Advancing sustainable development goals through university-community engagement in higher education

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Abstract

This paper examines the evolving role of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in advancing sustainable development through community engagement (CE) initiatives aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Recognizing HEIs as significant agents of change, the paper highlights the shift from a traditional academic focus to a more community-oriented approach that prioritizes social impact. Drawing from recent literature, it explores how HEIs should enhance CE efforts to address pressing societal challenges. This review illustrates how HEIs' focused CE activities actively support SDG objectives through diverse projects to achieve specific, tangible outcomes in line with the SDGs. Through case studies, the paper showcases various initiatives undertaken by universities that demonstrate progress towards the SDGs, highlighting how strategic CE activities contribute to local and global sustainability outcomes. Despite the growing recognition of CE's value, HEIs face operational and structural barriers to fully realizing their potential in sustainability efforts. Addressing these barriers is crucial for HEIs to harness their intellectual and social capital in promoting sustainable development. This paper emphasizes the need for an expanded role of HEIs, one that supports the well-being of surrounding communities and advances the global sustainability agenda.

Keywords: Higher Education; Sustainable Development; Community Engagement; Collaboration; Sustainability Initiatives; SDG Alignment

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1. Introduction

Mangosuthu University of Technology (MUT) is located in Umlazi, a vibrant township in KwaZulu-Natal and the fourth largest township in South Africa (MUT, Strategic Plan 2020–2025). Umlazi, like many communities worldwide, faces significant challenges such as poverty, inequality, health issues, food insecurity, and malnutrition (Tuomala and Grant, 2022; Mkhize et al., 2022). These pressing issues reflect a broader crisis in sustainability. As an institution deeply connected to its local environment and community, MUT is positioned to address the socio-economic and environmental challenges prevalent in Umlazi. However, this responsibility is not unique to MUT - many higher education institutions (HEIs) worldwide are situated in similarly diverse and disadvantaged communities.

Sanz et al. (2017) provided a framework for understanding HEIs' potential to address societal challenges, suggesting that universities hold a "moral contract" with society. This contract requires universities to act as agents of social transformation, promoting equity and enhancing human capabilities, particularly within vulnerable communities. In this context, HEIs have a unique opportunity and responsibility to address local issues such as poverty and inequality through sustainable community engagement initiatives. Beyond equipping students with knowledge, universities can actively involve them in transformative efforts to tackle these challenges within their communities. For example, Sanz et al. (2017) argued that HEIs can bridge the gap between academic goals and community needs by implementing sustainable practices, supporting agricultural education, and participating in public awareness campaigns on food security, among other initiatives. Through these efforts, universities extend their influence beyond traditional academic roles, directly addressing issues like poverty, inequality, and food insecurity, along with other pressing sustainability concerns in the communities they serve.

Tariq et al. (2022) highlighted that achieving a sustainable society requires all sectors to work together in addressing urgent socio-economic and environmental issues. Aligned with this perspective, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) advocate for a global, cross-sectoral approach to tackle key challenges, including poverty and inequality (SDGs 1 and 10), education (SDG 4), healthcare (SDG 3), environmental preservation (SDGs 13, 14, and 15), and food security (SDG 2) (United Nations, 2018). Importantly, local communities also play a significant role in these efforts. Given the complexity of sustainable development, addressing these issues requires inclusive, community-centered approaches (Jain and Jain, 2020; Halkos and Gkampoura, 2021). Effective sustainable development initiatives cannot be pursued in isolation; rather, they must incorporate local perspectives to ensure their relevance and impact. Through community engagement initiatives, HEIs can become pivotal in advancing the SDGs by implementing strategies that address interconnected issues at both local and global levels.

In recent years, universities have increasingly been called to address global challenges directly (Mancini et al., 2022). Fia et al. (2023) noted that universities are reconsidering their functions in the context of sustainable development, with a focus on the "third mission" of engagement. This concept, as explained by Chankseliani and McCowan (2021), highlights the responsibility of universities to partner with communities in addressing societal challenges. Yet, as Porter et al. (2015) and Hart et al. (2023) observed, CE activities often receive less institutional support than teaching and research. This lack of support implies a significant barrier for universities aiming to make a meaningful impact on sustainable development through CE initiatives. Without adequate support, these initiatives may struggle to achieve their full potential, limiting HEIs' capacity to

promote long-term change within communities. Addressing this imbalance is therefore critical. Miotto et al. (2020) urged university leaders to broaden their focus beyond academic priorities to encompass broader social responsibilities, emphasizing CE's crucial role in advancing sustainable development.

With their local roots and broad national and global reach, HEIs are uniquely positioned to drive sustainable development through community engagement (Shabalala and Ngcwangu, 2021). This prompts several pertinent questions: To what extent are HEIs integrating the SDGs within their community engagement initiatives? Are there standard frameworks or strategies in place that ensure these efforts contribute meaningfully to SDG implementation? Furthermore, are HEIs effectively engaging with local communities and stakeholders to identify SDG priorities and tailor their initiatives accordingly? Wallace (2020) highlighted that, although community engagement is widely acknowledged, its direct application in higher education lacks substantial discussion in the literature. There remains a notable gap concerning how universities actively involve communities and strategically focus CE efforts to address SDGs.

While universities recognize CE as a core function, few have developed integrated strategies that integrate CE into their operational frameworks (Hart et al., 2023). This emphasizes the need for more focused discourse on strengthening CE efforts within universities and aligning them with SDG targets. Addressing this gap is essential for advancing both theory and practice in promoting CE in higher education. Furthermore, there is a growing call for HEIs to enhance collaborations with communities to address specific SDG goals more effectively. This review aims to emphasize the importance of CE within HEIs, particularly in promoting university-community partnerships as a pathway to achieving SDGs. It advocates for a proactive approach, encouraging HEIs to align their CE activities with broader societal needs and to engage meaningfully with communities to achieve impactful results. Additionally, this paper synthesizes findings from the literature on the challenges of advancing CE within universities, focusing on identifying and analysing these challenges to provide a comprehensive understanding of the complexities HEIs face in incorporating CE into their operational frameworks.

2. Overview of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals

In recent years, sustainability has gained significant global importance, drawing attention across multiple sectors (Halkos and Gkampoura, 2021). The urgent need to safeguard society's future has become increasingly evident, emphasizing the importance of proactive steps toward a sustainable tomorrow (Rina and Siswati, 2023). Sustainable development has therefore emerged as a crucial global challenge, requiring solutions that meet the needs of both present and future generations while protecting essential resources and opportunities (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2021; Daú et al., 2023).

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted in 2015 by 193 United Nations (UN) member states, provides a comprehensive framework to address the intertwined economic, social, and environmental dimensions of sustainable development (UN, 2018; Blasco et al., 2020; Chankseliani and McCowan, 2021; Rashed and Shah, 2021; Lim et al., 2022; Cling and Delecourt, 2022; Qazi et al., 2023). This agenda identifies the major challenges hindering sustainable development, including poverty, inequality, gender disparities,

unemployment, health threats, resource depletion, and climate change (UN, 2015). It emphasizes the critical need to address these issues to secure a sustainable future for all.

The agenda is centered around 17 SDGs and 169 associated targets, designed to guide global efforts toward achieving sustainable development by 2030 (UN, 2018; Vorisek and Yu, 2020; Blasco et al., 2020; Weiland et al., 2021; Cling and Delecourt, 2022; Qazi et al., 2023; Leal Filho et al., 2023a). These goals collectively address socio-economic and environmental aspects of development. They include aims to end poverty and hunger, reduce inequality, ensure health and education, promote gender equality, provide clean water and sustainable energy, build resilient infrastructure, combat climate change, protect biodiversity, and foster peace and partnerships (UN, 2015). The agenda calls on all member states to adopt and implement the SDGs within their own borders while also supporting global efforts to achieve these targets (UN, 2018).

The SDGs evolved from the earlier Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (Reinert, 2020; Vorisek and Yu, 2020; Halkos and Gkampoura, 2021; Lim et al., 2022). Both frameworks serve as significant global initiatives addressing various socio-economic and environmental challenges. The MDGs, established at the Millennium Summit in 2000, set eight specific goals aimed at reducing extreme poverty and related issues by 2015 (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs Sustainable Development [UN DESA], 2024). These goals targeted areas such as poverty reduction, education, gender equality, child mortality, maternal health, disease prevention (e.g., HIV/AIDS), environmental sustainability, and promoting global development partnerships.

Over the years, substantial progress was made under the MDGs, but some goals remained unmet by the 2015 deadline (Leal Filho, 2020; Halkos and Gkampoura, 2021). Recognizing the need for a more inclusive and comprehensive approach, the United Nations adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in 2015. While the MDGs laid the groundwork for global development efforts, the SDGs represent a broader and more integrated agenda. This agenda acknowledges the interconnected nature of global challenges, requiring holistic solutions to achieve sustainable development.

Reinert (2020) argued that the SDGs, with 169 targets across diverse areas, may be too extensive and ambitious to be practical. He suggested that the broad scope and complexity of these goals could lead to cognitive overload, making it difficult for stakeholders to prioritize and focus effectively. Reinert's critique highlights the risk that such a wide-reaching agenda may hinder the practical implementation and achievement of the SDGs. Similarly, Cling and Delecourt (2022) noted that the SDG framework lacks cohesion and a centralized definition, emerging instead from a compromise that included a mix of goals and targets. However, UN DESA (2024) described the 2030 Agenda as a continuation of the MDGs, aiming to expand on earlier goals and address new, emerging challenges. Halkos and Gkampoura (2021) further suggested that the SDGs provide a more universal and comprehensive framework for global development beyond 2015, promoting a sustainable and equitable future for all.

According to Weiland et al. (2021), the MDGs focused on development objectives primarily aimed at developing countries, with financial and technological support from more advanced nations. In contrast, the SDGs comprise a broader range of themes and apply universally to all countries, regardless of development status. Table 1 adapted from the UN's 2018 SDG report, summarizes each SDG's key challenges, objectives, and the call for unified global action to achieve sustainable development.

Table 1. Sustainable development goals (SDGs) and summarized descriptions from UN 2018 report

SDG 1 **No Poverty**	Significant progress has been made in reducing extreme poverty since 1990, but one in five people in developing regions still live on very low incomes. Poverty encompasses more than just lack of resources, affecting access to basic services and participation in decision-making. Inclusive economic growth is crucial for sustainable job creation and equality.
SDG 2 **Zero Hunger**	To feed the current and projected global population, a fundamental transformation of the food and agriculture system is imperative. Degradation of natural resources and climate change exacerbate hunger, forcing rural populations to migrate in pursuit of opportunities.
SDG 3 **Good Health and Well-Being**	Ensuring good health and well-being across all ages is important for sustainable development, requiring intensified efforts to combat diseases and emerging health issues globally.
SDG 4 **Quality Education**	Access to quality education is essential for improving lives and sustainable development, requiring greater efforts to reach the objectives of education for all.
SDG 5 **Gender Equality**	Despite progress, gender discrimination and violence persist globally, emphasizing the necessity of gender equality for peace, prosperity, and sustainability. Providing equal opportunities in education, healthcare, and decision-making benefits economies and societies.
SDG 6 **Clean Water and Sanitation**	Ensuring access to clean water and sanitation is crucial for food security, livelihoods, and education, especially for vulnerable communities facing water scarcity and poor sanitation.
SDG 7 **Affordable and Clean Energy**	Affordable and clean energy access is significant for addressing various global challenges and opportunities, driving socioeconomic development and environmental sustainability.
SDG 8 **Decent Work and Economic Growth**	Promoting inclusive economic growth and decent work for all is essential for societal progress, requiring investments and policies that prioritize job creation and consumption.
SDG 9 **Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure**	Infrastructure investments are indispensable for sustainable development and community empowerment, driving productivity, health, and education improvements.
SDG 10 **Reduced Inequalities**	While progress has been made in reducing international income inequality, internal disparities within countries persist, necessitating universal policies to address the multidimensional aspects of inequality.
SDG 11 **Sustainable Cities and Communities**	Creating inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable cities and human settlements requires addressing challenges like congestion, inadequate housing, and declining infrastructure while promoting resource efficiency and poverty reduction.
SDG 12 **Responsible Consumption and Production**	Fostering sustainable consumption and production patterns involves promoting efficiency, green jobs, and consumer awareness while engaging stakeholders across the supply chain.
SDG 13 **Climate Action**	Urgent action is needed to combat climate change, which poses significant economic and environmental risks, necessitating inexpensive and scalable solutions for cleaner and more resilient economies.
SDG 14 **Life Below Water**	Conserving and sustainably using marine resources are crucial for global sustainability and well-being, requiring careful management to preserve vital ecosystems and regulate essential resources.

Table 1. *Cont.*

SDG 15 **Life On Land**	Protecting terrestrial ecosystems and combating deforestation and desertification are essential for sustainable development, biodiversity conservation, and poverty alleviation.
SDG 16 **Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions**	Promoting peace, justice, and strong institutions is essential for sustainable development, ensuring access to justice and accountable governance at all levels.
SDG 17 **Partnerships for the Goals**	Strengthening partnerships for sustainable development is crucial, involving collaboration between governments, the private sector, and civil society to mobilize resources and achieve shared goals.

3. Harnessing HEIs' CE function as a pathway to sustainable development

Das and Bisht (2022, p.2) provided an intriguing perspective on HEIs, describing them as "a place of cultivating intellect and propagating theoretical concepts." However, they critiqued this role as potentially paternalistic, suggesting that these concepts often reside in an 'ivory tower.' This metaphor implies that theoretical knowledge remains isolated from practical application and circulates primarily among academics, disconnected from the realities of everyday life. In essence, knowledge generated within academia may seem distant from the lived experiences and needs of society. This critique encourages reflection on academia's role in society and emphasizes the need to bridge the gap between theory and practice.

Withycombe Keeler et al. (2018) highlighted that universities have traditionally been viewed as institutions focused on knowledge generation. However, Petersen et al. (2022) challenged this conventional view, arguing that universities can do more than just produce and transfer knowledge. Groulx et al. (2021) noted a significant shift in perspective regarding HEIs since the 1990s, emphasizing that these institutions should not exist solely for their own benefit. Instead, there is growing recognition that HEIs must engage with and address the needs of their surrounding communities and regions. This shift reflects an understanding that HEIs have a responsibility to contribute positively to the development and well-being of their local communities.

In line with this perspective, we emphasize the importance of HEIs prioritizing development outcomes by actively engaging with communities to tackle societal challenges. This means that universities can play a crucial role in addressing issues related to the SDGs through community engagement and partnerships with local stakeholders to develop sustainable solutions. As universities expand their roles, they are increasingly seen as having a broader responsibility to meet societal needs (Miotto et al., 2020; Ali et al., 2021; Jones et al., 2021). Consequently, there must be a shift toward a more community-oriented approach in higher education, where HEIs are recognized as valuable assets that contribute to the socio-economic and environmental well-being of their surrounding areas. Griebeler et al. (2022) noted that since the establishment of the SDGs, academia has actively contributed to their achievement, alongside other key actors such as the public and private sectors, NGOs, and the media. This collaborative effort reflects a commendable commitment to addressing pressing global challenges and promoting positive change. However, several authors (Leal Filho, 2020; Moyer and Hedden, 2020; Vorisek and Yu, 2020) highlighted the urgency of continued efforts to advance progress toward the SDGs.

Leal Filho (2020) stressed the critical importance of striving to achieve as many SDGs as possible by 2030. Moyer and Hedden (2020) pointed out the challenges faced, particularly in regions like Africa, where progress has been slower due to various barriers. Vorisek and Yu (2020) further emphasized the uneven global progress of the SDGs, indicating the need for intensified efforts across all regions to ensure comprehensive realization of the goals. Moyer and Hedden (2020) also noted that while improvements have been made in important development areas - such as agriculture, economy, education, energy, environment, governance, health, infrastructure, and technology - these advancements are insufficient to ensure the achievement of the SDGs. Significant challenges remain that hinder progress toward human development-related SDGs by the 2030 target year.

While acknowledging the ambitious nature of the SDGs and the efforts made thus far, there is a common call among these authors for intensified and sustained action to further advance progress toward the SDGs and address global issues. Given this collective urgency and recognition of the important role played by various sectors, it is essential for HEIs to increase their efforts. They should prioritize addressing sustainable challenges, beginning in their local communities. The current inadequacies in SDG progress emphasize the need for greater university-community engagement to drive sustainable development efforts. Rashed and Shah (2021) stressed that achieving the 17 SDGs requires significant changes in how societies and economies operate. Embracing their community engagement mandate and collaborating with local stakeholders will enable HEIs to make substantial contributions to global efforts aimed at achieving the SDGs and promoting positive change on a broader scale.

Sibhensana and Maistry (2023) remarked on the significant role that HEIs, as social entities, can play in addressing contemporary challenges such as poverty, unemployment, and inequality. When universities engage in socially responsible activities, they demonstrate an understanding of how to tackle current societal problems and promote community development (Ali et al., 2021). HEIs have the potential to positively influence society by addressing issues related to exclusion, inequality, and sustainability (Santos et al., 2020). This potential has profound implications for universities in promoting the SDGs. As a result, HEIs are tasked with harnessing their intellectual capital, research capabilities, and community engagement efforts to advance these goals (Leal Filho et al., 2019; Heleta and Bagus, 2021).

The increasing awareness among universities of their responsibilities to both the environment and society, along with their recognition of the positive impact they can have on local communities (Garde Sanchez et al., 2022), signifies a promising step towards promoting sustainable and inclusive development. Integrating sustainability into university-community engagement initiatives aligns with the broader goal of achieving the SDGs. Therefore, understanding the shift toward sustainability and its implications for CE efforts can guide the development of strategies that prioritize university-community engagement. Such strategies can propel progress toward the SDGs within HEI systems. Positioned strategically within their communities, nations, and regions, HEIs have a significant role in promoting sustainable development and advancing the implementation of the SDGs (Heleta and Bagus, 2021). They are uniquely equipped to harness public policies, educational advancements, and technological innovations to effect lasting changes in both local and global contexts (Mehta, 2011).

According to Griebeler et al. (2022) and Bautista-Puig et al. (2022), the Times Higher Education Impact Ranking evaluates universities based on their contributions to the SDGs across four key areas: research, stewardship, outreach, and teaching. This ranking indicates that universities are assessed not only on their

academic performance but also on their actions and community engagement related to sustainability. Demonstrating involvement and interaction between HEIs and local communities through initiatives such as community outreach programs, partnerships with local organizations, and participation in community development projects is crucial for aligning with the broader goals of sustainable development.

More pertinent questions arise: How likely are we to achieve the SDGs if we maintain our current approach to promoting community-university engagement? Are these engagements aligned with the SDGs and making significant progress toward their achievement, or do they fall short in addressing the goals? Considering the substantial role of universities, how can these institutions maximize their impact within communities through engagement initiatives?

Asemah et al. (2013) proposed that universities, as modern institutions, should engage in societal initiatives and highlighted several key areas for universities to direct their efforts. This paper aligns these efforts with various SDGs: economic responsibility (SDG 8 - Decent Work and Economic Growth), philanthropy (SDGs 1 - No Poverty, 2 - Zero Hunger, 3 - Good Health and Well-being, 4 - Quality Education, 5 - Gender Equality, and 10 - Reduced Inequalities), environmental sustainability (SDGs 13 - Climate Action, 14 - Life Below Water, and 15 - Life on Land), employee well-being (SDG 3 - Good Health and Well-being), employment of qualified lecturers (SDG 4 - Quality Education), and legal responsibility, which indirectly supports good governance and various SDGs. In essence, universities can address various socio-economic and environmental challenges through their CE activities, thereby contributing to the achievement of multiple SDGs.

> *Higher education assists in the implementation of a wide range of SDGs. These vary from goals related to social aspects (such as poverty - SDG 1, hunger - SDG 2, health and well-being - SDG 3, and gender equality - SDG 5) to economic aspects and infrastructure (such as energy - SDG 7, decent work and economic growth - SDG 8, industry - SDG 9, sustainable cities - SDG 11, and production and consumption - SDG 12), as well as urgent matters related to climate change - SDG 13, and peace and justice - SDG 16.* (Leal Filho et al., 2023b, p.1)

Chankseliani and McCowan (2021) noted in their review that the UN, in a 2018 report, identified several universities as SDG Hubs due to their commitment to addressing the SDGs. We agree that more HEIs should be recognized as SDG Hubs, especially through the promotion of community-university partnerships aimed at achieving these goals. Community-based engagement activities serve as platforms through which universities can align their efforts with the global agenda for sustainable development. Through collaborative initiatives with local communities, universities can co-create knowledge, develop solutions, and implement initiatives (Fullerton, 2015; Wood et al., 2017; Yusuf et al., 2021) that address the complex sustainability challenges outlined in the SDGs.

4. Case studies demonstrating the contribution of universities to achieving SDGs

Universities have a special position that enables them to take the lead in promoting transformative sustainability efforts aimed at achieving the SDGs (Agusdinata, 2022). In essence, they are seen as the primary drivers of initiatives aimed at achieving the SDGs. The following case studies exemplify the unique strengths and capabilities that universities bring to SDG-related initiatives. These universities exemplify diverse approaches to CE for sustainable development across different regions of the world:

4.1. University partnerships for local impact: Driving sustainable development in Los Angeles

Academic institutions have been integral to the efforts directed towards achieving the SDGs since 2017 in Los Angeles, California, United States. Several universities have participated in community engagement activities within the city. According to Bromaghim and Kim (2020), this collaboration has been particularly extensive and impactful. They noted that over 111 university students collaborated with the city to translate global agendas, particularly the SDGs, into actionable initiatives at the local level, demonstrating a commitment to addressing local challenges through global frameworks. These partnerships serve to enhance capacity within the community, harnessing the expertise, resources, and energy of students to tackle complex issues effectively.

Through the dedication of more than 10,000 work hours collectively, students made a substantial contribution to advancing the SDGs in the city. The collaborating universities additionally contributed several hundred more hours. These partnerships were strategically initiated with support from organizations like the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation and the Mayor's Fund for Los Angeles. University partnerships started with Occidental College and the engagement was expanded to other institutions such as the University of California at Los Angeles, the University of Southern California, Arizona State University, and Pomona College. These partnerships were facilitated by identifying champions within each institution and structuring project-based teams to address specific SDG-aligned initiatives. This showcases the power of collaboration between academic institutions and government entities in driving positive change within communities.

4.2. Transforming communities: The Rutgers-Camden University-LEAP Academy school partnership

The partnership between Rutgers-Camden University and LEAP Academy school represents a comprehensive approach to community development and education in Camden, New Jersey. The collaboration, spearheaded by committed university faculty, administrators, parents, and community leaders, resulted in the establishment of the Rutgers-Camden Community Leadership Center (CLC) and LEAP Enterprise. This initiative aimed at revitalizing the Cooper neighborhood and creating a college access pipeline for local students. The university and the school district worked together to address educational challenges and improve outcomes for students, resulting in a 100% high school graduation and college acceptance rate for LEAP Academy since 2005. The partnership not only transformed the educational landscape in Camden but also served as a model for community development and university-school collaboration. By harnessing resources, expertise, and innovative approaches, the partnership had demonstrated significant impact on the community, fostering solidarity, agency, and sustainable well-being. The success of this partnership highlights the transformative potential of university-community collaborations in addressing societal challenges and promoting community development.

4.3. Empowering Jordanian communities: Academic-led initiatives for climate resilience

The project titled: "*Enabling Communities for Climate Change Adaptation Planning: Understanding Gender Roles*" focused on Jordan and involved the West Asia North Africa Institute (WANA Institute), an academic institution. It was implemented from September 2017 to June 2019. The main stakeholders included communities in Jordan most affected by climate change and water scarcity. Additionally, the initiative collaborated with 25 environmental Community Based Organizations, ensuring representation from both women and men, as well

as 30 youth participants. Academia played a significant role in focusing on empowering local communities to tackle the impacts of climate change and water scarcity. The project facilitated capacity building for local communities in Jordan in partnership with Community Based Organizations (CBOs) and youth ambassadors, enhancing their understanding of climate change science and gender-sensitive adaptation strategies. The institution also investigated the gendered impacts of climate change, informing the development of comprehensive adaptation plans. Through knowledge dissemination and policy dialogue, academia contributed to building momentum for gender mainstreaming and influencing policy at both local and national levels. By integrating academic expertise with community engagement, the project aimed to create sustainable solutions and served as a model for climate adaptation efforts across Jordan.

This paper presents Table 2, which highlights the CE activities undertaken by 10 universities. The table serves as an information resource for understanding the diverse approaches and initiatives employed by different institutions to promote community involvement and collaboration. Additionally, we have included the respective websites of these universities, providing readers with opportunities to obtain further information with respect to the various community engagement initiatives.

Table 2. SDG related CE initiatives undertaken by 10 universities

University	SDG(s)	Examples of Community Engagement	Website
Mangosuthu University of Technology	2, 4, 8, 9, 11,13, 15 17,	Mangosuthu University of Technology (MUT) engages in various community initiatives that align with several SDGs. Through its collaboration with the South Africa/Swedish University Forum (SASUF), MUT enhances educational and community outcomes while partnering with the Ethekwini Municipality to facilitate internships and job placements for students. The establishment of a Digital Centre in collaboration with the Moses Kotane Institute provides the Umlazi community access to digital resources and training, promoting quality education (SDG 4). Additionally, the Dexter and Matu Zama Agricultural Academy trains local communities in sustainable agricultural practices, contributing to food security (SDG 2) and environmental stewardship (SDG 13). MUT also supports unemployed graduates through Service-Learning and Work Integrated Learning programs with the Empangisweni Trust and Agri-SETA, aligning with decent work and economic growth (SDG 8) and promoting industry innovation (SDG 9).	Link
University of Manchester	3, 4, 5, 7, 10, 11, 13, 17,	The University of Manchester actively promotes social inclusion and community well-being through initiatives that support multiple SDGs. Its programs, such as the School Governor Initiative and the Manchester Access Programme, enhance educational equity (SDG 4) and reduce inequalities (SDG 10). The university's commitment to public health is demonstrated through its medical school and healthcare initiatives, promoting good health and well-being (SDG 3). Additionally, the institution's environmental sustainability strategy aligns with climate action (SDG 13) and efforts toward a zero-carbon future. Its engagement initiatives have earned recognition, exemplifying the university's dedication to promoting civic responsibility and community engagement (SDG 17).	Link

Table 2. *Cont.*

University	SDG(s)	Examples of Community Engagement	Website
Stanford University	2, 3, 4, 6, 8, 10, 16, 17	Stanford University's community engagement initiatives illustrate its commitment to various SDGs. Programs such as the Colibrí Service and Participatory Research Action Program enhance educational access and equity (SDG 4) while promoting sustainable community development. The university's focus on STEM education and community college outreach increases equitable access to quality education (SDG 4) and reduces inequalities (SDG 10). Initiatives like the R&DE Stanford Food Institute's Black Farmers Initiative support sustainable agriculture (SDG 2) and foster economic growth (SDG 8). Through partnerships and innovative programs, Stanford actively addresses community health and environmental challenges, contributing to broader sustainability efforts (SDG 17).	Link
The University of British Columbia	4, 9, 10, 11, 13, 17	The University of British Columbia (UBC) engages in various community initiatives that align with the SDGs. The Community-University Engagement Support (CUES) Funding and the Partnership Recognition and Exploration (PRE) Funding programs promote collaborative research and community partnerships, directly supporting sustainable cities and communities (SDG 11). UBC's Community Engagement Network fosters relationships between the university and local organizations, enhancing the quality of education (SDG 4) and promoting social inclusion (SDG 10). The university's commitment to the Canadian Carnegie Community Engagement Classification highlights its dedication to community service and sustainability efforts, demonstrating a strong alignment with SDG 17.	Link
University of Michigan	4, 10, 11, 16	The University of Michigan (U-M) exemplifies community engagement through various initiatives that support SDGs. Programs like the RECAP Education Collaboration and America Reads Virtual Tutoring promote quality education (SDG 4) and lifelong learning opportunities. U-M's construction of an environmentally sustainable building on campus emphasizes its commitment to sustainable practices (SDG 11). Initiatives such as the Community Leadership Fellows Program and the Ginsberg Graduate Consultant Program empower students to engage in community development, addressing inequalities (SDG 10). The university's focus on storytelling for social change also promotes a culture of inclusion and participation, aligning with SDG 16.	Link Link
University of Cape Town	3, 4, 10, 16	The University of Cape Town (UCT) actively engages in community initiatives that reflect its commitment to SDGs. Programs like the UCT Sutherland Reburial and Indumba Yolwazi promote cultural heritage and social inclusion (SDG 10) while cultivating a health-conscious community aligns with good health and well-being (SDG 3). UCT emphasizes teaching and learning through community engagement, directly supporting quality education (SDG 4). Additionally, the upskilling of communities by medical students highlights the university's dedication to promoting health equity and access to quality healthcare, demonstrating a holistic approach to sustainability (SDG 3).	Link

Table 2. *Cont.*

University	SDG(s)	Examples of Community Engagement	Website
University of Nairobi	2, 8, 9, 13, 15, 17	The University of Nairobi (UoN) demonstrates its commitment to SDGs through various community engagement initiatives. Projects such as the Strengthening African Food Processors (SAP) and high avocado fruit quality initiatives promote food security and sustainable agricultural practices (SDG 2). The university's focus on integrated climate-smart technologies enhances livelihoods, addressing climate action (SDG 13) and environmental sustainability. Additionally, the Annual Tree Planting Day and experiential training programs support local communities in sustainable land use practices (SDG 15). UoN's initiatives contribute to the well-being of its community while promoting partnerships for sustainable development (SDG 17).	[Link](#) [Link](#)
University of Washington Carlson Center	1, 4, 10, 11, 16,	The University of Washington Carlson Center engages in initiatives that align with various SDGs. Programs like the Riverways Rural & Tribal Programs and the Ellis Civic Fellowship promote social inclusion and community engagement (SDG 10). The Jumpstart: Early Education initiative enhances educational access for underserved populations, aligning with quality education (SDG 4). Additionally, the Civic Engagement & Leadership Corps and NextGen Civic Leader Corps empower students to participate in community service and civic leadership, fostering a sense of responsibility and promoting sustainable communities (SDG 11). The university's commitment to civic engagement reflects its dedication to advancing social equity and community well-being.	[Link](#)
Stellenbosch University	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 10, 11, 12	Stellenbosch University is dedicated to community engagement initiatives that support multiple SDGs. Its Global Service-Learning program emphasizes experiential learning while addressing local and global challenges (SDG 4). Collaborations with Vlottenburg Primary School focus on early childhood development and community service in areas like sports and the arts, promoting social inclusion and quality education (SDG 10). Initiatives like Mngani, an educational pen-pal project, enhance intercultural understanding and cooperation. The university's various community service societies facilitate diverse community projects, directly contributing to sustainable community development (SDG 11).	[Link](#) [Link](#) [Link](#)
University of Queensland	1, 3, 4, 8, 10, 11, 12, 17	The University of Queensland (UQ) engages in community initiatives that align with various Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The Social Economic Engagement Program (SEEP) promotes economic growth and community development (SDG 8). Initiatives like the Yalari Horizons Leadership Camp and consultancy advice for disability organizations enhance educational opportunities and promote social inclusion (SDG 10). UQ's involvement in projects such as the Brisbane Common Ground initiative and Uganda Tourism project reflects its commitment to sustainable practices and environmental responsibility (SDG 12). Through these initiatives, UQ actively contributes to building resilient communities and advancing social equity (SDG 17).	[Link](#)

4.4. An overview of lessons learned from the case studies

These cases illustrate the diverse range of CE activities undertaken by universities, spanning education, healthcare, environmental sustainability, social inclusion, and economic development.

- Many of the engagement initiatives are explicitly aligned with the SDGs, demonstrating a strong commitment to addressing global sustainability targets.
- In addition, many of the listed activities demonstrate innovation and creativity in addressing community needs. From initiating social enterprises to implementing experiential learning programs, these universities have shown that CE can be done in diverse ways to make a positive impact on society.
- Across the universities, there is also a remarkable diversity in the types of engagement initiatives undertaken, including service-learning programs, research collaborations, public engagement activities, and community service. This diversity reflects a comprehensive approach to addressing societal challenges.
- Another significant observation is that the universities collaborate with a diverse range of partners to maximize their impact. These collaborative networks enable universities to harness resources, expertise, and networks beyond their own campuses.
- It is also key to point out that while universities engage in global initiatives and partnerships, they also maintain a focus on local communities, addressing specific needs and challenges within their regions. This dual approach allows universities to contribute to both global sustainability goals and local development priorities.

5. Barriers to effective university-community engagement and sustainability

Larrán Jorge and Andrades Peña (2017) highlighted that, despite universities' growing emphasis on social responsibility, fully integrating this role remains challenging. Similarly, Leal Filho et al. (2017) argued that while HEIs recognize the importance of the SDGs, barriers hinder their full integration of sustainability initiatives. This suggests that although progress has been made, comprehensive implementation across university operations is still limited. These challenges in integrating sustainability impact university-community engagement, as they restrict the extent to which universities can engage in sustainable development with local communities.

5.1. Boundaries

Wallace (2020) explained that within universities, boundaries form between different groups, as well as between the institution and the outside community. These boundaries create barriers that limit relationships with surrounding communities, hindering engagement and collaboration. This disconnect can lead to misunderstandings, poor communication, and a lack of trust, making it difficult for universities to address community needs effectively. Additionally, Wallace observed that many in higher education view the local community primarily as a resource for research, rather than as a partner in mutual development. This mindset promotes one-sided relationships where the university benefits without adequately addressing community needs, perpetuating the disconnect.

For example, Johnson (2020) found from literature that an investigation of three city universities in the UK revealed specific barriers stemming from both internal and external boundaries. These boundaries often lead to limited participation in external projects, as internal priorities focus more on academic and institutional goals than on community collaboration. This inward focus results in communities being viewed as resources rather than partners, creating relationships where universities benefit without fully addressing local needs. Johnson also noted that the diversity within UK university communities complicates interactions, making it challenging for civic organizations to identify appropriate contacts within the university. This lack of clarity and communication erodes trust and impedes effective engagement. Similarly, a study by Bidandi et al. (2021) on the University of the Western Cape highlighted significant barriers in community engagement. Community members expressed concerns that the university was not effectively informing local youth about educational opportunities. They suggested initiatives like school visits to raise awareness among younger students. Participants also criticized the lack of feedback from students and researchers who engage with the community, which fosters distrust and weakens potential partnerships. These findings emphasize the need for HEIs to engage more ethically with surrounding communities to build trust, improve communication, and create meaningful collaborations (Das and Bisht, 2022). Inclusive relationships between universities and communities are essential for successful engagement initiatives.

Leal Filho (2020) further stressed that CE initiatives must be incorporated into sustainability efforts. Without adequate involvement of HEIs in CE sustainability, there is a gap in addressing the role of universities in achieving the SDGs by 2030. Incorporating CE into the design and execution of sustainability initiatives within HEIs, including stakeholder involvement from the community, ensures that these initiatives are relevant, impactful, and sustainable. Addressing the boundaries between universities and communities is therefore crucial not only for effective engagement but also for advancing sustainability efforts and achieving the SDGs.

5.2. Governance structures, defining and achieving engagement

Mugabi's (2015) study on Makerere University (MUK) identified significant barriers within institutional policies that limit effective community engagement, especially regarding faculty appointments and promotions. While MUK ostensibly values community engagement and acknowledges staff contributions, its policies lack incentives or clear criteria for recognizing community-related achievements. Both standard and fast-track promotion pathways emphasize teaching and research over community contributions, creating ambiguity in evaluating faculty engagement with external communities. This lack of clarity and incentive structure may deter faculty from actively participating in community initiatives. Miotto et al. (2020) found similar challenges within university governance structures, which often lack the positive perception needed to promote effective community partnerships. Faculty members frequently view these governance activities as inadequate for building a positive reputation. Since effective community engagement is essential for achieving the SDGs, any negative perceptions of university governance can hinder CE efforts. Therefore, addressing governance issues within universities is essential to promote CE initiatives and ensure faculty and stakeholder buy-in. Without improvements in governance, universities may struggle to mobilize faculty and other stakeholders toward effective engagement for SDG attainment.

Wallace (2020) also noted a potential clash between the participatory approach required for CE initiatives and the managerial focus common in HEIs. Balancing these perspectives is crucial to successfully integrating

CE into university structures. Similarly, Tariq et al. (2022) emphasized the role of university employees as key stakeholders, noting that their attitudes and engagement are significant for the success of sustainability initiatives. When employees are motivated and supportive, an institution is more likely to succeed in achieving its sustainability goals. Therefore, universities should promote a culture that values SDG initiatives and fosters a sense of responsibility among staff and students to advance sustainability. This may include integrating sustainability into curricula, research, and community engagement activities, which requires a supportive and inclusive institutional culture. Creating incentives for employees to participate in sustainability efforts is critical to building a workforce motivated to drive positive change within both the institution and the broader community.

Bivens et al. (2015) reviewed literature indicating a lack of a unified knowledge base around "engagement," which contributes to confusion in the field. Terms such as outreach, community service, service-learning, and community engagement are often used interchangeably, creating ambiguity that hampers effective communication and collaboration. Furthermore, the term "community" itself encompasses diverse groups and identities, necessitating an inclusive definition to ensure engagement efforts are equitable and comprehensive (Das and Bisht, 2022). The absence of clear terminology and a cohesive theoretical framework can reduce the effectiveness of engagement initiatives.

Das and Bisht (2022) highlighted the gap between theoretical ideals of CE and practical constraints, emphasizing the importance of aligning goals with feasibility. They argued that meaningful engagement requires balancing societal and environmental issues with an institution's realistic capabilities. For instance, while many pressing challenges may exist within a university's local context, engagement efforts must be feasible and aligned with the institution's resources and priorities. This calls for strategic planning that bridges the gap between idealistic aspirations and practical limitations, ensuring that engagement initiatives are both impactful and achievable within the specific institutional and community contexts.

5.3. Complexities in promoting holistic university-community partnerships

While universities are widely recognized for their role in economic and societal development, much of the literature primarily emphasizes economic contributions, potentially overlooking other essential aspects such as social equity and community well-being (Petersen et al., 2022). This narrow focus creates challenges, as it may result in initiatives that lack alignment with community priorities. Expanding engagement efforts to encompass a broader range of societal needs is crucial. Effective university-community collaborations should adopt a holistic approach, actively involving community members in defining objectives and developing programs that reflect the diverse dimensions of societal advancement. Collaborative efforts are particularly necessary for addressing complex challenges like the SDGs, as top-down, single-entity interventions often fall short due to their limited scope, rigidity, and narrow impact (Leal Filho et al., 2023a; Stibbe and Prescott, 2020). Sugawara et al. (2023) also highlighted that partnerships led exclusively by universities may compromise authenticity and limit effectiveness, as these initiatives often prioritize academic achievements over the genuine needs and perspectives of communities.

Collaborative partnerships are therefore essential for integrating varied perspectives, expertise, and resources, enabling universities and communities to co-create adaptive and impactful strategies for sustainable development. However, the purpose behind these partnerships must be carefully examined, as

motives tied to marketing or funding may detract from genuine, sustainable collaboration (Porter et al., 2015). Although student learning and experience are often positively impacted, the reciprocal benefits for communities can be less tangible. Research has shown that communities may indeed gain from such partnerships, but measuring these benefits is challenging compared to the more evident advantages experienced by students and academic staff (Gross et al., 2015; Strier, 2011). For example, Onwuemele's (2018) study of university-community engagements across three Nigerian universities—University of Ibadan (UI), Federal University of Technology Akure (FUTA), and Federal University of Agriculture Abeokuta (FUNAAB)—revealed disparities in perceived benefits. UI and FUTA respondents noted improved teaching, learning, and institutional reputation as primary outcomes, whereas FUNAAB respondents emphasized direct community benefits like enhanced livelihoods. This discrepancy indicates that while universities may engage in community initiatives, the tangible benefits for communities may be less substantial than those enjoyed by university stakeholders.

The issue of reciprocity in university-community partnerships has often been overlooked, with community members frequently perceiving universities as having minimal commitment to their welfare (Allahwala et al., 2013). Consequently, community members may respond with skepticism toward universities' efforts to foster collaborative initiatives. These partnerships are complex and can be hindered by competing priorities, resource constraints, and cultural differences (Strier, 2011; Strier, 2014; Lewis et al., 2016; Strier and Shechter, 2016). Additionally, inadequate attention to the sustainability of partnerships poses a significant barrier (Mosier and Ruxton, 2018). Negative past experiences with university partners have also strained some community relationships, as university participants accustomed to individual academic pursuits may struggle to adapt to collaborative frameworks (Patterson et al., 2014; Lockwood et al., 2011). Further challenges arise from logistical limitations, time, and the resources required to maintain successful collaborations (Patterson et al., 2014; Gerstenblatt and Gilbert, 2014; Lewis et al., 2016). Cultural differences between university and community members necessitate a mutual understanding, and disparities in power and status can contribute to inequality within these partnerships (Strier, 2011; Allahwala et al., 2013; Patterson et al., 2014; Lewis et al., 2016; Tarantino, 2017; Bhagwan, 2018).

Stanlick and Sell (2016) criticized the hierarchical dynamics often present in university-community partnerships, where universities assume a "hero" role while relegating communities to subordinate positions, limiting genuine collaboration. They argued that such dynamics are counterproductive to the spirit of partnership, as community members risk becoming mere recipients rather than active collaborators in these engagements. Therefore, it is essential to ensure that university-community partnerships are built on mutual respect and a shared commitment to community well-being. This approach can help promote authentic partnerships that equitably distribute benefits and create lasting positive impacts.

5.4. Lack of standardization

Leal Filho et al. (2021) noted that while universities generally support the SDGs and integrate them into their community engagement strategies, there is no standardized framework guiding these efforts. As a result, although universities may recognize the SDGs as important to their missions, they often struggle to implement them effectively due to a lack of structured guidelines. For example, in the South African context, Hart et al. (2023) observed that HEIs commonly establish dedicated offices or units to support, facilitate, and sometimes coordinate CE activities. These offices are embedded within the institutions' structures to align with the

legislated roles of research, teaching, and engagement. However, each HEI manages CE differently, resulting in diverse practices, definitions, and conceptualizations of CE across institutions.

This absence of standardization in CE practices and definitions presents a significant barrier to universities' ability to achieve the SDGs effectively through community engagement. Firstly, without uniform practices, measuring and evaluating the impact of CE initiatives across HEIs becomes challenging. This inconsistency can impede the assessment of how effectively university-community partnerships are advancing the SDGs. Secondly, the lack of standardized approaches may lead to disparities in the quality and scope of CE activities across institutions. Some HEIs may excel in their CE programs, while others may fall behind due to differences in institutional support, resources, or commitment levels. Additionally, diverse approaches to CE across HEIs may reduce opportunities for collaboration and knowledge-sharing, as the variations in practices can hinder cohesive action toward shared goals.

Implementing a standardized framework for CE could encourage sharing of best practices and promote collaboration among HEIs, strengthening the overall impact of university-community engagement efforts on the SDGs. To address this challenge, efforts are needed to develop consistent frameworks, guidelines, and evaluation mechanisms for CE across institutions. These standardization efforts would help ensure the consistency, effectiveness, and collective impact of community engagement initiatives, thereby enhancing the role of universities in promoting the SDGs.

5.5. Resource constraints

The Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) in South Africa (2014) identified key challenges to community engagement within universities, with inadequate funding emerging as a prominent issue. According to a report by DHET's Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC), this funding limitation may be due to the frequent lack of integration of CE initiatives with the academic curriculum, as they are often not directly aligned with teaching or research activities. This suggests a need for universities to adopt more strategic approaches that integrate CE with academic programs, learning objectives, and research priorities. Aligning CE initiatives with academic missions can help funding allocations prioritize these efforts, which in turn enhances universities' capacity to contribute meaningfully to their educational and research goals.

In South Africa, limited financial resources present significant barriers to HEIs in their efforts to invest in engagement activities, leading to restrictions on both project innovation and collaboration with communities. Dube and Hendricks (2023) investigated CE at a South African university (unnamed in their study) and reported substantial funding challenges. Unlike teaching, learning, and research, CE rarely receives dedicated funding, leaving many departments to rely on self-sourcing for CE projects. The exception lies in the Nursing Science department, which allocates CE funds to meet curriculum requirements, enabling students to conduct needs assessments and organize community events. Additionally, Dube and Hendricks observed that some CE projects are shaped by external funding sources, where the funders' priorities may diverge from the immediate needs of the local community. Participants in the study noted that because of these funding gaps, academics often focus on activities with state subsidies or research incentives, causing CE to be sidelined. This lack of institutional support limits CE's potential to address broader social issues, such as public health and sustainable development, which are crucial for marginalized communities. This situation reflects a wider trend

across South African HEIs, where funding structures can discourage collaborative, community-centered initiatives, thereby limiting the social impact of CE.

Similarly, Johnson (2020), referencing Goddard et al. (2016), noted that UK universities also experience funding constraints, as illustrated by Newcastle University's efforts to engage in regional economic development despite reduced state funding. As national higher education policies shift, universities like Newcastle increasingly depend on alternative financial sources, complicating efforts to secure stable funding for engagement projects. Without a reliable funding base, universities may face difficulties in implementing innovative CE projects and forming meaningful partnerships with local communities. This lack of financial support restricts HEIs' ability to fully integrate CE into their core missions, diminishing their potential as hubs for regional development and social impact (Das and Bisht, 2022; Bivens et al., 2015).

Insufficient funding also undermines HEIs' potential to become centers of social entrepreneurship and collaboration between academia and the community (Das and Bisht, 2022). Cross-institutional studies, which are significant for a holistic understanding of CE initiatives, also suffer from limited funding, as these studies require significant time and financial investment (Bivens et al., 2015). Consequently, individual programs or institutions are often prioritized over broader studies, potentially missing important insights into CE's effectiveness across diverse contexts. Addressing these resource constraints is critical for fostering effective university-community engagement and encouraging substantial collaboration between academia and communities.

5.6. Insufficient evidence and knowledge exchange of HEIs' community engagement activities

Universities that focus primarily on Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) related to research output and academic metrics may inadvertently create a disconnect between their academic efforts and the needs of surrounding communities. This divide often results from limited consideration of how research might address societal challenges. Nejati et al. (2011) highlighted that many HEIs establish KPIs around academic missions, particularly research, without assessing if their work addresses the specific needs of underserved communities. This disconnect is further intensified by the limited emphasis on measuring and reporting universities' contributions to the SDGs, as Blasco et al. (2020) pointed out. Despite growing engagement with the SDGs, universities still face substantial gaps in knowledge and evidence regarding their actual impact on these goals, making it difficult to evaluate the value and success of these partnerships (Sugawara et al., 2023).

Without a strong emphasis on measurement and reporting, external assessment is constrained, limiting the ability to measure the impact of university efforts to address societal challenges outlined by the SDGs (Blasco et al., 2020). A comprehensive understanding and documentation of university-community engagement contributions are essential to optimize these initiatives to effectively serve local community needs. However, universities are not typically required to report on SDG-related activities, leading to variability in the quality and extent of reporting across institutions (Blasco et al., 2020). According to Garde Sanchez et al. (2021), while universities are increasingly involved in societal initiatives, they often do not emphasize communication or dissemination of these activities. This gap could hinder efforts to promote social responsibility in higher education and to encourage university-community engagement in line with the SDGs. When universities fail to adequately communicate their engagement activities, it may impact the establishment of trust, collaboration, and support for initiatives targeting societal challenges linked to the SDGs. Addressing the issue of

transparency and dissemination of community engagement activities is therefore crucial for meaningful university-community collaboration and progress toward the SDGs.

Leal Filho et al. (2021) emphasized a gap in scholarly research that specifically analyzes how SDG-related initiatives or policies interact with universities' core roles and functions. Similarly, Chankseliani and McCowan (2021) stressed the importance of documenting and gathering evidence on university efforts to align with the SDGs, especially in low- and middle-income countries where socio-economic challenges are more pronounced. The focus on these regions underscores the need for targeted efforts to evaluate and document university initiatives that support sustainable development. Bivens et al. (2015) noted that a large portion of engagement literature consists of case studies that highlight individual projects and institutional successes, yet there is limited documentation of the intermediary processes between the initiation of engagement goals and the evaluation of their impacts. There is, therefore, a need for more comprehensive research to understand the implementation processes, challenges, and long-term outcomes of university engagement initiatives.

This paper aligns with calls for enhanced documentation and knowledge exchange to enhance sustainable development efforts. In general, there is a need for academic studies that thoroughly examine the intersection of the SDGs with universities' core responsibilities and activities. The limited empirical evidence on the benefits of integrating SDGs into university missions makes it essential for institutions to engage in thorough evaluation studies. Chankseliani and McCowan (2021) advocated for rigorous research to assess the practical societal impacts of engagement activities, noting:

> *Rigorous research is needed to gauge the impact in practice of these activities on society, beyond the intentions or assumptions of the work. As a result, there exist a number of unanswered questions in terms of the institutional forms and practices that can best support the SDGs, and the influences of local and national contexts.* (Chankseliani and McCowan, 2021, p. 2)

Encouraging universities to systematically assess the impact of their engagement activities on the SDGs will strengthen the evidence base and provide critical insights for effectively integrating these goals into institutional strategies. Documenting activities not only supports assessments of universities' engagement with sustainable development but also enhances their visibility and impact. This paper, therefore, supports expanding research initiatives to explore different methods of measuring and reporting universities' contributions to the SDGs, which could significantly advance both knowledge and practice in the field.

6. Conclusion

Community engagement empowers universities to address local development challenges in alignment with the SDGs. This engagement strengthens HEIs' connections with communities and enhances their contributions to sustainable development objectives. Embracing CE ensures that HEI initiatives respond to real community needs, significantly advancing the SDG Agenda 2030. Despite global challenges in attaining these goals, HEIs are positioned as facilitators of transformation, with community-based activities as essential platforms for aligning with the global sustainability agenda.

The 2030 Agenda calls for a shift from traditional development approaches, emphasizing collaboration and partnership across sectors. It recognizes the interdependence of diverse actors, calling for joint action to tackle

socio-economic and environmental issues. This agenda represents not just a set of goals, but a new approach focused on dismantling silos and creating partnerships that harness each partner's strengths and resources toward shared objectives. Such collaboration highlights that no single entity can tackle global challenges alone and that meaningful progress requires large-scale, collective action.

The case studies presented illustrate the transformative potential of university-community collaborations across regions and sectors, emphasizing the importance of innovative, cross-sector partnerships. Moving forward, HEIs must prioritize CE and align their actions with global sustainability targets to promote inclusive, sustainable development. Establishing policies that position CE as a core institutional function alongside research and teaching is critical.

To support sustainable development, HEIs must institutionalize policies that prioritize community engagement as a core function, alongside traditional academic metrics. Establishing clear frameworks to align CE efforts with SDGs provides HEIs an opportunity to enhance their impact both locally and globally. Policies that provide stable funding, recognize CE in Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), and encourage multidisciplinary approaches will enable HEIs to bridge gaps between academic objectives and community needs effectively. Integrating CE into HEI policy also promotes long-term commitment to social responsibility and supports a collaborative model essential for sustainable development.

This policy shift could redefine the role of HEIs, allowing them to address socio-economic challenges through partnerships that harness their unique intellectual and social capital. Such frameworks would ensure that HEIs are not only responsive to global sustainability targets but also proactive in promoting inclusive, sustainable growth in the communities they serve. Institutionalizing CE within HEI policy allows universities to drive progress toward the 2030 Agenda, fostering resilient pathways for community empowerment and transformation.

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