

The Role of Saudi Universities in Advancing the SDGs and Saudi Vision 2030

Abstract

Background

Through SDG 17: *Partnerships for the Goals*, the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development¹ (2030 Agenda) clearly encourages countries to employ all sectors and stakeholders in the realization of the Sustainable Development Goals² (SDGs). One majorly promising key sector and stakeholder in this effort is academia. Building on the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's (KSA) long-standing and persistent efforts towards achieving the SDGs and its intertwined commitment to realize its Saudi Vision 2030,³ the country continues to find new ways to mobilize all sectors, including academia, towards their dual advancement. One of the KSA's main targets, as noted by H.R.H., Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman, is to have three Saudi universities among the top 200 worldwide by 2030.⁴

Problem and Trigger

According to the 2022 Sustainable Development Report,⁵ the KSA ranks 96th out of 163 countries in terms of SDG achievement. While the KSA aims to improve its SDG ranking and bring about the overall success of the 2030 Agenda, key challenges remain regarding the promotion of the SDGs at the sub-national level, in addition to data availability and statistical capacity issues, as recognized in the *2018 Voluntary National Review (VNR)*.⁶ Recently, the KSA's *United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF) 2022–2026* revealed critical conditions facing the KSA in terms of achieving the SDGs: "16 of the 92 (17.4%) SDR/SDG indicators face data availability challenges for the KSA."⁷ Striving to address this issue, "The KSA's Government expects to make considerable advances in data availability and overall SDR performance between 2022 and 2024."⁸ Towards this goal, Saudi universities

¹ United Nations General Assembly, *Resolution 70/1: Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, United Nations Doc A/RES/70/1, 21 October 2015, <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N15/291/89/PDF/N1529189.pdf?OpenElement>.

² "The SDGs in Action," *United Nations Development Programme*, <https://www.undp.org/sustainable-development-goals>.

³ "Saudi Vision 2030," *Kingdom of Saudi Arabia*, <https://www.vision2030.gov.sa/>.

⁴ "Transcript: Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman's full interview on Vision 2030," *Al Arabiya English*, AlArabiya, 02 April 2022, <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/gulf/2021/04/28/Transcript-Saudi-Crown-Prince-Mohammed-bin-Salman-s-full-interview-on-Vision-2030->

⁵ Jeffrey Sachs et al., *Sustainable Development Report 2022 | From Crisis to Sustainable Development: the SDGs as Roadmap to 2030 and Beyond*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 21 September 2022, <https://dashboards.sdgindex.org/profiles/saudi-arabia>.

⁶ "Towards Saudi Arabia's Sustainable Tomorrow: First Voluntary National Review," *United Nations Development Programme*, 14 August 2018, <https://www.undp.org/saudi-arabia/publications/voluntary-national-review-vnr-saudi-arabia>.

⁷ "United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia 2022–2026," *United Nations Resident Coordinator Office in the KSA*, 12 June 2022, https://saudi-arabia.un.org/sites/default/files/2022-06/UNSDCF%20KSA%20en_0.pdf.

⁸ Ibid.

must activate their vital and leading role in supporting the overall achievement of the SDGs. The goal of this research is to review Saudi universities' activities in terms of advancing the SDGs and to enhance partnerships within and among the academic sector towards the advancement and ultimate fulfillment of both the SDGs and Saudi Vision 2030.

Methodology

This research relies upon data collected by means of an online survey that posed questions relating to the activities of Saudi universities towards advancing the SDGs and Saudi Vision 2030. The online survey was developed internally by the United Nations Resident Coordinator Office (RCO) using SurveyMonkey survey software. On July 13, 2021, the survey was distributed by the Ministry of Education to 83 Saudi universities, of which 16 responded. The survey responses as provided by those 16 participating universities were then collated, interpreted, and used to develop partnership recommendations geared towards the private sector, civil society organizations, and the Government of the KSA.

Results

The survey results indicated high correspondence rates – above 50% – between participating Saudi universities' initiatives and SDG 3: *Good Health and Well-Being* (63%) and SDG 17: *Partnerships for the Goals* (51%) and indicated low correspondent rates – under 10% – between participating Saudi universities' initiatives and SDG 1: *No Poverty* (9%), SDG 10: *Reduced Inequalities* (9%), SDG 2: *Zero Hunger* (6%), and SDG 5: *Gender Equality* (3%). These results indicate that there is a significant correlation between the SDGs facing data availability issues and "Major Challenges" identified in the 2022 SDG Report and the SDGs least advanced by Saudi universities. While the results reveal participating Saudi universities' strong sense of enthusiasm for achieving the SDGs, they also indicate the need for a series of coordinated initiatives to reach their full potential as partners working towards the realization of the 2030 Agenda. The results also revealed generally high correspondence rates between participating Saudi universities' initiatives and Saudi Vision 2030 at the levels of its three "Pillars," six Level 1 "Overarching Objectives," and 27 Level 2 "Branch Objectives."⁹ The outlying components of Saudi Vision 2030 that showcased curiously low correspondence rates with participating Saudi universities' initiatives were Overarching Objective 3: *Grow and diversify the economy* (60%) and Branch Objective 3.7: *Grow non-oil exports* (20%).

Conclusion

This research analyzes Saudi universities' activities in the KSA towards advancing the SDGs. The research visualizes and analyzes the correspondence rates between the initiatives of participating Saudi universities and the SDGs components while measuring their involvement in SDG-related research and outreach activities. The research also covers universities' interest in building partnerships with fellow academic institutions, government institutions, and civil society organizations to

⁹ "Saudi Vision 2030," *Kingdom of Saudi Arabia*.

advance the SDGs. Additionally, the research analyzes and illustrates the correspondence rates between Saudi universities' initiatives and the Pillars, Overarching Objectives, and Branch Objectives of Saudi Vision 2030.

While indicating the SDGs that are most advanced by participating Saudi universities' current initiatives, the analysis identifies poorly targeted SDGs in need of further implantation and focus in the Saudi academic domain. The analysis identifies participating Saudi universities' willingness to build partnerships to improve their contributions to advancement of the SDGs. These research findings reveal key information about the academic scene in the KSA, which we used to curate nine specific partnerships recommendations tailored to academia that can robustly respond to both the SDGs and Saudi Vision 2030. The results of this research are intended, in part, to support the Saudi Government with its plans to achieve the 2030 Agenda.