

Psy-SDGs: Building Bridges at University Between Psychology and Sustainability

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Keywords: social psychology, sustainability, sustainable development goals, education.

Introduction

This article presents the results of an intervention to bring together Social Psychology and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), carried out through the UNITWIN/UNESCO at Brasilia Catholic University in Brazil. Developed as a university extension course, entitled "Dialogues Between Social Psychology and the Sustainable Development Goals", the intervention aimed to promote participants' awareness of the urgency around the 2030 Agenda and to stimulate actions to achieve of the SDGs.

Sustainability has been the official agenda of the United Nations since 1968, when the organization, in a general assembly, decided to convene a conference on the subject, scheduled for 1972. The United Nations Conference on the Human Environment became known as the Stockholm Conference and brought together 113 countries, generating three main products: the Stockholm Action Plan, the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) and the Stockholm Declaration (Brisman 2011, 1039).

Also in 1972, the report *The Limits To Growth* was published, commissioned by the Club of Rome to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). The study used mathematical models to predict the risks of economic and world population growth. In the document, the scientists assumed (Meadows, Meadows, Randers and Behrens 1972, 183): "Humankind possesses, for a brief moment in history, the most powerful combination of knowledge, tools, and resources the world has ever known. It has everything physically needed to create an entirely new form of society, one built to last for generations. The two missing ingredients are a realistic, long-term goal that can lead to the balance of society and human will to achieve that goal."

The concept of sustainable development was coined years later, specifically in 1987, by the World Commission on Environment and Development, which became known as the "Brundtland Commission" in reference to its chairman, Norwegian Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland. The concept encompasses meeting the needs of the present generations without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. At that time, this development approach emerged as an alternative to unlimited economic growth, with an exclusive focus on Gross Domestic Product (Randall 2011, 1048). Today, sustainable development occupies a large part of the United Nations agenda.

Two decades after the Stockholm summit, the UN held the Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro, the Earth Summit or just Rio 92. In 2012, another meeting was promoted, Rio+20, with the objective of evaluating the progress around commitments established in 1992, as well as new guidelines. Between the two events, in 2000, the UN established the 8 Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) that aimed to fight poverty by 2015. The MDGs were established with a focus on helping the most vulnerable countries, different from the global and systemic character of the Sustainable Development Goals, which would be launched in 2015 (Fukuda-Parr 2016).

The success of the MDGs was admitted as partial, achieving specially the three health-related goals (Sachs 2015, 523). With the establishment of the SDGs, the challenge has grown, since it includes three spheres that work in a systemic way: planet, people, and prosperity. It brings together 17 goals, 169 goals and a deadline for their achievement: 2030. The agenda involves environmental protection, social inclusion and economic growth with the premise of leaving no one behind.

With less than 8 years ahead, nations are far from established milestones. Only within the scope of SDG 2, which deals with the fight against hunger, instead of advancing, Brazil went backwards, going from 19 million people in severe food insecurity in 2020 to 33.1 million in 2022 (Penssan 2022). Approximately 15% of the population suffers from hunger on a daily basis. The Sustainable Development Report (Sachs, Lafortune, Kroll and Woelm 2022) showed that, for the second year in a row, the world is not making progress towards the SDGs (Fig. 1).

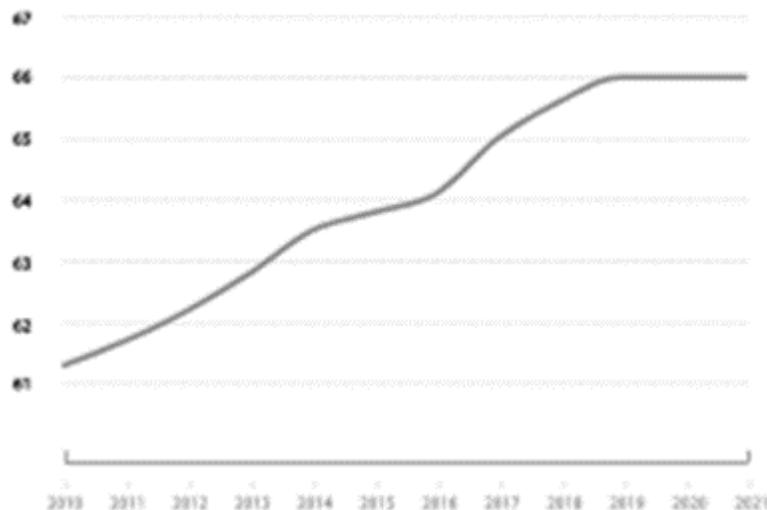


Fig. 1. SDG Index Score, world average, 2010–2021

(Figure from the Sustainable Development Report, 2022, 9)

It is urgent to reflect on the variables that might be capable of returning the SDGs to the path of evolution and, more than that, leveraging them. In the last paragraph of *The Limits to Growth* (1972, 197), the Club of Rome executive committee warned:

Man must turn to himself – to his goals and values – as well as to the world he seeks to change. Dedication to both tasks must be unending. The crux of the question is not just whether the human species will survive, but also whether it will be able to survive without incurring a pointless state of existence.

Stoknes (2014) argues, with regard to climate challenges, that the lack of action to address the problems is due to some cognitive biases, including the mistaken perception that the impact of warming is distant. It is necessary to bring the issue to the personal sphere, physically close and urgent. The scientist recommends: to involve the human being, the need to transform the status quo must be replaced by the need to dream again (2021).

With the extension course “Dialogues between Social Psychology and the Sustainable Development Goals”, a process was constituted to stimulate intrapersonal and interpersonal connection, acting on the affective and cognitive dimensions and fostering individual and collective action. In addition to knowing about sustainability, it is necessary to become sustainable.

Social Psychology and Sustainability: An Intervention

The approximation between psychology and sustainability is a rising field, with movements such as Environmental Psychology and the Psychology of Sustainability and Sustainable Development, among others. The first approaches the person in his/her context, having as its central theme the interrelationships between the individual and the physical and social environment (Moser, 1998). The Psychology of Sustainability and Sustainable Development involves optimizing and regenerating personal resources to establish meaningful lives and work experiences (Di Fabio, 2021).

In the intervention presented in this study, an approximation was built between Social Psychology and Sustainability and for this the researchers coined the term Psy-SGDs – the conjunction between psychology and SDGs. Social Psychology investigates the behavior of the individual and how he is socially influenced (Lane, 1981, p.8), but also considers how the individual changes the social environment in which he lives. For conceptual purposes, Psy-SGDs involves the strengthening of social fabric to effectively face the challenges of sustainability organized into 17 SDGs and 169 goals. It seeks to constitute the opposite path to what has led human civilization to a myriad of crises, starting from individualism to collectivism.

The extension course “Dialogues between Social Psychology and the Goals of Sustainable Development” was held at the UNITWIN UNESCO Chair in Youth, Education and Society at Brasilia Catholic University, in 2022. As recommended by Caliman (2019, 16), to create a more sustainable world, people need values and skills that allow them to contribute to sustainable development, being education a crucial factor.

In the pilot edition, registration was free, with high school diploma as the only prerequisite for participation. To have 30 participants throughout the program, 100 places were made available, which were filled in a few hours. In the end, 34 certificates were issued to participants who maintained 75% attendance and participated in the integrative conclusion work.

The program consisted of 24 hours, 16 hours for synchronous online activities, conducted live, and 8 hours for asynchronous activities. The agenda was spread over 8 weeks, with a weekly live meeting lasting 2 hours. The option for a program diluted in two months proved to be relevant for the social field establishment, favoring the an environment for connections and collective intelligence.

In the pilot edition, SDGs 2 (Zero Hunger), 3 (Health and Well-being), 5 (Gender Equality) and 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) were addressed. The synchronous sessions were structured as follows:

Time	Activity	Description
(-) 20min	Welcome Message	Welcome screen with instrumental music and a quote from an author present in the course bibliography.
00->05min	Kick Off	Music video to convey affections related to the central theme of the session. All songs played were from Brazil.
05->15min	Reception	Initial greeting from the professors with sharing of affections related to the chosen music and its relationship with the SDG addressed in the session.
15->45min	Check In	Professors present the guiding question of the session that may or may not have been introduced in asynchronous preparation activity. Participants are encouraged to voluntarily speak up, warming up the session for dialogue.
45min->90min	Storytelling	For 45 minutes, the professor in charge for the session presents the SDG in focus, bringing the current reality and the conjuncture that built and sustains this reality. In the case of SDG 2 (Zero Hunger), for example, numbers are not enough, we need have faces and voices. Participants are encouraged to express themselves freely, at any time, with questions, reflections, and personal experiences.
90min->115min	Dialogues	During the final stage, the professors use an adaptation of the Fishbowl technique for the remote environment, highlighting the participant who is taking the floor and up to three people registered to speak.
115min->120min	Check Out	In the conclusion, the professors stitch together the theme of the session and present available asynchronous materials, such as articles and documentaries.

The structure presented was followed to the letter in the first sessions. As the social field was constituted, it became more fluid, with more voluntary manifestations and in-depth dialogues with sharing of a personal nature that reflected the challenges of exclusion experienced or witnessed by the participants. Hunger, which currently affects 15% of Brazilians, was present in the life stories of ancestors and the participants themselves. The more flexible the session structure became to the growing demand for participation, the more the proposal for a program entitled Dialogues between Social Psychology and Sustainability was fulfilled.

The sessions were deliberately permeated by art, with references to literary and audiovisual works. As Fonseca (2016) argues, “emotions cannot continue to be separated from cognitions in the classrooms of the 21st century, as they were in the past. Meaningful and motivating learning is the result of the interaction between emotion and cognition, both of which are so connected at such a basic neurophysiological level that if one does not work, the other is affected considerably.” Art arouses emotion and emotion sediments memory and learning.

significant acquisition. When asked about changes in behavior around SDG 2, the following records stand out:

"I stopped ordering food on the App, I make my food in a state of presence. I am more conscious when shopping for food."

"Impossible not to have changed my behavior. Today I bought a mango that 'would no longer serve for consumption' due to a small crumple."

"I drive more attention to avoid waste, especially food waste. I got out of the 'normalization' of some topics and now I am challenging the status quo."

"There is a much broader perception of the topics addressed, identifying situations of illness and disorders in me and colleagues, I am much more compassionate and offering effective support for those who need food, I am improving domestic practices in relation to food reuse and recycling."

"I am more concerned about my relationship with food, whether in terms of waste, or in terms of selection and purchase."

"I have a better multidimensional understanding of hunger and have improved surveillance of waste. I feel a big embarrassment about it."

Considering Social Psychology as the background for the entire process of this intervention, it is important to highlight some points about the subjective impact of the extension:

"They were intense nights and stirring memories of pain that were anesthetized. Knowledge is liberating, and I feel profound gratitude for having had the privilege of diving into this dense but also so necessary journey. For me, participating in this course was also from a therapeutic nature, because through each theme and encounter I was diving into layers of my being that enhanced my self-knowledge in such important spheres that I had never allowed myself to look at, or maybe I had never dedicated myself to understand."

"We experienced a collective catharsis mediated with extreme sensitivity and I believe that this was a pillar for the course - touching and transformative from beginning to end. (...) It brought technical and academic knowledge linked to multiple other types of knowledge, and it is already being a driving force for the changes we want to see in the world."

"It's not a dream, it's reality and ongoing transformation."

Still in the search for elements that support the understanding of the impact of the intervention, the participants were invited to choose a word to synthesize the experience. From the words, the following cloud was composed (Fig. 3):



Fig. 3, Word Cloud

(Word cloud relating to the impact of intervention in Psy-SDGs, 2022)

Quantitative and qualitative assessments are still under analysis.

Conclusion

Preliminary evaluations point to favorable results arising from the integration between Social Psychology and the Sustainable Development Goals as a favorable path both for education and for action. The urgent changes presented in the 2030 Agenda require subjective and social mobilization, in addition to declarative and procedural knowledge. As the Portuguese writer Valter Hugo Mãe (2016) stated, “We live in a time that is splendid for knowledge, but not yet splendid for learning; humankind knows, but has not learned. We only learn when we change our behavior”.

One of the products of the intervention is the beginning of a possible field of action called Psy-SDGs by the researchers, which involves the strengthening of the social bonds to effectively face the challenges of sustainability systematized in the 17 SDGs. The development of Psy-SDGs as a construct constitutes one of the next steps in the studies to be accepted by the UNITWIN UNESCO.

Regarding the methodology developed for and during the process, three fundamental aspects stand out: the adoption of dialogue sessions, in which knowledge is shared by all participants and do not emanate exclusively from the professors; the use of art in a transversal way; and the acknowledgement of non-academic knowledge, such as ancestral, original and community knowledge.

It is expected that the maturation of studies around the Psy-SDGs and the Dialogues between Social Psychology and the Sustainable Development Goals will lead to the constitution of a methodology that can be replicated and scaled up.

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