

IAU: The Power to Foster Higher Education for Sustainable Development



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1 A Paradigm Shift in Development: From Economic Growth to Sustainability

Modernization theory, which believes that “*development equates economic growth*” and changes in social, political, and cultural structures are the pathways for societies to become modernized, has been the predominant paradigm for the development of nations for decades. However, the model was met with a lot of criticism, and there was a movement to rethink the real meaning of development and well-being. Alternatives for development were proposed, but the most widely accepted paradigm is “sustainability” or “sustainable development” which was defined by the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) in the 1987 Brundtland Report (also called “Our Common Future”) as “*development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.*” Under this development paradigm, programs, initiatives, and actions aim not only at the preservation of a particular resource but also at other distinct areas: economic, environmental, and social - known as the three pillars of sustainability. The Brundtland Report has had a worldwide impact. “Agenda 21”, a comprehensive plan of action to build a global partnership for sustainable development to improve human lives and protect the environment, was adopted in the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, followed by many other agendas, including the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDG) (2000–2015) and the present United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development or the 17 SDGs. The 2030 Agenda is not

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only an urgent call for action by all countries - developed and developing - in a global partnership, it also provides clear guidelines and targets for all countries to adopt in accordance with their own development priorities and principle guidelines. For example, Thailand's practical approach toward sustainable development is guided by the *Sufficiency Economy Philosophy (SEP)* which was bestowed upon the Thai people by His Majesty the late King Bhumibol Adulyadej in 1974. He has repeatedly reminded us about the genuine meaning of development as well as the challenges and consequences of rapid modernization and proposed the idea of balanced and self-reliant development based on the belief in the middle path¹ as the proper guideline to live sustainably. SEP contains 3 key components: moderation, reasonableness, and prudence, and based on knowledge and virtues. It underlines a balanced approach to the use of economic, social, environmental and cultural capital while underlining the importance of preparedness in dealing with changes in these four dimensions (see Fig. 1). Progress with balance promotes stability and, ultimately, provides a basis for sustainability. The Thai government has adopted SEP as the guiding principle of national development plans since the 1997 economic crisis. In recognition of his devoted work for sustainability of the country, in 2006, the King was awarded the first United Nations Human Development Lifetime Achievement Award. For decades, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic, the Thais have valued SEP as the true foundation of sustainable development and the main driving force for SDGs. Nowadays, SEP is not only practiced in Thailand but it was recognized as a gift to the world (Avery and Bergsteiner 2016). In other words, SEP has proven to be one of the major leaps towards a paradigm shift from "economic growth" to "balanced and sustainable development".

2 Higher Education as a Prime Mover of SDGs

Education has always been recognized as one of the most important key factors for the achievement of sustainable development (SD) as indicated in the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (UN-DESD) (2005–2014). It emphasizes that learners at all levels are expected to acquire the skills, capacities, values and knowledge required to ensure sustainable development and become co-creators of a more sustainable future in terms of environmental integrity, economic viability and a just society for present and future generations. It is noteworthy that this Whole Institution Approaches for Education for Sustainable Development (WIA-ESD) has been fostered internationally, including by UNESCO and IAU. Furthermore, SD has also brought about the rethinking of the four pillars of education in the Delors' report to the UNESCO International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century

¹ The concept of "middle path" is not necessarily drawn from Buddhist thinking, the philosophy is not exclusively grounded in one religion, but has also found Muslim and Catholic proponents in the country. It has likewise gained appreciation as an approach in line with humanist economics that emphasize humanity and happiness above economic priorities.



Fig. 1 Sufficiency economy philosophy for sustainable development goals of Thailand. Edited by Open Development Thailand (ODT), from TSDF (ODT 2018). Source: Thailand Sustainable Development Foundation, www.tsdf.or.th

(learning to BE, to KNOW, to DO, and to LIVE TOGETHER). In 2012, UNESCO’S Education for Sustainable Development Initiative presented a conceptual framework for lifelong learning and added the fifth pillar - Learning to TRANSFORM ONESELF and SOCIETY – it is the learning which individuals and groups gain knowledge, develop skills, and acquire new values as a result of learning, they are equipped with tools and mindsets for creating lasting change in organizations, communities, and societies.

As part of a global academic community, it is not only a duty to engage with global challenges – SD and SDGs - it is also the social responsibility of universities to promote and protect, to reflect on and to show the challenges and consequences of the paradigm shift from “economic growth” to “sustainability”. Many higher education institutions are fully aware that it is our responsibility to take a leading role to accomplish the goal. For instance, University of Bergen (2020) has formed a working group to discuss SDG quality in higher education. Moreover, since all the 17 sustainable goals base their argument on knowledge, it is time to rethink *new meaning of knowledge*, the benefit of *multidisciplinary collaboration* as well as how *to share knowledge and cooperation* among local and international universities and how to put **the fifth pillar of learning**, learning to transform oneself and society, into action. In short, HEIs have to transform themselves in order to *ensure that*

their members – administrators, faculty members, students, supporting personnel - become *sustainability change-makers* and lead to a transformation of how we treat, preserve, and protect nature, how we produce and consume, how we distribute values and how we secure an inclusive, fair and equal society.

In 2018, the Southeast Asia ESD Teacher Educators Network (SEA-ESD Network), organized by UNESCO Bangkok and SEAMEO, convened to share experiences of member universities in the Asia-Pacific region about disseminating SDGs, with special emphasis on SDG4. The participants agreed that at the institutional level, all personnel and students should be motivated to participate in ESD/SDGs activities, both within the campus and local communities. The Indonesia University of Education presented how to integrate ESD/SDGs into the existing curricula and lessons to equip teacher and personnel with ESD knowledge and the use of project-based learning through collective and experiential learning to enhance the capabilities of students. The University of Indonesia became the leader of GreenMetric activities and has performed particularly well in research funds dedicated to sustainability research and the number of courses related to sustainability. Te Herenga Waka Victoria University of Wellington has shown effective ways to promote human rights, sustainability and social justice. In accordance with the Philippines “Target 2040”, Cebu Normal University has clearly articulated its mission to protect nature as reflected in its ESD mandate “iGreenCNU” (Okayama University 2019 and UNESCO Bangkok 2019). As for Siam University in Thailand, “sustainability” has been one of the main pillars in the mission statement. The university has a policy in place to integrate SDGs in its academic activities: teaching, research, service and student engagement. The latest survey reported that 2,023 courses provided for both undergraduate and graduate students in the year of 2020 by 13 faculties and the general education program had integrated SDGs in terms of content and class activities (Siam University 2020).

3 IAU as the Global Voice of He for Sdgs and the Well-Being of the People and the Planet

Sustainable Development (SD) is one of the key priorities of the strategic plan of the International Association of Universities (IAU). We have fostered SD for a long time since the adoption of the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro and the 1993 IAU Kyoto Declaration on Sustainable Development. Besides being one of the key partners of the UNESCO Global Action Program on education for sustainable development (GAP-ESD), the Association now plays significant roles in the UNESCO ESD for 2030 program. The IAU leads the work on SDG 17 by fostering global HE partnerships and develops new richly diverse and intercultural projects engaging higher education into the UN Agenda 2030 process, by fostering attention and work specifically on the SDGs. We have regularly organized international conferences and worked with organizations and networks such as the Global University Network for Innovation (GUNI), Sustainable University Network Thailand (SUN), Asia

Cooperation Dialogue University Network (ACD-UN) and the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) in promoting SDGs.

For more than three decades, IAU has been working on Higher Education and Research for Sustainable Development (HESD). In 2014, IAU adopted a second SD-related statement: the Iquitos statement sets out to connect knowledge and research systems on sustainable development from around the world. This latest Statement was one of the many IAU contributions to the UN-DESD and our efforts to accomplish the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (SD) and the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). **The IAU Global Cluster on Higher Education and Research for Sustainable Development (HESD)** was then established. The cluster involves 16 lead universities, each engaging more specifically on one of the SDGs while connecting to the other SDGs as well. The lead universities, from all world regions, collaborate with 2 to 8 “satellite” institutions, engage with a particular SDG and initiate concrete projects, also across all goals. The cluster has two concrete objectives. Firstly, it serves as a resource and networking hub for collaboration and guidance on best practices to advance on the SDGs in local, national and international contexts. The cluster aims to be beneficial for those institutions already engaged with the SDGs and to engage new ones.

Secondly, the IAU Global Cluster serves as a global voice for higher education and sustainable development. Siam University as one of the leading institutions has supported the IAU advocates for HESD at the UN, in particular at the High-Level-Political Forum, at IAU global Conferences, at Member workshops and other initiatives developed at the local and the regional level. The Association has been internationally recognized as a promoter of mutual learning processes through continuous exchange of ideas and experiences and global collaboration. Many publications with regards to SD and SDGs have been disseminated by IAU. In the context of the UNESCO GAP-ESD, IAU developed the 1st Global Survey on Higher Education and Research for Sustainable Development (HESD) in 2016 and the 2nd one in 2019. The survey (Mallow et al. 2020) indicated that there has been increasing commitment to sustainable development in the higher education sector worldwide, but not all SDGs were equally addressed. There are obstacles still to be resolved, and more needs to be done.

This report is one of the exemplary works of IAU as the **“Global Platform and Global Voice for Sustainable Development”**. In the future, the Association and the IAU Global Cluster will surely continue to play this important role, especially after the Covid-19 pandemic since our world is at a point of change. New questions are being asked about the meaning and goals of “development” and “well-being” of people and society. The ecosystem of education is completely transformed. It is time to **“Rethink SDGs and Refocus Higher Education”** to keep up with this “transformative shift” (Maesincee 2020). IAU has a strong positioning to take an active part in rethinking, reinvestigating, and re-prioritizing the sustainable development goals and make this opportunity to act as the leader to refocus higher education to make universities a successful vehicle for the achievement of desirable SD and SDGs. In doing so, IAU can act as a think-tank, share and disseminate “best practices” of how to transform

higher education institutions and how to Refocus Higher Education which can be summarized as follows:

1. **Transforming universities to transform people and society.** Universities should endorse sustainability as a priority in their mission statement. They should aim to transform themselves to be sustainable in all their actions – from policies to practices - to ensure the well-being of people, community, society, and our planet.
2. **Developing university campuses as models of sustainability and sustainable living labs.** Universities need to become a role model for sustainability. They should take responsibility for the use of knowledge and an ethical responsibility that follows from our accountability to the SDGs. At the same time, they provide research platforms and take action to leverage the campus as a testbed for innovation and the co-production of sustainability knowledge and practices.
3. **Transforming academic programs and activities for sustainability.** HEIs should transform from universities that provide specialized academic disciplines to universities that provide training and innovation for the well-being of people and society. It is imperative to prepare learners to deal with the complexity of the issues connected to sustainability by empowering them with a mindset and key competences for sustainability, especially the 21st-century skills: systems thinking, anticipatory competency, normative competency, strategic competency, transdisciplinary collaboration, critical thinking, creativity, self-awareness, integrated problem-solving competency (UNESCO 2017). Universities should promote (1) *programme development* - creating undergraduate or graduate programmes of study in SDGs to produce leaders for sustainable development; (2) *curriculum/course development* –revising curriculum, courses (especially general education), textbooks so that all students will learn about SDGs and SDG-related issues, such as sustainable balanced and circular economy, Sufficiency Economy Philosophy (SEP), responsible consumption, climate action, duties and responsibilities of global citizens; (3) *promoting transformative learning* – active/experiential learning and activities should be encouraged; (4) *redefining learning outcomes and evaluation* - integrating key competencies for SDGs in learning outcomes and criteria for course evaluation; (5) *training, retraining and reskilling academic staff* - professionals with knowledge and understanding of the interconnection between the social, economic, environmental and natural worlds will be the most important change agents.
4. **Supporting student-driven activities/student engagement.** Universities have an obligation to put students on the right path towards creating a sustainable society. The universities should act as a role model for students and facilitate collaborations towards sustainable development. Student activities relating to SDGs should be promoted and make sure that the values of SD are reflected in actions.
5. **Redefining “Quality Education” and Quality Assurance.** SDGs have brought a new paradigm of education and learning. Quality of education and evaluation in the QA system, internal and external, need to recognize and reward initiatives in higher education both for, as, and about sustainable development.

6. Promoting mutual collaboration and networking for sustainability. In order to make substantial progress towards the fulfilment of SDGs, universities must increase collaboration among HEIs and with all stakeholders, public/private sectors, policymakers, community leaders, and NGOs. In other words, “*Sustainable Development for All*” will not be successful without “*All for Sustainable Development*”.

Since the early nineties, IAU has been committed to promoting the important role of higher education for sustainability. In 2005, a decade before the SDGs were published by the UN, former President of IAU (2000–2004), Hans van Ginkel, made the argument that sustainability without development or development without sustainability are both not possible, nor desirable. Therefore, sustainable development is the education required to build a better future for all (van Ginkel 2020).

In 2015, Goolam Mohamedbhai, former President of IAU from 2004–2008, underlined the role of university as role models for society. He stressed that HEIs have the responsibility, more than ever before, to integrate sustainable development into their teaching, research, community engagement and campus operations (Mohamedbhai 2015).

Dzulkifli Abdul Razak, former President of the IAU from 2012–2016, pointed out that university leadership has to understand that the SDGs are mandatory and no longer just an option. Sustainable development is part and parcel of education within universities and he invited all institutions to engage with the SDGs (Sharma 2015).

Pam Fredman, IAU President (2016–2021) argued that working closely with the community is essential (Fredman 2019). Individually, we cannot bring about the level of change required, it takes active international collaboration to bring about systemic change. By working as a collective, we become more active, less dependent, and more committed to what we believe in. We gain the ability to choose what is best for us and for others.

Finally, the International Association of Universities (IAU) with the active HESD Cluster and Platform is now uniquely positioned to be the catalyst and facilitator for universities across borders to be active and influential engines for sustainability. Through strong international partnership, the Association is committed to be the *Driving Force for Higher Education sustainable development and to offer a much needed Global Platform for Sustainable Development* to ensure that universities transform their own systems and structures toward reaching the SDGs – for the well-being of the people and the planet.

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