

**Name of the group (if applicable):** Canadian Environmental Network (RCEN)

**Date:** February 11, 2021

**Title of petition:**

## **Environmental Petition: Status of Implementation of Canada's Sustainable Development Goals**

This petition is being submitted to the Office of the Auditor General of Canada in accordance with section 22 of the *Auditor General Act* by Concerned Citizens making up the Canadian Environmental Network (RCEN).

We request that the Ministers of Employment and Social Development, Environment and Climate Change, Fisheries and Oceans, Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs, Natural Resources and Global Affairs Canada to address our questions regarding identified challenges toward the implementation of a whole-of-Canada strategy to meet the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The questions in this petition must be answered in order to support sustainable development, protect Canadian biospheres and fulfill Canada's commitment and obligation to the 2030 UN SDGs which the country adopted in September, 2015.

### **Introduction**

Canada's federal government has committed to allocating funding and resources toward achieving the goals set out in the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* both domestically and internationally (1). Since 2018, the Government of Canada has allocated 109.2\$ million in funding towards establishing an SDG unit and supporting the implementation of the SDGs (2). Yet, the scope of investments to date continue to fall short of the SDG targets without a current *National Strategy* and multi-stakeholder platform to implement its deliverables.

Given that the commitments have been announced by the federal government, it is deeply concerning that Canada is not on track to fulfill its stated commitments; particularly, as it pertains to the environmental sector. Implementing the *2030 Agenda* requires concrete action in all sectors and government leadership in order to confront current short-term thinking that threatens the environment and future generations.

Seeking to gain clarity on the government's steps toward furthering the SDGs, the petitioners have outlined areas of concern pertaining to SDG *allocation* of resources and funding, *implementation* of a national strategy and how Canada plans to *engage* with the environmental non-profit sector.

## **Background**

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is a 15-year global framework, adopted by all United Nations Member States in September 2015. On July 17th, 2018, Canada presented its first Voluntary National Review Report at the United Nations High Level Political Forum which highlights Canada's progress and action plan to achieve the *Agenda* (3).

This was matched by civil society shadow reporting that underlined the sharp difference between the governments aspirations and their actual performance. We note the OAG also published a report that documented the poor performance in Canada's 'readiness' regarding the SDGs in 2017.

A nationwide consultation resulted in the creation of Towards Canada's 2030 Agenda National Strategy in June 2019, an interim document consistent with implementation plans developed by other countries. The document outlines initial steps toward establishing structures, processes and activities to move the *Agenda* forward. Although this document was years late in arriving it did promise some forward movement despite.

The interim report includes 30 concrete federal actions to advance progress on the *Agenda* and 30 national ambitions. A number of these are directly related to RCEN's mandate and it's of particular concern that the government has not followed through on moving this interim document to a final document with actionable strategies. These include enhancing collaboration between different levels of government, the private and non-profit sectors and supporting the development of new and innovative partnerships and approaches.

The Government of Canada has claimed to be 'leading the development of a whole-of-Canada national strategy for the *Agenda* through engagement with Canadians by bringing together expertise across all levels of government, civil society, the private sector and Indigenous Peoples toward a shared vision' (3). Non-profit organizations are already answering the 2030 Agenda's call to action on the SDGs.

RCEN is a non-partisan, non-profit, member-based organization that, for more than 3

decades, has facilitated co-operation among environmental non-profit organizations, including community-based and grassroots groups, and contributed to the development of key environmental policies. RCEN has a vested interest in helping Canadians meet their commitments on the SDGs by providing a crucial link between the federal government and community stakeholders on environmental issues. The network is positioned to provide diverse perspectives and community-level insights on matters of environmental policy and is an invaluable resource to the implementation of a *National Strategy*.

Today the world is facing the worst public health and economic crisis in a century. The COVID-19 global pandemic is a trying time for Canada's economy. As a response, the federal government convened a High-Level event to discuss concrete financial solutions ensuring a sustainable and inclusive recovery by aligning recovery policies with the SDGs (6). This means that the SDGs were a continued priority and became part of a sustainable recovery for a post-pandemic Canada. The SDGs and their implementation promise to be a critical pathway to "build back better" as we emerge from the crisis.

## **Concerns with Canada's progress on the SDGs**

### **Lack of implementation plan**

Canada is 5 years into the 15-year SDG framework, and does not yet have a final implementation plan for carrying out its commitments. This is a telling marker on the direction and scale of Canada's progression on the SDGs. The final version of the *2030 Agenda National Strategy*, as stated in the interim document, identifies priority areas for action based on the country's strengths, challenges and gaps in achievement in the SDGs. It highlights concrete commitments, actions, partnerships and initiatives currently being undertaken to progress on the goals. It is imperative to the understanding of funding allocation as a strategic force of impact.

In the Budget 2018, the government allocated \$49.8 million over 13 years to establish an SDG unit and fund monitoring and reporting. The government also proposed up to \$59.8 million over 13 years to support the implementation of the SDGs (5). Without an implementation plan in place, the funding (already spent) cannot be ascertained to have had any strategic implications. The funding could have been a force of impact for change on the goals and progress on the targets as a whole due to their interlinked qualities.

Within the 2019 to 2022 Federal Sustainable Development Strategy (FSS) the Government of Canada's SDGs and targets are flagged as required by the Federal Sustainable Development Act (4). The strategy centres on 13 goals that reflect the environmentally-focused SDGs and is a step forward for strategic planning and should be included in the whole-of-Canada strategy plan.

National Strategies in other countries have been created in earlier years, built around priority clusters, taking advantage of synergies and trade-offs between targets and allowed for effective monitoring and reporting. Denmark presented its action plan in 2017 (10). The German Sustainable Development Strategy (GSDS) is the framework for national implementation of *the Agenda* with an updated strategy adopted in 2017 and updated in 2018 (8). Canada is allocating funding, yet is distinctly behind in releasing such a crucial first step component for SDG success: a whole-of-Canada strategy.

### **Lack of multi-stakeholder platform**

Many of Canada's SDGs fall within the jurisdictions of provincial, territorial municipal and Indigenous governments. This means that their policies, programs, initiatives and capacities are paramount to linking the global and national agenda to local communities. This means that the grassroots community is a key player in the development of the SGS as are these different level of governance

Furthering the SDGs involves working across sectors and scales including nonprofits. Mapping initiatives that convene organizations is the catalyst for cross-sectoral partnerships as witnessed in SDG Watch Europe; a mapping tool representing multi stakeholder coalitions organized to implement the SDGs at a national and regional level. Coalitions consist of civil society organizations from diverse backgrounds (7). It's a center for knowledge on how organizations are furthering the SDGs so that the work may be replicated across the European Union. A platform that Canada needs and was promised for accelerating the SDGs within each province, territory, municipality and community.

### **Falling behind on commitments**

In the Sustainable Development Report 2020 on the impacts of COVID-19, Canada ranks 21st out of 193 countries on overall progress on the SDGs (9). Progress on biosphere goals in particular are especially dire.

Goal 13, Climate Action and Goal 12, Responsible Consumption and Production have

major challenges with a score increasing at less than 50% of required rate as per the Global SDG Index (11). Goal 14, Life Below Water and Goal 15, Life on Land have significant challenges remaining (11). This is despite Canada's 2016 Pan-Canadian Framework on Clean Growth and Climate change which plans to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and build resistance to a changing climate through a whole-of-Canada strategy (12).

## **Overall Conclusion**

Health, environmental and economic systems weakened by COVID-19, compounded by the ongoing climate crisis which can contribute to famine, conflict and exacerbated inequality, means that fulfilling the SDGs must be a priority for the federal government. Canada has adopted this international framework, failed to prepare to implement it, and is now still lagging on a strategy.

Concerned citizens of the RCEN are disappointed by Canada's continued setbacks, lack of government support and disregard for the important role of civil society efforts in the SDG movement. The weaknesses outlined in this petition create risks for Canadians and their environment from the further irreparable degradation that weakens societal and economic sectors for future systemic shocks if we do not implement the goals effectively.

## **Questions**

**These questions are addressed to the Minister of Employment and Social Development, Natural Resources, Global Affairs, Fisheries and Oceans, Crown Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs, and Environment and Climate Change Canada.**

- 1) What are the criteria for distribution of SDG funding, given the absence of an implementation plan & strategy?
- 2) When will Canada complete and publish its 2030 Agenda National Strategy and when it does how will it engage Canadians to implement this across sectors, scales and levels of government
- 3) What is Canada doing, and what does it commit to be doing, in response to the Auditor General's previous findings that, 5 years into the 15-year SDG process, Canada is not on track to achieve the SDGs?
- 4) How does Canada account for the fact that other countries have made such progress on multi-stakeholder engagement while we have not?

**This question is addressed to the Minister of Employment and Social Development, Environment and Climate Change, Fisheries and Oceans and Natural Resources Canada.**

- 5) When will Canada establish its multi-stakeholder platform/national advisory council, and how will this body engage with stakeholders in the environmental nonprofit sector?
- 6) Will Canada properly resource, enable and encourage civil society participation in a time bound, transparent and accountable way? Will we draw upon best practices of other countries who lead in this regard?

**This question is addressed to the Minister of Employment and Social Development, and Global Affairs Canada.**

- 7) Along with the previous questions, what will the Minister do to accelerate implementation of the SDGs both in Canada and abroad, and will the Minister fulfill his obligations as the lead Ministry to work toward a whole of society approach? What have been the obstacles to progress? How will the Minister fulfill the government's promises in the next 2 years, and will we report to the HLPF on our implementation a second time? If so, when and will the Minister reveal the obstacles that have slowed our progress on implementation to be shared among the nations at the HLPF in an honest and transparent discourse?

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