

The UN sustainable development goals: a regional aspect in higher education

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Abstract. The article discusses the UN sustainable development goals (SDGs) and the ways of their implementation at the regional level in the field of higher education. The author analyzes examples of such projects in Russia and abroad. She also emphasizes the importance of adapting the SDGs in Russian regions.

Keywords: goal, sustainable development goals, United Nations, higher education, plan

1. Introduction

On September 25, 2015, all United Nations Member States adopted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The sustainable development goals is a global program for solving the most acute and long-standing problems [1]. According to this plan, the humanity sets a goal to eliminate poverty and hunger on the planet (goals 1 and 2), to create conditions for obtaining quality education (goal 4), to achieve gender equality and reduce inequality in the world as a whole (goals 5 and 10) by 2030. In particular, the objectives 14 and 15 are aimed at protecting the environment, preserving marine and terrestrial ecosystems, and the goal 13 focuses on combating climate change. Other closely related goals set the tasks of creating responsible consumption and production, creating sustainable cities, providing access to affordable and clean energy. The UN SDGs include such vital tasks as human health (goal 3), clean water and sanitation (goal 6), decent work and economic growth (goal 8), as well as peace, justice, and effective institutions (goal 16).

Achieving such ambitious and urgent goals requires the efforts of one and all, the hard work of all countries in a partnership for sustainable development, which is implied by the SDG No. 17. It is well-known that achieving a big goal is the sum of small but steady efforts in the right direction. Sustainable development in the world is achieved through efforts at the country level, and sustainable development in the country is the result of continuous work in each region. Joint coordinated actions to achieve the UN SDGs at the regional level, informing local communities and working with young people should be a priority for higher education.

2. Materials and Methods

The empirical method of observation and self-observation of the pedagogical process of the author in the process of teaching the “United Nations” and “Sustainable Development Goals” to students of the “International Relations” course in English was used as a method for studying the content of higher education. A comparison was made of the semantics and use of the terms “ustoychivoye razvitiye” and “sustainable development” in the Russian and English-language worldviews. Documents and scientific

research on the implementation of the UN SDGs in Russia and in the world were studied. Also, the author had the opportunity to learn directly about the international experience in solving global problems in different countries while participating in the “Social Finance” Program, which took place at the Said Business School at Oxford University.

3. Results

First, it should be noted that understanding the term “ustoychivoye razvitiye” in Russia is somewhat different from its English version of “sustainable development.” For example, the Russian version of Wikipedia speaks about the inaccuracy of the translation [2]. In Russian, “ustoychivoye razvitiye” implies sustainable, i.e. continuous development of the economy, the main focus is on economic development and growth. In English, the word “sustainable” implies, first of all, environmental friendliness, viability, and consideration of the future needs. It is not only the semantics of expressions in two languages that differ but also their common usage as well. In world literature, “sustainable development” has a broader meaning, it is an organizing principle for achieving the goals of human development, taking into account the ability of ecosystems and natural resources to meet human needs, the dependence of the economy and society on environmental processes. Sustainable development in the global dimension is the development of the world community in such a way that this development itself does not question or threaten the development and decent life of future generations. One solution to this linguistic inconsistency in terms may be to add the word “ecological” to an already established expression, as a result, we would get a more transparent in semantics expression “environmentally sustainable development.” It is already used by a number of Russian scientists [3].

For 19 years now, I have been discussing the UN and the Sustainable Development Goals (in the first 15 years of the 20th century, the predecessor program existed – the Millennium Development Goals) with international relations students. Students (and these are the graduate students of the “International Relations” course!) rarely know anything about the UN SDG program at the beginning of their studies. Let alone the majority of the Russian population! After studying and discussing the Sustainable Development Goals in the classroom, the majority shows great interest and desire to change something in the world and in their own region. Many students note insufficient attention to environmental literacy in schools, as well as they complain about the lack of state attention to ecology. But more and more young people are not indifferent to such problems as climate change, the creation of sustainable cities and gender equality. They want to take part in solving them!

Informing about the UN SDGs and creating conditions for the implementation of student projects in this area should be important objectives of university education. The system of higher education should prepare competent specialists to achieve the SDGs in Russia as a whole and in its regions.

The first steps have been taken in this direction. In 2016, the federal partner program “Green Universities of Russia” was established. It was aimed at introducing environmental initiatives and practices in universities of the Russian Federation through educational quests for students [4]. In April 2019, the third meeting of the Green Universities Association of the Russian Federation was held, where the team of the ASU Rubtsovsk Institute (Branch) became a winner and a prize winner of the ecoquest “Lesomania” [5]. “The quest participants organized tree planting and planted over 1 million pines, conducted eco-lessons for schoolchildren, recycled wastepaper, created social advertisements for forest conservation and carried out other practical and creative tasks” [6]. The successful eco-creative experience of our students was summarized in a collection of eco-practicals “Environmental Initiatives in Russian Universities” [7, p. 34-36]. I believe that the remarkable experience of the ASU Rubtsovsk Branch should be taken up by the head institution. Introducing a separate collection on the territory of the university would be the implementation in practice of the pedagogical principle of teaching by example.

As for the implementation of the UN SDGs at the state and regional levels in Russia, a very little work has been done so far. As S. N. Bobylev notes, “In Russia, in the conditions of the crisis and the search for short-term solutions to get out of it, the discussion of the processes of formation of new ecological and economic realities in the world related to long-term trends is not enough. This situation

creates additional risks for the future of the country” [3, p. 91]. The first step in the adaptation of the UN SDGs for Russia was the “Human Development Report in the Russian Federation: The UN Sustainable Development Goals and Russia” [11], which was published by the Analytical Center under the Government of the Russian Federation in December 2016. In order for the situation to change, a number of comprehensive efforts are needed. At the level of federal and local authorities, from business and public organizations, new technological and scientific innovations, a creative non-standard approach to solving truly wicked problems are needed. And universities should play a significant role here. Being the most important centers of education and training, universities are responsible for the promotion of the UN SDGs in their country. Possessing scientific potential and creating innovation centers, they should become the coordinators of the joint work of science, business and civil society in the implementation of these complex tasks. Professor Jeffrey Sachs, a leading expert on sustainable development and one of the most influential economists in the world, believes that universities are called upon to become resource centers for the realization of sustainable development goals in their countries [8].

There are already successful practices in the world to solve the most complex problems of mankind. I was fortunate to meet with prominent social finance leaders on the implementation of the SDGs in different countries, while participating in the “Social Finance” program at the Said Business School in Oxford.

One of the brightest case studies on the implementation of the UN SDGs (4th and 5th goals on the quality education and gender equality) was the “Educate Girls” project presented by Safina Hussain and Phyllis Costanza. The goal of the project is to provide quality school education for girls in the Indian state of Rajasthan. For three years, from 2015 to 2018, a new scheme of funding the educational social project “Education Development Impact Bond” was launched. This scheme includes the interaction between the investment fund UBS Optimus Foundation [10] (headed by Phyllis Costanza) and the NPO “Educate Girls (headed by Safina Hussain), who managed to attract and organize the work of 12,000 local volunteers, as well as the government of the Indian state of Rajasthan [11]. As a result of the project, 7,300 children began to attend school regularly, the quality of education after working with teachers improved. Special attention was paid to working with the girls’ parents in order to change the traditions established in the Indian village to consider them only as housekeepers who do not even need the basics of literacy. Safina’s enthusiasm, desire to achieve educational equality and perseverance in achieving goals are impressive. When I asked her “What was the greatest challenge you faced?”, the answer was surprisingly unexpected. Safina said that it was not about overcoming difficulties, on the contrary, working with volunteers who walked from house to house in Rajasthan villages, technical support for the project and interaction with investors were so exciting and interesting for her that she was not going to stop there. This project will be continued. It aims to reach 16 million children by 2024.

Another project presented at the Social Finance Program concerned the 13th SDG (Combating Climate Change on the Planet). Mark Kampaneil introduced it, he is the founder of the independent financial analysis center “Carbon Tracker” [12]. By analyzing the data of the largest energy companies and the changing trends in the world of investment according to his unique scheme, he was able to show even for amateurs in finance that the total dependence of the economy on hydrocarbon fuel without a gradual transition to alternative energy sources could result in the collapse of such an economy.

These are only 2 of the 17 speeches presented in Oxford in November 2018. Each of the speakers presented various approaches to solving the global environmental and social problems identified by the generally accepted program of the UN SDGs.

4. Discussion

One could ask a great number of questions regarding the SDGs, taking into account various perspectives. How to achieve economic prosperity and social justice, without jeopardizing the ecological balance of the planet? How to stop the catastrophic effects of climate change and move to

alternative environmentally sustainable energy sources? What can and should universities do to become leaders in addressing these complex and urgent challenges of the time? How to direct the energy of young people to their decision and create the conditions for creativity and innovation?

5. Conclusion

It all starts with a correct formulation of the questions and goals. Goals have already been set. These are the UN sustainable development goals. We should be glad that the humanity has finally reached a consensus on which problems to solve together, engaging in the creative process. Solving such complex problems as the implementation of the UN sustainable development goals cannot be easy and quick. Coordination of actions of the most diverse public institutions is required, including governments at different levels, business representatives, and non-profit public organizations. The Russian regions should adapt these goals to the conditions and plans of their territories. It is necessary to study international experience in implementing the UN SDGs and cooperate with other countries in this direction. Universities are called upon to take an active position as the prominent centers for training future specialists and coordinating the interaction of science, government, business, and public organizations.

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