Transforming Universities for the Sustainable Development Goals: Institutionalizing Government and Community Partnerships in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the evolving role of Nigerian universities in advancing the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), with particular emphasis on the institutionalization of partnerships with governments and communities. While evidence indicates that over 90% of Nigerian higher education institutions are aware of the SDGs and more than 80% are familiar with Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), this awareness has not consistently translated into systematic institutional action. Many universities still treat SDG implementation as a governmental responsibility, resulting in fragmented, ad hoc initiatives with limited long-term impact. Nonetheless, emerging models—such as SDSN Nigeria at the University of Ibadan, Ebonyi State University's Directorate of Research and Innovation, CIFAL Nigeria at Rivers State University, and Afe Babalola University's Hydrogen Research Institute—demonstrate how universities can integrate sustainability into curricula, research, governance, and community outreach. The paper identifies six critical barriers constraining the transformative role of Nigerian universities: chronic underfunding and bureaucratic bottlenecks, regulatory rigidity, capacity gaps, misaligned academic incentive structures, power imbalances in partnerships, and risks of partisan political interference. Drawing on Nigerian and international literature, it argues that addressing these challenges requires systemic reforms that embed partnerships into the core functions of universities. Recommendations include establishing a joint SDG Innovation Fund, reforming regulatory frameworks, investing in staff and student capacity building, aligning academic reward systems with developmental engagement, institutionalizing participatory governance mechanisms with communities, and safeguarding university neutrality through ethical guidelines and independent monitoring. The study concludes that by institutionalizing partnerships and aligning their mandates with societal needs, Nigerian universities can move beyond rhetorical awareness of the SDGs to become anchor institutions for sustainable development—bridging the gap between knowledge, policy, and practice, and accelerating Nigeria's progress toward the 2030 Agenda.

Keywords: *Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Nigerian universities, institutional partnerships, higher education, policy reforms; innovation*

INTRODUCTION

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development presents more than just a checklist of goals; it lays out a holistic and interconnected vision for human progress. Poverty reduction, quality education, improved health outcomes, lasting peace, and environmental sustainability are not separate issues to be addressed in isolation. Instead, they are tightly woven together, each one influencing and depending on the others (United Nations, 2017). Efforts to tackle them in silos often fall short, as evidence consistently shows that fragmented approaches fail to create meaningful or lasting change. Real progress requires partnerships that cut across boundaries, bringing together academia,

policymakers, civil society organizations, and the private sector to collaborate in more systematic and coordinated ways (Griggs, 2017; United Nations, 2016).

Within this landscape, universities stand out as uniquely positioned actors. As El-Jardali (2018) notes, their combination of research expertise, institutional credibility, and convening power enables them to play a leading role in advancing cross-sectoral SDG implementation. This role is particularly crucial in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), where universities face the dual challenge of maintaining their traditional responsibilities in teaching and research while also reorienting themselves toward broader societal engagement (Schendel & McCowan, 2016). In these contexts, the SDGs are not only a global framework to align with but also a call to action—an ethical responsibility to use academic knowledge in service of the public good. At the same time, they present an opportunity for universities to shift from being producers of knowledge in isolation to active co-creators of solutions, working side by side with governments, local communities, and industry.

However, the way these collaborations are structured matters greatly. Treating university–government–community partnerships as short-term or project-based initiatives often leads to weak outcomes. Once donor funding ends or political attention shifts, many of these efforts collapse, leaving little long-term impact and rarely influencing policy at scale (El-Jardali, 2018). By contrast, institutionalised partnerships—those that are embedded into the very fabric of universities and policymaking structures—are far more effective. They create stable channels for regular knowledge exchange, nurture trust over time, and ensure that academic insights remain relevant to policy and community needs. In other words, moving beyond ad hoc collaborations to sustained, institutional frameworks is essential for turning the SDGs from aspirational goals into lived realities.

Current State of SDG Awareness and Implementation in Nigerian Universities

A significant majority of Nigerian universities demonstrate strong awareness of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Surveys reveal that about 92.3% of higher education institutions recognize the importance of the SDGs, while 84.6% indicate familiarity with the principles of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) (Nwogbo, 2019). This suggests that universities are not only aware of global sustainability discourses but also understand the educational dimension required to achieve them. However, this awareness has not consistently translated into structured institutional action. For example, nearly 80% of universities in Nigeria still lack comprehensive strategic plans specifically tailored toward SDG implementation, and approximately 74% have no immediate plans to integrate the SDGs into their curricula (Nwogbo, 2019). Instead, many institutions continue to view SDG achievement as a governmental responsibility rather than a shared mandate, resulting in fragmented and ad-hoc interventions instead of systematic, long-term strategies.

Nevertheless, a few universities have begun to stand out as models of best practice. Some have established dedicated SDG hubs, sustainability centres, or research networks that foster interdisciplinary research and cross-sectoral collaboration. These platforms serve as incubators for innovative solutions, policy advocacy, and partnerships with government agencies, non-governmental organizations, and local communities. Such institutionalized efforts highlight the potential of universities to serve as anchor institutions in driving Nigeria's sustainable development agenda when commitments are properly aligned with resources and policy frameworks.

Environmental Education (EE) has been widely recognized as a particularly important mechanism for embedding sustainability values and practices in Nigerian higher education. National policies, including frameworks on sustainable development, emphasize the centrality of EE in fostering environmentally responsible graduates who can address local and global sustainability challenges (Babalola & Olawuyi, 2021). Despite this recognition, the operationalization of EE within universities is constrained by persistent challenges. Chief among these is inadequate government funding for the education sector, which limits the resources available to develop curricula, train academic staff, and expand research and community engagement in sustainability. Without adequate financial and infrastructural support, embedding EE and broader SDG themes into higher education risks being symbolic rather than transformative.

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Broader analyses of Nigeria's SDG trajectory since their adoption in 2015 further underscore these gaps. While some progress has been recorded in areas such as gender equality and climate action awareness, persistent deficits remain in poverty eradication, access to quality healthcare, infrastructure provision, and inclusive economic growth. These enduring challenges illustrate the insufficiency of government-led approaches alone and reinforce the imperative for universities to assume stronger institutional roles in SDG implementation (Oweibia, Elemuwa, Akpan, Elemuwa, Oruikor, Tarimobowei, Okoho, & Ononiwu, 2024). By leveraging their research capacities, human capital development functions, and community engagement mandates, universities can act as critical catalysts in bridging the implementation gaps and accelerating Nigeria's progress toward the 2030 Agenda.

Transforming Roles through Institutionalized Partnerships

Nigerian universities are increasingly evolving beyond their traditional roles of teaching and research by institutionalizing partnerships that strategically leverage academic resources to foster collaboration with both government agencies and local communities. This transformation directly aligns with SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals), which emphasizes the importance of multi-stakeholder cooperation in achieving sustainable development outcomes. These institutionalized partnerships represent a shift from ad-hoc engagements to structured, long-term collaborations that integrate the strengths of academia with the policy priorities of government and the practical needs of communities.

Partnerships with Governments

Several Nigerian universities have gone beyond rhetorical commitments by formalizing partnerships with federal and state governments, as well as with international organizations, to advance SDG-aligned initiatives. One of the most prominent examples is SDSN Nigeria, hosted by the University of Ibadan since 2013. This platform mobilizes a broad coalition of universities, research institutions, NGOs, and government agencies to collectively address national sustainability priorities, including quality education, food security, public health, and sustainable energy (Sustainable Development Solutions Network, 2024). Through active collaboration with ministries such as Education, Agriculture, and Environment, SDSN Nigeria has been instrumental in reshaping university curricula to reflect sustainability values, supporting the transition to sustainable food systems, and implementing carbon offsetting schemes. Its expansion has been notable; between 2022 and 2023, five new knowledge institutions joined the network, further strengthening its geographic and disciplinary reach. Importantly, the network engages directly with youth through programs that have impacted over 200 communities across all 36 states of Nigeria, demonstrating the power of coordinated, multi-stakeholder partnerships in scaling SDG initiatives nationwide.

Similarly, Ebonyi State University (EBSU) has institutionalized its SDG commitments through the establishment of a Directorate of Research, Innovation, and Commercialization. This directorate ensures that all academic curricula across the institution are aligned with SDG objectives, while mandating that graduate research outputs directly contribute to sustainable development solutions (United Nations, n.d.). Beyond curriculum reforms, EBSU has cultivated partnerships aimed at community outreach, providing interventions in areas such as agriculture, health, and environmental management. These outreach programs are not only responsive to pressing societal needs but are also monitored through annual progress reports—documented between 2012 and 2015—ensuring accountability and continuity.

A landmark development occurred in January 2025 when Rivers State University partnered with the United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR) to establish CIFAL Nigeria—a capacity-building hub dedicated to training public servants, policymakers, and local leaders in governance and sustainable development (United Nations Institute for Training and Research, 2025). Through a formal Cooperation Agreement, CIFAL Nigeria institutionalizes SDG advancement in critical areas such as health systems strengthening, inclusive economic growth, and sustainable community

development. This hub not only aligns academic expertise with public sector needs but also provides a structured mechanism for integrating SDG-focused knowledge into governance practices across Nigeria and the wider West African region.

On a global scale, Afe Babalola University has emerged as a leading institution in advancing SDG 7 (Affordable and Clean Energy). The university was ranked first worldwide in this category in the 2024 *Times Higher Education Impact Rankings*, a recognition driven largely by the pioneering work of its Hydrogen Research Institute (Baty, 2024). This institute is spearheading innovations in renewable hydrogen technologies and shaping international policy discussions on clean energy transitions. The university's achievements underscore the potential for Nigerian institutions to not only contribute to national development but also lead in global sustainability discourse and technological advancement. Collectively, these examples highlight how Nigerian universities are gradually moving from fragmented, ad-hoc interventions toward more structured, institutionalized approaches in advancing the SDGs. By embedding sustainability into curricula, fostering multi-stakeholder partnerships, creating dedicated research hubs, and influencing policy at both national and international levels, these institutions are redefining their roles as key drivers of sustainable development. Their initiatives provide a blueprint for other universities to follow, demonstrating that when higher education institutions commit to institutional frameworks, they can meaningfully accelerate progress toward the 2030 Agenda.

Partnerships with Communities

Community engagement has increasingly become a cornerstone of the transformative role of Nigerian universities, with Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) shifting from traditional functions of teaching and research toward deliberate social impact. This transformation underscores the recognition that universities must extend beyond the classroom to serve as catalysts for community development and local solutions to global challenges. Nigerian HEIs are therefore encouraged to prioritize community-oriented approaches, as evidenced by case studies where institutions actively deliver digital resources, promote sustainable agricultural practices, and implement community-based health initiatives (Popoola, Ighodaro, & Nkonki-Mandleni, 2025). Such interventions not only contribute to immediate social improvements but also build trust between universities and their surrounding communities, fostering a sense of shared ownership of sustainable development efforts.

A notable example is the University of Maiduguri's SDG School, which collaborates on sustainability education with international partners. Funded by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), the initiative extends its reach to communities in Abuja and beyond, embedding sustainability learning and awareness into community life (Haruna & Micheals, 2021). This demonstrates the capacity of Nigerian universities to leverage global partnerships in addressing local development challenges while aligning with SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals).

Similarly, academic libraries across Nigeria have redefined their roles as SDG delivery hubs, particularly in rural and underserved communities. For instance, libraries in Imo State have expanded beyond their conventional mandate by organizing sensitization campaigns, collaborating with health-focused NGOs, and repackaging critical information in accessible formats (Chukwu, Emezie, Njoku, & Abanum, 2022). Such initiatives bridge significant gaps left by limited government outreach, thereby highlighting how academic institutions can institutionalize sustainable development through non-traditional entry points like information services.

Covenant University exemplifies the institutionalization of SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals) through its consistent policy engagement and collaborative initiatives. By fostering partnerships with governments, private actors, and civil society organizations, Covenant University underscores the value of cross-sector collaboration as a driver of sustainable development (Covenant University, n.d.). Its approach reflects a deliberate strategy of embedding SDG principles into governance, research, and outreach, providing a model that other Nigerian universities could adapt to institutionalize their community impact. Beyond the Nigerian context, broader African experiences further reinforce the

importance of university-community partnerships. Empirical studies highlight how universities across the continent, including Nigeria, have advanced community health through nursing outreach programs and innovative solutions addressing nutrition, mental health, and disaster preparedness (Filho et al., 2023). These initiatives emphasize the mutual benefits of such partnerships: communities gain access to specialized knowledge and resources, while universities strengthen their relevance, legitimacy, and capacity for applied research. Importantly, these partnerships foster feedback loops where community needs inform academic inquiry, thereby ensuring that research outputs remain contextually grounded and socially responsive.

Despite these encouraging practices, challenges persist. Weak university-community relationships in some regions, driven by mistrust, limited communication, or lack of consistent engagement structures, often hinder the scalability of these initiatives. Moreover, resource constraints and inadequate institutional frameworks can reduce sustainability, making projects overly dependent on external funding or individual champions rather than embedded in university policy. Addressing these barriers requires deliberate strategies such as establishing permanent community engagement offices within universities, integrating service learning into curricula, and developing co-financing mechanisms with government and donor agencies.

International and Cross-Sector Collaborations

International cooperation significantly strengthens Nigeria's sustainable development efforts by providing financial resources, technical expertise, and policy guidance. The country partners with multilateral and bilateral institutions such as the World Bank, USAID, and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) to support initiatives in critical sectors, including agriculture, healthcare delivery, renewable energy, and infrastructure development (Adiele, Pepper, Animashaun, Moses, Aiwekhoe, Aliyu, Agu, Nnaji, Igeleke, Agbah, & Israel, 2024). These collaborations are particularly valuable in filling domestic funding gaps and accelerating the deployment of innovative solutions. Nigerian universities, while not always explicitly foregrounded in these agreements, frequently contribute indirectly through research consultancies, policy dialogues, and collaborative projects embedded within such frameworks. For instance, academics are often commissioned as technical experts or local project leads, yet systematic documentation of these university-led roles in international cooperation remains sparse, underscoring a gap in both practice and scholarship.

The Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) Africa provides a regional model of how universities can be more directly integrated into national and cross-border SDG strategies. With flagship centers such as the SDSN at Addis Ababa University in Ethiopia, the network demonstrates how academic institutions can coordinate policy advice, data analytics, and stakeholder training to guide governments—Benin's use of SDSN input for SDG policy alignment being a notable example. This offers valuable lessons for Nigeria, where universities could similarly position themselves as policy advisors and monitoring hubs within existing international cooperation projects, thereby ensuring local ownership and contextual adaptation of global frameworks.

Global mappings of university–community partnerships further emphasize the value of transdisciplinary approaches, where researchers, students, policymakers, and community stakeholders co-create knowledge and interventions for SDG advancement. Studies highlight how such partnerships contribute meaningfully to SDGs such as quality education, climate action, and sustainable cities by embedding sustainability principles in curricula, engaging students in real-world projects, and producing applied research with immediate community benefits (Filho et al., 2023). Importantly, these mappings recommend institutionalizing joint research programs, service-learning modules, and student-led sustainability initiatives as standard practice within universities. By formalizing such approaches, Nigerian universities can bridge the current gap between awareness and action, leverage international cooperation more effectively, and establish themselves as indispensable partners in national and regional SDG frameworks.

Principles and Mechanisms for Institutionalisation

Building long-lasting partnerships requires both cultural and structural change within universities. Literature identifies several mechanisms that reinforce institutionalisation:

- Leadership Commitment: Strong support from top executives and the integration of engagement into strategic plans are vital (Sandmann & Platen, 2009). Establishing dedicated offices or appointing senior leaders to oversee engagement ensures visibility and accountability (El-Jardali et al., 2018).
- Revised Incentive Systems: Promotion and tenure often reward research output over engagement. To shift behavior, universities must reward policy briefs, technical advice, and community-based work alongside publications (Saltmarsh et al., 2009).
- Dedicated Funding: Seed funds and co-financed grants provide resources for pilot initiatives and lower barriers for collaboration.
- Accessible Platforms: Universities should establish one-stop offices that link government and community needs to relevant expertise.
- Reciprocal Staff Exchanges: Fellowship schemes, internships, and temporary secondments between academia and government foster empathy and mutual understanding (Greenhalgh, 2016).
- Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL): Establishing clear indicators—such as policies influenced, communities reached, or knowledge products delivered—ensures accountability and helps measure impact.

Operational Pathways for Engagement

Institutional structures must translate into practical, impactful actions. Universities can contribute to SDG implementation through the following pathways:

1. Knowledge Brokerage: Producing rapid evidence syntheses and tailored policy briefs enables policymakers to act on evidence during critical decision windows (Turner & El-Jardali, 2017).
2. Convening Neutral Platforms: By hosting dialogues and policy labs, universities provide safe spaces where diverse stakeholders can negotiate trade-offs and co-design solutions.
3. Integrated Research and Indicators: Universities can pioneer systems modelling and integrated SDG monitoring to capture cross-sectoral effects.
4. Curriculum Innovation: Programs should embed systems thinking, policy engagement, and experiential learning to prepare graduates for SDG-related careers.
5. Community Co-production: Participatory research that involves communities as partners enhances legitimacy and ensures solutions are contextually relevant (Greenhalgh et al., 2016).
6. Advocacy and Ethical Leadership: Universities should not only provide evidence but also advocate responsibly where policies neglect equity or justice.

Barriers and constraints: Evidence from Nigerian literature

Funding and Bureaucratic Bottlenecks: One of the most persistent challenges confronting Nigerian universities in advancing the SDGs is chronic underfunding of research and community engagement. Despite the establishment of intervention agencies such as the Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TETFund), resources allocated for sustainability-related research and extension services remain insufficient to cover the scope of demand. Moreover, even where grants are approved, delays in disbursement, stringent reporting requirements, and limited flexibility in grant utilization often disrupt project timelines and weaken continuity (Ubogu & Isreal, 2023; Nwogbo, 2019). These constraints make it difficult for universities to build long-term partnerships with governments and communities, as partners often require predictable financing and timely execution of agreed initiatives.

Regulatory Rigidity: The regulatory environment governing higher education in Nigeria, largely overseen by the National Universities Commission (NUC) and other agencies, is often criticized

for its rigidity. Studies note that cumbersome approval processes, excessive bureaucratic oversight, and prescriptive compliance mechanisms can discourage universities from experimenting with innovative approaches to SDG-focused engagement (Agbabiaka & Albert, 2025). For instance, initiatives that require rapid piloting or adaptive management in collaboration with local governments and communities often stall due to slow administrative approvals. This rigidity hinders responsiveness to local needs and diminishes opportunities for universities to function as agile partners in sustainable development.

Capacity Gaps: Beyond financial and regulatory constraints, Nigerian universities face significant capacity challenges. Many academic and administrative staff lack formal training in community engagement, project management, and knowledge translation, which are essential for translating research into actionable solutions (Ogunode & Akuh, 2024). Without these skills, partnership projects often remain academic in nature—producing research outputs that may not be accessible, usable, or sustainable for community stakeholders. This undermines trust and reduces the long-term viability of university–community collaborations.

Mismatch of Incentives: The academic reward system in Nigeria continues to privilege traditional scholarly outputs, such as peer-reviewed journal publications and conference presentations, over community service or impact-driven research. This misalignment discourages staff from investing time and energy into community partnerships, as such activities contribute little to career advancement or tenure evaluations (Onwuemele, 2018). As a result, even when universities establish engagement frameworks, faculty participation tends to be limited or inconsistent.

Power Imbalances: Another barrier is the imbalance of power between universities, government agencies, donors, and local communities. In many cases, community perspectives are overshadowed by the priorities of external funders or institutional leadership. Projects may therefore reflect donor-driven agendas rather than locally defined needs, resulting in low levels of community ownership and sustainability. Such dynamics risk alienating the very communities that universities are meant to serve, undermining the legitimacy and effectiveness of engagement efforts.

Risks of Partisan Politics: Finally, universities in Nigeria operate within a highly politicized environment, which creates risks of being drawn into partisan disputes. When university-led initiatives align too closely with the agenda of ruling political parties or particular government officials, they may lose credibility with opposition groups or community members who perceive them as politically biased. This not only threatens the neutrality of the university as an academic institution but also jeopardizes the sustainability of partnerships when political leadership changes.

CONCLUSION

The pursuit of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Nigeria requires a fundamental rethinking of the roles and responsibilities of universities. While significant awareness of the SDGs exists across Nigerian higher education institutions, the translation of this awareness into sustained institutional action remains limited. Too often, universities have viewed SDG implementation as a government-led task, resulting in fragmented, project-based interventions with limited long-term impact. Yet, as evidence from both Nigeria and international practice demonstrates, universities are uniquely positioned to serve as anchor institutions for sustainable development, bridging the critical interface between science, policy, and society. Institutionalized partnerships—with governments, communities, and international stakeholders—are central to realizing this potential. When universities embed SDG-focused collaboration into their governance structures, curricula, research agendas, and community engagement strategies, they create durable mechanisms for advancing national development priorities. Examples such as SDSN Nigeria at the University of Ibadan, Ebonyi State University's Directorate of Research and Innovation, CIFAL Nigeria at Rivers State University, and Afe Babalola University's Hydrogen Research Institute highlight how Nigerian universities can lead not only in local problem-solving but also in shaping global sustainability discourses. Similarly, community-centered initiatives—from the University of Maiduguri's SDG School to rural academic library outreach

in Imo State—illustrate how universities can foster trust, deliver tangible benefits, and empower communities as co-creators of knowledge and solutions. At the same time, persistent barriers—including chronic underfunding, regulatory rigidity, capacity gaps, mismatched incentives, power imbalances, and risks of politicization—continue to constrain universities' transformative roles. Addressing these barriers requires systemic reforms: revising incentive structures to reward engagement and policy impact, establishing co-financing mechanisms with government and donors, embedding community engagement offices in universities, and adopting flexible regulatory frameworks that enable innovation. Equally important is the need for universities to safeguard their neutrality, ensuring that partnerships serve broad societal interests rather than partisan political agendas.

RECOMMENDATION

1. Establish a joint SDG Innovation Fund managed by universities, government, and private partners to provide direct, flexible financing for university–community projects while cutting down bureaucratic delays.
2. Reform accreditation and approval frameworks to grant universities more autonomy in piloting SDG-focused initiatives without excessive administrative restrictions.
3. Invest in continuous training programmes for staff and students on community engagement, project management, and interdisciplinary research to enhance universities' ability to drive SDG implementation.
4. Integrate community impact and SDG contributions into promotion and appraisal systems so that academic staff are rewarded not only for publications but also for developmental partnerships.
5. Institutionalize participatory governance structures where communities have equal representation and decision-making power in partnership planning, execution, and evaluation.
6. Introduce non-partisan ethical guidelines and independent monitoring boards to protect university partnerships from political interference and ensure focus on sustainable development outcomes.

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