

“Metric Conversations” to Help Align Community Indicators with UN SDGs: The Journey from April to November

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Beyond GDP Colorado is a pilot project under the umbrella of the University of Denver’s Grand Challenges Program. Beyond GDP Colorado stems from the conviction that, for many persons, organizations, and institutions, Gross Domestic Product and stock market indices have come to serve as proxies for the overall health and wellbeing of individuals, communities, states, nations, and the world. Our primary goal is to promote with equal vigor the development and transmission of measures of human and ecological wellbeing in Colorado and beyond.

Our work is primarily guided by the 17 Sustainable Development Goals adopted unanimously by the U.N.’s 193 member states in 2015, together with their associated targets and indicators. Although there are many programs to “go beyond GDP” at local, state, national, and international levels, no other framework to measure and track human and ecological wellbeing can claim to be vetted globally.

In addition, the SDG framework is centered upon the core principle of “equity”—expressed simply as “Leave No One Behind.” Indeed, many of the SDG targets and indicators include the words “access” and “availability” or variants thereof. A recent UN position paper puts it even more strongly: achieving equity is inseparable from striving to reach the SDGs by 2030.

“ . . . without addressing the root causes of exclusion and poverty, guaranteeing food and nutrition security, ensuring access to quality and equitable education and lifelong learning, universal health coverage, as well as fighting climate change by protecting the environment, its goods and resources, no inclusiveness, equality or empowerment will ever be possible.”

-- ["Realizing the SDGs for All: Ensuring Inclusiveness and Equality for Every Person, Everywhere"](#)

Beyond GDP Colorado is working along two fronts to advance greater use of measures of human and ecological wellbeing in light of the SDG framework. First, we are working toward a dashboard of state-level indicators, similar to those developed in other states, but aligned for the most part with the SDGs and their indicators.

Second, we have been examining the relevance of the SDG framework for non-governmental organizations and public agencies via a process we call “metric conversations.” In simplest form, this entails placing metrics (i.e., quantitative indicators) that are important to the purpose, strategies, and programs of the organization or agency alongside metrics from the relevant SDGs. By interlacing these two sets of metrics, points of alignment emerge, along with metrics that appear in only one list. We contend that such metric conversations can enrich the interior planning and public

outreach of any NGO or agency whose purpose and programs enhance the common good.

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The journey to foster alignment between community indicators and the SDG indicators has taken some twists and turns since submitting our panel proposal six months ago for this CIC Summit. In a nutshell, *we are now examining the merits of including SDG targets in such conversations, along with SDG indicators that are not quantifiable*. The purpose of this update is to describe that journey briefly and to suggest additional ways for linking the SDG framework to “measures that matter” to organizations and agencies serving the common good.

Shortly after submitting our proposal to CIC last April, I completed a metric conversation between SDG-2 (Zero Hunger) metrics and metrics gleaned from two Colorado organizations deeply engaged in hunger and food insecurity issues—[Hunger Free Colorado](#) (HFC) and the [Colorado Blueprint to End Hunger](#) (Blueprint). More than 35 organizations and agencies in Colorado are collaborating in the Blueprint initiative.

Briefly, the metric conversation process entailed interweaving three sets of metrics: 15 metrics from HFC’s November 2020 online Fact Sheet; 32 metrics gleaned from Blueprint’s 40-page, 5-year plan to end hunger in Colorado; and 18 SDG-2 metrics. As expected, the process identified alignments involving all three sets of metrics (e.g., Food insecurity (% of households) and WIC or SNAP/food stamp coverage) as well as alignments involving different pairs of metric sets (e.g., both HFC and Blueprint track the number of people kept out of poverty by food stamps). In addition, many metrics did not overlap with metrics in the other metric sets.

Details of this metric conversation example are described in [Metric ‘Conversations’ on Hunger in Colorado and U.N. Sustainable Development Goals](#). This 3-page article describes the metric conversation process in detail and references an Xcel document that displays the conversation process, step-by-step, across 14 worksheets.

This article also describes the rationale for using SDG metrics developed by a U.N. affiliate, the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN), instead of the SDG indicators initially developed by a U.N.-led technical team in 2016. This move was deemed necessary in light of the fact that approximately 40% of the original 232 indicators developed by the U.N.-led team were not quantifiable.

On the one hand, using SDSN’s transparently and rigorously developed SDG metrics has made it possible to track—and compare—progress toward reaching the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030 across more than 160 countries, all U.S. states, and more than 100 major U.S. cities. On the other hand, SDSN’s metrics have not been officially endorsed by the U.N.

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Accordingly, we are currently examining with colleagues from the Metro Denver Nature Alliance the merits of structuring “metric” conversations that draw from the 232 current UN-sanctioned indicators (qualitative as well as quantitative), *plus the 169 SDG targets (which were unanimously vetted by U.N. member states in 2015, along with the 17 SDGs themselves)*. The interweaving process now includes an extra step. Once the key metrics from the organization or agency have been identified, we do word searches on the key terms in these metrics across all of the SDG targets and indicators. This produces an expanded set of SDG “markers” for conversation with the organization or agency’s key metrics.

For an example of an “expanded” metric conversation, see the 3-page article, [Candidate Metrics from Urban & Community Forestry in Conversation with SDG Targets & Indicators](#). Similar to the earlier example of a metric conversation, this article references an Xcel document that displays the expanded metric conversation process with SDG targets and indicators across six worksheets.

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As one of my Beyond GDP colleagues aptly put it, people and groups have conversations—not metrics. Fair enough. The metaphorical use of “conversations” in relation to metrics is justified only if it leads to fruitful conversations between people and groups. And here, “fruitful” means leading to action that enhances human and ecological wellbeing for all persons and the planet.

The final worksheet in each example displays points of alignment between the SDG framework and the key metrics that illuminate the organization’s purpose and drive its goals, strategies, and programs. It is also the case that some key organization/agency metrics have no closely matched SDG counterpart—and vice versa. All three outcomes can be opportunities for reflection among staff, leaders, supporters, and colleagues in other organizations and agencies.

But what might trigger a conversation among persons, organizations, and agencies around the SDGs in the first place? One of our metric conversation partners, the Denver-based Alliance Center, invites SDG conversations by displaying its Impact Dashboard on the Alliance’s [website](#). Visitors to its downtown headquarters see the same image shown in a continuous loop of slides shown on a wall screen on the lobby. At a glance, visitors online and in person grasp the Center’s vision, goals, strategies, and programs as mapped onto the SDGs.

THE ALLIANCE CENTER IMPACT DASHBOARD

LOCAL WORK. GLOBAL IMPACT.



As an environmental nonprofit, we align our work with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) developed by the United Nations. This ensures our local actions are relevant and measurable at the global scale.

The Impact Dashboard perhaps could be called the Alliance Center’s “SDG-signature.” Perhaps the sharing of SDG-signatures across members of a network, collaborative, or consortium could be the first step toward identifying points of SDG alignment across such groups. Refinements of this idea might include highlighting no more than 3-4 of the 17 SDGs as of primary importance, and a similar maximum number of SDGs of secondary importance. Next steps might include identifying points of alignment among the targets of the SDGs that are common to the signatures of different organizations and agencies within a network.

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