

By
Gunnar Köhlin, Marie Stenseke and Jenni Strömstad

The SDG 8 Dilemma: How the School of Business, Economics and Law at University of Gothenburg is taking action on this front



The 17 global goals for sustainable development in the 2030 Agenda, commonly known as the SDGs, speak to different areas, but it is emphasised that they are integrated and indivisible. As such, SDG 8, *Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all*, concerns a core controversy of sustainable development – the link between environment and economy. SDG 8 builds on the recognition that the existing economic system is not sustainable, and that modifications or alternatives have to be explored. At the same time, SDG 8 contains an implicit presumption that it is possible to decouple economic growth from environmental degradation and growing inequalities. Despite actions being taken, this has not yet been accomplished. Critics have questioned the inclusion of economic growth in the 2030 Agenda and the presumption of decoupling as possible, arguing that more fundamental changes are necessary. The evidence that alternative models for the economy have been effective are, however, thus far inconclusive. The critical situation for the planet and the global human community, hence, begs for increased and intensified production of applicable knowledge on how the economic and financial systems need to adjust and change in order to contribute to fostering sustainable development.

The International Association of Universities (IAU) advocates for the idea that higher education can play a key role for sustainable development. Through the strategic thematic priority Higher Education and Research for Sustainable Development (HESD), IAU promotes a Whole Institution Approach to SD. The IAU Global HESD Cluster is a unique network of universities engaged with the SDGs, and The School of Business, Economics and Law (SBEL) has a key role in the University of Gothenburg's assignment as leader of SDG 8. Importantly, the work on SDG 8 involves eight universities in the Global South, facilitated by the research network Environment for Development and its global hub, located at SBEL. The ambition is to engage and support a global community of researchers and to mobilise academic work and policy interaction in support of sustainable economic growth with good conditions for an increasing number of workers. In practice, it means transdisciplinary, applied research and policy interaction that focus on solutions to growth- and work-related challenges.



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SDG 8 comprises a wide range of topics, such as per capita GDP growth, new policies for economic development and the labour market, improved resource efficiency, innovation, health and safety in the workplace, youth employment, child labour, and sustainable tourism. At present, a number of SBEL scholars, along with researchers from other faculties and institutions, nationally and internationally, are engaged in compiling and writing literature reviews on specific themes connected to the targets of SDG 8. Drafts have been presented and discussed at workshops and conferences. In these papers, targets and their indicators are critically scrutinised to reveal inherent biases, contradictions, and links to other SDGs. Most importantly, the researchers are identifying the most salient research themes for successful implementation of each SDG 8 target. These papers will be the basis for dialogues between researchers and policy makers in each of the participating countries. The ambition is that these dialogues, and in particular the critical review of the related indicators, will be reflected in the Voluntary National Reviews that all countries present at the UN High Level Political Forum, and ultimately in the countries' implementation of SDG 8.

It is also expected that new and policy-relevant research will result from a co-creative process, with academia taking the politically-agreed SDGs seriously and devoting time and effort to discussing their implementation with policy makers, thereby advancing knowledge by identifying key areas for further research. To reinforce youth and future leaders, the integration of research-based knowledge on sustainable development in HE is crucial and is therefore naturally a focus area to be further explored in the SDG 8 Initiative in the years to come.



This engagement with SDG 8 started in 2019 and has in many respects been successful. There are, however, also challenges and obstacles that merit reflections, e.g., related to:

- (i) administrative structures, such as how to initiate, finance, and implement a broad collaborative and interdisciplinary initiative in a traditional academic organisational structure;
- (ii) identifying and channelling interest and capabilities among staff when it comes to interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary cooperation, particularly given that collaboration and utilisation are weakly promoted in the prevailing merit system;
- (iii) international North-South collaboration, which requires relevance and mutual interest, as well as creativity, persistence, and financial resources to overcome physical hurdles;





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(iv) contextual differences between regions and countries, that affect the interlinkages between different goals and their targets. An obvious example is the discussion around economic growth, where a clear distinction must be made between the Western hemisphere vs. the Global South. In LDCs, economic growth is a necessity to alleviate poverty and hunger, whereas in high-income countries, it is rather a matter of responsible consumption and production, and systemic transformations for a sustainable future.

However, the challenges so far have been more than balanced by a heightened sense of purpose and the excitement of new constellations among the participating researchers. Through the work of the SDG 8 Initiative, a multidisciplinary, international community of researchers is under development. The literature reviews thus far show interesting results and tangible measures that have potential value at policy level, demonstrating the vast amount of knowledge available. This points to the importance of

transdisciplinary collaboration in academia, in order to contribute to the realisation of the 2030 Agenda. It also suggests that there is much that researchers can do to be part of the transition to a more sustainable world by 'rolling up their sleeves', compiling knowledge already at hand, scrutinising it the way academics should, and presenting it in a way that is apprehensible to policymakers and practitioners.

The year ahead includes a second international research conference on SDG 8 at SBEL in Gothenburg, as well as research-to-policy workshops, likely to take place in Africa in the autumn.

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i About the authors

Gunnar Köhlin is Director of Environment for Development, and Associate Professor at the Environmental Economics Unit, Department of Economics, University of Gothenburg

Marie Stenseke is Professor of Human Geography and Deputy Dean at the School of Business, Economics and Law, University of Gothenburg

Jenni Strömstad is Project Manager at the Gothenburg Centre for Sustainable Development, GMV