

TOWARD MORE JUST SOCIETIES: THE SDG AGENDA AND INNOVATIONS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

This chapter delves into the significant role Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) play in advancing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) aim of strengthening and refocusing institutional efforts toward the 2030 Agenda and beyond. Acknowledging the limited progress made toward the 2030 Agenda, the chapter discusses the extent to which universities are meeting their social and ethical responsibilities in fostering sustainable development and human rights. Through an examination of the relationship between universities and the SDGs (including criticism of their role in reinforcing urban inequalities), the chapter articulates a vision for HEIs to embrace transformative partnerships, interdisciplinary approaches, and community engagement to rebuild public trust and reinforce their place as pivotal actors in driving social and economic progress. Three essential tasks for HEIs are identified: fostering SDG synergies, establishing trust and collaboration with local communities, and advancing a data-informed progress

assessment that provides a roadmap for how to use the SDGs to further new agendas.

Keywords: Higher education institutions; social justice; human rights; SDG 16; rankings; 2030 Agenda

“We do not need more warnings. The dystopian future is already here.” With these words, the United Nations (UN) High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Türk set the stage for an appraisal of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. As Türk told delegates at the Human Rights Council in Geneva on September 11, 2023, “we are on target for [the 2030 Agenda] to become a tragic monument to the failure of our generation to erase extreme poverty and realize human rights.”¹ Former UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon’s promise that the 2015 adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) would be “a defining moment in human history” has gone largely unrealized, with many arguing that the world is further from the sustainable development achievements now than it was nearly a decade ago. In fact, a UN progress report acknowledged that “progress on more than 50 percent of targets of the SDGs is weak and insufficient; on 30 percent, it has stalled or gone into reverse.”² This disappointing trajectory has led many to question whether institutional leaders worldwide are truly committed to realizing the promise of SDGs. *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof went so far as to describe the 2023 UN General Assembly in New York as a combination of “Cocktails, Steak, and Hypocrisy.”³ This frustration was echoed by the many

¹ Volker Türk, “Türk: Human rights are antidote to prevailing politics of distraction, deception, indifference and repression,” *United Nations Human Rights*, September 11, 2023, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/statements/2023/09/turk-human-rights-are-antidote-prevailing-politics-distraction-deception>.

² United Nations, “The Sustainable Development Goals Report Special Edition,” 2023, <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2023/The-Sustainable-Development-Goals-Report-2023.pdf>.

³ Nicholas Kristof, “Coming Soon in New York: Cocktails, Steak and Hypocrisy,” *The New York Times*, September 16, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/09/16/opinion/un-sustainability-goals-poverty.html?smid=nytcore-ios-share&referringSource=articleShare>.

protestors who gathered around Times Square in New York at the start of Climate Week in September 2023, calling for the US government to act on climate change and stop fossil fuel dependency. The signs they carried expressed angst and rage: “We can’t work in a wildfire,” “Climate S.O.S.,” and “Stop Co₂lonialism.”⁴

If the 2030 Agenda is unrealistic or already a failure, what is the purpose of adhering to the SDGs? By reaffirming this agenda, and even committing more resources to it, are we as institutional leaders complicit in the hypocrisy Kristof described? The purpose of this chapter is not to settle these questions, but to reflect on the SDGs’ aim of strengthening and refocusing our institutional efforts toward the 2030 Agenda and beyond. I will center on Higher Education Institutions (HEI) specifically in the United States and consider some lessons that hold promise but require immediate, focused, and sustained action from universities. With this, I will also highlight some specific and actionable strategies that HEIs can take on to better facilitate the SDG agenda. As I will detail below, universities are uniquely positioned to support the ideals of the SDGs, and achieving these goals can measurably improve public confidence in universities as well as enhance the university experience for students, faculty, staff, and communities alike. My discussion will highlight SDG 16: Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions.

WHY UNIVERSITIES?

The literature on the connection between universities and the SDG agenda is abundant. A search across sources using the keywords “SDG” and “HEI” on Google Scholar returned 7,290 articles since 2015. In addition to possessing extensive research capabilities, many universities are also home to centers and institutes that facilitate the cross-fertilization of ideas. With these resources, HEIs facilitate the exchange of knowledge, ideas, experiences, and best

⁴ Reuters, “Climate Protesters in New York Send Message to United Nations,” September 18, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/pictures/climate-protesters-new-york-send-message-united-nations-2023-09-18/>.

practices that help shape cross-cultural understanding and collaboration through partnerships within and across nations. Partnerships play a vital role in harnessing the full potential of universities in advancing the SDG agenda by bridging local and global engagement. Collaborations among universities, governments, businesses, and civil society organizations can amplify the impact of sustainable initiatives, leverage resources, and contribute to scaling solutions. Universities serve as key conveners for smart investment in their cities and regions, act as engines for knowledge production, and train new generations of practitioners.⁵

Universities' decisions have significant implications for their communities. Some institutions have adopted Carnegie Mellon University's model of the Voluntary University Review (VUR).⁶ In the process, universities have learned not only about the hard work of tracking and reporting their engagement with the SDGs but also the challenges involved in accelerating actions and sustaining institutional commitment.⁷

The world communicates about the SDGs through voluntary reporting. Designed initially at the state level, the process (and product) has evolved to include cities and regions conducting Voluntary Local Reviews. In 2020, Carnegie Mellon adapted the process to the university setting through a first Voluntary University

⁵ Sustainable Development Solutions Network, "Accelerating Education for the SDGs in Universities: A Guide for Universities, Colleges, and Tertiary and Higher Education Institutions," September 2020, https://irp-cdn.multiscreensite.com/be6d1d56/files/uploaded/accelerating-education-for-the-sdgs-in-unis-web_zZuYLaoZRHk1L77zAd4n.pdf.

⁶ Carnegie Mellon University Sustainability Initiative, "2020 Voluntary University Review of the Sustainable Development Goals," Carnegie Mellon University, 2020, <https://www.cmu.edu/sustainability-initiative/review/cmu-vur-2020.pdf>.

⁷ Ángel Cabrera and Drew Cutright, *Higher Education and SDG17: Partnerships for the Goals*. (Emerald Publishing, 2023); Nikhil Seth, "SDG 17 and the Role of Universities Achieving Agenda 2030," in *Higher Education and SDG17: Partnerships for the Goals*, eds. Ángel Cabrera and Drew Cutright (Emerald Publishing, 2023), 19–25; Duncan Ross, "Higher Education's Role in Advancing the SDGs in the G20: Progress & Opportunities," *Times Higher Education*, August 2023, https://www.timeshighereducation.com/sites/default/files/g20_report.pdf.

Review (VUR) to assess how CMU's education, research, and practice aligned with the SDGs. As CMU provost Jim Garrett wrote in the introduction to that first VUR,

*Our intention is for CMU's VUR to be a framework for us to track what we are doing across the 17 Global Goals and where we might find opportunities to do more. We also hope that by issuing this VUR, we will spark action at other institutions of higher education to do the same.*⁸

Can universities make a difference concerning SDG implementation? In the introduction to their book on Higher Education and SDG 17, Ángel Cabrera and Drew Cutright argue that universities' engagement with the 2030 Agenda should focus on four steps: building networks of research, facilitating cross-disciplinary collaboration, expanding access to tertiary education, and developing binational and multinational alliances. Starting with the appropriate management tools, universities should develop sound plans and evaluate existing programs and initiatives utilizing dynamic formats. These efforts need to align with institutional priorities, strengths, and strategic goals. Transformational partnerships represent a key vehicle to advance this agenda.⁹

The perspective that the university is a responsible stakeholder has been questioned by those who argue that the rise of the university as a corporate structure creates major roadblocks to building just and inclusive communities. This is not a minor criticism, as cities and their regions face the challenges of a post-COVID-19 pandemic era, a generalized crisis of representation, legacies of racism and colonialism, climate change, health disparities, and long-standing shortages in housing, food supply, and other basic needs.¹⁰

While universities often report having a positive economic impact on their regions, their role in effectively working to promote more equitable growth in their communities has become a focus of

⁸ Carnegie Mellon University Sustainability Initiative, "2020 Voluntary University Review."

⁹ Cabrera and Cutright, *Higher Education and SDG17*.

¹⁰ Ariel Armony and Ann E. Cudd, *Toward a Post-Pandemic Higher Education System* (Routledge, 2022), 302–15.

concern.¹¹ Critics stress that HEIs have become a powerful actor in urban governance, having emerged as the dominant employer, real estate holder, health-care provider, and even agent of policing.¹² Furthermore, the physical expansion of universities often results in higher housing costs and the displacement of lower-income residents. Critics have also noted that the university's claim to advance a social justice mission – for example, under the framework of the SDGs – is often contradictory to the institution's position vis-à-vis its employees' working conditions and well-being.¹³

The link between universities and the SDG agenda is not only grounded in the capabilities of HEIs, but also in the ethical responsibility of universities serving their local communities and adhering to values that align with the needs of global communities.¹⁴ Linking the utilitarian demands of these institutions and their ethical ideals requires universities to design strategies for engagement that address both the imperatives posed by today's knowledge economy and their commitment to extend prosperity and well-being to society at large.¹⁵ This requirement is particularly relevant for SDG16 – on Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions – because sustainable and inclusive development is inextricably linked to good governance, robust and resilient rule of law, independent civil society, and the protection of human dignity.

¹¹ Anna Valero and John Van Reenen, "The Economic Impact of Universities: Evidence from Across the Globe," *Economics of Education Review* 68 (2019): 53–67; Ted Van Green, "Republicans Increasingly Critical of Several Major U.S. Institutions, Including Big Corporations and Banks," Pew Research Center, August 20, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2021/08/20/republicans-increasingly-critical-of-several-major-u-s-institutions-including-big-corporations-and-banks/>.

¹² Davarian L. Baldwin, *In the Shadow of the Ivory Tower: How Universities Are Plundering Our Cities* (Bold Type Books, 2021).

¹³ Paul Bennenworth, "So What Is a University in Any Case? A Grass-Roots Perspective on the University and Urban Social Justice," in *Hope Under Neoliberal Austerity: Responses from Civil Society and Civic Universities*, eds. Mel Steer, Simin Davoudi, Mark Shucksmith, and Liz Todd (Bristol University Press, 2021), 251–56.

¹⁴ Liz Todd, Simin Davoudi, Mark Shucksmith, and Mel Steer, "The Civic University: Introduction," in *Hope Under Neoliberal Austerity: Responses from Civil Society and Civic Universities* (Policy Press, 2021), 147–52.

¹⁵ Armony and Cudd, *Toward a Post-Pandemic Higher Education System*.

In the United States, public trust in HEIs has been in decline for some time. According to Gallup polling, Americans' confidence in higher education has dropped drastically during the past eight years. In 2023, 22% of respondents expressed "very little" confidence in colleges and universities, up from 9% in 2015, while 36% of respondents had "a great deal" or "quite a lot" of confidence in higher education, down from 57% in 2015.¹⁶ Other surveys have shown similar trends, indicating that public opinion has increasingly questioned whether colleges and universities have a positive effect on their communities, regions, and the country's well-being.¹⁷ There is also a growing chorus of voices – from within and outside of universities – that speak critically "about the objectivity, legitimacy, and accuracy of the academy as a locus of truth and facts."¹⁸

Both those with and without college degrees question how well-equipped they are to succeed in the 21st century workplace. Part of this sharp decline in confidence and uncertainty around the value of a college degree is likely due to the rising costs of postsecondary education and/or difficulty gaining access to four-year institutions.¹⁹ Some factors that may have eroded public trust in higher education include attacks by conservative politicians, the effects of disrupted learning and traditional university life due to COVID-19, and numerous public controversies and scandals around admissions which has reinforced the idea that higher education is only for the wealthy and elite.²⁰

In late 2023 and early 2024, US colleges and universities are also being widely criticized because of their responses to the

¹⁶ Megan Brenan, "Americans' Confidence in Higher Education Down Sharply," Gallup, July 17, 2023, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/508352/americans-confidence-higher-education-down-sharply.aspx>.

¹⁷ Van Green, "Republicans Increasingly Critical."

¹⁸ Ronald J. Daniels, *What Universities Owe Democracy* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2021).

¹⁹ Brenan, "Americans' Confidence"; Sarah Wood, "Americans Have Less Confidence in Higher Ed: Why?" *U.S. News*, August 7, 2023, <https://www.usnews.com/education/best-colleges/applying/articles/americans-have-less-confidence-in-higher-education>.

²⁰ Michael T. Nietzel, "Americans' confidence in higher education sinks to a new low," *Forbes*, July 11, 2023, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/michaelt Nietzel/2023/07/11/americans-confidence-in-higher-education-sinks-to-a-new-low/>.

Israel-Hamas war. HEIs have experienced tense disputes on their campuses, from protests to threats on students. *The New York Times*'s Michelle Goldberg has cogently argued that the complexity of the situation "should make it an ideal subject to teach critical thinking and how to have difficult discussions," but the result has been very different, in fact, she contends that "it is being used as a toxin that threatens the entire academic enterprise."²¹ Universities in the United States have struggled to foster debate while embracing a diversity of views, impairing their capacity to serve as an inclusive place for discussion of critical social and political issues. In other words, HEIs have shown poor performance in fostering conversations across different perspectives, arguably a fundamental component of their mission as educational institutions.

If universities want to play a meaningful role in elevating the relevance and effectiveness of the SDG agenda to solve public policy problems, they need to align their mission with their place in their local community and the global challenges we face today. The problems Higher Education has fostering meaningful dialogues that engage a variety of perspectives are compounded by the serious challenges facing democracies at large, which are not delivering equitably for large sectors of their populations. Even though this scenario is pessimistic, adopting the SDGs (and linking this agenda to the framework of human rights, as discussed below) provides an opportunity to reinvent the ways we address urgent challenges in communities across the world, while also contributing to building a new future for HEIs.

THE SDGs: GUIDING PRINCIPLE FOR A NEW HUMAN RIGHTS AGENDA?

Scholars have argued that embracing the role of the university as an institution committed to the public good requires a decision to

²¹ Michelle Goldberg, "When it Comes to Israel, Who Decides What You Can and Can't Say?" *The New York Times*, November 4, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/11/04/opinion/sunday/israel-palestine-speech-debate.html>.

move toward a new paradigm based on social responsibility, ethical engagement, and reciprocity.²² As universities seek to reimagine themselves and deliver this paradigm shift, they need to identify and develop best practices concerning curriculum changes, institutional commitments, and internal reorganization. They must also engage in frank conversations regarding the future role of US colleges and universities in enabling democratic practices to thrive within an increasingly fragmented and violent society.²³

A new paradigm should reinvent the field of human rights by combining the SDG and human rights agendas in innovative ways. This is a vital opportunity for universities. As Sarah Mendelson writes, reflecting the views of a burgeoning Community of Practice, “Innovations in higher education offer a pathway to advance the closely aligned endeavors of creating peaceful, just, and inclusive communities. Universities have a critical role to play in generating a refreshed approach to human rights that includes SDG literacy.”²⁴ Building a “human rights action plan” dovetails with the SDG agenda because, as established by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, civil and political rights alongside economic, social, and cultural rights, are indivisible and interdependent. As Volker Türk has argued, any attempt to separate these rights is detrimental to advancing a genuine human rights agenda.²⁵ The

²² Sarah E. Mendelson, “Paradigm shift: Creating more just societies with the SDGs, human rights, and innovations in higher education,” *The SDG Second Half: Ideas for Doing Things Differently*, April 5, 2023, Brookings Institution, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/paradigm-shift-creating-more-just-societies-with-the-sdgs-human-rights-and-innovations-in-higher-education/>; Emiliano Bosio and Gustavo Gregorutti, *The Emergence of the Ethically-Engaged University* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2023).

²³ Mellon Foundation, “Call for Concepts: Exploring Democracy, Environmental Justice, and Social Justice,” 2023, https://www.mellon.org/article/call-for-concepts-higher-learning-2024?utm_source=biweekly&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=november_2_23.

²⁴ Sarah E. Mendelson, “Synthesis Document – Toward a Paradigm Shift: Creating a Community of Practice on Human Rights and the Sustainable Development Goals,” Carnegie Mellon University, June 22, 2023, <https://www.heinz.cmu.edu/faculty-research/profiles/mendelson-sarah/postbellagiooutcomedocumentcommunityofpracticesdsgandhumanrights.pdf>.

²⁵ Türk, *Human Rights Are Antidote to Prevailing Politics*.

SDGs can help reinvigorate and renew human rights education by localizing specific rights and translating them to particular contexts. This framework is necessary to bring human rights to local communities, address social justice gaps, as well as retool policies and how progress is measured.²⁶

The responsibility of universities to advance the SDGs is part of their “indispensable role in the exercise of building, maintaining, and inspiring liberal democracy.” This is particularly germane to the research university, which “weaves together the four connections to democracy – social mobility, civic education, stewardship of facts, and pluralism.”²⁷ These functions are essential to an integrated SDG and human rights agenda.

THE SDGs: A MARKETING TOOL?

Universities operate in a highly competitive environment. They are continuously vying for public recognition while devoting significant efforts to improve their rankings and prestige, particularly in comparison to their peers.²⁸ University impact rankings that evaluate the extent to which academic institutions have successfully mainstreamed the SDGs into their strategies have gained significant attention in recent years and influenced institutional strategies, reputations, and stakeholders’ perceptions.

However, a growing number of studies have explored the relationship between such university rankings and their alignment with the SDGs, focusing specifically on the accuracy of those rankings in capturing universities’ sustainable development efforts. They also discuss the implications of these rankings on HEIs and propose methods to improve the quality of these university ranking systems in assessing SDGs.²⁹ Research to date indicates that university sustainability rankings, while influential, may not adequately capture HEIs’

²⁶ Mendelson, “Paradigm shift.”

²⁷ Daniels, *What Universities Owe Democracy*.

²⁸ Cabrera and Cutright, *Higher Education and SDG17*.

²⁹ Walter Leal Filho et al, “A Framework for the Implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals in University Programmes,” *Journal of Cleaner Production* 299 (2021).

comprehensive efforts toward sustainable development. Inconsistencies in evaluation criteria, indicators, and methodologies across ranking systems lead to ranking discrepancies and limited alignment with the SDGs.³⁰ Improvements in transparency, inclusion of qualitative indicators, automation of indicator mapping processes, and collaboration among ranking organizations are recommended to enhance alignment with the SDGs.³¹ Further research and diversified research methodologies are necessary to address the complexities and challenges associated with assessing HEIs' performance vis-à-vis the 2030 Agenda and their alignment with sustainable development. The most attention has been paid to outlining better practices for implementing SDGs and standardizing frameworks through which successful SDG implementation can be assessed within university ranking systems to facilitate accurate institutional comparisons.

For example, the Times Higher Education Impact Ranking (THE-IR), a global sustainability ranking for HEIs, has received significant attention from the global academic community.³² The THE-IR is a comprehensive assessment of HEIs' contributions toward the SDGs based on four different areas: research, stewardship, outreach, and teaching. As of 2023, the highest-ranked countries in the THE-IR were the United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada. While over 90 countries submitted to THE-IR assessments in 2023, researchers have argued that the THE-IR only helps academic leaders evaluate “just how difficult it is to classify and inventory work under each goal, capture the extent of their university's engagement with the goals, and, perhaps most importantly, accelerate commitment and actions.”³³

³⁰ Bautista-Puig et al, “Enhancing Sustainable Development Goals”; Galleli et al, “Sustainability University Rankings.”

³¹ Anwaar Buzaboon et al, “Automated Mapping of Environmental Higher Education Ranking Systems Indicators to SDGs Indicators using Natural Language Processing and Document Similarity,” *2021 International Conference on Innovation and Intelligence for Informatics, Computing, and Technologies (3ICT)* (2021): 170–74.

³² Times Higher Education, “Impact Rankings 2023,” <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/impactrankings>.

³³ Cabrera and Cutright, *Higher Education and SDG17*; Ross, “Higher Education's Role.”

For example, Bautista-Puig, Orduña-Malea, and Perez-Esparrells find that the THE-IR does not effectively capture universities' comprehensive impact on the SDGs. Using summative content analysis of THE-IR web-scraped data from 2019, 2020, and 2021, they conclude that because THE-IR evaluations are based upon universities' highest performing SDG benchmarks, the areas of emphasis in the resulting performance rankings varied significantly across individual SDGs for all institutions, including those institutions with the highest rankings.³⁴

Using an explanatory case study approach, Derakhshan, Hassanzadeh, and Nekoofar arrived at similar findings. They identified divergence across sustainability-related ranking systems and concluded that university impact ratings are insufficient in identifying institutions that positively influence their societies by achieving the SDGs.³⁵ Comparative analyses of different sustainability ranking systems have also concluded that their reliability in evaluating university sustainability efforts is questionable at best. These difficulties in goal classification and progress tracking have led several scholars to advocate for greater transparency and standardization within and across sustainability ranking systems.³⁶ Specifically, they call for limiting the use of THE-IR in decision making until a more comprehensive and reliable evaluation framework for sustainability efforts is developed, one that includes qualitative and quantitative indicators.

³⁴ Núria Bautista-Puig, Enrique Orduña-Malea, and Carmen Perez-Esparrells, "Enhancing Sustainable Development Goals or Promoting Universities? An Analysis of the Times Higher Education Impact Rankings," *International Journal of Sustainability in Higher Education* 23, no. 8 (2022): 211–31.

³⁵ Maryam Derakhshan, Mohammad Hassanzadeh, and Mohammad H. Nekoofar, "A Cross Analysis of Impact University Ranking System," *International Journal of Information Science and Management (IJISM)* 19, no. 1 (2021): 87–98.

³⁶ Barbara Galleli et al, "Sustainability University Rankings: A Comparative Analysis of UI green metric and the Times Higher Education World University Rankings," *International Journal of Sustainability in Higher Education* 23, no. 2 (2022): 404–25.

Improving the reliability of SDG assessment tools like THE-IR is essential because HEIs are in a strong position to bring about the broader cultural shifts required to successfully implement sustainability practices, which fundamentally requires adherence to non-monetary purposes and incentives that cannot happen without these shifts.³⁷ While the incorporation of SDGs into university ranking systems has resulted in many HEIs emphasizing their sustainability efforts in order to market themselves to a more and more sustainability-conscious clientele, these efforts fall short of incorporating clear, transparent, and accountable sustainability visions; robust shared governance structures; and inclusive community engagement initiatives into all aspects of their operations. Since there are many different types of HEIs, their purposes need to be specific and so should their reporting on sustainability efforts.³⁸

CONCLUSION: THREE PILLARS

The interconnection between human rights and the SDGs underscores that inclusive economic development and social justice are inextricably linked to good governance, robust and resilient rule of law, independent civil society, and the protection of human dignity. The interdependency between civil and political rights and economic, social, and cultural rights is as relevant to the 2030 Agenda as it is to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted over 75 years ago.³⁹ SDG 16, the focus of this volume, which is explored in detail by other contributors, offers an opportunity for universities to leverage the connections and networks they have built over decades to co-create solutions with their communities and address socio-economic imbalances that hinder the goals of building peace, more just societies, and strong institutions.

³⁷ Fabio Caputo, Lorenzo Ligorio, and Simone Pizzi, “The Contribution of Higher Education Institutions to the SDGs—An Evaluation of Sustainability Reporting Practices,” *Administrative Sciences* 11, no. 3 (2021).

³⁸ Luis Alberto Mejia-Manzano et al, “An Exploratory Study Examining the Key Aspects and Actions for Universities to Achieve High Sustainability Rankings,” *Sustainability* 15, no. 5 (2023).

³⁹ Türk, *Human Rights Are Antidote to Prevailing Politics*.

The work ahead is complex. As some universities embark on these paradigm shifts, there are three pillars that deserve particular attention as we think about the role of HEIs in advancing the SDGs, as well as how to train the next generation of public policy experts and engaged scholars through the context of the SDG agenda.⁴⁰

A focus on interactions between SDG targets is a critical component of any concerted effort to advance the 2030 Agenda in a university setting. Universities should first address the problems of siloed structures, single discipline thinking, and compartmentalized operations. In addition to structural and organizational changes, HEIs also need to find innovative ways to inspire and guide educators, administrators, researchers, staff, and students in advancing sustainable development. The promotion of “SDG synergies” offers a roadmap for multiple initiatives, including curriculum development, teaching approaches, institutional policies, and community engagement.⁴¹ This task is an essential and innovative component to help train the next generation of practitioners in this field. It is, however, not necessary to start from scratch. There are plenty of existing models that demonstrate the integration of sustainability practices into the university’s operations, communications, and engagement, such as the integration of a climate change and carbon emissions framework into university strategic planning.⁴² Other models include interdisciplinary collaborative networks that concentrate on research and teaching in

⁴⁰ “The world’s goals to save humanity are hugely ambitious – but they are still the best option,” *Nature* 621 (2023): 227–29.

⁴¹ “The world’s goals to save humanity”; Paulo R. M. Correia and Ian M. Kinchin, “Pedagogic Resonance and Threshold Concepts to Access the Hidden Complexity of Education for Sustainability,” in *Higher Education for Sustainable Development Goals*, eds. Carolina Machado and João Paulo Davim (River Publisher, 2022), 1–22.

⁴² Thomas Owen-Smith, “Integrating Climate into Strategy and Planning in Universities,” SUMS Consulting, 2023, https://sums.org.uk/app/uploads/2023/10/Integrating-climate-into-strategy-and-planning-in-universities_vf.pdf; Brooke Hansen, Peter Stiling, and Whitney Fung Uy, “Innovations and Challenges in SDG Integration and Reporting in Higher Education: A Case Study from the University of South Florida,” *International Journal of Sustainability in Higher Education* 22, no. 5 (2021): 1002–21.

and concerning the global south; teams that bring together researchers in environmental archeology, sustainability, business, and other fields; and sustainability-focused learning communities.⁴³

This volume emphasizes the notion that “many of the SDGs address and elevate socioeconomic rights, which in turn, when implemented, can engage local communities and community leaders, make human rights more relevant for people, and improve lives.”⁴⁴ In alignment with this idea, a second pillar of this volume is based on the notion that “local communities, not national governments, are often the front lines for developing rights-based approaches to socioeconomic challenges.”⁴⁵

Localities differ greatly in terms of accessible social justice data for community members, government officials, scholars, and practitioners. Data gaps and lags, particularly when it comes to disaggregated data by gender, race, and geographical boundaries, make it extremely difficult to identify who is falling behind in cities. Academic institutions can be vital in bolstering the ability to apply data science to address this critical challenge. We must determine how to better use the data we already have and establish more direct and mutually beneficial relationships with local stakeholders so that they can participate in the data-creation process. New models of community engagement can help close data gaps and develop more effective strategies to share information with policy makers. Universities should pay attention to local populations, pose pertinent questions, and assemble diverse, multidisciplinary teams. Establishing confidence between HEIs and local communities is essential.⁴⁶

Advancing justice in the context of SDG 16 often requires working on problems as defined by the community in order to localize the actual challenges they face.⁴⁷ Universities have the capacity

⁴³ Godwell Nhamo and Vuyo Mjimba, *Sustainable Development Goals and Institutions of Higher Education* (Springer Cham, 2020).

⁴⁴ Mendelson, “Synthesis Document.”

⁴⁵ Mendelson, “Synthesis Document.”

⁴⁶ Mendelson, “Synthesis Document.”

⁴⁷ As an example of a specific challenge faced by a community, see: Center for Analytical Approaches to Social Innovation, “Allegheny County Policing Project (ACPP),” University of Pittsburgh, 2021, <https://www.caasi.pitt.edu/initiatives/allegheny-county-policing-project-acpp>.

to embrace a “place-based” role and help facilitate social justice. As a result, universities can maximize the benefits of economic investments and opportunities for their communities to ensure that under-resourced, vulnerable, and underserved populations do not continue to be left behind.⁴⁸

The third task for universities is to assess progress regarding the 2030 Agenda. This requires that they identify a suitable framework to assist them in the implementation of the SDGs. Institutionally, universities need to establish policies, strategies, plans, and governing structures to support mainstreaming the SDGs into their operations. Thematically, HEIs should support interdisciplinarity and the exploration of a variety of topics, widening the scope of subjects to address a greater number of SDGs, as well as diversifying themes to cover multiple SDGs at once. Structurally, HEIs should provide the necessary resources, equipment, materials, and operational support toward SDG implementation. Lastly, at the individual level, universities must facilitate and encourage concern, awareness, and commitment to the SDG agenda and equip their faculty, staff, and students with the necessary tools to advance a coordinated and effective sustainability agenda.⁴⁹ As noted, a key dimension of this task is to work with local communities to create “people-centered data ecosystems, including open-source data portals” aimed at creating solutions to enhance rights for all.⁵⁰

These three pillars – SDG synergies, trust and collaboration between HEIs and local communities, and progress tracking and assessment informed by data generated with community input – provide a roadmap for how to use the SDGs to teach, train,

⁴⁸ John Goddard and Paul Vallance, *The University and the City* (Routledge, 2013); UPP Foundation, “Truly Civic: Strengthening the Connection between Universities and Their Places,” UPP Foundation, 2019, <https://upp-foundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Civic-University-Commission-Final-Report.pdf>.

⁴⁹ Leal Filho et al, “A framework for the implementation.”

⁵⁰ Elizabeth Andersen and Sarah Mendelson, “Room 16: #JustRecovery – Toward the Universal Advancement of Accountable, Inclusive, People-Centered Social and Justice Policies in the Post-COVID-19 era,” Brookings Institution, 2021, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/2021-Room-documents_Room16.pdf; Mendelson, “Synthesis Document.”

partner, and advance new agendas that position universities as responsible, place-based stakeholders, and connect people, information, and policies in more effective ways. The interconnection of the human rights framework and the 2030 Agenda places social justice at the center of the health of democracy and creates an unprecedented opportunity for HEIs to re-energize efforts aimed at socio-economic renewal in cities and regions in the United States and around the world.

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