11</sup>

Ultimately, however, the idea of breaking down the silos between developed and developing countries, and framing the 2030 Agenda through the lens of sustainable development, a process already underway in every country no matter its level of income and economic power, proved both compelling and reflective of the Obama Administration’s orientation. The General Assembly reached agreement on a resolution laying out the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs in August 2015, and the United States joined the consensus. President Obama’s speech a month later at the U.N. during the initial SDG Summit cemented

that commitment on behalf of the United States.

That consensus consists of 17 goals, 169 targets, and more than 230 indicators to measure progress on social, economic, and environmental benchmarks to be achieved by each country by 2030. The framework thus requires countries to pursue an evidence-based discipline of development that remains sensitive to the links among these interconnected objectives. Importantly, the goals recognize 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.

The consensus also sets out an architecture of follow-up and review to enable learning and accountability. Each year during July, the Economic and Social Council of the U.N. convenes development ministers during the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF), where countries voluntarily report on their progress on the SDGs, submitting a voluntary national review (VNR). Every four years, heads of state will participate in a summit under the auspices of the U.N. General Assembly, and a team of scientists will publish a Global Sustainable Development Report to take the full measure of global progress and mobilize action to address key gaps and opportunities.

As President Obama committed the United States to this consensus, not only did his remarks reinforce the U.S. acceptance of the universality of the SDGs, but the United States ultimately chose to highlight a key domestic policy during the launch celebration. The major side event in which senior U.S. government officials participated showcased a presidential memorandum that zeroed in on access to justice in the United States (a target of Goal 16) and the formal establishment of a Legal Aid Interagency Roundtable as a presidential initiative to expand civil legal assistance for those who could not pay for it. Rather than focus on its international investments, the choice to elevate domestic policy interventions to advance progress on Goal 16 at home demonstrated that the United States saw the SDGs as applying to itself.

## **U.S. Implementation of the SDGs: 2016-2020**

The commitment by President Obama in 2015 remains the high mark of U.S. involvement in the SDGs. Subsequent implementation by the U.S. government was short-lived and spotty at best.

To be fair, the basic internal structures of the U.S. government, which in modern times have not changed dramatically between presidential administrations, do not lend themselves to easy coordination between the national security and foreign policy apparatus and the machinery of domestic and economic policy. There is

9. NICOLE RUDER ET AL., *THE GA HANDBOOK: A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO THE UNITED NATIONS GENERAL ASSEMBLY* (2017), [https://research.un.org/ld.php?content\\_id=36397685](https://research.un.org/ld.php?content_id=36397685).

10. Lindsay Maizland, *Global Climate Agreements: Successes and Failures*, COUNCIL ON FOREIGN RELS., Nov. 17, 2021, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/paris-global-climate-change-agreements>.

11. G.A. Res. 71/313, *Work of the Statistical Commission Pertaining to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, U.N. Doc. A/71/L.75 (July 6, 2017), [https://ggim.un.org/documents/A\\_RES\\_71\\_313.pdf](https://ggim.un.org/documents/A_RES_71_313.pdf).

no real tradition of collaboration or partnership between the NSC and the DPC, for example. With the SDGs perceived internally as primarily a global development framework—the purview of the U.S. government’s foreign policy leadership—the U.S. domestic agencies never fully embraced the SDGs as drivers of policy relevant to their objectives.

Despite the clear commitment to the SDGs and their universality by President Obama, neither during the negotiations nor during his tenure in 2016 did the Administration ever convene Cabinet secretaries or deputies of domestic departments to provide guidance as to their roles and responsibilities for achieving the goals. Thus, even before the 2016 presidential election and subsequent transition to the Trump Administration, the goals never received high-level political attention among the domestic policy leadership despite their many touchpoints across the Administration’s domestic policy priorities and resources.

In 2016, the chief statistician within the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) did become actively involved in the deliberations to define the indicators that measure progress on the SDGs. Through a process guided by the U.N. Statistical Commission, Member States adopted a resolution in July 2017 to ensure countries would be providing measurements that are comparable across countries and can be aggregated to assess progress on the global targets.<sup>12</sup> Once the U.N. set up the official reporting architecture for countries to submit their data, OMB took the step of setting up an online reporting portal for U.S. reporting.<sup>13</sup> However, the data have not been updated regularly since 2016.

Surely this was influenced by the advent of the Trump Administration. Under its “America First” foreign policy, the United States had a strong aversion to agreements taken in multilateral settings. While the Trump Administration did not publicly reject the U.S. commitment to the SDGs or officially “pull out,” it generally ignored them as having any relevance to U.S. domestic or foreign policies. There were several instances in which the goals made brief or submerged appearances on the foreign policy side—when the Administration agreed to benign language in the 2017 G20 communiqué, for example, or initially published a crosswalk between indicators used for USAID’s new Journey to Self-Reliance policy framework and the SDGs in a footnoted appendix.<sup>14</sup>

12. *Id.*

13. U.S. National Statistics for the U.N. Sustainable Development Goals, <https://sdg.data.gov> (last visited June 24, 2022).

14. The initial online publication of the indicators used for USAID’s Journey to Self-Reliance referenced how the U.S. government’s indicators related to relevant SDG indicators. That publication was revised and updated and, when published, removed the mention of the SDG indicators. “Transformation at the U.S. Agency for International Development,” published in 2019 by the Congress-

For the most part, however, the goals were entirely absent from the U.S. government lexicon unless forced to acknowledge them in multilateral resolutions or discussions. By the beginning of 2021 and the end of the Trump Administration, the United States was the only member of the G7, the G20, and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) not to have presented a VNR at the U.N. to report its progress on the SDGs.

The lack of leadership from the U.S. government does not mean American leadership on the SDGs has been absent. Some U.S. cities and states have been at the forefront worldwide of applying the SDGs locally. New York City pioneered the first voluntary local review (VLR), a local adaptation of the VNRs, and has played a key role in expanding this movement globally by signing up other cities through its VLR declaration.<sup>15</sup> Los Angeles and Hawaii were among the first U.S. jurisdictions to launch online dashboards to measure their progress.<sup>16</sup>

American businesses, universities, philanthropies, and nonprofits have also been at the cutting edge. Carnegie Mellon University, for example, published the first ever voluntary university review worldwide.<sup>17</sup> U.S. multinational corporations from Verizon to Walmart to Citibank have put the SDGs at the center of their environmental, social, and governance (ESG) efforts and even their corporate strategies, and private investors such as BlackRock and PIMCO are using them to assess societal impacts of their investments. The SDGs have attracted significant attention as a vetted, applicable framework as the corporate community increasingly sees its role as improving stakeholder—as opposed to shareholder—value. Thus, while the national government has looked the other way, other parts of American society have proclaimed the importance of the goals and have taken action based on their imperatives.

sional Research Service, links the Journey to Self-Reliance to the SDGs ([https://www.everycrsreport.com/files/20190620\\_R45779\\_0db7e190b3f3362d82154fcac3b30741189cc1c7.html](https://www.everycrsreport.com/files/20190620_R45779_0db7e190b3f3362d82154fcac3b30741189cc1c7.html)).

15. NYC Mayor’s Office for International Affairs, *Voluntary Local Review Declaration*, <https://www1.nyc.gov/site/international/programs/voluntary-local-review-declaration.page> (last visited June 24, 2022).

16. State of Hawaii Office of Planning and Sustainable Development, *Sustainable Development Goals*, <https://planning.hawaii.gov/sustainability/sustainable-development-goals/> (last visited June 24, 2022); Los Angeles, *Los Angeles Sustainable Development Goals*, <https://sdg.lamayor.org/> (last visited June 24, 2022).

17. Heidi Opdyke, *CMU Completes Voluntary Review of Sustainable Development Goals*, CARNEGIE MELLON UNIV., Sept. 15, 2020, <https://www.cmu.edu/news/stories/archives/2020/september/sustainable-development-goals-report.html>.

## The United States and the SDGs Post-2021: “Build Back Better”

With the advent of the Biden Administration comes a pledge that the U.S. government will focus on building back better as it recovers from the health, economic, and social impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Indeed, the “Build Back Better” slogan of the Biden-Harris Administration’s policy agenda echoes the very vocabulary that has been used by U.N. Secretary General António Guterres since the beginning of the pandemic—and in which he elevates the SDGs as the policy framework for achieving this.<sup>18</sup>

The Biden-Harris Administration has signaled a willingness to incorporate the SDGs into its international development priorities and strategies. Remarks by Samantha Power, former ambassador to the U.N. and current USAID administrator, at the U.N.’s HLPF in July 2021 positioned the Administration’s agenda within the framework of the SDGs.<sup>19</sup> Yet the Administration has yet to focus on the SDGs as relevant to its domestic agenda. This despite the case that much of the Administration’s approach and framing are a good fit for the framework of the goals, both substantively and rhetorically. The four pillars of the Build Back Better agenda—stopping the COVID-19 pandemic, generating a transformative economic recovery, addressing systemic racism, and taking ambitious action on climate change—are all reflected in SDG targets and metrics.

Take, for example, the president’s Executive Order on tackling the climate crisis at home and abroad.<sup>20</sup> It establishes a high-level, interagency National Climate Task Force chaired by the national climate advisor. Among its tasks, in addition to reducing climate pollution and enabling better resilience to climate change impacts, are to “protect public health; conserve our lands, waters, oceans, and biodiversity; deliver environmental justice; and spur well-paying union jobs and economic growth.”<sup>21</sup> This is a wide-ranging mandate that aligns with the breadth and interdependence of

the 2030 Agenda and would benefit from its integrated framework and discipline of time-bound, quantitative benchmarks.

The disproportionate impacts of COVID-19 and the racial reckoning in the United States provoked by the murder of George Floyd by a police officer galvanized attention on the intertwined legacies of inequality and racism. Addressing these systemic impacts of this racism is another key pillar of the Administration’s domestic policy, highlighted by a stand-alone Executive Order on racial equity (as well as key provisions on climate justice within the climate Executive Order).<sup>22</sup> The key considerations for addressing the root of these challenges—public and equitable access to health security, equitable economic mobility, justice equally applied—are embedded in Goals 3 (Good Health and Well-being), 10 (Reduced Inequalities), and 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions). The SDGs, in other words, provide a starting point for this agenda.

Given the ambitions of its domestic vision in advancing a set of interrelated social, economic, and environmental priorities, the SDGs are both politically interesting and policy relevant for the Administration. But taking advantage will require policy commitments and direction. I recommend a three-point plan below.

### 1. Establish Whole-of-Government Leadership

In the Biden-Harris Administration, the boundaries between the foreign policy interests and domestic agenda of the United States are becoming increasingly interconnected, especially as they relate to transnational issues. Jake Sullivan, the national security advisor under President Biden, has played a central role in encouraging U.S. diplomats and national security strategists to define the success of the country’s foreign policy in terms of its impact on the middle class. The SDGs, which commit the United States to achieving the same objectives in-country that they are promoting and encouraging countries to achieve overseas, offer another entry point for drawing the connection between the domestic and international.

#### *Recommendations include:*

The president should establish a Cabinet-level committee, co-chaired by the national security advisor and the head of the DPC, that brings together U.S. foreign and domestic policy leadership to regularly assess U.S. progress on meeting the SDGs by 2030. This committee should focus high-level attention on U.S. policy interventions and resources to address key gaps and opportunities in achieving the SDGs.

The president should direct the SDG Commit-

18. See Press Release, United Nations, “We Are Only as Strong as the Weakest,” Secretary-General Stresses, at Launch of Economic Report on COVID-19 Pandemic (Mar. 31, 2020), <https://www.un.org/press/en/2020/sgsm20029.doc.htm>; António Guterres, *We Are All in This Together: Human Rights and COVID-19 Response and Recovery*, U.N., Apr. 23, 2020, <https://www.un.org/en/un-coronavirus-communications-team/we-are-all-together-human-rights-and-covid-19-response-and-recovery>.
19. *Remarks by Administrator Samantha Power at the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development*, USAID, July 14, 2021, <https://www.usaid.gov/news-information/speeches/jul-14-2021-administrator-samantha-power-high-level-political-forum-sustainable-development>.
20. Exec. Order No. 14008, 86 Fed. Reg. 7619 (Feb. 1, 2021).
21. *Id.*

22. Exec. Order No. 13985, 86 Fed. Reg. 7009 (Jan. 25, 2021).

tee to submit a U.S. VNR at the U.N. by the soonest possible HLPF.

The SDG Committee should also identify key opportunities for action by federal departments to advance progress on the SDGs. At a minimum, these should include:

Federal agencies should map to SDG targets and metrics the Administration's U.S. domestic climate action plan to achieve a 50% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2030, to position its climate agenda within the framework of the SDGs.

Federal agencies should map to SDG targets and metrics the key components of the American Rescue Plan Act,<sup>23</sup> the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act,<sup>24</sup> and subsequent legislation and executive actions to advance a "Build Back Better" policy agenda, to assess the comprehensive effects of these policies on social, economic, and environmental progress in the United States.

USAID, the Department of State, and other agencies should ensure that global development investments adopt the SDGs as a major policy platform for guiding and measuring the impact of U.S. bilateral and multilateral aid.

USAID, the Department of State, and other agencies should leverage opportunities on the global development calendar to advance U.S. foreign policy interests by elevating U.S. domestic commitments and innovations.

This set of recommendations aims to align and coordinate the leadership of the U.S. government on both the international and domestic aspects of the 2030 Agenda, and to maximize the benefits for U.S. interests at home and abroad. Doing so requires high-level attention and political leadership, the kind that only members of the president's Cabinet can provide. In lieu of a national development strategy, success at home will depend upon departments prioritizing and measuring their performance against relevant targets.

A whole-of-government approach will enable the United States to break down its own internal silos, to the benefit of its larger agenda. For example, the Biden Administration made it a key foreign policy priority to host a Summit of Democracies early in its tenure, to counteract the global rise in authoritarianism and populism and demonstrate how democracies deliver for their citizens. Responsiveness to citizens and democratic governance are core to Goal 16, giving the Unit-

ed States a ready-made platform—given the violence experienced at the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021, and the differing perceptions as it relates to the integrity of the 2020 presidential election—to acknowledge the work needing to be done at home while promoting such an alliance abroad. This is just one case of how the SDGs provide an opportunity for the United States to project global leadership by integrating its domestic commitments, challenges, and innovations into its approach. The United States will find it much easier to reestablish its leadership internationally when it leads by its own example.

## *2. Adopt the Data-Driven Discipline of the SDGs to Transparently Measure Impact of Domestic Policy*

The time-bound benchmarks of the SDGs force policymakers to analyze the extent to which "business as usual" will bring the United States to achieving the SDGs and identify gaps and opportunities that will require more focused action. Specific recommendations are below.

*Recommendation:* The interagency SDG Committee should disaggregate SDG reporting by race and sex for SDG indicators of inequality, economic mobility, justice, education and jobs, and other relevant targets.

By asking policymakers to prioritize and reach the most vulnerable first, the SDGs offer a clarion call to "Leave No One Behind," an agenda that has taken on increased relevance during the COVID-19 pandemic, which exposed fault lines of inequality among different demographic groups. This imperative provides additional political momentum for the U.S. government to redress the impact on communities and groups that have been marginalized, mistreated, and discriminated against based on their color or sex. Viewing and measuring the targets of the SDGs through a racial and gender equity lens, and disaggregating the data by race and sex, can help pinpoint where the history in the United States of systemic marginalization continues to result in inequitable outcomes—and puts it into a larger global context, important both for U.S. and global progress on these issues. Measuring disaggregated progress toward 2030 will offer a clear, evidence-based appraisal of the U.S. government's success in closing these gaps.<sup>25</sup>

23. American Rescue Plan Act of 2021, Pub. L. No. 117-2, H.R. 1319, 117th Cong., <https://www.congress.gov/117/bills/hr1319/BILLS-117hr1319enr.pdf>.

24. Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, Pub. L. No. 117-58, H.R. 3684, 117th Cong. (2021), <https://www.congress.gov/117/bills/hr3684/BILLS-117hr3684enr.pdf>.

25. LARRY MCGILL, CHARLES STEWART MOTT FOUNDATION, HOW THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS CAN HELP COMMUNITY FOUNDATIONS RESPOND TO COVID-19 AND ADVANCE RACIAL EQUITY (2020), <https://www.mott.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/How-SDGs-help-CFs-respond-to-COVID-and-racial-equity-1.pdf>.

*Recommendation:* Congress should introduce legislation to mandate submission of a U.S. VNR every three years.

A first VNR will establish a U.S. baseline and clarify where the greatest opportunities and challenges exist for the United States. Legislation mandating subsequent VNRs will ensure a sustained focus across election cycles and signal the importance of being accountable to the time-bound, evidence-based nature of the targets. Congress should also appropriate funds in the legislation to ensure that the VNR will occur and continue in spite of electoral cycles or budget pressures.

*Recommendation:* The president should direct the executive branch departments and agencies responsible for domestic policy to integrate relevant SDG targets and metrics into the plans required by President Biden's Executive Orders Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government and Tackling the Climate Crisis at Home and Abroad.

These Executive Orders provide the basis for two of the key pillars of the Administration's Build Back Better agenda, and agencies are already following a set of clear instructions to meet their mandate. Putting these in the common language and metrics of the relevant SDGs will make their actions more accessible to a global audience, make it easy to highlight U.S. innovations and policy successes on challenging social issues, and act as an important first step in "building the muscle" for the U.S. government to utilize the accountability and evidence base of the SDGs to assess progress and mobilize additional partnerships and actions.

### *3. Leverage "All-of-Society" Leadership on the SDGs*

While developing a VNR, the SDG Committee should convene a set of regional summits within the United States as part of its recommitment to the SDGs to offer the opportunity for local leaders and multiple sectors to showcase their innovations, best practices, and commitments; offer data and assessments of progress at the local level; identify policy areas and resources where the federal government could help accelerate their progress; and develop new models of collaboration and governance to accelerate progress.

The SDG Committee should also develop a national 2030 platform that brings together state and local governments, corporations, investors, universities, philanthropies, civil society, and citizens to showcase their SDG commitments and actions, share tools and best practices, develop partnerships, and receive support for new ideas. This platform could encourage widespread adoption of innovations that have proven successful at

a small scale. It would also highlight to government officials and the public the degree to which leading private-sector actors have adopted the SDGs, perhaps lending credibility to the metrics.

Based on this encouragement, and policy support and resources from the federal government, governors, state legislators, mayors, and city councils should adopt the metrics and time-bound, outcome-based targets of the SDGs to prioritize their policy objectives, improve transparency, and mobilize partners and stakeholders to contribute to progress. As a first step, local governments should align their strategies to the SDGs and undertake a VLR of progress, using the SDG metrics to set a baseline and assess gaps and opportunities for progress.

Similarly, corporate leaders, businesses, and investors should frame their social and environmental impacts within the framework and metrics of the SDGs, adopting its common language to enable greater comparability and set a standard that can be collectively understood. The business and investor community can use the SDGs to inform the next generation of universal ESG measures and disclosures; these must be rigorous and transparent, and eventually be a part of corporate material reporting.

The leadership that is already being displayed by multiple sectors of U.S. society on the SDGs offers an opportunity to the federal government simultaneously to accelerate progress at home while renewing American global "soft power" through a multistakeholder and networked approach. Rather than remain insular, concerned only about its own policies and resources in relation to the SDGs, the federal government should exercise leadership and act as a conductor to enhance coordination and collaboration among businesses, universities, philanthropies, nonprofits, and the city and state governments that have taken leading actions, by creating a platform for cultivating new partnerships and mutually reinforcing disparate efforts.

## **Conclusion**

The United States may have been slow to warm to the idea of universality and accept the mandate that the SDGs should apply to its own social, economic, and environmental challenges. It has also been slow to make the SDGs meaningful in any real policy sense, having stayed mostly on the sidelines since the SDGs launched in January 2016. Yet the United States still has the chance to become a major force, even consequential, in driving progress both globally and at home in this decade of action. Embracing that the goals have meaning for its domestic agenda, and acting upon it, is a critical first step. **ELI PRESS**