

International Best Practices for Localizing the SDGs

Since their adoption in 2015, [the Sustainable Development Goals \(SDGs\)](#) have increasingly gained attention from municipal leaders as a useful way to connect diverse municipal and community efforts around shared sustainability goals. Cities from around the world have adopted and shaped the SDGs as a reference point in exploring how this global agenda can advance local municipal actions and priorities leading to greater coherence in planning, [integrated systems thinking](#), and the development of more partnerships locally and internationally.

Despite the momentum and action for the SDGs in many global cities, [there has been somewhat limited engagement with the SDGs in Canadian municipalities](#).

The Local Futures project aims to drive a new wave of SDGs localization in Canadian communities. Over the summer of 2025, the Local Futures team convened a series of conversations with leading SDGs cities from around the world to learn about best practices for operationalizing and integrating the SDGs within municipalities, as well as the perceived value-add the SDGs bring for them.

Interviews were conducted with representatives from:

- City of Barcelona, Spain
- City of Bristol, United Kingdom
- City of Durban, South Africa
- City of Espoo, Finland
- City of Los Angeles, United States
- City of Strasbourg, France
- City of Malmö, Sweden
- City of Bonn, Germany
- City of Mannheim, Germany
- City of Stuttgart, Germany

Additional conversations were also conducted with organizations supporting cities on SDGs implementation, including United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), the Institute for Global Environmental Strategies (IGES), UN Habitat, the Brookings Institute, and the consultancy Global Solutions 4 U.

The Value of the SDGs to Municipalities

The SDGs offer an ambitious vision to build a more sustainable, safe, equitable, and prosperous world for all humanity by 2030. They do not, however, offer much direction on how to operationalize or integrate them into institutional or corporate processes. In the

municipal context, this means finding ways to integrate the SDGs into governance, planning, budgeting, and program implementation. Successful SDGs operationalization is also dependent on having political will, clear and consistent communication, and finding connections to tangible local issues.

While the operationalization of the SDGs can take many different forms, cities around the world tend to integrate them in three keyways:

1. Creating Coherence in Planning by Consolidating Programs and Policies Under One Comprehensive Framework

Since the framework of the SDGs offers a broad, holistic view of sustainability, it allows staff and community members to find linkages to each other towards the shared objectives of the municipality. Using the framework of the SDGs helps increase visibility of actions already happening and builds coherence between municipal departments by bridging siloes and fostering internal collaboration.

Examples of SDGs integration from global cities:

- **Malmö, Sweden:** Integrated the SDGs into existing [steering and management systems](#) and implemented a continuously updated "Platform 2030" that localizes the SDGs, connects them to the City's five political goals, and presents data-driven analysis.
- **Durban, South Africa:** Aligned development plans, municipal mandates, and the city budget to the SDGs. [All new projects must identify which goals and indicators they are contributing to](#) so that the impact of the project on the SDGs can be monitored.
- **Barcelona, Spain:** Successfully set measurable SDGs targets for local issues like homelessness, aligned actions for mayoral mandates to relevant SDGs, and calculated the economic contributions of budgets towards their achievement.
- **Espoo, Finland:** Conducted capacity building training for municipal staff on the SDGs and how they are relevant to the city, including an SDGs canvas tool for localization, gap analysis, and planning. These trainings [increased ownership over the sustainability strategy](#) and encouraged municipal staff across departments to see how they each advance the SDGs in their daily work.

2. Planning for Sustainable Development Using Systems Thinking

The SDGs help highlight the [multiple connections and systems thinking needed to understand the complexity of community issues](#). In this way, the SDGs are a helpful reference tool in planning and developing strategies that address the social, environmental, and economic dimensions of any one challenge the community faces.

Examples of SDGs integration from global cities:

- **Mannheim, Germany:** Developed a citizen-led vision for the city using the SDGs to create the [Mannheim 2030 Strategy](#). This vision was translated into seven strategic goals for the municipality that were incorporated into the city budget through the inclusion of regular reporting on money spent on priority themes and impact targets that relate to the strategic objectives.
- **Strasbourg, France:** Developed a [Food Strategy using the multi-dimensional framework of the SDGs](#). The strategy and action plan advances all 17 SDGs by addressing components of food systems including equitable access to food, health, agricultural production, and food waste.
- **Stuttgart, Germany:** Used their findings from their Voluntary Local Review to [inform their annual poverty conference](#), leading to recommendations for budget allocations, additional human resources for statistical work, procurement, and city strategy to address poverty.

3. Supporting Partnership and Collaboration within the Local and International Community

As a shared international framework, the SDGs provide a common language and serve as an effective tool to develop deeper international partnerships and collaborative opportunities. The SDGs are also useful to develop partnerships locally with community organizations, academic institutions, and different levels of government through their coverage of a wide range of issues focused on a “whole-of-society approach” and leaving no one behind.

Examples of SDGs integration from global cities:

- **Bristol, United Kingdom:** Developed the [Bristol SDG Alliance](#), a group a stakeholders from across the community (universities, City officials, major businesses, and



community organizations) working together to drive the policy framework for long-term sustainable development of the city and region, to discuss, shape and improve SDGs implementation, and to link community action to global and national challenges.

- **Los Angeles, United States:** Created strong [working relationships with local universities and colleges](#) to engage over 100 undergraduate and graduate students in the SDGs localization efforts of the city. This work sparked the development of two Voluntary Local Reviews, an SDGs data platform, and a mapping of SDGs activities by community organizations, in addition to several international relationships.
- **Espoo, Finland:** Created an [SDGs Card Deck](#) that provided a snapshot of the SDGs in the city to increase awareness and build engagement with students and youth.
- **Malmö, Sweden:** Developed strong public communication and education approaches to engage citizens on SDGs issues, including podcasts and public campaigns (e.g., ["talking trash cans"](#)).
- **Durban, South Africa:** Developed [community art murals and projects](#) throughout the city, partnering with local artists and community groups to raise public awareness of the SDGs, to give hope and inspiration for a better future, and reinforce that the SDGs are the responsibility of everyone in the community through collective action.

Voluntary Local Reviews - A Tool for Operationalizing the SDGs

One of the most common tools used by cities in working with the SDGs is the creation of a Voluntary Local Review (VLR) – a reporting approach that assesses local progress, challenges, and opportunities for the SDGs. For some cities, the VLR is their entry point for SDGs engagement, while for others, a VLR was developed after several years of working to implement the SDGs. In both cases, the VLR process (not only the output) is considered extremely important to showcase the city's work on the SDGs, engage with partners on community issues, and support innovative future planning for holistic sustainable development.

The majority of VLRs globally ([249 VLRs have been submitted to the United Nations](#)) focus on the "current state of the SDGs" in the community, identifying the relevancy of SDGs targets to current city actions and progress to-date. The gold standard for VLR work, however, focuses on the future and how the principles and ambition of the SDGs support the identification and planning of new sustainable development opportunities with an eye to tracking progress over time ([read more on future-oriented VLRs](#)).

Many of the cities interviewed have used their VLR work to leverage greater integration towards holistic planning using the SDGs, and offer this advice to other cities looking to start developing their own VLR:

- **Use the VLR as a regular reporting mechanism:** Integrate the VLR with existing city reporting or use it to create coherence and connection for many city strategies with common goals. The VLR can be an effective tool for ongoing monitoring and evaluation and to identify and enhance the impact of city programs.
- **Align the VLR's data with city data:** Several cities prioritized indicators that have accessible data and use indicators that are aligned with existing monitoring frameworks. Aligning SDGs indicators with existing systems can allow for comparison between municipalities and greater integration into current municipal systems.
- **Determine the purpose of the VLR and tailor communications to your audience:** The VLR should address questions and issues of concern to the city and have a clear purpose – whether providing recommendations to policymakers, accountability to citizens, or reporting on SDGs progress over time.
- **Focus on the process, not necessarily the output:** The most important part of the VLR is not the report itself, but the process that drives it. The process can bring together multiple stakeholders, who can begin speaking about issues using a common approach and collaborating towards shared goals. Conducting a VLR can build the capacity for ongoing work to advance and localize the SDGs.

Working with the SDGs – Advice to Canadian Municipalities

Cities interviewed for this insights document were selected based on their advanced understanding and integration of the SDGs in their own municipal processes. These cities all had practical and useful advice for Canadian municipalities looking to get started or deepen their current SDGs work:

- **“Breathe the SDGs”:** Focus on building an understanding of holistic sustainable development and what citizens want for the future of the city, rather than starting with a statistical debate about goals, targets, and indicators.
- **Start with engaged people:** Begin working with the departments and individuals who are invested in and see value in the SDGs. Momentum can be built by demonstrating success through pilot projects and initiatives.



- **Integrate don't duplicate:** Connect the SDGs to existing political goals and include SDGs reporting into existing reporting mechanisms to avoid creating another layer of work. Don't stress about not hitting all targets. Reach out to other cities for interpretation of less applicable goals.
- **Connect the SDGs to local issues:** Demonstrate how the SDGs provide new perspectives and insights on issues that are relevant to and resonate with the community and municipal staff. Identify how the SDGs align with what is already happening and how the framework can help deepen and improve planning.
- **Foster broad ownership and dialogue:** Build ownership of SDGs work across departments and throughout the community to broaden impact. Leverage formal commitments by different levels of government to build momentum and generate buy-in for the SDGs. Broad ownership for the SDGs helps ensure consistency through times of political change and can be a platform for dialogue and consensus.
- **Use existing data:** Leverage existing data collection systems for SDGs indicator tracking. If data is not collected, determine if there is a partner to collaborate with who has access. The SDGs offer a "good start" for municipalities without systematic sustainability approaches.
- **Adapt the language of the SDGs to the local context:** Change the way you talk about the SDGs so that they resonate in the community, perhaps more focused on the issues and principles they represent or their ambition and vision for a better world. Advancing the SDGs does not require talking explicitly about the framework of the 17 SDGs as presented by the United Nations.

About Local Futures

The Local Futures project aims to drive a new wave of Sustainable Development Goals localization throughout Canada, aligning the international focus of the SDGs with local priorities in Canadian communities. Local Futures is located in the Grebel Peace Incubator on the University of Waterloo campus. Visit www.local-futures.ca to learn more.



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