

Russian Donors Forum

Philanthropy in BRICS countries and the UN Sustainable Development Goals

Review



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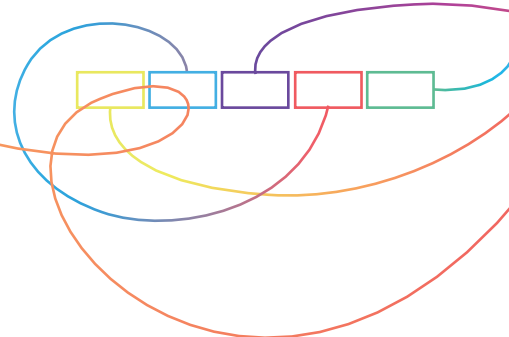
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Russian Donors Forum

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ON RUSSIAN DONORS FORUM

Russian Donors Forum is an association of Russian largest philanthropic and donor organizations. It is the only organization that, since 2002, has united more than 65 corporate and private foundations, as well as socially responsible companies that systemically implement social programs and projects.

Philanthropy in BRICS countries and the UN Sustainable Development Goals

This review studies the correlation between philanthropy in BRICS countries and the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the progress made so far and current challenges.

In 2020, the world entered the Decade of Action, the home stretch before the 2030 finish line. In recent years, we see in BRICS countries that **the philanthropy and social investment sector begins to play a more active role in implementing Agenda 2030**. Stakeholders are more aware of the SDGs and use the goals as a framework for their reporting. However, while the overall trend is for philanthropy to devote more attention to the SDGs and get more involved in their implementation, we see that maturity levels for different stakeholders in BRICS countries vary greatly.

First, the situation depends greatly on the presence and the level of activity of international development institutions. UN Development Program offices and Global Compact networks are powerful drivers for the development of domestic, national structures if they work in close cooperation. **South Africa**, for example, is a particularly vivid example of that: businesses and corporate foundations actively cooperate with the local UNDP office, and they are more engaged in implementing the SDGs than private foundations.

Second, the position of the government plays a key role. In **China**, for example, because of the government's strong and centralized policy, the SDGs are consistently incorporated into national development programs, and reports are regularly published on the progress made. In **Brazil**, on the other hand, changes at the top meant that the central government was no longer interested in Agenda 2030, and local state governments together with civil society had to pick up the responsibility for implementing the SDGs.

Third, the makeup of the philanthropy sector means a lot: the stronger the corporate element is, the more the entire sector is involved in the SDGs. **Russia** is a good example of that: the Sistema Foundation, which has acquired the SDG focus from its parent company, acts as a trendsetter and shares its best practices with others.

In addition to the overall growth of SDG awareness and engagement, we observe a few other **similarities** between BRICS countries when it comes to implementing the SDGs:

1. **Businesses are the vanguard of the sustainability agenda**, especially large companies operating on the global markets. Since BRICS countries don't have a clear border between corporate social investment and private charity, the SDG agenda penetrates philanthropy as well.
2. It is businesses and corporate foundations who are particularly active in integrating the SDGs into their philanthropy and social investment practices (through CSR and corporate charity mechanisms) and who are interested in evaluating and presenting their results based on Agenda 2030. Their primary

motives are business-related: they want access to international loans, they want to meet the expectations of international investors and partners, they care about their reputation and brand value, they want to minimize risks, and they want a lasting effect on their communities, the environment and their employees. Also, the ESG (environmental, social and governance) criteria are quite popular, and this definitely helps get companies more involved in the sustainability agenda. However, it is still an open question whether the influence of ESG on SDG implementation is purely positive. Other members of the donor community who are not directly linked to big business (i.e., independent and private foundations) often don't share the enthusiasm of the corporate sector regarding the SDG agenda and don't demonstrated particular progress in this track, dismissing it as a new facade put on the same old contents.

3. The donor communities in BRICS countries largely agree that **the SDG agenda could hypothetically become a common language for communications** and a universal framework for interaction between various stakeholders, at this point it is largely limited to **an elite group of major players** with extensive resources who care a lot about external factors (international cooperation, global markets, multinational corporations, etc.). In order to persuade local government bodies, NGOs, and small and medium-sized enterprises to embrace the SDGs, the central government has to promote them in a systemic way, providing, among other things, powerful incentives.
4. Very often, instead of using sustainable development goals and targets for the purposes of strategic planning and adjusting their philanthropy and social investment activities, stakeholders use them merely as **a way to present their existing projects**, as a tool for public reporting and communications.
5. BRICS countries have a high degree of social and economic inequality between various regions, which results in **significant differences between regions in terms of SDG awareness and implementation**.
6. **Systemic shortage of (financial, material, human, technological and other) resources** in philanthropy is a major obstacle to the SDG agenda in BRICS countries. Instead of focusing on long-term goals, players tend to be preoccupied with addressing short-term issues.
7. **Accessibility and transparency of SDG data** is a challenge that all BRICS countries face. Donors don't have mandatory reporting forms reflecting their SDG efforts, which makes it difficult to perform quantitative studies of engagement levels or the progress achieved by the philanthropy sector. Within the donor community, it is mostly socially responsible companies who disclose their SDG statistics through their non-financial reporting. Countries' progress with Agenda 2030 can be tracked through their official [Voluntary National Reviews](#) (VNRs). In addition, important data can be found in Voluntary Civic Reviews (VCRs), prepared by civil society (for example, in **Russia** and **Brazil**) as an alternative to the VNRs.

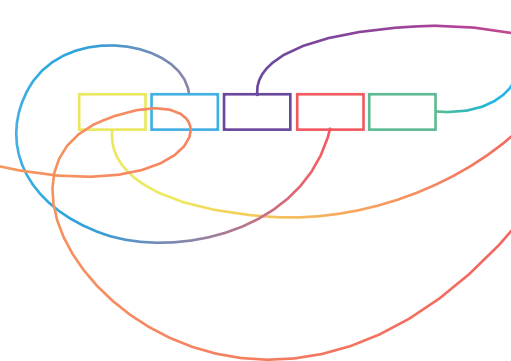
8. For the donors working within the SDG framework, it is important to be able to **monitor their progress in achieving the Agenda 2030 indicators**. Currently, there are about 60 global indices for social and environmental responsibility, and nearly all of them include assessment of how much the sustainability agenda has been incorporated into the company's strategy, how well the company is doing in terms of the SDGs and ESG. However, **what is lacking is a universally recognized methodology for evaluating this progress**. In some cases, it might be difficult for a donor to match SDG indicators with their existing system of monitoring and evaluation, or to coordinate with other stakeholders on how they will measure their contributions to the SDGs. The donor communities in BRICS countries say they would like to see a universal evaluation system or at least some guidelines, which could be used, among other things, for the purposes of self-evaluation.
9. **The COVID-19 pandemic** has clearly highlighted the relevance of Agenda 2030, but at the same time it set stakeholders and countries back a lot in their implementation of the SDGs. For example, three of the BRICS countries (Brazil, India and China) saw their SDG scores drop in 2021 compared with 2020. Countries with higher SDG scores include **Russia (73.8)**, **China (72.1)** and **Brazil (71.3)**. **India (60.1)** and **South Africa (63.7)** are in a more difficult situation.

Table 8. SDG Index in BRICS countries

Country	SDG Index (2021)	SDG Index (2021)
Brazil	71,3	72,7
Russia	73,8	71,9
India	60,1	61,9
China	72,1	73,9
South Africa	63,7	63,4

Source: [Sustainable Development Report](#)

Provided below are **details on the implementation of the SDGs in each of the BRICS countries**: peculiarities, priorities, key achievements and challenges.



BRAZIL

Brazil's pathway to implementing the SDGs can be divided into two parts – before and after 2019, when major changes happened in its domestic and foreign policies.

- Brazil was one of the countries that responded enthusiastically to the adoption of Agenda 2030. The government established the National SDG Commission as early as in 2016. The commission was an advisory body and interacted with civil society and government agencies on SDG issues. Based on the commission's [report](#), its efforts were quite successful. Also, Brazil's Applied Economic Research Institute ([IPEA](#)) adapted the 17 goals and 169 targets to the national context.
- In 2017, Brazil published its first (and so far only) Voluntary National Review.
- After the new government came to power, the SDGs, as well as other areas of international cooperation, were no longer perceived as a priority. In 2019, the National SDG Commission was disbanded, and the IPEA efforts on SDG adaptation were rolled back. The president also vetoed mentioning Agenda 2030 in the 2020-2023 national development plan.

One of the things that make Brazil stand out is that its civil society is very active. Once the government overhauled its policies, the leading role in implementing the SDGs shifted from the government to civil society and local governments in various states, which enjoy a high degree of autonomy. According to a representative of a large international network in Brazil, in a sense, it is even easier to work this way, and states are often more effective than the federal government. However, they lack the scale that federal projects usually have.

After President Jair Bolsonaro disbanded the National SDG Commission, some of its members joined the Civil Society Working Group for Agenda 2030 (GTSC A2030), which annually published some very valuable [documents](#). In 2021, this working group published the 5th Civic SDG Review, which indicates a high level of civil society involvement in monitoring SDG progress in Brazil.

On the whole, Brazil has an [extensive](#) network of civil society organizations (associations, institutes, etc.) dealing with the SDGs. GIFE, Brazil's national donor association, plays an important role in promoting the sustainability agenda.

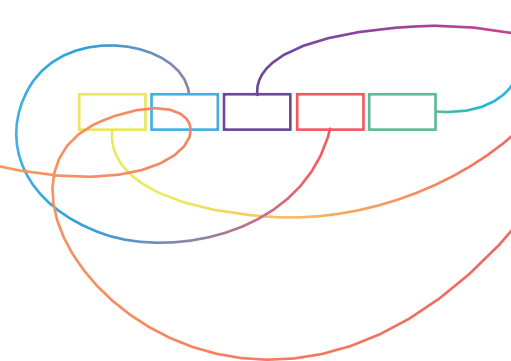
In the philanthropy sector, awareness about the SDG agenda is increasing. For example, in 2017 sector representatives were extremely [skeptical](#) about their contribution to the SDGs. According to an executive director of one of Brazilian think-tanks, "obviously everybody knows about the SDGs but they have not really helped reframe the work that philanthropy is doing." In a 2021 interview, the experts said that the corporate segment of the philanthropy sector was actively working with the SDGs, while foundations were somewhat lagging behind, although they too were making progress. In 2017, executive director of one of the Brazilian institutes said, "I don't see institutions changing their strategies based on the SDG framework; I think they are just matching what they do with the SDGs." Today, this tendency persists.

Business is the most active player in Brazil as far as implementation of the sustainability agenda is concerned. A recent [study](#) by ABCR (Brazilian Fundraiser Association) shows that SDG awareness has increased among corporate players after the pandemic, and their public reporting often uses the SDG framework. According to a representative of a large international network in Brazil, apart from the obvious increase of engagement in SDG 3 (Good health and well-being), businesses are focused primarily on SDG 13 (Climate action), as well as inequality-related goals – SDG 5 (Gender equality) and SDG 10 (Reduced inequality). The Global Compact Network actively develops projects aimed at helping businesses to incorporate the SDGs into their strategies. The SDGs Theme Group of GCN Brazil published a [document](#) in 2018, offering vivid examples of Brazilian companies contributing to the SDGs. It should be noted, however, that the document and the theme group focus more on integrating the SDGs into the company's core business, not about CSR, philanthropy and social investment.

Some experts point out that foundations are also gradually getting on board with the agenda, helped along by international institutions like the UN Development Program and WINGS (Worldwide Initiatives for Grantmaker Support).

Here are a couple of interesting cases:

- Brazil's [Sustainable Cities Institute](#) (ICS) and the [UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network](#) (SDSN) have produced an [SDG index for 770 Brazilian municipalities](#), which is a good example of productive cooperation between a civil society organization and an international development institution.
- In 2019, Sebrae, UNDP Brazil and the [UNDP Istanbul International Center for Private Sector in Development](#) (IICPSD) did a [study](#) on inclusive business as one of the most effective ways to contribute to the SDGs.



RUSSIA

Just like other BRICS countries, Russia has a definite trend of increasing SDG awareness. Various stakeholders tend to focus on Agenda 2030 more. Yet it would be premature to say that we are witnessing a concerted effort from all parties. According to a representative of a large international network in Russia, the country is yet to engage in purposeful and systemic national adaptation of Agenda 2030, yet the government and all the other stakeholders are much more open today to localizing the SDGs than before.

The government does take steps to adapt the SDGs to the national context. The first (and so far only) Voluntary National Review (2020) says that Russia's 12 national development projects and the Comprehensive Infrastructure Modernization and Expansion Plan cover, directly or indirectly, 107 of 169 SDG targets. Also, the President's Office has set up an interagency working group on climate change and sustainable development. The Federal Statistics Service (Rosstat) tracks the progress made: descriptions of national SDG indicators, developed in 2017, as well as statistical data for each of them, are available on the agency's web page. At the same time, Russia does not yet have a designated body implementing the SDGs or coordinating stakeholders' efforts. In late 2020, the position of a special presidential envoy for SDG implementation was created, yet this did not result in increased efforts on Agenda 2030.

In 2020, the Sustainable Development Coalition (KURS), an NGO pushing for SDG implementation in Russia and abroad by 2030, published its National Civic Review.

Businesses are so far the most active stakeholder in implementing the SDGs. A study by the Russian Donors Forum shows that the role of ethical motives in engaging in Agenda 2030 has diminished (from 54% in 2016 to 27% in 2020). Initially, general moral motives played a significant role, but now they often associate sustainability with being able to survive and develop in the rapidly changing environment. The goals that companies primarily align their programs with include SDG 8 (Decent work and economic growth – 80% of the companies), SDG 3 (Good health and well-being – 77%), SDG 11 (Sustainable cities and communities – 61%) and SDG 4 (Quality education – 59%). SDG 17 (Partnerships for the goals) also ranks high with businesses (75%). According to a 2019 PwC study, 89% of the 200 CEOs polled had incorporated sustainable development into their companies' overall strategies, and only 11% said they were not aware of the SDGs.

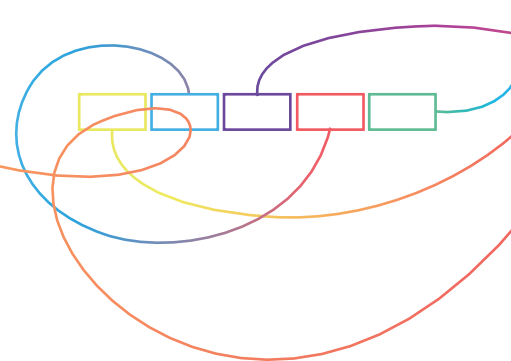
Many companies implement the SDGs through their corporate foundations. For example, the Elevator to the Future program, designed by the Sistema Foundation in 2021, was listed by the UN among the top 400 sustainable practices. Elevator to the Future is a free educational platform allowing college students and young specialists, regardless of their age, gender and place of residence, to secure an internship and job with one of Sistema companies.

With most private foundations, the SDGs are not on their agenda. The CEO of one of the largest Russian private foundations explains that the SDGs "are not a new invention for the sector, as the nonprofit sector in every country works to fight poverty, provide access to quality education, improve the quality of life, etc." For example, over 100

Russian NGOs took part in the 2020 national annual reporting contest in the SDG Reporting category, but only seven of them were able to present their activities and results within the sustainability framework. For example the Navstrechu Peremenam (Embracing the Change) Foundation, which supports social startups, uses the SDG paradigm for its social impact reports.

At the same time, Agenda 2030 is a good opportunity for various sector members, including NGOs, to use a language that corporate donors understand and develop cooperation across sectors. The NGO Development Center, together with its partners, has launched an educational course entitled “SDGs for NGOs,” which helps organizations adapt Agenda 2030 to their activities.

The Kindness Basket program, implemented jointly by X5 Retail Group and the Rus Food Foundation, aligned with SDG 2 (Zero hunger) and SDG 10 (Reduced inequalities), is a vivid [example](#) of cross-sectoral cooperation between an NGO and a corporation. Under this program, any person can put together a food basket in any of the X5 stores and donate it to the needy people in their community, whereas the company will add up to 30% of the donation to cover the logistics and other expenses.



INDIA

In India, the government makes a significant contribution to the SDGs.

[NITI](#) (National Institute for Transforming India) Aayog, a special institute responsible for adapting the SDGs to the national context and their implementation, has been created. The Institute coordinates systemic efforts of government agencies, UN institutions, private companies, civil society and philanthropy and prepares Voluntary National Reviews (2017, 2020).

- In 2017, NITI Aayog [mapped](#) the SDGs to existing national development programs (Centrally Sponsored/Central Sector Schemes, CSS) and the ministries overseeing those.
- Together with other companies and development institutions, NITI Aayog regularly publishes reviews on SDG implementation. For example, the [SDG India Index](#) is an extensive document covering the progress made in implementing the SDGs across various states and territories. Reports have been published for 2018, 2019-2020 and [2020-2021](#), where each state and territory is assigned specific index values for all the SDGs together and for each goal in particular. The report presents the data collected through an [interactive Web page](#). A separate [report](#) (2019) has been prepared on India's experience with localizing the SDGs.

The Ministry of Statistics and Program Implementation has [designed](#) the [National Indicator Framework](#) to localize the SDGs.

Specific ministries and departments have been put in charge of implementing each of the goals and given control of respective funds and resources.

The state has adopted necessary laws, requiring businesses to disclose their sustainability indicators. For example, the top 1,000 companies by market capitalization are now [required](#) to file regular ESG reports.

A joint [report](#) by Sattva Consulting and the UNDP points out that Indian businesses use the terms “sustainability” and “corporate social responsibility” interchangeably. When talking about their sustainable practices, companies do not differentiate between introducing the SDGs into their core business and implementing SDG-related CSR programs. However, companies that do make such a distinction have better-developed sustainable CSR programs.

Indian businesses prioritize SDG 12 (Sustainable consumption and production) and SDG 8 (Decent work and economic growth) in their reporting. A representative of a large international network in India points out that businesses also care about SDG 13 (Climate action).

In [2020](#), India was the second fastest-growing market for Socially Responsible Investment (SRI) with a CAGR of 104% between 2014 and 2019, second only to China with 105%.

Agenda 2030 has also been finding its way into the operations of corporate foundations. According to the CEO of a large Indian corporate foundation, the founding

company engages with the Dow Jones Sustainability Index, sustainability reporting, GRI and other initiatives, and this policy by the parent company affects the foundation. The JSW Foundation, for example, has carefully reviewed all 169 targets and 17 SDGs to have a clear understanding which of those they can contribute to. Now every aspect of the foundation's activities is linked to some SDG.

Just like in other countries, foundations in India “definitely don't drive the agenda”; it is the corporate sector that plays the leading role, says the head of a major consulting agency.

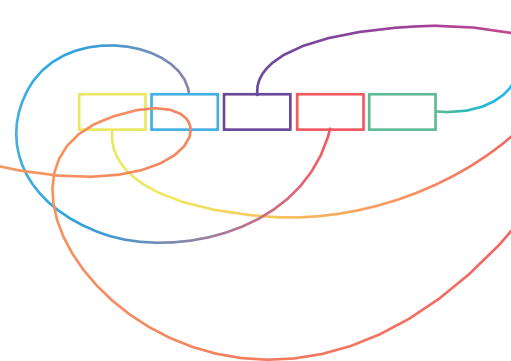
According to the [2021 India Philanthropy Report](#), most SDG-related initiatives by private and family foundations are fragmented, focusing on specific areas. For example, a large proportion of private giving prioritizes education (47%), where India's SDG scores are actually not that bad, while other sectors, which are doing worse, receive much less: healthcare gets 27%; disaster relief, 12%; and gender equality, 1%.

India is [expected](#) to have a shortfall of \$60 billion per year to achieve even five of the 17 SDGs. Development requires large and sustained funding with continuous effort – something that is only truly achievable through multi-party collaboration. This is where family philanthropy could act as a catalyst of change.

In its pursuit of the SDGs, India seeks multilateral partnership with various stakeholders. Here are a couple of examples:

- The Aspirational Districts Program, led by NITI Aayog and funded by the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), as well as national development programs, seek to coordinate the efforts of local government agencies, NGOs, corporate foundations and academia to accelerate growth in India's underdeveloped states and territories.
- [The Swachh Bharat \(Clean India\) Mission](#) channeled the funds provided by corporate donors to address sanitary problems through a series of measures, carefully designed by the central and local government bodies.

At the same time, experts point out the need for better organized and comprehensive coordination to prioritize the SDGs for a broader spectrum of stakeholders. In the words of the CEO of a large Indian consulting agency, “It is necessary to address the matter of sustainability at all levels. We need to see changes on higher levels as well – on national and sectoral levels. Otherwise, smaller organizations won't be able to survive.”



CHINA

The fact that China has a centrally planned economy means that its approach to the SDGs is also centralized, with the state (and not just businesses) playing an important role in the SDG agenda:

- In 2016, just a year after Agenda 2030 was adopted, China developed its 13th five-year plan (2016-2020) in line with the Agenda's goals and objectives.
- The same year, China produced the National Plan for Implementing Agenda 2030, identifying key priorities and strategies in achieving the SDGs. The National Plan highlights the need of cooperation between various sectors – donors, private companies and civil society – in achieving the SDGs.
- China produced two reports on Agenda 2030 implementation progress (2016, 2019), showing in detail which objectives in the National Plan have been achieved and which will require additional efforts.
- In 2021, China adopted the 14th five-year plan. Soon after that, it produced a Voluntary National Review, offering an update on the progress achieved. In this new five-year period, China will largely focus on climate action – the goal which was not particularly emphasized in the previous plan.

China is the only BRICS country that has published a separate [report](#) on how philanthropy contributes to sustainable development. The report was produced by the UN Development Program together with the China Foundation Center and published in 2020. Also, the same two partners launched a [platform](#) offering a unique database of information and specific examples of how Chinese philanthropy helps to implement Agenda 2030. No other BRICS country has this kind of data (most of the database is only available in Chinese). At the same time, the authors point out in the foreword that they will only cover Chinese foundations, which are only 1% of China's civil society organizations.

According to the report, Chinese foundations focus primarily on SDG 1 (No poverty), SDG 3 (Good health and well-being), SDG 4 (Quality education) and SDG 11 (Sustainable cities and communities).

Charitable projects in China have their geographic peculiarities: most foundations are located in economically developed cities of eastern China, while their efforts focus primarily on developing western regions.

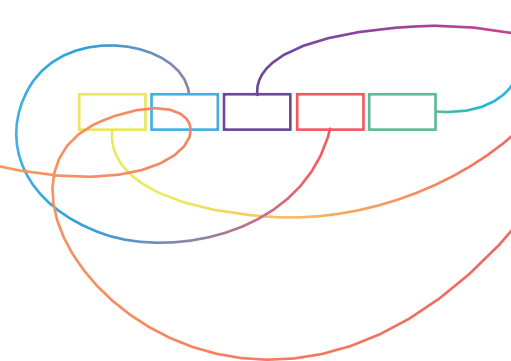
The authors point out that many foundations offer recommendations and guidelines for increasing the efficiency of public and private investment in the SDGs, leveraging their impact. Foundations and charitable projects supply solutions to development problems, but the funding they offer, too, can play a key role in driving change.

A [study](#) conducted by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) in 2020 together with the China Chamber of International Commerce (CCOIC) and PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) shows the extent to which socially responsible companies in China are aware of the SDGs. Most Chinese companies (89%) said they knew about the

SDGs, but 42% said they had no clear idea how to evaluate the SDGs. The companies said they prioritized SDG 3 (Good health and well-being), SDG 4 (Quality education), SDG 12 (Responsible consumption and production), SDG 8 (Decent work and economic growth), and SDG 9 (Industry, innovation and infrastructure). Most of the companies polled (76%) said they were interested in implementing the SDGs because they thought it could increase their brand value. When asked who should play a major role in achieving the SDGs, the respondents named government, enterprises and the UN, ranking NGOs and charitable foundations as merely fourth in importance.

Chinese experts point out that the sustainable development agenda is making its way into the philanthropy and social investment sector through major Chinese or international corporations. There are also some foundations and NGOs “learning the language” of the SDGs and positioning their projects through the lens of specific goals, yet to most Agenda 2030 is yet to become a relevant framework.

Experts do not expect well-balanced action to achieve all 17 SDGs. Historically, environmental and climate-related goals were not too high a priority for Chinese companies, donors and NGOs. However, with the adoption of a new five-year plan in 2021, China has revised its priorities with respect to the SDGs. For example, decarbonization has been proclaimed one of the top goals for China. China expects its carbon dioxide emissions to peak by 2030, and by 2060 it is China’s goal to go carbon neutral. According to a head of a major international network in China, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused all the stakeholders to shift their focus more towards the climate agenda: “People are now more interested in long-term projects. After the pandemic, more and more companies prioritize climate issues. They care about things that affect people’s lives in a broad sense.”



SOUTH AFRICA

The key document defining priorities for South Africa's development is the National Development Plan (NDP): Vision 2030, adopted in 2012. Even though the NDP predated the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, it has [a 74% convergence](#) with the Sustainable Development Goals, albeit the Plan does not mention the SDGs directly. Despite South Africa's significant high-level engagement in the 2030 Agenda, it is yet to adapt the SDGs to its national context and various stakeholder groups.

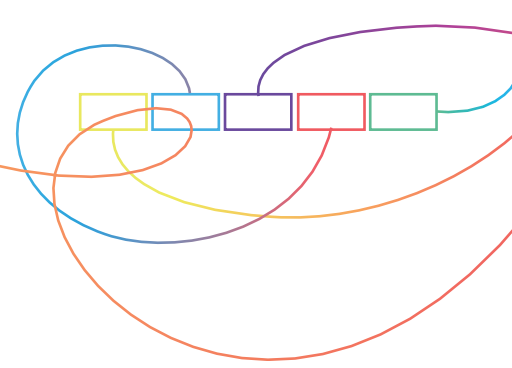
According to the 2019 Voluntary National Review (the first and so far only VNR in South Africa), the country has prioritized SDG 1 (No poverty), SDG 10 (Reduced inequality) and SDG 16 (Peace, justice and strong institutions). UNDP South Africa economic advisor Fatou Leigh points out that businesses are also interested in SDG 5 (Gender equality), SDG 8 (Decent work and economic growth) and SDG 9 (Industry, innovation and infrastructure), with the UNDP focusing on creating new jobs, especially for young people.

South Africa has an active Global Compact Network, which annually publishes a report on members' contributions to the SDGs. In 2020, in the aftermath of the pandemic, membership increased by 22%, indicating increased interest by South African businesses in multilateral cooperation and sustainable development. The organization itself is also growing: the [2020 report](#) states that both the network of programs run by the UNDP regional office in South Africa and the organization's team are expanding, suggesting that the relevance of the SDGs is growing. According to the report, Global Compact Network members' priorities include SDG 5 (Gender equality), SDG 8 (Decent work and economic growth), SDG 13 (Climate action), SDG 16 (Peace, justice and strong institutions) and SDG 17 (Partnerships for the goals).

According to the [2020 Triologue Business in Society Handbook](#), 59% of South African companies have integrated the SDGs into their overall strategies, which is a high percentage. However, as in other BRICS countries, businesses tend to align their existing projects with the SDGs and rarely focus on the SDGs at the planning stage of their operations. As the managing director of a large business points out in the company's 2021 report, it is difficult even for major companies to navigate the plethora of reporting systems and frameworks to which they must conform (ESG, SDGs, GRI and others), and for small and medium-sized businesses it is too onerous. As a result, adoption is often superficial, such as a simplistic reference to the SDGs.

According to Independent Philanthropy Association South Africa (IPASA) chairwoman Sarah Rennie, at this point foundations do not prioritize the SDGs, but the trend is for the SDGs to play a larger role.

The Good Work Foundation (GWF), a corporate foundation of Investec, is a good example of a foundation using the SDG paradigm to evaluate its performance. For example, IPASA reports, a digital education program the foundation initially launched as part of SDG 4 (Quality education) achieved progress on other SDGs as well – SDG 10 (Reduce inequality) and SDG 8 (Decent work and economic growth), combating unemployment and increasing economic activity in the area.



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