
Guest editorial: Work, progress, and global responsibility in the implementation process of UN SDGs

Guest editorial

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Introduction

Agenda 21, the first international agreement on sustainable development (SD) reached in 1992, was not very well implemented. According to the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation and the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development held in Rio (Rio + 20), the central theme of 10- and 20-year reviews was lacking in the implementation process. In comparison, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were thought to have been carried out more successfully; hence, Rio + 20 pushed for the formation of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that would be modelled, at least in part, after the MDGs (Nhamo *et al.*, 2021). The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, endorsed by the United Nations General Assembly in September 2015, includes the SDGs (Miralles-Quirós and Miralles-Quirós, 2021). With the world's need for SD growth, the SDGs concept has acquired fast traction. The triple-bottom-line concept of human well-being is at the essence of SD, even though particular definitions may differ (Bui and Filimonau, 2021). Even while nearly every society acknowledges that it aims to achieve a balance between economic growth, environmental sustainability and social inclusiveness, the particular goals vary internationally, between cultures and even within communities (Ferreira *et al.*, 2021). It is still important to remember that SD requires a focus on the Economy, environment and social well-being.

The literature shows the theory of SD has progressed through three distinct phases: the formative (before 1972), the intermediate (1972–1987) and the developmental (1987–present) (Shi *et al.*, 2019). From a different notion, SD is being developed into a worldwide movement with the incorporation of ever-increasing practical knowledge (Zhu and Hua, 2017). Initially, SD's focus was on ensuring the long-term use of the world's environmental assets to SDGs (Sindhvani *et al.*, 2022). The United Nations' 2030 Sustainable Development Goals agenda has been regarded as the most integrated and comprehensive framework for tackling the challenges of global environmental change. According to Weber and Weber (2020), the SDGs approach is highly consistent with ecological modernization theory (EMT) framework. Integrating “environmental” and “developmental” goals is advocated for and proposed based on EMT. Understanding and adapting to the dynamic interaction of science, technology, ecology, social, economic and political change requires greater weight for these foundational realizations. As the need to simultaneously address environmental and social goals grows, this is an issue of prime significance. This calls for a more in-depth reconsideration of “sustainable development” meaning and the political opportunities it creates or eliminates.

Having identified the significance of SD, we must also acknowledge that it requires significant effort and faces substantial challenges (Olabi *et al.*, 2022). It is also important to remember that although developing and developed countries deal with opposite ends of the spectrum, SD applies to both. Just because a country is considered “developed” does not mean it is sustainable; in fact, many “developed” nations still struggle with fundamental



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challenges like poverty and waste management (Adie *et al.*, 2022). SD is possible, despite the highly challenging conditions that many developing countries are currently facing; however, it would require a great deal of focused and coordinated effort.

Furthermore, human society is currently faced with several severe challenges on a global scale (Virakul, 2015). Rapid depletion of natural resources, global warming, excessive consumption of goods and resources, toxic waste and chemical accumulation and an alarming increase in the imbalance between material resource demands and a finite planet (Weerasooriya *et al.*, 2021). As much as half of the natural resources that should be available to future generations have been used by our generation. In the event that the problems of the present are not resolved promptly, the survival of human civilization may be placed in serious trouble. Achieving the 2030 Agenda demands mobilizing and using all resources to develop. The global partnership for effective development cooperation provides a multi-stakeholder platform to increase the efficacy of development activities by all partners, generate long-lasting effects and contribute to the SDGs (Abbas, 2021).

As the SDGs have been around for over half a decade since they were adopted, it is now an appropriate moment to evaluate challenges linked to their implementation. On the one hand, the implementation process might not have started in certain nations yet, or it might be in the early stages in others. There are 17 objectives and 169 targets that make up the SDGs (United Nations General Assembly, 2015). The whole number of indicators has not yet been determined, but it is anticipated that there will be more than 200 of them. There are a lot of obstacles, ranging from a lack of obtained data to weak institutions, and they all need to be overcome. Knowledge on achieving the SDGs is limited and contradictory, and success will require a reassessment of the economic and development techniques (Plag and Jules-Plag, 2019). As the goals are highly interrelated with each other, which leads to contradictions between targets. Because of these complexities, earlier initiatives and efforts by the government and policymakers have been inadequate (Allen *et al.*, 2021). On the other hand, some nations with greater enthusiasm have already started or made headway on the institutional structures necessary for the implementation process.

So, the special issue aims to answer some key research questions:

- RQ1. What are the major theories behind the implementation of UN SDGs?
- RQ2. Where are the knowledge gaps in achieving the UN SDGs?
- RQ3. How do we handle the problems appearing during the implementation process?
- RQ4. What are the global challenges and responsibilities in adopting UN SDGs?
- RQ5. How can the industry respond most effectively to global challenges and SD goals to improve performance?
- RQ6. What are the future directions and global responsibilities to successfully implement UN SDGs?

Overview of accepted papers

The special issue aims to test the existing, validating and extended theoretical debates in the area of SDGs by studying it from a global viewpoint. The special issue proposes four interesting and impactful works that contribute to SDG.

The first paper titled “Environmental sustainability through aggregate demand behavior – Does knowledge economy have global responsibility?” aims to consider environmental sustainability, a global challenge under the preview of SD goals, highlighting the significance of knowledge economy in attaining sustainable aggregate demand behavior globally. This study

contains the empirical existence of aggregate demand-based EKC. The role of the knowledge economy is examined through an index which is calculated by using four pillars of the knowledge economy (technology, innovations, education and institutions). Data drawn from 155 countries from 1995 to 2021 validates the U-shaped aggregate demand-based EKC at global level. The knowledge economy has played a significant role in global responsibility, shifting the EKC downward and extending the CO₂ reduction phase for every selected country. Furthermore, urbanization, energy intensity, financial development and trade openness significantly deteriorate the environmental quality.

The second paper titled “Reaching out to the bottom of the pyramid to achieve financial inclusion” aims to explore the factors influencing the bottom of the pyramid (BOP) consumers’ adoption and usage intention towards mobile payment (m-payment) to achieve financial inclusion and SD goals. As a novel contribution to the BOP, financial inclusion, SD goals and m-payment literature, this study unfolds several unknown perceived benefits and perceived sacrifices that influence the BOP consumers’ m-payment adoption intention and usage. The study’s findings help the government and banks formulate and implement strategies to achieve financial inclusion among BOP consumers. A qualitative research design is used to explore the enablers and inhibitors that influence BOP consumers’ m-payment adoption and usage intention. To collect the qualitative responses, semi-structured in-depth interviews with BOP respondents were conducted. The results suggested awareness, social influences and self-efficacy as crucial enablers and privacy and security risks and vulnerability concerns as crucial inhibitors towards m-payment adoption and usage.

The third study “Transformational women leadership: a road to SD goal of women empowerment” contributes to SDG 5. This study aims to examine the contribution made by women transformational leaders to their employees’ performance. The study seeks to emphasize the role played by female leaders in the on-job performance of employees and their mental well-being by encouraging intrinsic motivation among them. The study has implications for not just researchers but other stakeholders as well. The study is useful for organizations as it directs them to hire and promote more women for leadership positions. Data was collected from employees who had females as their superiors or in the decision-making position. Data from a final sample of 517 respondents was gathered, on which SEM was applied to analyze the direct impact of transformational women’s leadership on employee performance and the indirect impact through the mediation of intrinsic motivation. The study found that by having feminine traits, women are stronger transformational leaders as they encourage individuals to be self-motivated instead of getting stimulated because of some external incentive. In addition, transformational women’s leadership creates a better work environment by inspiring a teamwork culture instead of individualism.

The fourth paper “Prestige over Profit, Corporate Social Responsibility Boosts Corporate Sustainable Performance: Mediation Roles of Brand Image and Brand Loyalty” aims to investigate the influence of corporate social responsibility (CSR) on corporate sustainable performance (CSP) of small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs), as well as the mediating roles of brand image (BI) and brand loyalty (BL) in an emerging economy. The relevance of the study derives from how it contributes to the corpus of existing publications related to CSR and its influence on corporate sustainability. This article contributes to the current research in this area by providing additional statistical proof of the method through which CSR promotes CSP, including the participation of BI and BL in mediating this connection. Additionally, this study throws light on CSR aspects that go beyond the quality or technical scope that was previously considered. The results showed strong and positive correlations

between the model's components, including CSR and CSP, CSR and BI, CSR and BL and the mediating role of BI and BL in the relationship between CSR and CSP.

Conclusion

The diverse range of papers presented here not only highlights the multifaceted nature of this endeavor but also underscores the indispensable role of collaborative efforts across different sectors and regions. The implementation of the SDGs requires a paradigm shift in how nations, industries and communities conceptualize and approach development. From the importance of a knowledge economy in fostering environmental sustainability to the pivotal role of financial inclusion at the bottom of the pyramid, the contributions in this issue reflect a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of SD. The insights gained from these studies underscore the need for innovative approaches that balance economic growth with environmental stewardship and social inclusion.

The transformational impact of women in leadership, as explored in this issue, brings to the fore the untapped potential of inclusive governance in driving the SDGs. Furthermore, the exploration of CSR within the context of SMEs provides compelling evidence of the synergistic relationship between ethical business practices and SD.

As we reflect on the collective wisdom shared in this issue, it is clear that the path to achieving the SDGs is not linear. It is fraught with challenges that span across data inadequacies, institutional weaknesses and inherent contradictions between different goals. However, these challenges are not insurmountable. They call for a renewed commitment to global partnership, where knowledge sharing, resource pooling and collaborative action become the cornerstone of our collective endeavor. Looking ahead, the global community must continue to foster an environment that encourages dialogue, innovation and action. It is through such concerted efforts that we can hope to not only meet the targets set by the SDGs but also create a more equitable, sustainable and resilient world for future generations.

As guest editors, we express our gratitude to the authors, reviewers and readers who have contributed to this enlightening discourse. We hope that the insights shared in this issue will not only advance academic understanding but also inspire practical actions towards the realization of the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for SD. The journey ahead is long, but together, we can make strides towards a future where progress and responsibility go hand in hand.

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