

The role of the university in the development of SDGs practices

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1. INTRODUCTION

The world is at risk: a growing and demanding population together with limited resources lead to a situation where action needs to be taken; such action is a challenge different agents should assume and start dealing with (Boeve-de Pauw et al., 2015). The data published by the United Nations are revealing: 836 million people live in extreme poverty, one in five women and girls have experienced physical and/or sexual violence by an intimate partner, global temperature is increasing, tones of food are wasted while millions of people fight against hunger, many developing countries lack basic infrastructures, more than 1 billion people do not have access to fresh water, ... Sustainable development asks for a development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the future generations. Different proposals have been made to shape sustainable development. Translating theory into practice has turned into a difficult task. One of the last and more holistic attempts to define what the main problems the planet faces is the 2030 Agenda, proposed by the United Nations. It spells out targets for countries to meet by 2030. These goals require that different actors play their role: nations, citizens, public institutions, companies, ... The university, as a powerful force to promote social change, must play its part and, as Aleixo et al. (2018) claim, it should connect students and sustainable development. Their participation is not limited to the immediate effect on students but it also affects the area where the university is located, i.e., it also contributes to regional sustainable development.

A Spanish university has recently initiated a project called ODSesiones™, a play on words based on ODS, the initials in Spanish for Sustainable Development Goals and term obsession, to capture the idea of making people obsessed with the SDGs. The project will be carried out over a two-year period and brings different stakeholders on board. Specifically, schools, students, NGO's, Public Administrations, among others, will work together in the pursuit of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG's from now on) proposed by the United Nations in 2015 under the term 2030 Agenda. The two main goals of ODSesiones™ are as follows: 1) to increase knowledge about the SDGs among students, professors and other staff at the university, and 2) to facilitate regional development through courses of action aimed at having a clear social impact in the geographical area where the university is located.

The structure of the paper is as follows. First, we briefly revised the literature about the role of universities as agents that promote regional development. Afterwards, we describe the project and finally, we discussed the main outcomes reached so far.

2. THE ODSESIONS™ PROJECT: THE UNIVERSITY AS A PLATFORM TO PROMOTE REGIONAL SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Previous research has highlighted the prevalent role of universities in the promotion of sustainable development (Farrant and Pyle, 2002; Petry et al. 2011; Wakkee et al. 2019). Indeed, authors such as Cortese (2003) argue that it is not only that universities have the opportunity to encourage change, but they have the moral responsibility to provide students and citizens in general with the knowledge and skills required to build a sustainable and fair future. Therefore, it is at the core of the universities' basic duties to promote sustainable development. In other words, universities can act as sustainability leaders and integrators.

Although the key role of universities in sustainable development is out question, it is equally true that the implementation of a blueprint to guide their actions is not as straightforward as some people might think. The desired end can be devised quite easily but the means are not that clear. For that reason, the 2030 Agenda emerges as a reference framework to guide the universities' leadership in this mission. Thus, in 2015, the United Nations came to an agreement about the main problems threatening humans and defined 17 Sustainable Development Goals where mainly social (poverty, hunger, inequalities, quality education), economic (decent work and economic growth, sustainable cities, responsible consumption and production, affordable energy), environmental (climate action, life on land, life below water) and institutional (peace, justice and strong institutions, partnerships) concerns are signaled as the big issues to deal with if we want to make the world a better place to live. The 2030 Agenda is a call for action where different actors are expected to play their part: citizens, companies, public administrations... should be on the same boat to achieve the goal.

2.1. Stages to implement ODSesiones™

Based on the spirit of the SDG's, a Spanish university designed the ODSesiones™ project. The seed that initiated the project was the conviction that the university represents a platform where different stakeholders could work jointly and comfortably as the university is a neutral actor that promotes social change and encourages society's development. Since different stakeholders were to be invited to ODSesiones™, they were approached at different stages. Thus, the first stage involved more than 20 Schools and Faculties. They would be the hosts of many activities later. Therefore, we needed to engage the Deans and their teams and persuade them to adhere to the SDG's that were more connected to the degrees they offer (for example, the School of Business and Economics adhered to the SDG 1: No poverty and SDG 12: Responsible consumption and production whereas the Faculties of Medicine and Psychology adhered to the SDG 3: Good health and well-being). At a second stage, a similar procedure was used with NGO's. They were invited to participate in ODSesiones™ and chose the SDG's more associated to the organizations. More than 70 NGO's are currently collaborating with the project. Another important issue related to gaining students' engagement. Consequently, a meeting with the students' council was held. Although the scope of the project is wide, that is to say, any member of the university as well as any citizen in general can attend the different sessions, students are considered as the most important stakeholder for the project since they will lead the future. Therefore, their interests and preferences with regard to the activities and rewards had to be taken into account. Finally, the project was also presented to local authorities and they instantly realize that its potential to promote sustainable behavior and social change was huge so they decided to sponsor the initiative. Similarly, a couple of private companies joined ODSesiones™ also as sponsors.

Once we knew which faculties and NGO's would work on each goal, we set a monthly calendar as the idea was to devote one month to each of the 17 SDG's. Prior to the focal month, all the partners (basically, hosting schools, students and NGO's) were summoned for a preparatory meeting where all were asked to come up with specific activities to be conducted along the month and integrated in a common schedule. Those activities include talks, art exhibitions, field trips, fairs, workshops, ... As a result, on average, 50 to 60 initiatives are conducted each month.

ODSesiones™ was presented by the end of January 2019 and the SDG 1: No hunger was tackled in February. As the project evolved and gained visibility in the media, more partners showed interests in participating. Thus, members such as trade unions, professional associations, more NGO's and private companies have been swelling since the opening ceremony. This tendency reassured the university role as a platform where very different stakeholders can act altogether to build a better world, providing different and non-mutually exclusive perspectives into the 2030 Agenda implementation. This is in line with Leal Filho (2011), who posited that one of the essential points in implementing sustainability in universities is connected to the translation of the "added" value of such sustainability to different agents.

2.2. The 2030 Classroom

The 2030 Classroom deserves special attention since it entails bringing the 2030 Agenda into the Degrees offered by the university and listening to the call for a more comprehensive integration of sustainability into curricula (Larrán-Jorge et al. 2015). Such a call for action implies that besides the promotion of SDGs outside the university, through the activities mentioned in the previous section, it should also be of primal relevance to integrate the values of sustainable development into the contents and skills learned by students. Therefore, it means that the 2030 Agenda should be placed at the core of the university's mission, that is, providing students with a rich curriculum that goes beyond the traditional contents. Current students will lead the future and it is the university's duty to encourage them to do their jobs professionally while observing and working for the SDG's at the same time. With this idea in mind, we created the 2030 Classroom, where experts, professors and students are invited to share their ideas on the ways SDG's could be integrated into the curricula. So far, four sessions have been conducted, one each month, where different actors have discussed a variety of practices to deal with the SDG's in the different degrees.

3. CONCLUSIONS

Although ODSesiones™ started quite recently, its value as a SDGs enhancer among young students, in particular, and citizens, in general, is unquestionable. Additionally, it also highlights the role of universities in regional sustainable development. With this project, bridges with NGO's, private companies, Public Administrations, among others, have been built to work jointly in the pursuit of SDG's.

Specifically, with regard to the two main goals stated previously, both are being achieved gradually. Thus, on the one hand, knowledge about the 2030 Agenda is increasing so that the members of the university are becoming more familiar with the goals, which, in turn, might raise concern, involvement and action. Actually, our count shows that around 4,000 students attended the activities during the first four months (February-May) and a survey revealed that they are highly satisfied with the initiatives they witnessed, with a

mean score above eight out of ten. We expect that exposure to the ODSesiones™ activities set the seed for future responsible behavior, in line with Bhattacharya's (2019) recent results showing that the more pro-social the students are, the more pro-environmental. In other words, universities can enhance sustainability and promote more favorable attitudes by implementing a holistic approach in that regard. On the other hand, the impact on the closest geographical area, inspired by the firm commitment of the university to contribute to regional development, is also happening. Thus, a volunteering program to assist those in need of a shelter has been implemented, funds have been collected to support a specific program to help children in highly risky conditions, workshops to learn how to reuse food waste at home, with the subsequent impact on the efficient use of resources have been carried out, visibility has been given to the special educational needs of some groups (autism, deafness,...), a basic training about how to act in an emergency to provide first aid was offered, among a wide variety of actions.

Beside the outcomes stated in the preceding paragraph, another indication of success of the project ODSesiones™ refers to the media reach. Thus, close to 100 videos were recorded and uploaded during the first months and the number of visualizations exceeded 3,700. Similarly, the project website received around 6,500 visits and the number of followers in the different social networking sites increased at a steady pace until now. Finally, with respect to media coverage, according to our tracking, almost 80 pieces of news were published in different newspapers and websites during the first period.

The experience accrued so far leads us to believe that ODSesiones™ could serve a benchmark role, as a holistic framework to put the SDGs into action. In that regard, we think that this project could be easily transferred to those universities all over the world attempting to spread the word regarding SDGs. What is more, it could also be applied to other educational institutions. In sum, ODSesiones™ is a project that allows to work for the achievement of the SDG. It is a first attempt, not without difficulties, to increase awareness and put initiatives into action.

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