

An aerial photograph of a dense forest covered in snow. A dirt road with tire tracks runs diagonally through the lower right portion of the image. The trees are mostly evergreens, their branches heavily laden with snow. The ground is a mix of white snow and dark soil where the road is.

INDIGENOUS PEOPLES AND THE UNITED NATIONS SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

FACTSHEET ONE

COALITION FOR THE HUMAN RIGHTS OF
INDIGENOUS PEOPLES
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We can be the first generation to succeed in ending poverty; just as we may be the last to have a chance of saving the planet.

- United Nations: 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

We hear the terms “sustainability” and “sustainable development” a lot. They are referred to in government and corporate policies. They are also part of Canadian laws, such as federal, provincial and territorial laws governing resource development.

But what do these terms really mean?

The national governments that make up the United Nations have developed a shared vision of sustainable development – and a commitment to action – that gives more substance and meaning to these terms. The UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) can be used by Indigenous peoples as another tool to promote development that genuinely benefits Indigenous peoples, that respects Indigenous peoples’ decision-making authority and priorities, and that reflects Indigenous peoples’ own concepts of sustainability.

This factsheet is part of a series of resources being developed by the Coalition for the Human Rights of Indigenous Peoples to help make connections between Canada’s commitments to sustainability and the implementation of international human rights standards, including the *UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*.





WHAT ARE THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS?

The Sustainable Development Goals or SDGs are set out in Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The member states of the United Nations adopted the 2030 Agenda by consensus in 2015. Since then, the UN General Assembly – the main body where states meet and adopt resolutions – has repeatedly emphasized the importance of all countries taking concrete action to achieve these goals.

The 2030 Agenda sets out 17 goals, including ending poverty in all forms everywhere, clean and sustainably managed water for all, decent work for all, and urgent action to combat climate change. Agenda 2030 acknowledges that these goals are “supremely ambitious” and can only be accomplished through profound changes in society and the economy. For each goal, there are a number of specific targets setting out steps that must be taken to achieve the SDGs.

There are 169 targets in total. Many specifically refer to Indigenous peoples. For example, under the goal of ending hunger, the 2030 Agenda sets a target that includes doubling the income of small-scale food producers, particularly Indigenous peoples. Under the goal of inclusive and equitable education for all, the Agenda sets the target of “ensuring equal access to all levels of education and vocational training” for Indigenous peoples.

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT MUST PRIORITIZE HUMAN RIGHTS AND THE ENVIRONMENT

The 2030 Agenda also sets out an important framework defining what “sustainable development” really means. The 2030 Agenda rejects the idea that protection of the environment or respect for human rights should be sacrificed in the name of economic development. The Agenda states that development has three dimensions – social, environmental and economic – and that all three must be “balanced and integrated.”

Agenda 2030 also underlines that it is not enough to simply guard against development projects having unintended negative consequences. Agenda 2030 says “peaceful, just and inclusive societies” and “lasting protection of the planet”

We pledge that no one will be left behind

must be prioritized in the kinds of development that are promoted and permitted.

One of the first lines of the 2030 Agenda is the statement, “We pledge that no one will be left behind.” This commitment to leave no one behind, which is repeated throughout the Agenda, entails combating the systemic racism, discrimination, inequality and marginalization that excludes individuals, families and whole communities from the benefits of development. It also requires action to address inequalities that lead to marginalized individuals and communities bearing an unfair burden of harms from unsustainable development, including unsafe working conditions and environmental contamination.

The Agenda calls for an inclusive and just approach to decision-making about all forms of economic development. This includes looking closely at how any development plans may impact or benefit different sectors of society and people of different genders. The Agenda specifically emphasizes the need for high quality data that includes factors such as gender, race and ethnicity.

Alongside this commitment to inclusivity and fairness, the 2030 Agenda includes a clear and explicit call to prioritize the needs of individuals and groups who have been most marginalized or excluded. The Agenda states, “We will endeavour to reach the furthest behind first.” The UN General Assembly has repeatedly added, “this includes Indigenous peoples who should participate in, contribute to and benefit without discrimination from the implementation of the 2030 Agenda”.

The Agenda states that the implementation of the SDGs must be consistent with international law. The Agenda emphasizes the responsibility of all states to respect, protect, and promote human rights. The vision set out in the Agenda includes “universal respect for human rights and human dignity, the rule of law, justice, equality and non-discrimination; of respect for race, ethnicity and cultural diversity; and of equal opportunity permitting the full realization of human potential and contributing to shared prosperity.”



SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

HOW DOES THE WORLD DEFINE IT?

2015

UNITED NATIONS REACHED CONSENSUS TO ADDRESS SOME OF THE MOST URGENT ECONOMIC, SOCIAL, AND ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

17 SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

TRANSFORMING OUR WORLD

TRANSFORMING OUR WORLD, THE UN AGENDA FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT, SETS OUT A DETAILED FRAMEWORK OF PRINCIPLES, GOALS, AND TARGETS

THE AGENDA SAYS SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT...



INCLUDES COMBATING SYSTEMIC RACISM

AND ALL FORMS OF DISCRIMINATION

PROMOTES INCLUSION, JUSTICE, PEACE & LASTING PROTECTION OF THE PLANET

BALANCES SOCIAL, ENVIRONMENTAL & ECONOMIC NEEDS

PRIORITIZES MOST MARGINALIZED OR EXCLUDED

MUST BE CONSISTENT WITH INTERNATIONAL LAW



THESE GOALS SHOULD BE IMPLEMENTED ALONGSIDE
THE UN DECLARATION ON THE RIGHTS OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLES



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SIGNIFICANCE OF THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS FOR INDIGENOUS PEOPLES IN CANADA

Indigenous peoples have long maintained ways of life, including systems of law and deep knowledge of the environment, that embody principles and values which are now being described as “sustainable development.” Indigenous peoples are also at the forefront of the global movement to address climate change. Some Indigenous governments and organizations have embraced the sustainable development goals as a tool to advocate for the changes they

want to see in federal, provincial, and territorial laws and policies.

The 2030 Agenda is a global document meant to guide all governments. Canada has made numerous

promises to implement the 2030 Agenda, as well as legal commitments to the concept of sustainability. This enhances the opportunity for Indigenous peoples to use the 2030 Agenda, alongside the *UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, to help ensure that Indigenous values, laws, and jurisdiction are respected in decisions

about all forms of economic development impacting Indigenous peoples.

In addition, Canada’s commitments include the following:

- In 2021, the federal government adopted a national strategy for advancing the SDGs. The federal strategy acknowledges that “reaching the furthest behind first” requires addressing the “gaps in well-being and opportunities facing Indigenous Peoples.” The strategy names as one of its four core objectives “reconciliation with Indigenous peoples.”
- The federal law governing approval of resource development and other projects says that the first purpose of impact assessment is to “foster sustainability (*An Act to enact the Impact Assessment Act*, 2019).”
- Canada is a party to the 2015 Paris Agreement, the international treaty for responding to climate change. The Paris Agreement sets action on climate change in the context of the pursuit of sustainable development.

Implementation of the Declaration can contribute to supporting sustainable development and responding to growing concerns relating to climate change



- The new federal law to implement the *UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* notes that “implementation of the *Declaration* can contribute to supporting sustainable development and responding to growing concerns relating to climate change and its impacts on Indigenous peoples” (*An Act respecting the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, preamble).

As federal, provincial, and territorial governments come under increasing pressure to adopt more rigorous responses to the climate emergency, there will be even greater attention on the concept of sustainable development. The 2030 Agenda, and the ongoing international discussion around its implementation, are an important context for interpreting what sustainable development means for Indigenous peoples. The 2030 Agenda is also a tool to help hold Canada accountable to the commitments it has made.

It is worth noting that Canadian courts have also used the concept of sustainability in their interpretation of the constitutional rights of Indigenous peoples. In the landmark 1997 *Delgamuukw* decision, the Supreme Court of Canada concluded that an inherent aspect of the Aboriginal title is the necessity to manage the lands and resources in a way that will “sustain future generations of Aboriginal peoples.” In the 2014 *Tsilhqot’in* title decision, the Supreme Court said lands under Aboriginal title cannot be “developed or misused in a way that would substantially deprive future generations of the benefit of the land.”

WHERE DID THE SDGs COME FROM?

There is a long history of discussion within the United Nations about how to integrate poverty reduction and environmental protection. The term “sustainable development” came to the forefront at the 1992 UN Summit on Environment and Development, known as the Rio Summit. Indigenous peoples were active participants in that Summit and helped popularize the idea that a new balance must be reached between economic growth and environmental stewardship.

In 2000, the United Nations adopted eight Millennium Development Goals or MDGs to address urgent issues of poverty reduction and environmental protection. However, the MDGs were widely criticized for the fact that they were developed with little participation by Indigenous peoples.

The SDGs were developed as a follow-up to the MDGs, and in response to some of the ways that the MDGs had failed. Indigenous peoples were more significantly involved in the development of the SDGs and targets. A series of follow-up resolutions adopted by the UN have referred to the importance of Indigenous Peoples in implementation of the SDGs.

THE SDGs AND THE CLIMATE CRISIS

"SDGs" = SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS.

INDIGENOUS PEOPLES
ARE ALREADY FEELING THE IMPACTS OF THE CLIMATE CRISIS

THE SDGS CALL FOR URGENT ACTION TO
COMBAT CLIMATE CHANGE & ADDRESS ITS IMPACTS

TARGETS INCLUDE:

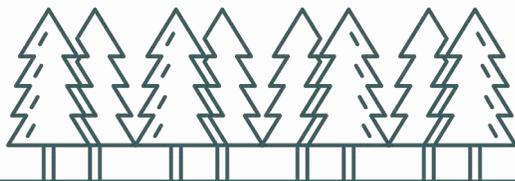


IMPROVE
EDUCATION, AWARENESS-RAISING
& CAPACITY

STRENGTHEN RESILIENCE &
THE CAPACITY TO ADAPT TO
CLIMATE CHANGE

INTEGRATE CLIMATE CHANGE MEASURES
INTO NATIONAL POLICIES,
STRATEGIES, & PLANNING

COASTAL ICE PERMAFROST
& BOREAL FOREST
MUST BE PROTECTED TO
SUSTAIN INDIGENOUS
ECONOMIES & SOCIETIES



INDIGENOUS PEOPLES ARE COMBINING
INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE
& NEW TECHNOLOGIES TO PROTECT
THEIR LANDS AND WATERS

INDIGENOUS PEOPLES NEED THE
OPPORTUNITY AND RESOURCES TO
IMPLEMENT THEIR OWN DECISIONS, AS
SET OUT IN THE **UN DECLARATION
ON THE RIGHTS OF INDIGENOUS
PEOPLES**



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THE SDGS AND THE *UN DECLARATION ON THE RIGHTS OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLES*

The *UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* is a global minimum standard for upholding the rights of Indigenous peoples. All laws, policies, and programmes enacted by any government must meet these minimum standards.

This requirement is affirmed in the federal implementation legislation adopted in June 2021. The *Act respecting the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* states that the *Declaration* is “a universal international human rights instrument with application in Canadian law” and that the Government of Canada “must, in consultation and cooperation with Indigenous peoples, take

A universal international human rights instrument with application in Canadian law

all measures necessary to ensure that the laws of Canada are consistent with the *Declaration*.”

Many Indigenous commentators have noted that although Indigenous peoples are clearly central to the SDGs and their implementation,

key targets do not accurately reflect Indigenous realities and rights. For example, traditional occupations such as Indigenous hunting, trapping and fishing traditions, which embody sustainability, are not explicitly referred to in the SDGs.

Interpreting the SDGs so that they are consistent with the minimum standards set out in the *UN Declaration* can help fill these gaps and resolve potential concerns. Consistency with the *UN Declaration* requires respect for the decision-making authority of the governance structures chosen by Indigenous peoples. Consistency also requires federal, provincial and territorial governments to obtain the free, prior and informed consent of Indigenous peoples on decisions impacting their rights.

The relationship between the *UN Declaration*, sustainable development, and the SDGs is considered in greater detail in a separate factsheet.



CONTRIBUTERS:

The Coalition for the Human Rights of Indigenous Peoples would like to acknowledge the following individuals who participated in the conversations in the Fall of 2021 leading to the creation of this factsheet.

Craig Benjamin, Ana Collins, Kenneth Deer, Ellen Gabriel, Grand Chief Mandy Gull Masty, Brenda Gunn, Paul Joffe, Laila Kasuri, Kiera Ladner, Sheryl Lightfoot, Keira Mann, Kirby Muldoe, Jennifer Preston, Dalee Sambo Dorough, Mark Smith, Priscilla Settee, Mariam Wallet Med Aboubadkrine

THIS FACTSHEET IS ENDORSED BY:

Amnistie internationale Canada francophone,
Assembly of First Nations,
BC Assembly of First Nations,
BC Treaty Commission,
Canadian Friends Service Committee (Quakers),
First Nations Summit,
Grand Council of the Crees (Eeyou Istchee)/
Cree Nation Government,
Union of BC Indian Chiefs

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS:

1. End poverty in all its forms everywhere
2. End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture
3. Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages
4. Ensure inclusive and quality education for all and promote lifelong learning
5. Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls
6. Ensure access to water and sanitation for all
7. Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all
8. Promote inclusive and sustainable economic growth, employment and decent work for all
9. Build resilient infrastructure, promote sustainable industrialization and foster innovation
10. Reduce inequality within and among countries
11. Make cities inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable
12. Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns
13. Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts
14. Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources
15. Sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, halt and reverse land degradation, halt biodiversity loss
16. Promote just, peaceful and inclusive societies
17. Revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development

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