



**ADVANCING  
THE UNITED NATIONS  
SUSTAINABLE  
DEVELOPMENT  
GOALS THROUGH  
EDUCATION ABROAD**

THE  
FORUM  
ON EDUCATION  
ABROAD

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The Forum thanks its Aligning with the UN SDGs Working Group for their contribution to the preparation of these Guidelines:

Adrienne Fusek, *San Diego State University*, **co-chair**

Valeria Albani, *Rhode Island School of Design*

Maria Dietrich, *Northampton Community College*

Elizabeth Frohlich, *The Forum on Education Abroad*, **co-chair**

Rikke Kolbech, *DIS - Study Abroad in Scandinavia*

Kevin Murphy, *University of New Haven Tuscany Campus*

Daniel Ponce-Taylor, *Intercultural Outreach Initiative (IOI)*

Ravi Raj, *Authentica*

Uttiyo Raychaudhuri, *The University of Denver*

Leo Rowland, *Studio Arts College International (SACI)*

Karla Torres, *Go Experience Travel (GET) Ecuador*

Karen Williams, *Drake University*

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The Forum on Education Abroad  
PO Box 1773

Carlisle, PA, USA 17013

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[www.forumea.org](http://www.forumea.org)

# INTRODUCTION

These guidelines serve to direct the education abroad sector toward social, economic, and environmental sustainability by connecting the [Standards of Good Practice for Education Abroad](#) and the [United Nations Sustainable Development Goals](#) (henceforth referred to as the SDGs). The SDGs have received widespread recognition as a critical pathway to assuring the long-term maintenance and enhancement of human well-being in light of finite planetary resources. The SDGs are the center of the [2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#), which provides “a shared blueprint for peace and prosperity for people and the planet.” These guidelines, like the SDGs, recognize that sustainability is an important aspect of promoting social and economic well-being around the world and counteracting climate change.

Aligning practices with the United Nations SDGs is crucial to The Forum on Education Abroad’s [mission](#) to “cultivate educators who champion high quality education abroad experiences that ignite curiosity, impact lives, and contribute to a better world.” The SDGs are global and aspirational, representing a monumental change in practices, values, and priorities resulting from ground-level action across all nations and sectors. By aligning with the SDGs, education abroad can be carried out in a way that not only benefits people but also enriches the planet.

## HOW TO USE THESE GUIDELINES

This document is intended to supplement the [Standards of Good Practice for Education Abroad](#). These guidelines can be used in many ways, including:

- As a resource to advocate for change within organizations
- To guide program design, development, and review
- As a resource to promote incorporating the SDGs into education abroad curricula
- To aid in the establishment and review of institutional and community partnerships
- As a benchmarking tool to map institutional and organizational progress

These guidelines are for individual practitioners, institutions, and organizations. The guidelines apply to:

- Undergraduate, graduate, professional, continuing education
- For credit and not-for-credit programs
- All education abroad program types
- Faculty and researchers
- Institutional and organizational administrators
- National and international organizations
- External leadership and community partners

Ideally, institutions would take a holistic approach to the SDGs, embedding their themes across the curriculum and all programs, activities, and operations, empowering staff, instructors and students to take action on them. However, these guidelines recognize that this may not always be feasible and aim also to support learning and thinking about the SDGs, and acting on them, in a wide range of academic and logistical contexts where perhaps only targeted or gradual steps are possible. The SDG Impact Table for Education Abroad that follows these guidelines provide examples of how education abroad may advance each SDG. Practitioners are invited to use the Impact Table Worksheet to make additional or different connections between their programming and the SDGs.



## KEY TERMS

### Cultural Tourism

Tourism, or travel for pleasure, in which the traveler's motivation is to learn about and experience the tangible and intangible cultural characteristics of the host location. (Adapted from the [United Nations World Tourism Organization](#))

### Educational Colonialism

The policy of acquiring full or partial control over another country's educational system, occupying it with nonlocal teachers, and exploiting it educationally. ([Simonson, 2014](#))

### Open Educational Resources

Open Educational Resources (OER) are teaching, learning and research materials in any medium – digital or otherwise – that reside in the public domain or have been released under an open license that permits no-cost access, use, adaptation and redistribution by others with no or limited restrictions. (As defined by the United Nations Education, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, [UNESCO](#))

### Renewable Assignments

A renewable assignment is student work that is openly published so that it contributes to a body of knowledge extending its value beyond the course in which it was assigned. Unlike traditional “disposable assignments,” which are discarded after being graded, renewable assignments provide opportunities for students to add value to their academic communities and future students. Renewable assignments can be made possible by open educational resources (OER).

### Sustainability

Sustainability is the long-term maintenance and enhancement of human well-being within finite planetary resources. It is usually considered to have environmental, economic, and social dimensions. (As defined by the [United Kingdom Houses of Parliament Office of Science and Technology](#))

### Sustainable Development

Sustainable development promotes prosperity and economic opportunity, greater social well-being, and protection of the environment. United Nations Member States agree that sustainable development offers the best path forward for improving the lives of people everywhere. (Adapted from the [United Nations](#))

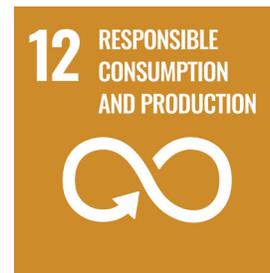
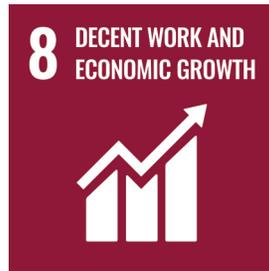
### UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are the center of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which was adopted by all United Nations Member States in 2015 as an urgent call to action by all countries. The 17 SDGs are a set of priorities and aspirations to guide all countries in tackling the world's most pressing challenges. The SDGs are integrated and indivisible, balancing the economic, social, and environmental dimensions of sustainable development. (Adapted from the United Nations [2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#))

The 17 Sustainable Development Goals are defined in a list of 169 SDG Targets. Progress towards these Targets is agreed to be tracked by 232 unique Indicators. See the [SDG Tracker](#) for more information. See the following page for all 17 goals in their visual representation.



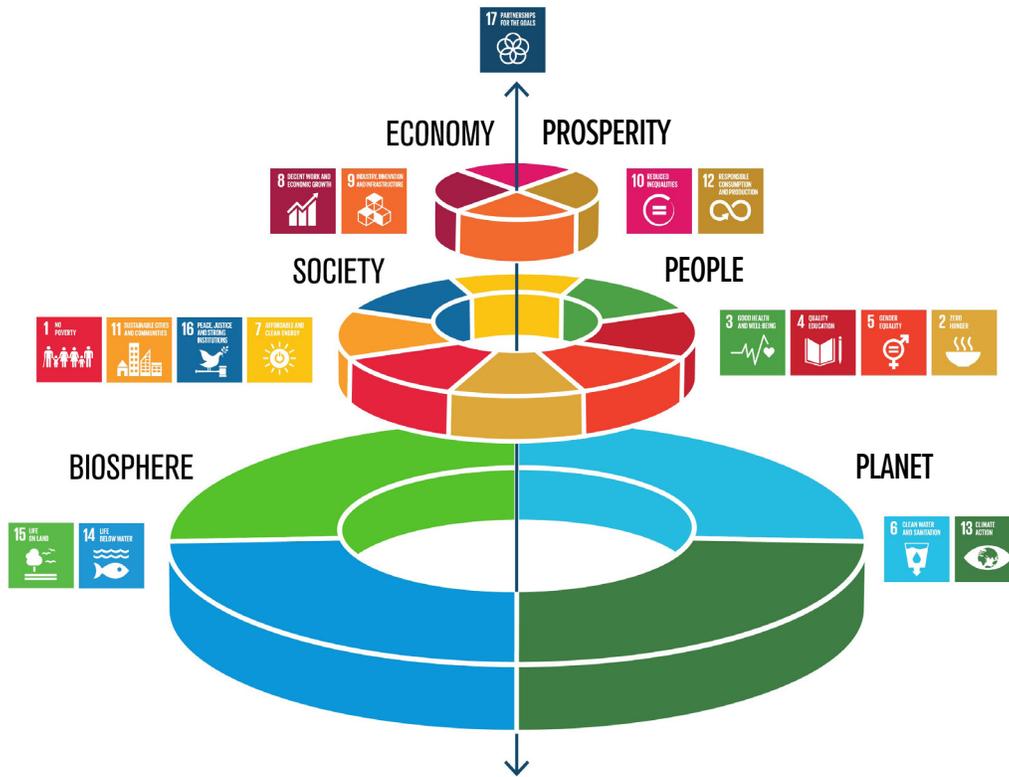
# SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS





Scholars and practitioners have made various connections between and among the SDGs and we invite you to do the same. The interdependency of the SDGs can be illustrated by the “5 Ps,” as in the graphic above, or in a nested model, as in the graphic below, where the SDGs that advance economies (i.e. prosperity) can be nested within those that advance society (i.e. people), which, in turn, can be nested within the boundaries of our planet’s resources (i.e. planet). Many scientists believe that loss of biodiversity is the greatest threat to humanity because it reduces the earth’s life supporting ability. This positions biodiversity preservation as fundamental to all SDGs.





Graphics by Jerker Lokrantz/Azote

## GUIDING PRINCIPLES

### 4.1\* MISSION AND GOALS

\*For ease of reference, sections are numbered to match the corresponding clauses of the *Standards of Good Practice for Education Abroad*, 6th edition.

Establish your mission, goals, objectives, and outcomes for being socially and economically just and environmentally responsible.

- Clearly articulate how these goals for sustainable development relate to, support, and enhance the institution or education abroad organization's mission and goals, and goals of the host community, institution, or organization.
- Distribute goals, objectives, and outcomes for sustainable development to partners and participants.

- Be aware that integrating the SDGs may increase financial cost and time to plan and implement programs.
- Evaluate the ways in which education abroad programming is or is not achieving its mission, goals, objectives, and outcomes for sustainable development.
  - » Conduct formative evaluations early in the programming process and continuously throughout to ensure stated objectives remain central.
  - » Conduct summative evaluations to measure the extent to which stated objectives were achieved.
- Assess the outcomes of sustainable development initiatives and use the results for continuous improvement.



## 4.2 COLLABORATION AND TRANSPARENCY BETWEEN PARTNERS

Collaborations openly communicate mutual commitment to the development of sustainable educational programs and thereby contribute to the achievement of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. Collaborations identify respectful, mutually beneficial, jointly agreed upon incorporation of the pertinent SDGs. This guides the relationship between the parties as well as specific program design, structure, and activities.

- Prior to formalizing a partnership:
  - » Seek mutual commitment to the SDGs from each respective organization, beginning at the request for proposals stage or when first providing proposals.
    - Ensure compatibility of goals, objectives, and expected outcomes on the basis of the proposed program structure and content.
  - » Establish agreement on each partner's shared and individual responsibilities.
    - Determine functional roles and the equitable distribution of responsibilities for each party.
  - » Commit to ensuring that program goals contribute positive SDG benefits to the local community, local institutions and local environment.
  - » Agree to work towards eliminating the negative impacts that result from any program activity.
  - » Ensure that policies and procedures related to the partnership between parties and any related activity, including program delivery, align with the appropriate SDGs.
- Make an effort to invest in long-term partnerships to extend benefits to all stakeholders over time. Be sensitive to the impact that ending a partnership might have on the local community.

- Include shared and individual responsibilities related to sustainable development in formal agreements signed by both parties.
- Regularly review and evaluate collaborations in light of evolving best practices related to the SDGs.
- In your collaborations, bear in mind that all the member states of the United Nations, but not all nations, have committed to the 17 goals.

## 4.3 ETHICS

Strive to ensure that stakeholders recognize there is an ethical dimension to sustainable development, and that sustainability cannot be understood or achieved without consideration of ethical dimensions.

- Prepare and train staff on the SDGs so that they are equipped for ethical decision-making and practices that support sustainable development.
- Commit to transparency of decision making and actions: all constituents, including participants and families, staff, and the local community should be able to see that responsible parties make decisions that contribute to sustainable development.
- Clearly communicate to participants, institutions, and partners that sustainability may impact some factors such as financial cost and planning time, and try to create a shared understanding of the challenges and hurdles associated with sustainable development.
- Pursue partnerships, collaboration, and mutually beneficial decisions more than individual interests.
- Conduct education abroad activities and advise participants in a way that openly addresses the ethical issues surrounding the SDGs, including but not limited to, the concepts of cultural tourism and educational colonialism.
- Make efforts to create and develop programs that address the issues of sustainability even if less commercially viable, at least in the short term.



- Encourage academic and extra-curricular components that openly address consequences and impacts of education abroad, including travel, as they relate to the SDGs.
- Establish policies for engaging with local communities in an ethical manner (e.g. Social and Environmental Responsibility Policy, Responsible Travel Policy, Preventing Sexual Exploitation, Abuse and Harassment (PSEAH) Policy). Institute mechanisms to familiarize all stakeholders with these policies. Require partners to adopt and apply similar policies.
- As education abroad in certain communities inherently holds a wealth-differential between the visitor and the visited, implement guidelines that seek to alleviate these differentials and create an environment of mutual and equitable exchange of ideas, learning, benefit, and value between the participants and the local communities.
- The ethics of sustainable development require that the program sponsor shares with the host community rights and responsibilities, benefits and burdens.
  - » Distinctions including race, class, gender and ethnicity do not diminish the need for this sharing. Your institution should commit to power sharing where possible in host locations.
  - » Recognize the rights of employees and vendors in host locations to the benefits of a basic standard of living, pay, and conditions.
- Know that ethical systems, like values, vary widely across different cultures, religions and societies. Take account of the ethical systems of all stakeholders, including the communities from which the participants come and the communities in which they operate, and embrace the resulting complexity.
- Revisit your decisions and actions regarding sustainable development at regular intervals to assess the ethical perspective, provide safe opportunities for people to engage in ethical reflection and dialogue, and be accountable.



## 4.4 EQUITY, DIVERSITY, AND INCLUSION

Equity, diversity, and inclusion are integral to the SDGs, and should be prioritized in program design, implementation, goals, objectives, and outcomes.

- Establish equitable and inclusive policies and procedures for students, faculty, staff, and partners, prioritizing sustainable development.
  - Identify and address systemic biases and deficiencies in policies, practices, and programs. Eliminate discriminatory policies and practices.
  - Ensure inclusive and equitable access to education abroad.
    - » Find ways to ensure cost is not a barrier to access.
  - Employ and enroll diverse participants, making an effort to recruit, support, and retain historically underrepresented and underserved populations.
  - Include partners with diverse voices so participants meet and experience different viewpoints from the community. Consider how to improve outreach to identify diverse partners.
- Develop meaningful, equitable, reciprocal community partnerships.
    - » Be sensitive to dynamics of power and privilege among all stakeholders.
    - » Include the host community in all phases, from planning to assessment.
    - » Promote economic growth and preservation of biodiversity in the communities in which programs operate.
      - Consider how the program contributes to the local community. Design programs that align with and strengthen the host community, not focusing solely on participant learning outcomes. What benefits are shared by host partners and by the institution?
      - Keeping equity, diversity, and inclusion central, how can the program support the local community to continue the objectives of the program even when participants are not physically present in the host community?
      - Aim for equitable financing. If equal monetary investment is not possible, consider what shared funding models can be utilized. This may be particularly helpful for exchange programs.
    - » Be conscious of the use of partners' time and resources.
    - » When appropriate, build long standing partnerships to benefit a diverse community of stakeholders over time.
  - Assess student learning, disaggregating data by demographics to check for equitable outcomes. [The 2030 Agenda](#) recognizes that reliable disaggregated data is essential to measure progress across all populations to ensure that no one is left behind.



# ADMINISTRATIVE FRAMEWORK

Incorporating clearly articulated objectives for advancing the SDGs in policies, procedures, and guidelines demonstrates organizational commitment to sustainable development and increases the likelihood of attaining stated objectives. A range of opportunities exist within the administrative framework of an institution's or organization's operations for closer alignment with the SDGs.

## Operations

- Promote a work culture of energy conservation. Utilize, and advocate for, clean and sustainable energy sources to reduce greenhouse gas emissions including energy sources utilized by offices, workstations and staff.
- Consider implementing policies that allow for smart working, telecommuting, video conferencing, and other flexible operational plans which might be more sustainable than commuting to a shared workspace.
- Incorporate procedures to facilitate virtual pre-departure meetings with participants, faculty, and program leaders.
- Explore ways to recycle and reuse office hardware and minimize purchasing new equipment.
- Utilize marketing approaches that do not require printing or creation of promotional products.
- Consider collaborating with established entities within your institution such as the Sustainability Office, Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, and Facilities Office.
- Provide information to participants electronically to reduce printing.

## Program Planning and Development

- Ensure resources (human, financial, and physical) are adequate to meet program goals.
- Design itineraries using international and on-site transportation options with minimal greenhouse gas impact, when possible. When travel by land is possible, take advantage of the additional time by incorporating activities related to learning outcomes and/or team building.
- To the degree possible, ensure that program housing options, including their operational and management features, align with pertinent SDGs and positive practices (such as the use of renewable energy, filtered drinking water, and electric vehicles).
- Work with local producers and suppliers who minimize use of raw materials and have an integrated recycling process.
- Periodically evaluate the effectiveness of SDG-related policies, procedures, guidelines, and practices in order to improve them where possible. Showcase your policy successes to exemplify sustainability in action.
- Ensure that program activities support causes that are identified by the local community as high need.
- Recurring programs should contribute to the medium- and long-term wellbeing of the host community. Follow up activities should evaluate sustainability of program activities in collaboration with local partners.



## Personnel

- Recruit individuals with knowledge, skills, approaches, and behaviors that can enhance your efforts in the realm of sustainability.
- Consider including sustainability planning and tasks as a core part of job descriptions, roles and responsibilities.
- Incorporate sustainability-related goals into employees' performance reviews.
- Provide equal access to training and professional development related to the SDGs.
- Ensure that facilitators are adequately trained to address sustainable development and the socio-economic and environmental impact of education abroad in participant and program leader pre-departure and post-arrival events.
- Support individual innovation and enact change, as appropriate.
- Strive to achieve a work culture that empowers employees to commit to positive environmental outcomes.
- Develop reward systems to recognize sustainability initiatives led by staff.
- Conduct training to empower all levels of the organization to implement sustainable operational practices through successful application of policies, procedures, and practices.

## Partnerships and Collaboration

- Consider stating objectives regarding the SDGs in Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs).
- Consider involvement in partnership opportunities with the UN, such as the [Partnerships for SDGs global registry](#) and [UN Academic Impact](#).
- Consider establishing partnerships with organizations outside the UN which also promote the SDGs.
- Be transparent about the degree to which shared values related to sustainable development are considered in formalizing partnerships.
- Explicitly state requirements in requests for proposals to allow prospective partners to share the ways in which they promote the SDGs and seek to incorporate complementary program design and/or program elements.
- Consider how the supply chain is sourced for the education abroad program and ensure local communities benefit from the economic activity.
- Use resource-light marketing practices and content that is reflective of values consistent with the SDGs.
- Define a schedule for regular partnership review and identify items to evaluate with the aim of continuous improvement, advancement of the SDGs, and strengthening the relationship between partners.
- Share knowledge, expertise, technology and financial resources with local communities and institutions to support the achievement of the SDGs.



## Community Engagement

- Structure staff team building activities that serve the local community and preservation of native flora and fauna.
- Publicly recognize the contribution of international education in creating a more peaceful planet by increasing cultural humility and acceptance of diverse worldviews.
- Publicize and celebrate community projects that preserve local biodiversity.
- Take advantage of virtual resources to maintain consistent connection with local communities.
- Consider developing reward systems to recognize and encourage sustainable development initiatives led by community partners.



# STUDENT LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT

Embedding the values of sustainable development within education abroad not only helps the world achieve the SDGs, but also boosts participants' learning about the SDGs, and enriches their development as students, as individuals and as future professionals. To achieve these ends, sustainable practices and learning 'about' sustainability can be incorporated into academic and co-curricular elements of program design, student recruitment, and program assessment.

## 6.1. BEFORE PROGRAM

### Program Design

- Encourage incorporating the SDGs as a learning framework within education abroad curriculum.
  - Where possible, embed sustainable development in learning objectives and outcomes.
  - Organize formal opportunities for program designers and leaders to learn about programs which embrace economic, social, and/or environmental issues, and how such issues can enrich all types of programs across the curriculum.
  - Ensure program design accommodates the different learning styles and adjust programs to maximize participant competencies.
  - Consider Open Pedagogy, Open Education, and other forms of student-driven learning which can align with sustainable goals, specifically the design and use of renewable, non-disposable assignments in programs that add value to a student's world, live outside of the boundaries and beyond the duration of the program, and are likely to have a lasting impact.
    - » Encourage participants to consider the UN's Open Pedagogy Learning Community and Sustainable Development Goals Open Pedagogy Fellowship.
- Encourage the development of internships, community engagement opportunities, and experiential or co-curricular activities for students while abroad that address or promote the SDGs.
  - Explore possible collaboration in program design through partnerships with the offices of sustainability, equity, diversity, and inclusion, as well as academic departments engaged with SDG-related issues.
  - Encourage programs where the students' spending supports local efforts to create equitable, inclusive, and sustainable economies. Encourage other partners in other destinations to follow suit.
  - Communicate to local partners an interest in learning about traditional and contemporary sustainable practices in the local context. Invite information sessions or lectures on SDG-related topics by local experts on-site, even when the SDGs are not a formal part of course learning objectives.
  - Where community engagement is part of the education abroad program, consider designing learning outcomes and data collection in a format that can be added to the [SDG Indicators Database](#).
  - Where safely possible, incorporate low-carbon footprint means of travel when designing programs that require local travel.
  - Consider the distance between the home and host locations and encourage travel by land, if possible.
  - Consider whether mid-length and long-term programs more directly meet your goals for community engagement and minimizing your carbon footprint than short-term programs.
  - Consider planning for one or more plant-based group meals during the program in promotion of carbon and methane reduction and sustainability benefits.
  - Encourage consumption of local food and foodways.
  - Prioritize sustainability in program design, but not at the expense of stakeholder health, safety, and security.



## Recruitment and Advising

- Develop strategies to recruit historically underserved populations, including those for whom issues of sustainability might not feature as motivation to study abroad. Consider too that some underrepresented groups may be attracted to a program precisely because of its focus on sustainable development.
  - Develop resources to support historically underserved populations to participate in programs with SDG goals.
  - Assist students and faculty to explore social impact and environmentally-related funding opportunities, such as scholarships, loans, grants and discounts.
  - Be sensitive to issues of privilege and exclusion with all stakeholders: students, faculty, staff, collaborators. Collaborate with your organization's leaders in diversity.
  - Work with relevant academic departments and campus offices to recruit students with an interest in sustainable development and related issues such as social justice.
  - Prepare students so that they might better engage with socio-economic and environmental issues during their education abroad experience.
  - Communicate the value of familiarity with the SDGs for students' personal, academic and professional goals.
- Provide information to students about key social, economic and environmental issues as they relate to all the programs you offer or permit.
  - Communicate responsibilities and expectations to students and faculty with regards to sustainable development.
  - Sensitize students to the complicated moral and ethical issues that surround sustainable development, including the associated resources and fossil fuel consumption related to travel.
  - Advise students how they can conduct their independent travel sustainably while abroad and in the future. Consider inviting students to gather and share this information among themselves and for future participants.
  - Strive to use advising resources, promotional brochures and giveaway items that are "resource-light" and made from recycled and/or compostable materials. Consider making resources available in an environmentally friendly way, such as offering resources through electronic formats.
  - Strive to limit advising and informational practices that create clear environmental damage such as large meetings that require mass travel and catering. Instead, adopt alternative, relatively resource-light methods such as online conferencing.
  - Ensure that sustainable development and the socio-economic and environmental impact of education abroad are clearly addressed in your pre-departure material and events.



## 6.2. DURING PROGRAM

- Support students' understanding of sustainable development aspects of the environmental, social, cultural, and economic context for each program and location.
- Help students to understand the impact of their presence and activities on the host community over time and not just while they are on-site.
- Communicate responsibilities and expectations to students with regards to sustainable development, including any possible consequences for not meeting expectations.
- Find ways to promote a habit and culture of exchange when visiting host communities, so students learn about traditional and modern methods to achieve sustainable development in the local context.
- Ensure students are shown how to operate sustainably in the host community (and host family, if applicable) with regards to daily activities such as shopping, travel, water and electricity usage, and eating.
- Encourage the facilitation of a reflection session linking all education abroad activities and learning to the SDGs.
- Provide students with structured time and ways to reflect upon sustainable development during the program.
- Provide students with ways to participate in curricular and/or co-curricular components relating to social, economic, and environmental issues, preferably engaging with host communities in support of community-identified objectives.
- Support students to ensure respectful, ethical, and mindful interactions with the host community, including sensitivity to dynamics of power and privilege.
- Provide students with ways to offset their environmental impact during or after the program and to actively measure and track this offset so that they can reflect on the effects of these actions during the program.

## 6.3. AFTER PROGRAM

- Provide students with structured ways to reflect together and articulate their experiences of sustainable development post-program.
- Support students' understanding of how the economic, social and environmental impact of their participation in the program and the lessons learned abroad can be applied in their personal, academic, and professional lives.
  - » Encourage continuing local and global engagement in sustainable development activities.
  - » Assist students to find ways to integrate their experiences into future learning and research.
  - » Help students identify transferable skills and utilize what they have learned about sustainable development to boost their professional skill set and their employability.
- Devise ways to recognize and reward participants who have championed sustainable development.
- Create ambassadorial or leadership roles for participants to assist future participants to consider sustainability as a key theme of education abroad.
- Ensure that the surveys and questionnaires employed to review students' and/or program leaders' development during and after your programs address their understanding of sustainable development.
- Debrief with stakeholders to learn about successes and challenges regarding sustainable development learning components or activities during the program, so that improvements can be made in future programs.
- Review and evaluate programs regularly in light of evolving good practices related to the SDGs.

