



Towards Building Peaceful and Inclusive Societies for Promoting Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Higher Education in the Arab Region

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Abstract

This study aims at exploring the role of higher education in the Arab region in building peaceful and inclusive societies. It discusses promoting Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by attempting to answer the question of the study on how higher education can contribute to achieving all sustainable development goals, specifically SDG 16 through teaching, research, and governance for building peaceful and inclusive societies. Higher education contributes to achieving all sustainable development goals, specifically SDG 16 through teaching, research, and governance in building peaceful and inclusive societies. Goal 16 of the Sustainable Development Goals is focused on the promotion of peaceful and inclusive societies, ensuring access to justice for all, and the establishment of effective and accountable institutions at all levels. The study uses the inductive analysis methodology. The study concludes that Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in the Arab region have the potential to expand knowledge on various subjects and have the ability to cultivate students' abilities to navigate complexity and enhance their learning through dialogue and effective communication. And the results show that the relationship between SDGs 4 and 16 is one of interdependence, as education cannot thrive without the presence of peaceful and just societies, and at the same time, education plays a crucial role in promoting these values.

Keywords: Sustainable Development Goals; Higher Education; Peaceful and Inclusive Societies; Arab Region.

1. Introduction

Universities and other higher education institutions (HEIs) play an important role in achieving the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). HEIs are specifically mentioned under SDG 4 on quality and inclusion of education, but in fact their impact extends across all the goals through teaching and learning, research outcomes, and initiatives undertaken by university students. HEIs contribute to social, environmental, and economic development as they are one of the most important incubators of ideas and solutions to global problems, which makes them capable of making a positive impact (Leal Filho, Salvia & Eustachio,

2023). In light of Goal 16 of the SDGs on promoting peaceful and inclusive societies, as well as Goal (4): high-quality, inclusive, and equitable education; Goal (5): gender equality; Goal (8): decent work and economic growth; and Goal (10): reduce inequality, there is a strong global imperative to understand the fundamental link between positive human development outcomes and ending recurring cycles of conflict and violence (Barbeito, 2019).

The Arab region faces many unique and important challenges in terms of SDGs, which vary greatly between different parts of the Arab region. Some countries are still striving to provide the basic needs of their people and free themselves from extreme poverty; among them are Somalia, Sudan, and Yemen. Many countries in the Arab region are major oil centers in an era when the countries need to work in transition from fossil fuels to renewable energy; these countries include Algeria, Iraq, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. And there is a third group of Arab countries that are unfortunately ravaged by wars, and these wars are often caused by external forces that divide Arab countries; among the countries falling into the cycle of violence and conflicts are Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, Palestine, Somalia, Syria, and Yemen (Çağlar & Gürler, 2022). In the Arab region, commitment to the SDGs is no longer a choice that HEIs and universities take or not, but rather it has become an urgent necessity and a principle to which all universities in the Arab countries must adhere. And the presence of an element of sustainability in all educational courses has become a requirement and an indispensable basic condition. Furthermore, reconsidering and revising the plans and curricula in universities has become a priority, and there should be a strategy to include the concepts of sustainable development in the educational and research programs of universities as well as in their non-curricula activities inside and outside the university campus. This should be done to develop mechanisms to evaluate strategies and set standards for evaluation that are compatible with both the internal and external environment, and the necessity of benefiting from the experiences of other countries and learning from best practices, by involving university and college professors, national experts and stakeholders (Al-Kuwari, Al-Fagih & Koç, 2021).

The issue of peace and inclusive societies are of the most controversial issues, particularly in the Arab countries. Hence many studies were held to shed light on these issues in terms of peace concepts, cases, and their philosophical intellectual conceptions and political analysis (Jarrar & Althubetat, 2013). Thus, the reflections of the cultural and ideological factors have a great influence on HEIs in building peaceful and inclusive societies for promoting sustainable development goals in the Arab Countries. Cultural aspects in the Arab countries can be reflected in different cultural manifestations, and particularly the ideological expressions of intellectual approaches and concepts that govern the Arab mind in general. Many factors are influencing the Arab mentality, some are political and others are economic, interacting together to form what we may call the Arab mind. Where each Arab country unite under one umbrella, but they differ in their particularities. The Arab future will be mainly depending on the attempt to understand the reality and the obstacles facing the Arab countries by analysing the structure of societies; all their political, economic, media, literary, and artistic components. This is attributed to the intellectual origins of thoughts and cultural system that the HEIs are facing toward building peaceful and inclusive societies for promoting SDGs in the Arab countries. Hence, strong and innovative cooperation in the field of higher education, and the partnership between higher education and society as a whole entity, is one of the basic necessities to address the global challenges identified in the United Nations 2030 Agenda, achieve the SDGs, and build a more sustainable future for all.

2. Problem Statement

Launched in 2015, the SDGs are notable for integrating understudied issues into global development standards, including the environment and quality education. In particular, SDG 16 on peace, justice, and inclusion is a bold step forward in a field accustomed to seeing these issues as "political" and away from development policies. While the post-2015 agenda offers a better framework for dealing with conflicts and development issues, such Arab countries are being less peaceful. Whilst this alarming statistic has fallen by 49% between 2014 and 2018, in 2018, the number of state-based armed conflicts was much higher than a decade ago (Strand et al 2019). SDG 16 promotes peaceful and inclusive societies to achieve sustainable development, providing access to justice for all, and building effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions at all levels.

While SDG 16's concerns on violence reduction, rule of law, and governance are relevant to all societies, this paper focuses on fragile and conflict-affected Arab countries, many of which face the most difficult task of achieving SDG 16. It analyses how higher education can contribute to achieving or detracting from SDG 16 through teaching, research, and governance. And then analyses the dynamics of public interest, academic freedom, insecurity, and politicization affecting universities in fragile and conflict-affected contexts in interaction with SDG 16. Therefore, this study will try to answer this question: How can higher education contribute to achieving all SDGs, specifically SDG 16 through teaching, research, and governance in building peaceful and inclusive societies?

3. Importance of the Study

The importance of this study lies in its attempt to address the dilemma of the role of higher education in building peaceful and inclusive societies for promoting sustainable development goals in the Arab countries by analysing how higher education can contribute to achieve or detract all sustainable development goals, specifically SDG 16 through teaching, research, and governance. It then analyses the dynamics affecting universities in fragile and conflict-affected contexts in interaction with SDG 16, and these dynamics are: public interest, academic freedom, insecurity and politicization; and the tensions of the inclusivity logic of peacebuilding models related to promoting sustainable development goals.

4. Study Methodology

The study relies on the inductive analysis methodology, as the inductive analytical method is considered one of the most important and specific methods in the field of scientific research. This method is used by researchers in any branch of science with the aim of detailing and clarifying the phenomenon under study (Kyngeäs, 2020). In addition, the inductive approach is a perception and a vision of the existing facts and a reading of the changing events of the aspects of society to express a phenomenon or event or even define a culture and civilization (Liu, 2016).

5. Discussion

It is more important than ever to speed up efforts to accomplish the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Arab nations stand to benefit both individually and collectively from overcoming the increasing developmental obstacles and stepping up efforts to meet the SDGs. However, there are a few requirements in place before these initiatives can produce value and have an impact through the various developmental pathways. These include,

among other things, providing the numerous stakeholders with accurate and representative evidence, which first permits an impartial localized assessment of the current state of development, and secondly, equips all parties involved with the information necessary to guide policy choices and plot a course for accomplishing the SDGs. Essentially, seeing the situation and evolving patterns via a data-driven perspective ought to shed light on how to get past the numerous challenges mentioned. The 2022 Arab Region SDG Index and Dashboard (Bayoumi, et al., 2022), comprises 110 indicators covering the 17 SDGs, with an assigned score (0–100).

5.1. The 2023 Arab Region SDG Index and Dashboard

In terms of indicators, the 2023 Arab Index and Dashboard (Zakzak, et al., 2022) includes 29 unique indicators that are based on regional priorities and challenges, as well as related thresholds. These indicators were selected based on regional expert consultations that were conducted for the 2013 edition. In comparison to the Global Sustainable Development Report 2023 (GDR), and to avoid any bias, the Arab Index also excludes indicators where there is insufficient data coverage. The strength of the Index, dashboard and country profiles in this report is their ability to inform local action at thematic and sectoral levels within each country by presenting the data through a regional perspective, this report can also serve as a platform for regional collaboration efforts, a key element in achieving the SDGs (Moallemi, et al., 2020).

Sustainable development outcomes vary across the region, with common challenges such as gender inequality, decent work, economic growth, sustainable food production systems. Challenges remain as well in regards to SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being), SDG 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation), SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure), SDG 14 (Life below Water) and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions). Other SDGs show more variation, which in turn require country-specific solutions to address such challenges. And table (1) indicates that the Arab region SDG ranking by showing the regional score related to the index score.

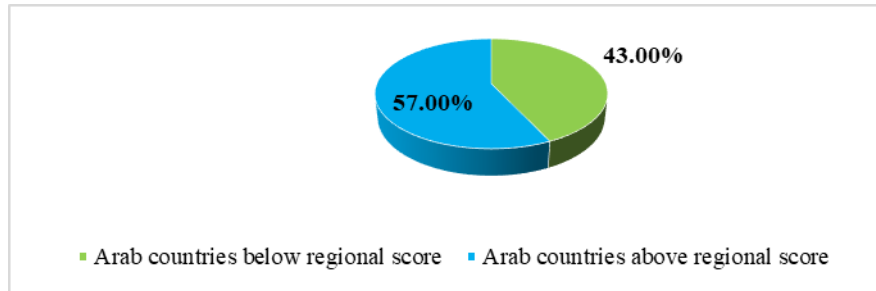
Table 1. Arab region SDG ranking by showing the regional score related to the index score

Country	Regional Score	Index Score	SDG 16 (Trend)
LEBANON	59.8	64.8	Stagnating
LIBYA	59.8	54.4	Decreasing
MAURITANIA	59.8	58.0	Stagnating
MOROCCO	59.8	70.3	Stagnating
OMAN	59.8	66.7	Stagnating
PALESTINE	59.8	-	Moderately improving
QATAR	59.8	60.9	Decreasing
SAUDI ARABIA	59.8	63.5	Decreasing
SOMALIA	59.8	42.2	Stagnating
ALGERIA	59.8	69	Decreasing
BAHRAIN	59.8	57.2	Stagnating
COMOROS	59.8	47.2	Decreasing
DJIBOUTI	59.8	52.7	Decreasing
EGYPT	59.8	68.3	Stagnating
IRAQ	59.8	62.0	Stagnating
JORDAN	59.8	69.5	Stagnating
KUWAIT	59.8	61.6	Stagnating
SUDAN	59.8	50.3	Stagnating
SYRIAN ARAB REPUBLIC	59.8	52.8	Stagnating
TUNISIA	59.8	70.6	Stagnating
UNITED ARAB EMIRATES	59.8	66.6	Stagnating
YEMEN	59.8	48.8	Decreasing

Source: Zakzak, et al. (2023).

Data in table (1) show the SDG Index overall score and ‘scores by goal’ that can be interpreted as a percentage of optimal performance. The difference between 100 and the countries’ scores is therefore the distance in percentage that needs to be completed to achieving the SDGs and goals. The same indicators are used for all 22 Arab countries to generate comparable scores and rankings. The data also show that Jordan has the highest score of (70.6), and with (Stagnating) situation on SDG 16. Followed by Morocco with the second highest score of (70.3), but with (Stagnating) situation on SDG 16. While Somalia has the lowest score of (42.2), with (Stagnating) situation on SDG 16. And figure 1 show the percentage distributions of the Arab countries’ index score related to the regional score.

Figure 1. Distribution of the Arab countries’ index score related to the regional score

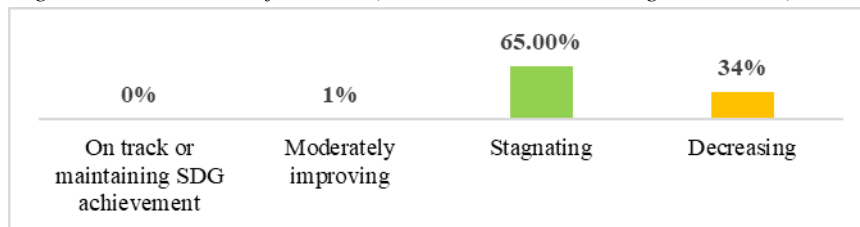


Source: The researcher (2024)

5.2. SDG 16 trends

In terms of indicators, the 2023 Arab Index and Dashboard (Zakzak, et al., 2023) includes SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions) trends as the SDG Dashboards provide a visual representation of countries’ performance by SDGs to identify priorities for action that illustrates a country’s current status for a particular goal. And figure 2 represents these percentage distributions of SDG 16 trends.

Figure 2. Distribution of SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions) trends



Source: The researcher (2024)

Data in figure 2 show a remarkable result on the SDG 16 trends in the Arab region with (0%) for (On track or maintaining SDG achievement), while (14%) are with a decreasing trend, and a (38%) with moderate trend, and finally, but with the highest rate (48%) for the stagnating trend.

5.3. Higher Education engagement with SDG 16

By fostering robust and groundbreaking partnerships, higher education possesses the potential to significantly contribute to the advancement of the rule of law and sustainable development, specifically SDG 16. Furthermore, through the alliance between higher education and society at large, we can effectively tackle the worldwide obstacles outlined in the United Nations Agenda 2030 and the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), thereby forging a more sustainable future collectively. Academia and universities, along with other HEIs in the Arab region have a vital role to play in the rapidly evolving global landscape of today. This landscape is increasingly shaped by knowledge, information, innovation, and

ideas. However, it would be narrow-minded to view the role of higher education solely in terms of economic development and as a source of innovative and sustainable solutions to current problems, as highlighted by numerous leaders in the field. Instead, it is crucial to support and acknowledge HEIs as the breeding grounds for the next generation of leaders who will be equipped to address the challenges of tomorrow. In addition to economic prosperity and innovation, it is equally important to develop leaders who possess a deep understanding of the rule of law, good governance, and effective strategies to combat organized crime, terrorism, and corruption (Klima, Martins & De Backer, 2021).

6. Conclusions

When asking about how can higher education contribute to achieve all sustainable development goals; specifically, SDG 16 through teaching, research, and governance in building peaceful and inclusive societies; goal 16 of the Sustainable Development Goals is focused on the promotion of peaceful and inclusive societies, ensuring access to justice for all, and the establishment of effective and accountable institutions at all levels. This goal recognizes the interconnectedness of problems of inequality, searching for peace, and facing environmental issues with global development principles. While SDG 4 specifically addresses education, it is a cross-cutting theme that is relevant to all 17 goals. The relationship between SDGs 4 and 16 is one of interdependence, as emphasized in UNESCO's 2012 Global Education Monitoring Report. Education cannot thrive without the presence of peaceful and just societies, and at the same time, education plays a crucial role in promoting these values.

HEIs in the Arab region have the potential to expand knowledge on various subjects, including legal rights and environmental law. They have the ability to cultivate students' abilities to navigate complexity and enhance their learning through dialogue and effective communication. Moreover, results show that these institutions can inspire students to engage in profound reflection, develop a comprehensive worldview, and appreciate the importance of resilience. Given their privileged position, HEIs can play a crucial role in reinforcing essential skills that promote justice and consensus, such as conflict resolution techniques. Additionally, they can foster values of gender awareness, non-discrimination, and actively advocate for participatory democracy. When it comes to incorporating these subjects into the curriculum, there are two approaches to consider. The first is horizontal integration, which involves infusing sustainable development principles across various courses and topics. The second approach is vertical integration, which entails designing specific courses that focus on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The former option is generally regarded as more effective as it addresses the intricate nature of sustainability issues. Furthermore, HEIs have a broader role in education that extends beyond their enrolled students. They can provide tailored training on the SDGs to local stakeholders, including Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), the private sector, and governmental institutions, and establish partnerships to foster transdisciplinary co-creation trajectories. An Arab higher education institution has the potential to enhance evidence-based policymaking through research. One way to achieve this is by independently evaluating SDG indicators, as demonstrated by a case study conducted in Egypt, and other countries should follow the steps. This valuable contribution ensures that official and governmental data regarding the implementation of SDGs is thoroughly examined. As a result, HEIs and civil society actors can guarantee that the evaluation process remains transparent and unbiased.

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