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Image credit: International Association of Universities (IAU)

Universities Step Up Focus on SDGs in Post-Pandemic Revival

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By Kalinga Seneviratne

SYDNEY, 16 Feb 2023 (IDN) — Universities are sometimes seen as ivory towers aloft from the communities they are supposed to serve. But, in reviving a sector that was badly hit by the COVID-19 pandemic, universities are now taking the lead in working with the communities to achieve the United Nation’s Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030.

The higher education sector is showing enthusiasm right across the world to accelerate action for achieving the SDGs. According to the third [International Association of Universities \(IAU\) Global Survey Report on Higher Education and Research for Sustainable Development](#) released recently, universities are showing “more substantial institutional commitment”, with more actors involved and increasingly holistic approaches.

In the past year, there has been a whole raft of initiatives by universities to address various segments of the SDGs, especially in climatic change mitigation, water and sanitation, and education. The London-based University World News (UWN) has set up an [SDG Hub](#) to track these initiatives.

In an interview with UWN, Hilligje van’t Land, secretary general of the Paris-based IAU, said their findings reaffirm that higher education and partnerships are essential to address the global challenges identified in the SDGs and UN Agenda 2030.

“Higher education institutions are in a key position to foster engagement with sustainable development by adopting a whole institution approach to teaching and learning, research, and community engagement, thus triggering a fundamental transformation of a sector that impacts society as a whole,” she said, adding that one of the key findings of the survey, is that more funding and training are needed.

This is because to engage in more activities and especially more transdisciplinary activities, more coordination is needed and for that, more people are needed, Van’t Land points out.

At the World Economic Forum in Davos in January, Brazilian professor and acclaimed meteorologist Carlos Nobre presented his visionary plan for the creation of an Amazon Institute of Technology (AMIT) right in the middle of the Amazon rainforest in Brazil. Though the idea of an ‘MIT of the jungle’ is not exactly new, it has created a wide array of enthusiasts—from researchers and practitioners in the field in global higher education to scientists, policymakers, and climate and social activists around the world. This has added fuel to the new awakening that universities should be working with communities on the ground along with them—rather than observing them and making recommendations from an ivory tower.

“The creation of a research university that combines breakthrough knowledge—in the arts *and* sciences—and cross-disciplinary education, from both global *and* native indigenous contexts, to prevent a social and environmental apocalypse is both brilliant and disruptive,” argued Dr Frederico Menino, a Brazilian sociologist and international education expert in a commentary on UWN. “An ‘MIT of the jungle’ may very well be the best shot we have at saving the planet – and, in the process, transforming higher education.”

After the recent election of Lula Da Silva as Brazil’s president, there is added enthusiasm for the idea. Last November, only weeks after his election, Lula not only attended COP27 but made sure to be accompanied by a large delegation of indigenous leaders and environmental activists—most of whom are directly involved with initiatives in the Amazon.

A few weeks later, Brazil submitted to UN Secretary-General António Guterres an official bid to host the 2025 COP30 in the Amazon. In his second week in office, Lula signed a decree to reactivate the Amazon Fund, a US\$630 million credit line to combat deforestation.

In the deserts where access to water could be a huge problem of the future due to climate change, the United Arab Emirates University has launched an initiative to ensure the efficient exploration, development, use, storage, and sustainability of precious resources.

Through a two-year programme, staff and professionals of the Abu Dhabi Environment Agency are trained by the university on geological, hydrogeological and geochemical investigations, groundwater simulation models, assessing water availability and quality in aquifer systems, and predicting future scenarios for water-pumping that would ensure sustainability of the system. Staff have received training on advanced numerical models to simulate water flow and solute transport in groundwater systems.

Another vital project, launched in collaboration with the Abu Dhabi Municipality, investigated the feasibility of unconventional stormwater drainage systems as a replacement for the conventional ‘underground’ closed systems.

At the 27th session of the United Nations Conference on Climate Change (COP27), hosted by Egypt in November last year, Sustainable Urban Resilience for the Next Generation (SURGe) initiative, the first of its kind aimed at strengthening cities’ resilience to climate change, especially in vulnerable communities, was launched.

The joint COP27 presidency-United Nations-Habitat initiative puts cities “at the frontline of climate change”, and universities are expected to play a major part in its implementation through a “multi-level governance” formula.

Professor Edgar Pieterse, the South African Research Chair in Urban Policy and director of the African Centre for Cities at the University of Cape Town in South Africa, speaking to UWN’s Wagdy Sawahel after the announcement of the initiative in Egypt, said SURGe is significant because most African governments have not yet recognised that they need to invest in growing the capabilities of their universities.

He added that universities can play a key role in working with city governments and civic organisations to advance a radical transformation in infrastructure technology, design and operationalisation in order to simultaneously

address environmental crises and multidimensional inequality that erodes the capabilities of citizens. “I hope the SURGe initiative is able to unlock the necessary resources at the scale of the challenges we face.”

But Asian academics and development experts IDN spoke to were somewhat sceptical. They point out political manipulation of local government and corruption of land developers as a major problem.

Professor Ma Theresa Rivera, a university research fellow in development communications based in Mindanao, Philippines, says local governments in her country tended to follow the policies set forth by the national government.

Thus, every time presidents and governors change, the Local Government Units (LGU) have to re-orient policies to suit their political masters. In order to support the SURGe initiatives, she feels universities have to form alliances with civil society.

“SURGe’s aim to tie up with local governments to step up urban resilience is a step in the right direction [and] they must be supported with resources and expertise to find nature-based solutions,” argues Jayasri Priyalal, regional director of UNI Global Union’s Asia and Pacific Regional Office based in Singapore. However, he warned that the initiative would face resistance from vested commercial interests in Asian cities.

“There will be resistance from the powerful lobby groups who are into the real estate business,” warned Priyalal. “They work hand in hand with corrupt systems and they are all part of the problem.”

While the global unions could support the SURGe initiative, Priyalal said it was also “high time” that the universities encouraged the world to move out of the “Take, Make and Waste” linear economic model towards a sustainable circular economic model “based on returns on ethics, instead of returns on equity”. [InDepthNews]

NEWSLETTER

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