

# Setting National Pace for Achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030: The Critical Role of Universities

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**The Global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): Universities as Critical National Engines for setting Pace and Acceleration of SDGs Activities.**

On 25<sup>th</sup> September 2015, at its seventieth session, the United Nations (UN) General Assembly adopted a resolution themed “Transforming our World: the 2030 agenda for Sustainable development.”<sup>1</sup> The World council on Environment and Development in its report titled “Our Common Future” had earlier defined the concept of Sustainable Development as “Development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”<sup>1-6</sup> The UN General Assembly had also earlier, at its 68<sup>th</sup> Session, received a proposal of 17 specific Sustainable Development Goals (17SDGs) developed by the UN's Open Working Group (OWG) an intergovernmental process established to develop the SDGs. These 17SDGs (See Figure 1) cover a wide range of interrelated goals and are hatched on three developmental pillar themes namely economic, social equity, and environmental protection sustainable development. They are Global goals that member states have committed to achieve by 2030 and emanates from major earlier commitments of member states including the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), UN Convention on Biodiversity and the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change<sup>4-8</sup>. Now the scope and nature of these 17SDGs necessitates concerted and coordinated efforts across all sector and players in order to ensure their success and achievement by 2030 by all committed member countries.

Key to achieving progress on the SDGs, besides the irrefutable requirement of respective governments' political will, is the need of informed policy or indeed relevant policy evidence<sup>7</sup>. Each country's universities and higher education institutions are uniquely placed and critical in the provision of such relevant policy evidence. Indeed, as observed and reported elsewhere, universities as country think tanks are naturally the source of expertise in research and education<sup>4,5,6,7</sup>. World-wide, this unique position of universities has been recognized and with respect to SDGs, the United Nations (UN) has enacted and supported a number of initiatives to ensure that universities come on board in the implementation of SDGs. These UN

**Figure 1. The 17 Global Sustainable Development Goals and their respective image symbols**

Global Sustainable Development Goal (SDG)	SDG Image Symbol
1. End poverty in all its forms everywhere	
2. End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture	
3. Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages	
4. Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all	
5. Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls	
6. Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all	

7. Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all	<b>7 AFFORDABLE AND CLEAN ENERGY</b> 
8. Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all	<b>8 DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH</b> 
9. Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation	<b>9 INDUSTRY, INNOVATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE</b> 
10. Reduce inequality within and among countries	<b>10 REDUCED INEQUALITIES</b> 
11. Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable	<b>11 SUSTAINABLE CITIES AND COMMUNITIES</b> 
12. Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns	<b>12 RESPONSIBLE CONSUMPTION AND PRODUCTION</b> 
13. Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts*	<b>13 CLIMATE ACTION</b> 
14. Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development	<b>14 LIFE BELOW WATER</b> 
15. Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss	<b>15 LIFE ON LAND</b> 

16. Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels	<b>16 PEACE, JUSTICE AND STRONG INSTITUTIONS</b> 
17. Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development	<b>17 PARTNERSHIPS FOR THE GOALS</b> 

supported initiatives include the Higher Education Sustainability Initiative, the Principles of Responsible Education Initiative and the Sustainable Development Solutions Network<sup>7,8</sup>. In the current editorial of UNZA JABS we highlight the available opportunities for universities to be integral components of respective countries' SDGs implementation activities in general as well as charting a feasible and evidence-based course for our university, UNZA, to rise to the occasion and place itself central to the ongoing national SDGs activities.

### Opportunities and challenges for Universities participation in National SDGs activities

#### Opportunities

The SDGs provide exceptional opportunities for universities to demonstrate their disposition and expertise in playing an active and central role in the sustainable development of their respective countries thereby exuding their relevance to society. Table 1 list these various opportunities that are at the disposal of universities. It must be noted here that universities naturally have the capacity to generate, translate and disseminate knowledge and thus in view of SDGs they have the unique

**Table1. Summary of Opportunities for Universities to participate in National Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) activities**

1. Playing the central role in strengthening the science – policy interface
2. Playing the lead roles for SDGs related research
3. Laying the Learning and Teaching Platforms for the SDGs
4. Provision of neutral platforms for cross-sectoral dialogues
5. Provide support of integrated and coherent SDGs policy action frameworks
6. Establishment of sustainable partnerships between government and community

opportunity of playing the central role of generating SDGs related scientific evidence and thereby strengthening the science – policy interface of the respective national SDGs activities<sup>7,8</sup>. In the same vein the unique opportunity to play the roles of laying the learning and teaching platforms of their respective countries' SDGs implementation activities.

For effective SDGs implementation universities have that exceptional opportunities of being the basis or sources of national SDGs research. On the other hand, one of the major bedrocks of SDGs is education in the sense that quality education is essential for sustainable development for both its acceleration and attainment. To this end universities naturally have extensive teaching and learning experiences and there is need for informed dialogue across the various players including governments, private sector, civil societies, the public and communities. Universities are uniquely placed and can initiate and create neutral platforms for such cross-sectorial dialogues<sup>5,6,7,8</sup>. Furthermore, the 17SDGs are so interconnected demanding that deep analysis of this interconnectedness is vital for their effective implementation and attainment. Again this is a unique opportunity for universities to conduct such deepened analysis in the national context and thereby provide support of integrated and coherent SDGs action policy frameworks. Finally and of prominent importance is the current trend of universities re-aligning themselves away from the tradition of education and research to the vocation of partnering with governments and communities to achieve societal impact<sup>9,10</sup>. This editor and author of this editorial witnessed this re-alignment of a high ranking university in the UK, Cardiff University, that in its administrative structure has a Dean of Politics and Public Engagement. This Cardiff University Dean of Politics and Public Engagement actually sits on the Wales' parliament. In this respect of re-alignment of universities, the SDGs provide excellent opportunities for the establishments of sustainable partnership with Government and Communities.

### Challenges

The discussed opportunities are not without challenges for many universities to rise to the occasion and take them on. These challenges as listed in table 2 are particularly marked in least developed countries such as on the African continent and range from inadequate infrastructure, poor university funding, and inadequate human resource<sup>11,12</sup>. As recently observed<sup>11</sup>, what exacerbates these challenges in most these countries is

**Table 2. Challenges of Developing countries Universities for effective participation in National SDGs activities**

1. Inadequate funding and resources
2. Unawareness of Governments and communities of the universities' potentials as SDGs activities engines
3. Universities and academics' failure to perceive governments as partners in their academic activities
4. Inadequate infrastructure
5. Inadequate Human resource

lack of awareness by many governments of the potential of their respective universities as engines of national development including SDGs activities. On the other hand, academics of universities in these countries themselves fail to perceive their respective governments as partners in their academic activities.

### Setting pace for Achieving SDGs by 2030 for Zambia: Proposed feasible and Evidence-based SDGs activities integration approaches by University of Zambia

With the foregoing observations, it is appropriate to conclude that universities need to embrace their critical roles and exceptional positions as engines of sustainable development activities in their respective countries. Indeed universities ought to set pace for the attainment of SDGs by 2030. For the University of Zambia (UNZA) this editorial proposes feasible and evidence-based approaches of integrating SDGs in the day to day university life (see table3). To start with it must be recognized that UNZA is unknowingly already involved in many SDGs related activities. Thus it would be a good start to begin this SDG integration by taking inventory of these university SDGs activities and publicize them. This will not only set the baseline for the university SDGs engagement with the country but it will also enhance the relevance of the institution to the community. With respect to this beginning with this editorial, UNZA JABS will carry out editorial highlights of UNZA's participation on the ongoing SDGs national activities. Following this inventory it is proposed that UNZA must create capacities and ownership of the identified SDGs related activities besides proactively integrating and implementing SDGs activities into day to day university activities thereby building a business case for the university engagement in the national SDGs activities. These proposes are evidenced-based prescriptions discussed and reported recently elsewhere<sup>5,6,7,8,9</sup> as most feasible for many universities. By carrying out these proposes, UNZA will have evidently set pace of achieving SDGs by 2030 in Zambia in line with its current 2018 -22 strategic plan<sup>13</sup>.

**Table 3. Proposed feasible and Evidence-based SDGs activities institutional integration approaches for the University of Zambia**

1. Take an inventory of the ongoing SDGs activities at the Universities and thereby map the university contributions to the national SDGs
2. Create capacities and ownership of the SDGs related activities
3. Identify priorities, opportunities and gaps in relation to national SDGs activities and thereby establishing commitment of the University to the national SDGs undertakings.
4. Proactively integrate and implement the SDGs as part of the university day to day activities and build a business case for university engagement.
5. Create an M & E framework for the university SDGs activities as well as carrying out regular publicity of the activities



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