Engaging universities in implementing SDGs

This is an excerpt of the keynote address delivered by the former Director General of the Department of Census and Statistics Dr. Amara Satharasinghe at the National Research Conference on Applied Social Statistics - 2018 organised by the University of Kandy and held on 30 November 2018.

The importance of social statistics is the Social Statistics Division of the United Nations statistics system serves to study human behavior in a social environment. Social statistics research is critical for the effective implementation of the development agenda of a country. In the absence of robust, reliable, and valid social statistics that are derived from credible research, development actors would be blinded; vast resources spent on development would be wasted, or even cause negative repercussions.

Social statistics guide the way to effective and efficient pathways for bringing development rights to people. Thus, social statistics bring substantial benefits to legislators, policy makers, program managers, and to local, regional, national, and international communities. If estimated properly and monetarily, these benefits could be huge.

One example that illustrates the importance of social statistics is the United Nations Social Statistics Division. This division provides data on social developments such as health, education, and employment, which are critical for informed decision-making. Social statistics are also used to assess the impact of policies and interventions and to identify gaps and bottlenecks in development.

The SDGs present an opportunity for universities to contribute to the implementation of the global agenda. Universities have a unique position in society. With a broad remit around the creation and dissemination of knowledge, they have long been powerful drivers of global, national, and local innovation, economic research, and development. This includes the development, testing, and piloting of new tools and methods that can be used to monitor progress and evaluate outcomes.

In conclusion, engaging universities in the implementation of the SDGs is crucial for achieving the goals set by the United Nations. Universities have the expertise, resources, and influence to make a significant contribution to the implementation of the SDGs. By working together, we can ensure a sustainable future for all.

Scientific and technological research and the resulting innovations can offer solutions to both national and global issues. The key driver to achieve balanced national development is scientific and technological research and innovations, which are aligned with national and global development agendas such as the Sustainable Development Goals. Scientists and innovators are needed to fill the gaps in the national developmental landscape.

The 2030 Agenda

In September 2015, world leaders at the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) 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 sustainable lives; and ensuring that all people are free from hunger.

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 development 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 agenda to national and local contexts – including helping to identify relevant local challenges, priorities for action, and appropriate indicators for measuring local progress.

Developing solutions

In order to drive the development of social and technological innovations and solutions across the SDG challenges, research is needed. This will include the engagement of 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 research staff (permanent and visiting)
e. Recognise research contributions to the SDGs - this conference can be a 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’ organised 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.