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Viewpoint: Accelerating the Implementation of the SDGs

Walter Leal Filho

European School of Sustainability Science and Research, Hamburg University of Applied Sciences, Ulmenliet 20, D-21033 Hamburg, Germany.

&

Department of Natural Sciences, Manchester Metropolitan University. All Saints Building. Oxford Road. Manchester M15 6BH. UK

E-mail: w.leal@mmu.ac.uk

Abstract

This viewpoint reflects on the evolution process leading to the UN Sustainable Development Goals, the many issues influencing them, and describes the need to accelerate their implementation. It also outlines a variety of actions which higher education institutions may undertake, in order to take an active part in the process.

Key-words: sustainable development goals – universities – academic community - implementation

Viewpoint

The international debate on the implementation of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) has reached a significant degree of maturity, so that time is prone to review them, and assess the extent to which higher education institutions have been, and may continue to contribute to this process.

From a historical perspective, discussions about creating the SDGs started at the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (UNCSD), commonly known as Rio+20, which was held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil in June 2012. The Declaration "The Future We Want" (UN 2012) opened the way for it (Leal Filho, Manolas, Pace 2015). The idea behind the SDGs drive was to produce a set of universal goals, that meet the pressing environmental, political and economic challenges which the world faces, and which impact both industrialised and developing nations alike.

The SDGs were expected to replace the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which started a global effort in the year 2000. The MDGs established at the time universally-agreed objectives for tackling extreme poverty and hunger, preventing deadly diseases, and expanding primary education to all children, among other development priorities (UNDP 2015).

The MDGs did not unfortunately succeed in fully achieving the aims it set, within the time span provided (2000-2015). This was so for three main reasons. Firstly, even though 189 UN members endorsed them, the financial means needed to support their implementation were not fully made available. Secondly, there were no effective mechanisms in place to measure and reward progress . Thirdly, even though the MDGs were important, they were not very visible enough, and not as present in the international discussions and debates, as they should have been. However, the MDGs did drive progress in several important areas such as:

a) moderately reducing poverty levels in some countries

b) providing much needed access to water and sanitation

c) driving down child mortality and

d) improving maternal health

among many others. They also started a global movement for free primary education, inspiring countries to invest in their future generations.

The legacy and achievements of the MDGs provided valuable lessons and experiences to begin work on the new goals, the SDGs. Colombia proposed the idea of the SDGs at a preparation event for Rio+20, which was held in Indonesia in July 2011.In September 2011, this idea was picked up by the United Nations Department of Public Information, at its 64th NGO Conference in Bonn, Germany (UN 2015) Much preparation work towards the UN Sustainable Development Goals was done behind the scenes.

In January 2013, the 30-member "UN General Assembly Open Working Group on the Sustainable Development Goals" was established, to discuss and agree on the specific goals for the SDGs. The Open Working Group (OWG) was tasked with preparing a proposal on the SDGs for consideration during the 68th session of the General Assembly, to be held in the period September 2013 – September 2014. On 19 July 2014, the OWG forwarded a proposal for the SDGs to the General Assembly. After 13 sessions, the OWG submitted their proposal of 17 SDGs and 169 targets to the 68th session of the General Assembly in September 2014 (OWG 2014).

On 5 December 2014, the UN General Assembly accepted the Secretary General's Synthesis Report, which stated that the agenda for the post-2015 SDG process would be based on the OWG proposals.

In January 2015, the General Assembly began the negotiation process on the post-2015 development agenda. The process culminated in the subsequent adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, with 17 SDGs at its core, at the UN Sustainable Development Summit in September 2015. The Resolution was endorsed by more than 190 world leaders committed to the SDGs, to help end extreme poverty, fight inequality and injustice, and address climate change, among other goals. The SDGs are part of Resolution 70/1 of the United Nations General Assembly, documented on the UN 2030 Agenda. There was an agreement on a set of 17 SDGs, these being:

1- No Poverty

2 -Zero Hunger

3- Good Health and Well-being

4- Quality Education

5- Gender Equality

6-Clean Water and Sanitation

7- Affordable and Clean Energy

8- Decent Work and Economic Growth

9- Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure

10- Reducing Inequality

11- Sustainable Cities and Communities

12- Responsible Consumption and Production

13- Climate Action

14- Life Below Water

15- Life On Land

16- Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions

17- Partnerships for the Goals

(UN 2015)

The goals are broad-based and interdependent. Each of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals have a list of targets, that are expected to be measured with indicators. The key to making the SDGs successful is to make the data on the 17 goals widely available and understandable, and to mobilise the relevant stakeholders at all levels.

But despite the fact they were well meant, two important details were overlooked when the SDGs were agreed. Firstly, is the fact that the level of emphasis in the delivery was bound to be different. Whereas industrialised nations tend to not pay enough attention to Goals such as fighting poverty (SDG1) or eradicating hunger (SDG2), these two SDGs are among the priorities in many developing countries. But at the same time there is also a need to address the widely spread misconception that the SDGs are targets for poor countries only, and that wealthy nations should not engage with some of them. Secondly, the implementation of individual goals needs to be based on a careful framework, which combines planning, budgeting, activities and monitoring and evaluation, as outlined on Figure 1.
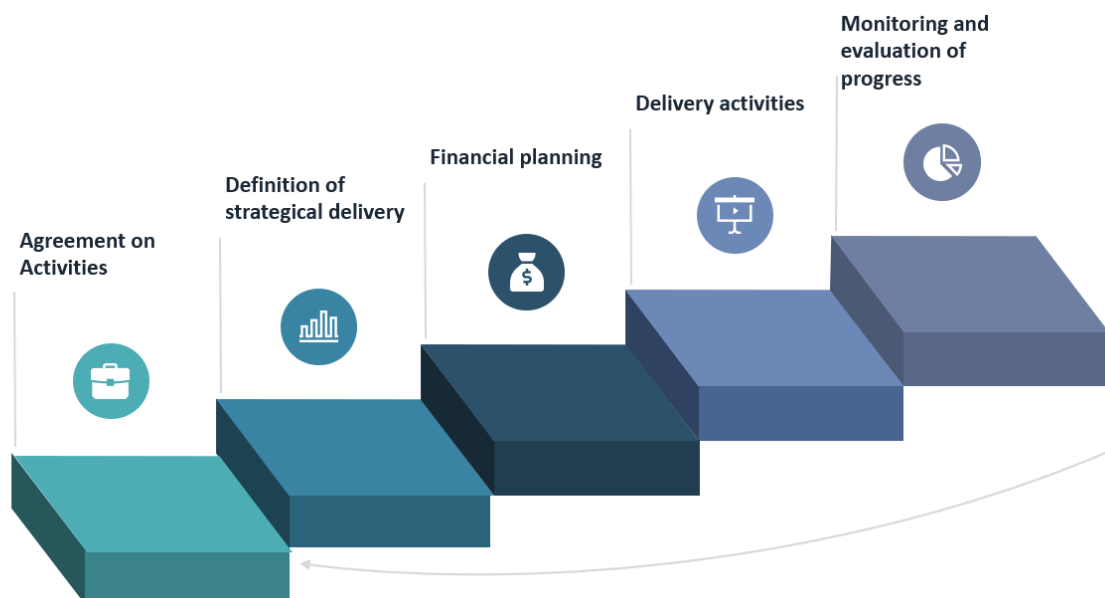

Figure 1- A framework to implement the SDGs

Unfortunately, this aspect was also largely overlooked: there was an agreement on the activities to be performed, but individual countries were not sufficiently advised on the

strategies leading to their execution. As a result, the north-south divide is still being seeing, where some -better organised- countries are systematically moving forward, whereas others are not.

In addition, whereas the 17 Goals interconnect, the ramifications of the SDGs have not yet been fully taken into account. For instance, the exacerbation of hunger and poverty in particular in sub-Sahara Africa, negatively influences health (SDG3) and is at least to some extent influenced by climate change (SDG13). Moreover, only a few of the nations which endorsed the decision of the 2015 UN General Assembly have made concrete funding provisions to specifically pursue the SDGS. Furthermore, despite the fact that much is spoken about the interactions between higher education institutions (HEIs) and communities in the implementation of the SDGs, little progress has been achieved in this regard. Finally, the knowledge and experience of HEIs on matters related to sustainable development are not yet being fully taken into account in the design or implementation of sustainability initiatives related to the SDGs: this still remains a grey area where action is needed.

There is therefore a real danger the SDGs may not be reached by 2030. The academic community, which was not sufficiently involved in the discussions leading to the SDGs, can and has been providing an important contribution to the implementation of the Goals. Apart from offering training and informing millions of students at HEIs about the SDGs, academics round the world have been performing a wide range of research activities across disciplines, which are all useful in making the SDGs a reality. They have also engaged in undertaking field projects and organising events, which have been very helpful in promoting awareness about the SDGs.

But awareness alone is not enough. The academic community believes that the following, concrete actions are needed, and pledge for their implementation:

1. The creation of funding streams to support research programmes specific to the implementation of the SDGs. These are only available in a handful of countries, a matter which needs to be urgently addressed. The transformative power of research can greatly assist in fostering a better understanding of the many socio-economic and environmental features of the SDGs and in the process, support their implementation. The SDGs, it is believed, may also reinvigorate the sustainable development research agenda(Leal Filho, Azeiteiro, Alves, Pace, Mifsud, Brandli, Caeiro, Disterheft 2017).

2. Better integration of topics related to the SDGs in teaching programmes. There is a quite fertile ground here (Leal Filho, Mifsud, Moltan-Hill, Brandli, Shiel, Azeiteiro, Vargas, Caeiro, Veiga Avila 2019). Teaching on, about and for the SDGs can be flexibly practicised by interested teaching staff. For instance, by having SDGs related issues inserted as courses, modules, units or even as themes in specific lectures. The vision is that students from all degree programmes offered by HEIs round the world are "**SDG Literate**", a term herewith coined to describe the basic knowledge about the nature and usefulness of the SDGs which should be part of the education of all university students round the world, along with the awareness about the pressing need to actively participate in their implementation.

3. More use of the know-how and technical competence from universities, by UN agencies, donor bodies and national and regional governments in the design and implementation of programmes related to the delivery of the SDGs. In particular, the global presence of HEIs means that they are a powerful local asset, whose potential has so far been overlooked. Since the implementation of the SDGs is global in

nature, but requires support on the ground, it makes sense to involve local universities, whose expertise and familiarity with local communities (Leal Filho, Paco, Shiel, Brandli 2015) makes them formidable allies in the realisation of the SDGs.

Moreover, there is a need to intensify efforts with a view to make the SDGs a reality. In other words, there is a need to "**accelerate**" their implementation. The year 2030 is not far away. We have about 10 years to go before the 2030 deadline is reached, and it would be a shame that, comes 2030, the SDGs share the same destiny as the MDGs. This should be avoided.

Table 1 outlines some of the key areas within higher education, where the acceleration is needed.

Table 1- Some key areas where "acceleration" is needed in a higher education context

Area	Impact
Sustainability in the curriculum	Better integration of sustainability issues in teaching programmes
Sustainability on campuses	Optimisation in the integration of sustainability thinking on campus programmes
Sustainability literacy	Increased awareness of sustainability by means of skills building, additional knowledge and opening of new mindsets
Sustainability research	New findings which may pave the way for transformation and future developments
Sustainability governance	Long-term sustainability strategies at the institutional level
Sustainability reporting	Systematic disclosure of institutional efforts, to measure progress and guide future improvements
Thematic integration	Integration of sustainability thinking and elements within specific subjects within their respective remits (e.g. engineering, arts, social sciences, etc)

In order to lead and coordinate the efforts needed in the higher education section, the "**Accelerating the Implementation of the SDGs Series**" has been started and is coordinated by this journal. It consists of a set of high-calibre events, addressing matters related to sustainable development in higher education, via which a platform to discuss and showcase initiatives undertaken by the academic community to implement the SDGs, is provided. Most papers which are submitted to these events and which are accepted after peer-review, are published in this journal, hence providing a sound basis for the documentation and dissemination of experiences.

Whereas it is unclear at this point in time if the SDGs will be fully achieved by 2030, it is clear that efforts need to be made in order to reach as many of the SDGs as possible by that time. The food security, health and well-being of billions of people round the world depend on it.

P.S. Members of the academic community who may wish to endorse this Viewpoint, may be able to do so by completing an endorsement form available via this link: https://www.haw-hamburg.de/en/ftz-nk/programmes/iusdrp/editorial.html. The names and organisations of all colleagues will be displayed at the "International Journal of Sustainable Development in Higher Education" as an Annex. This Viewpoint can also be quoted in relevant papers on the SDGs.

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