

# Building public-private partnerships through trust, culture, and community

## How Hawai'i Green Growth is a model of cross-sector collaboration to deliver on the SDGs

Celeste Connors, CEO, Hawai'i Green Growth and Hannah Thompson, Sustainability Business Forum Coordinator, Hawai'i Green Growth

**THE PROBLEM:** Progress on the SDGs requires trust-based and effective public-private partnerships.

**WHY IT MATTERS:** The private sector is a key source of investment, leadership, and innovation for sustainable development.

**THE SOLUTION:** Hawai'i Green Growth, a public-private partnership that is recognized by the UN as a Local2030 Hub and center of excellence for local sustainability solutions, connects leaders to build trust across sectors anchored in culture, community, and values.

As one of the most isolated locations on the planet, the State of Hawai'i faces unique challenges from the mainland, from a dependence on food and energy imports and a high cost of living to biodiversity loss, sea-level rise, and increasingly severe weather events due to climate change. COVID-19 further underscores Hawai'i's vulnerability to external disruption, affecting social and economic well-being and exposing systemic inequities.

As a result, Hawai'i and other island economies at the frontlines of climate change are taking innovative steps to build community resilience. Hawai'i Green Growth (HGG) has built high levels of trust among a network of public, private, and civil society partners that enables collective action by aligning the

evidence-based approach of the SDGs with the historical, cultural, and social ties that are the cornerstone of Hawaiian society.

### Multi-stakeholder action among public and private sectors

Hawai'i Green Growth was launched at the 2011 Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Summit in Honolulu as a coalition of diverse partners to catalyze public-private discussion and take on difficult sustainability issues. HGG identified green growth economic recovery priorities within an island context that builds on a legacy of local movements and a history of indigenous knowledge and systems thinking.

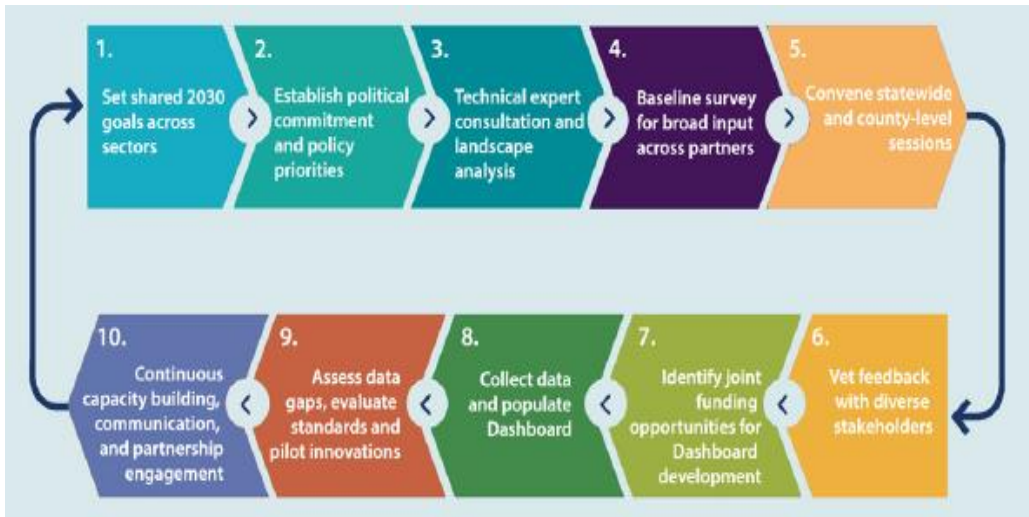
HGG has intentionally been multi-stakeholder from the beginning, and now convenes a network of over 150 members, individuals, and institutions. The network includes all four counties and mayors in Hawai'i, the Office of Hawaiian Affairs, civil society, and private sector partners committed to taking measurable steps toward building a green and resilient economy aligned with the global 2030 Agenda.

Enabling a level of trust for these stakeholders to act together towards the same goals has resulted from a mix of stakeholder-led process, evidence, and grounding in shared culture and history. HGG's members convene regularly across several working groups. These meetings generally operate in an informal "Chatham House Rule" setting that enables a candid dialogue to explore solutions and achieve consensus in ways not

possible in a formal setting. HGG develops a network-driven strategic plan every three years and convenes an annual statewide membership event to identify opportunities, challenges, and priorities for cross-sector collaboration.

HGG’s non-affiliated, network-based approach has been remarkably successful in supporting short-term decisionmaking across Hawai‘i’s institutions to achieve long-term sustainability goals. Its consensus-building process ensures every diverse perspective can be heard (Figure 1).

**Figure 1. Process to develop and build consensus among stakeholders on metrics and indicators**



Source: Hawai‘i Green Growth

### Bringing executive-level buy-in from the private sector

At the 2015 annual members’ meeting, the network called for increased private sector leadership in advancing Hawai‘i’s sustainability efforts. HGG responded by working with local business leaders committed to more effective community engagement to launch the Sustainability Business Forum (SBF) as a platform to support candid dialogue and concrete action. The SBF was founded by a group of 11 companies with aligned values that identified the mission and vision. The group has since grown to include 26 Hawaiian businesses representing diverse industries from energy and infrastructure to banking and land asset management.

The SBF is a voluntary peer-to-peer network that follows a “CEO plus-one” format, which includes CEO-designated representatives responsible for creating forward momentum on initiatives and conversations. The CEOs convene quarterly to engage peers in

sharing best practices for integrating sustainability in their business operations and to discuss opportunities for collective action across four focus areas: 1) building community resilience, 2) transitioning to a net-zero economy, 3) advancing a green growth recovery, and 4) supporting sustainable and regenerative tourism. In 2022, members agreed to take more deliberate action on energy efficiency and food security, as well as Sustainable Aviation Fuels (SAFs).

Concrete action on stated CEO interests and goals is driven in the months between quarterly meetings by plus-one “Working Groups.” Working group recommendations are presented at the quarterly meetings for CEO-level input and approval and, following approval, the recommendations become SBF initiatives implemented by working groups.

The diversity of companies can present a challenge in identifying collective priorities. Although all SBF members are encouraged to take collective action, support from all members is not required to move initiatives forward. Initiatives are most successful when one or two CEOs are committed to championing an issue and

encourage other CEOs to take similar action. For example, the Kona Hema Carbon Offset Pilot was supported by an initial four companies that eventually grew to a coalition of ten members.

SBF members engage the broader HGG network through other working groups to support cross-sector collaboration. For example, the SBF and the Policy and Legislative Working Group and its partners collaborated to identify common policies to support invasive species management that reduces economic risk, supports environmental stewardship, and builds resilience. In another example, SBF members worked closely with the City and County of Honolulu to pass legislation that enables building owners and the City to measure and track building energy and water efficiency, which is an important step to reduce energy waste and carbon emissions, as well as manage water resources.

## Goals and evidence as the basis for trust

Accountability and transparency have also been critical. In 2014, HGG members created the Aloha+ Challenge—the state’s roadmap and commitment to deliver on the SDGs—by identifying six local priority areas and developing community-based goals and measurable targets to be achieved by 2030.

Progress on Hawai’i’s sustainability goals is tracked on the Aloha+ Dashboard, an open-data platform with community-driven metrics to inform statewide and county-level decision-making. The Aloha+ Dashboard currently tracks 37 targets and over 200 indicators as well as features county-level resources for residents to measure household impact and drive behavior change.

The SBF tracks its contributions and commitment to the Aloha+ Challenge through its own set of localized Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) metrics. Having aligned values and shared goals through the

Aloha+ Challenge builds trust among the HGG Network members. This sense of a collective North Star can result in members taking joint action on testimony submissions for bills or providing in-kind or financial resources for projects.

## Culture and traditional knowledge drive SDG action

It has been important to ground this work on sustainability, with evidence and goal-setting, in the history and experience of Hawai’i itself. Prior to European contact, Native Hawaiians managed resources holistically and efficiently, sustaining a population comparable to today through the ahupua’a system—traditional divisions of land that provided a foundation for stewardship, governance, and sense of place. The Aloha+ Challenge He Nohona ‘Ae’oia: A Culture of Sustainability is grounded in this legacy of systems thinking and indigenous wisdom through Kānaka Maoli (Native Hawaiian) host culture values and practice to mālama (care for and steward). In joining the HGG network, members commit to working together by valuing respect, collaboration, and action-oriented priorities, by honoring the process and outcome, and through cross-sector support for joint priorities.

Hawai’i’s culture of sustainability, inspired by Native Hawaiian knowledge and values, including mālama and kuelana (responsibility), provides the foundation for trust-based partnerships needed to drive action today and to encourage all communities to think and act like islanders on Island Earth.

In 2018, the United Nations recognized Hawai’i as a Local2030 Hub for the implementation of the SDGs focused on knowledge exchange and collective action among small island states, which HGG partners have led since 2011. In 2020, the partnership contributed to the first statewide Voluntary Local Review in the United States, which benchmarked Hawai’i’s progress on the Aloha+ Challenge. The trust built through HGG’s multi-stakeholder experiences have provided the basis for these successful actions and initiatives, with further action to come.