

# Stanford SOCIAL INNOVATION<sup>Review</sup>

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*Canada Supplement*  
**Canada and the Sustainable Development Goals**  
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# Canada and the Sustainable Development Goals

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**A**t the turn of the century, world leaders and the international community adopted the UN Millennium Declaration, uniting around a new global partnership to reduce extreme poverty by 2015. Among other actions, the Declaration committed “developing” countries to eight ambitious Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) focused on areas that had what they determined was the greatest potential to make significant progress toward achieving the overarching objective.

The United Nations’ 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which were adopted in 2015 and set goals for 2030, marked another bold leap forward in the fight to address poverty and protect the planet. These goals apply to all countries equally and focus more deeply than the MDGs on the root causes that hinder or prevent sustainable progress. The SDGs are not about halfway measures or Band-Aid solutions, but rather about working directly with the people and communities most affected by global challenges to create social change. We know from past experience that to be most effective, SDG solutions will need to be collaborative, holistic, and contextualized to specific countries, geographies, cultures, and social norms.

As Canada begins to set its own national goals and to contribute more broadly to the global SDGs, the country is at an interesting point in its own development. In the next 20 years, Canada’s demographic makeup will change significantly. By 2036, Statistics Canada, the country’s national statistical agency, forecasts that 30 percent of all residents will have been born outside of the country. Canada’s urban centers will also become larger, younger, and more diverse, with an increasing mix of visible minorities, Indigenous people, and newcomers.

These shifts are not isolated but rather reflective of a more globalized world that is changing at a rapid pace. Forces such as economic inequality, environmental degradation, human migration, and political conflict are no longer an ocean away. We are feeling them closer and closer to

home. And if these trends continue, as they are likely to, it’s safe to assume that the future will be even more complex than it is today, and that any hope of tackling global challenges connected to the SDGs will in turn require more innovative and community-driven solutions at home.

Fortunately, Canada is in a prime position to lead on such an ambitious agenda. With a diverse and educated population, strong social values, and an abundance of resources, the country can take an important leadership and facilitation role in achieving the SDGs. To do so, we must enable an ecosystem that allows for both large-scale and community-based innovation to flourish.

## LARGE-SCALE ACTIVITIES

Within Canada, a number of investments aimed at supporting the SDGs are already under way. Civil society and the federal government are currently working together on the country’s Social Innovation and Social Finance Strategy, with the goal of improving outcomes for vulnerable populations and creating more inclusive and sustainable communities. Community Foundations of Canada (whose CEO coauthored this article), the Canadian Council for International Cooperation, and a dedicated network of partners are leading the creation of an open SDG network to help mobilize public engagement, cross-sector collaboration, knowledge sharing, and institutional action. The Canadian government’s feminist international assistance policy to promote gender equality also will have an impact, through commitments including \$150 million over five years to women’s rights organizations in the Global South—the single largest investment of its kind to date from any country. All of these actions indicate positive signs of early leadership and innovation related to achieving the SDGs by the 2030 goal.

## THE LOCAL SCENE

But we know that these investments are likely to yield positive results only if they are complemented by innovative solutions that are locally led, designed, and implemented. One place where these solutions are being employed is

in Canada’s Arctic region, through the work of Inspire Nunavut, a social enterprise founded by this article’s other coauthor. Inspire Nunavut has been working closely with Inuit people through a social entrepreneurship training and mentoring program that helps young people create new businesses and take other actions to tackle community problems and improve their lives. The organization is purposeful about integrating Inuit culture into its offerings and has developed an infrastructure that fosters collaboration between various business and mental health support organizations in Nunavut, providing the territory’s entrepreneurs with all-encompassing assistance. This framework has been essential to the success seen so far in the first five communities in which it operates.

Community-based innovation is also abundant in Canada’s biosphere reserve regions, which have long been at the forefront of creating sustainable communities. On Vancouver Island, the Clayoquot Biosphere Trust, one of 191 community foundations across Canada, is promoting sustainable development by mapping local data and community knowledge to SDG targets through its annual “Vital Signs” report. In doing so, the Trust is able to benchmark progress against a set of global targets and better understand the community’s contribution to an international agenda.

These kinds of community-based innovations are reflective of a more contextualized approach to sustainability—one in which civil society has an important role to play alongside government and the private sector.

## SUCCESS MAY NOT BE SO FAR AWAY

The stakes for the planet have never been higher, and the SDGs rightly recognize that ending poverty and ensuring global prosperity must go hand in hand with strategies that build sustainable communities. Although global progress so far has been anything but uniform, and far from complete, the advancements that we as an international community have made in less than a generation suggest that achieving the moonshot goals of poverty eradication and global sustainability may not be as far away as they once were.

As we continue to take on global challenges at the local level, Canada has so much to contribute. With the right investments and support to help the engines of social enterprise and social innovation flourish, Canada can continue to demonstrate its leadership on the global stage—creating a fertile environment for change and a future that is better and brighter for all. ❌

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