Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Sustainable Development Goals, and Race

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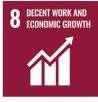
SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

Progress on Meeting the Global Sustainable Development Goals

How close is the United States to achieving a just and sustainable future and why should we care? A sustainable future is one that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability to meet the demands of the future. A just and sustainable future should leave no one behind. The new 2021 Sustainable Development Report gives us glimmers of hope that such a future is forthcoming, but it also provides reasons to be concerned, and plenty of reasons to care about the intersections of justice and sustainability (Sachs et al., 2021). Given their missions to advance underserved populations, Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) as well as other Minority-serving institutions (MSIs) are uniquely positioned to address the intersectionality of sustainability and justice.

For the first time since the adoption of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015, the global average SDG Index Score for 2020 has decreased from the previous year: a decline driven to a large extent by increased poverty rates, inequality, and unemployment following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. The global average SDG Index Score is a progress report that indicates how well nations are progressing toward achieving the 17 SDGs and the 169 associated targets that all United Nations Member States agreed to work toward achieving by the year 2030.

The pandemic has created setbacks on all fronts of sustainable development here in the U.S. and abroad. The impact of COVID-19 on specific goals was greater among the most vulnerable groups, the poor, and marginalized communities. The UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network USA (SDSN USA) report, In the Red: the US failure to Deliver on a Promise of Racial Equality measured the achievement of the SDGs based on how well they were delivered to the least served ethnic and racial groups. The findings revealed that white communities are receiving SDG related resources and opportunities at three times the rate of minoritized communities (Lynch, et al., 2020). These results suggest that SDG delivery in the U.S. is highly unequal and unjust, and that the SDGs will not be fully realized without significant progress to end systemic inequality in the U.S. Gaps in how states have implemented the SDGs in communities of color are so wide that, unless the inequality is targeted like a tumor and removed, the SDGs have no chance of taking root across the U.S (Lynch, Bond, & Sachs, 2021).

Leave No One Behind

The UN's [Leave No One Behind (LNOB) Principle](#), a central commitment of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, requires a firm commitment to racial equality and justice. LNOB not only entails reaching the poorest of the poor, but also focuses on combating discrimination and paying attention to root causes of systemic racism. Race, ethnicity, and gender are not only relevant to the SDGs, but essential to determining who is being left behind in the realization of sustainable development. The SDGs cannot be attained in part, or for some. People are often left behind due to a combination of intersecting identities and factors. They remain hidden in averages, and only revealed through data collected and refined on personal characteristics and categories, such as race, ethnicity, gender and other relevant demographics, such as location. Disaggregating data along two axes such as race and location is revealing. But an even more refined analysis using multilevel disaggregation, such as looking at women and race in urban settings, can reveal the faces at the bottom of the well that Derrick Bell, the noted civil rights scholar, says stares back at us when we dare to look (2018). Evidence shows that women and girls can be some of the most marginalized individuals within other highly marginalized people. Future research conducted by universities around the SDGs and the LNOB agenda should seek to better understand these and other intersections.

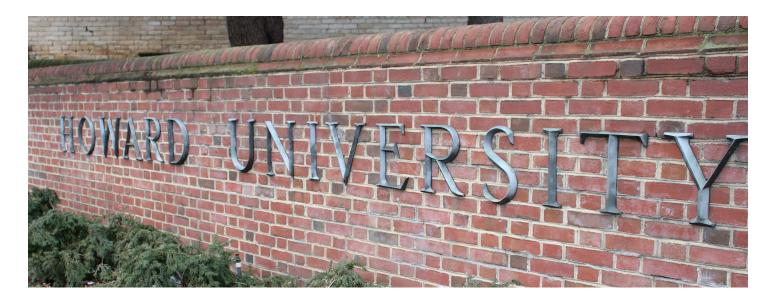# The Role of HBCUs and Other MSIs

Universities play an increasingly important role in helping communities realize the SDGs, and minority serving institutions can lead the way (SDSN, 2020 & Lynch et al., 2020). MSIs play a critical role in the education of learners from minority and low-income communities that have been left behind in SDG delivery and implementation. With missions focusing on serving the nation, while bettering their constituent communities, MSIs are often referred to as the preeminent "engines of upward mobility" for millions of disadvantaged students (Espinosa, Kelchen, & Taylor, 2018, p. iii). They serve in this capacity while financially disadvantaged themselves when compared to predominantly white institutions (PWIs). MSIs include, but are not limited to Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs), Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs), Asian American and Pacific Islander Serving Institutions (AAPISIs), and Predominantly Black Institutions (PBIs). Single-sex institutions are sometimes included under the broad category of MSIs.

MSIs are key partners in expanding research and awareness to better understand root causes and connections between groups left behind. SDG 4.7 calls for ensuring that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development broadly. Education for the SDGs (ESDGs) provides learners the knowledge, skills and mindsets to address the SDGs. MSIs apply ESDGs through their distinct missions of working with the disadvantaged. While ESDGs is founded on the more established area of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), it has a broader mission and is particularly suited to the university sector in engaging with the SDGs (SDSN, 2020).

HBCUs, with their deep connections to underrepresented communities, can further extend the research agenda by considering the intersections of racial identity and their impact on the delivery of the SDGs. HBCUs and other MSIs can help expand the availability of racially disaggregated data required for such an analysis. There is a lack of disaggregated data around many of the areas outlined by the SDGs. HBCUs possess strong and historical ties to underserved communities with strong commitments to their success that can help drive the research agenda around sustainability and race. Participatory research of this type requires trust. HBCUs can harness the power of culture to help localize SDG research for a deeper understanding of the connections between sustainability and race. Thought leaders, influencers, musicians, actors, sportspeople, religious leaders, community leaders, educators and others can serve as ambassadors of trust to involve local communities in research, equitable data collection, and in creating awareness that the SDGs are relevant to everyone and especially to communities that are being left behind.

ESDGs incorporates an action-based experiential learning component that can situate learners in the context of real-world problem solving on HBCU campuses. Solving SDG-related challenges like racial injustice in education, healthcare and the criminal justice system cannot be pursued through the classroom only. During the pandemic, HBCUs collaborated by sharing resources and ideas, which was helpful in surviving a pandemic which impacted African Americans at twice the rate of white communities (Murray, 2020). Focusing the ESDGs curriculum around collaborating to solve SDG related problems can help students integrate SDG theory into real-life practice.

For example, Howard University, an HBCU located in the heart of the nation's capital, offers an [Alternative Spring Break (HUASB)](#) that incorporates a break in formal studies in March for an experience tackling social justice issues. What is unique about this experience at Howard is that it is grounded in the historical and cultural community of an HBCU. This community embeds its underrepresented and often minoritized members into a historical context of social justice that infiltrates every aspect of the campus program, including co-curricular activities, curriculum and research, and academic and non-academic staff who are invested in transformational approaches to teaching, learning, and living. This enables students at HBCUs to have sustainable lifestyles that are not in conflict with their culture. The skills, knowledge and mindsets that result from this are well positioned to address the challenges posed by the SDGs within disadvantaged communities. During the 2019 spring break, Howard University sent more than 800 students throughout the world to develop leadership and community building skills as they gained first hand experience in helping restore blighted communities (Regman, 2019).

Partnerships to Bridge the Gap

HBCUs help create the science, technology and innovation that must be harnessed to promote equity, justice and sustainability. The Building Green Initiative created by the United Negro College Fund (UNCF) recognized the University of Maryland Eastern Shore and Spelman College as leading in the area of campus sustainability at HBCUs. MSIs stand at the ready to assist in developing solutions that incorporate diverse perspectives, including local and traditional knowledge, as well as community driven best practices and solutions based on science. Yet, Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) and the Higher Education Sustainability Movement are also important actors and can play a role. PWIs and other sustainability organizations, like the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education. (AASHE) can help bridge knowledge, capacity and resource gaps where MSIs may be limited in reach and scope.

As an example of intercampus collaborations, Virginia Tech (2020) engages students and academic staff from HBCUs and MSIs through its annual HBCU/MSI Research Summit, and has evaluated the impact of the program with the focus on students' engagement and recruitment (Jalali, Lee, Grimes, 2021).

Partnerships can help HBCUs and MSIs in general to expand their networks and capacity, enhancing both reach and impact. Achieving the SDGs will require multiple approaches and partnerships so that no one is left behind.

Goal 17 recognizes that multi-stakeholder partnerships that incorporate diverse perspectives, expertise, technologies and financial resources support the achievement of the SDGs across all communities, particularly ones that have been left behind. No justice, no sustainability. No sustainability, no justice.

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