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Walking the Talk on Sustainable Development Goals: The Case of Community Foundations in Canada

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Introduction

Since the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development entered into effect (U.N., 2015), the promise presented by its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for a more transformative philanthropy has been highlighted. From the side of academia, the capacity to address the roots of the structural problems at the core of the Agenda has been characterized as the cornerstone of radical philanthropy. Radical foundations address poverty or inequality by recognizing the central role of the current economic system in maintaining them and acknowledging their crosscutting dimensions (economic, social — race, gender, and class — and environmental). They aim at “fostering new economic institutions; tackling manifestations of colonialism by supporting local, grassroots initiatives; and combating racist and discriminatory laws, policies, and practices” (Herro & Obeng-Odoom, 2019, p. 884).

From a practical perspective, the SDGs open a window of opportunity for philanthropic actors to play collaboratively in the league of global challenges, regardless of geography, size, mission, and resources. On one hand, SDGs are universal, and “the work of any foundation, so long as it seeks to better humanity, is part of a larger global development effort” (Edwards & Ross, 2016, p. 9). On the other hand, and different from their antecedent Millennium Development Goals, the SDGs “incorporate all dimensions of development — economic, social, and environmental — and are equally applicable

Key Points

- The United Nations 2030 Agenda creates an opportunity for philanthropic foundations to become more collaborative and transformative in their work toward global goals. Thus, since 2016, the extent to which foundations adopt the Sustainable Development Goals framework in their functioning has become a topic of interest. Although survey- and case-based research shows increased rates of self-reported adoption and several tools are available to help foundations to act toward the goals, there is a lack of systematic evidence about the purposes of and processes for adopting the goals among foundations.
- This void is particularly relevant for community foundations, as they have been proposed as natural champions for the 2030 Agenda. This article provides global and national context to the process of adoption of the goals by Canadian community foundations through a multiple case study, tracing it back to its origins and disentangling its antecedents, enablers, and effects during the early implementation phase. Special attention is paid to the roles played by collective action by Community Foundations of Canada, by grassroots actors, and by innovative practices in that process of adoption.

(continued on next page)

for all nations,” both domestically and internationally (Edwards & Ross, 2016, p. 6).

Therefore, the extent to which foundations adopt the SDG framework in their functioning is becoming a growing area of interest for researchers, policymakers, and practitioners. Scant available evidence shows increased rates of self-reported adoption accompanied by variations in the selection of priority SDGs across time and geography of grantees. In a survey of 544 foundations in 10 countries and Hong Kong, 55% indicated that they align their activities with the SDGs. Among the 335 foundations (over 80% located in Latin America) that identified which SDGs they prioritize, the goals of greatest interest were Quality Education (SDG 4, 57%), Good Health and Well-being (SDG 3, 42%), No Poverty (SDG 1, 35%), and Decent Work and Economic Growth (SDG 8, 34%) (Johnson, 2018).

Community foundations have been put forward as uniquely positioned to champion the 2030 Agenda and have starred in many accounts of successful adoption of the SDG framework (Community Foundations of Canada [CFC], 2020; Edwards & Ross, 2016; Ross, 2018; European Community Foundation Initiative [ECFI], 2020). However, the antecedents, enabling conditions, and outputs of SDG adoption are yet to be systematically explored. How does adoption originate in community foundations? How does adoption unfold in practice — what are the enabling factors and main purposes of implementing the framework? How do the first phases of implementation affect the work of the foundation vis-à-vis the community? This research aims at better understanding the antecedents, enablers, and early effects of SDG framework adoption by community foundations.

With that goal in mind, we developed a multiple case study for Canadian community foundations that scopes the national umbrella organization — CFC, with 191 members; and three foundations acknowledged as innovators for the SDGs: the earliest adopter, the Clayoquot Biosphere Trust, which manages the Biosphere Reserve in the Clayoquot Sound region of British Columbia; the London Community Foundation, which works across London and Middlesex County in Ontario; and the regional

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Key Points (continued)

- Conclusions point toward bottom-up social innovation originating in grassroots work that is diffused horizontally by Community Foundations of Canada to its member foundations, as a key antecedent. Enduring collaboration dynamics involving community foundations, prior engagement with data collection and a shared measurement framework, and space for local discussion and adaptation around the framework are identified as key enablers for adoption.
- Finally, early effects of adoption for mapping, reporting, and aligning purposes include reframing current work and promoting new activities and leadership roles, paving the way for new partnerships, and providing a coherent planning framework and strategic focus to grantmaking.

Community Foundation of Northwestern Alberta. Multiple sources of data were combined to strengthen reliability.

Starting in November 2019, we collected information from interviews with practitioners belonging to the three national networks — CFC, Environment Funders Canada, and Philanthropic Foundations Canada — and individual foundations in Canada. To guarantee that the most innovative cases of community foundations' involvement with the SDGs were identified, we used snowball sampling

TABLE 1 Tools/Frameworks to Help Organizations Work Toward SDGs

	Purpose	Content	Context	Example
Mapping	Help organizations match their current programs, activities, or value chains against SDGs to identify how they are dealing with the goals.	Matching current activities against SDGs	“Business as usual”	<i>SDG Indicator Wizard</i> (SDG Philanthropy Platform, n.d., https://www.sdgphilanthropy.org/SDG-Indicator-Wizard)
Reporting	Help organizations with performance benchmarking and reporting against SDGs.	Measuring and reporting end-state performance against the SDGs	Sustainability reporting	<i>GRI standards</i> . (Global Reporting Initiative (2022), https://www.globalreporting.org)
Aligning	Help organizations to use SDGs as strategic opportunities for enhanced social and environmental performance.	Redefining the organization to achieve the SDGs	Strategic management process (ideation, development, implementation)	None found

Source: Grainger-Brown & Malekpour, 2019

with members of the Canadian Philanthropy Partnership Research Network (PhiLab), gathering a mix of academics and practitioners nationwide. Additionally, we systematically reviewed academic literature on the Canadian foundation sector and community foundations, grey literature on philanthropic involvement with the SDGs, online databases, internal documents, and websites.

The SDG Framework as a Strategic Opportunity

Numerous advantages to integrating the SDGs in philanthropic activities have been argued, supported by limited evidence from success stories published by funder networks (CFC, 2020; Edwards & Ross, 2016; ECFI, 2020; Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors, 2019). However, integrating the 2030 Agenda into foundations’ strategy is not an easy task. The SDG framework adds a layer of intimidating complexity to the inherent intricacy of strategic foundation management. This complexity transcends organizational boundaries and is compounded by interactions among the 17 goals, their global scope, and a massive repertoire of 169 targets, each measured by specific indicators (a total of 231) that are often measured at a country level (U.N., 2021).

Research has identified three types of tools/frameworks to help organizations — mostly businesses — to work toward SDGs, according to their purpose: mapping, reporting, and aligning tools. (See Table 1.) Most of the tools that are currently available are of the mapping and reporting types, which means SDG adoption occurs after organizational strategies have been developed and even implemented. A small number of tools refer to “problem definition” and “goal setting,” the early stages of strategic management. However, no tools or frameworks engaging with actual strategy development, the stage that can shape transformative change, were found (Grainger-Brown & Malekpour, 2019).

With this landscape of SDG adoption just emerging in the background, the unique positioning of community foundations to champion the 2030 Agenda has been argued on similar grounds in both sides of the Atlantic. In Europe, the EFCI (2020) states:

Being concerned with defined geographical areas, and having long-term institutional presence, [they] are well placed to understand and address a complex array of interdependent issues at local level. ... They therefore provide an important connection between local actions and global aspirations. (p. 10)

In Canada, CFC (2020) argues, “community foundations are a good fit as SDG champions and implementers because [they] are holders of community knowledge ..., well connected to diverse stakeholders and partners, ... community leaders, and conveners” (p. 19).

Although the idea that community foundations are natural champions of SDG alignment is yet to be systematically demonstrated, evidence shows they already are among the early adopters of the 2030 Agenda in the philanthropic sector. In Europe, almost 60% of community foundations recognize a connection between their work and the SDGs (ECFI, 2020). In North America, collective action led by CFC has turned Canadian community foundations into champions of SDG adoption; it has engaged with the federal government for the development of its own Agenda implementation strategy and 34% of CFC members are already tracking their contribution to community well-being in connection with the SDGs (CFC, 2020).

Community Foundations in Canada as a Case Study of SDG Adoption

Collective action by community foundations around the SDGs seems a rare dynamic in the broader context of Canadian foundations, where collaboration — though increasing in recent years — remains an exception to the rule. On the positive side, 14 philanthropic affinity groups were created between 2008 and 2016, made up of funders focused on a specific issue (Glass & Pole, 2017). A handful of foundations “are fostering innovation, social and policy change, and are embarking on meaningful partnerships and acts of reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples in Canada” (Elson et al., 2018, p. 1777). Nonetheless, those more prone to collaborating (i.e., staffed foundations that may have a strategy or set of goals) are very few (Glass & Pole, 2017). The COVID-19 pandemic had ambiguous effects: While cross-sector collaborations changed very little, foundations reported increased intrasector partnerships for purposes of information and knowledge sharing, aligning

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or pooling grants and thought leadership provision for recovery (Phillips et al., 2020).¹

Not surprisingly, the size of the three national networks is small relative to the overall size of the sector, composed of around 10,000 foundations. Environment Funders Canada, created in 2001, gathers 64 funders, mostly foundations, that focus on environmental issues. Philanthropic Foundations Canada, created in 1999, has 143 members, mainly family and corporate grantmaking foundations. These two networks overlap to some extent.

By contrast, community foundations pioneered formalization of intrasector collective action in the country (CFC was founded in 1992). Their association is not only the largest network, but also the most comprehensive, including virtually all 191 community foundations in Canada, and cohesive (i.e., community-only). Members of CFC hold combined assets of over CD \$6.2 billion, and include some of the oldest (the Winnipeg Foundation, started in 1921) and one of the largest (the Vancouver Foundation) in the country (Phillips et al., 2016).

Leading Intrasector and Cross-Sector Partnering

Thus, the distinct trait of community foundations’ background against the 2030 Agenda is a

¹ Throughout this article, “intrasector” will be used to refer to collaboration within the foundation sector, while “cross-sector” will refer to collaboration between foundations and other actors (e.g., nonprofit, public, business).

A second idiosyncratic feature of community foundations relative to other types of foundations in Canada originates from participation in the most extensive community-driven data program in Canada, called Vital Signs.

long experience of collaboration, illustrated by their self-denomination as a “movement” (CFC, 2020). Community Foundations of Canada has deployed its strategy through a proactive search for partnerships — both intrasector, with an emphasis on larger-scale mobilizations of place-based philanthropy; and cross-sector, engaging public-sector agencies, other foundations, corporations, and nonprofits around a shared vision or outcome for complex national efforts. The settlement of refugees and the support for community-led initiatives connected to inclusion, belonging, and reconciliation with Indigenous peoples are recent examples. This strategy is cross-site: the “CFC played a central role by promoting a shared vision, managing relationships with partners, designing the initiatives, and coordinating implementation at the national level, while the community foundations themselves led and coordinated these efforts at the community level” (Carlton & Lyons, 2020, p. 5).

Not only have community foundations participated in place-based partnerships at a local or regional level, but also have frequently adopted a leading role. On one hand, their funding structure compels them to collaborate, as they must secure and piece together multiple sources of income, sometimes disjointed, to fulfill their mission; on the other hand, they need to educate funders on how to partner, and to jointly manage the risks of local resistance to and disruption of relationships provoked by top-down

initiatives, driven by powerful funders, that may be disconnected from community priorities (Glass & Pole, 2017; Kubisch et al., 2011).

Using Data to Lead Community Change

A second idiosyncratic feature of community foundations relative to other types of foundations in Canada originates from participation in the most extensive community-driven data program in Canada, called Vital Signs. A shared framework promoted by CFC to report on community well-being, Vital Signs covers over 70 indicators on housing, transit, environment, safety, arts and culture, gender equality, education, health and wellness, belonging, and leadership. However, its approach differs from other effective efforts by foundations to use data to feed collaborative change (CFC, 2018).

Vital Signs is more a knowledge-based leadership style than a reporting initiative, its learning is cross-site as it links the local and national levels, and it goes beyond data gathering to start what it calls Vital Conversations that may shape change in communities. This creative process of engagement, and the reciprocity it generates, are captured by the idea of a sense of belonging. The goal is ultimately to mobilize community knowledge to understand the factors that promote belonging, and then use that knowledge to work toward more inclusive and engaged models of community in co-creation among diverse stakeholders. Although place still matters, the definition of community is now shaped by shared and fragmented interests, values, and social identities (Phillips et al., 2016).

Vital Signs emerged in the mid-1990s, from the initiative of a group of Toronto community leaders, as a tool to measure how the expanded city was doing in terms of quality of life. In 2001 the Toronto Community Foundation adopted this approach, which was relatively new for Canada’s community foundations. In 2006, CFC took over the program at a national level and participation of members grew steadily. The 2006 pilot gathered six community foundations (of 155 members at the time). Then the program jumped to 18 foundations in 2009, and finally stabilized at 65 foundations (of 191 members)

from 2015 onwards. After 15 years, the program has an established legacy; people know and recognize the community foundation work through Vital Signs, which has been exported to 41 community foundations abroad (CFC, 2021a; Patten & Lyons, 2009).

The Clayoquot Biosphere Trust: A Pioneer of SDG Adoption

The first adopter of the SDGs among Canadian community foundations was the Clayoquot Biosphere Trust (CBT). It was created in 2000 in Clayoquot Sound, Vancouver Island, British Columbia, to manage a CD \$12 million endowment allocated by the Canadian government for the region right after its designation as a UNESCO biosphere reserve. Its mission is to assist conservation and sustainable development in the region by providing funding and logistical support (Fifield, 2017).

The CBT is the only community foundation created to manage one of the 18 UNESCO biosphere reserves in Canada (worldwide, there is a network of 699 sites in 120 countries). After decades of conflict over natural resources and aboriginal rights, in the 1990s a group of community leaders discovered the UNESCO biosphere reserve program and started a discussion with local people, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, toward using this model to settle the dispute, achieve sustainable development based on values long endorsed by First Nations in the area, and honor the ecological, cultural, and spiritual importance of the region (Fifield, 2017).

The CBT was the first community foundation to include the SDGs in its Vital Signs report. Its pre-SDGs reporting was anchored mostly on 10 Vital Signs indicators: belonging and leadership; health and wellness; food security; economy; safety; housing; environment; youth; learning; and arts, culture, and recreation (CBT, 2017). In 2016, the Vital Signs report included a page matching CBT initiatives with eight SDGs. In the latest report, referring to 2018, almost every page is related to SDG alignment according to CFC recommendations. Each Vital Signs indicator is matched not only with the relevant SDG,

The first adopter of the SDGs among Canadian community foundations was the Clayoquot Biosphere Trust. ... At this point, the trust is not only using the U.N. framework for mapping and reporting, but also for aligning as it strives to achieve the SDGs through its activities and programs at a grassroots level. ... [T]he London Community Foundation and the Community Foundation of Northwestern Alberta were also identified as innovative adopters of SDGs and, despite their many differences, show substantial similarities from a 2030 Agenda adoption perspective.

but also with a selection of Agenda 2030 targets. (See Table 2.) According to Rebecca Hurwitz, the CBT's executive director, "this report is one way that we can track progress on the global goals by bringing together research and community action to share a snapshot of our region" (CBT, 2019, p. 1).

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TABLE 2 Matching Vital Signs Indicators and Targets With 2030 Agenda SDGs and Targets

Clayoquot Biosphere Trust*			London Community Foundation			Community Foundation of Northwestern Alberta		
Vital Signs Indicators	SDG	2030 Agenda Targets	Vital Signs Indicators	Vital Signs Targets	SDG	Vital Signs Indicators	Vital Signs Targets	SDG
Health and Wellness	3	3.5	Be Healthy	Obesity rate, children's mental health support, alcohol consumption	3	Health and Wellness	Birth rate, medical doctor access, sexually transmitted infections, home care services, suicides' evolution, accidental fentanyl poisoning deaths	1 3 5 10 11
Housing	11	11.1	Be Sheltered	Rental vacancy, % Indigenous households, % income allocated to housing	11	Housing	Household types, household sales, hotel occupancy rates, shelter demand, senior families house debt, rural homeless	1 3 4 10 11
Income Inequality	1 2 10	1.2 2.1 10.2	Be Equal	Londoners living in poverty, % children and Indigenous in poverty	1 2 5 10	Standard of Living	Food security in Alberta, low-income population evolution	1 2 3 4 5 8 10 11 16
People and Work	8	8.9	Be Employed	Gender income gap, London labor market, growing employment sectors	8	Work and Economy	Food sector in Alberta, charitable sector economic impact, unemployment rate, % Indigenous business	1 3 4 5 8
Climate Change Impacts	13 14	13.1 14.2	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Environment	6 14 15	6.3 14.2 15.1	Be Green	Voluntary composting, London's forests, quality of water	6 7 12 13 14 15	Environment	Emission reduction, energy efficiency, litter disposed in parks	3 9 12 13 15
Learning	4	4.1 4.2 4.7	Be Educated	Gender gap, % students Indigenous, % students studying trades	4	Learning	Enrollment art gallery learning programs, school mental health support, library visits	1 3 5 8
Belonging and Leadership	5	5.5	Belonging	Key concepts on belonging	16 + all cited goals	Belonging and Leadership	Voters last elections, % volunteers, giving evolution, % people community belonging	1 3 8 10 11 16

TABLE 2 Matching Vital Signs Indicators and Targets With 2030 Agenda SDGs and Targets (continued)

Clayoquot Biosphere Trust*			London Community Foundation			Community Foundation of Northwestern Alberta		
Vital Signs Indicators	SDG	2030 Agenda Targets	Vital Signs Indicators	Vital Signs Targets	SDG	Vital Signs Indicators	Vital Signs Targets	SDG
Transportation and Safety	11 16	11.2 16.1	NA	NA	NA	Getting Around	Access to transportation, regional tourism	1
								3
								5
								8
								12
13								
Safety	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	Safety	Emergency wildfire support, fireworks going green, domestic violence, crime rates, cannabis use	1
								3
								5
								10
								11
								15
16								
Arts & Culture	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	Arts, Culture, and Recreation	Exhibition's attendance, childhood sports practice, developmental disability people sports practice	3
								5
								10
								11

*The CBT has a Youth Vital Signs specific to residents age 13–18 that is not linked to the SDGs across the following Vital Signs indicators: Arts, Culture, and Recreation; Environment; Health; Access and Transportation; Belonging and Leadership.

Sources: CBT (2019); LCF (2019); CFNA (2020)

used in combination with other frameworks endorsed by the networks the CBT belongs to, such as Vital Signs.

Whereas the SDGs provide “a coherent planning framework for organizations and local governments throughout the region ..., publication of Vital Signs every two years provides a regular means of tracking a variety of metrics related to development within the biosphere region” (CBT, 2021, p. 126). Furthermore, the trust has adopted an SDG lens for prioritizing project funding, particularly the ones associated with biophysical attributes of ecosystem health: SDGs 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation), 13 (Climate Action), 14 (Life Below Water), and 15 (Life on Land). The CBT is asking local research organizations to address the changes they have observed on their measures for SDGs indicators in the biosphere zonation they focus on: “Looking at

sustainability issues through the lens of local researchers allows us to focus more closely on local sustainability priorities” (CBT, 2021, p. 86).

CFC’s Approach to Diffusing SDG Adoption

In 2016, CFC knew about the trust’s report. According to one interviewee, “[it was,] I think, the first time CFC kind of heard of it, and then we saw it show up in Vital Signs in 2016 from a member without any prompting from us; we were really surprised.” Shortly after, CFC started promoting adoption of the 2030 Agenda among its members through the same dialogic approach it took for itself. According to another respondent,

When we first heard about the SDGs, we thought, “OK, so fancy U.N. global agenda — how is it relevant to us? And is it relevant to us?” ... We found

CFC encouraged its members to question the relevance of using the SDGs and customize the framework to make it more relevant for each community.

that the SDGs are a valuable tool for us because they help primarily to break down silos. And what that means is they present an opportunity for a shared common framework or a shared language around similar goals.

Instead of adopting available SDG-specific tools or developing a new one, CFC encouraged its members to align their Vital Signs with Agenda 2030 goals and targets through a four-step process:

1. accessing, getting to know the SDGs;
2. questioning the relevance of using the SDGs, both internally and externally;
3. understanding the sources to have a good data collection considering the SDG framework; and
4. promoting public education on SDGs (CFC, 2021b).

In parallel, CFC started advocating for the reduced costs and potential benefits of this soft adoption strategy. As described by a network representative,

What we realized is that the goals outlined by the Agenda are goals that community foundations are already working on. So, through their Vital Signs, through their granting, through their partnerships, these are all priorities that community foundations already have in place It was really just reframing the work that they're already doing. And in doing so, community foundations then have the opportunity to communicate their work in a way that makes sense to other people who might not be as engaged [with] the community foundation kind of world. And so, it's a helpful

tool for community foundations to develop partnerships ... [with] others who are also already thinking about the SDG agenda — corporate partners, for example; donors.

During the following years, CFC shared stories and launched SDG-specific collaborations and learning opportunities to engage membership around understanding the importance of connecting their Vital Signs with the SDGs and demonstrating it to bring awareness and inspiration to their communities. These included the SDG Learning Community, a six-part webinar series in 2017–2018 (CFC, 2021b); release of its guidebook and tool kit (CFC, 2020); and opening of an SDG hub in Ottawa, Ontario, a new center to promote the goals in Canada.

The CFC approach advocated for the importance of customizing the SDG framework to make it more relevant for each community. Its latest 2021 training, for example, begins with a demonstration of how to create themes for a site and how to use the SDGs as a thematic option. Users will then learn how to edit the indicators provided through Vital Signs, including choosing unique visualizations and styles, and developing a descriptions tab that will allow them to place the data in the context of their community ..., [and] how to create new indicators and how to update existing indicators for future work. (CFC, 2021b, para. 3)

With this flexible approach, SDG adoption may start from almost any of the many facets of the work of community foundations: from communications to granting; from investing to convening.

Furthermore, the effort to integrate Vital Signs with the SDGs opened a window of opportunity for new partnerships between CFC and the federal government. Together with the Institute for Sustainable Community Development, they collaborated to disaggregate national data from the 2016 Census and other federal surveys into community level and feed back local data on the SDGs. According to CFC, in 2018, many indicators were directly matched with SDGs, with foundations frequently administering their own

public opinion surveys locally to supplement national data (CFC, 2018).

London Community Foundation and Community Foundation of Northwestern Alberta

Through snowball sampling, the London Community Foundation (LCF) and the Community Foundation of Northwestern Alberta (CFNA) were also identified as innovative adopters of SDGs and, despite their many differences, show substantial similarities from a 2030 Agenda adoption perspective. Both foundations belong to diverse communities with a traditional Indigenous imprint. The LCF, registered in 1979, works in the Southwest of Ontario, originally a First Nations territory (CFC, 2020). The CFNA, registered in 1996, works in the county of Grande Prairie and the municipal district of Greenview, the homeland of various First Nations and Métis peoples (CFNA, 2020).

Both perceive their role as a balance of grantmaker and convener. Their work is grounded in strong partnerships that start with grantees — which are the first to signal the sustainability problems to be tackled. According to a representative of the LCF, “our [grantee] organizations on the ground have recognized, they have been reactive, and they’re looking for long term solutions.” In the words of a representative of the CFNA, grantees “have identified that the demands for hot meals, our community kitchens, our food banks, have increased. ... So, recognizing all of the areas in the community that food security is becoming a presence and a topic and a priority.”

Another pertinent commonality lies in their engagement with measurement through Vital Signs: the LCF started in 2008; the CFNA, in 2011. They have used Vital Signs not only for reporting purposes, but also as a tool to identify and frame the most relevant problems in the community, explain them to stakeholders, and raise their profile for “changing the mindset in the community of what to donate and how to

donate.” One foundation sees its main expected contribution as a combination of “leadership, convening, and the data measuring through the Vital Signs,” and perceives data collection as a shared responsibility: “It would be our staff ... [and] the organizations on the ground, the grassroots organizations. Dual line of data collection. And also national data, because we work close to CFC.” The other highlights that, although the grantee initially committed to measure outputs, “we will be asking for outcomes, because that is the end of our funding ... in alignment with [the] Vital Signs approach that tries to measure outcomes rather than outputs, and community impacts: social, environmental, economic, and governance.”

Both foundations engaged with the SDGs after acknowledging that the global roots and impacts of local problems are forcing them to redefine the boundaries of their respective communities. “We’re really part of the global community,” observes LCF CEO Martha Powell (CFC, 2020, p. 39). According to the CFNA’s 2019 Vital Signs report, the alignment of Vital Signs with the SDGs “can be a tool for making the link between the local and the global. While the SDGs are ambitious goals, it is when we work together — one step at a time — with those beyond our local borders that we can create a sustainable future that includes us all” (CFNA, 2020, p. 2).

For the purposes of SDG adoption, both foundations use the framework for mapping and reporting. In their latest Vital Signs reports, the LCF and CFNA map their Vital Signs indicators and targets against the SDGs but, unlike the CBT, do so without using 2030 Agenda targets to track progress toward the goals (LCF, 2019, 2021; CFNA, 2020).² (See Table 2.)

However, some changes in the work of both foundations are already worthy of note, suggesting incipient use of the SDGs for alignment purposes. In 2018, the LCF used the SDGs to map London’s priority areas in its Vital Signs report, releasing it just before the municipal

² Vital Signs reporting is done biannually. The LCF reported data for 2008, 2010, 2012, 2014, 2016, 2018, and 2020; the CFNA’s data was for 2011, 2013, 2015, 2017, and 2019.

TABLE 3
Antecedents, Enablers, and Early Effects of SDG Framework Adoption by Canada's Community Foundations

Antecedents	Enablers	Effects
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bottom-up social innovation originating in grassroots: community leaders promoting the creation of UNESCO biosphere reserve in Clayoquot Sound (CBT as the earliest SDG adopter) or measuring quality of life in Toronto in the 1990s (later to become Vital Signs) • Horizontal diffusion: social innovation adopted and diffused to and among members by the effective collective action of the umbrella organization (CFC) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enduring collaboration dynamics between community foundations (intrasector) and with other actors, particularly grassroots partners and grantees (cross-sector) • Prior engagement with data collection and a shared measurement framework (Vital Signs) • Space for local debate and local adaptation around the SDG framework 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mapping: Identifying connections between local activities and long-range, global sustainability challenges through a shared language helps reframe the work community foundations are already doing (e.g., LCF rebranding the Social Impact Fund), and opens the opportunity for new activities and leadership roles (e.g., CFNA and food security). • Reporting: Measuring and communicating the (intended) contribution to SDGs paves the way for new partnerships (e.g., CFC and the government on data collection; LCF and higher education institutions around social impact investing). • Aligning: SDGs provide a coherent planning framework at a community level and a strategic focus to project funding (e.g., CBT integrating 2030 Agenda goals and targets in its governance and strategic business plan).

election for the sake of advocacy and civic engagement. According to Vanessa Dolishny, LCF’s communications manager, this mapping not only provides “leadership to people in our community and allows citizens to use it as a tool for debate,” but also inspired more SDG framework adoption initiatives in the city: “We had people calling us after we released Vital Signs, from Western University to small community churches, saying, ‘how can we get on board with this?’” (CFC, 2019, paras. 6–7).

In 2019, after engaging in discussion with local stakeholders on key Vital Signs issues through the lens of the SDGs, the LCF identified impact investing as an innovative way of applying the SDG framework. Its existing Social Loan Fund, which combined financial and social returns, was transformed into a more comprehensive Social Impact Fund that provides social purpose organizations a wide range of financial instruments (e.g., lines of credit, letters of guarantee, mortgages, loans). Furthermore, the LCF partnered with the Ivey Business School at Western University to develop an SDG-based framework to measure the impact of such responsible investment strategies (CFC, 2020).

The CFNA, meanwhile, has refocused its priorities based on community response around Vital Signs–SDG data and taken a leadership role to fight food insecurity (related to SDGs 1, No Poverty; 2, Zero Hunger; 3, Good Health and Well-Being; and 4, Quality Education). This new role suggests a capacity to shape transformative change that strongly echoes SDG 17, Partnerships for the Goals. The interviewee from CFNA said:

We have for over a year been chairing the leading Food Security Committee for our local municipality, where we’ve brought all the stakeholders to the table. And all the stakeholders come to the table with their knowledge, their expertise, from the health authority to the school divisions, the social networks of our organizations that are operating community kitchens.

Discussion and Conclusions

The SDG adoption processes of the CFC, Clayoquot Biosphere Trust, London Community Foundation, and Community Foundation of Northwestern Alberta reveal common patterns that shed light on the factors that prompt and enable implementation of the 2030 Agenda at the

community level, and on the first effects of this implementation. (See Table 3.)

First, SDG adoption does not happen in a vacuum; rather, it needs fertile ground to take root and emerge and time to evolve. The 2030 Agenda puts both measurement and collaboration involving all types of societal actors in a central position. When the Agenda was passed, community foundations were better positioned to adopt the SDGs than other types of Canadian philanthropic actors due to their dual track record of engagement with data collection, measurement, and reporting to feed community transformation; and involvement in intra- and cross-sector partnerships at a local, provincial, and national level.

We argue that it is not just their condition as community foundations per se, but rather this trajectory of engagement with partnering and meaningful measurement that turns then into natural of SDG adoption. In particular, the case of CBT is evidence that SDG adoption entails a feasible, incremental innovation for community foundations that are already engaged with sustainable development at a local level. Being a biosphere reserve and a community foundation seems the perfect fit for strategic alignment with SDGs. Once the relationships among the social, economic, and ecological systems are understood, the interconnectedness between the local, national, and global levels becomes apparent and strategic alignment of SDGs with the foundation's Vital Signs flows naturally. Therefore, a track record of collaborative and data-driven community work on local sustainability issues (implicit or explicit) emerges as a key enabler of alignment with the SDG framework.

Secondly, all social innovations analyzed in this research (Vital Signs, SDG adoption) share another path-dependency: They originate from continued discussions among local community leaders that are then institutionalized by individual foundations in their proximity. Next, the role of the collective action network consists of listening to that grassroots leadership and scaling the innovation from the local community or the single foundation to the sectoral or national level

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across two vectors: one horizontal, as its members assess and engage with the innovation; and another vertical, as network interests in SDGs are contrasted and tuned in with those of governments. Thus, SDG adoption is ingrained in a bottom-up, long-term process of diffusion and scaling of grassroots, cumulative innovations at the community, provincial, and national levels.

It is worthy of note that, though based on these common antecedents and enablers, the three foundations analyzed here show some divergence in their implementation strategies. Back to

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the mapping–reporting–aligning typology, only the CBT plans, implements, tracks, and reports progress against 2030 Agenda goals and targets. The LCF and CFNA mostly use the SDG framework for mapping and/or reporting purposes, utilizing SDGs as themes with which to match their current Vital Signs indicators. (See Table 2.) While the LCF captures the essence of its Vital Signs indicators and directly connects them to one or a few SDGs, the CFNA stresses the complex relationships of each Vital Signs indicator with multiple SDGs.

Nevertheless, the three foundations under our lens follow CFC recommendations to customize both frameworks in ways consistent with community identities, values, and priorities. Consequently, names for similar Vital Signs indicators vary and the expressions that make more sense locally are used for targets (CFC, 2020, 2021). The CBT emerges as the best practice: While being able to report progress toward the 2030 Agenda goals and targets, it is also capable of safeguarding local priorities. One example of this is including an exclusive target about the Nuu-chah-nulth language, a milestone in achieving reconciliation with Indigenous peoples that the CBT considers determinant toward the Vital Signs indicator Health and Wellness (CBT, 2019).

We argue that these heterogeneous trajectories may be interpreted as a strength of the adoption strategy, rather than as a sign of weak or less advanced commitment to the 2030 Agenda. The CFC strategy of flexible SDG adoption is a copycat of Vital Signs’ — respectful not only of place-based traits, but also of the distinct sense of belonging of each community. What

really matters is that, thanks to this creative or dialogic approach to SDGs in each community, the process of adoption advances and utility of measurement towards sustainable development increases. In the words of one CFC representative, “indicators now are more aligned to the things that municipal governments are looking at, provincial governments, federal governments in Canada, so between communities, across provinces, and at the national and global level as well.”

As of today, adoption of the SDG framework by Canadian community foundations is an incipient conversation within a relatively small but highly cohesive network. “It’s still early, it’s still kind of new,” said one network representative; “it’s still something that community foundations are kind of grappling with and trying to figure out how it best fits into their work.” Additionally, the CFC strategy of integrating SDG adoption within the ongoing, broader Vital Signs conversation makes it difficult to isolate the specific implications of the 2030 Agenda for continuing change in community foundations.

Nevertheless, this emergent conversation starts to show some promising effects. (See Table 3.) If Vital Signs supported the reframing of the concept of “community” as “a process of engagement and a resulting sense of belonging” (Phillips et al., 2016, p. 68), SDG adoption is paving the way for further reevaluation within and around community foundations. Our case study evidences reframing of current work, expansion of partnerships, redefinition of strategies, and repositioning of community foundations. As described by one respondent, CFC members have been holding more and more Vital Conversations around 2030 Agenda-related questions:

“How are we doing on SDG 1 and what are some ways the community together can tackle this? And how do we respond to the challenge that we’re seeing?” ... Community foundations are bringing that global conversation really making it local. ... They’re also reframing the conversation locally to focus more on sustainability. ... Historically, that’s not been the most popular topic.

This case suggests that the true potential of SDG adoption for community foundations may lie in further feeding this conversation to keep reframing their model from that of typically small, local actors confined by the urgencies and constraints of place and time, to that of conveners and partners capable of radically contributing to large-scale, long-range sustainability challenges, today and into the future. Recognizing the interdependence of global sustainability issues and community concerns goes hand in hand with acknowledging that implementing Agenda 2030 requires the type of collective leadership that integrates global collective action with community-based approaches.

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