

Global Action on SDGs

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The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development provided brand new goals and action targets for human well-being and development, but the COVID-19 pandemic has cast a shadow on the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It is therefore essential to provide a reference for making policy adjustments and transformations to promote the realization of SDGs in the post-pandemic era. Based on a literature review of the progress and policies of SDGs across countries worldwide, we find that research on sustainable policies has rapidly increased since the SDGs issued in 2015 with particular focuses on eco-environment, sustainable policies, green economy, sanitation and health, and water sanitation. Most countries are in the process of nationalization, institutionalization, and universalization of the SDGs through incorporating the SDGs into national development frameworks, enabling extensive participation and negotiation mechanisms, and promoting the SDGs' national publicity. Countries of different economic and institutional backgrounds demonstrate divergent development pathways, priorities, measures, and progress in the implementation of SDGs.

Keywords: SDGs ; sustainable development ; 2030 agenda ; policy transformations ; human well-being

1. Introduction

Sustainable development is the common goal of humankind and is necessary to achieve human well-being. In 2015, 193 countries around the world passed the “Transforming Our World: The United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development” at the United Nations Sustainable Development Summit and proposed a set of 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs) and 169 targets to guide international development, specifically with regard to society, the economy, and the environment. This is the inheritance of the agenda of the new millennium. The 17 goals revolve around themes that are closely related to human prosperity, such as poverty, equality, hunger, climate change, resources, and the environment ^[1]. The new agenda calls on all countries to take action now and work toward achieving the 17 SDGs in the next 15 years. While the SDGs are intended to be achieved on a global scale, their action implementation depends on the level at which countries prioritize them, and on how sustainability issues compete with a country's other challenges ^[2].

SDGs require the joint participation and promotion of science, policies, tools, etc. The implementation of policies is a critical and leading measure in achieving the SDGs. UN specialized agencies, enterprises, various social groups and stakeholders, and most importantly, governments, have initiated extensive actions and formulated many policies and measures aimed at the SDGs ^[3]. There are some policy studies on the realization of SDGs, but they are mainly focused on specific countries (regions) or specific areas or cities, such as the European Union ^[4], Ganges River basin ^[5], Amazonia ^[6], Pearl River Delta ^[7], India ^[8], New Zealand ^[9], as well as specific fields such as decent work ^[10], agriculture development, public health ^[11], energy ^[12], climate change ^[13]. The current analysis of various global policies is still seriously inadequate.

Since the spring of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically influenced the human socioeconomic system. Up until 6 April 2021, WHO has reported more than 132 million confirmed cases of COVID-19 and 2,871,642 deaths. The World Bank estimates that the global economy would shrink by 5.2% in 2020, which would be the deepest recession since World War Two ^[14], and WHO Director-General Tedros stated that the impact of the coronavirus will be felt for decades to come ^[15]. The COVID-19 pandemic has been a global threat with great economic and social challenges. Two-thirds of the 169 SDG targets are either under threat as a result of this pandemic or not well implemented to mitigate its impacts ^[16], for example, inequality ^[17], poverty ^[18], agricultural and food security ^{[19][20]}, drinking water and sanitation ^[21], biodiversity conservation ^[22]. COVID-19 is exposing the fragility of the SDGs and will have a significant negative impact on most goals as global depression looms ^{[16][23]}. Making policy adjustments and transformations to promote the implementation of global SDGs in the post-pandemic era is a major issue.

2. Bibliometric Analysis

English papers written in the past 40 years were obtained through the SCI/SSCI database of the Web of Science. To retrieve as much comprehensive and accurate literature in the field of SDGs policy action research as possible, we used title keywords to search. The search format is designed as: (TI = (SDG × OR sustainable development goal × OR 2030 agenda OR sustainable development) AND TI = (police × OR action OR plan)) AND LANGUAGE: (all languages) AND DOCUMENT TYPES: (all document types) Indexes = SCI-EXPANDED, SSCI, CPCI-S, CPCI-SSH, Timespan = 1981–2020. The final search yielded 1402 English documents found in the WOS core database from 1981 to 2020.

Figure 1 shows the changes in the number of articles published about “SDGs and Policy” from 1981 to 2020. It was found that after the implementation of the UN SDGs in 2015, the number of related articles has grown rapidly, from 49 articles in 2014 to 147 articles in 2020. Research on sustainable development emerged in the 1980s, and the research on sustainable development policies has grown rapidly since the 21st century. The occurrence year and frequency of Subject terms on “SDGs and Policy” from 1981 to 2020 were identified using Citespace (Table 1). It demonstrates that “sustainable development” has always been the core keyword of research, as it has the highest frequency of occurrence. Sustainable development policy and environmental policy became hot spots in 1997, and green economy, energy policy, and climate change began to become hot spots in 2011. In recent years, climate policy, cultural policy, and climate action have attracted attention from scholars. The global climate policy and SDG agendas are highly interconnected [24], and cultural policy can and should play a more active role in shaping social change [25].

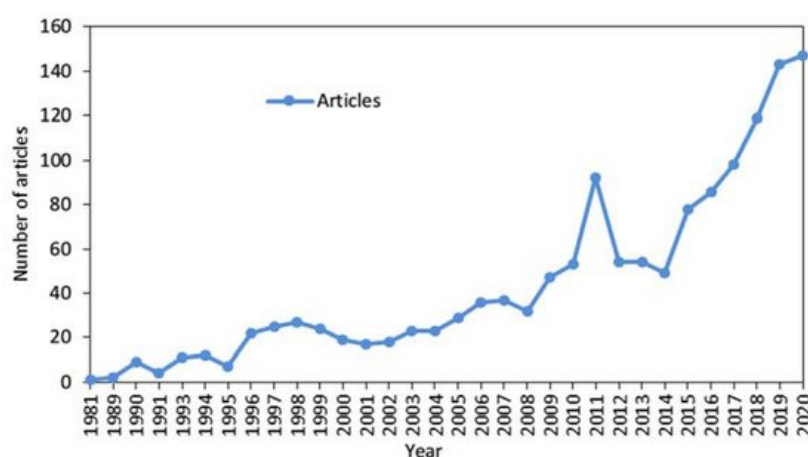


Figure 1. Number of articles published about “SDGs and Policy”, 1981–2020.

Table 1. Subject terms evolution and frequency regarding “SDGs and Policy”, 1981–2020.

Subject Terms (Title + Keywords)	Occurrence Year	Number of Articles
sustainable development	1981	416
policy implications	1989	4
energy policy	1994	9
sustainable development plan	1995	5
urban planning	1996	6
achieving sustainable development	1996	5
sustainable development policy	1997	31
environmental policy	1997	17
policy integration	1997	3
agricultural policy	1999	5
European union	2001	12
strategic planning	2001	8
spatial planning	2001	4
public participation	2001	3

Subject Terms (Title + Keywords)	Occurrence Year	Number of Articles
economic growth	2003	3
sustainable rural development	2003	3
policy framework	2003	3
cohesion policy	2004	3
sustainable urban development	2005	9
sustainable development planning	2006	9
policy coherence	2006	3
local communities	2008	4
development policy	2010	4
sustainable tourism	2010	3
green economy	2011	32
useful way	2011	30
energy policy	2011	30
climate change	2011	11
renewable energy	2011	4
natural resources	2011	4
sustainable energy development	2011	4
action research	2012	5
climate policy	2014	3
sustainable development goal	2016	40
cultural policy	2017	5
climate action	2018	3

Since the implementation of the UN SDGs in 2015, the Web of Science core library has published 2218 articles related to SDGs. The search format is designed as: (TI = (SDG × OR sustainable development goal × OR 2030 agenda)) AND LANGUAGE: (all languages) AND DOCUMENT TYPES: (all document types) Indexes = SCI-EXPANDED, SSCI, CPCI-S, CPCI-SSH, Timespan = 2015–2020. Using the VOSviewer software to conduct keyword co-occurrence network analysis, we found that the most frequently cited articles around the world focus on the eco-environment, sustainable policies, green economy, health, water sanitation, and other topics in the SDGs, and the different topics are closely related (Figure 2). According to the keyword co-occurrence, there are three research subnetworks, which are displayed in different colors in Figure 2. One is related to the SDGs' priority in health, gender equality, and children; the second is the water–food ecosystem nexus; the third is about the measures, challenges, and difficulties of SDGs attainment.

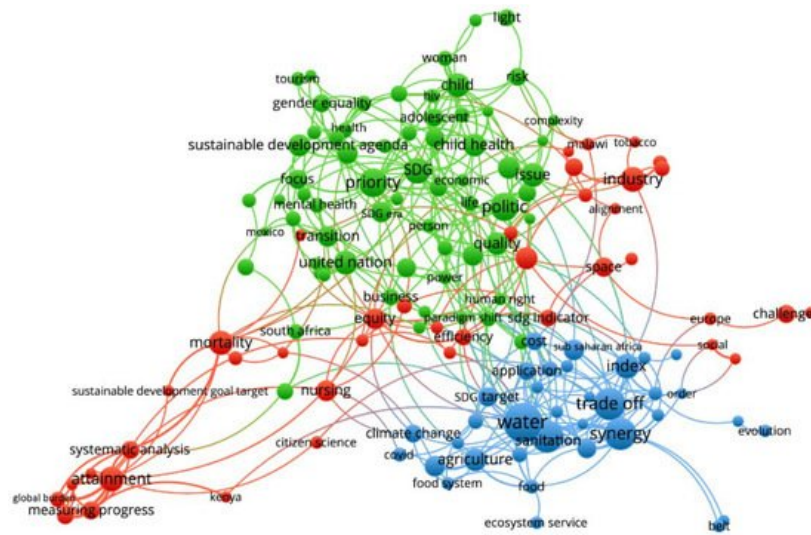


Figure 2. Keyword co-occurrence network of “SDGs” related literature, 2016–2020.

3. Policy Review of Different Countries to Implement the SDGs

This article summarizes the main practices of OECD countries, BRICs countries, and LDCs in implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, by their development levels. As part of its follow-up and review mechanisms, the 2030 Agenda encourages member states to “conduct regular and inclusive reviews of progress at the national and subnational levels, which are country-led and country-driven” [26]. The voluntary national reviews (VNRs) are an opportunity for countries to share their successes, challenges, and lessons learned, accelerating the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. Although they are not compulsory, as of April 2021, 168 countries have submitted VNRs to the annual meeting of the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development. References in this section come from various kinds of government documents, research papers, and reports, in addition to the VNRs submitted by various countries.

3.1. OECD Countries

OECD countries are generally concerned about global natural environmental issues. OECD countries are at an advanced stage in achieving various SDGs (e.g., Sweden, Denmark, Norway, and Switzerland). For individual goals, such as No Poverty (Goal 1) and Zero Hunger (Goal 2), efforts are given to improving social welfare, especially for vulnerable groups such as children and the disabled. Iceland and Switzerland prioritize Sustainable Consumption and Production (Goal 12) in their policy implementation. Canada emphasizes No Poverty (Goal 1), Gender Equality (Goal 5), Decent Work and Economic Growth (Goal 8), Sustainable Consumption and Production (Goal 12), Climate Action (Goal 13), and Life below Water (Goal 14). Austria regards Good Health and Well-being (Goal 3), Gender Equality (Goal 5), and Climate Action (Goal 13) as the priority for achieving SDGs. Denmark adopts Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure (Goal 9), Life below Water (Goal 14), and Life on Land (Goal 15). Norway takes Quality Education (Goal 4), Decent Work and Economic Growth (Goal 8), and Sustainable Consumption and Production (Goal 12) as priority implementation areas. Meanwhile, Iceland believes that the realization of Sustainable Consumption and Production (Goal 12) and Climate Action (Goal 13) is the current challenge, and Denmark has challenges in the realization of Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure (Goal 9), Sustainable Cities and Communities (Goal 11), and Sustainable Consumption and Production (Goal 12).

Most countries have responded to the United Nations “the 2030 Agenda” and are launching suitable action plans. In 2016, the European Union released a sustainable development package plan along with “The Future of Sustainable Europe: The EU’s response to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development,” which systematically explained the EU’s measures to implement the goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development [27]. The UK government published “Agenda 2030: The UK Government’s approach to delivering the Global Goals for Sustainable Development—at home and around the world” [28], which provided an approach to delivering the Global Goals for Sustainable Development at home and around the world. Spain is committed to achieving the highest level of SDGs, focusing national public policy and political priorities on achieving SDGs [29]. The Swedish government’s ambition is to be a leader in implementing the 2030 Agenda—both at home and globally [30].

OECD countries are widely participating in international assistance and are committed to the realization of global SDGs. For example, the UK issued the “British Aid Strategy” in 2015 [31]. The US Agency for International Development is committed to the realization of global SDGs through existing initiatives and programs such as “Feed the Future”, “Global Labor Plan”, and the “US Government Education Strategy” [32]. Canada announced its new Feminist International

Assistance Policy in 2017 ^[33]. Norway actively provides marine environmental protection assistance to developing countries by implementing multilateral mechanisms such as the Green Climate Fund, providing climate financing to vulnerable countries in LDCs, supporting the promotion of renewable energy in African and Asian countries, etc. ^[34]. Austria uses its position as the official seat of international organizations to promote sustainable development on a global level ^[35]. Germany is committed to the goal of using 0.7% of its gross national income for ODA within the 2030 Agenda and plans to double international climate financing by 2020 ^[36].

OECD countries are committed to developing global partnerships and promoting the implementation of the SDGs through extensive cooperation. With capital, talents, and technology, OECD countries will promote the deepening of global development partnerships by leading the “Global Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation” and occupying a dominant position in the international order for solving global environmental problems. This will facilitate exchanges among its member states as well as deepen international cooperation with other developing countries. Norway maintains substantial investments in global health, women, and children, establishing partnerships in the private sector, vaccine alliances, and global education ^[34]. Switzerland has contributed to the effort by strengthening domestic resource mobilization and capacity building, and by promoting a universal, rules-based, multilateral trading system ^[37].

3.2. BRICS Countries

Government plans dominate in the process of implementing SDGs. India has fully coordinated and led the realization of SDGs through NITI Aayog, chaired by the Prime Minister (<https://niti.gov.in/>, accessed on 25 May 2021). China incorporated SDGs into the “14th Five-Year” National Economic and Social Development Plan Outline, translated SDGs into specific tasks in the economic, social, and environmental fields ^[38], and eradicated absolute poverty by 2020 under the long-term efforts of the government, which provided a strong impetus to the cause of global poverty reduction ^[39]. Brazil connects SDG targets and indicators with Plano Plurianual (PPA) attributes, linking the medium-term vision of government action with the expectation of implementing the commitments contained in the SDGs. South Africa has established the Inter-Ministerial Committee on the Sustainable Development Agenda and the National Development Stakeholder Forum to strengthen the dialogue on SDGs ^[40]. Russia has 12 National Projects and has created the Comprehensive Plan for the Modernization and Expansion of Main Infrastructure, which is aimed at SDG achievement ^[41].

BRICS countries are actively involved in the development of international cooperation and regional cooperation. The scope of partnership among different countries depends on national strength. China and India tend to strengthen their global partnerships, but South Africa and Brazil tend to strengthen partnerships at the regional level. China has promoted the establishment of a global partnership for the implementation of SDGs through the “Belt and Road” initiative ^[42]. India has actively contributed to the crafting of policy coalitions such as the International Solar Alliance, Coalition for Disaster Resilience Infrastructure, India-Africa Forum Summit, India-CARICOM, the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation, etc. ^[43]. Russia actively promotes regional cooperation among the countries of Eastern Europe, Transcaucasian and Central Asian countries, and the countries of the Asia-Pacific region. The implementation of such cooperation is reflected in the framework of multilateral and regional associations such as EAEU, BRICS, SCO, ASEAN, ASEM, and APEC ^[41]. South Africa would assist Africa in coordinating representation in the United Nations Multi-Stakeholder Forum for Science, Technology, and Innovation for the SDGs, and has also been active in supporting collaborative research projects with other African countries to improve the use of technology in addressing the SDGs ^[43].

BRICS countries are generally willing to provide international support within their capacity. China provides voluntary support to developing countries in terms of funding, technology, and capacity building, and provides beneficial public products for global development. In 2017, China announced that it would provide CNY 2 billion of emergency food aid to developing countries along the “Belt and Road” and invest USD 1 billion in the South–South Cooperation Assistance Fund, as well as support the implementation of 100 Happy Home Projects, 100 Anti-Poverty Projects, 100 Health Recovery Projects in countries along the “Belt and Road” (http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2017-05/16/content_29359377.htm, accessed on 25 May 2021) This encouraged the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the BRICS New Development Bank to play a greater role in providing international support ^[44]. According to the Ministry of Finance of the Russian Federation, the 2018 federal budget expenditures classified as official development assistance (ODA) under the OECD methodology reached almost USD 1 billion ^[41], and the main recipients of such assistance are Latin American and CIS countries. India has committed a total of USD 150 million over a decade to the India-UN Development Partnership Fund ^[43].

3.3. Least Developed Countries (LDCs)

LDCs tend to prioritize the implementation of basic and urgent SDGs. Due to limited financial and facility conditions, LDCs tend to give priority to achieving goals for solving people's basic needs. For example, in Malawi, more efforts have been dedicated to Health (Goal 3), Education (Goal 4), Gender (Goal 5), Clean Water and Sanitation (Goal 6), Sustainable Cities (Goal 11), and Strong Institutions (Goal 16) ^[45]. Sierra Leone has prioritized Education (Goal 4) and Access to Justice (Goal 16) ^[46]. Bhutan prioritizes No Poverty (Goal 1), Climate Action (Goal 13), and Life on Land (Goal 15) ^[47]. The reduction of poverty and hunger are at the core of Zambia's national development agenda ^[48].

LDCs actively sought international support. The Turkish President called on the UN member states to maintain meaningful ODA support, which constitutes the most important source of funding for LDCs ^[49]. The international community has pledged to provide Afghanistan with a total of USD 15.2 billion in aid for five years (2017–2021) ^[50]. The United Nations Country Team (UNCT), including IMF, World Bank, and African Development Bank continue to play a key role in the development of Sierra Leone. In 2017, the total ODA by the top 10 donors in Sierra Leone amounted to USD 490.3 million ^[46]. ODA funds about 34 percent of Bhutan's development programs, and Bhutan has been effectively utilizing ODA to the maximum benefit ^[47].

There are some obstacles to the implementation of the SDGs, which include insufficient government finances, a large population, insufficient capacity to collect statistics, and a shortage of government enforcement. Implementation capacity gaps, comprising perceptions, technical know-how, technology, finances, etc. are also considered serious challenges to be dealt with in the effort to eradicate poverty in all its manifestations by 2030 ^[51]. For instance, 70% of the total expenditure budget of Ethiopia is being used to fund five sectors: education, health, agriculture, water and sanitation, and rural road construction, which means that the other SDGs lack financial support, and thus are difficult to achieve ^[52]. The sheer number of poor people is also a huge challenge for Bangladesh ^[53].

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