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Viewpoint
Building the Field of Sustainable Development
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VIEWPOINT

Building the Field of Sustainable Development

To help achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), foundations should apply last century's patient approaches to field building in international security.

BY SARAH E. MENDELSON

Not long ago, at the dawn of the internet age, philanthropy operated differently. News of grants traveled slowly, through the US postal system. Donors appeared more patient, less interested in instant measurement, and more committed to long-term investments, including in people.

I benefited from this era. In the 1980s and 1990s while I was in graduate school, major US foundations collaborated to jointly invest in the next generation of scholars as well as in academic institutions and ideas. They underwrote fellowships at world-class universities, where our networks grew to include people who would become friends and mentors for life; invitations to convenings around the world to help grow a new cohort of researchers and practitioners; and the time to develop expertise that ultimately informed efforts inside and outside government to shape policies. Their investments slowly but surely revitalized a field of inquiry with fresh topics and a greater diversity of researchers.

Contrast that with today. Pick up the latest *Stanford Social Innovation Review* and you see philanthropy dedicated to “big bets,” “scaling up,” “failing fast,” “quick wins,” “grand challenges,” and “impact investing.” These big-and-fast approaches all reflect the era in which we now live, but they may not be best suited to the challenges we currently face.

Consider, for example, the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)—17 global objectives to create a more equitable and viable planet by 2030. What if foundations applied the kinds of field-building exercises that they conducted in international

security to sustainable development? What if, as part of their SDG portfolios, foundations were investing not only in quick wins but also in young people and educational institutions to develop the next generation of experts—what I call Cohort 2030?

As a beneficiary of such field building, I maintain that to grow the workforce that will advance the SDGs—particularly those associated with building peaceful, just, and inclusive societies (“the SDG16+ agenda”)—foundations ought to bring back approaches they relied on decades ago.

THREE LESSONS

The SDGs represent a historic, multiyear process in which the international community identified the needs and the opportunities of a broadened agenda on sustainable

development. That process, which my US Department of State and USAID colleagues and I participated in, included input from academics, governments around the world, civil society organizations, and, notably, millions of young people. (Perhaps it is no coincidence that the lead US negotiator through much of that SDG agenda-building process and my predecessor at the US Mission to the United Nations [USUN], Elizabeth Cousens, also benefited from the same field-building exercise in international security.)

As with the effort to broaden and diversify the field of international security, the SDGs, the framework adopted in 2015 by UN member states, will require a transformation in the training of young people. We need academic programs that break down the silos of those working, for example, in international development and those in domestic public policy. We are well past the post-Vietnam era that triggered the earlier field-building exercise but in perhaps an equally grave geopolitical moment. The scale of threats today to the global order, the polarization inside societies, the clashes between open and closed systems, the decline in democracy, and the crisis in human rights are potentially catastrophic. Achieving the SDGs will require ambitious new thinking developed through older, more patient approaches.

We fortunately know how the field-building exercise in international security unfolded. Among other published work on the topic, the MacArthur/Carnegie Group on International Security supported an influential 1984 study led by former Ford Foundation President McGeorge Bundy. Titled “To Make a Difference: A Report on Needs and Opportunities for Philanthropic Action in the Field of International Security,” the report can be found today in The Rockefeller Foundation's archives. Scholars and the



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major foundations believed that the field suffered from a post-Vietnam hangover: It was unpopular; focused too narrowly on great-power relations; and overlooked the many transnational forces that would challenge global security, such as forced migration, climate change, and the role of technology.

Specifically, the intellectual history of the field-building exercise in international security yields three lessons for growing the cohort of leaders who will help advance the SDGs through 2030 and beyond.

First, redefining the field emerged then as a top priority for philanthropy. While the world has agreed upon a 2030 agenda, there is a lot of work to do to ensure that the field of sustainable development is better understood. Sustainability emerged in the 1970s and 1980s as primarily an environmental issue, and to this day, most people equate sustainability with environmental concern. The SDGs, by contrast, represent a total reimagining of development and sustainability. They are universal and apply to all of us—development happens everywhere—and they reflect a more complex, far-reaching definition of sustainability. To create a sustainable world, violence and corruption must be reduced, inequality must be tackled, access to justice must expand, and people must not be bought and sold. Today, sustainability is not only about energy and land use, just as international security is not only about nuclear weapons.

Second, recognizing the need for collective action exemplified that era of philanthropy. Around certain SDG clusters—those relating to climate, for example—donor dialogues and philanthropic collective action is occurring. This development is welcome, but it does not yet include, for example, the SDG16+ agenda. In fact, many philanthropies that have traditionally funded human rights work have stopped altogether or continue to invest in it but without aligning their work with the SDGs. In this way, they are missing the opportunity to broaden and refresh field building in human rights and social justice. On this issue of collective

action, the Bundy report offers the following observation, which remains relevant:

Foundations, like universities, governments, and even individuals, do not always find it easy to work well together when each in its own way would like somehow to be the best of its kind. Yet the history of organized philanthropy strongly argues that while honorable competition of this kind is understandable ... competition based on mutual ignorance can often lead to avoidable inefficiency.

Third, patient philanthropy acknowledges the long game and focuses on generational change. Today's venture capitalization of philanthropy has happened in parallel with the rise of Silicon Valley and the global spread of information technology. Longer-term investments and patient philanthropy have largely given way to a desire to be seen as innovative, supporting technocratic solutions implemented with speed. But many of the problems we confront today related to peace, justice, and security do not lend themselves to quick or easy fixes. Fast philanthropy should be balanced by a renewed commitment to patient philanthropy to tackle fundamental, persistent problems. In particular, field-building an area of expertise and growing a new cohort requires extensive practice, patience, and support for multiple, iterative opportunities for intellectual and professional growth.

A GENERATION OF SDG LEADERS

Some of the big US foundations might well argue that they have not substantially shifted from long-term investments. In a recent newsletter, Darren Walker, president of the Ford Foundation, notes the need to “invest in the architects and the architecture of progress—the individuals, ideas, and institutions that make change happen.” The Carnegie Corporation continues to support networks of scholars and research at universities. No doubt there are other examples. Overall, however, the collaborative investments to educate a next generation of scholars and practitioners at a number of the world's leading universities

and research institutes have largely fallen out of fashion.

Yet the slower, generational approaches have continued relevance in the 21st century, even if they do not immediately generate results. For example, a grant from one foundation helped me develop expertise in combating human trafficking that I applied more than a decade later to shaping new USAID policies. I eventually helped organize the first-ever session in 70 years on the issue at the UN Security Council, featuring a young Yezidi, Nadia Murad, who had survived enslavement by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2018 for her efforts to end sexual violence in armed conflict. Investments in young leaders can drive outcomes that do not show up on a dashboard or a results framework but shape US foreign or domestic policies decades later.

If foundations pivoted to patient philanthropy on the SDGs, they would include support for pre- and postdoctoral fellowships and create research consortia, as they did in international security. Universities need to be teaching and researching the broader concept of sustainable development embodied in the SDGs that transcends a narrow environmental focus—just as international security as a field grew beyond great-power rivalries and nuclear deterrence—and they may need a nudge from philanthropy to do so. For example, foundations could promote the next generation of human rights experts trained not only in the traditional legal frameworks that have dominated the field but also in the wide variety of economic and social rights that the SDGs seek to address.

In short, donors can help facilitate SDG literacy in universities in the United States and all over the world. By supporting collaborations among young scholars, practitioners, and universities, when 2030 arrives, we will have a greater chance to generate an “SDG effect” that will help to realize these global goals. If done robustly, it could include the growth of peaceful, just, and inclusive societies, led partly by the Cohort 2030 that they helped develop. ■