

The Otherness: the Disconnect Between Researchers and the SDGs

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I cannot remember when I first heard the words “Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)”. This seems odd, as I conduct research and teaching in the conservation realm with a focus on the socio-ecological challenges. However, I clearly recall the moment a guest speaker in the “Sustainable Futures” course in RMIT University talked about the 17 goals and showed the students the colourful icons representing of each of them. Surprisingly, none of our 600 students had heard about the goals. The speaker presented her work about the production of primary school-friendly materials to engage kids with the SDGs; avatars for each goal that kids can choose. The role of informal environmental education in promoting sustainability is well studied. As an adult, I personally found the concept she developed quite amazing. A one-off presentation to students is a great way to initiate the conversation but it is not enough to sustain it and maintain the interaction. There is a gap in practical hands-on activities to engage student’s heads and hearts at the same time for a long-term change.



Figure1: Gender equity materials developed for kids. Source: https://www.unicef.org/agenda2030/69525_82235.html

The second time I heard the word in the research and teaching area was in the Victorian Biodiversity Conference earlier this year. This presentation was about the poor application of mitigation hierarchy for a unique ecosystem in Australia by a multi-billion-dollar international mining company. The local community opposed the project and took it to court. They could not win the case and a last-minute change to the biodiversity offset regulations changed the history. Later, someone suggested that that specific company is committed to the SDGs and if the local community had had that knowledge, they could have taken the matter to the international levels. Conference attendees start whispering “SDGs?” It was obvious that the majority never heard about them.

The above mentioned two stories are just a few examples of my experience with the knowledge and communication gap in the field. Problem arises when as teachers and researchers we still use the old triple bottom line models of sustainability. In a rapidly changing environment where sustainability related challenges are multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary, the new 5Ps model captures the complexity very well. In addition, we work in the silo of our disciplines. We just follow what is directly relevant to our KPIs. Some of these topics are limited to the national issues. The “silo effect” has negative impacts on the long-term sustainability of an academic career, on our problem-solving capacity, and on our personal well-being.



Figure2: The challenge of the silo effect in academic sector. Source: <https://www.tibco.com/>

Researchers also tend to follow a trend of frameworks and paradigms in publishing; for example, ecosystem services have been popular for a long time. The other challenge is the current mind set about the SDGs; they are either considered the UN's agenda and responsibility or too distant from the practices that enable them. It is challenging to make researchers realise that sustainability is not just a department in their universities.

To move from the status quo, a shift in the institutional culture seems essential. However, like Shipman, I firmly believe that "Social researchers are part of the world they research". At the individual level, my responsibility is not only to inform my students and colleagues about the 5Ps and the SDGs, but assist them in integrating those into our teaching and research agenda.

This is a higher-level goal and to achieve it my objectives are:

1. To include the 5Ps of the sustainable development model and the SDGs into my teaching materials for students in the Ecological Foundations of Planning course in RMIT University. The course is developed for the environment and planning students that will be working in the local councils and shires in the future. The gained knowledge and skills will assist them in developing sustainability ethos in their life and future career. By the end of Semester 2, 2017, they will be able to see the interconnectedness and trade-offs in the sustainable development decision making. I have enough agency to achieve this objective.
2. To bring the SDGs framework and lens directly into my research. This is a more challenging objective as collaborating with others brings a structural challenge into the picture, especially when I am not the project leader. To shift the values, I will start with writing an opinion piece myself, highlighting these challenges. I will also communicate my experience in the Leadership Program with a wider audience through our newsletter, blog, and presentation in our research group.

By the end of 2017, I will evaluate my progress in incorporating the SDGs into my teaching and research agenda. Lessons learnt from this evaluation could guide me to update my objectives for 2018.

Observing real world problems through the case studies in Bangkok and sharing experience with other participants has provided an opportunity for me to investigate and analyse the challenges each community is facing through the 5Ps lens. I have also made a network with other researchers from different universities through this leadership program that will assist me with the successful implementation of my second objective. I am sincerely grateful for such an amazing and eye-opening experience.