Analysis of the Implementation of SDGs as Part of Community Engagement Activities at South African Universities: An Exploratory Study

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Abstract: The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) developed and adopted by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in September 2015 have created a new understanding of social responsibilities. The SDGs are a framework for building or creating a more sustainable future for all by 2030. Decision-makers in numerous industries have regarded the SDGs' implementation as a challenging undertaking. University community engagement initiatives undertaken by universities is one of the ways that can fast track the implementation of the SDGs. Universities are in a position to train and prepare the next generation with the skills required in the implementation of SDGs by involving students in their community engagement endeavors. Therefore, research on how universities are conducting their community engagement initiatives to incorporate SDGs is necessary. The objective of this study was to explore how the South African universities have incorporated the SDGs in their community engagement initiatives and what their SDGs priorities are. The focus of this study was on the eighteen traditional universities in South Africa. Universities' annual reports were examined using a qualitative exploratory approach and a content analysis research method was used to review the universities' involvement with SDGs. ATLAS.ti. was used as a data analysiss tool for this study. The findings indicate most South African universities incorporate SDGs in their community engagement initiatives. The universities' community engagement initiatives are directed towards achieving SDG 4 (quality education), SDG 17, which centres around partnerships to achieve the goals, and SDG 5 (gender equality). Universities are working cooperatively and have already begun referencing and integrating SDGs in their reporting. However, the incorporation of SDGs into the universities' community engagement reporting is not sufficient as some universities are not yet mentioning SDGs in their annual reports.

Keywords: Community engagements, SDGs, Universities, Higher education

1. Introduction

The United Nations (UN) adopted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in 2015 (UNDP, 2015). The 17 SDGs serve as a roadmap for building a better and more sustainable future for all people as they address issues like poverty, inequality, climate change, environmental degradation, peace, justice, as well as other global problems. Achieving the SDGs will undoubtedly require stakeholders from various sectors, such as government, the private sector and universities learning to work together towards this common goal. Many organisations have started to incorporate these SDGs as part of their operations being socially responsible and are further striving to meet them (PricewaterhouseCoopers (PWC), 2019). According to a survey conducted by KPMG (2020), approximately 72 percent of the G250 (the largest companies in the world by revenue as defined in the Fortune 500 ranking of 2019), have already begun incorporating these SDGs into their strategies. However, SDG reporting is still unbalanced and disconnected (KPMG, 2020).

As a response to the framework offered by the SDGs, universities are revisiting their teaching, research and community engagement programmes (Fia, Ghasemzadeh & Paletta, 2022). However, there are still massive challenges in implementing and achieving the SDGs (Scheyvens, Banks & Hughes, 2016). Knowledge deficit and lack of collaboration have been identified as some of the challenges in implementing and achieving the SDGs (Agusdinata, 2022; Tandon, 2017). Universities can assist in overcoming this challenge through incorporating the SDGs in their research, teaching and learning, and community engagement activities. Universities are crucial contributors to reaching SDGs as they are the main centres for the creation of new knowledge through research and the transmission of knowledge through teaching (Junior, Fine & Horne, 2019; Mawonde &

Togo, 2019; European University on Responsible Consumption and Production, 2022). Universities have a long tradition of conducting in-depth research and engaging with various communities through their research and community engagement initiatives. Furthermore, universities are essential in bringing diverse stakeholders together to act and have an influence in achieving the SDGs (Leal Filho, Shiel, Paço, Mifsud, Ávila, Brandli, Molthan-Hill, Pace, Azeiteiro, Vargas & Caeiro, 2019).

With their ability to collaborate, form partnerships, and engage with external parties (Trencher, Rosenberg Daneri, McCormick, Terada, Peterson, Yarime & Kiss, 2016), universities can contribute their intellectual expertise to address complex societal and environmental challenges. Universities, as large entities, can establish sustainability divisions in order to launch community-based initiatives like recycling waste into usable materials, collaborating with industry and other important groups to promote efficient, clean technologies, and ultimately, sustainable campuses and universities. In this way, such initiatives can inspire students and wider communities to change their own behaviours to achieve the SDGs. Such initiatives are expected to be included in the universities' community engagement reporting in their annual reports. Therefore, research on how universities are conducting their community engagement initiatives to incorporate SDGs is necessary. The objective of this study was to explore how the South African universities have incorporated the SDGs in their community engagement initiatives and what their SDGs priorities are. Furthermore, the study made a comparison of the findings with the priorities of other universities from developed countries. The next section will firstly introduce the theoretical framework that underpins the study, then it will highlight the link between SDGs and decolonialty in an African context. Further, it will also introduce the literature that explains the SDGs, and it will provide an explanation of the universities' perspectives regarding the SDGs and how universities globally are implementing these SDGs.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Theoretical Frameworks

There were two theories considered for this study, which include stewardship theory and legitimacy theory:

2.1.1 Stewardship Theory

According to the stewardship theory, people are innately motivated by their concern for the success of their organisations to achieve the responsibilities that they have been tasked with. As part of stewardship theory, there are several key features, including a strong sense of purpose, long-term focus, sustainability as well as strong and mutually beneficial relationships (between employees, stakeholders, and community members) (Viswanathan *et al*., 2021. From this view, people tend to be mutually understanding and in support of the organisational objectives instead of having personal selfish goals. As a result, through community engagement initiatives, stewardship theory allows universities to address the UN's social-ecological sustainability challenges from the local community level (Menyah, 2013).

2.1.2 Legitimacy Theory

As a fundamental tenet of legitimacy theory, entities should continue to exist only if their moral principles and rules of conduct reflect the values of the society in which they function (Samkin & Deegan, 2012). It is imperative for entities seeking legitimacy to make rational and informed choices that will lead to their success and legitimacy in society (DiMaggio & Powell, 2000; Thompson, 2017). Despite South Africa being the second largest economy on the African continent, the country is afflicted by the triple threats of inequality, high unemployment and poverty (Masikane, Hewitt & Toendepi, 2020).

In light of these challenges, higher education institutions are faced with a balancing act. As a part of the solution to these challenges, these institutions cannot solely rely on producing university graduates and creating research outputs. Accordingly, higher education institutions are equally obligated to seek legitimacy by contributing to solving the challenges that affect society and at the same time achieve the SDGs. It follows, therefore, that the goals of teaching and learning, generating research outputs, and addressing societal challenges can happen and can be achieved simultaneously, and their community engagement initiatives should incorporate efforts towards achieving the SDGs.

2.2 SDG Overview

The SDGs have emerged as one of the main umbrella frameworks for addressing issues of inequality and societal concerns, with the goal of ensuring a more

sustainable future for all by the year 2030 (UNDP, 2015). The SDGs comprises of 17 goals which were adopted by 193 countries and South Africa was one of them. The list of the 17 SDGs is presented in Figure 1.

The objective of the SDGs is to eradicate poverty, safeguard the environment, and guarantee that people live in peace and prosperity. The SDGs goals replaced the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which came to an end in 2015. The MDGs only had eight objectives, which were centred on reducing poverty, preserving the environment, enhancing education, battling diseases, and enhancing the livelihoods of women and children. The SDGs have expanded the MDG's objectives to include climate change, economic inequality, innovation, sustainable consumption, peace, and justice (UNDP, 2015). The SDGS model a systems-based approach to analysing both global and local issues (International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD), 2020).

Since the adoption of the SDGs, organisations globally have started to incorporate them into their strategies and have begun reporting on them (KPMG, 2020). Although South Africa in particular has made progress toward reaching the SDGs, there are still many obstacles to overcome (United Nations, 2019). Among other challenges, implementing the SDGs will require collaboration and integration across many stakeholders, as well as clear instructions on how to do it (Agusdinata, 2022). Furthermore, it has been stated that organisations are still selective of the SDGs that they focus on, which is slowing down the progress in meeting these SDGs (Bockstette, Pfitzer, Smith, Bhavaraju, Priestley & Bhatt, 2015).

Achieving the SDGs calls for a combination of administrative, political, technological, scientific, and administrative contributions and will require a collaborative strategy (Nhamo & Mjiba, 2020). Universities are better placed to facilitate this strategy by facilitating the involvement of different stakeholders given their role in society, which includes creation of knowledge through research and teaching. Thus, universities can play a big role in meeting the SDGs.

Figure 1: The UN Vision 2030 SDGs

Source: (UNDP, 2015)

2.3 Universities' Perspective

One of the important aspects that the SDGs incorporated, which was not present in the MDGs, is the inclusion of the higher education sector in the global sustainable development agenda (Chankseliani & McCowan, 2021). This was done by adding SDG 4, which is quality education. Universities are by definition fully aligned with the goals and objectives of SDG 4, which calls for inclusive, equitable, and high-quality education (European University on Responsible Consumption and Production, 2022). Although SDG 4 speaks specifically to ensuring access to quality education for all, universities can play an important role in accelerating the achievement of all 17 goals by their contribution to the creation of knowledge, creativity, and human development (Chankseliani & McCowan, 2021).

Universities offer research, teaching and innovative ideas that aligns with SDG 4 (quality education) and SDG 9 (industry, innovation and infrastructure). Universities are also a crucial component of civil society, which is dealt with as part of SDG 16 (peace, justice and strong institutions), and they can play an effective role in advocating for both local and international partnerships, which is SDG 17 (partnerships for the goals).

According to Agusdinata (2022), there are possible synergies across all the SDGs so entities should not pick which SDGs to focus on. Thus, SDG initiatives should focus on co-benefits. Agusdinata (2022) developed a model that should inform SDG initiatives at universities, as shown in Figure 2.

The main focus of this model is on the fact that there are synergies between the 17 SDGs. When

Figure 2: A model That Should Inform SDG Initiatives at Universities
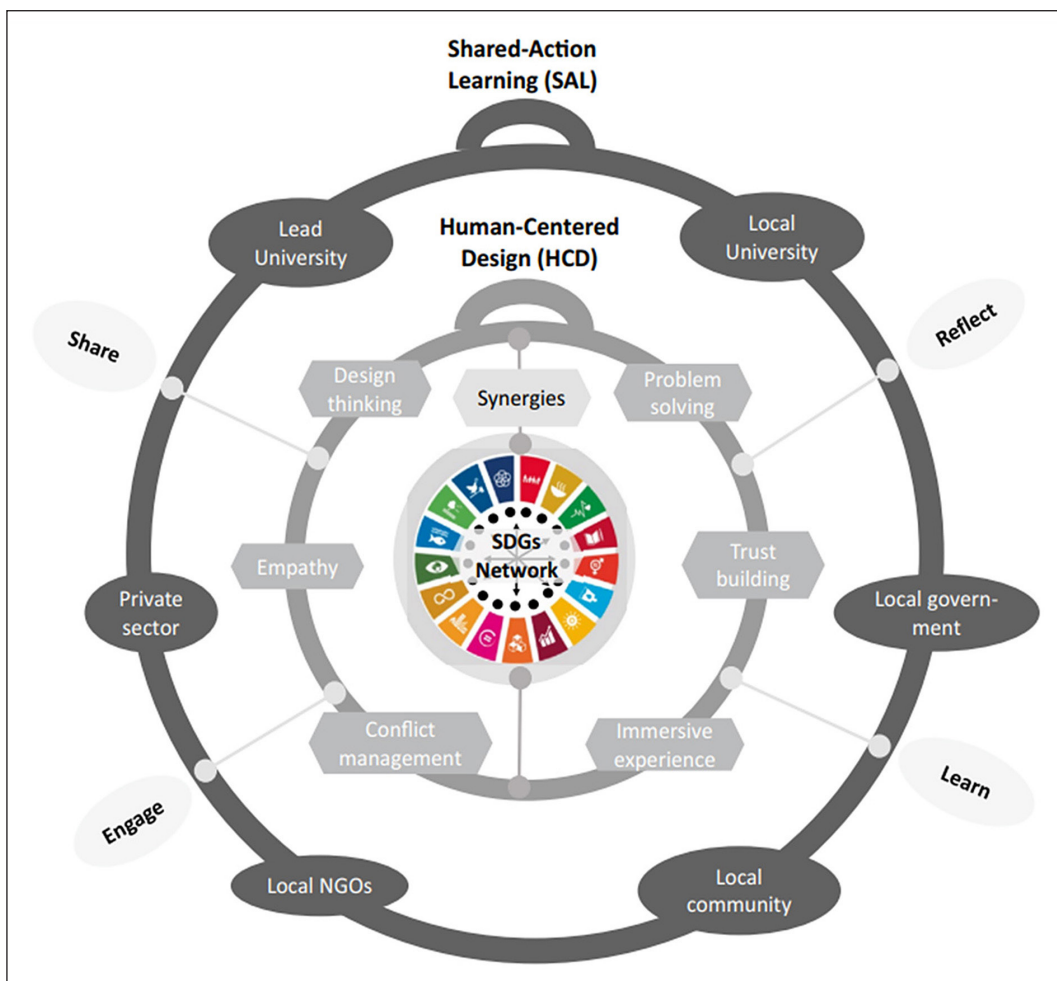
Source: Agusdinata (2022)

developing SDG strategies, universities need to identify these synergies and maximise them. Another important factor in this model is the emphasis on partnerships and collaborations to meet the SDGs. It is imperative for universities to engage the local community and other stakeholders when developing their SDG strategies.

It is important to note that universities are under no obligation to meet all the SDGs, however, many universities have opted to do so (IISD, 2020), as they seek to be regarded by the perspective of society as a whole rather than just as a means of preparing people for work and life (Tandon, 2017). This is consistent with the legitimacy theory, which contends that organizations constantly strive to seem to be operating within the constraints and social norms of society and to uphold the social contract, a system of standards, definitions, and values that is created by society (Suchman, 1995; Donoher, 2017). The legitimacy in the context of this study, for the universities, can be achieved through adopting the SDGs as the social contract and incorporate them in research, teaching and learning, and community engagement.

Research, teaching and learning, and community engagement are the core functions of universities (Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), 2013). All of these core functions can be utilised to achieve the SDGs. The following sections detail how the three core functions can be utilised to meet the SDGs.

3. Research

Research on SDGs has been highlighted as one of the urgent research areas (Leal Filho *et al*., 2019). One of the most significant ways that universities can support the SDGs is through research (IISD, 2020). Implementing and achieving the SDGs by 2030 will require strong partnerships and collaborations between universities and other stakeholders in sustainability research (Körfgen, Förster, Glatz, Maier, Becsi, Meyer, Kromp-Kolb & Stötter, 2018). This means that universities need to have research initiatives that mainly focus on the 17 SDGs and solve real-world problems. Universities can conduct research that focusses on providing solutions to sustainable development challenges such as poverty, quality education, unemployment and climate change, among others (Junior *et al*., 2019). This SDG research can also be utilised to inform political

actions from governments in various countries. For example in South Africa, the research can be considered when revising the National Developmental Plan (NDP), which provides a thorough plan for South Africa's attempts to meet the SDGs (Haywood, Funke, Audouin, Musvoto & Nahman, 2018). Universities should also form collaborations and partnerships among themselves to implement sustainability research as part of their research activities. The same approach can also be implemented in teaching and learning.

4. Teaching and Learning

There are various ways in which universities can integrate SDGs into the teaching and learning environment. As an example, they can achieve this through the introduction of new courses, pedagogies, and curriculum modifications (Tandon, 2017). The universities should move towards a sustainability related pedagogy. According to Hong (2022), the SDGs are still to make it into the classroom and the curriculum. Embedding the goals within the curriculum promotes a relevant work-ready educative offering that addresses the industry's need for a workforce whose education is more appropriate for a sustainable context (UNESCO, 2017). As a result, certain disciplines may have a greater impact on certain goals, for example, water and sanitation, SDG 6, may align more closely with environmental science; similarly, healthy lives and well-being, SDG 3, may have a greater influence on Health Sciences. Incorporating the SDGs into the curriculum will require commitment from university management, staff and buy-in from students. Therefore, the first step would be to establish interest from these stakeholders. Apart from research as well as teaching and learning, universities can act as a facilitator for delivering services to communities (Owens, 2017).

5. Community Engagements at Universities

Community engagement is a process by which the affiliation with the community is prioritised (Driscoll & Sandmann, 2016). As a result, it refers to the engagement procedures and practices where a variety of people collaborate to accomplish a common objective while adhering to a shared set of values, principles, and criteria (Bhagwan, 2020). Community engagement is defined in the context of this study as actions carried out by universities and its larger community that are primarily intended to elevate

or help society and/or people in need of support (Mawonde & Togo, 2019).

Community engagement is regarded as a "stepchild" of higher education (Johnson, 2020), which means it is not getting enough attention, despite the fact that it has been part of the higher education landscape for decades (Times Higher Education, 2021). This is also evident in the fact that there is still no broadly accepted structure for the application of community engagement in universities in South Africa (Johnson, 2020). This challenge can be addressed by engaging extensively with the constant shifting meaning of community engagement, with the recent one being the SDGs' context, as the SDGs are considered part of the social contract between entities and the society within which they operate (UNDP, 2017). Community engagement is the way in which universities can interact with the needs of local communities and these needs are well captured by the SDGs (that is, the social contract).

Globally, universities have committed to achieving the SDGs. Times Higher Education (THE) releases annual impact ratings detailing how universities are achieving SDGs. The rankings are intended to recognize the efforts made by universities that are committed to addressing challenges that affect society at large, such as gender inequality, access to high-quality education, climate change, world peace, and economic prosperity. The latest impact ratings report was released in 2022 which included 1,406 universities from 106 regions (Times Higher Education, 2022).

The THE Impact Rankings are international rankings which rate the universities according to their performance in regard to the SDGs. They employed measures providing a thorough and fair comparison across four main categories: research, stewardship, outreach, and teaching. The ratings also showed that the top ten universities focussed on SDG 17, which is partnerships for goals. Figure 3 shows the SDG focus of the top 100 universities according to THE Impact Rankings.

All the top 100 universities had SDG 17 (Partnerships for the goals) in the ratings as one of their focus

Figure 3: SDG Focus of the Top 100 Universities According to THE Impact Rankings
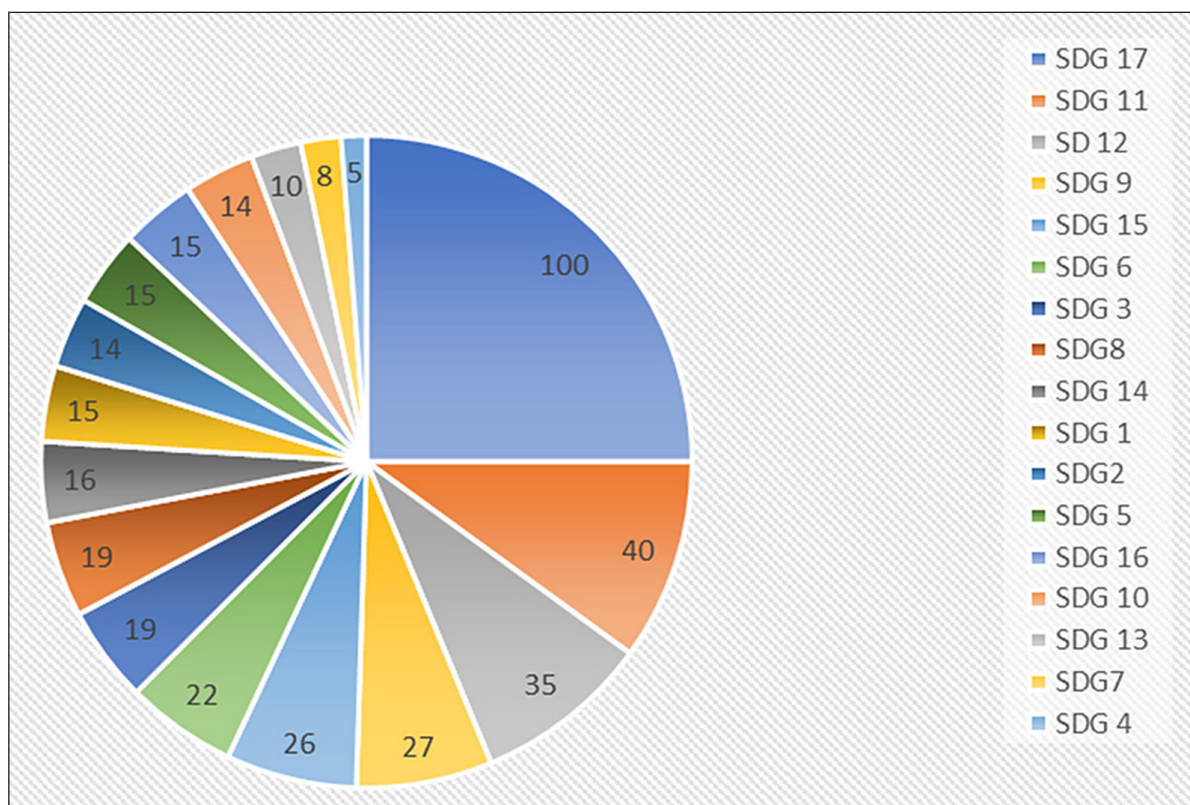
Source: Adapted from THE Impact Rankings (2022)

areas. Out of the 100 universities, 40 universities had SDG 11(Sustainable cities and communies) as their focus area, 35 universities had SDG 12 (Responsible consumption and production), and 27 universities prioritised SDG 9 (Industry, innovation and infrastructure). The top 100 universities are prioritising partnerships in the SDGs endeavors. Apart from THE, there are other organisations that are committed to holding higher education institutions accountable when it comes to the SDG agenda, such as Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education (AASHE) and Higher Education Sustainability Initiative (HESI).

5.1 SDGs and Decoloniality as an Epistemological Movement in Africa

Decoloniality has become a focus point and a popular epistemological concept, especially in an African context. Decoloniality is a political and epistemological movement which is essential for the future of Africa as it encourages research to address social issues such as unemployment, poverty and inequality (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015). Krauss, Jiménez Cisneros and Requena-i-Mora (2022) have linked sustainable development and decoloniality in that focusing on the SDGs, which pertains to safeguarding people, planet, prosperity, peace and partnerships, can accelerate decoloniality (Krauss *et al*., 2022). The authors emphasised the importance of decolonising the curriculum in the higher education in an effort to meet SDG 4 (quality education). Because of their standing in the society, universities can contribute towards decoloniality by prioritising SDGs in their teaching and learning, research and community engagement.

In light of the importance of universities in achieving the SDGs, the alignment between the SDGs' objectives with community engagement, decoloniality and development issues in Africa, the study reviewed how the South African universities are incorporating the SDGs into their community engagement and what their priorities are. Furthermore, a comparison of these priorities with global universities, specifically the top 100 universities, which are mainly from developed countries, is also necessary in order to improve the efforts towards achieving the SDGs in sub-Saharan Africa. Although SDGs can be achieved through research, teaching and learning, and community engagement initiatives, this study will focus on community engagement as the core area that is neglected. This study aims to investigate how

universities challenge the status quo and advance the 2030 SDGs through its community engagement initiatives. The following section will discuss the research methodology applied in this study.

6. Methodology

This study is a qualitative exploratory study in the form of content analysis. The focus was on reviewing the annual reports of the 18 traditional and comprehensive universities in South Africa. This method is appropriate for this study as the information is available in the public domain. The study scrutinised the community engagement section in the annual reports of these universities to explore how they have incorporated the SDGs in their community engagement initiatives and what their SDGs priorities are. The selected period per university was based on the latest report available, ranging from 2018 to 2021 as some universities last issued reports in 2018.

Content analysis was used as a data analysis tool for this study. For this study, annual reports from the universities were used as secondary data, which was subsequently examined using ATLAS.ti 22, to provide a reliable and organised data analysis and interpretation (Woods, Macklin & Lewis, 2016). The tool was chosen due to its benefits, which included adaptability, usability, a reliable support system, and affordability.

The process started with the creation of codes that were deduced from the 17 SDGs as listed on the UN Agenda 2030. This study mainly followed deductive coding because the codes were deduced from an existing phenomenon, which are the SDGs (Cho & Lee, 2014). The codes were then used to label all the statements that addressed the SDGs' objectives from the universities' annual reports under the community engagement section. The coding of the annual reports was done electronically using ATLAS.ti 22 by dragging and dropping the codes from the codebook to link with the relevant community engagement initiatives as explained in the reports. The researchers then used the ATLAS.ti 22 reports that included the number of occurrences of the codes to meet the objective of the study.

6.1 Limitations of the Study

The focus was on the 18 traditional and comprehensive institutions as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: List of 18 Traditional and Comprehensive Universities in South Africa

Institution	Location(s)
University of Cape Town	Cape Town
University of Fort Hare	Alice, East London, Bhisho
University of the Free State	Bloemfontein, QwaQwa
University of Johannesburg	Johannesburg
University of KwaZulu-Natal	Durban, Pietermaritzburg, Pinetown, Westville
University of Limpopo	Polokwane, Turfloop
Nelson Mandela University	Port Elizabeth, George
North-West University	Mafikeng, Mankwe, Potchefstroom, Vanderbijlpark
University of Pretoria	Pretoria
Rhodes University	Grahamstown
Sefako Makgatho Health Sciences University	Ga-Rankuwa, Pretoria
University of South Africa (Unisa)	Distance education, headquartered in Pretoria, campuses and regional offices nationwide
University of Stellenbosch	Stellenbosch, Saldanha Bay, Bellville, Tygerberg
Walter Sisulu University	East London, Butterworth, Mthatha, Queenstown
University of the Western Cape	Bellville (Cape Town)
University of the Witwatersrand	Johannesburg

Source: DHET (2022)

7. Results and Discussion

We performed a document review of the universities' annual reports to understand how universities are integrating SDGs into their community engagement activities as detailed in their annual reports. We took into account the goals of each SDG and examined the yearly reports in light of their objectives. The results that follow paint a picture of how the South African universities' community engagement initiatives are contributing towards achieving the SDGs. These results are regarded as an impression rather than the complete picture as some universities report on community engagement separately on their websites, and not in their annual report. Figure 4 provides details of the results of the analysis.

The numbers in Figure 4 represent the number of initiatives that speak to different SDGs in the community engagement section of the universities' annual reports. The results show that some South African universities are incorporating SDGs in their community engagement initiatives. Figure 4 shows that most of the universities' community engagement initiatives are directed towards achieving SDG 4

(quality education), with 35 initiatives. The universities are providing bursaries, assisting schools with information, hosting career expos, providing training to teachers and providing tutoring services to schools. This finding is expected because one of the universities' primary functions is to focus on education (European University on Responsible Consumption and Production, 2022). However, compared to the global universities, there seems to be a disparity. Out of the top 100 universities, only one university prioritised SDG 4 (see Figure 4).

The South African universities also focussed on SDG 17, which centres around partnerships to achieve the goals, with 33 initiatives. The universities built strong partnerships and collaborated with government organisations, community-based organisations, civil organisations, local radio stations, international humanitarian organisations, other local and international universities, among others, to meet the needs of society. This finding agrees with the legitimacy theory.

Universities are maximising their ability to build strong partnerships to meet the SDGs as suggested in Agusdinata's (2022) model. The model

Figure 4: South African Universities' SDG Priorities
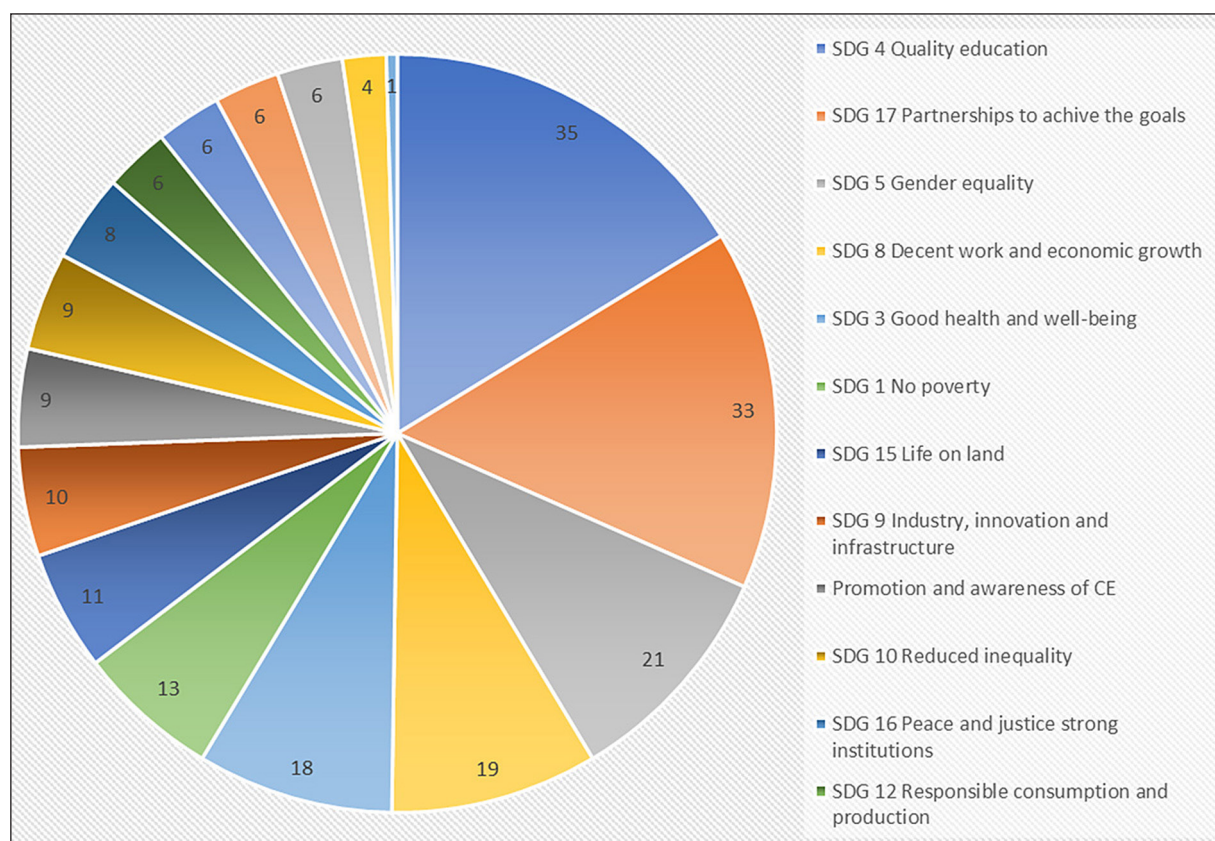
Source: Researchers' own contribution

emphasised strong partnerships and collaborations to achieve the SDGs. This finding agrees with the priorities of the top 100 universities as all these universities prioritised SDG 17 partnerships for the goals (Figure 4), which indicates that the community engagement activities of South African universities are focussed on building and strengthening partnerships between the universities and the communities in line with the global trend.

Another SDG that came through from the universities' community engagement initiatives is SDG 5 (gender equality) and SDG 8 (decent work and economic growth). The universities undertook a lot of initiatives to support women and the girl child, such as hosting workshops focussing on women leadership, girls' mentorship programmes, women leadership development programmes, webinars focussing on women in the fourth industrial revolution (4IR), among others. The universities also had many initiatives that addressed SDG 8 (decent work and economic growth). This shows that the universities are committed to decoloniality and

to solving issues such as unemployment, inequality as well as contributing towards economic growth.

However, there are some SDGs that are still not getting enough attention, such as SDG 7 (affordable and clean energy), SDG 6 (clean water and sanitation), SDG 2 (zero hunger), SDG 13 (climate action) and SDG 14 (life below water). Universities can utilise all the SDGs to reconfigure their community engagement and use all 17 SDGs as a framework for reporting their initiatives. According to Agusdinata (2022), there are possible synergies across all the SDGs so entities should not pick which SDGs to focus on.

Although our findings demonstrate that universities are working cooperatively and have already begun referencing and integrating SDGs in their reporting, it seems like the incorporation of SDGs into the universities' community engagement reporting still requires attention as some universities are not yet mentioning SDGs in these reports. Out of the

18 universities' annual reports that we reviewed, five universities did not even mention SDGs in their annual reports. This is concerning given the role of universities in achieving SDGs through their core functions. This can have an impact on the progress towards achieving the SDGs.

South African universities are, however, prioritising SDGs that speak to their core functions and environments, such as SDG 4 (quality education) and SDG 8 (decent work and economic growth). These SDGs also link to the issues around decoloniality and social development issues in South Africa, such as low economic growth and unemployment. At the moment, South Africa's unemployment rate is 33.9% (Stats SA, 2022) and economic growth is projected at 4.9% in 2023 (RSA National Treasury, 2022), which makes addressing unemployment and contributing towards economic growth priorities for South Africa challenging. On the other hand, global universities are focussing mainly on SDG 17 (partnerships) and SDG 9 (industrial innovation and infrastructure). This is expected given that different regions have different priorities.

8. Conclusion and Recommendations

South African universities are putting a lot of effort to incorporate the SDGs into their community engagement reporting. Even though their SDG priorities do not align with the global universities' priorities, they are aligned with the social issues that are specific to the country. However, there is still a need for community engagement reporting in the annual reports to be more aligned with the SDGs. However, there is a suggestion in literature that community engagement initiatives should be rigorously embedded into teaching and learning and research (Bender, 2008; Bhagwan, 2020; THE, 2021). The community engagement section should still be part of the universities' annual reporting as a separate section. This is because community engagement is a core function on its own for universities. The SDGs can assist universities to structure the community engagement section of the annual reports as they provide clear objectives and present a structure of the social contract.

We recommend that universities review their community engagement planning and reporting to ensure that it is aligned with the SDGs in the annual reports. Both the SDGs and community engagement seek to achieve a common goal, which is to prioritise

the needs of the society and address broader societal challenges. Future research can explore how universities incorporate the SDGs into their other core functions, namely, research, teaching and learning. Further research can also focus on mapping the requirements of community engagement which is one of the pillars or core function of the universities, with the objectives of SDGs, in order to develop a framework for community engagement reporting in universities.

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