

# Lost in translation? Tanzanian students' views on sustainability and language, and the implications for the pledge to leave no one behind

Sustainability  
and language

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – Less than eight years remain to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Numerous authors underlined the importance of language in achieving the SDGs; however, its role in the process remains overlooked. This paper aims to investigate the sustainability understanding among Tanzanian students and graduates, their translation approaches and the awareness of people living outside of universities regarding sustainability and the SDGs. The importance of including language in implementing the SDGs is highlighted, and further research regarding local languages to enhance sustainability awareness is suggested.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This study builds upon an extensive review of the current language of instruction conundrum present in many African countries and embeds the SDGs in this complex situation. Using a Tanzanian University as a case study, a questionnaire was administered to Tanzanian students and graduates, and follow-up interviews were conducted.

**Findings** – Findings suggest that Tanzanian higher education students and graduates are knowledgeable about both sustainability and the SDGs, with most of them integrating at least one goal into their respective research. However, in the interviews conducted, interviewees stated that in their experience, only a minority of people outside of universities are aware of both concepts. The findings indicate that the aim of target 4.7 and, ultimately, the pledge to leave no one behind remain void when African languages continue to be neglected.

**Research limitations/implications** – A case study is characterized by a lack of generalizability. Findings from this study should, therefore, be transferred cautiously to other African countries and universities. Furthermore, university students and graduates represent highly educated participants, which does not allow deductions to other parts of society.

**Originality/value** – The authors are not aware of other studies investigating the views of Tanzanian students and graduates regarding sustainability and language and how they handle emerging translation challenges in their research. Furthermore, to the best of the authors' knowledge, this research is the first to



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highlight the importance of language in achieving target 4.7 of the SDGs and, ultimately, the pledge to leave no one behind. It, therefore, represents a valuable contribution to the scientific body of knowledge regarding education for sustainable development and language.

**Keywords** Africa, Higher education, Education for sustainable development, Sociolinguistics, Sustainable development goals

**Paper type** Research paper

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## Introduction

Less than eight years remain to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Introduced in the year 2015, the SDGs were designed to replace the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (Leicht *et al.*, 2018) and aim to address the key shortcomings and unfinished business left behind by the MDGs (Fukuda-Parr, 2016; UNDP, 2016). However, various authors expressed their concern that the SDGs could be confronted by the same or similar setbacks as the MDGs (Toboso and Kandagor, 2018; McCloskey, 2015). And indeed, the African continent is off-track in achieving the SDGs, with only three of the goals likely to meet the 2030 target. The rest of the SDGs are “unlikely to be met if rapid and unified action is not taken” (Twinoburyo *et al.*, 2019, p. 8). So, while implementing the SDGs proves challenging, actually achieving them “appears virtually impossible” (Twinoburyo *et al.*, 2019, p. 14).

Reasons for this bleak prospect are numerous, and are caused by data constraints (UNESCO, 2020; UNDP, 2016), inequities in funding (IPCC, 2022) and the ongoing Corona pandemic (Leal Filho *et al.*, 2021; Fagbemi, 2021). Other causes for the persistent failure of development efforts are seen in problems arising from miscommunication (Marinotti, 2017). The continuous neglect of language in development (Mweri, 2020; Bamgbose, 2014) and the lack of localization (Jönsson and Bexell, 2021) were criticized by several authors. For localization to occur and for people to “value and practice the principles of sustainable development” (Leicht *et al.*, 2018, p. 37), the average citizens (Abdulai *et al.*, 2018) need to be reached in a language they understand (Ugwu and Ogunremi, 2019; Bamgbose, 2011). Yet, awareness of the SDGs is still low beyond a limited circle of elites (Jönsson and Bexell, 2021) and sustainability is “neither seen nor heard of in most of Africa” (Manteaw, 2012, p. 376).

Researchers continuously highlighted the need for governments in Sub-Saharan African countries to integrate language in their development activities in general (Heugh, 2006; Alexander, 2003) and when implementing the SDGs in particular (Mweri, 2020; Toboso and Kandagor, 2018). Most governments have largely ignored such calls (Brock-Utne, 2015; Williams and Cooke, 2002) and proved reluctant to attribute greater importance to African languages (Ishumi, 2014; UNESCO, 2011). The resulting miscommunication thwarts reaching the wider population, and therefore, endangers achieving the SDGs as a whole and target 4.7 in particular. Target 4.7 is recognized as one of the “most ambitious, interesting and challenging” targets of the SDGs (Leicht *et al.*, 2018, p. 25), and aims to ensure that by the year 2030:

“all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including [...] through Education for Sustainable Development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and nonviolence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture’s contribution to sustainable development” (UNESCO, 2017, p. 2).

UNESCO’s definition of target 4.7 explicitly mentions Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) as a means to achieve the SDGs. However, little is known about the interdependence of ESD and language (Wolff, 2006). In their literature review regarding this

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connection, [Ulmer and Wydra \(2022\)](#) found that most authors approached this topic theoretically, focusing on Africa and education as a whole rather than individual countries and specific types of education. They found only little empirical evidence in this field, confirming [Tilbury's \(2011\)](#) description of ESD as poorly researched and weakly evidenced more than a decade later. In spite of the Decade for Sustainable Development and the introduction of the SDGs, little progress was made using empirically grounded research to inform politically sound decisions.

This study, therefore, aims to contribute to the body of knowledge in this field, taking a Tanzanian university as a case study. We investigated students' and graduates' understanding of sustainability, the integration of both sustainability and SDGs in their research and their translation approaches when doing so. We further asked students and graduates for their experiences regarding the number of people outside of universities who have heard of both concepts in either English or Swahili. In the Tanzanian education system, students are taught in English starting secondary school up to higher education, resulting in at least nine years of education in English. Due to the close historical and educational ties to Western culture ([Ismail, 2007](#)), it is hypothesized that Tanzanian students and graduates are knowledgeable about both sustainability and the SDGs. In contrast, people outside of universities, representing the average citizens, are unlikely to have heard about these concepts and are denied to actively engage in the development process ([Djité, 2008](#)). The study argues that for target 4.7 to be achieved, and ultimately, for no one to be left behind, African languages need to be part of both formal and informal ESD.

### Research methodology

This study starts with an extensive review of the current language of instruction conundrum present in many African countries and embeds the SDGs in the Tanzanian sociolinguistic situation. Instead of adding to the predominantly theoretical reflections in this field, a case study approach was used to generate evidence: students and graduates of a Tanzanian university with less than 1,000 students were asked to share their views regarding sustainability and the SDGs. The research design builds on the premise that Tanzanian students and graduates function as a bridge between academia and the average citizens, as they are experienced in researching with and in communities using the local language. Students and graduates are, therefore, well-suited to give practical insights into the state of sustainability awareness of people outside of academia. To reach a satisfactory number of responses, data were collected by using a questionnaire and by conducting follow-up interviews, allowing to delve deeper into participants' experiences. The questionnaire consisted of three parts: understanding of sustainability and the SDGs, integration of both topics in their research and how they approach English/Swahili translations when researching in and with communities. The final part of the questionnaire consisted of questions regarding demographics such as age, academic background and the level of their current studies. The questionnaire was drafted in English, translated into Swahili and proofread by several Swahili native speakers, including one Swahili teacher. The questionnaire was then pre-tested on several Tanzanian Bachelor and Master students in Arusha, one Master's graduate in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania and a Kenyan Master's student in Kassel, Germany. Their suggestions and corrections were integrated accordingly, and the questionnaire was subsequently sent to students and graduates via the university's email distribution list. In total, 56 students and graduates filled out the questionnaire.

The follow-up interviews were carried out in Swahili and with the same respondents who were willing to engage and who left their contacts in the questionnaire. The interviews were conducted on the basis of guiding questions derived from the results of the questionnaire

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and allowed participants to elaborate their experiences shared in the questionnaire. Before conducting the interview with participants, it was first tested with two master students in Arusha and Dar es Salaam and edited according to their suggestions. Participants were then contacted in written form, briefed about the research topic and asked for a convenient time for them to be interviewed. At the beginning of the interviews, the study's aim was explained to the interviewees, asking whether there were any questions regarding the research. Then, terms such as "average citizens" were explained to interviewees, being defined as people who had not had the chance or were not interested in attending higher education, thereby representing the society some authors described as being disconnected from universities (Cloete *et al.*, 2018; UNDP, 2004). The respective research of interviewees deals with different topics in accordance with their academic backgrounds, such as health, environment or agriculture and is or was undertaken with people in communities. The recorded interviews were transcribed, and the Swahili transcriptions analyzed using Mayring's (2014) thematic analysis approach. MAXQDA Analytics Pro 2018 software was used for analysis.

#### *Limitations of the study*

A case study design was chosen because this study's focus was on data richness as opposed to representativeness (Wemmenhove and de Groot, 2001). Case studies are characterized by and were criticized for their lack of generalizability (Idowu, 2016; Corcoran *et al.*, 2004). This criticism holds true for this study as well because students of higher education were chosen purposely, representing highly educated participants. Transferring findings from this study to other African countries or universities should, therefore, be done cautiously. Furthermore, among the participants who filled the questionnaire, there was a predominance of male over female participants with a relation of around two to one. A similar relation of participants emerged in the interviews. Findings may be influenced by this skewed relation; however, the gender relation of participants in this study corresponds with the general gender enrollment in Tanzanian Higher Education (UNESCO, 2022).

The language used in the questionnaire and the interviews was Swahili, whereas the main author is fluent in Swahili, he is not a native speaker. However, the language of science is English, and the main author is no native English speaker either. The decision to conduct the research in Swahili, as opposed to English, was taken for several reasons. Different authors argued conducting research in African languages to be a desirable way of investigating language issues (Mohr and Ochieng, 2017; Harries, 2010) because "working with and listening to communities in their own languages" (UNESCO, 2012, p. 34) allows access to data which otherwise may be blocked by the language barrier (Wolff, 2016). Swahili represents both the lingua franca in Tanzania (Kanana, 2013) and the *de facto* language used in Tanzanian educational settings (Wamalwa *et al.*, 2013; Senkoro, 2005). The use of Swahili, therefore, reduces barriers in communication and allows participants free expression of thought (Vuzo, 2018), as experienced numerous times by the main author over the course of several years of research in Tanzania. Thus, the advantages of using Swahili outweigh the possible disadvantages, which manifest in translation issues: There is, for instance, no direct equivalent of the word *sustainability* in Swahili, so the closely related *uendelevu* was used, which translates as *durableness* or *longevity*. The challenge of accurately translating technical terms from English to African languages was experienced by other researchers as well (Chikuni *et al.*, 2015), and was circumvented in this study by using three approaches: first, by choosing the closest fitting Swahili equivalent after discussing with Swahili native speakers. Second, by adding the respective English words for some technical terms in brackets for clarity. And finally, by relying on the same terms

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used by (inter-)national institutions, if available. For instance, the Tanzanian Ministry of Community Development, Gender, Women and Special Groups and The United Nations Environment Program also translate *sustainability* as *uendelevu*.

### *Embedding the SDGs in the Tanzanian language of instruction conundrum*

A host of scholars addressed the issue of African languages of instruction in education (Negash, 2005), which was described as the “most important and least appreciated issue” (Brock-Utne, 2014, p. 4). Walter and Benson (2012, p. 300) estimated that around 40% of the global population “are at a significant disadvantage in the classroom” because they do not (fully) master the language they are taught in. Tanzania is no exception: there are 150 languages spoken in total in the country (Muzale and Rugemalira, 2008), but only Swahili and English function as official national languages. However, social development can only be achieved when it is linked to linguistic inclusion: different authors traced the failure of the MDGs to the ignorance of language in the process (Toboso and Kandagor, 2018; Romaine, 2013). In the case of the SDGs, Mweri (2020, p. 13) suggested a language-based approach to ensure the SDGs’ success because the process “requires engaging people in the language they speak and understand”. Mutembei (2014, p. 348) similarly argued that African languages function as a gateway to sustainable development, allowing people to “contribute ideas towards shaping their future”. The following synthesis reveals three overarching and interconnected spheres and depicts the complex web in which the SDGs in general, and target 4.7 in particular, are supposed to operate in Tanzania.

The scientific body of research largely agrees that students should learn in a language they understand (UNESCO, 2016). In Tanzania, Swahili is spoken and understood by the overwhelming majority (ADEA, 1996), with estimates of Tanzanians conversing in Swahili ranging between 90% and 99% (Arthur, 2021; Djité, 2008; Alidou and Brock-Utne, 2006). In contrast, English is spoken by an estimated 5% of the Tanzanian population (Skattum and Brock-Utne, 2009; Wamalwa *et al.*, 2013), leading to the status of English as a minority language in Tanzania (Tibategeza, 2010). Most students are facing major challenges in knowledge acquisition (Mapunda, 2022; Qorro, 2013) because students, as well as their teachers, are “not sufficiently competent in English” (Ismail, 2007, p. 807). The ensuing language barrier prevents parents from supporting their children in school work (David-Erb, 2021), whereas some students drop out of school not because they fail to grasp the subject matter but because they fail to express themselves well enough in English (Vuzo, 2018). Examinations, therefore, measure students’ English skills rather than their knowledge in a given subject, calling the validity of examinations into question. Various authors further warned that students not only lose out in educational settings but may further lose touch with digital developments, given most digital resources are available in languages students do not (fully) master (Mapunda and Rosendal, 2021; Benjamin, 2014).

On the societal level, education stakeholders hold opposing views: while the majority of scholars recommend Swahili as a language of instruction (Qorro, 2013), teachers, as well as parents, favor their children to be taught in English (Kiramba, 2018; Kanana, 2013). Most students are aware of the challenges of English being the language of instruction (Senkoro, 2005) but still prefer to be taught in English. These “perplexing results” (Senkoro, 2005, p. 13) may be traced back to social prestige (David-Erb, 2021), as being able to speak English in Tanzania is equated with being educated (Mapunda, 2022; Rugemalira, 2017; Petzell, 2012), with getting ahead in life (Cleghorn, 2005) and with economic value (Kamwangamalu, 2015; Kamwendo, 2009). The ruling elite, benefitting from this linguistically induced social stratification (Brock-Utne, 2015), has no interest in giving up its privileges (Brock-Utne, 2014; Heugh, 2006; UNDP, 2004). The exclusion of African languages in education, therefore,

created an intellectual distance (Prah, 2011) as well as communication and knowledge gaps (Ouane and Glanz, 2011) between the schooled and the rest of society (Qorro, 2013). This intellectual distance led to scholars' characterization of the African university as being alienated from its surroundings (Biao, 2014; Ouane and Glanz, 2010).

To counteract this alienation, numerous conferences were organized (UNESCO, 2011; Ouane and Glanz, 2010), in which the importance of African languages in education was highlighted and resolutions passed (Walter and Benson, 2012). However, the rhetoric has not kept up with actual implementation (Seti *et al.*, 2015), and when change does occur, it is too little and too slow (Heugh, 2006). Change is slow because the language debate represents a highly controversial (Johnson and Mbah, 2021), complex (Pawliková-Vilhanová, 2018) and political one (Nyanchoga, 2014). Inadequate knowledge of political actors (UNESCO, 2011; Storen, 2014) coupled with conflicting language policies (Ismail, 2007) and unclear responsibilities regarding the implementation of the SDGs in Tanzania (Jönsson and Bexell, 2021) further solidifies the "status quo maintenance syndrome" (Alidou and Brock-Utne, 2006, p. 29). The predominantly theoretical research output regarding the connection of ESD and language produced by scientists fails to inform decision-makers and leads to a lack of empirically grounded evidence (Ulmer and Wydra, 2022; Cleghorn, 2005). And finally, because the SDGs do not explicitly mention language as an important factor for their achievement, receiving funds for respective initiatives proves difficult, exacerbating the stalemate (Heleta and Bagus, 2020).

The SDGs, therefore, enter a complex language situation in which various interests collide. The scientifically well-established importance of language in development marks a stark contrast to the invisible (Footitt *et al.*, 2018) and ignored (Wolff, 2006) status attached to language. This juxtaposition of scientific importance versus factual neglect of language raises concerns regarding the achievement of target 4.7 until the year 2030. The following sections present the findings from the case study, followed by a discussion and a conclusion.

## Findings

A total of 56 participants filled the questionnaire, with a predominance of male (40) over female (16) students and graduates. Table 1 presents the academic background of participants, with the majority showing a background in environmental studies. Most participants were between 31 and 35 years of age (32%), followed by 36–40 years (26%) and 26–30 years (16%). The remaining participants were between 41 and 45 years (12%), older than 46 or younger than 25 years (7% each). The comparatively old age of participants can be explained by the educational focus of the university: because there are only Master's and PhD courses offered, participants at the lower end of the age spectrum are Bachelor graduates, making it less likely for them to be younger than 25 years.

**Table 1.**

Participants' academic background (percentages do not total 100 due to rounding)

No. of participants	%	Academic background
17	30	Environment, climate change, wildlife conservation, water management, agriculture
10	18	(Electrical) engineering
10	18	Computer Sciences, telecommunications
7	13	Natural Sciences (Biology, Chemistry)
5	9	Health and Medicine
5	9	Accountancy and Administration
2	4	Economics

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Out of 54 responses, 53 (98%) of participants affirmed knowing the sustainability concept, whereas one student declined (2%). Participants were subsequently asked to define sustainability in their own words, and 40 further elaborated their understanding: participants stated that sustainability includes the necessity to reconcile the needs of the current generation with upcoming generations (16), to use resources in a sustainable manner (6), to continue initiated projects instead of letting them perish (6), connecting sustainability to the SDGs (4) and to development in general (4) and the importance of development to have positive effects on the community (3). Participants' definitions, therefore, mainly focused on the social dimension, represented by generational justice and positive effects on the community, as opposed to the other dimensions of sustainability. One participant defined sustainability in a more general sense with a focus on the environmental sphere:

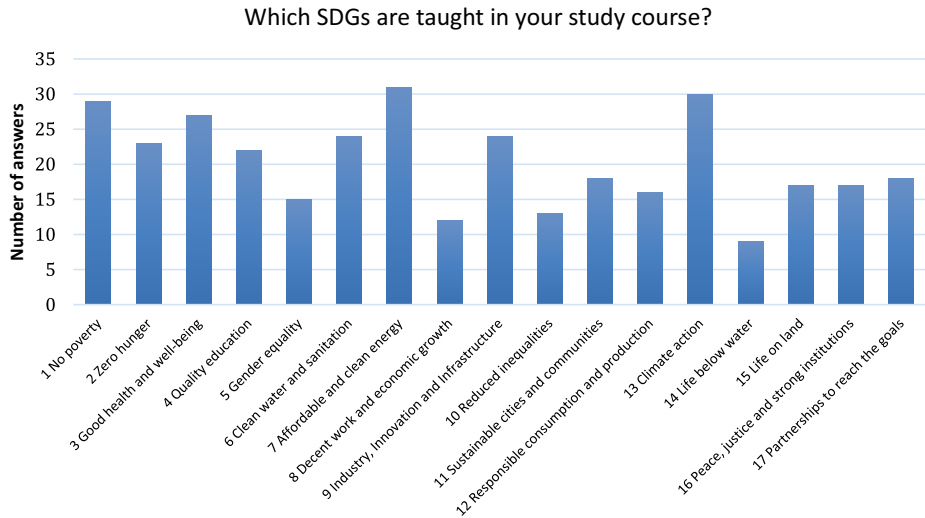
A system or thing is sustainable when it can be continuously maintained without the need to deplete natural resources or big environmental destruction [“Endelevu ni mfumo au kitu kinachoweza kudumishwa kwa muda bila hitaji la kumaliza maliasili au uharibifu mkubwa kwa mazingira.” Participant 41]

More than half of the participants (28) were taught about sustainability in primary and/or secondary school, with a strong focus on the environmental sphere (mentioned 17 times, including planting trees, organic agriculture, the importance of forests and national parks as well as the sustainable use of resources and water), energy (mentioned 11 times, including renewable energies) and intergenerational justice (mentioned six times). The other half (25) of participants stated they were not taught about sustainability in primary and/or secondary school.

The last items of this first section enquired whether sustainability and the SDGs are part of students' syllabus in university. Sustainability is part of the syllabus of 38 students (68%), again showing a strong focus on the environmental sphere (including environmental protection and pollution, biodiversity conservation, wildlife management and forestry such as planting trees and sustainable firewood), climate change (including clean energy, renewable energies and climate protocols), agriculture, development, social engagement/prosperity/stewardship and others (including entrepreneurship, food, health, education and city planning). Sixteen participants (29%) declined sustainability being part of their syllabus, with no answer from two participants. In contrast to sustainability, the SDGs are part of the university syllabus of 46 participants (85%). As depicted in [Figure 1](#), there was no clear indication of dominating SDGs but rather of neglected SDGs. Eight participants (15%) declined the SDGs being part of their syllabus, potentially indicating a missing link between sustainability and the SDGs.

Other places and institutions where students learned about sustainability and the SDGs were mentioned by 29 participants. Among these institutions are mostly former attended universities (11), as well as seminars and conferences (4) or social media (3). Participants also attended institutional events in which they were taught about sustainability and the SDGs (such as the Royal Academy of Engineering, the International Atomic Energy Agency, the National Environment Management Council, the National Institute of Transport or the Tanzania Agricultural Research Institute). Twenty-four participants declined having been taught about sustainability and the SDGs in other institutions before commencing their current studies.

The second part of the questionnaire investigated the integration of the SDGs in participants' research. Forty-one participants (73%) confirmed integrating at least one of the goals in their research, while seven participants declined (no answer from eight participants). The main focus of students' research lies on SDGs #3: *Good health and well-being*, #6: *Clean Water and Sanitation*, #7: *Affordable and clean energy* and #13 *Climate*



**Figure 1.**  
SDGs taught in  
participants'  
respective study  
course

action. Twinoburyo *et al.* (2019) stated that only goals #5 *Gender equality*, #13 *Climate action* and #15 *Life on land* are likely to meet the 2030 target, so participants' research focus can be seen as a way of creating knowledge in the other SDGs. However, participants do not include SDGs #8 *Decent work and economic growth* or #16 *Peace and justice and strong institutions*, in their research.

The third part of the questionnaire dealt with students' translation approaches. Thirty-eight participants stated they are using interviews (32), questionnaires (28), focus group discussions (26), observations (3) or a mix of those methods when researching in communities. When doing so, 15 participants stated they use exclusively Swahili, 12 participants use exclusively English, whereas 11 participants claimed using both languages in their research. Participants mostly translate the interviews and questionnaires themselves (39 participants), followed by the use of digital means such as *Google Translate* (27), professional services (5) or by being supported by their supervisor or friends (4). Furthermore, the majority of participants deemed language to be a very important or important (48) aspect when researching with communities. The options "Not very important" or "not important at all" were chosen by four participants. When asked for the reasons of their choice, participants highlighted the bridge function of language, enabling understanding between the researcher and the participants:

Language is important for [first] the researcher in order to ask the right questions, but also for those who are asked questions it is good to use a language they understand so they can answer correctly ["Lugha ni muhimu kwanza kwa ajili ya yule anayefanya utafiti kuuliza maswali yanayoeleweka, lakini pia kwa wanaoulizwa maswali ni vyema ikatumika lugha wanayoielewa ili waweze kujibu kwa ufasaha." Participant 54]

Speaking the same language increases understanding between the speaker and the listener of the respective issue that is being talked about and also leads to effectiveness, especially when those who are being taught infect others with their gained knowledge ["Kuzungumza kwa lugha moja kwa mzungumzaji na msikilizaji huongeza uelewa zaidi wa jambo linalozungumzwa na pia linaleta tija hasa pale ambapo waelimishwaji wakiambukiza elimu hiyo kwa watu wengine." Participant 27]



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The ensuing interviews investigated the awareness of sustainability and the SDGs among communities and focused on those 38 students who stated they research in communities and who were willing to be interviewed. In total, 14 interviews were conducted, ten with male and four with female interviewees. Students were interviewed considering their experiences with average citizens being aware of both sustainability and the SDGs, the estimated percentage of people aware and, finally, whether students think it is important for the average citizen to know about these concepts. In general, all interviewees stated that people outside of universities are unlikely to be aware of both concepts, in either English or Swahili. Students' estimates of people being aware of both concepts ranged between 0% and 40%, with most estimates being in the 10%–20% spectrum. One interviewee stated that both concepts are known to people who are working in the area of sustainability but not outside of that circle. This statement was backed up by another interviewee highlighting that the awareness and knowledge of both concepts depend on the sector of the community: in the student's experience, SDG #3 *Good health and Well Being* is partly known to health workers, whereas in other sectors, such as information and communications technologies, the SDGs are mostly unheard of. Another interviewee similarly highlighted that the importance of long-term planning is well-known in agriculture but is partly ignored for the sake of short-term benefits in the form of higher yields. This knowledge-behavior gap is well documented and known in the Western world as well. Another interviewee stated hearing about sustainability for the first time when commencing his/her Master's studies but was not aware of sustainability through lessons in either school or during Bachelor studies. The interviewee, therefore, assumed awareness among people who have not had the chance to attend higher education to be low.

All interviewees unanimously highlighted the need of people outside of universities to be taught about sustainability and suggested that this education could be realized in two ways: as part of formal education, they suggested both schools and universities teaching pupils about sustainability as early as a primary school for them growing up with the concept. Regarding possible informal ways, some students suggested making use of digital means such as smartphones as communication tools to spread awareness about the SDGs or via analog means such as magazines and newspapers. [Jönsson and Bexell \(2021\)](#) noted that the SDGs are mostly discussed in Tanzanian newspapers printed in English, as opposed to those printed in Swahili. The SDGs are therefore communicated in a medium most Tanzanians are unlikely to use. Experiences from the MDGs show they gained legitimacy in the eyes of the broader public through different community groups and leaders who made them “visible, understandable and meaningful in context” ([UNDP, 2016](#), p. 25). Learning from these experiences, the SDGs similarly need to be communicated through and portrayed in media commonly used by people to gain visibility.

## Discussion

Students and graduates, representing highly educated participants, show a high understanding regarding sustainability and the SDGs, and both concepts are part of participants' research as well as parts of their syllabi. Interestingly, participants' definitions of sustainability indicated a rather anthropocentric conception and are, therefore, in line with the *Our Common Future* report defining “sustainable” as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” ([Brundtland, 1987](#), p. 37). In contrast to their own socially focused conceptions, participants described sustainability education in schools as mainly geared toward the environmental sphere. Their conceptions, therefore, contrast [Kagawa \(2007\)](#) findings of students in the UK strongly associating sustainability with the environmental sphere. This

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difference in social interpretation versus the ecological focus in school may indicate differing emphases in sustainability concepts, with potentially differing approaches.

In contrast to students and graduates, people outside of universities seem to be mostly unaware of both sustainability and the SDGs. The range of interviewees' estimates regarding the percentage of people outside of universities who are aware about both concepts are even lower than findings by a study by [Selormey et al. \(2019\)](#), which indicated that around 31% of Tanzanians have heard about climate change, in either English or Swahili. The results of this study, therefore, corroborate [Manteaw's \(2012\)](#) and [Jönsson and Bexell's \(2021\)](#) argument that knowledge regarding the SDGs and sustainability has not reached beyond a limited circle of elites. Against the background of this limited penetration of sustainability awareness, several goals of the SDGs are unlikely to be reached, which supports [Twinoburyo et al.'s \(2019\)](#) rather pessimistic prospect stated in the introduction. The description of the SDGs as a high-sounding concept "crafted in the specialized parlance of development experts" ([Ighobor, 2016](#), p. 41); therefore, holds true, as the SDGs are failing to reach exactly those groups who are not to be left behind. Counteracting this situation calls for the integration of translating concepts into a language people understand, possibly by partnering with organizations such as *Translators without Borders*.

Participants are aware of these language challenges and mostly rely on their own skills and digital means when translating from English to Swahili. Some participants viewed themselves in the role of sustainability educators: two interviewees deemed their own translations to be the most fitting approach, arguing that students are the most familiar with the respective community they are researching in. They, therefore, have the best feeling for the existing knowledge and terms to use for the respective community to understand. Professional language agencies are likely to translate formally correct but possibly unfamiliar Swahili terms. Thus, imparting sustainability knowledge could fail not only by choosing the wrong language but also by using academic terms unfamiliar to the broader community. Furthermore, official translations are hard to come by as major international institutions seem to neglect translating the SDGs into local languages. The task of translating the SDGs is, therefore, shifted to private initiatives such as Ntiokam Divine's engagement to translate the SDGs into local African languages and vernaculars ([Ighobor, 2016](#)).

However, another interviewee highlighted that in spite of being unaware of the SDGs' existence, some communal people may already practice the SDGs. Other authors similarly argued that "not everything that occurs under the 'banner' of Sustainable Development is named as such" ([Lotz-Sisitka, 2011](#), p. 54). Almost three decades ago, [Davis and Ebbe \(1995\)](#), p. 10) remarked that while some languages "may not have specific terms for the modern concept of "sustainability", it is obvious that many traditional peoples had a sustainable relationship to the earth". In describing sustainability as a *modern concept*, [Davis and Ebbe \(1995\)](#) imply that sustainability is nothing new to cultures with a better understanding of the respective environment's functioning. It is rather the Global North that rediscovered, rebranded and globally disseminated this concept in the form of the SDGs. Against this background, the description of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs as a "global affirmation of the core values" of the European Union ([SDSN and IEEP, 2019](#), p. V) seems like a rather unfortunate wording, given there are cultures with a deeper understanding of the environment's function. Students could therefore function as a bridge between academia and communities and thereby support reaching target 4.7, which would be beneficial for two reasons: first, students have the ability to use both spoken and written word, which fosters exchange with people who

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may be unable to read (Wolff, 2016; Robinson, 1996). And second, sharing a similar cultural background and language, student sustainability educators are arguably perceived more positively than outsiders unfamiliar with local realities.

## Conclusion

This study investigated the sustainability understanding of Tanzanian students and graduates and enquired whether sustainability and the SDGs are known to the average citizen. The findings confirm the initial hypothesis of people outside of universities mostly being unaware of both concepts, rendering target 4.7 of the SDGs unlikely to be achieved until the year 2030. Development activities need to be connected to people's realities in order for people to perceive those activities as useful. The rather socially oriented sustainability understanding among participants would support such development on both the micro level, such as capacity building and the macro level, with the ongoing 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The SDGs and the *pledge to leave no one behind* remain empty concepts when the majority of people are not aware of their existence, which is interrelated with the way the SDGs are being communicated. Until there are major shifts from international institutions to integrate language into development efforts, we contend that the UNDP's (2018, p. 3) assertion that "no one will be left behind" needs to be complemented with "unless they are not sufficiently skilled in a former colonial language".

Considering various authors' calls to include African languages in development agendas were ignored, it seems promising to rather rely on grassroots efforts translating the SDGs into the respective local languages. If language is the difference "between working together and talking past each other" (Benjamin, 2014, p. 6), scholars need to focus on ways of including communities outside of academia. A litany of questions emerges regarding further research in this area: one of the key issues lies in bridging the gaps between academia and the average citizen. Instead of predominantly focusing on the connection between academia and industry, the relation between academia and politics and the successful transfer of scientific findings to the community level needs to be further investigated. Furthermore, a study by GUNi, IAU and AAU (2011) on Sustainable Development in African Universities warned that some ESD messages may be lost when indigenous languages are lost, leading to the question of how African languages could potentially contribute to sustainable development. There is no one size fits all solution for African countries facing similar yet unique development challenges (Negash, 2005). However, if the promise of the SDGs is to be kept, creating awareness among people outside of academia requires suitable linguistic approaches in any outreach activity.

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### Further reading

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