POLICY PAPER

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS (SDG)

Implementation in Higher Education in the MENA Region

CSC
Center for Sustainability and Climate

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

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Dr Fletcher has published over 60 peer-reviewed articles, book chapters, and major international reports, and is a contributing author to the 2019 IPCC Special Report on Climate Change and Land. She has served as a consultant to the United Nations World Water Assessment Programme, as an official delegate to the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women and is former President of the Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women. Fletcher holds two medals from the Governor General of Canada for her research and advocacy on gender equality in Canada.

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Ms Allison Cheung is Senior Research Executive (Consultancy) at Times Higher Education, where she looks after a wide range of data analyses, including Impact Rankings-based studies. She provides data-driven advice to universities, governments and corporates worldwide to support their strategic growth in higher education. Ms Cheung has researched in the UK (including both Oxford and Cambridge universities), the USA and Asia. She holds a master's in education from the University of Cambridge and is an award-winning researcher whose education-related paper topped the Global Undergraduate Awards, the world's largest academic award programme, founded in Dublin, Ireland.

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Professor Michael Phillips is the UNESCO Chair on TVET and Sustainable Development and QAPCO Professional Chair in Vocational Studies. He has a degree in Civil Engineering, a Master's in Environmental Management and PhD in Coastal Morpho-dynamics. He has served as an Adjunct Professor in Canada, Iceland and Malaysia and his TEDx talk entitled: 'Living on the coast, climate change and acceptable risk' in response to economic and business loss from climate change impacts, focused on improving resilience.

Professor Phillips has published >120 academic articles, including being editor of two open access conference books related to sustainability, and he has supervised >30 successful research degree students. He has also been involved in interdisciplinary research and through a design education lens has helped develop strategies to deliver effective entrepreneurial education.

He has long been involved in STEM and TVET education and has always emphasised its importance for the economy and employability. As part of the organising committee for the international symposium on STEM and TVET for a sustainable and resilient society, he contributed to the final outcome, the Doha Declaration on Education and Skills for Future Jobs.

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In Finland, he worked as a Principal at the University of Tampere (TAMK) where he was involved, among other things, in quality assurance, digital transformation, Research and Innovation, and Internationalisation of HEIs in the Euro-Med Region. He was elected Member of the Management Board and Senate of the Euro-Mediterranean University in Slovenia. Anasse has also been a visiting Professor for several years at the Bordeaux School of Management and Le Havre University in France. He is a holder of a PhD. in Technical Sciences.

Dr Peter J. Wells
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Dr Peter Wells took up his new post as Head of Education for Southern Africa at the UNESCO Regional Office in Harare in October 2022 where he oversees the Prioirity Africa education work in Education for Sustainable Development, teacher education, TVET and higher education across nine countries.

Prior to this, Dr Wells was Chief of Global Higher Education at UNESCO Headquarters in Paris. In this role, he led UNESCO's priority areas of work on quality higher education with an emphasis on widening access, quality enhancement and academic mobility, the latter reinforced by the Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education adopted in 2019. In this capacity, Peter also drafted the text of the Addis Convention for Africa and was present at its adoption in 2014. He also worked with regional colleagues to draft and adopt the Buenos Aires Convention for Latin America and the Caribbean and the revised Convention for the Arab States – each of which has quality assurance and university cooperation in teaching and research as a foundation. Peter is author of policy papers, articles, and monographs on the topic of higher education reforms, quality assurance, internationalisation, digitalisation, and equity and inclusion in national HE systems.

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Dr Ishan Cader is senior director of consultancy at Times Higher Education, having previously held the position of director of consultancy. He has had extensive experience in the higher education sector in roles with academic, regulatory, commercial and strategic responsibilities.

He currently works with universities, governments and businesses around the world providing research, insight and advice on higher education strategy, internationalisation, reputation and performance. He has led the development of the transnational education (TNE) consultancy service, which offers market intelligence, data-driven programme analysis and TNE partnership development opportunities for universities around the world, focused on enabling sustainability in international collaboration.

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FOREWORD

T his policy paper examines the implementation of the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) within higher education institutions in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. The MENA region includes 19 countries, which include Algeria, Bahrain, Djibouti, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates, and Yemen. Globally, among the 135 targets that can be evaluated, only 17 per cent show adequate progress to meet the goals set by the UN for 2030.[1] The findings reveal significant insights into the progress and challenges faced in the MENA region.

The analysis calls for a more robust monitoring and evaluation system to track the progress of SDG initiatives in higher education. Establishing clear metrics and benchmarks will enable institutions to assess their contributions to the global goals more effectively. By fostering a culture of accountability and continuous improvement, higher education in the MENA region can play a pivotal role in advancing sustainable development and addressing pressing societal challenges.
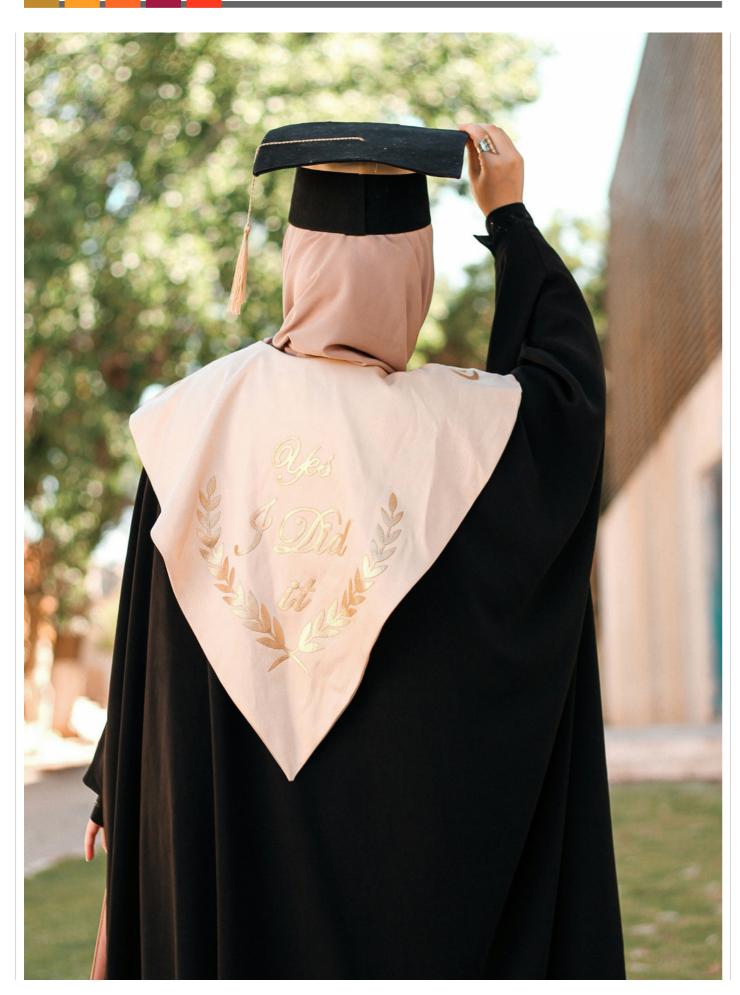
Furthermore, the study underscores the importance of collaboration among stakeholders, including government bodies, educational institutions, and the private sector, to foster a more cohesive approach to SDG implementation. Engaging in partnerships can enhance resource sharing and knowledge exchange, ultimately leading to more effective educational practices that support sustainable development. The role of faculty and student involvement is also critical, as their active participation can drive innovation and create a culture of sustainability across campuses.

[1]United Nations. (2024). The sustainable development goals report 2024.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

T his paper highlights the various strategies adopted by MENA universities to align their curricula and research initiatives with the global sustainability agenda. By assessing the current state of Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) integration, it becomes evident that while some institutions have made commendable strides, others still grapple with the complexities of fully embedding these goals into their educational frameworks. It also addresses the disparities in implementation across different countries and institutions, emphasising the need for collaborative efforts and policy frameworks to enhance the effectiveness of these initiatives in promoting sustainable development in the region.

The study has proposed five areas of policy recommendations for policymakers and higher education institutions (HEIs):

Policy Integration and Governance: Governments should create policies that embed sustainability and the SDGs into HEIs. This includes incorporating sustainability into curricula, aligning educational goals with SDG targets, and requiring HEIs to report on progress. Ministries of Education are encouraged to collaborate with HEIs on SDG implementation plans and recognise international degrees. Funding mechanisms should support sustainability initiatives, including research and community engagement.

Data and Monitoring: Reliable and standardised data is essential for tracking SDG progress in higher education. Governments should strengthen monitoring systems that capture HEIs' sustainability contributions and promote transparency through voluntary reporting. Support from international organisations such as UNESCO can enhance data collection, sharing, and management practices. Improved data infrastructure will support evidence-based decision-making.

Faculty Development and Curriculum Innovation: Professional development for educators is key to integrating the SDGs into teaching and research. Policymakers should fund training focused on sustainability and interdisciplinary methods. HEIs should offer experiential learning opportunities and support faculty through grants for course development and SDG-focused research. These measures will help institutionalise sustainability within academic culture.

Partnerships and Collaboration: Collaboration between HEIs, governments, businesses, and NGOs are essential for advancing the SDGs. Policymakers should encourage partnerships that promote knowledge exchange and align education with labour market needs. Establishing advisory councils and fostering public-private partnerships can mobilise resources. Opportunities such as internships in sustainability sectors should also be expanded.

Equity and Inclusion: Ensuring equity in higher education is crucial for achieving SDG 4 (Quality Education). Policymakers should develop initiatives that increase access for marginalised groups, including expanded scholarships and inclusive teaching practices. HEIs should prioritise diversity and address barriers to participation. A strong focus on equity ensures that sustainable development benefits all communities.

1. INTRODUCTION

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, embraced by all United Nations Member States in 2015, serves as a collective framework aimed at fostering peace and prosperity for both humanity and the planet, extending into the future. Central to this agenda are the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs),[2] which represent an urgent call to action for all nations, regardless of their development status, to engage in a global partnership. These goals emphasise that the eradication of poverty and other forms of deprivation must be pursued (Filho, Salvia, & Eustachio, 2023; International Association of Universities, 2023; Nurunnabi et al., 2023; Filho et al., 2024; Bui, Bui, & Pham, 2024).

The SDGs provide a comprehensive framework to address global challenges: "The SDGs are a call for action by all countries – poor, rich, and middle-income – to promote prosperity while protecting the planet. They recognize that ending poverty must go hand-in-hand with strategies that build economic growth and address a range of social needs, including education, health, social protection, and job opportunities, while tackling climate change and environmental protection." (United Nations)[3] By integrating the SDGs into education and policies, societies can work towards long-term sustainability, ensuring that needs are met for present and future generations.

This paper focuses on the implementation of SDGs within

the context of higher education in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. It focuses on the MENA region due to the scarcity of research and policy analysis regarding the implementation of SDGs in higher education in this area. The countries in the region share a common language and cultural background, with Arabic being the predominant language spoken across the Middle East.

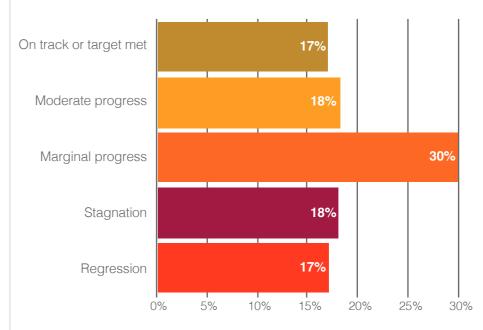This paper aims to achieve three primary research objectives.

• **First,** it seeks to assess the implementation of the SDGs within higher education across the MENA region, examining both the current and historical contexts across years.

• **Second,** it intends to highlight successful implementations from various MENA countries and their universities that have positively influenced local communities.

• **Lastly,** this paper will offer policy recommendations aimed at guiding future efforts in the MENA region and beyond, to fulfil the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

According to the SDGs progress assessment 2024,[4] the world is falling short of realising the 2030 Agenda. 34 targets were excluded due to insufficient trend data. As shown in Figure 1, among the 135 assessable targets, only 17 per cent of the SDG targets display progress sufficient for achievement by 2030. Meanwhile, only 18 per cent exhibit moderate progress, with 30 per cent showing

marginal progress to significant changes from the planned direction. Surprisingly, the assessment also reports that 18 per cent indicate stagnation and 17 per cent regression below the baseline levels. A key challenge highlighted was a lack of data as the progress assessment of the SDGs continues to face ongoing challenges concerning the availability and timeliness of the data required for monitoring all 17 goals. This assessment underscores the urgent need for intensified efforts to put the SDGs back on track.

Figure 1. Overall SDG progress across targets based on 2015 – 2024 global aggregate data

On track or target met	17%
Moderate progress	18%
Marginal progress	30%
Stagnation	18%
Regression	17%

Source: United Nations (2024) - The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2024

The MENA region is particularly interesting when considering future SDG implementation. It presents significant opportunities with relatively young populations, a growing HE sector, and investments in renewable energies, green infrastructure, and sustainable urban development.[5] The region plays a growing role in international diplomacy and sustainability efforts to transition towards a more sustainable future.[6]

This section has outlined the objectives of this paper. Section 2 presents a summary of the literature review. Section 3 offers a country-by-country analysis of the implementation of SDGs within higher education in the MENA region. Finally, the concluding sections propose policy recommendations and provide a summary of the paper.

[2]United Nations. (n.d.). Transforming our world: The 2030 agenda for sustainable development.

[3]United Nations. (n.d.). Sustainable development.

[4]United Nations. (2024). The sustainable development goals report 2024: The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2024 is the only UN official report that monitors global progress on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Using the latest available data and estimates, the report provides a comprehensive assessment of the 2030 Agenda.

[5]World Economic Forum. (2024, September). How to close sustainable development gaps across the Middle East and North Africa.

[6]World Economic Forum. (2024, November). New research charts path for MENA to meet mounting global sustainability demands.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN, 2024) outlined eight essential roles for universities in advancing sustainable development:

1. Higher education is key for young people's economic success.
2. Universities combine knowledge from various fields to solve sustainable development challenges.
3. Universities conduct research that considers local conditions for achieving sustainable goals.
4. Universities connect governments, businesses, and society for collective sustainable development efforts.
5. Universities serve as incubators for new businesses and innovations, particularly in the private sector.
6. Universities foster global collaborations and support resource-scarce institutions.
7. Universities link national economies with global academia and culture.
8. Lastly, universities promote access to advanced knowledge and technology worldwide.

The eight roles outlined emphasise the critical role of universities in advancing sustainable development. The ability of universities to tailor knowledge to local contexts and foster partnerships is essential for achieving SDGs in the MENA region, making them key players in sustainable development efforts. For instance, education and social equity, central to SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), which are identified as core SDGs in the region in this paper, are fundamental in conflict-affected countries such as Jordan and Lebanon, where universities play a key role in fostering social cohesion and resilience, promoting solutions to these global challenges.

Among the various roles universities play in sustainable development, their contribution to SDG 4, which focuses on quality education, serves as a fundamental driver for the advancement of numerous other SDGs. Goal 4 emphasises the importance of acquiring both foundational and advanced skills, ensuring equitable access to technical and vocational education, as well as higher education. It advocates for lifelong learning and the development of the knowledge, skills, and values necessary for individuals to thrive and contribute positively to society. Education serves as a vital pathway for socioeconomic advancement and is essential for breaking the cycle of poverty. The key indicators and targets of SDG 4 can be found on the Global Goals website.[7] In the MENA region, SDG 4 is often prioritised as mentioned, reflecting a strong regional emphasis on inclusive development (see Section 3 for details). Countries such as Jordan, Lebanon and Palestine stand out for their progress on SDG 4. In these Levantine and crisis-affected areas, education is seen as more than a means of development and is a cornerstone of social stability, national identity, and recovery from conflict. This highlights the powerful role of education in fostering resilience and unity within vulnerable communities in the region.

Despite the recognised importance of SDG 4 in advancing sustainable development, challenges remain in translating educational goals into effective implementation.

According to the Sustainable Development Goals Report 2024,[8] while 90 per cent of countries indicate that they incorporate sustainable development and global citizenship subjects into their national educational frameworks, actual implementation appears to be limited. Partnerships are needed to effectively implement SDGs in higher education. United Nations (2023) argued that the example of the Greening Education Partnership which aims to help countries prepare learners with the knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes needed to address climate change and promote sustainable development. The expected outcomes include: 1) gaining political commitment and resources for making every learner climate-ready; 2) creating a community of practice for greening education to enable mutual learning and collaboration; and 3) ensuring that learning, schools, capacity building, and communities are sustainability-centred by 2030. Achievements will occur through strategic implementation, knowledge management, advocacy, and monitoring progress as part of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD). This Partnership is led by UNESCO and is open to countries and partners.

In response to these implementation challenges, universities around the world also have begun developing structured approaches and institutional models to embed sustainability more deeply into higher education systems. According to Hellmann and Ponce-Taylor (2024), European universities offer valuable SDG implementation models for

> **According to the Sustainable Development Goals Report 2024, while 90 per cent of countries indicate that they incorporate sustainable development and global citizenship subjects into their national educational frameworks, actual implementation appears to be limited.**

international educators, focusing on policy frameworks and the European Green Deal, which targets climate neutrality by 2050 through sustainable investments and transformative changes. These institutions excel in operationalising, measuring, and evaluating SDGs. In the US, universities such as Carnegie Mellon track courses, publications, and activities that align with the SDGs, while Georgia Institute of Technology's 2020 strategic plan highlights its commitment to all 17 SDGs. These models showcase the effectiveness of public-private partnerships, strategic planning, and activity mapping (Hellmann and Ponce-Taylor, 2024). Evidence from these two specific regions also suggests that tracking and monitoring the alignment of academic activities with the SDGs can promote progress. Integrating sustainability into institutional strategic plans can also contribute to SDG

advancement. In Asia, Bui, Bui, and Pham (2024) explore how Vietnamese HEIs integrate sustainability into business and management curricula, noting that only 9 of 237 institutions were recognised for their contributions to sustainable development in 2023. Emphasising awareness and communication remains vital for addressing deficiencies in these areas.

Building on the successful international models, it is essential to consider how similar strategies can be adapted and applied within the diverse contexts of the MENA region. When making recommendations for MENA policymakers and HEIs, it is important to recognise that there are differences in terms of SDG implementation. Wealthier nations are generally faring better than those facing conflict or economic difficulties. For example, Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries are more advanced in certain areas compared with others in the region.[9] There has also been progress in many MENA countries which has not been reported in annual returns due to the data gap discussed above. However, since the introduction of UNESCO's Strategy for Priority Africa 2022-2029,[10] there has been growing interest in regional cooperation to address shared sustainability challenges, such as water scarcity, climate change, and economic diversification. This increasingly active regional role in advancing sustainable development sets the stage for a deeper exploration of SDG implementation, evaluating contributions and outcomes in the data analysis section that follows.

[7]Global Goals (n.d.), Goal 4: Quality education. https://www.globalgoals.org/goals/4-quality-education/

[8]United Nations. (2024). The sustainable development goals report 2024.
[9]SDG Transformation Center. (2023). Arab region SDG index and dashboards report 2023.
[10]African Union Commission & UNESCO. (2024, September). *International Forum of UNESCO Chairs and Partners convened by the African Union Commission and UNESCO: Compilation of concept notes.*

3. TIMES HIGHER EDUCATION IMPACT RANKINGS DATA ANALYSIS

3.1. Analysis Methodology and Overview

To gain a deeper understanding of the research landscape, it is essential to analyse the progression of the SDGs at the individual country level within the MENA region. Mirroring the Times Higher Education (THE) Impact Rankings methodology[11] for measuring university progress in the SDGs, the data analysis below follows the same approach by considering the country-level SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals) score, and their best three results across the remaining 16 SDGs (see Figure 2 for details). The THE Impact Rankings methodology is as follows: Universities that participate in the Impact Rankings can submit data for as many SDGs as they wish. To be ranked, they must submit data for SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals) and three other SDGs as a minimum. Submission for SDG 17 is compulsory, as it reflects the core mission of universities together to support global sustainability and the SDGs. As such, any data presented in the following analysis for SDG 17 represents the totality of institutions that participated in the Impact Rankings.

Figure 2. THE Impact Rankings Methodology

- SDG 17: 22%
- Top three SDGs: each 26%

= 100%

Source: THE Impact Rankings 2024 Methodology

It should be noted that countries with fewer than three universities participating in the Impact Rankings 2024 across the SDG 17 and their top three SDGs have been excluded from the country-level analysis due to low participation rates. While the performance of these countries is commendable, the limited number of participating universities renders comparisons and trends with other countries statistically unreliable.

[11] Times Higher Education. (2024). Impact rankings methodology 2024.

The following analysis will first provide an overview of participation rates of MENA universities in the Impact Rankings 2024. It will then move on to provide the detailed country-by-country analysis across the three-year period from 2022 to 2024.

3.2. Summary of Regional Trends

Table 1. Participation rate of ranked MENA universities in SDG data submissions 2024

	SDG 1	SDG 2	SDG 3	SDG 4	SDG 5	SDG 6	SDG 7	SDG 8	SDG 9	SDG 10	SDG 11	SDG 12	SDG 13	SDG 14	SDG 15	SDG 16	SDG 17
Iraq	52	31	59	62	52	24	32	28	27	33	31	20	23	16	19	32	71
Algeria	37	22	28	52	36	16	18	26	15	23	17	9	13	9	18	25	54
Egypt	33	22	43	38	35	34	33	28	23	30	27	25	30	17	16	23	46
Saudi Arabia	12	6	26	27	20	9	12	17	11	14	11	8	8	9	8	13	32
Iran	20	20	22	26	23	21	22	16	20	18	17	15	17	14	16	16	29
Jordan	8	1	15	18	4	9	8	3	3	3	1	2	6	0	1	5	18
Morocco	7	6	8	10	9	7	9	7	6	5	6	6	7	3	5	6	12
UAE	6	6	10	10	10	7	8	9	6	9	5	6	9	5	5	6	12
Lebanon	7	4	9	8	7	6	5	4	5	6	7	4	4	4	4	7	9
Palestine	4	3	6	7	3	5	4	5	4	4	3	3	5	1	2	3	7
Tunisia	4	3	5	5	6	3	2	4	3	5	3	3	4	2	4	5	6
Kuwait	3	3	3	4	4	3	3	4	3	4	3	3	3	3	3	3	4
Oman	1	0	2	4	3	1	0	1	1	2	0	0	0	0	0	2	4
Syria	1	1	4	1	4	2	3	3	1	3	1	1	3	2	2	1	4
Bahrain	2	2	3	3	3	2	2	3	0	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	3
Libya	0	0	2	2	2	0	0	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	2
Qatar	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Yemen	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Djibouti	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Regional total	199 (63%)	132 (42%)	247 (78%)	279 (89%)	223 (71%)	151 (48%)	163 (52%)	161 (51%)	131 (42%)	164 (52%)	137 (43%)	109 (35%)	136 (43%)	89 (28%)	107 (34%)	151 (48%)	315

Source: Times Higher Education Impact Rankings 2024.

Notes: This table shows the number of universities that submitted SDG data and were ranked in the Impact Rankings 2024, with the proportion of the regional total calculated (%) for each SDG; Heatmap shading is applied within each column across countries, as well as within the row of totals per SDG, with green being highest, red being lowest

As Table 1 shows, the overall participation data highlights that countries with well-established higher education systems such as Egypt, Algeria and Iraq show strong engagement in the compulsory SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals). Of the three countries, Iraq has the greatest number of universities engaged in SDG 17 related activities (71), followed by Algeria (54) and Egypt (46). Similarly, Saudi Arabia (32) and Iran (29) also have high participation, reflecting expanding interest in sustainability reporting. This phenomenon could be explained by differences in national policy priorities and the capacity of higher education systems. Apart from SDG 17, SDG 4 (Quality Education) attracts the highest number of submissions from universities in the MENA region, demonstrating that institutional priorities lie in education, while environmental SDGs such as SDG 14 (Life Below Water) see lesser engagement, particularly

when the MENA region has vast desert areas across most countries. Gulf nations, for example, Kuwait, Oman, Bahrain and Qatar, show a smaller number of ranked universities compared to North Africa countries such as Egypt, Algeria.

On the other hand, Djibouti has no universities submitting SDG data and being ranked, indicating limited institutional capacity or engagement in sustainability efforts. They may require more investment in higher education and sustainability initiatives to strengthen their SDG data submission. As touched upon on the differences, variations in participation across SDGs highlight differing national priorities and challenges in sustainable development efforts.

Divergence in SDG Implementation Across MENA: Progress Amidst Challenges

Overall, the implementation of the SDGs across the MENA region reflects a landscape of different and uneven progress, shaped by differing national priorities, institutional capacities, and geographical contexts. While several countries have made commendable strides, particularly in education and social equity, others continue to face challenges in areas such as partnerships. This divergence highlights both the potential and the limitations of the region in translating SDG frameworks into outcomes.

Education and Social Equity as Core Priorities in MENA

SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) remain central to many national agendas in the MENA region, standing out as the

top-performing SDGs across countries (see Section 3.3 for details). SDG 4 consistently emerges as one of the top three SDGs in countries such as the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Algeria, Lebanon, Iraq, Jordan, Morocco, and Tunisia. Despite variations in the number of universities submitting data, these countries show relatively stronger average scores in SDG 4 compared to their performance in other goals. This highlights a regional prioritisation of education, with institutional efforts more effectively translating into measurable outcomes.

In the meantime, in conflict affected and refugee hosting countries such as Jordan and Lebanon, they have demonstrated a strong commitment to inclusive education policies with SDG 10 being a top-performing SDG, responding to demographic and humanitarian pressures. This strong performance on SDG 10 reflects efforts to address structural inequalities and promote social justice, despite resource constraints and ongoing challenges in infrastructure and capacity. In these contexts, education is seen not only as a developmental instrument but also as a pillar of social cohesion and resilience. However, the sustainability of these efforts depends on continued international support and systemic investment in higher education and public services.

Disproportion Between Partnerships and Impact in MENA

While SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals) is a key indicator of global engagement, an increase in cross-border partnerships does not necessarily translate into substantive impact. For one, the implementation of SDG 17 varies significantly across the region. Countries such as Iraq and Algeria have expanded reporting significantly, yet their SDG 17 scores remain low or stagnant, highlighting

that broader engagement alone is insufficient. This suggests that while more universities are contributing data to SDG rankings, it is the quality, not quantity of such data that determines progress in the SDGs and ensures that participating institutions are substantively impacting sustainable development.

Countries with consistently higher SDG 17 scores, such as Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the UAE, demonstrate that quality collaborations matter more than quantity. These nations show more stable international engagement, though fluctuations in scores indicate challenges in maintaining partnership quality over time. Meanwhile, countries such as Jordan, Tunisia, and Morocco show gradual improvements in both participation and performance, pointing to emerging potential in building effective partnerships. Ultimately, progress in SDG 17 hinges more on the strength and consistency of partnerships than on the number of participating institutions, underscoring the need for quality-driven collaboration to advance sustainable development.

Countries experiencing institutional fragility or protracted conflict such as Yemen, Libya and Djibouti, continue to face major obstacles in meeting their SDG commitments. According to United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA, 2022), it was identified that Yemen, Libya, and Djibouti among the countries were with the highest humanitarian needs, highlighting the challenges these nations face in achieving SDGs due to ongoing crises and limited resources. The following subsection will examine the details of SDG implementation at the country level.
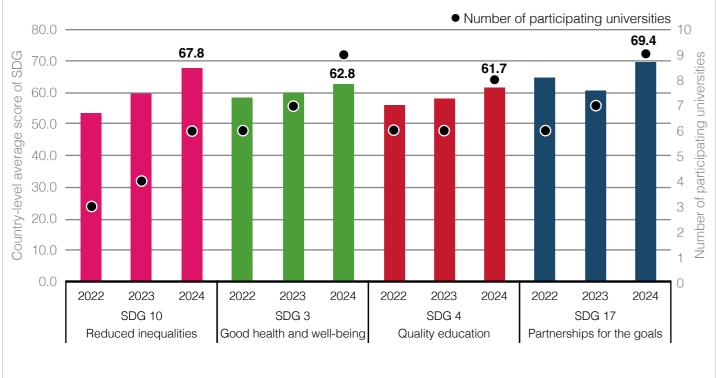
3.3. Country-by-Country Detailed Analysis

LEBANON

As shown in Figure 3, from 2022 to 2024, Lebanon displayed a steady upward trend in the performance of SDGs, which includes the areas of reducing inequalities, health, education, and partnerships. The increasing number of participating universities which have submitted data to these specific SDGs in 2024 further suggests a growing commitment to sustainability. The most notable progress is in SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), with the country-level average score of SDG 10 improving significantly from 53.5 (2022) to 67.8 (2024), suggesting a strong focus on social justice and inclusivity. SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-Being) and SDG 4 (Quality Education) are steadily improving as well.

Lebanon performed the strongest in SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals), marking the highest recorded score among Lebanon's SDGs with submitted data. This score alludes to an increasing emphasis on international collaboration within the nation. The consistent improvement across all top SDGs indicates Lebanon's universities are strengthening their impact on sustainable development. This also demonstrates how universities are increasingly embodying the roles outlined by SDSN (see details in Section 2). This exemplifies how a university promotes social equity and strengthens international collaboration while advancing education quality.

Figure 3. Lebanon - Top three SDGs and SDG 17 progress from 2022 to 2024
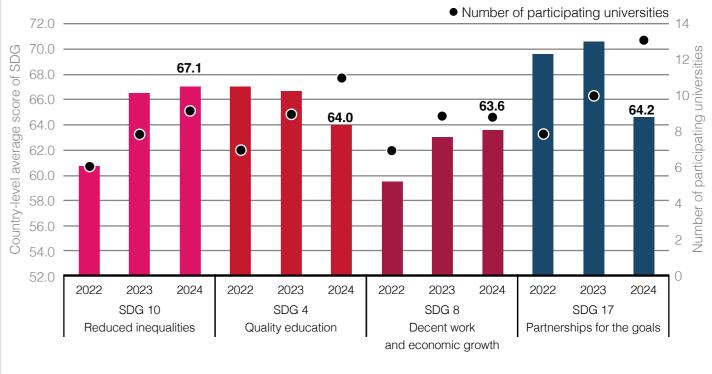
UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

From 2022 to 2024, the UAE showed a mix of steady improvements and slight declines across SDG performance. While progress is evident in areas such as reducing inequalities and economic growth, there are small setbacks in quality education and partnerships. Steady progress in SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) and SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) highlights the UAE's focus on social inclusion and economic resilience. A decline in SDG 4 (Quality Education), with a score decreasing from 67.0 (2022) to 64.0 (2024), suggests potential challenges in maintaining high education standards as more universities participate in the Rankings.

The drop in SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals) from a peak of 70.6 in 2023 to 64.2 in 2024 raises concerns about the consistency of global collaborations despite more universities submitting SDG data. Overall, the evolving SDG performance of the UAE, marked by gains in social and economic resilience but setbacks in education and partnerships, reflects the complex challenge of sustaining the full spectrum of the university roles, particularly in maintaining SDG 4 (Quality Education) and consistent SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals) amidst rapid institutional expansion.

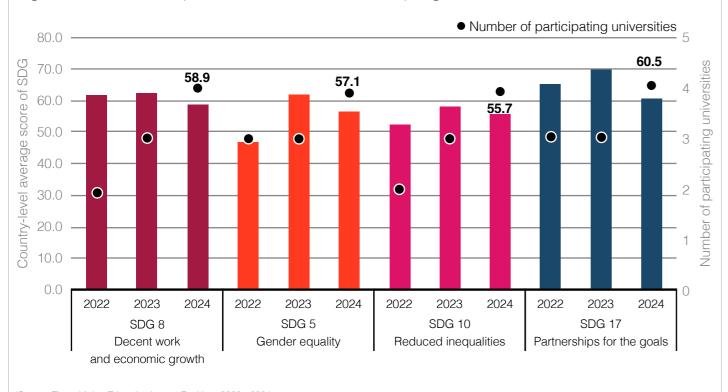Figure 4. UAE - Top three SDGs and SDG 17 progress from 2022 to 2024

KUWAIT

K uwait progressed in key SDGs from 2022 to 2024, albeit with a slight drop in 2024. While improvements have been seen in previous years, recent declines in most areas suggest potential challenges in sustaining long-term progress. Initial improvements in SDG 5 (Gender Equality) and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) in 2023 were not sustained in 2024, suggesting the need for continued focus on social equity policies. SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) and SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals) declined in 2024, indicating economic and collaborative challenges. The highest performing SDG for Kuwait is SDG 17, with an increase in score from 65.9 (2022) to 70.6 (2023), but a drop to 60.5 in 2024.

Across the key SDGs, the increase in participating universities suggests a growing commitment to sustainability, but it may also have contributed to fluctuating scores as new institutions adjust to ranking criteria. Overall, Kuwait has shown commitment to sustainability but recent declines across all SDGs highlight areas that need reinforcement. The fluctuating SDG trends in Kuwait reflect the broader global challenge noted in Section 2: while sustainability goals are increasingly embedded in educational frameworks, translating them into consistent, impactful action remains a critical hurdle.

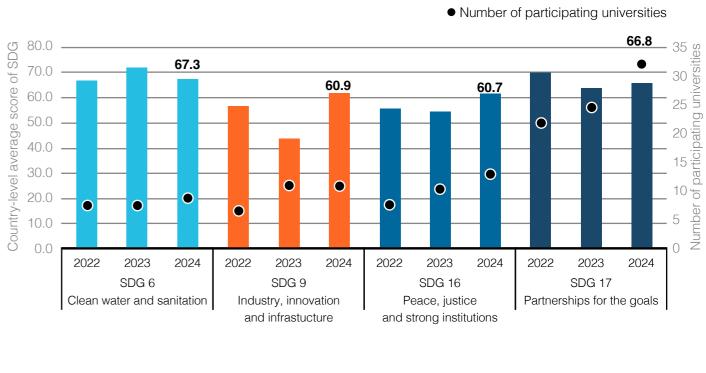## Figure 5. Kuwait - Top three SDGs and SDG 17 progress from 2022 to 2024

*Source: Times Higher Education Impact Rankings 2022 - 2024

SAUDI ARABIA

S audi Arabia reveals fluctuations across different SDGs between 2022 and 2024, with some areas showing steady progress while others experience inconsistencies. The number of universities that submitted SDG data has increased across all SDGs, reflecting growing engagement in sustainability efforts.

SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure) and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions) showed notable recovery in 2024, reflecting renewed efforts in these two areas. SDG 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation) peaked in 2023 (71.4) but fell back to 2022 levels in 2024 (67.3), indicating ongoing challenges in maintaining long-term progress.

SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals) remains strong, with Saudi Arabia actively expanding its global collaborations, though consistency in maintaining high scores is needed. The growing number of participating universities (22 in 2022, 32 in 2024 for SDG 17) signals a positive trend in national engagement with sustainability and development goals. The fluctuating yet increasingly engaged SDG performance of Saudi Arabia illustrates the importance of adopting structured institutional models similar to those seen in Europe and the US (see Section 2), to effectively align university efforts with sustainable development goals through strategic planning and monitoring.

Figure 6. Saudi Arabia - Top three SDGs and SDG 17 progress from 2022 to 2024

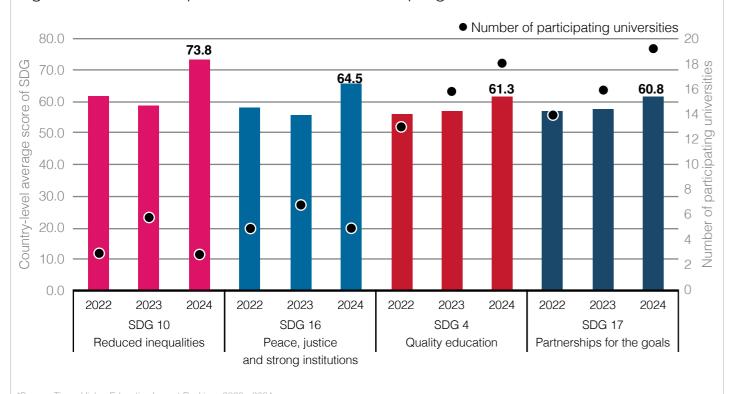
*Source: Times Higher Education Impact Rankings 2022 - 2024

JORDAN

Jordan demonstrates steady improvements across top SDGs from 2022 to 2024, with significant progress in SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions), and SDG 4 (Quality Education). Jordan has made remarkable progress in social equity (SDG 10) with a surge in SDG 10 scores from 61.9 in 2022 to 73.8 in 2024. Similarly, Jordan has improved in governance with its SDG 16 score recovering to 64.5 in 2024 after dropping to 55.8 in 2023, showing its dedication to inclusivity and institutional development. SDG 4 (Quality Education) continues to improve, reflecting increased academic quality.

The consistent rise in universities submitting SDG data (SDG 17) in the Rankings is a positive indicator of increasing national engagement with SDGs. Overall, the sharp rise in SDG 10 suggests remarkable progress in social inclusion, while increased university participation in SDG 4 and SDG 17 underscores broader engagement with academic quality and partnerships. The consistent progress of Jordan in SDG 4 (Quality Education), coupled with its improvements in SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), reinforces the argument listed in literature that quality education is a key enabler of social equity and other sustainable development outcomes.

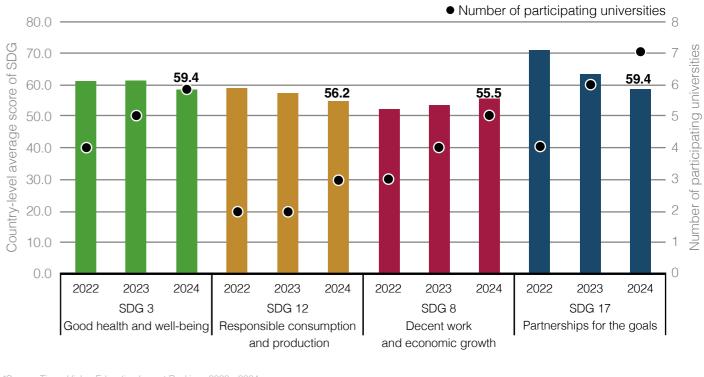Figure 7. Jordan - Top three SDGs and SDG 17 progress from 2022 to 2024

*Source: Times Higher Education Impact Rankings 2022 - 2024

PALESTINE

Palestine presents mixed trends between 2022 and 2024, with some SDGs experiencing slight improvements while others show a steady decline. Declines in SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-Being), SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production), and SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals) suggest difficulties in maintaining healthcare quality, environmental responsibility, and global collaborations. SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) is the only key SDG showing consistent improvement from 52.9 (2022) to 55.5 (2024), highlighting efforts in labour market and economic development.

The increase in universities submitting SDG data (from 4 to 7 for SDG 17) indicates a positive trend in higher education engagement with sustainability in Palestine, but it may also be affecting overall average scores as newer institutions contribute varying performance levels. While Palestine has made progress in economic growth, the decline in health services, environmental efforts, and global partnerships presents challenges. The increasing number of universities participating in the Rankings is a positive sign, but ensuring consistency in sustainability efforts across institutions remains essential. The mixed SDG performance of Palestine reflects the broader challenge of maintaining sustainable development progress in conflict-affected regions as introduced in Section 2, where institutional capacity and global collaborations are often disrupted.

Figure 8. Palestine - Top three SDGs and SDG 17 progress from 2022 to 2024

*Source: Times Higher Education Impact Rankings 2022 - 2024

EGYPT

E gypt reflects notable progress in sustainable energy, responsible consumption, and global partnerships between 2022 and 2024, while health-related performance remains relatively stable with some fluctuations.
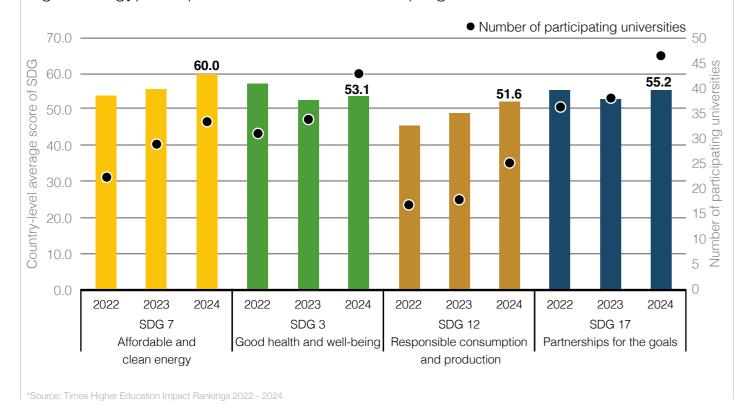
Strong progress in SDG 7 (Affordable and Clean Energy) from 53.7 (2022) to 60.0 (2024) and SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production) from 45.7 (2022) to 51.6 (2024) aligns with Egypt's Vision 2030 aims, to generate 42% of the country's electricity from renewable sources by 2030.[12] SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-Being) remains relatively stable, but investment is needed to reverse minor declines from 55.7 (2022) to 52.2 (2023), although this was followed by a slight recovery to 53.1 (2024). SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals) have fluctuated (55.4 in 2022, a dip to 53.0 in 2023, and recovery to 55.2 in 2024).

Egypt is making notable advancements in clean energy, waste reduction and partnerships, supported by growing university participation. However, healthcare improvements remain slower. The steady increase in universities submitting SDG data is a positive indicator, demonstrating Egypt's commitment to integrating higher education into its sustainability agenda. This growth also reflects the growing role of higher education institutions in promoting sustainability, ensuring that SDGs are effectively incorporated across various sectors.

[12]Cohen, J. R., & Helwa, R. (2025). The green gold rush: Why renewable energy is Egypt's next big opportunity. Atlantic Council.

Figure 9. Egypt - Top three SDGs and SDG 17 progress from 2022 to 2024

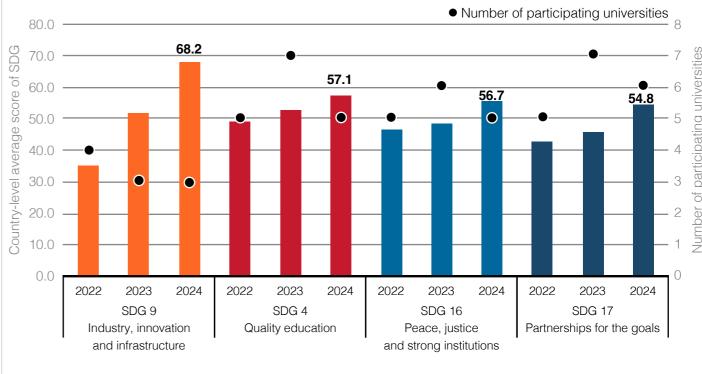*Source: Times Higher Education Impact Rankings 2022 - 2024

TUNISIA

T unisia highlights significant progress in industry, education, governance, and partnerships from 2022 to 2024, with notable improvements in innovation and institutional stability. The fluctuating number of participating universities reflects varying engagement levels across SDGs.

Tunisia has shown remarkable progress in SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure) from 35.4 (2022) to 68.2 (2024), reflecting substantial growth in innovative advancements and industrial development. SDG 4 (Quality Education) continues to improve from 49.0 (2022) to 57.1 (2024). This ongoing improvement in SDG 4 (Quality Education) of Tunisia highlights the role of universities in advancing academic excellence and ensuring equitable access to education, reinforcing education as a critical driver of long-term sustainable development.

SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions) is on a positive trajectory, with an increase in SDG 16 scores from 46.4 (2022) to 56.7 (2024), indicating progress in governance, justice and institutional strength. SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals) are steadily improving from 43.1 (2022) to 54.8 (2024), though further strengthening of collaborations is needed. Overall, Tunisia is making substantial strides in the key SDGs, supported by growing university participation. In particular, the country's rapid advancement in industry, innovation and infrastructure is a standout achievement.

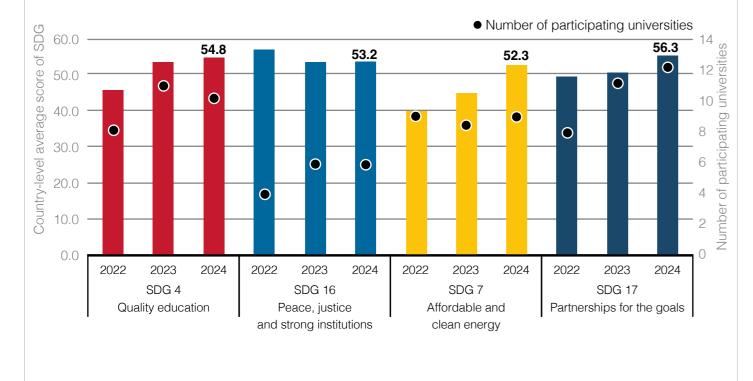## Figure 10. Tunisia - Top three SDGs and SDG 17 progress from 2022 to 2024

*Source: Times Higher Education Impact Rankings 2022 - 2024

MOROCCO

Morocco highlights steady progress in education, clean energy, and partnerships between 2022 and 2024, while SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions) performance remains relatively stable with minor fluctuations.

Morocco is making strong advancements in SDG 4 (Quality Education) with a consistent improvement from 44.8 (2022) to 54.8 (2024). The steady progress in SDG 4 (Quality Education) of Morocco again aligns the pivotal role of universities in advancing inclusive and equitable education, ensuring access to quality learning as a cornerstone for sustainable development. In the meantime, SDG 7 (Affordable and Clean Energy) improves from 40.1 (2022) to 52.3 (2024). SDG 16 has shown only slight fluctuation, with a slight drop from 56.3 (2022) to 52.9 (2023), followed by a marginal rise to 53.2 (2024). SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals) scores are steadily improving from 49.5 (2022) to 56.3 (2024) with steady rise in participating universities (from 8 to 12), highlighting Morocco's increasing integration into the global community. The positive trajectory in global partnerships and clean energy adoption reinforces Morocco's commitment to sustainable development.

Figure 11. Morocco - Top three SDGs and SDG 17 progress from 2022 to 2024
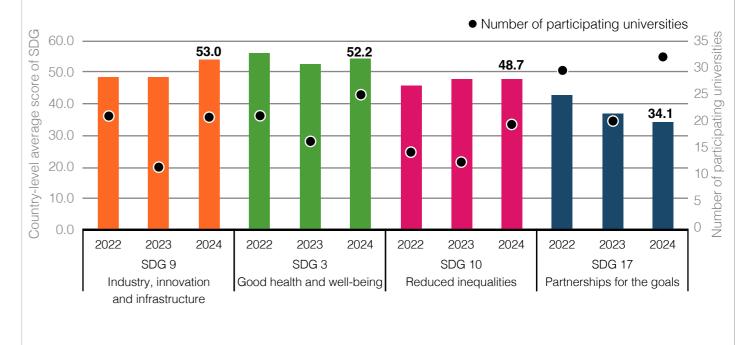
IRAN

Iran highlights steady improvements in industry, innovation, infrastructure and social equity, while health and partnerships face fluctuations from 2022 to 2024. Despite fluctuations in participation rates as well, Iran's universities remain engaged in key sustainability goals.

Iran's universities are showing resilience in SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure) with consistent progress from 48.7 (2022) to 53.0 (2024) and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) from 46.1 (2022) to 48.7 (2024), showing gradual progress. SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-Being) remains a priority as one of the best SDGs in Iran, though improvements have been modest with fluctuation in scores (a decrease from 53.8 in 2022 to 51.0 in 2023, recovering slightly to 52.2 in 2024). SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals) is in decline from 41.4 (2022) to 34.1 (2024) despite an increase in participating universities. This lower score suggests difficulties in securing impactful global partnerships to achieve broader impact.

Despite increasing SDG data submission (SDG 17), the data across years underscores a key challenge that expanding university involvement does not automatically translate into effective global partnerships and actual implementation, as suggested in Section 2. Overall, Iran's focus on industry, healthcare, and social equity is yielding slow but steady improvements, while partnerships remain a critical area for development.

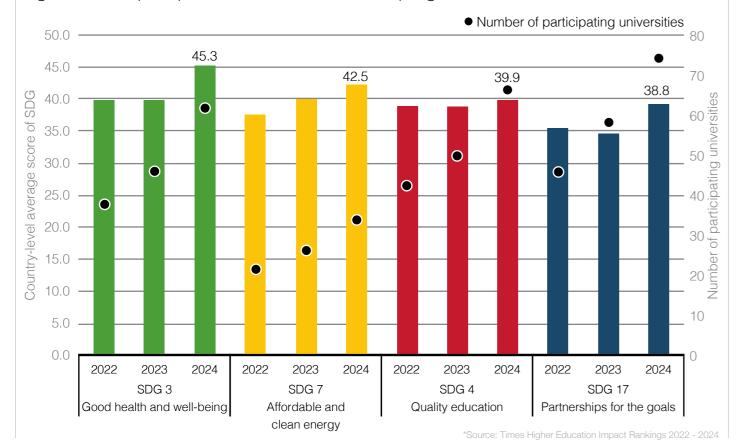Figure 12. Iran - Top three SDGs and SDG 17 progress from 2022 to 2024

IRAQ

Iraq has demonstrated gradual improvement in its SDG performance, particularly in SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-Being) and SDG 7 (Affordable and Clean Energy) between 2022 and 2024. However, challenges persist across all key SDGs as their scores are relatively lower than other MENA countries, with scores farther away from 50, which is half of the maximum score. The number of universities submitting data has risen significantly across all key SDGs, particularly in SDG 3 and SDG 17 with approximately a 60% rise each between 2022 and 2024. This signals a greater institutional focus on healthcare and global collaboration, even if the overall scores remain moderate.

SDG 3 has seen a consistent upward trend (39.9 to 45.3), reflecting incremental progress in healthcare. Similarly, SDG 7 has also improved (37.4 to 42.5), suggesting a growing emphasis on renewable energy initiatives, albeit at a slower pace. SDG 4 (Quality Education) remains relatively stagnant (38.2 to 39.9), indicating that challenges persist in improving academic quality. This stagnant progress in SDG 4 highlights the ongoing challenges in translating educational aspirations into measurable improvements. This reinforces the importance of fostering stronger institutional frameworks and international collaborations, to more effectively integrate sustainability into higher education. Meanwhile, SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals) has slightly improved (35.5 to 38.8), but the low score suggests ongoing difficulties in building strong international collaborations and networks.

Figure 13. Iraq - Top three SDGs and SDG 17 progress from 2022 to 2024

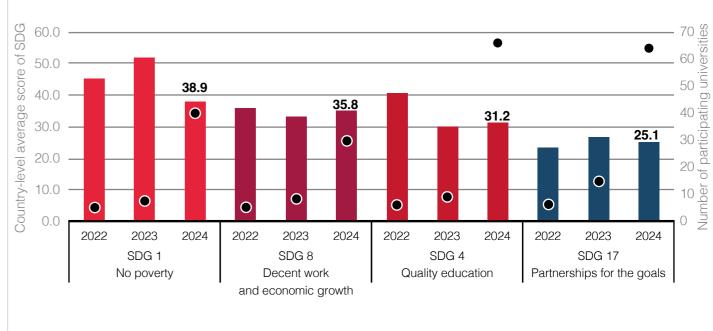*Source: Times Higher Education Impact Rankings 2022 - 2024

ALGERIA

The data in Figure 14 suggests mixed progress in Algeria's sustainable development efforts between 2022 and 2024. While SDG data submission has expanded significantly, particularly in SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals), scores remain relatively low across all key SDGs. The fluctuations also indicate inconsistencies in institutional efforts, while education continues to face challenges despite wider university involvement in SDG 4 data submission.

More specifically, SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) dropped from 36.6 in 2022 to 32.8 in 2023 before recovering slightly to 35.8 in 2024. Similarly, SDG 4 saw a sharp decline from 40.4 in 2022 to 30.1 in 2023, with only a marginal improvement to 31.2 in 2024, raising concerns about sustained progress in these areas. SDG 1 (No Poverty) scores showed initial improvement from 45.6 in 2022 to 50.7 in 2023, followed by a notable decline to 38.9 in 2024, despite a sharp rise in participating universities. SDG 17 remains low, suggesting that collaborative efforts must be further strengthened to effectively advance global sustainability initiatives. Moving forward, Algeria may need to strengthen SDG policy implementation and ensure quality improvements, rather than expanding participation only.

Figure 14. Algeria - Top three SDGs and SDG 17 progress from 2022 to 2024

*Source: Times Higher Education Impact Rankings 2022 - 2024

4. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

E ffective policy recommendations for MENA policymakers and higher education institutions (HEIs) should reflect the varied progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in the region, as showed in Section 3 of this paper. While some countries, particularly those with greater financial stability, have advanced in integrating sustainability into education, others face obstacles due to economic hardship or conflict. Nonetheless, there is growing momentum for regional collaboration to address shared challenges. This context underscores the need for stronger partnerships between governments, HEIs, and other stakeholders to embed sustainability into educational systems and institutional practices. The following policy recommendations offer targeted actions to support SDG integration, foster inclusive access to education, strengthen accountability, and build cross-sector cooperation, enabling HEIs to play a central role in driving sustainable development across the MENA region and beyond.

4.1. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS

Strengthening Policies for SDG Integration in HEIs: The data analysis of this paper underscores how some of the MENA countries with stronger higher education systems such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia, show higher levels of SDG implementation. This highlights the importance of establishing national policy frameworks that support HEIs in becoming strong and embedding sustainability into teaching and research. As institutional engagement is closely linked to governmental direction and support, governments should establish clear policies and expectations for embedding sustainability concepts and action plans into regional and national higher education frameworks. This includes ensuring sustainability is a core component of curricula and aligning educational objectives with sustainability as a purpose. Ministries of Education should collaborate with HEIs to develop roadmaps for SDG implementation, incentivising institutions to integrate sustainability into teaching, research, and community engagement. This also includes creating new mechanisms of recognising higher education degrees from beyond borders as driven by the UNESCO Global Convention on Recognition of Qualifications Concerning Higher Education.[13] Regional and national policies should also require HEIs to report on SDG progress, fostering accountability and continuous improvement. Additionally, linking funding opportunities to sustainability would encourage institutions to prioritise SDG-related efforts.

Enhancing Data Transparency: The wide variation in SDG participation across MENA countries highlights the need to address

[13]UNESCO. (n.d.). Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education.

data gaps in countries with lower SDG data submission rates. Improved data availability would support assessments of institutional impact and allow governments and international organisations to identify gaps, promote accountability, and foster effective collaboration across higher education systems. Governments should enhance monitoring systems that collect standardised, publicly accessible data on HEI contributions to sustainability and encourage voluntary reporting as well as making use of SDG-related rankings data available within the system. UNESCO and other relevant international organisations should enhance data collection methods and comparability across regions. Ensuring transparency in SDG reporting will not only drive accountability but also foster knowledge-sharing between institutions. Governments should also incentivise improved data management particularly for sustainable development.

Bridging the Funding Gap: Section 3 reveals uneven SDG participation across MENA countries, with lower engagement particularly evident in nations with constrained resources or institutional fragility, such as Djibouti, Libya, and Yemen. This underscores how inadequate funding limits the capacity of HEIs to contribute meaningfully to sustainable development. Increasing public expenditure on education and directing dedicated resources towards SDG-related initiatives would help close these gaps, enabling more inclusive participation and stronger implementation of sustainability efforts across the region.

- Increasing Government Expenditure on Education as a Percentage of GDP (%): The Education 2030 Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action[14] for the implementation of SDG 4 (Paragraph 105) advocates for countries to establish contextually relevant spending targets for education. This includes the recommendations: (i) to allocate a minimum of 4% to 6% of gross domestic product (GDP) towards educational funding, and/or (ii) to dedicate at least 15% to 20% of public expenditure to the education sector. In the MENA region, educational spending exhibits significant variation that is not solely dependent on the income levels of the respective countries. Consequently, an increase in educational funding may be essential to promote sustainable development within this sector.

- Allocating Funding to Support SDG Initiatives: Adequate financial resources are necessary for HE to implement sustainability programmes effectively. Policymakers should allocate dedicated funding for SDG-related projects, including research grants, green infrastructure development, and community engagement initiatives. Governments should establish public-private partnerships to mobilise resources for sustainability-oriented education programmes, leveraging corporate sponsorships and philanthropic contributions.

Investing in Capacity Building and Faculty Development: Section 3 also highlights that while many MENA universities, especially in countries such as Iraq and Algeria, report high levels of participation in SDG submissions, there is a clear discrepancy in the quality and

[14]UNESCO. (2016). Education 2030: Incheon framework for action - Implementation of sustainable development goal 4.

impact of these efforts, particularly in SDG 17. This points to a need for greater institutional capacity and expertise in implementing sustainable development initiatives. To effectively integrate SDGs into higher education, policymakers should invest in professional development programmes for faculty members and advance leadership for sustainable development. This includes training educators on interdisciplinary teaching approaches, sustainability pedagogy, and systems thinking. HEIs should be encouraged to incorporate SDG-related research and experiential learning opportunities into their curricula. Governments should provide grants for faculty to develop new courses, engage in collaborative research on sustainability challenges, and participate in international knowledge exchanges. Building capacity among academic and non-academic staff ensures that sustainability moves beyond isolated courses to become a purpose of education, and a vision embedded within institutional culture.

Promoting Cross-Sector Collaborations: The data specifically reveals that while some of the MENA countries show strong SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals) data submission, the impact of these collaborations is inconsistent. This highlights the importance of fostering cross-sector collaborations between HEIs, businesses, and NGOs to bridge this gap. Governments should facilitate partnerships between HEIs, businesses, NGOs, and international organisations to foster knowledge exchange and innovation. Establishing regional and national SDG advisory councils with representatives from academia, government and industry can help align educational priorities with labour market demands and sustainability goals. Policymakers should encourage work-integrated learning opportunities, such as internships and cooperative (co-op) education programmes, which combine academic study with placements related to the field of study of a student, that connect students with sustainability-focused industries as well as bringing awareness and expertise to private sector entities that are in early stages of embracing more sustainable practices.

Fostering Inclusive and Equitable Access to Higher Education: The data analysis of this paper shows that countries such as Lebanon and Jordan are prioritising SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), reflecting a regional commitment to social equity. However, the varying levels of progress in achieving inclusive education, especially in conflict-affected areas, highlight the need for targeted initiatives to improve access for marginalised groups. Policymakers should develop targeted initiatives to improve access for underrepresented or marginalised groups, including women, rural populations, refugees, and persons with disabilities. Once again, the UNESCO Global Convention on Recognition of Qualifications Concerning Higher Education can play an important role. The efforts include expanding scholarships, reducing tuition costs, and strengthening support services. HEIs should also be required to implement inclusive teaching strategies and accessibility measures, ensuring that all students can participate fully. By fostering equity, policymakers can ensure that sustainable development benefits all communities and advances a future right to higher education.

4.2. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

Advancing a Whole-Institution Approach to SDG Integration: The lower engagement with environmental SDGs and the uneven quality of SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals) implementations highlight the need for HEIs to move beyond selective engagement. Embedding sustainability across curricula and research can help bridge these gaps and ensure a more comprehensive, balanced approach to sustainable development across all SDGs. The varying levels of SDG participation and performance across MENA universities also underscore the need for structured institutional strategies and the institutional recommendations are as follows:
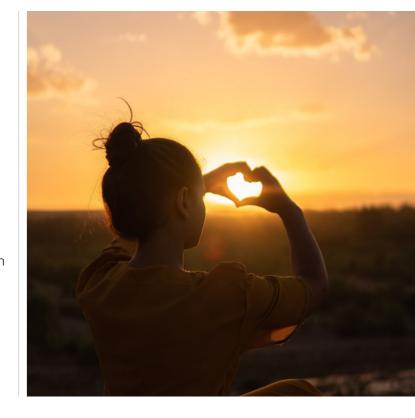
- Embedding Sustainability Across Curricula and Research Agendas: HEIs should integrate sustainability into all disciplines, ensuring that students across all fields of study develop a strong understanding of sustainability and the SDGs as the current global action plan. This can be achieved by embedding sustainability concepts into existing courses, developing interdisciplinary programmes, and offering sustainability-focused electives. Overall, a whole-institution approach towards the SDGs must be achieved to offer a transformative learning environment for all learners, students, faculty and staff to embody their learning and learn through their everyday experiences. Institutions should also encourage research that addresses pressing sustainability challenges, supporting faculty in publishing sustainability-related (interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary) work as well as demonstrating and practicing their work with communities.

- Developing Institutional SDG Roadmaps and Action Plans: HEIs should create detailed SDG roadmaps outlining their strategies to further support the whole-institution approach and think beyond the SDGs in a broader concept of reaching sustainability in a post-2030 world. This includes setting measurable targets such as those for carbon neutrality and community outreach. HEIs should establish SDG steering committees with stakeholders from the local community to oversee implementation and ensure accountability. Publishing voluntary progress reports as discussed can enhance transparency and encourage continuous improvement. Participation in selected SDG rankings can enhance sustainability and SDG commitment and transparency.

Strengthening HE-Community Partnerships for Local SDG Impact:
Section 3 reveals that while participation in SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals) is high in some MENA countries, the corresponding scores could remain low, indicating a gap between engagement and impact. Strengthening HE-community partnerships can address this gap by anchoring sustainability efforts in local contexts, enhancing the quality of collaborations, and ensuring that academic contributions directly support tangible, community-level outcomes. HEIs should actively engage with local communities to address sustainability challenges. This can be achieved through service-learning projects, student-led initiatives, partnerships with local governments and NGOs and engaging with citizens holding unique knowledge and skills. Institutions should encourage faculty and students to collaborate on community-based research that aligns with SDG priorities, such as renewable energy projects, waste reduction programmes, and public health initiatives. Strengthening HE-community partnerships ensures that academic knowledge is translated into real-world impact, fostering inclusive and locally driven sustainable development solutions.

Enhancing Inter- and Transdisciplinary Approaches to Sustainability: The data again shows that while countries such as Iraq and Algeria have high participation in SDG reporting, their performance scores often lag, indicating a need for deeper, more integrated institutional strategies. Enhancing inter- and transdisciplinary approaches offers a pathway to address this disconnect, enabling universities to move beyond surface-level engagement and build capacity for innovative, impactful solutions. HEIs should adopt inter- and transdisciplinary methods through team-teaching, problem-based learning, and cross-departmental research. Encouraging students to tackle real-world sustainability issues fosters critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Cross-disciplinary engagement prepares students to address complex global challenges with system-based approaches. Collaboration among HEIs is vital for accelerating SDG implementation through regional and international networks, joint research, faculty exchanges, and knowledge-sharing platforms. Participation in global initiatives such as the Impact Rankings helps benchmark progress, while cross-border cooperation ensures best practices are shared and implemented.

Leveraging Digital Tools and Open Education Resources for Sustainability: Given the uneven participation in SDG data reporting across the MENA region, especially in countries with limited institutional capacity such as Djibouti, leveraging digital tools and open education resources (OER) offers a scalable solution to bridge access gaps. HEIs should embrace digital learning tools to expand access to relevant knowledge and potential solutions. This includes offering online courses, open-access textbooks, and virtual simulations that explore SDG-related scenarios. Leveraging technology can also facilitate knowledge-sharing between HEIs globally, creating a more collaborative approach to sustainability. Institutions should invest in digital literacy training for faculty and students, ensuring they can effectively use technological resources to support learning and research in sustainable development.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This paper has provided insights into the current state of SDG implementation in higher education across the MENA region. By looking at the key SDGs per country, this paper highlights successful performance from MENA countries and their universities. This paper is intended to support future efforts towards achieving all SDGs in higher education, informing progress towards 2030 and beyond. This section contains a summary of the findings and identifies limitations to guide future efforts.

As part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development embraced by UN member states in 2015 as discussed, the SDGs provide a call to action and institutions of higher education are well-positioned to support the SDGs through research, training, and innovation; therefore, the SDGs provide an important entry point for institutions to participate in national and international conversations on sustainable development. The implementation status of the SDGs in the MENA region has been explored in this paper, with a focus on the higher education sector, highlighting progress to date.

Globally, further progress towards achieving the SDGs is necessary. A 2024 United Nations assessment showed that of the 135 currently assessable SDG targets, only 17% are on track or have been met, while 18% are stagnated and 17% have shown regression. SDG 4 (Quality Education) sets targets and indicators to track progress on inclusive and equitable education and is therefore particularly pertinent to the higher education sector. Existing literature shows that further progress on SDG 4 is needed; however, in the MENA region, reporting levels on SDG 4 are commendably high relative to other SDGs. Nevertheless, SDGs should not be seen in isolation from each other. Education is relevant to all 17 SDGs; for example, by helping to empower women and girls (SDG 5: Gender Equality), enhancing climate literacy and knowledge of climate change (SDG 13: Climate Action), and educating students on violence prevention, peace, and institutional transparency (SDG 16: Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions).

The 2022-2024 Impact Rankings analysis also shows that overall SDG progress scores rose for most MENA countries. However, data gaps exist in this area, indicating the need for transparency and improved data collection. In terms of SDG reporting, according to the THE Impact Rankings, MENA countries with established higher education systems, such as Iraq, Algeria, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia have high participation rates. Other countries such as Djibouti, Libya and Yemen showed low participation, which could be attributable to limited institutional capacity and suggests the need for support. It is also important to note that even if some of the current SDG scores in the MENA region have much room for improvement, higher participation and engagement in the region paint a positive picture, signalling future investment, suggesting long-term potential, and underscoring the need for sustained institutional support through appropriate policy.

Overall, this paper has aimed to provide a starting point and baseline on current progress, but the conclusions are limited by breadth of scope and data availability. Future research and in-depth analysis of individual country contexts is required. Furthermore, individual universities across the region are engaging important sustainability initiatives at a micro level, which should be recognised through future in-depth and case-based analyses.

This paper also presents a series of policy recommendations for both policymakers and higher education institutions. Policies should encourage the participation of MENA HEIs in international networks focused on higher education and the SDGs, facilitating knowledge exchange and best practices that focus on sustainability, global awareness and cooperation. This will enable measurement of quantity and impact of institutional partnerships and joint initiatives with global universities and organisations working on SDGs. Funding should be allocated specifically for projects that address local and regional SDG issues, through innovative financing mechanisms, and public-private partnerships encouraging collaboration between universities, governments, and the private sector.

By implementing these recommendations, MENA countries and others can enhance their contributions to sustainable development. Through regional cooperation, innovation, and alignment with global best practices, HEIs in the region can become key drivers of long-term resilience, equity, and progress towards the SDGs.

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POLICY PAPER

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS (SDG)

Implementation in Higher Education in the MENA Region