



Actions on the UN Sustainable Development Goals in Scotland's grassroots communities



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Introduction



The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are a set of 17 global objectives established by the United Nations in 2015 as part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. They are designed to address a broad range of issues to promote wellbeing, human rights and prosperity while protecting the planet. As a signatory to the SDGs, Scotland has made a commitment to apply them both locally and globally. In the summer of 2024, with assistance from Anastasia Connor, an intern funded by the Santander Leadership and Employability scheme at Queen Margaret University, SIDA conducted a survey to gauge grassroots community groups' and organisations' awareness of the SDGs. The survey aimed to assess their level of awareness, their engagement in pursuing these goals, the challenges they encounter, and the impact of their efforts.

The invitation was open to a wide range of participants, welcoming submissions from community led groups and organisations already engaged with the SDGs, those who were unfamiliar with them, and those interested in future involvement with the goals. The online survey was distributed via weblink to a range of networks, including Third Sector Interfaces, community councils, Interfaith Scotland, West of Scotland Regional Equalities Council, the Scottish Refugee Council network, the SDG Network, the Scottish Community Development Centre (SCDC), and SIDA's membership and community networks. We received **121** submissions, with **115** deemed valid. The responses were geographically diverse, encompassing rural and urban areas from Orkney to the Borders, and included contributions from community councils, community groups, trusts, small charities, community interest companies, diaspora organisations, migrant and refugee rights organisations, churches, temples, and Third Sector Interfaces.

Although the sample size was not large enough to be fully representative, the results point to a varied landscape of SDG engagement among community groups in Scotland, with differing levels of awareness and involvement. There was a notable lack of awareness regarding the breadth and relevance of the SDGs to local communities, and a sense that the SDGs were not 'for' them, but something used at a higher level. It highlighted significant challenges and a need for greater support, and recognition for grassroots organisations. However, it also demonstrated a positive willingness among many respondents to engage more deeply with the SDGs moving forward.

Results



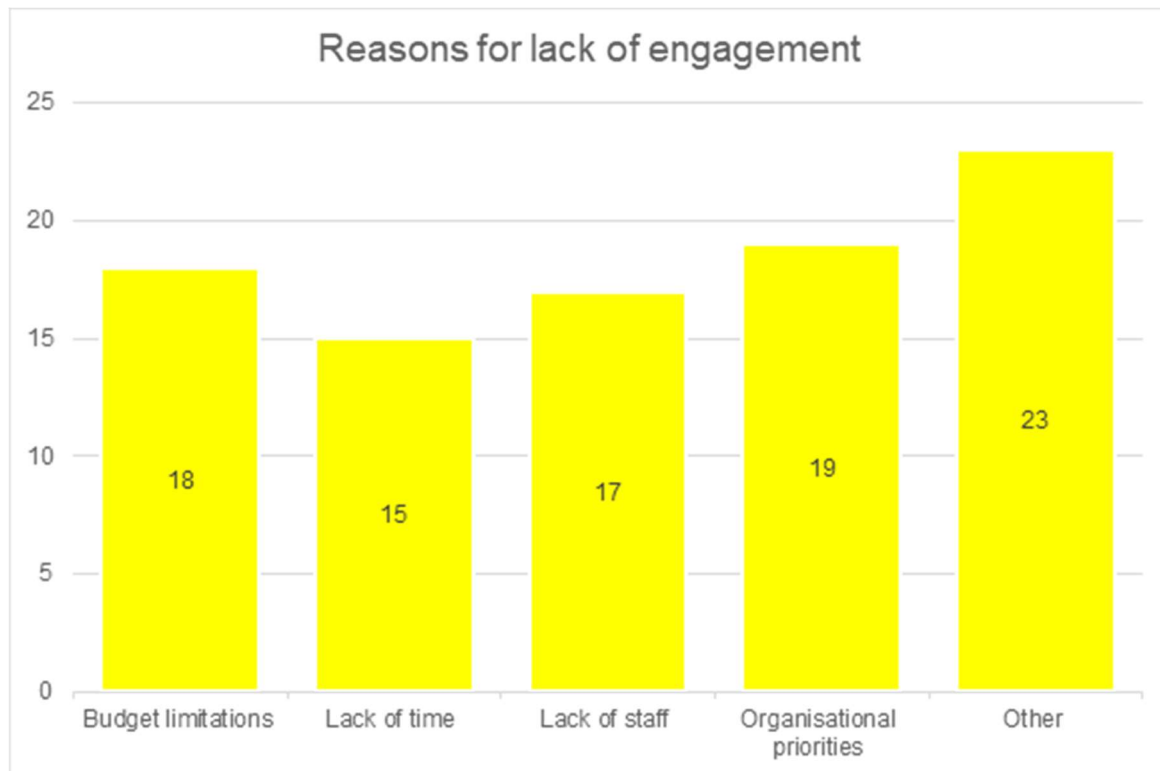
The range of organisations that responded indicates that the survey reached a broad and inclusive set of recipients. Submissions came from a diverse array of organisations, including Community Interest Companies (CICs) producing period products and mental health and counselling support, a group recovery aftercare community enterprise, a food growing project, a charity building positive interfaith relationships, a community hall, and a charity championing the equal rights of disabled children.

The survey received responses from across the nation, from the Borders to Orkney, from the Western Isles to Aberdeen and Edinburgh. The high number of responses from remote communities revealed that their concerns often differ from those of larger urban areas.

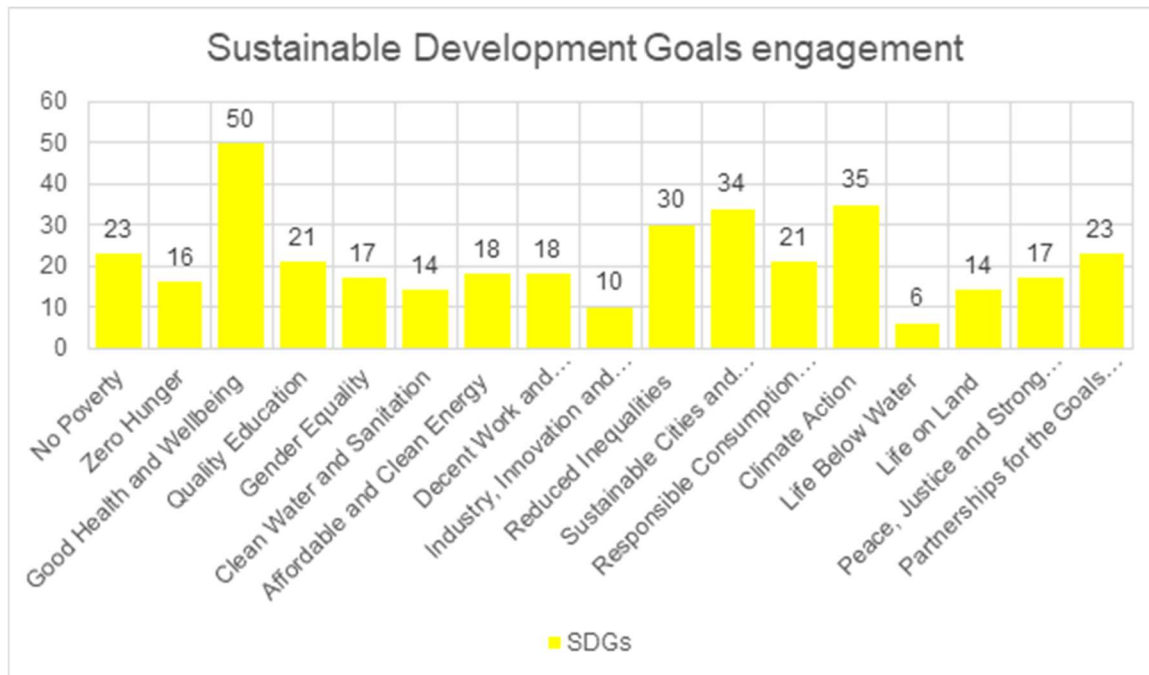
Regarding overall awareness of SDGs, only **56.5%** of respondents indicated that their organisation is "working on or promoting" SDGs, with **3.5%** offering no response and **40%** stating they were not involved in SDG activities. In analysing the reasons for limited engagement with the Sustainable Development Goals, the factors of Organisational Priorities (**19** responses) and Budget Limitations (**18** responses) were most prevalent, followed by Lack of Time (**15** responses) and Lack of Staff (**17** responses).

Notably, **23** out of **49** respondents provided more detailed insights into their specific circumstances. Although lack of SDG engagement was predominantly linked to Community Councils, many respondents were willing to elaborate on their reasons for inactivity. Respondents conveyed that "action on UN SDGs is not within the remit of Community Councils" and that "this topic is not a standard part of community discourse, and development is not framed around the

SDGs." Numerous submissions revealed that respondents had never heard of the SDGs, and others highlighted their focus on immediate local issues, such as opposition to windfarms and large pylons, local infrastructure crises, poverty, affordable housing, and mental health. The SDGs were often perceived as high-level political concepts rather than relevant local priorities.

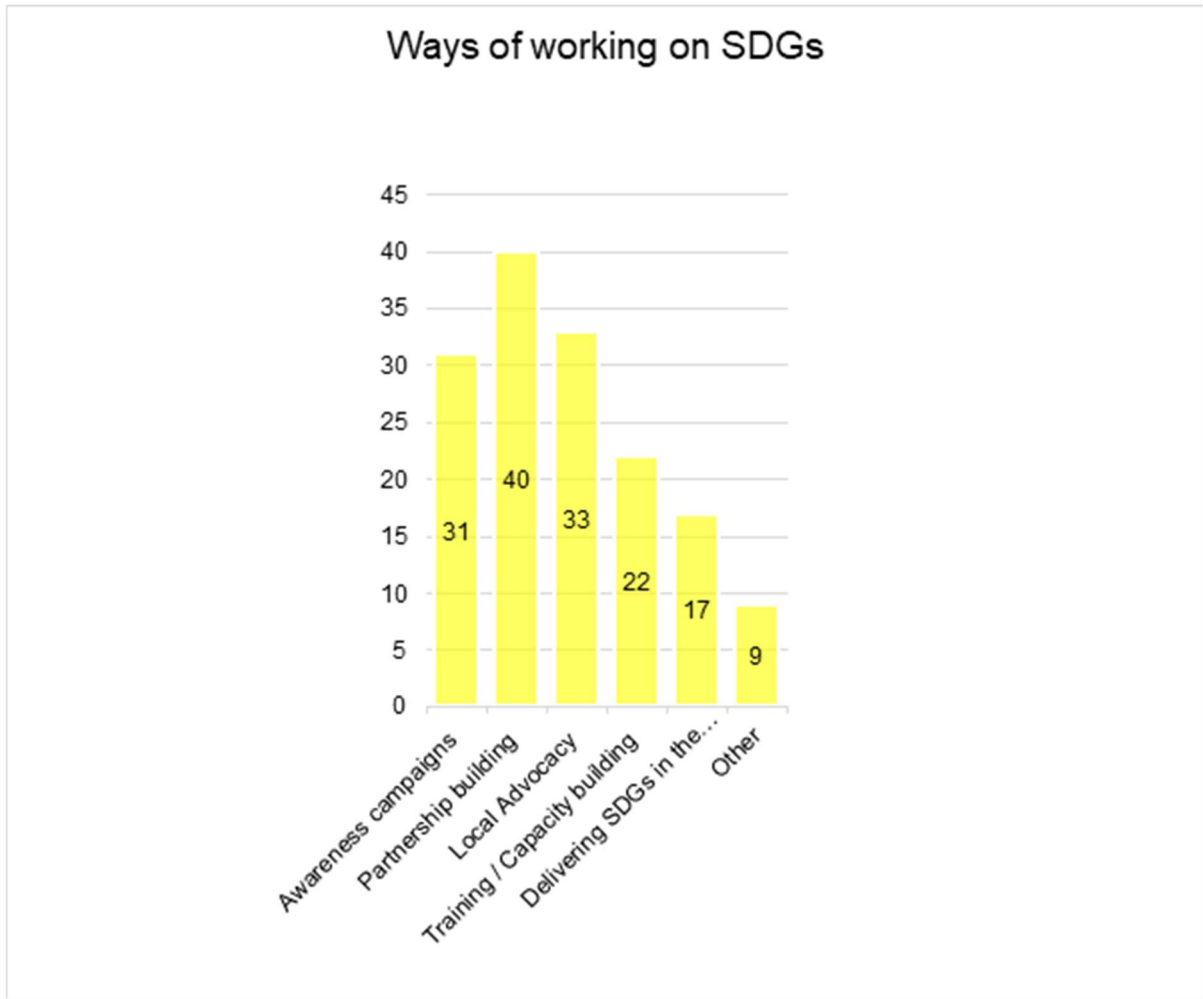


A few respondents indicated that while their work does not explicitly target the SDGs, it inadvertently supports some of these goals. Additionally, there was openness to potential SDG involvement in the future under more favourable conditions. The prevailing sentiment from the Community Council responses was that their current priorities were more immediate and pressing.



When asked which SDGs they were working towards, Good Health and Wellbeing was the most popular, with 50 respondents selecting it. Climate Action followed with 35 respondents, and Sustainable Cities and Communities was chosen by 34. The predominance of the Good Health and Wellbeing goal may partly be attributed to the larger number of health-focused organisations in the SCDC data. However, the relatively low number of responses from this set suggests it could not significantly skew the overall results.

When asked about their engagement with SDGs, organisations were provided with several options and the opportunity to comment on their experiences. Partnership Building was the most frequently mentioned activity, cited by 40 respondents, followed by Local Advocacy (33) and Awareness Campaigns (31). Notably, only 62 out of 115 submissions (54%) responded to this question. However, 14.5% of those who answered offered valuable insights into their work. These included broader strategic efforts such as incorporating SDGs into project decision-making, petitioning MPs and MSPs, developing circular economies, capacity building, and ensuring inclusivity by using simplified language and translation in community settings. Practical initiatives mentioned included bike repair clinics, repair cafes, home energy efficiency advice, conferences discussing the relationship between Fair Trade and the SDGs, and networking opportunities.



A total of **59** individuals provided insights into their methods for engaging local communities in supporting the SDGs. This feedback was extensively provided by respondents from SCDC and TSI/SIDA segments, as well as by **78.3%** of those who responded via the weblink. In contrast, only **35.9%** of submissions from Community Councils addressed this question.

The engagement strategies reported include the use of social media, email campaigns, blog posts, window displays, and local press coverage. Various types of events, such as workshops, litter picks, regular meetings with members and partners, discussion groups, tree planting, and community gardening, were employed by small charities and community groups. Additionally, partnerships with other organisations, churches, schools, and networks, as well as volunteer matching, networking, and the establishment of knowledge hubs, were frequently mentioned. Larger organisations participated in more extensive initiatives, including citizen science projects, a Climate Leadership programme, Saltire Awards for Volunteers, and a Climate Action Network Hub.

A total of **55** respondents provided insights on what would help them in achieving their objectives. The predominant theme was the need for funding, particularly multi-year grants and support for core costs. Enhanced cooperation and partnership with local authorities also emerged as a significant concern. Respondents emphasised the importance of communication, knowledge sharing, and resource exchange within the third sector and beyond.

Additional suggestions included fostering a more balanced community demographic with a higher proportion of working-age individuals and increased support for smaller, geographically remote communities outside major urban areas. Respondents highlighted the need for greater visibility and recognition of the efforts of small community groups. There was a call for more government support for community-based solutions, increased training and networking opportunities, more active volunteer engagement, affordable advertising for charities, coordinated actions from the

Scottish Government, local authorities, and community planning partnerships, as well as stronger leadership at both local and national levels. Finally, respondents underscored the importance of increased public involvement and buy-in.

A particularly positive outcome of the survey was the proportion of individuals/organisations open to further communications from SIDA. A total of **70** organisations, representing **61%** of respondents, agreed to further action. When it comes to those who declined the option of further communication, some qualified their response by citing being overstretched or focusing on local priorities. One respondent invited SIDA to their meetings, and several organisations willing to participate in future research proactively made suggestions, inquired about SIDA's work, and outlined their terms, such as freelancer fees for research cooperation.

Conclusions



Given the small sample size and targeted data sets, conclusions should be interpreted with caution. However, the results reveal a relative lack of awareness about the SDGs, their objectives, and how relevant they are to the work of communities and small organisations. Some respondents saw alignment with their efforts, but many viewed the SDGs as distant, underscoring the need for increased awareness efforts and more meaningful support and community engagement from organisations and authorities responsible for implementing the SDGs.

This gap requires a shift from top-down frameworks to one where communities are more involved and can better define their own sustainable development paths. Many community councils felt the SDGs were irrelevant to their immediate concerns, reflecting a broader disconnect between global goals and local issues. Addressing this requires framing global issues in a way that highlights their interconnection with local priorities and partnerships.

Barriers such as organisational priorities, budget constraints, and limited staff remain. Promoting community philanthropy, multi-year grants, and stronger local partnerships could strengthen grassroots efforts. Many respondents are already engaging their communities through social media and local events but need additional support, particularly in funding and networking, to increase their impact.

SIDA's focus on global citizenship offers a framework for linking these local and global perspectives. Initiating down to earth discussions about the SDGs within communities, based on their own priorities and existing work, could encourage more people to understand themselves as part of a broader global movement for change. Including community groups in national SDG dialogues could broaden the conversation and ensure that diverse viewpoints are represented.

If we are to achieve the 2030 goals, we need to work together across sectors, communities, regions, viewpoints and nations. To make Scotland's development agenda more inclusive and relevant, it is crucial to meaningfully include the voices of our communities of all kinds, especially those most often left out. By connecting local community efforts with the global goals, Scotland can foster active global citizenship and address shared challenges through locally driven, globally connected actions.



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