

Report 4

Reports of the Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development to the Parliament of Canada

Lessons Learned from Canada's Record on Sustainable Development



2025



Office of the
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of Canada

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Summary

Achieving sustainable development will require deep societal transformation. Over the past 30 years, Canada has set national targets and contributed to setting international targets through, for example, the Federal Sustainable Development Strategy and commitments to international initiatives such as the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals. When Canada's [Federal Sustainable Development Act](#) came into force in 2008, the country established itself as an international leader in providing a legislative base for advancing sustainable development.

Despite these actions and commitments, Canada has had difficulty making substantial improvements in its performance toward sustainable development. Drawing on past audits by the Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development and the Auditor General of Canada, and interviews with experts, in this report we identified that Canada could learn from its efforts to date on sustainable development by

- strengthening leadership at the national level to drive a more strategic and coordinated approach to sustainable development
- establishing an integrated approach to sustainable development planning that unifies policy direction and enhances implementation
- enhancing collaboration and inviting all actors to the decision-making table
- engaging with Indigenous governments and peoples and honouring Canada's commitments to them
- ensuring reporting is consistent and that indicators to measure progress are appropriate
- taking a long-term approach that protects future generations and ensures continuous progress

With decisive, concerted action, Canada can make significant progress on its sustainable development agenda and foster a sustainable future for generations to come.

About the report

The Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development and the Auditor General of Canada have been reporting to Parliament on Canada's performance toward sustainable development since 1998 (see [Appendix A](#)). In this report, we looked at 3 decades of Canadian efforts to foster sustainable development. We reviewed our previous audit recommendations and interviewed experts in the field, former government officials, and former Commissioners of the Environment and Sustainable Development.

Drawing from this collective experience, this report identifies trends in Canada's efforts, along with 6 lessons learned from Canada's record on sustainable development. This is not an audit report. Instead, this report provides a historical perspective on Canada's attempts to implement sustainable development. This will assist parliamentarians in holding government to account in meeting its international and domestic sustainable development commitments. This report also aims to build Canadians' awareness of the importance of fostering sustainable development.

In 2026, the federal government of Canada is required to issue its sixth Federal Sustainable Development Strategy. As the government embarks on drafting its next strategy, and to help frame future discussions and actions on the sustainable development agenda, this report provides

information, analysis, and critical questions for parliamentarians to consider. Improving Canada’s approach to fostering sustainable development will increase the chances of meeting its goals and improving the quality of life of current and future Canadians by, for example, reducing poverty and inequities, advancing Indigenous reconciliation, encouraging economic prosperity, conserving biodiversity, and addressing climate change.

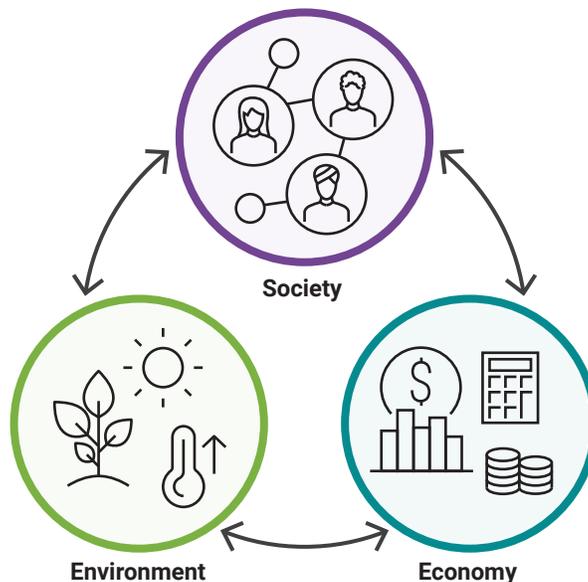
The challenge of sustainable development

Sustainable development is vital for the well-being of humans and the planet

The well-being of our societies and Earth’s natural systems depends on more sustainable approaches to interacting with each other and the environment. Ever-rising consumption has led to increased demand for food, water, energy, land, and other resources. This demand has strained the Earth’s finite resources and ecosystems, leading to global issues such as climate change, pollution, biodiversity loss, conflict, poverty, and hunger.

In response, the concept of “sustainable development” has emerged as an internationally accepted approach to improving humankind’s stewardship and ensuring an inclusive and equitable distribution of the planet’s resources. Sustainable development aims to ensure that we meet our current needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet theirs. It requires the integration of social, economic, and environmental factors into policies, programs, and decision making ([Exhibit 4.1](#)). If properly implemented across governments and society, sustainable development will improve the quality of life of current and future Canadians.

Exhibit 4.1—Recognition of the interconnected nature of social, economic, and environmental factors is important to support decision making and coordinated action



[Read the Exhibit 4.1 text description](#)

Nevertheless, implementing sustainable development is proving to be an immense challenge in Canada and around the world. Sustainable development requires systemic and societal change across all sectors, nations, and peoples. It requires adopting more collaborative structures, especially among actors and sectors that do not normally work together. Such a shift presents significant challenges to decision makers as it requires reformed institutional frameworks, strengthened capacities, high-level political commitment, and an inclusive and integrated vision of a sustainable future.

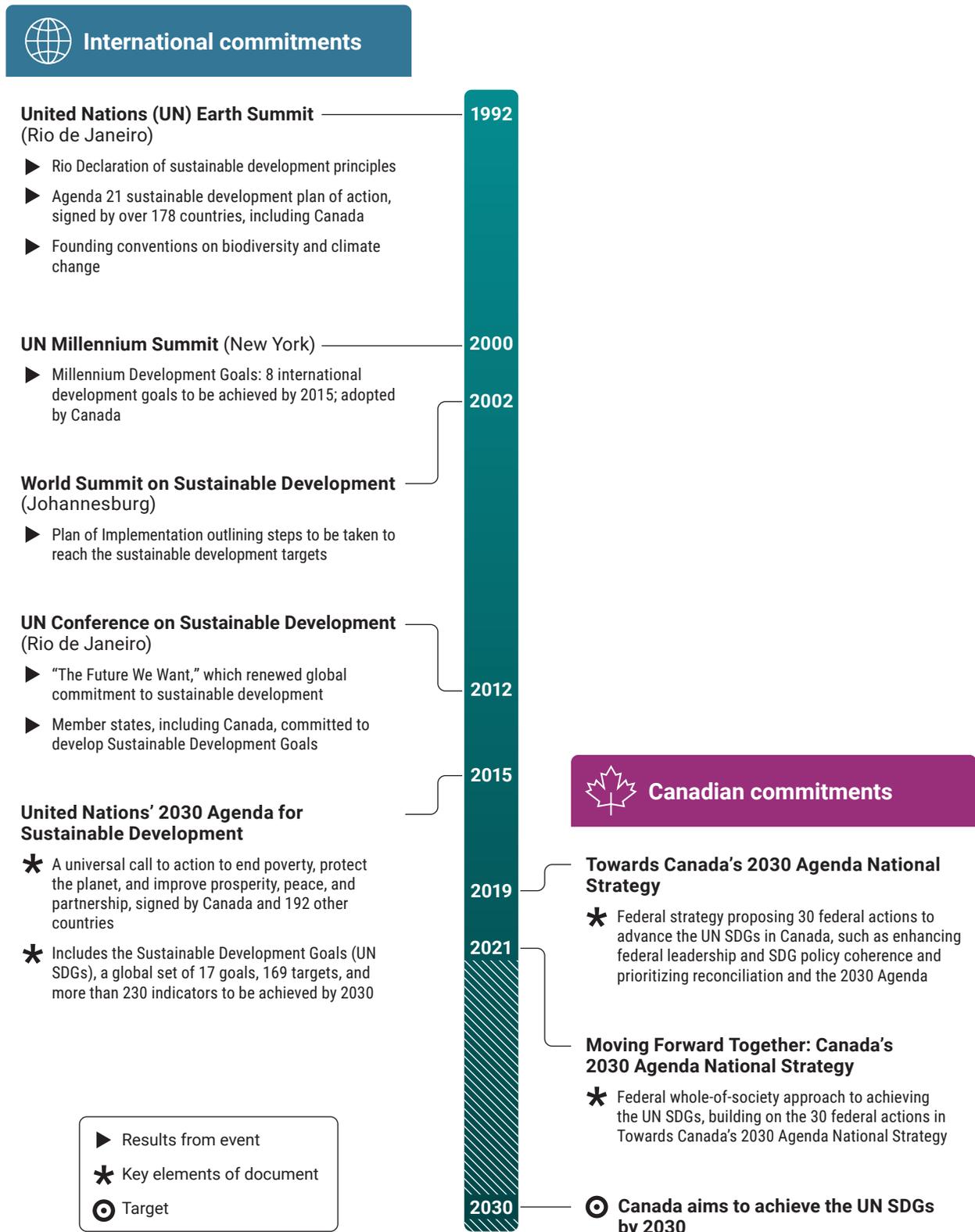
Canada's commitments and actions on sustainable development

At the federal level, the government has committed to advancing sustainable development through the [Federal Sustainable Development Act](#) and internationally through the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The deadline for achieving the international Sustainable Development Goals is 2030 and the deadlines for many of Canada's domestic targets are earlier than that.

Over 30 years of international collective action on sustainable development

International recognition of the need to address environmental stewardship and development in an integrated way dates back to the 1972 United Nations Conference on the Human Environment. However, the term "sustainable development" did not begin to gain momentum until the release of the Our Common Future report of the World Commission on Environment and Development (also known as the Brundtland Report) in 1987. The Brundtland Report highlighted that environmental stewardship and development are inextricably linked and that we must meet present needs without compromising the future by integrating economic development, environmental protection, social justice, and inclusion. The report emphasized that "sustainable development must rest on political will." In 1992, Brazil hosted the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, also known as the Earth Summit, in Rio de Janeiro. Since then, there has been concerted global action on sustainable development ([Exhibit 4.2](#)).

Exhibit 4.2—Major recent international and Canadian commitments to sustainable development



Source: Based on information from various United Nations and Canadian government documents

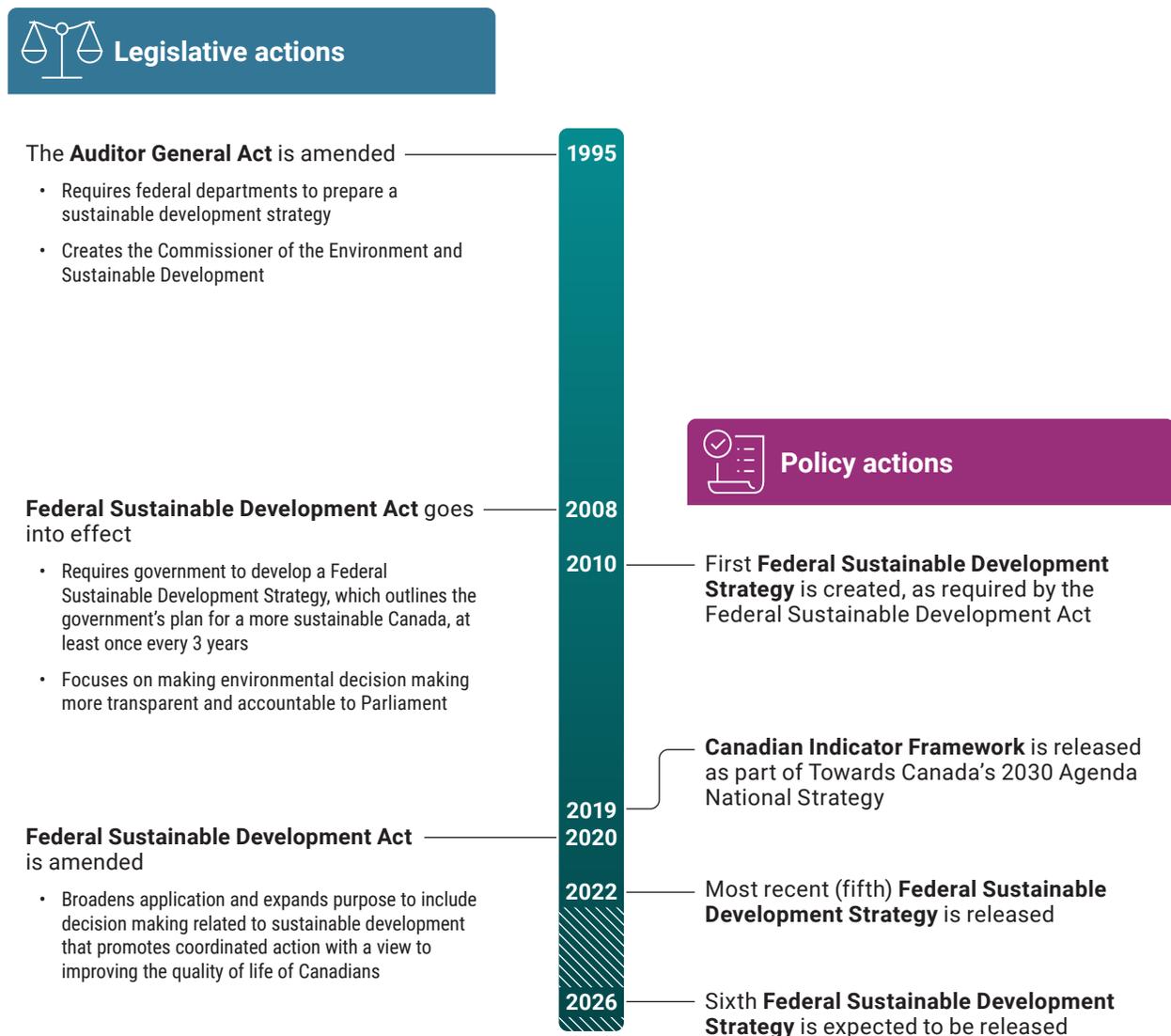
[Read the Exhibit 4.2 text description](#)

Currently, the main source of guidance for many efforts to implement sustainable development in Canada and across the world is the United Nations’ 2030 Agenda and its 17 [Sustainable Development Goals](#). In 2022, Canada’s sitting Prime Minister was appointed as co-chair of the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals Advocates group, which demonstrates the leadership expected from Canada in advancing the 2030 Agenda at home and abroad.

Federal actions on sustainable development

Since the 1992 Earth Summit, the federal government has taken several legislative and policy actions to implement sustainable development ([Exhibit 4.3](#)).

Exhibit 4.3—Key federal legislative and policy actions on sustainable development



Source: Based on information from various federal legislation and documents

[Read the Exhibit 4.3 text description](#)

The Federal Sustainable Development Act and the [Auditor General Act](#) set out several principles to guide sustainable development decision making in Canada ([Exhibit 4.4](#)).

Exhibit 4.4—Principles to guide sustainable development decision making found in the Federal Sustainable Development Act and/or the Auditor General Act

Principles of sustainable development	Icon	Principles of sustainable development	Icon
Integrating environmental, economic, and social factors in planning and decision making		Collaborating with interested parties	
Protecting ecosystems and showing respect for nature		Respecting intergenerational equity and the needs of future generations	
Incorporating the precautionary principle, polluter pays, pollution prevention, and cost internalization		Promoting equity	
Protecting human health		Promoting openness and transparency	
Conserving cultural heritage		Meeting international and domestic obligations	
Involving Indigenous peoples		Developing objectives and strategies for meeting targets, using indicators to report on progress, and promoting continuous improvement	

[Read the Exhibit 4.4 text description](#)

The current [Federal Sustainable Development Strategy](#), covering 2022 to 2026, includes 17 goals and 50 targets, supported by 114 short-term milestones and 162 implementation strategies. The 2022 to 2026 strategy was the first time the federal goals aligned with the 17 United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals ([Exhibit 4.5](#)). All federal departments and agencies are responsible for implementing sustainable development and advancing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development within their areas of responsibility. Under the Federal Sustainable Development

Act, approximately 100 federal organizations are mandated to prepare their own Departmental Sustainable Development Strategies that comply with and contribute to the Federal Sustainable Development Strategy.

Exhibit 4.5—The federal sustainable development perspectives on the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), as set out in the Federal Sustainable Development Strategy

Federal perspective on the United Nations’ SDG	United Nations’ SDG	Federal perspective on the United Nations’ SDG	United Nations’ SDG
Goal 1 Reduce poverty in Canada in all its forms	1 NO POVERTY 	Goal 8 Encourage inclusive and sustainable economic growth in Canada	8 DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH 
Goal 2 Support a healthier and more sustainable food system	2 ZERO HUNGER 	Goal 9 Foster innovation and green infrastructure in Canada	9 INDUSTRY, INNOVATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE 
Goal 3 Support mental health and adopt healthy behaviours	3 GOOD HEALTH AND WELL-BEING 	Goal 10 Advance reconciliation with Indigenous peoples and take action to reduce inequality	10 REDUCED INEQUALITIES 
Goal 4 Promote knowledge and skills for sustainable development	4 QUALITY EDUCATION 	Goal 11 Improve access to affordable housing, clean air, transportation, parks, and green spaces, as well as cultural heritage in Canada	11 SUSTAINABLE CITIES AND COMMUNITIES 
Goal 5 Champion gender equality	5 GENDER EQUALITY 	Goal 12 Reduce waste and transition to zero-emission vehicles	12 RESPONSIBLE CONSUMPTION AND PRODUCTION 
Goal 6 Ensure clean and safe water for all Canadians	6 CLEAN WATER AND SANITATION 	Goal 13 Take action on climate change and its impacts	13 CLIMATE ACTION 
Goal 7 Increase Canadians’ access to clean energy	7 AFFORDABLE AND CLEAN ENERGY 	Goal 14 Conserve and protect Canada’s oceans	14 LIFE BELOW WATER 

Federal perspective on the United Nations’ SDG	United Nations’ SDG	Federal perspective on the United Nations’ SDG	United Nations’ SDG
<p>Goal 15</p> <p>Protect and recover species, conserve Canadian biodiversity</p>	<p>15 LIFE ON LAND</p> 	<p>Goal 17</p> <p>Strengthen partnerships to promote global action on sustainable development</p>	<p>17 PARTNERSHIPS FOR THE GOALS</p> 
<p>Goal 16</p> <p>Promote a fair and accessible justice system, enforce environmental laws, and manage impacts</p>	<p>16 PEACE, JUSTICE AND STRONG INSTITUTIONS</p> 	<p>Source: Adapted from the 2022–2026 Federal Sustainable Development Strategy and Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, United Nations</p>	

[Read the Exhibit 4.5 text description](#)

Linking national commitments to domestic actions

In 2017, to track progress on the Sustainable Development Goals and the targets of the 2030 Agenda, the United Nations member states agreed to the Global Indicator Framework, designed to measure progress on implementing the goals at a global level. Successful implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals requires that each country define what constitutes success in its own national context. Canada released its domestic framework, the Canadian Indicator Framework, in June 2019 as part of Towards Canada’s 2030 Agenda National Strategy to help measure progress on the federal government’s ambitions and targets alongside other measurement frameworks. For example, the Canadian Environmental Sustainability Indicators program helps measure progress toward environmental sustainability and reports to Canadians on the state of the environment.

The role of the Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development

Audit offices play an important role in monitoring national progress on the 2030 Agenda and specific Sustainable Development Goals as well as auditing the coherence of public policies implementing these goals. In 2017, the Office of the Auditor General of Canada committed to examining how federal organizations are contributing to the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals. Under the Auditor General Act, the Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development assists the Auditor General in performing the duties of the Auditor General related to the environment and sustainable development. Additionally, the Commissioner

of the Environment and Sustainable Development monitors and reports on the progress of designated federal organizations that are subject to the Federal Sustainable Development Act. The Commissioner does the following:

- [Reviews](#) the draft of the government's next Federal Sustainable Development Strategy.
- [Reviews](#) the government's progress reports on the Federal Sustainable Development Strategy.
- Every year, [monitors and reports](#) on how well selected departments and agencies are supporting, through their own sustainable development strategies, the achievement of the targets and goals set out in the government's Federal Sustainable Development Strategy.

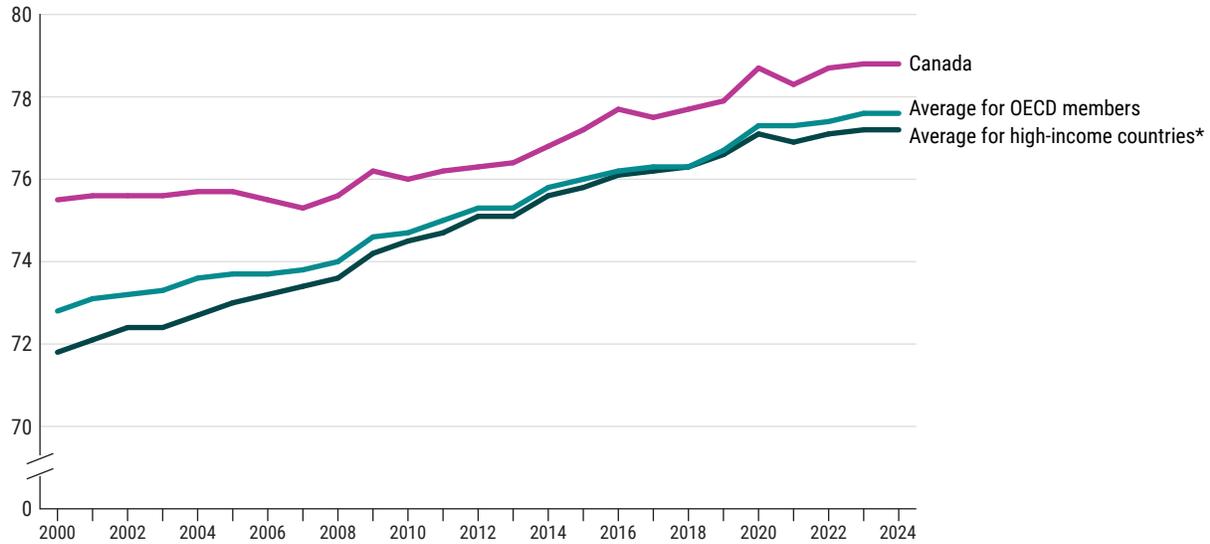
The Office of the Auditor General of Canada (OAG) has undertaken several audits related to the federal government's efforts to foster sustainable development ([Appendix A](#)). In addition to the audit reports on sustainable development matters that the OAG presented to Parliament, either by the Auditor General or the Commissioner, the OAG has covered sustainable development matters in reports to northern legislatures, special examinations of Crown corporations, and the commentaries on financial audits. The OAG regularly tracks how its reports assess progress toward the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals and uses this information to monitor trends, take stock of which goals have been assessed in the past, and consider future focus areas. Since 2017, the OAG has required that audit reports issued by both the Auditor General and the Commissioner identify the sustainable development goals and associated targets that are relevant to the subject matter of the audit. The OAG's audit selection and planning process also considers the importance of, and risks associated with, sustainable development.

Canada's performance on sustainable development

International ranking of Canada's performance on sustainable development. Over the past 2 decades, when compared with other countries with advanced economies, Canada has been slower to make progress in achieving the sustainable, peaceful, resilient, inclusive, and prosperous world envisioned by the 2030 Agenda. According to the Sustainable Development Solutions Network global performance ranking of 193 member states, a widely used measurement of a country's total progress toward achieving the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, in 2024 Canada ranked 25th, with a score of 78.83 out of 100 (with 100 meaning all Sustainable Development Goals have been achieved). While Canada's score has been above average for member countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and high-income countries ([Exhibit 4.6](#)), it is below average for Group of Seven (G7) countries ([Exhibit 4.7](#)).

Exhibit 4.6—Canada's performance in achieving the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals has been higher than the average for members of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and high-income countries

Sustainable Development Goal Index score



* Defined by the World Bank as countries with a gross national income per capita of US\$14,005 or more.

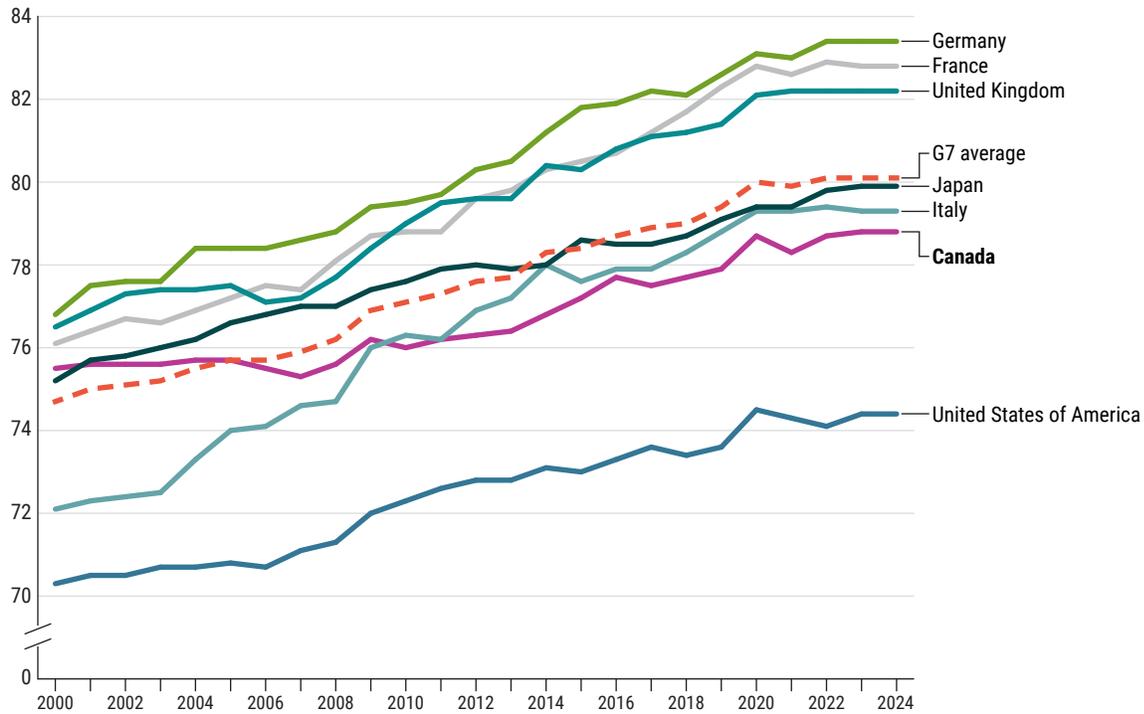
Note: 2000 is the earliest year for which data is available.

Source: Based on information from Sachs, J.D., Lafortune, G., Fuller, G. (2024). The SDGs and the UN Summit of the Future. Sustainable Development Report 2024. Paris: SDSN, Dublin: Dublin University Press

[Read the Exhibit 4.6 text description](#)

Exhibit 4.7—Canada's performance in achieving the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals has been generally lower than the average for the Group of Seven (G7) countries

**Sustainable Development Goal
Index score**



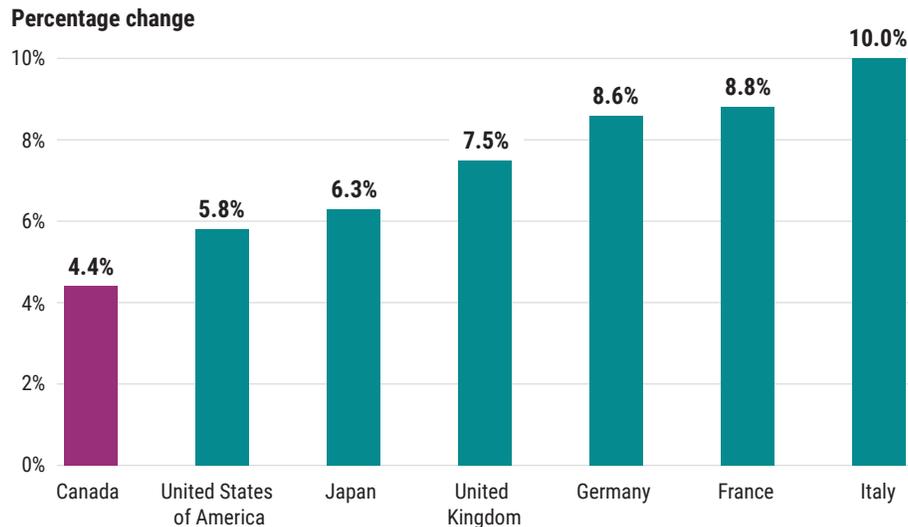
Note: 2000 is the earliest year for which data is available.

Source: Based on information from Sachs, J.D., Lafortune, G., Fuller, G. (2024). The SDGs and the UN Summit of the Future. Sustainable Development Report 2024. Paris: SDSN, Dublin: Dublin University Press

[Read the Exhibit 4.7 text description](#)

When it comes to how much countries have improved their sustainable development score since 2000, the first year for which data is available, Canada has made the least improvement among G7 countries, such that now it is below average ([Exhibit 4.8](#)).

Exhibit 4.8—Canada had the lowest rate of improvement from 2000 to 2024 of the Group of Seven (G7) countries in meeting the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals



Source: Based on information from Sachs, J.D., Lafortune, G., Fuller, G. (2024). The SDGs and the UN Summit of the Future. Sustainable Development Report 2024. Paris: SDSN, Dublin: Dublin University Press

Read the Exhibit 4.8 text description

According to the Sustainable Development Solutions Network global performance ranking for 2024, Canada has achieved or is on track to meet only 47% of the 168 targets associated with the 17 United Nations' 2030 Agenda Sustainable Development Goals. For example, Canada has seen improvements on the following goals:

- Sustainable Development Goal 1: No poverty
- Sustainable Development Goal 9: Industry, innovation and infrastructure
- Sustainable Development Goal 11: Sustainable cities and communities

However, Canada has made limited progress on 26% and worsening progress on 27% of the global targets. It has struggled in its implementation of the following goals:

- Sustainable Development Goal 2: Zero hunger
- Sustainable Development Goal 12: Responsible consumption and production
- Sustainable Development Goal 13: Climate action
- Sustainable Development Goal 15: Life on land

As a global responsibility, domestic implementation of the 2030 Agenda Sustainable Development Goals should not compromise other countries' ability to achieve them. This concept, known as spillover effects, is a measure of the impact that a country's actions have, either positive or negative, on other countries' abilities to achieve the 2030 Agenda Sustainable Development Goals. As an example, a country may import industrial products that generate high emissions of greenhouse gases and other pollutants instead of producing them locally. This will improve the importing country's domestic environmental performance at the expense of that in the exporting country. High-income countries, including Canada, tend to generate larger negative international spillovers,

driven principally by trade-related spillovers such as unsustainable consumption. According to the Sustainable Development Solutions Network global performance ranking, Canada's spillover score for 2024 was 68 out of 100 (a higher score meaning that a country causes more positive and fewer negative spillover effects). While Canada ranks third compared with other G7 countries, Canada faces challenges with impacts embodied through trade, such as greenhouse gas emissions, nitrogen emissions and air pollution associated with imports, and exports of hazardous pesticides and plastic waste.

Office of the Auditor General of Canada assessments of Canada's performance. Through audits and reviews over the years, the Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development and the Auditor General of Canada have examined the federal government's preparedness and implementation of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, implementation of select goals and targets, and progress of specific departments in implementing their sustainable development strategies ([Appendix A](#)). These reports identified shortcomings that persist today such as the need for a strong national strategy and implementation plan, clear accountability, public awareness, and collaboration among all levels of government and stakeholders.

Lessons learned

In undertaking this look at 3 decades of sustainable development efforts in Canada, a variety of lessons emerge. In turn, these lessons—along with some examples from other jurisdictions—suggest opportunities for Canada to turn its sustainable development commitments into lasting results for present and future Canadians. Many of the lessons that emerged are interrelated and complementary.

Lesson 1: Stronger leadership can drive a more strategic and coordinated approach to sustainable development

The Challenge

Coordinated action across the Government of Canada to advance sustainable development is included in the purpose of the [Federal Sustainable Development Act](#). This requires federal leadership to establish a more strategic and coordinated approach to sustainable development. Structures could be created or strengthened to facilitate this coordinated action. Currently, no central agency ensures that departments work toward a common goal and are held accountable for their contributions. Over 100 federal government organizations have an increasing number of responsibilities and priorities related to sustainable development. Competing mandates and responsibilities can lead to duplication or gaps in policies and decisions. For example, the Federal Sustainable Development Strategy is led by Environment and Climate Change Canada and the implementation of the 2030 Agenda Sustainable Development Goals is led by Employment and Social Development Canada. As non-central agencies, these 2 departments cannot compel other federal organizations to implement actions related to sustainable development under their respective mandates. This has led to a lack of coordination, duplication of efforts, and a siloed approach.

Canada has struggled to move beyond a fragmented approach to sustainable development, with a tendency to focus on reporting activities rather than the actual outcomes of sustainable development initiatives. For example, the Federal Sustainable Development Strategy has often been a vehicle to compile and showcase what the federal government is already doing on sustainable development rather than to strategically address actual sustainable development in a proactive manner.

Opportunities

The Federal Sustainable Development Act requires that a committee of the King's Privy Council for Canada oversee the development and implementation of the Federal Sustainable Development Strategy. Currently, this role is filled by the Cabinet Committee on Economy, Inclusion and Climate "A," which discusses sustainable development periodically alongside other programs and legislation for which it is responsible.

Some countries have established a role within a central body with the authority to coordinate sustainable development efforts, which could be a model to overcome the challenges of Canada's current federal system. Several Nordic countries such as Sweden, Finland, and Denmark are frequently cited as leaders in sustainable development because their sustainable development objectives are integrated across government and society, favouring policy coherence. Finland's Committee for the Future, as an example, has a significant role in managing sustainable development issues by integrating long-term perspectives into policymaking and ensuring that sustainability is a core consideration in future planning. This parliamentary body in Finland operates independently, choosing its own agenda and initiatives.

Considerations for parliamentarians

- How can the federal government take a more strategic and coordinated approach to advance sustainable development initiatives in Canada?
- How can central agencies be more involved to reduce the fragmentation that has stalled progress?

Lesson 2: An integrated approach to sustainable development planning is critical to unify policy direction and enhance implementation

The Challenge

Policies and programs that consider the positive outcomes on the environment, economy, and society and strategically outline goals, targets, and actions will lead to more effective, inclusive, and accountable decision making that helps to ensure that progress in 1 area supports the others. For example, addressing environmental issues such as resource depletion and climate change can have significant benefits in terms of economic stability and social equity if these dimensions are recognized and tackled together. The federal government has not brought together all of its policies and actions toward sustainable development, which has led to a lack of coherence, coordination, and accountable targets and confusion among the implementing organizations and the Canadian public. The federal government has 3 overarching but uncoordinated plans that set out goals,

targets, or actions related to sustainable development rather than just 1 well-designed and coordinated strategy ([Exhibit 4.9](#)). The multiplicity of sustainable development frameworks could lead to efforts that are fragmented and ineffective.

Exhibit 4.9—Canada has 3 overarching but uncoordinated plans in effect that set out sustainable development goals, targets, and actions

Name	Purpose	Goals, targets, and/or actions
Federal Sustainable Development Strategy, 2022–2026	The federal government’s primary strategy, which outlines the government’s vision for integrating sustainable development at a national level into decision making.	17 goals, 50 targets, and more than 50 indicators, supported by 114 milestones and 162 implementation strategies across various sectors
Moving Forward Together: Canada’s 2030 Agenda National Strategy, 2021	Canada’s national strategy for action on the United Nations’ 2030 Agenda.	30 federal government actions to advance progress on the 2030 Agenda
Quality of Life Framework for Canada, 2021	A framework to measure and improve the well-being of Canadians by incorporating a broad range of indicators into government decision making and budgeting. Developed by the Department of Finance Canada and publicly released in Budget 2021, the framework aims to go beyond traditional economic measures like gross domestic product to capture what truly matters to Canadians.	84 indicators organized into 5 domains: prosperity; health; society; environment; and good governance. It also applies 2 cross-cutting lenses: fairness and inclusion, and sustainability and resilience

In addition, there remain gaps in the integration of environmental, economic, and social factors within the Federal Sustainable Development Strategy. Integration of these 3 dimensions into planning and decision making is 1 of the key principles as outlined in the Federal Sustainable Development Act. As the Minister of Environment and Climate Change is mandated to lead the Federal Sustainable Development Strategy, the focus has often been on the environment. However, the latest Federal Sustainable Development Strategy has aligned its domestic goals within the general framework of the international United Nations’ 2030 Agenda Sustainable Development Goals and has begun to incorporate some social and economic goals and targets.

Opportunities

As the Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development highlighted in the commentary on the draft 2022–2026 Federal Sustainable Development Strategy, there is an opportunity for the federal government to mainstream and harmonize sustainable development decision making, as envisioned by the Federal Sustainable Development Act, by integrating and aligning the various federal plans to achieve policy coherence. Although the federal government uses many plans, the Federal Sustainable Development Strategy is likely the most suitable vehicle for bringing together all the federal government’s sustainable development goals and targets. When

the Federal Sustainable Development Act was passed in 2008, it had a focus on environmental decision making. However, in 2020, revisions to the act broadened the focus to include the promotion of coordinated action across the Government of Canada to advance sustainable development, with a view to improving the quality of life of Canadians.

For the upcoming sixth Federal Sustainable Development Strategy, there is an opportunity to more fully integrate environmental, social, and economic factors. Changes between the draft and the final 2022–2026 Federal Sustainable Development Strategy provide an example. In that case, the target on poverty reduction, which had been narrowly focused on the environment, was revised and improved to focus directly on Canada's poverty rate after the Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development's comments on the draft. A similar approach could be used in other sections of the strategy that do not yet incorporate all relevant social and economic aspects. If that is done, then the Federal Sustainable Development Strategy would become a more comprehensive sustainable development strategy, as envisioned by the revised Federal Sustainable Development Act.

Further, there is an opportunity for Canada to take a whole-of-Canada approach to sustainable development that aligns not only the actions of the federal government but those of the provinces, territories, municipalities, and Indigenous governments and peoples. This would also include ensuring that domestic actions support sustainable development and the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. This work has already begun. For example, Statistics Canada, with the Canadian Indicator Framework, is breaking down silos and going beyond just reporting on federal progress to reporting on Canada's progress as a whole toward achieving the United Nations' 2030 Agenda Sustainable Development Goals. Additionally, the Pan-Canadian Framework on Clean Growth and Climate Change is a federal, provincial, and territorial plan with most of Canada's First Ministers having adopted it in 2016. The framework builds on existing leadership and actions taken individually and collectively by the provinces and territories.

Examples can also be drawn from international partners, such as the Netherlands where the national government emphasizes policy coherence for sustainable development, ensuring that different policy areas support and reinforce each other. This approach helps avoid conflicts among policies and maximizes their positive impact. The country's National Coordinator for the Sustainable Development Goals helps government position the goals in policy and encourages society to work toward the goals, through raising awareness, fostering collaboration between different sectors, and engaging with various stakeholders, including businesses, civil society, and local governments.

Considerations for parliamentarians

- How can Canada's current federal plans be rationalized or integrated to achieve policy coherence and to ensure that actions are complementary?
- How can the recent revisions to the Federal Sustainable Development Act promote coordinated action on sustainable development, and reflect domestic and international obligations in federal policy and decision making?
- How can the next Federal Sustainable Development Strategy better integrate environmental, social, and economic factors?

Lesson 3: Enhanced collaboration among all actors is key for sustainable development initiatives

The Challenge

Achieving sustainable development goals in a federal nation like Canada requires cross-sector partnerships and collaborations. The scale, scope, complexity, and cost of achieving sustainable development are such that no one sector will be able to manage the transformation alone. As 1 of the key principles of sustainable development, the Federal Sustainable Development Act highlights the principle of collaboration. However, there are varying levels of uptake of the 2030 Agenda Sustainable Development Goals by provinces and territories. Collaboration across the federal government, the provinces and territories, municipalities, and Indigenous governments and peoples is crucial to address jurisdictional issues and to create a unified national approach. Provinces, territories, and municipalities have an instrumental role to play in meeting Canada's national and international sustainable development goals given their jurisdiction, role in public investment and policy making, and closer connection to citizens while Indigenous governments and peoples in Canada bring perspectives and practices that are essential for achieving long-term sustainability.

Cross-sector partnerships involving non-governmental organizations, the private sector including financial institutions, and the public are essential to achieving the scale and sustained impact needed. These groups, with their reach spanning entire sectors and professions, are uniquely positioned to drive collective action, support the transition to sustainable practices, and partner with governments to align efforts with policy goals.

Sustainable development must be equitable and inclusive and create solutions that work for those who need them most. To ensure that no Canadian is left behind and that diverse and marginalized interests are represented and reflected, it is crucial that these partnerships also involve Canada's most vulnerable groups. Vulnerable groups may have different perceptions, values, and priorities, leading to diverging perceptions of measures needed to improve their situation. In addition, engaging the Canadian public on sustainable development requires a multi-faceted approach that includes increasing awareness, clearer communication, and a focus on tangible issues that affect people's daily lives. Yet much of the potential for collaboration and coordination among all actors necessary to drive sustainable development action remains untapped.

Opportunities

The federal government encourages input from Canadians, provinces, territories, municipalities, and Indigenous governments and peoples through its consultation processes, public webinars, website, and social media. To increase the chances that the policies of 1 government support the efforts of others, there is an opportunity for the federal government to work with provinces, territories, municipalities, and Indigenous governments and peoples to establish further mechanisms for collaboration, identify potential synergies, encourage setting of shared goals and priorities, promote policy coherence, and co-develop solutions.

There are several international and domestic examples where cross-sectoral partnerships, collaboration, and increasing public awareness are leveraged to drive progress toward achieving sustainable development:

- The federal government's National School Food Program, announced in 2024, aims to work with provinces, territories, and Indigenous partners to expand their existing school food programs, an area otherwise under provincial and territorial responsibility. By working together, the program ensures more children can enjoy the healthy meals they need and thus directly contributes to Canada's progress on Sustainable Development Goal 2: Zero hunger.
- Ghana's Sustainable Development Goal Implementation Coordinating Committee provides technical support to the implementation and monitoring of the 2030 Agenda. This committee brings together representatives from government, civil society organizations, the private sector, and academia to implement the 2030 Agenda Sustainable Development Goals.
- Guatemala has established a national administrative structure to implement and monitor the 2030 Agenda Sustainable Development Goals. This structure includes Indigenous peoples, representatives from civil society, and others, ensuring diverse input and perspectives in decision making. These representatives have the authority to allocate funds for prioritization of specific goals, allowing them to directly influence the implementation of sustainable development initiatives.
- Germany launched the Partners for Review initiative, which is a transnational, multi-stakeholder network designed to support the review and implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The initiative promotes the involvement of various stakeholders, including government representatives, civil society, the private sector, and academia, in the review and follow-up processes.
- In Canada, at the non-governmental organization level, coalitions such as Alliance 2030 are working across a national network to build a partnership model for engaging in the 2030 Agenda Sustainable Development Goals. The Alliance is working with partners to build a searchable database of all the work that is being done across Canada in alignment with the 2030 Agenda.

Considerations for parliamentarians

- How can collaboration among all actors be strengthened to achieve a shared understanding and commitment to sustainable development, to find solutions, and to ensure alignment of policies?
- How can the federal government strengthen Canadians' awareness by connecting sustainable development actions to issues that directly impact people's daily lives, such as housing, health, and affordability?
- How can diverse interests, including those of marginalized communities, be equitably engaged in collaborative efforts to advance sustainable development initiatives?

Lesson 4: Engaging with Indigenous governments and peoples and honouring Canada's commitments to them are crucial to success

The Challenge

Engaging with Indigenous governments and peoples is crucial to Canada's successful implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the central commitment to leave no one behind. Working collaboratively with Indigenous partners to develop an integrated approach to advancing sustainable development supports Canada's commitment to reconciliation and obligation to uphold Indigenous peoples' inherent right to self-determination and honour commitments under modern treaties and self-government agreements. The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples recognizes Indigenous peoples' inherent rights to self-determination and contribution of Indigenous knowledge, cultures, and practices to sustainable and equitable development and emphasizes the importance of consulting and engaging meaningfully. Involvement of Indigenous peoples and promoting equity are key principles of the Federal Sustainable Development Act, which also requires Indigenous representation on the Sustainable Development Advisory Council.

Indigenous communities in Canada face significant health, social, cultural, environmental, and economic challenges, due in part to the impacts of colonialism, such as generational trauma and systemic discrimination. These harms are compounded with challenges from climate change and environmental degradation, especially for Indigenous communities located in remote and northern areas. As a part of Canada's evolving system of cooperative federalism and distinct orders of government, modern treaty and self-government agreement holders exercise rights and jurisdiction in several areas including education, health, and lands, that are key in advancing sustainable development in Canada. Indigenous communities often face challenges such as marginalization, lack of access to resources, and lack of recognition of their rights to land and knowledge. Addressing these challenges requires respect for Indigenous rights and interests and equitable inclusion in decision-making processes. Attempts to involve Indigenous communities and perspectives in sustainable development decision making have included having Indigenous members on advisory councils, specifying relevant actions in the Federal Sustainable Development Strategy, consultation and cooperation to develop the Action Plan to achieve the objectives of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, and supporting the work of Indigenous peoples through the Sustainable Development Goal funding program. Despite these initiatives, Indigenous views do not always play a prominent role in important decision-making processes related to sustainable development.

Opportunities

Indigenous governments and peoples possess a wealth of knowledge, passed down through generations, about working together, education, health, well-being, environmental stewardship, and sustainable practices. Integrating Indigenous knowledge as a lens for examining issues offers valuable opportunities for advancing sustainable development. As well, Indigenous governments and peoples are emerging as leaders of social transformation, with novel approaches to address today's challenges. For the upcoming sixth Federal Sustainable Development Strategy, there is an opportunity to make progress on Canada's commitments to Indigenous peoples and move toward

genuine partnership and participation in decision making, drawing on Indigenous knowledge and governance models, and centering Indigenous perspectives as key elements of sustainable development in Canada.

New Zealand's Zero Carbon Act recognizes the importance of the synergy between Indigenous wisdom and modern science for creating a sustainable future. The legislation emphasizes engagement, recognition, and inclusion of Māori perspectives throughout its development and implementation. The act integrates Indigenous worldviews and ecological knowledge to offer valuable insights into sustainable practices that can complement contemporary environmental strategies. This type of collaboration and integration of Indigenous knowledge could lead to innovative solutions in advancing Canada's domestic and international sustainable development goals.

Considerations for parliamentarians

- How can Indigenous knowledge be better integrated into discussions around sustainable development?
- How can the next Federal Sustainable Development Strategy address socio-economic disparities to ensure that sustainable development benefits all communities, including Indigenous communities?
- How can the federal government engage with Indigenous governments and peoples to co-develop approaches to achieving sustainable development and honouring Canada's commitments?

Lesson 5: Consistent reporting and appropriate indicators are fundamental to tracking the successful implementation of sustainable development

The Challenge

As outlined in the Federal Sustainable Development Act, the principle of setting and meeting objectives, and using indicators to report on progress is fundamental to the successful implementation and monitoring of sustainable development initiatives. To fully implement and monitor progress on sustainable development in Canada, decision makers need information and data that are accurate, timely, sufficiently disaggregated, relevant, accessible, and easy to use. Appropriate indicators can provide crucial guidance for decision making and reveal trends and emerging challenges.

The 2030 Agenda emphasizes that no one is to be left behind in the implementation of the goals. Achieving this requires detailed data, which is broken down, or disaggregated, into smaller segments or groups to extract more specific insights and requires conducting adequate monitoring to ensure that the well-being of affected groups improves and that no other groups are harmed. There are significant challenges related to the need for disaggregated data, particularly concerning Indigenous communities, within the context of sustainable development in Canada. For example, there are often data gaps or data that may not be meaningful or relevant, making it difficult to get a comprehensive picture of the issues facing Indigenous communities. Policy development and implementation should be driven by robust, evidence-based data, so that policymakers can take

action to identify and address disparities to ensure vulnerable communities are not left behind. In addition, there is a need for complementary measurement strategies driven by the affected groups themselves. Providing communities and vulnerable groups with control over the selection and use of data is important for both decision makers designing interventions and for community members stimulating engagement. Current reporting mechanisms often fail to provide specific data for Indigenous communities. This lack of detailed data makes it difficult to assess the actual impacts of sustainable development initiatives on these communities.

In addition to the need for better disaggregated data, there remain challenges with the existence of numerous reporting mechanisms across different levels and departments as well as the lack of consistent data sets over time. This makes it difficult for parliamentarians, the public, and government officials to track progress, identify trends, and understand what is being done. These gaps must be addressed to improve assessments of progress in Canada and globally. Many reports of the Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development have highlighted gaps and a lack of consistency in Canada's monitoring and reporting on sustainable development. For example, our 2021 report [Departmental Progress in Implementing Sustainable Development Strategies—Healthy Coasts and Oceans, Pristine Lakes and Rivers, and Sustainable Food](#) found that performance indicators were often missing or lacking important aspects needed to enable reporting on progress. As a result, the 12 federal departments and agencies audited failed to report results for almost half of the actions presented in their sustainable development strategies. Several audits also point to the failure of departments and agencies to explicitly link their actions to federal targets or the failure to describe how their actions advance the achievement of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals. This lack of clear connection between departmental actions and federal and international goals makes it difficult to determine whether progress is being made.

Opportunities

Statistics Canada launched the Disaggregated Data Action Plan in 2021, which aims to improve the quality and availability of statistics on 4 employment equity population groups: women, Indigenous peoples, people from racialized populations, and people with disabilities. As noted, however, by the United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, in some contexts, civil society organizations and social services may be in a better position than National Statistical Offices to reach marginalized populations and collect data. Similarly, these organizations may be able to advise National Statistical Offices on engagement, participation, and data collection approaches with hard-to-reach populations.

In 2024, Australia published its Framework for Governance of Indigenous Data, which was co-designed with local Indigenous and Torres Strait Islander partners. The framework is designed to ensure that data related to Indigenous populations is collected, managed, and used in a way that respects their rights and interests. Key aspects include emphasis on the importance of Indigenous data sovereignty, ethical guidelines to ensure that data collection and use are conducted in a manner that is respectful and beneficial to Indigenous communities, building the capacity of Indigenous communities to manage and use data effectively, transparency and accountability in data governance practices, and a focus on collaboration among government agencies, Indigenous organizations, and researchers to ensure that data governance practices are inclusive and culturally appropriate. The Australian Government provides resources and tools to support the implementation of these principles and practices.

There is continued and growing awareness of the need to move beyond measuring gross domestic product (GDP) and integrate information on economic, social, and environmental conditions to better measure the well-being and quality of life and progress of nations. Current economic models, including market-based ones such as GDP, generally overlook many aspects of life that drive prosperity and well-being, while not accounting for activities that undermine human and environmental health such as environmental degradation. Many countries are moving to a broader integration of quality of life into the development, implementation, and evaluation of policies. The Government of Canada has been moving in a similar direction. For example, Canada's Quality of Life Framework recognizes the shortcomings of traditional economic indicators as stand-alone measures of the overall well-being of societies. Through its Quality of Life Framework, Canada aims to build a comprehensive view of well-being beyond traditional measures such as GDP to measure and improve the well-being of Canadians including prosperity, health, environment, social cohesion, and good governance.

Iceland and New Zealand have gone a step further by building formal mechanisms to embed their measurement frameworks into government decision making and budgeting processes:

- Iceland's well-being indicators are a set of 40 measures that cover a wide range of social, environmental, and economic factors, and are based on the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals. The Icelandic government uses these indicators to guide policy priorities and strategic planning. For example, the indicators are integrated into the Medium-term Fiscal Strategy Plan, where they are used by the Icelandic government to help set clear objectives for public prosperity and quality of life.
- New Zealand's Wellbeing Budget 2022: A Secure Future is designed to use social and environmental indicators, along with economic and fiscal ones, to guide the government's investment and funding decisions. Cabinet committees work closely together to develop packages of measures within each priority area. All budget proposals are assessed on the difference they would make across a range of economic, social, environmental, and cultural considerations. In addition to the traditional economic and fiscal outlook, the Wellbeing Budget included a wellbeing outlook outlining the rationale for budget decisions.

Considerations for parliamentarians

- What steps can be taken to ensure that Canada's indicators and data on sustainable development matters affecting Indigenous communities are reliable, consistent, and timely?
- In what ways can the federal government support collaboration among Indigenous communities, civil society organizations, and service providers to co-create effective data collection strategies?
- How can Indigenous governments and peoples and the federal government co-develop a framework that upholds data sovereignty, ethical considerations, and the respect of Indigenous rights and interests?
- How can reporting systems and sustainability indicators include Indigenous measures of success—such as cultural and environmental well-being—that reflect Indigenous views on sustainability?
- How can the federal government embed broader well-being measurement frameworks into government decision making and budgeting processes?

- How can the federal government report on progress toward its sustainable development goals and targets in a transparent manner that would give the needed information to decision makers?
- How can the federal government ensure that departmental actions are explicitly linked to federal targets as well as the achievement of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals?

Lesson 6: A long-term approach can ensure continuous progress and promote intergenerational equity

The Challenge

The concept of intergenerational equity and long-term thinking is built into the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the principles of sustainable development within the Federal Sustainable Development Act. The 2030 Agenda envisions that the needs of the present are met without compromising the ability of future generations to meet theirs. To make progress toward long-term sustainability, a fundamental shift in thinking and acting from the perspective of future generations is required. Although a key principle of sustainable development, governments often struggle with long-term problems, as noted in the OAG's 2021 report [Lessons Learned from Canada's Record on Climate Change](#). Sustainable development requires up-front investments with benefits that may not be realized until the future, making it difficult to gain support in the face of short-term election cycles and the need for immediate results. Without a grasp of how different systems are interconnected, it is difficult to foresee and appreciate the long-term consequences of current decisions and to make choices that avoid negative impacts in the future. Government planning cycles favour short-term thinking at the expense of long-term planning. Budget deficits are examples of current decisions that will have financial impacts in the future. The 2022–2026 Federal Sustainable Development Strategy indicates that Canada promotes intergenerational equity through its measures to assess the state and value of ecosystems and the environment, including the Census of Environment, and the natural capital indicator being developed as part of Canada's Quality of Life Framework. However, much work remains to be done to fully integrate the concept of intergenerational equity and long-term thinking.

Federal departments often focus on short-term actions and operational changes, rather than the broader, longer-term considerations of sustainable development. To effectively advance the sustainable development agenda, the federal government needs to enhance the consideration of the needs of both present and future generations. Youth can be a driving force for advancing international and domestic sustainable development actions and are in the best position to understand the problems they face and to offer new ideas and alternative solutions. Including youth perspectives allows for the decisions made today to account for the potential impacts on their future.

Opportunities

We identified examples of how other countries are addressing the intergenerational aspect of sustainable development. For example:

- Wales's Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 requires public bodies to consider the long-term impact of their decisions to prevent persistent problems such as poverty, health inequalities, and climate change. Wales has also established a Future Generations Commissioner for Wales, an independent role responsible for ensuring that the needs of future generations are considered in all policy decisions.
- Finland has established a Committee for the Future, an independent parliamentary body that deliberates on long-term trends and advises lawmakers on issues such as technological advancements, demographics, and climate change, emphasizing the importance of long-term thinking in legislative decision making.
- Costa Rica's General Law for Young People has established a legal framework to include youth in decision making. This legislation has led to the development of several mechanisms that ensure youth participation in decision making such as the establishment of the Vice Ministry of Youth, the National Council of Young Persons, and the National Youth Survey.

Considerations for parliamentarians

- How can the federal government ensure that the interests of future generations are included in decision making?
- How can the federal government better involve youth in sustainable development policies and programs?

Appendix A—Key findings and messages from selected reports of the Commissioner and the Auditor General on Canada's sustainable development performance

Aspects of sustainable development arise in many Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development and Auditor General reports. For example, audit reports issued by both the Auditor General and the Commissioner identify the sustainable development goals and associated targets that are relevant to the subject matter of the audit. This appendix highlights key findings of Commissioner and Auditor General reports in which the focus is on sustainable development.

2024—Departmental Progress in Implementing Sustainable Development Strategies—Clean Energy:

- Canada is not on track and unlikely to meet the energy efficiency target of 600 petajoules by 2030 unless more aggressive action is undertaken.
- While the assessed departments contributed to meeting the government's clean power generation and energy efficiency targets, their contribution was limited as they had not fully implemented their departmental plans, and progress reports had information gaps that made it unclear to what extent the achieved results contributed to the targets.

2023—Departmental Progress in Implementing Sustainable Development Strategies—Zero-Emission Vehicles:

- While there have been some contributions, the government is unlikely to meet its stated targets due to a lack of comprehensive strategic approaches and external barriers.

2022—Comments on the Draft 2022–2026 Federal Sustainable Development Strategy:

- The draft strategy retains its “environmental decision making” rather than a sustainable development focus that will improve Canadians' quality of life.
- Many of the targets in the draft strategy are not measurable, and that, together with performance indicator gaps, the draft strategy as it stands impedes the government's ability to report on progress and demonstrate accountability.
- Targets are not connected to short-term milestones and implementation strategies. Half of the targets are not results-oriented, and many targets carried over from the previous strategy were downgraded.
- The strategy is not well aligned with the targets associated with the social and economic aspects of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals.

2022—Departmental Progress in Implementing Sustainable Development Strategies—Species at Risk:

- While the assessed departments identified actions, their strategies and reporting had gaps, especially in tracking and demonstrating progress toward the federal species-at-risk target and the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 15: Life on Land.

2022—Review of the 2021 Progress Report on the Federal Sustainable Development Strategy:

- For the 2021 Progress Report on the 2019–2022 Federal Sustainable Development Strategy, reporting information was incomplete and untimely for 5 of the 8 targets under the goal of greening government.
- The review noted inconsistencies in reporting: 4 targets mentioned that only “partial data” was available for them. However, information found elsewhere in the report on these same targets stated that there was “no new data.”

2021—Departmental Progress in Implementing Sustainable Development Strategies—Healthy Coasts and Oceans, Pristine Lakes and Rivers, and Sustainable Food:

- While the assessed departments generally aligned their actions with the Federal Sustainable Development Strategy, their progress reporting was often incomplete and unclear, lacking explicit links to federal targets and failing to follow reporting guidelines, which limits the ability to accurately gauge progress toward sustainable development goals.

2021—Implementing the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals:

- Achieving the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals by 2030 will require a strong national implementation plan, complete with clear roles and responsibilities, tools for policy coherence, and more detailed data.

2020—Departmental Progress in Implementing Sustainable Development Strategies—Safe and Healthy Communities:

- The reporting was often unclear or incomplete, particularly concerning outdoor air quality, hindering a comprehensive understanding of the progress made toward sustainable development goals.

2019—Departmental Progress in Implementing Sustainable Development Strategies:

- There was no contribution to meeting the goal of sustainably managed lands and forests in the 2016–2019 Federal Sustainable Development Strategy or clear indication of how progress on targets and actions in departmental plans had contributed to the federal goal and related targets.

2019—Review of the 2018 Progress Report of the Federal Sustainable Development Strategy:

- Nothing from the review led to the conclusion that the information contained in the 2018 Progress Report on the 2016–2019 Federal Sustainable Development Strategy was unfair, except for information relating to 3 of the strategy's goals.

2018—Canada's Preparedness to Implement the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals:

- The Government of Canada was not adequately prepared to implement the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. There was no governance structure and limited national consultation and engagement on the 2030 Agenda. There was no implementation plan with a system to measure, monitor, and report on progress nationally.

2018—Departmental Progress in Implementing Sustainable Development Strategies:

- While progress has been made, some organizations still require further improvement in consistently applying the Cabinet Directive on the Environmental Assessment of Policy, Plan and Program Proposals.

[2017—Departmental Progress in Implementing Sustainable Development Strategies:](#)

- The assessed departments failed to consistently apply the Cabinet Directive on the Environmental Assessment of Policy, Plan and Program Proposals, report on their practices, or strengthen their assessment methods.

[2016—Departmental Progress in Implementing Sustainable Development Strategies:](#)

- The assessed departments had no consistent application of the Cabinet Directive on the Environmental Assessment of Policy, Plan and Program Proposals, had inadequate reporting on the extent and results of strategic environmental assessment practices, and had unsatisfactory progress in meeting departmental sustainable development strategy commitments and the Federal Sustainable Development Strategy commitment to strengthen strategic environmental assessment practices.

[2016—Review of the 2015 Progress Report of the Federal Sustainable Development Strategy:](#)

- The information in the 2015 Progress Report of the Federal Sustainable Development Strategy provided a fair presentation of the government's progress. However, the Progress Report did not always explain why progress had been slow in some areas. In addition, the Progress Report did not present information on how sustainable development had been considered in decision making.

[2015—Departmental Progress in Implementing Sustainable Development Strategies:](#)

- The assessed departments failed to adequately assess and report on environmental effects.

[2014—Departmental Progress in Implementing Sustainable Development Strategies:](#)

- Information on the strategic environmental assessment process is not consistently included in proposals going to Cabinet or the Treasury Board, and individual ministers, Cabinet, and the Treasury Board are not systematically receiving information on the environmental implications of policy, plan, or program proposals.

[2013—Federal and Departmental Sustainable Development Strategies:](#)

- Targets lack clarity, the Progress Report offers an incomplete picture of progress, and departments are generally making satisfactory progress toward greening government operations.

[2011—A Study of Environmental Monitoring:](#)

- The main challenges that managers need to meet when putting in place monitoring systems include establishing objectives and a strategic direction, clarifying roles and responsibilities, building in quality at every step of monitoring, preparing reports that contain useful information, and using the available resources efficiently.

[2011—A Study of Managing Fisheries for Sustainability:](#)

- Ensuring that a fishery is sustainable requires leadership and well-defined accountability from all who are responsible for and involved in the fishery.

[2010—Managing Sustainable Development—A Discussion Paper by the Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development:](#)

- There is a need for integrated decision making, which balances environmental, economic, and social factors, and for long-term planning that considers the needs of future generations.

[2008—Annual Report on Sustainable Development Strategies:](#)

- The government's approach to the preparation and use of sustainable development strategies over the past decade has not worked. There are no clear federal goals or indicators to clarify the government's expectations for sustainable development strategies or to measure the individual or collective progress of departments and agencies. Consequently, there is no basis for a meaningful assessment of results in relation to the sustainable development strategies.

[2007—Sustainable Development Strategies:](#)

- There are weaknesses in goal setting and target measurability, and a lack of government-wide coordination and accountability. The strategies remain largely compliance-oriented exercises rather than effective tools for integrating sustainable development into departmental practices.

[2006—Sustainable Development Strategies Action on Strategy Commitments:](#)

- Improvement of the federal government's overall approach to sustainable development is required, focusing particularly on strengthening these management systems across departments.

[2005—Report of the Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development to the House of Commons:](#)

- There is a lack of cohesive leadership and planning, despite repeated commitments to a comprehensive federal strategy. Additionally, the report finds inconsistencies and a focus on processes over long-term results.

[2004—Report of the Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development to the House of Commons:](#)

- Stronger government-wide strategies and clearer accountability are required to achieve meaningful progress in sustainable development.

[2003—Sustainable Development Strategies: Case Studies:](#)

- Key case-study themes include the challenges of defining and measuring environmental benefits, the importance of results-oriented objectives and performance expectations, and the need for improved performance reporting and accountability across departments.

[2002—Sustainable Development Strategies:](#)

- There is a need for stronger central government direction, a long-term vision for sustainable development, and improved accountability mechanisms to ensure the strategies achieve their intended impact.

2001—Assessing First Sustainable Development Strategies:

- There is a critical need for early, systematic assessments, emphasizing the importance of strong management review, and corrective action. Improvements in performance measurement, senior management commitment, and the utilization of internal and external audits are needed for continuous improvement in sustainable development management.

2001—Managing for Sustainable Development:

- A government-wide timetable is needed to ensure consistent progress across all departments.

2000—Implementing Sustainable Development Strategies: Year Two:

- There is a need to focus on improving reporting clarity, strengthening management systems, and prioritizing training to bridge the implementation gap.

2000—Greening Government Operations:

- Immediate action including establishing clear targets, collecting baseline data, and designating clear leadership is required to ensure accountability and government-wide reporting on environmental performance.

1999—Report of the Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development to the House of Commons:

- There are weaknesses in managing toxic substances, stemming from poor interdepartmental coordination, conflicting departmental agendas, and insufficient implementation of existing policies. Shortcomings include consultation processes, capacity building, and performance measurement.

1998—Managing for Sustainable Development:

- There is a failure to establish the clear and measurable targets that are key to the success or failure of the sustainable development strategy process, and the sustainable development strategies tend to focus more on past accomplishments than future directions.

Appendix B—Text descriptions of exhibits

Exhibit 4.1—Recognition of the interconnected nature of social, economic, and environmental factors is important to support decision making and coordinated action—Text description

Three circles showing the 3 dimensions of sustainable development, society (with icons of people), the economy (with icons of money), and the environment (with icons of a plant, a thermometer, and the sun), are linked with doubled-ended arrows.

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Exhibit 4.2—Major recent international and Canadian commitments to sustainable development—Text description

A timeline showing international and Canadian events, agendas, and strategies. The text notes various results from the event, key elements of documents, and targets.

International commitments

1992—United Nations (UN) Earth Summit (Rio de Janeiro). Results from the event:

- Rio Declaration of sustainable development principles
- Agenda 21 sustainable development plan of action, signed by over 178 countries, including Canada
- Founding conventions on biodiversity and climate change

2000—UN Millennium Summit (New York). Result from the event:

- Millennium Development Goals: 8 international development goals to be achieved by 2015; adopted by Canada

2002—World Summit on Sustainable Development (Johannesburg). Result from the event:

- Plan of Implementation outlining steps to be taken to reach the sustainable development targets

2012—UN Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio de Janeiro). Result from the event:

- “The Future We Want,” which renewed global commitment to sustainable development
- Member states, including Canada, committed to develop Sustainable Development Goals

2015—United Nations’ 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Key elements of the document:

- A universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet, and improve prosperity, peace, and partnership, signed by Canada and 192 other countries
- Includes the Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs), a global set of 17 goals, 169 targets, and more than 230 indicators to be achieved by 2030

Canadian commitments

2019—Towards Canada’s 2030 Agenda National Strategy. Key element of the document:

- Federal strategy proposing 30 federal actions to advance the UN SDGs in Canada, such as enhancing federal leadership and SDG policy coherence and prioritizing reconciliation and the 2030 Agenda

2021—Moving Forward Together: Canada’s 2030 Agenda National Strategy. Key element of the document:

- Federal whole-of-society approach to achieving the UN SDGs, building on the 30 federal actions in Towards Canada’s 2030 Agenda National Strategy

2030—Target: Canada aims to achieve the UN SDGs by 2030

Source: Based on information from various United Nations and Canadian government documents

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Exhibit 4.3—Key federal legislative and policy actions on sustainable development—Text description

A timeline is grouped with the left side listing legislative actions and the right side listing policy actions.

Legislative actions

1995—The Auditor General Act is amended

- Requires federal departments to prepare a sustainable development strategy
- Creates the Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development

2008—Federal Sustainable Development Act goes into effect

- Requires government to develop a Federal Sustainable Development Strategy, which outlines the government’s plan for a more sustainable Canada, at least once every 3 years
- Focuses on making environmental decision making more transparent and accountable to Parliament

2020—Federal Sustainable Development Act is amended

- Broadens application and expands purpose to include decision making related to sustainable development that promotes coordinated action with a view to improving the quality of life of Canadians

Policy actions

2010—First Federal Sustainable Development Strategy is created, as required by the Federal Sustainable Development Act

2019—Canadian Indicator Framework is released as part of Towards Canada’s 2030 Agenda National Strategy

2022—Most recent (fifth) Federal Sustainable Development Strategy is released

2026—Sixth Federal Sustainable Development Strategy is expected to be released

Source: Based on information from various federal legislation and documents

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Exhibit 4.4—Principles to guide sustainable development decision making found in the Federal Sustainable Development Act and/or the Auditor General Act—Text description

A table listing principles of sustainable development found in the Federal Sustainable Development Act and/or Auditor General Act with an icon depicting each principle:

Principle: Integrating environmental, economic, and social factors in planning and decision making. Icon: A leaf, dollar sign, and person connected with double-ended arrows.

Principle: Protecting ecosystems and showing respect for nature. Icon: a plant.

Principle: Incorporating the precautionary principle, polluter pays, pollution prevention, and cost internalization. Icon: A smokestack.

Principle: Protecting human health. Icon: A medical cross symbol.

Principle: Conserving cultural heritage. Icon: A building.

Principle: Involving Indigenous peoples. Icon: A feather.

Principle: Collaborating with interested parties. Icon: Conversation bubbles.

Principle: Respecting intergenerational equity and the needs of future generations. Icon: 2 adult figures on either side of a child holding their hands.

Principle: Promoting equity. Icon: A balanced scale.

Principle: Promoting openness and transparency. Icon: An open book.

Principle: Meeting international and domestic obligations. Icon: A globe of the world.

Principle: Developing objectives and strategies for meeting targets, using indicators to report on progress, and promoting continuous improvement. Icon: Bar and line graph.

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Exhibit 4.5—The federal sustainable development perspectives on the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), as set out in the Federal Sustainable Development Strategy—Text description

A 2-column table states what the federal perspective on the United Nations' (UN) SDG is next to the UN SDG:

- Federal perspective: Goal 1 Reduce poverty in Canada in all its forms. UN SDG: 1 No poverty
- Federal perspective: Goal 2 Support a healthier and more sustainable food system. UN SDG: 2 Zero hunger
- Federal perspective: Goal 3 Support mental health and adopt healthy behaviours. UN SDG: 3 Good health and well-being
- Federal perspective: Goal 4 Promote knowledge and skills for sustainable development. UN SDG: 4 Quality education
- Federal perspective: Goal 5 Champion gender equality. UN SDG: 5 Gender equality
- Federal perspective: Goal 6 Ensure clean and safe water for all Canadians. UN SDG: 6 Clean water and sanitation
- Federal perspective: Goal 7 Increase Canadians' access to clean energy. UN SDG: 7 Affordable and clean energy
- Federal perspective: Goal 8 Encourage inclusive and sustainable economic growth in Canada. UN SDG: 8 Decent work and economic growth
- Federal perspective: Goal 9 Foster innovation and green infrastructure in Canada. UN SDG: 9 Industry, innovation and infrastructure
- Federal perspective: Goal 10 Advance reconciliation with Indigenous peoples and take action to reduce inequality. UN SDG: 10 Reduced inequalities
- Federal perspective: Goal 11 Improve access to affordable housing, clean air, transportation, parks, and green spaces, as well as cultural heritage in Canada. UN SDG: 11 Sustainable cities and communities
- Federal perspective: Goal 12 Reduce waste and transition to zero-emission vehicles. UN SDG: 12 Responsible consumption and production

- Federal perspective: Goal 13 Take action on climate change and its impacts. UN SDG: 13 Climate action
- Federal perspective: Goal 14 Conserve and protect Canada's oceans. UN SDG: 14 Life below water
- Federal perspective: Goal 15 Protect and recover species, conserve Canadian biodiversity. UN SDG: 15 Life on land
- Federal perspective: Goal 16 Promote a fair and accessible justice system, enforce environmental laws, and manage impacts. UN SDG: 16 Peace, justice and strong institutions
- Federal perspective: Goal 17 Strengthen partnerships to promote global action on sustainable development. UN SDG: 17 Partnerships for the goals

Source: Adapted from the Federal Sustainable Development Strategy 2022–2026 and Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, United Nations

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Exhibit 4.6—Canada's performance in achieving the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals has been higher than the average for members of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and high-income countries—Text description

A line graph shows that Canada's Sustainable Development Goal Index score was consistently above the average for OECD members and the average for high-income countries from 2000 to 2024. High-income countries are defined by the World Bank as countries with a gross national income per capita of US\$14,005 or more. All 3 scores of Canada, the OECD average, and the high-income countries' average rose between 2000 and 2024.

In 2000, Canada's score was 75.5, compared with 71.8 for the OECD average and 72.8 for the average of high-income countries.

In 2024, Canada had a score of 78.8, compared with 77.2 for the OECD average and 77.6 for the average of high-income countries.

Note: 2000 is the earliest year for which data is available.

Source: Based on information from Sachs, J.D., Lafortune, G., Fuller, G. (2024). The SDGs and the UN Summit of the Future. Sustainable Development Report 2024. Paris: SDSN, Dublin: Dublin University Press

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Exhibit 4.7—Canada's performance in achieving the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals has been generally lower than the average for the Group of Seven (G7) countries—Text description

A line graph shows that Canada's Sustainable Development Goal Index score was consistently below the average score for G7 countries.

Lines for each of the 7 countries and a line for the average show an overall rise in score for each during that time period. Canada started in 2000 with a higher score, 75.5, than the average of 74.7. In 2005, Canada had the same score as the average of 75.7. From 2006 to 2024, Canada lagged behind the average. In 2024, Canada had a score of 78.8, below the average of 80.1.

Overall, Germany generally had the highest score of the G7 countries while the United States had the lowest score during the time period.

Note: 2000 is the earliest year for which data is available.

Source: Based on information from Sachs, J.D., Lafortune, G., Fuller, G. (2024). The SDGs and the UN Summit of the Future. Sustainable Development Report 2024. Paris: SDSN, Dublin: Dublin University Press

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Exhibit 4.8—Canada had the lowest rate of improvement from 2000 to 2024 of the Group of Seven (G7) countries in meeting the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals—Text description

A bar graph shows that Canada's improvement was 4.4%, the lowest improvement rate among the G7 countries. The other rates of improvement were:

5.8%, United States of America

6.3%, Japan

7.5%, United Kingdom

8.6%, Germany

8.8%, France

10.0%, Italy

Source: Based on information from Sachs, J.D., Lafortune, G., Fuller, G. (2024). The SDGs and the UN Summit of the Future. Sustainable Development Report 2024. Paris: SDSN, Dublin: Dublin University

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