



SDGS IN THE UNITED STATES:

OPPORTUNITIES FOR 2017 AND BEYOND

CONRAD N.



FOUNDATION

MEETING SUMMARY - JANUARY 2017

During a one-day meeting in Los Angeles on January 9, 2017, a group of non-profit and philanthropic organizations convened at the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation to discuss how best to accelerate action on domestic application of the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in the United States. Attendees included representatives of philanthropy, national non-profits, academic institutions, and think tanks, all of whom are already working on domestic implementation of the SDGs within the US.

Throughout the conversation on January 9, a number of key themes emerged as attendees discussed how best to collaborate in order to increase awareness of and engagement around the SDGs by a variety of sectors. This summary highlights key themes discussed by the group, as well as suggested next steps and a list of meeting attendees.

This conversation took place at a very particular moment – following President Trump's election, but shortly before his inauguration. Most organizations at the meeting had worked closely with the Obama administration on the development of the SDGs and had begun plans for implementation. After the election of the new President, these organizations realized the need for a nuanced strategy around continued work on both international and domestic implementation of the global goals, either with the Trump White House or independently of it. Alongside identifying short-term strategies and activities to engage both national and sub-national partners across sectors, participants reflected on the significance of the 15-year agenda created by the SDGs, an agenda that spans presidential administrations. Although the conversation was realistic with a strong sense of urgency, it was not entirely negative, especially given the critical role of civil society, including philanthropy, in leading work around the SDGs in both the short, medium, and long term.

The discussion also highlighted how results of the 2016 presidential election make a strong case for an ambitious framework like the SDGs to bridge divides, address the concerns of groups that feel “unheard” and ignored within growing American inequality, and inspire a collective movement to perhaps “make America great again.” Within the current context of American politics and given current national and local challenges, the SDGs provide a non-partisan framework for moving the country towards ambitious targets that aim to leave no one behind by 2030. A sense of needing to “use this moment” to mobilize different actors, including linking the goals to current momentum around relevant initiatives like Sanctuary Cities, permeated the conversation. There are also key elements of the SDGs that should resonate with Republican-led Washington, including issues like jobs and infrastructure. How can we leverage shared interests to build support of all 17 global goals? Can we frame the SDGs as a lever for social progress, even with conservative leadership?

Alongside a strategy for national implementation, the discussion often returned to the critical role and opportunity for cities and potentially states to lead on the SDGs, especially during the next four years. Overall, it's clear that a strategy is needed to engage at multiple levels and with myriad partners – including cities, states, and when possible, federal agencies and national political leaders.

What follows is a summary of the day's key themes.

KEY THEMES

A. Opportunities for Collaboration by Bridging Silos & Identifying Unlikely Partners

Attendees highlighted a number of potential partners for moving the SDG agenda forward, but flagged the need to 1) strategically choose the best actors worth engaging and 2) develop individualized strategies to engage different audiences. Beyond aiming to engage directly with a Trump White House, “unlikely partners” to consider included:

- Career staff within federal agencies who worked on SDGs under Obama (especially because of list provided by Obama White House of career staff who will remain post transition)
- State-level actors, including governors and state legislatures
- Mayors and Cities
- Faith-based communities
- Media partners who can “tell the story” of SDGs domestically, via news/journalism as well as Hollywood/television
- Diaspora communities
- Private Sector – already leading on utilizing the SDGs, through a variety of networks, looking at both their philanthropy and their core business. Accenture’s report on corporate disruptors, for example, highlights the market returns of leveraging SDGs for companies.

Participants noted that to achieve broad success in a media strategy, work must occur on both sides of the political divide – bridging across liberal Hollywood and right-wing media. As a non-partisan framework without policy solutions, the goals can bridge political and ideological divides if used strategically.

In the first year of the SDGs, several conversations about domestic implementation of the framework have begun, often in sector-specific silos. The group flagged a clear need to bridge silos and develop shared messaging between:

- Philanthropy (domestic conversations led by Council on Foundations with SDG Philanthropy Platform),
- Non-profits (domestic conversations led by Bread for World),
- Think tanks and data partners,
- Business sector (conversations led by Global Compact, Impact2030, Business2030)
- City governments and pilots (led by SDSN, SPI, and de Blasio’s compact of mayors)

One group identified for further leverage is the swath of civil society organizations who worked with the Obama

administration around the SDGs (for both domestic and global implementation) – can this network be maintained (perhaps outside government) during a Trump administration?

Silo-busting also should happen within sectors. With non-profits, for example, certain groups more easily “get” the SDGs (like environmental orgs who know local is global, especially on issues like climate change), but we need to bridge across goals to advance this integrated, holistic agenda and not just work on goals where it’s easier to engage partners.

Throughout the day, participants raised important questions around how new actors can be **incentivized** to use this framework, especially given the wealth of frameworks already utilized. For non-profits, the biggest incentive will be funding, so work to bring philanthropy to table around SDGs must continue. A “coalition of the willing” who require reporting on and proposals around implementing the SDGs may have the largest impact on how non-profits utilize the global goals.

Overall, attendees agreed that there is no one size fits all approach, and different strategies to engage different audiences must be collectively developed. We also must understand what works where – jobs as a key issue might resonate nationally, while climate change might only resonate locally (in certain geographies).

B. Need to Carefully Shape and Frame SDGs Narrative

The US has few, if any, stated social goals to which the country already holds itself accountable, and the SDG’s provide a ready-made framework for us to implement as a country, especially at a moment of political turbulence and growing divide domestically. However, the framing of this set of goals is critical. We do not want the goals to be seen as a framework of “Bicoastal Liberal Snobs” or a top-down directive from the United Nations, especially given anti-UN sentiment from conservative politicians.

It’s not the SDG’s as an abstract framework that are important, but the specific outcomes and targets of the goals which Americans already care about (i.e. the targets around ending extreme poverty and hunger, improving gender equality, reducing inequality, etc.). We must work to ensure these goals resonate with average Americans and key actors like politicians at national, state, and local levels, many who won’t connect with an abstract framework but do care about issues that impact themselves and their communities. There were several recommendations around messaging:

- The goal must be to make the goals **Graspable, Attractive and Feasible**, as an ambitious American framework.
- When presenting the framework, which is non-partisan and does not include policy solutions, it will be important to not just present problems (current levels of hunger, for example), but also present policy solutions so the goals, although ambitious, can feel tangible and achievable. The conversations should start with outcomes and not abstract ideals and ideas.
- As we develop messaging and framing, we cannot be afraid to “simplify” the goals – “End Hunger by 2030” is something almost everyone can get behind (and something we can achieve). For example, the above is a better/ stronger message than “achieve Goal 10 of UN’s SDG global goals framework”.

- We also should identify trusted, non-UN champions of the goals and use them to build awareness and support – including Pope Francis, Bill Gates, Obama (in some cases), business leaders, and celebrities.

C. Importance of Data

Data is a critical component of the SDGs, not least because data around the SDGs is how civil society and American citizens might use the SDGs to **hold our governments accountable** between now and 2030. There is a LOT of data already that relates to the SDGs – so it is not always about collecting new data, but more about how to frame and utilize existing data to shape reporting, decision-making, and engagement around specific goals.

We also know that people consume information in different ways. People use data to confirm and/or support bias, making changing minds a difficult and time-consuming challenge. Today, polling shows that most American’s do not know about the SDGs. Can data help how we redefine that narrative?

Participants discussed several elements of data collection and utilization, including:

- **Nationalizing and Localizing the SDGs** - Not all indicators within the 17 goals are relevant – at a national or a local level. Work is already underway to identify the most relevant indicators for the US nationally, and for American cities. It’s important to use the framework but not be paralyzed by idea that not everything in the framework is relevant in the US.
- **OMB Dashboard** - Before the transition, OMB launched a first-ever national dashboard that documents US progress on the SDGs – www.data.sdgs.gov. The site is still up on the OMB website, but a need exists to take data offline and protect the sources and current findings, especially if this info may be removed during a Trump administration. Would need to decide where that data could live outside of the government.

This national data collection is a great start (and more than most ever expected), plus will be used for national reporting to the UN on progress, but there are clear data gaps at a national level. Therefore, there are opportunities for civil society to help with data collection, both to augment data and perhaps provide a “shadow report” for reporting, if needed.

- **Comparative Indices** – To measure the SDGs, we need tools that compare places within the US and countries around the world on how SDGs are being achieved. Several indices are being developed and will be launched over next few years – how can we reduce duplication, increase collaboration, and have the greatest impact?

Proposed Next Steps

1. Short Term Strategies (thru Trump Administration)

- i. Preserve OMB data outside of the government, especially if may be taken down by Trump administration during next four years.

- ii. Develop shared messaging for Civil Society (across sectors) about importance of SDGs and their value domestically
- iii. Undertake “opposition research” to understand the threats to the SDGs domestically – once have better sense of threats, can develop strategies to protect momentum to date on SDGs and ensure don’t move backwards over next 4 years, as well as possibly moving forward.
- iv. Identify right incentives and messaging to increase interest in and engagement around the goals, for various groups.
- v. Use reporting moments (like high-level political forums) to leverage and create incentives for engagement with civil society and government around domestic application of SDGs. Will US representatives to the UN be “embarrassed” about not moving needle domestically, enough to want to engage civil society?

2. Medium/Long Term Strategies (thru 2030)

- i. Build ways for exchange of lessons learned across geographies** - Mayors and cities may be looking at SDGs locally, but not currently exchanging lessons learned across geographies. Also, need to exchange with other countries as they also work on domestic implementation of the SDGs. Could be great potential for trans-Atlantic network of funders and NGOs working on SDGs, especially in other high-income contexts where MDGs were not implemented and in countries going through similar changes in political nationalism/populism.
- ii. Need for broad education around what the SDGs are** - especially in schools. The goals must be both relevant and “cool”, especially for the next generation.
- iii. Work to increase investment in infrastructure for SDGs in US** - limited interest in domestic application of SDGs. How can Hilton, COF, and others encourage philanthropic and private sector investment in applying the SDGs domestically?

3. Potential Activities to Pilot collaboration with this group

The group agreed that a way forward to utilize this group of organizations would be to design a strategy for a national coalition of partners working to advance SDGs, leveraging ongoing work in different sectors and bridging current silos between philanthropy, non-profits, academics, cities, and data partners all working domestically on the SDGs. This group would provide an infrastructure for engaging around the SDGs domestically, even if individual groups are focusing more on issues within the goals. This would bridge current silos domestically and potentially take on some of the activities listed above.

This group could:

- i. Connect and Exchange** - virtually and in-person - to share lessons learned, collaborate where possible, and leverage resources. Also provide a growing marketplace of partners for collaboration on SDGs within specific geographies and/or issue areas.
- ii. Pilot collaboration** - perhaps starting in a single geographic location like Los Angeles, California (state), or Minneapolis/Minnesota -- bringing together philanthropy, non-profits, city government, academic institutions, and measurement/data partners to track investment into SDGs and outcomes on relevant goals going forward.

iii. iDesign a “seal” for the collaboration to identify collaborators - different organizations and actors, including cities, working domestically on SDGs could identify themselves as part of this broader/larger network, helping market the goals, build momentum, and expand the network.

In order to design this national coalition, attendees agreed to launch a working group. The intention is not to create a new entity but to utilize existing partners and networks working on the goals. Given bandwidth constraints and competing priorities, the group noted that identifying a dedicated staff person to move this work forward (housed within a partner organization) would be critical. The group also suggested exploring funding SDG “fellows” to work in critical network “nodes” working on the SDGs domestically.

The working group/key staff/SDG fellows could then develop a strategy that would include:

- Theory of change, goals and organizing principles
- “Lines of action”, identifying roles and opportunities for a range of partners, including activities around:
 - Messaging/Communications
 - Connecting/Knowledge Exchange
 - Piloting Collaboration
- Resourcing needs and potential funding sources
- Coalition architecture and structure

Meeting Attendees

Allison Holder - Sustainable Development Solutions Network

Asma Lateef - Bread for the World

Bill Pitkin - Conrad N. Hilton Foundation

Brad Smith - Foundation Center

David Beckman - Bread for the World

David Udell - National Center for Access to Justice/
Cardoza Law School

Ed Cain - Conrad N. Hilton Foundation

Elizabeth Cheung - Conrad N. Hilton Foundation

Emily Skehan - Conrad N. Hilton Foundation

Shaheen Kassim-Lakha - Conrad N. Hilton Foundation

Jennifer Gross - Gross Family Foundation / Sustainable Development Solutions Network

Jody Heymann - Fielding School of Public Health at UCLA

Justin Edwards - Social Progress Imperative

Mike Beard - United Nations Foundation

Kristen Lewis - Measure of America

Natalie Ross - Council on Foundations

Nick Perry - Fielding School of Public Health at UCLA

Paula Kravitz - Social Progress Imperative

Sarah Burd-Sharps - Measure of America

Solomon Greene - Urban Institute