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Awareness of Sustainable Development Goals among Youth-A Comprehensive Review

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Abstract

This paper seeks to understand the perceptions of the SDGs by the youth considering how they perceive, know, and act on these global goals. Through the systematic literature review methodology, the researcher reviewed the studies on various youth populations in the world published in the period 2015-2023. The research that was carried out prior to 2015 were not covered in the review as the agenda of SDGs was adopted in 2015. A thorough search was carried out based on good databases, such as Google Scholar, Web of Science, Taylor and Francis. The literature review used key words related to SDGs and youth awareness, Awareness, SDGs, youth, Perception, SDGs, youth, and Knowledge, SDGs, youth. The total number of identified relevant studies selected to the review is nineteen, and to identify gaps in the body of existing literature a thematic analysis was adopted in the synthesis. The review showed how varied the youth consideration of the SDGs was to require specific approaches and increased social consciousness to become a part of the sustainable development plans.

Key Words: SDGs (Sustainable development goals); SD (Sustainable development); Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), Youth, Awareness, Perception and Knowledge

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Introduction

A collection of seventeen goals, the Sustainable Development Goals is a blueprint of peace and prosperity of people and the planet both today and in the future (UN, 2017). No poverty, zero hunger, good health and wellbeing, quality education, gender quality, clean water and sanitation, affordable and clean energy, decent work and economic growth, infrastructure, reduced inequalities, sustainable cities and communities, responsible consumption and production, climate action, life below water, life on land, peace, justice, and strong institutions, and partnerships with the goals, fall in the SDGs. These objectives are supposed to facilitate economic, social and environmental sustainability development in developing sustainable future of humankind and the three areas (economic, social and environmental) must be considered to develop holistically. The gap that exists in the literature is the lack of studies that examine the perception of sustainable development by students and their level of understanding of sustainability (Carew and Mitchell, 2002; Kagawa, 2007). The global goals should be made more public and alliances should be established to implement various programs in order to fulfill the same (Minimol & Francis, 2023). The problem that these goals bring about can be addressed through concerted efforts. Against this, the present research will seek to present a literature review concerning the views, attitudes, and awareness of the youth on the sustainable development goals.

Awareness is a cognitive capacity of being in a position to selectively direct attention to certain events in the past, present, or the future (Eileen, 1968). Jati et al. (2019) suggest that awareness of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) can be used to determine the amount of knowledge people have about the concept and their emphasis on SDG practices. Awareness is a requirement of SDGs because no one can do anything good to SD when he/she lacks awareness. Informed individuals and communities are in a better position to foster, participate in, and execute sustainable practices, which can make the SDGs successful in general. When people know about these intentions, they can more easily form a group that will help them positively change something. It helps individuals to make decisions that are friendly to the environment as well as help in the formulation of effective government policies. Essentially, awareness creation is highly significant towards a better and sustainable future. Understanding the importance of sustainability is essential for the decision-making (Heeren et al 2016). Knowledge deficit model is a theoretical construct which has developed out of the initial research of what affects individual behaviour. It says that individuals would make more effective choices in the event that they possessed perfect knowledge. This model is built on the principles of a hierarchical, one-way communication process whereby authority and scientists disseminate what is considered to be the correct information in an attempt to close an apparent gap in knowledge, and hoping that this will result in change in behaviour (Miller, 2001). There are four assumptions behind this model: (1) scientific literacy of the population is deficient; (2) insufficient scientific literacy among the populace is the genesis of lack of interest of the populace in the scientific policymaking and decision-making; (3) professionals possess adequate knowledge that can pass on to the general population, and (4) This will cause scientific topics to increase the level of knowledge and interest in the scientific fields among the population since the expertise of the experts will be made available to the general population. All

these assumptions indicate that when professionals convey correct information in a proper way, the citizens will be better informed and this will subsequently promote the social responsibility behaviour. In its vision 2030, United Nations (UN) wants sustainable development goals to be met by 2030 and it is the youth that could be the pillars to make it a success (Agenda of UN, 2030). Therefore, there is a serious need to investigate the degree of awareness or knowledge among the youth about SDGs since unless they have adequate information about SDGs, they may not be able to do a better act to secure a sustainable future. It is hard to conceive that the modern society can be prosperous without the active involvement of young individuals (Kušljčić, 2022). The acknowledgement of knowledge as a determinant of human capital and an important aspect in sustainable development highlights the significance of knowledge in nurturing intellectual potential, creativity, and development. This focus on knowledge is a part of the lifelong learning and development of the learning society as it will provide the means of tackling and solving the multifaceted issues of the contemporary reality in the most effective manner possible. Youth is a strong and untapped resource of the world in the relentless struggle to attain sustainability (The World Federation of United Nations Associations, 2022).

Methodology:

The aim of the study was to examine in detail the awareness of the Sustainable Development Goals among the youth through a systematic literature review approach. The inclusion criteria included the research on various youth populations in the world published between 2015 and 2023. The review did not consider the studies that were published before 2015 since the agenda of SDGs was adopted in 2015. Such databases as Google Scholar, Web of Science and Taylor and Francis were used to conduct a thorough search. The keywords used in the literature review included SDGs and youth awareness, Awareness, SDGs, youth, Perception, SDGs, youth and Knowledge, SDGs, youth. To obtain the data, there was a need to categorize the findings based on the inclusion criteria that had been listed above. The review did not include research on the perception and awareness of stakeholders regarding the SDGs and research on non-youth population. The review identified a total of 19 studies to include in the review, and, to determine any gaps in the existing body of literature and identify general trends, a thematic analysis was used during the synthesis. Such a systematic treatment of the topic ensures the in-depth analysis of the topic and simplifies the understanding of how young people know about the SDGs.

Literature Review

In order to effectively disseminate awareness, knowledge, and best practices and ensure effective implementation of the SDGs, the youth should be involved. A study by Ariffin, and Ng (2020) aimed to assess the perceptions and the understanding of sustainable development values by the respondents using the questionnaire survey given to 402 students of six institutions of higher learning. The statistical analysis was conducted using the SPSS software and it revealed that the respondents were well aware of and supportive of sustainable development. In addition to that, no distinguishable differences were observed in the understanding of sustainable development according to gender or the discipline.

The youth can make a valuable contribution towards achieving sustainability in the society as they

promote creativity and innovations. The construction of a democratic, transparent, and sustainable society cannot be possible without the active engagement of the youth in the decision making process. But there were serious issues, which were revealed by the review of Borojevic, et al. (2017) including lack of knowledge regarding sustainable development among the participants. The research established that youths ranked the various sustainable development objectives differently and that their understanding of sustainable development and the objectives were influenced by their gender roles to a large extent.

Jati et al (2019) tested the awareness and knowledge of university students with regards to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Universitas Muhammadiyah Yogyakarta, Indonesia. The researchers established that 89.5% of students knew about SDGs, and 62.5% of students were highly aware of the SDGs. Correlation was established between the awareness of students and the availability of information and gender; only information accessibility influenced the knowledge.

It is widely assumed that knowledge influences the attitude but a recent and thrilling research conducted by Ilham et al, (2021) has revealed that even though the young people in Kuala Lumpur have good knowledge about the SDGs. Nevertheless, they do not exercise it, it is not manifested in their attitudes.

The article by another researcher, Genovese, (2022), provides the results of the survey conducted on students attending the course Cultural Geography at the University of Torino that revealed that the students showed a strong level of environmental awareness and perception, which is why there was a correlation between behavior, attitude, and environmental perception. Their environmental consciousness and self-initiated efforts, however, are not in line with that of reported by Ilham et al, (2021). It appears that knowledge is not the only factor that should be taken into account to change the behavior of the future generation.

A more or less similar study by Afroz and Ilham, (2020) has recorded that knowledge and practice of the SDGs has weak negative correlation, however positive correlation between practice and attitude towards SDGs has been reported. Adedeji et al, (2021) contributed to understanding of the SDGs in terms of comprehension, awareness, and perceptions among the Agricultural College students of the state of Niger, Nigeria. Primary data regarding the attributes and the degree of awareness of SDGs among 518 respondents was gathered using a structured questionnaire based on a basic random sampling process. The findings have indicated that the students were well knowledgeable with some form of awareness regarding the SDGs agenda and a neutral perception about the SDGs agenda. It is recommended that the SDG education must be integrated through campaigns, media distribution and education so that the youth are more conscious, which would lead to the development of a positive perception towards the SDGs.

In a survey of 154 students in five Malaysian universities, Balakrishnan et al, (2020) discovered that although there are positive attitudes towards environmental sustainability, there were also worries of the economic and social dimensions. In general, the findings demonstrate that higher education institutions have been able to instill the sense of sustainability responsibility in undergraduates but they also indicate the need for educators to focus on the economic and social dimensions of sustainable development education. The research gives the stakeholders a primary assessment in

order to consider improving the existing paradigms of sustainable development education.

leixo et al, (2021), have analyzed the views of students towards sustainable development in Portuguese institutions of higher education of the public. 1257 students were observed in the study but they were in different institutions. Based on the results, students believe that institutions should provide more training on sustainable development as they know how important it is and are conscious of its objectives (16% have never heard of it).

Dlamini et al, (2023) surveyed adults in South Africa to understand their level of awareness about and their feelings towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Findings indicate that age and gender have some differences in SDG awareness with younger and more female respondents registering higher awareness. Other unexpected trends have also manifested in terms of educational attainment with those with higher degrees (50 percent of those who graduated with PhDs) reporting that they did not receive any education on the SDGs.

Therefore, some of the studies reflect that youth have a good awareness of SDGs, compared to some other studies that show that youth are generally not aware of SDGs and its implications.

When it comes to higher education, it helps students to reach the objectives of sustainable development (Krishna et al, 2022). A recent study by Brondo et al, (2022) conducted at Universitat Politècnica de València(UPV) demonstrated that despite the fact that there were many students of the UPV who recognized the SDGs, a significant amount lacks proper understanding of the 17 goals and their current implementation.

The research by Odelami, and Fasakin, (2019), investigated the way the youth know about the SDGs & found that Nigerians youths remained very unsensitized and uninvolved in the SDGs despite the termination of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in 2015. In 2022, Noviestari assessed the level of knowledge, attitudes and understanding of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) among students in an Indonesian state-owned university. Findings had it that 42 percent of the respondents did not know about the SDGs, 76.8 percent were good in their knowledge, and 73.9 percent had good perceptions of the SDGs. It indicates a necessity of change in the curriculum and suggests the introduction of special education programs at an individual and population level in the university.

Zamora-polo, et al (2019) tested the knowledge level of the students of the University of Extremadura to different extents and concluded that the sample population, on average, was not very familiar with the SDGs.

Smaniotto et al, (2020) observed that academic programs need to be organized to raise awareness and interest in sustainable development. He conducted a survey among first-year students of nine universities in Italy, to determine their awareness, knowledge and attitudes about the SDGs and the sustainability and discovered that most of the surveyed students had very little or no previous exposure to relevant educational activities and had very little knowledge of the 2030 Agenda and SDGs. However, the awareness of the individuals that had undergone certain educational engagements was greater. Unrealistic expectations of SDG education by the universities were high among students driven by professional value and personal interest.

Ang, (2021) examined the awareness of 31 science students in one of the Malaysian universities concerning the concept of sustainable development and the 17 sustainable development goals

(SDGs). The findings showed that 41.9% of respondents had no idea about these ideas whereas 58% of the respondents had the ideas. The students also seemed to possess moderate environmental literacy. The study by Cachero et al, (2023) aimed at investigating the influence of gender and study subject on the perception of the SDGs by university students. Results indicated that, instead of an education campaign and introduction of 17 SDGs in various fields of study, Spanish students in universities had little knowledge about SDGs.

In their study, Vukadin, and Mlaadsenovic, (2023) aimed at identifying the level of knowledge among young people in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia aged between 15 and 30 have regarding sustainability and SDGs. It was found by applying an online survey and descriptive statistics that the level of awareness of respondents was between high and low. It is interesting to note that a quarter of the surveyed in both groups knew nothing about the SDGs indicating a serious lack of awareness about the SDGs among the youth and the need to sensitize them on the SDGs and its implementation. **Conclusion**

A thorough analysis of the literature on young people's awareness of the Sustainable Development Goals reveals a complex picture. On one spectrum it came to light that youth have a good awareness and understanding of the SDGs while the other end of the spectrum shows that youth do not have adequate knowledge or awareness of the SDGs, they only possess a moderate level of awareness and believe that education institutions should start campaigns, courses and increase information accessibility so that it could improve their overall understanding which will help them to contribute at the bigger end.

In addition, awareness of the SDGs did not promise to take environmentally sound actions on the part of the youth, although they were aware of the SDGs, it still could not push them to work towards the achievement of the agenda. However, those who hold positive attitudes towards SDGs did practice some of it which is indicative of the positive association between the attitudes and practice. So, besides awareness, educational institutions should also contribute towards spreading the word in such a way that it could reflect in their attitudes as well.

Notably, gender and education levels contribute to varying degrees of SDG awareness, with females and those with graduate-level education exhibiting higher awareness. Educational initiatives or programs relevant to the SDGs play a very important role in the comprehensive understanding of the SDGs among youth as it has been shown to improve their overall understanding.

Higher education institutions are recognized by the UN as the prime institutions to influence and motivate the youth to engage in practicing sustainable behaviours and studies have demonstrated that students can achieve sustainable development through higher education. Since youth awareness levels are inconsistent, it emphasizes the need for focused educational interventions and curriculum changes. Together, the data highlights how diverse young people's engagement with the SDGs is, necessitating the use of nuanced strategies and social awareness raising for successful integration into sustainable development agendas.

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