

THE 2030 AGENDA

In September 2015, world leaders at the United Nations (UN), unanimously adopted "Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development". It is one of the most ambitious and vital global agreements in recent history. The SDGs are a set of priorities and aspirations to guide all countries in tackling the world's most pressing challenges: ending poverty and hunger; protecting the planet from degradation and addressing climate change; ensuring that all people can enjoy prosperous, healthy and fulfilling lives; and fostering peaceful, just and inclusive societies free from fear and violence to all countries and all people by 2030. Accordingly, the agenda, which came into effect on 1 January 2016, aims to set the world on a path towards a better future for all by 2030. At the heart of the agenda are the 17 SDGs with 169 targets and 232 indicators between them.

IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGES

Quantitative targets help in tracking the progress of SDGs. Indicators are the backbone of monitoring the progress of SDGs. The 232 indicators proposed by the Sustainable Development Solutions Network, accompanied by suggestions for complementary national indicators, will help track the progress of SDGs. Each country is expected to pick the number and range of complementary national indicators that best suit its needs and capacity to collect and analyze data.

Countries are facing many challenges in implementing SDGs. One challenge is that many indicators fall into Tier 3 of the UN Tire classification system. Tier 3 indicators are those for which there is no established methodology, and standards or methodology are being developed or tested. Another challenge is making necessary data available for computing the indicators.

Data can be numerical values, text, images, or perceptions. Often the concept of data suggests

lenges the world is facing today. To address them,

Sustainable Development needs to become the cornerstone for future research at all levels, particularly at university level. This will require support for research on the SDGs to be internalised within the policies and culture of the university. Through their activities in education, research, and operations, universities already make essential contributions to the achievement of the SDGs. However, for the SDGs to be a reality, universities need to play a much stronger and leading role in the implementation of the SDGs.

Universities occupy a unique position in society. With a broad remit around the creation and dissemination of knowledge, universities have long been powerful drivers of global, national, and local innovation, economic development, and societal well-being. As such, universities have a critical role in the achievement of the SDGs and will also greatly benefit from engaging with them. Given the size of the task of achieving the SDGs, and the critical roles universities have in delivering on the SDGs, there is an urgent need for the sector to accelerate action.

POSSIBLE CONTRIBUTIONS

The SDG agenda covers a wide range of interconnected social, economic, and environmental challenges and the unique functions and expertise of universities are critical for overcoming many of these. Encourage and promote the SDGs as a topic of research within the university; Support the full spectrum of research approaches needed to address the SDGs; Support and incubate innovation for sustainable development solutions; actively support national and local implementation of the SDGs; Advocate for national support and coordination of research on the SDGs. A few key roles that could be played by the universities in facing these challenges are described below.

planning. Such a realigned university education can not only drive the SDG processes to success, it can also equip the university intelligentsia to be effective leaders, decision-makers, and innovators that the country needs so much.

LEARNING AND TEACHING

Education is one of the bedrocks of the SDGs. Quality education leads to significant sustainable development benefits for individuals and communities. As such, universities, through their extensive learning and teaching activities - including undergraduate and graduate teaching, professional training, executive and adult education, online learning, can play a significant role in SDG implementation. Further, universities can contribute to all of the SDGs by ensuring that they are training graduates for the jobs that are needed for SDG implementation and to ensure they are agile, change-ready and future-focused, so that they remain relevant not just for the jobs that exist today, but for those that will exist in the future.

RESEARCH

To achieve the SDGs, the global community will need to overcome many difficult and complex social, economic and environmental challenges. Overcoming some of these challenges will require transformations in how societies and economies function, and how we interact with our planet. Universities, through their extensive research capabilities and activities, have a critical role in providing the necessary knowledge, evidence base, solutions, and innovations to underpin and support this task.

More broadly, research, knowledge creation, and innovation across the physical sciences, social sciences, biomedical sciences, engineering, and the humanities are fundamental for the successful implementation of all of the SDGs. Research is the basis for understanding challenges, localising the

ing SDGs. Universities can adopt many strategies to raise awareness and the profile of the SDGs among researchers, including Early Career Researchers who are looking to build their profile and presence in new spaces. These strategies may include the following.

- a) Develop a National Research Agenda on SDGs
- b) Align current and planned research with the SDGs
- c) Identify the research gaps
- d) Recruit suitable academic staff (permanent and visiting)
- e) Recognise research contributions to the SDGs - this conference can be one forum for this.
- f) Showcase research relating to the SDGs and highlight the SDGs in major flagship projects
- g) Report on how university research is contributing to the SDGs
- h) Engage in global research community efforts to support the SDGs.

New approaches based on the findings of the research on SDGs are crucial for addressing the complexity and real-world context of the SDGs. These approaches help to explore 'what is possible' and are guided by values to achieve the SDGs equitably. They include Policy-relevant advice that uses existing knowledge and research to assist policymakers to understand the implications of different policy options and to design new policies.

BENEFITS

Engaging with the SDGs will also greatly benefit universities by helping them to demonstrate their impact, create a demand for SDG-related education, build new partnerships, access new funding streams, be leaders in development research, and gain recognition globally as providers of development relevant education.

I am sure that the 'National Research Conference on Applied Social Statistics' organized by the University of Kelaniya, will play a leading role in making SDGs a reality for the people in Sri Lanka. I wish the conference a great success.

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