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The University as a Civic Agent: Promoting Civic Engagement and the UN SDGs in Northeastern Brazil

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Much civic engagement pedagogy research is conducted in developed countries or with study abroad students from developed countries. Thus, there is less research regarding civic engagement pedagogy in, for, and by institutions in developing countries, which could mean a lack of exploration of civic engagement education on international development initiatives from a developing country's perspective. This chapter demonstrates how universities in developing countries can become civic agents and contribute to the promotion of the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by working with civil society, the private sector, and public administrators. It demonstrates how a community outreach project developed by a university in northeastern Brazil contributed to meeting the University's civic responsibilities and implementing the SDGs, indirectly benefiting the citizenry in the region. This was achieved by establishing the crucial connection between the global agenda and local needs and realities through training of key actors and building fertile, institutionalized partnerships between the UN, university, civil society, and public actors.

KEYWORDS: Civil Society and Development; Civic Engagement; Service-Learning; Sustainable Development Goals.

Introduction

While a great deal of civic engagement pedagogy research has been conducted in developed countries, there is less research regarding civic engagement pedagogy in, for, and by institutions in developing countries, which could mean a lack of exploration of civic engagement education on international development initiatives from a developing country's perspective. The discourse on civic engagement pedagogy has largely focused on such issues as service-learning and voter drives, but there is less discussion about global-level initiatives, including the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). When combined with the fact that civic engagement pedagogy is largely focused on developed countries in the global North, the impact of the UN's Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which ran from 2000–2015, and their follow-up, the SDGs on civic engagement in developing countries lacks attention in the literature. This gap is surprising, given the potential impact of these initiatives on society in developing countries

and how, to be successful in any country, the SDGs require broad public participation and cannot be achieved by governments' sporadic adoption of a set of initiatives. In this chapter, we present a service-learning initiative developed at the Federal University of Paraíba (UFPB) that was based on the recognition of: (1) the importance and richness of the academic debate on development strategies and the roots of underdevelopment in Brazil; (2) the role played by higher education institutions (HEI) in the production and dissemination of qualified scientific and technological knowledge to society; and (3) the need for greater civic engagement in the dissemination and implementation of the SDG agenda.

This case study focuses on a service-learning project which recognized the relevance of civil society's contribution to the implementation of the SDGs and sought to disseminate the SDG agenda's content among civil society organizations, social movements, public managers, and the private sector in the Brazilian northeast. The knowledge dissemination carried out in the initiative was executed by undergraduate students engaged in the project and supervised by academics. This project's immediate goals were to disseminate the SDGs' agenda and encourage its appropriation by key local actors able to influence its adoption in a way which is aligned to the needs and demands of the region. Student participants helped the project to succeed while learning about sustainable development and participatory democracy. It also allowed the establishment of partnerships between our university and some civil society organizations, public agencies, and policy-makers, leading to the creation of the Public Policy and Sustainable Development Center, through which further partnerships and civic engagement are developing.

This chapter has three main sections. The first presents the context where the project was developed, the northeastern region of Brazil, and its political and economic conditions. It also reviews the context of the UN's development of the SDGs and examines the connection between the SDGs and citizen participation, highlighting the importance of localizing the UN's 2030 agenda to achieve global and local sustainable development. The second section presents the community engagement project developed by the Department of International Relations at UFPB with the aim of contributing to the implementation of the UN's SDGs through civic engagement. It details the process of structuring the project, the various actions developed as part of it, some of the challenges encountered in this process, and the results achieved.

These explanations are followed by a discussion of how HEIs can act as civic agents and contribute to promoting global-local civic engagement and the SDGs' local implementation, establishing the crucial connection between the global agenda and local needs and realities. Considering the transformative potential of actions developed within the Brazilian higher education environment, it is argued that universities in developing countries can and should play a significant role in promoting civic engagement and sustainable development. This potential is considered in relation to the challenges which emerged during the project's execution and are connected to the limitations faced by a federal HEI in a shifting political context, highlighting the limits which bottom-up civic action may encounter in a federation like Brazil. The chapter demonstrates how all universities can advance their commitments to civic engagement by performing their traditional academic functions grounded in the needs of the communities where they are situated.

Civic Engagement and Development in Northeastern Brazil

While Brazil might be associated with a mix of tropical forests and beautiful beaches with white sand and blue sea, this continental country is complex. Brazil has one of the largest biological reserves in its forests, the largest freshwater reserve in the world, and an Atlantic coastline of almost 7,500 kilometers. However, it is heterogeneous socially and culturally, has considerable geographical, climatic, and environmental diversity, and faces many economic, political, and social challenges. The Brazilian Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita income for 2019 was US \$8,717. While this level places it among the highest GDP per capita in Latin America, it is far from the average of Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) countries, at US \$39,485.90.¹ Brazil faces high rates of inequality, which are reflected in some social indicators, e.g.,

life expectancy overall in Brazil is 75.9 years,² but these numbers vary widely between cities and are lower for rural populations. According to the 2010 census, while the national urban average Human Development Index (HDI) is high (0.75), in rural areas the HDI is medium (0.586).³

The Brazilian northeast, the region of Brazil where the project presented in this chapter was carried out, has important characteristics which are relevant for a better understanding of the potential that university community engagement has to foster civic engagement, but also its limitations and challenges. It is a region with more than 50 million inhabitants distributed among nine states and 1,554,000 sq km, which includes biomes ranging from the Atlantic Forest in the coastal region to semi-arid areas inland. The region also faces important socio-economic problems—such as the persistence of pockets of poverty, especially in large cities' agglomerations and in the regions with a more arid climate. The states in this region have high levels of social inequality, infant mortality, and underemployment, and are poorer with a per capita income that is less than half the national average.⁴

Table 1. Human Development Index (HDI) of Brazilian Locations Compared to Other Countries

Brazilian location	Brazilian location's HDI	Other countries' HDI	Other countries
São Caetano do Sul (SP)	0.862	0.861	Estonia
Águas de São Pedro (SP)	0.854		
Distrito Federal	0.824	0.828	Hungary
São Paulo	0.783	0.782	Bulgaria
Brazil	0.755	0.756	Mexico
		0.754	Georgia
<i>Rio Grande do Norte</i>	0.684	0.684	Indonesia
<i>Ceará</i>	0.682		
<i>Pernambuco</i>	0.673		
<i>Sergipe</i>	0.665		
<i>Bahia</i>	0.660		
<i>Paraíba</i>	0.658	0.631	Nicaragua
<i>Piauí</i>	0.645		
<i>Maranhão</i>	0.639		
<i>Alagoas</i>	0.631		
Fernando Falcão (MA)	0.443	0.442	Ethiopia
Melgaço (PA)	0.418	0.419	Mali

Table created from the 2013 Atlas of Human Development in Brazil, available at: <https://www.br.undp.org/content/brazil/pt/home/idho/rankings/idhm-municipios-2010.html>

Table 1 shows the socioeconomic situation of the Brazilian northeastern region contextually, comparing the HDI of the states (in italics) in the region with the Brazilian average, while also highlighting the extremes found in Brazilian municipalities. Including the four tiers of human development found in Brazilian localities, the table illustrates the socio-economic heterogeneity and inequalities found within the country with HDIs comparable to OECD and low-income states.

All states in the northeast have a HDI below the Brazilian average, which is 0.755. The state of *Rio Grande do Norte*, which has the highest HDI in the region, compares with the HDI in Indonesia, while *Alagoas*, the state with the lowest HDI in the northeast, is similar to Nicaragua. The extremes which characterize Brazil are also featured: while *São Caetano do Sul* and *Águas de São Pedro*, two municipalities in the state of *São Paulo*, and the Federal District and the State of *São Paulo* have a

very high or high HDI similar to that of European countries, the municipalities of *Melgaço* (in the state of *Pará*) and *Fernando Falcão* (in *Maranhão*) have a low level of development similar to that of less developed countries. The disparities which characterize Brazilian locations indicate the inadequacy of top-down and one-size-fits-all approaches to promoting development. To foster development in lower HDI regions such as the northeast and reduce regional inequalities, the specificities of each region—and even municipalities—must be considered. Also, to acknowledge the connection between social capital and inequality,⁵ bottom-up solutions supported by local civic engagement must be at the center of development programs.

An important issue is the role of education. Brazilian education indicators are the lowest score in the country's HDI, and the indicators tend to be lower in the northeast. In 2010, for example, while Brazilian municipal HDI was high (0.727), the life expectancy index was very high (0.816), income was high (0.739), and education was medium (0.637). In the northeast, the municipal HDI was medium (0.663), while the education index was low (0.569).⁶ The Brazilian illiteracy rate (for persons aged 15 or older) in 2017 was 7.1% of the national population, while the northeastern average was around 15%. While around 14% of all Brazilians aged 25 or above have completed higher education, the average in the region is less than 10%.⁷ The lower education rates and development indicators in northeastern Brazil highlight the importance of focusing on education and on universities as institutions which can promote development.

Brazilian HEIs are usually divided according to their funding and their organization. In terms of academic organization, HEIs can be universities, university centers, or colleges.⁸ While colleges are not autonomous, universities enjoy didactic-scientific, administrative, financial, and property management autonomy,⁹ even though they are dependent on public resources. In terms of financing, HEIs can be private or public, the latter being funded by governmental resources. Public HEIs can be federal, state, or municipal, depending on which level of public administration provides the resources for their maintenance. In public institutions, the education is completely free, while in private HEIs the funding comes mostly from the payment of tuition fees.¹⁰

Brazilian HEIs, especially public universities, take on a role which surpasses their educational responsibility. They develop their formative missions by embracing their social commitments to educating citizens and cultivating their civic engagement, reducing inequalities, creating opportunities, and promoting development while constructing and preserving cultural identities.¹¹ These goals are supported by the constitutionally established principle of inseparability between teaching, research, and community outreach,¹² which underlines the connection between the University and its social, economic, and political context. This principle emphasizes the importance of providing an academic education which prepares students to enter the job market, but also contributes to solving social issues in line with local demands and specificities. It encourages production of high-quality academic and scientific knowledge conducive to overcoming structural socio-economic problems in Brazilian society such as poverty and inequality.

These three dimensions of academic activity—teaching, research, and community outreach—form a tripod which constitutes, according to article 207 of the 1988 Brazilian Constitution, the fundamental basis of Brazilian higher education and a duty of the federal higher education system. They must be understood as complementary but autonomous aspects of a university's mission, necessary to guide a competent, ethical, and socially engaged university which acknowledges its civic responsibilities.¹³

Through their research activities, universities are central to the production of innovative scientific and technological knowledge. Universities can act as catalysts for innovation and knowledge generation, and, as the project presented in this chapter demonstrates, they can develop new approaches, solutions, and technologies in collaboration with local communities through academic outreach. In this context, the accumulation of expertise, structure, equipment, and qualified personnel which universities promote through regular academic activities can contribute in an efficient and multidisciplinary way to deal with contemporary challenges and barriers that currently limit sustainable development.

Just as education has an important role to play, so too has civil society, which has played an

increasingly important role in the promotion of development in recent decades.¹⁴ Although this participatory aspect was left out in the formulation of the UN's MDGs in the 1990s,¹⁵ the Millennium Declaration urged governments to partner with civil society. The importance of greater and more effective civic engagement was also noted in the UN's evaluation of the progress made by the MDGs and embraced as a core element in the following 2030 agenda, which highlighted the need to expand the political participatory process and establish more effective mechanisms for civil society involvement as the UN formulated the SDGs.¹⁶

The 2030 Agenda recognizes the importance of localizing¹⁷ the SDGs for them to be effective, that is, translating the global agenda into policies tailored to meet specific local realities.¹⁸ Localizing involves connecting the international, national, and subnational levels (regional and municipal) so that the global guidelines are seen in the light of national norms and aligned to the specific needs and demands identified at the local level. To achieve a civically engaged bottom-up approach, prioritizing local action is necessary through strengthening the capacities of local communities to engage in civic action, cultivating local governments' material and human resources, mobilizing political will, and developing institutional and legal frameworks at the local, regional, and federal levels.¹⁹

Brazil has gone through dramatic changes in the last four decades. The year 1985 marked the end of an authoritarian military regime, followed by progress toward an increasingly vibrant democracy. During the first years of the 21st century, especially during Luis Inácio Lula da Silva and Dilma Rousseff's first term, the country experienced a moment of innovative public policies which mitigated extreme poverty and hunger, increased social rights, generated millions of jobs, and contributed to the reduction of social inequalities.²⁰ These improvements were connected to the decentralized and participatory character of Brazilian re-democratization, which fostered the development of bottom-up socio-political transformations.²¹

The participatory institutions enshrined in Brazilian public governance by the 1988 constitution were empowered two decades later when, during the Lula da Silva administration, the National Policy Councils and National Policy Conferences were reformed. These institutions provide spaces for members of civil society to participate in multi-level deliberative processes to inform drafting of national policies. Thus, these participatory institutions contributed to the definition of government agendas, the enactment of resolutions and recommendations, and the formulation of public policies, plans, strategies, and guidelines to implement them and supervise their application.²² Participatory budgeting, which had been created in 1989 by the *Partido dos Trabalhadores* (PT), was adopted nationally between 2003-2016. This method was considered a "best practice" among the world's 40 best policy programs by the UN in 1996 and became Brazil's main "democratic export," adopted by more than a thousand cities in almost 50 countries.²³

In this context of human development, an important policy adopted was the expansion and internalization of the network of Brazilian federal universities, expanding the number of young people in undergraduate and graduate courses and democratizing access to higher education. The expansion and strengthening of this network together with structural political changes increased the possibilities for interaction between universities, local governments, and civil society organizations in the development of collaborative research and community engagement projects.²⁴

Due to these advances, there were great expectations for further improvements in Brazilian democratic governance and development in 2014 when the project outlined in this case study was initiated, with the aim of contributing to the advancement of civic engagement and development while relying on the capacity of universities to act as civic agents promoting positive change. Yet, as the chapter highlights, political events since 2016 have shown the frailty of Brazilian institutions and democracy, which has shifted the character of federal governance significantly and led to the project's conclusion. The project's conception, development, and results achieved are addressed in the following section.

Civil Society Participation in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals Project

The civic engagement project, *Civil Society Participation in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals*, was developed within the Department of International Relations at UFPB, a small department of 15 scholars based in the Centre of Applied Social Sciences located in the University's João Pessoa Campus.²⁵ UFPB is a large institution, with four *campi*, 18 centres, and 97 departments.²⁶ In 2019 it offered 124 undergraduate courses and 112 post-graduate courses and had 30,385 students enrolled in undergraduate studies and 5,937 in post-graduate studies. During that year, the HEI registered 98 patents, published 10,233 scientific articles, and conducted 1,253 community outreach projects.²⁷

The project outlined was based on the premise that public engagement and civic participation are critically important for the successful implementation of the SDGs. Considering the importance of localizing the SDG agenda in the northeastern states of Brazil, this initiative aimed to join University and civil society organizations in the region and sought to build bridges between the knowledge produced in the academy and the knowledge of practice from relevant political actors.

From the localizing approach, the coordinators understood from the outset that the global sustainable development agenda cannot thrive based on sporadic top-down actions taken by governments. Instead, this agenda requires a network of actors that internalized and used the SDGs as a language and action tool. To be achieved, the internationally negotiated SDGs must be adopted by a civil society which applies the SDGs in its local communities; by local governments, which make decisions about public policies and resource allocation; and by private initiatives, which define investments and directly affect the natural resources available to society.

In line with this agenda, the project sought to contribute to localizing SDGs in the northeastern region of Brazil, that is, adapting global sustainable development discourses to local realities. To promote sustainable development, the University could disseminate the agenda among relevant local actors, assist in creating a strong, interconnected structure supporting policies aligned with the SDGs and train civil society actors to exert political pressure when necessary. In other words, through an outreach project structured around education and trainings on the theme of the SDGs, the University sought to foster learning and civic engagement among students and local citizens, while strengthening the capacity of local public and civil society actors to promote sustainable development.

Structuring the project

In 2014 the *Political Economy of the United Nations Millennium Development Goals* research project was initiated. This project included three undergraduate students supervised by one member of the faculty from the Department of International Relations. It was developed as part of UFPB's Scientific Initiation program, which aims to provide opportunities for undergraduate students to engage in the practice of developing research. This project²⁸ provided the conceptual basis for future activities on the SDGs and was developed around two topics: first, the results of the MDGs and their impact on the post-2015 Agenda, and second, the political processes shaping and structuring the SDGs. The project focused on building a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the political processes for adopting, implementing, and evaluating the United Nations' development agenda and made it possible to develop knowledge about the two specific UN development agendas of the 21st century. It was in the context of this project that partnerships with key actors in the region were examined with the support of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) special representative for the SDGs for northeast Brazil, marking the beginning of the collaboration with UNDP.

From this organizational and intellectual basis, the *Civil Society Participation in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals* community engagement project was created the following year. In light of the need to incorporate the SDGs in the logic and practices of municipalities and states,

that is localizing the SDGs, the project worked to insert the global goals into local administrations by assisting local adoption of the goals and monitoring of public actions. The coordinators hoped to facilitate these changes by training political and social actors to participate in the implementation of the SDGs while simultaneously identifying the specific demands of these actors related to issues connected to the UN's development agenda.

In order to achieve the project's goals, a team was recruited comprising undergraduate students enrolled in different courses. The participants were not required prior knowledge. The project expected commitment from all team members to the project's goals, as well as a desire to develop an awareness of the importance of civic engagement and an understanding of the particularities of each partner and their contexts.²⁹ During the initial months of their inclusion in the project, every team member developed the skills necessary to carry out the activities promoted with project partners and to contribute in the preparation of didactic and pedagogical materials and technical reports to support the trainings, presentations, and proposals presented to partners.

Organizationally, this service-learning project was institutionally supported and financed by the Ministry of Education during 2015 and 2016. In each year the project received around R\$50,000 (Brazilian Real), a high amount for community outreach projects in social sciences and humanities according to Brazilian standards. The majority of resources were used to fund travel to develop trainings, acquire equipment to develop the training materials, and provide scholarships for participating students.

The project also received institutional support from the UNDP, which, between 2015–2016, maintained a special representative for the SDGs for northeast Brazil based in the city of João Pessoa—where UFPB's International Relations Department is also based. The UNDP supported the production of content for the training activities and facilitated an active dialogue between the University and other institutions throughout the project. Being a well-known, credible organization with access to the spaces needed for initial meetings, the UNDP helped to initiate dialogue with public and private organs.

Civil society organizations were also critical in building bridges between the University and the public administration. The barriers faced by the project in connecting with local and regional actors were mostly related to lack of interest from public administrators. Project leaders felt that many public managers were conducting minimal *box ticking*, i.e., satisfying bureaucratic administrative requirements, instead of seeking innovative ways to improve local conditions. This aforementioned difficulty in connecting to and working together with state agencies was minimized through the contact channels facilitated by civil society organizations which already had established connections and partnerships with the public administration. Throughout the development of the project, some of the participant students linked to NGOs such as “Engajamundo” and “Minha Jampa”, which in addition to the organization “Nós Podemos”,³⁰ contributed to establishing the dialogue between the University, NGOs, and local government by intermediating contacts and facilitating the approach to public managers.

The project trained young leaders and civil society organizations, decision makers, and corporate social responsibility organizations. The training sessions and materials were structured based on the team's research about the MDGs and the SDGs, their targets, their goals, their fulfillment, and the identification of priority themes and issues for those being given capacity. The training sought to disseminate knowledge to build technical and organizational capacities so that trainees could contribute to discussions related to socio-economic development and the implementation of public policies.

Developing the project: trainings and their outcomes

Putting these ideas into practice was a major challenge. In addition to difficulties strengthening university-public administration relationships, the immense dimensions of the northeast region (2.5 times greater than France), its relative lack of development, and poorly trained personnel in public administration adversely affected the development of the project. Nevertheless, the project developed varied community activities to disseminate SDGs and to train policymakers and NGO

leaders to mediate debate and monitor the implementation of SDGs. Trainings occurred over the 2015–2017 time frame. The tables below detail the training activities carried out, all of which were provided free of charge.

<i>Table 2. Trainings Offered to the Public Sector</i>	
Ceará Mayors' Association (APRECE).	
Venue	Fortaleza/CE:
Target Audience	Representatives from municipalities of the state of Ceará; and state/municipal associations and agencies.
Aims	Training public managers on the SDG agenda and presenting 'best practices' of public policies for the implementation of the SDGs.
Municipal Education Secretary of São Bento do Una/PE	
Venue	São Bento do Una/PE.
Target Audience	Municipal Secretary of Education, São Bento do Una.
Aims	Training for around 600 teachers and public managers from the Municipal Secretary of Education (São Bento do Una/PE). The objective was to reconcile the SDGs with the planning of teaching activities in the municipality.
Municipal Association of Pernambuco (AMUPE)	
Venue	Recife/PE
Target Audience	Representatives from municipalities of the state of Pernambuco, as well as educational institutions and social movements.
Aims	Training public managers on the SDG agenda and presenting 'best practices' of public policies for the implementation of the SDGs.
Paraíba State Secretariat of Planning and Management	
Venue	State Secretariat of Planning and Management, João Pessoa/PB
Target Audience	Public administrators from the State Government
Aims	Presentation and discussion of the SDG Agenda with the managers of the State of Paraíba, in line with the government's demand to bring its planning closer to the goals and targets of the SDGs.
City Hall of Pombal	
Venue	State Secretariat of Planning and Management, João Pessoa/PB
Target Audience	Public administrators from the State Government
Aims	Balance and discussion of activities and actions implemented by the local administration to implement the SDGs, knowledge and experience sharing for the evaluation and improvement of public policies.

Tables 2 and 3 show some of the activities developed by the project. They highlight the broad scope of the project, which managed to reach most of the states of the northeastern region of Brazil. Table 2 displays the agenda of activities which were directed to public institutions with the aim of contributing to the internalization of the SDGs in the process of planning and implementing public policies. Table 3 details the activities targeting civil society institutions which sought to strengthen their capacities to participate in public debates and contribute to their abilities to oversee governmental action. It includes the actions developed with civil society organizations, educational institutions of different levels of training, and business organizations which promote

social responsibility activities.

Table 3. Trainings Offered to the Private Sector and Social Responsibility Institutions	
Brazilian Micro and Small Business Support Service (SEBRAE)	
Venue	Natal/RN: Sebrae.
Target Audience	Representatives from municipal and state agencies; associations and institutions and micro and small Business.
Aims	Dissemination of knowledge and good practices on incorporating the SDG agenda into business practices and municipal public management.
Maria Madalena Oliveira Cavalcante Institute (IMMOC).	
Venue	Recife/PE
Target Audience	Around 60 young people, aged between 16 and 21 years, from the communities of the cities of Olinda and Recife/PE.
Aims	Dissemination of knowledge and good practices on incorporating the SDG agenda into corporate social responsibility policies. Training the young people served by the association
Alpargatas Institute	
Venue	João Pessoa/PB
Target Audience	Continuous activities developed in 11 cities, involving all teachers of basic education and municipal education managements.
Aims	Work in partnership with the Alpargatas Institute alongside 11 cities served by the institute to train and qualify teachers and municipal managers on the incorporation of the SDGs in their teaching practices and activities.

The training of members of the public sector, such as the public primary school teachers from São Bento do Una, were developed at the request of the Secretariat of Education of the São Bento do Una municipality, which has been operating since 2014 with a focus on the United Nations' development agendas. Until December 2015, activities revolved around the Millennium Development Goals and, as of 2016, the #MAIS: Morality + Action + Social Integrity Project was initiated, operating under the SDGs framework.

This training focused on preparing and sharing information and materials about the SDGs, helping participants connect the global agenda to their realities, and identifying specific elements which they could relate to and use as the basis for projects in their schools. In this way, the training of 600 teachers offered a conduit to disseminate the contents of the SDGs with the entire public primary school community—teachers from 63 schools attended by 10,129 students. In addition to sharing information on the MDGs and the SDGs, the workshop identified similar projects previously developed by this community, discussed challenges and opportunities in implementing the SDGs and highlighted their roles as local actors relevant to achieving global targets.

The training of civil society multipliers, such as those developed in the state of Ceará, aimed to improve the performance conditions for a network of 280 volunteers trained by UNDP-Brazil to

work in their specific states to promote SDGs. The project's contribution focused on the SDGs and took place within a broader event, the Training of ODM/ODS Multipliers. This training took place on 7 August 2015, was sponsored by *Nós Podemos Ceará*, the National Movement for Citizenship and Solidarity and UNDP and also covered the MDGs in Brazil. It touched on the formulation process for SDGs, explained the goals and their targets, and described mechanisms for local mobilization toward their implementation and monitoring.

The training developed in partnership with the [Alpargatas Institute](#)—which is the institution responsible for the socio-environmental responsibility agenda of a prominent Brazilian company with global reach—directly impacted the work of the Institute, which supports municipal education secretaries throughout the region. Since the training, the Institute formalized its commitment to the 2030 agenda, aligned its mission to the agenda, emphasized the relevance of social sustainability, and helped to disseminate information about the SDGs. Through this partnership, it was possible to educate teachers and municipal managers on SDGs and help them to align their teaching with the principles of the 2030 Global agenda.

Institutional and educational outcomes

During the development of the project, important partnerships flourished between the University and the institutions involved in it and allowed the institutional and academic maturation of the enterprise engaged in localizing SDGs and multiplying civic engagement activities. Within the University, the [Observatory of Sustainable Development Goals](#) initiated its activities during the project's implementation. The observatory is a platform for the dissemination of academic research on the SDGs which monitors activities, actions, publications, and results related to their implementation. The observatory offers analysis of the information it provides and identifies academic projects and activities developed at the Federal University of Paraíba that contribute in some way to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals.

Through this initiative it was also possible to establish the [Public Policies and Sustainable Development Centre at UFPB](#) (NPDS). NPDS was established as the institutionalization of UFPB's commitment to the SDGs, creating a permanent forum to devise and implement actions designed to internalize the SDGs' goals. The Federal University of Paraíba signed two memoranda of understanding with the UNDP committing to contribute to the achievement of the 2030 Agenda and joined the UN's Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN), an online network which mobilizes scientific and technological knowledge to promote practical solutions for sustainable development and the United Nations' academic impact.³¹ The NPDS Centre was created to support the University in implementing the SDGs. It is now a hub that brings together professors, researchers, and students from different areas of knowledge, with a focus on the implementation of sustainable development projects.

Within the NPDS several academic and scientific research, teaching, and community outreach projects which relate to sustainable development and public policies have been or are being developed. It provided a physical space for activities connected to this project and other initiatives which promote the SDGs. The Observatory of Sustainable Development Goals, for instance, whose activities initially had to be developed in the offices of the project's coordinators, can now be housed at the Centre. UFPB also dedicated a few grants to the development of research on the topic.

Another outcome of the project was the launching in August 2020 of the portal [The Federal University of Paraíba and the Sustainable Development Goals](#). The portal aims to disseminate scientific and technological knowledge and other service-learning initiatives developed at UFPB that positively impact the implementation of the SDGs. It seeks to encourage future partnerships between the University and actors promoting development in the region. Stimulating the production of knowledge within the University can contribute to sustainable development according to local, regional, and national demands.

The project also prepared participating students to develop trainings, deliver lectures, organize debates, and support the production of projects, didactic, and pedagogical materials. Through the combination of research, production of materials, and practice with training events, they ac-

quired and consolidated their own knowledge about the SDGs and development issues affecting communities in northeastern Brazil. At the same time, they honed their public speaking skills, contributed to debates, worked in groups, and supported development of the project.

In this way, the project strengthened the students' academic knowledge but, most importantly, allowed them to participate in dialogues with actors from outside the University, learn about different social and environmental realities and problems, and develop critical thinking abilities. They mastered the concepts associated with the SDGs, established direct dialogue with civil society and public administrators, learned to prepare project proposals, reacted to problems experienced by people and public administrations, and developed a sense of responsibility toward local development and the public good.

Participating students' sense of accomplishment was nurtured by their ability to directly witness the impact that their actions and the project generated on the partners. The Alparagatas Institute, for example, institutionalized the SDGs as a main element in its social responsibility actions, actively disseminating the sustainable development agenda in its partnership with the eleven municipalities in the region which it supports. The local public administration organs, who were also partners of the University, have been adopting the SDGs as parameters for implementing public policies.

The public and civil society institutions involved in the project benefited from receiving free and personalized trainings on the SDGs according to their social roles and needs. Reaching several public sector bodies in many states of the northeast, a region with lower development levels compared to the Brazilian average, the project contributed to strengthening the capacity of these local and regional institutions in localizing the SDGs and therefore, was conducive to the establishment of conditions where sustainable development can be promoted. Partnering with civil society institutions in the region, the project also helped transmit knowledge about the sustainable development agenda and the role of civic engagement in localizing international goals among organizations which can multiply this knowledge among other civil society actors. This way, this initiative developed within UFPB can indirectly benefit the citizenry in the region through the promotion of sustainable development according to local needs and demands through the channels of both public and civil institutions which received trainings from the project.

Universities as Civic Agents: Bridging the Global SDGs and Local Development Through Community Engagement

The initiative presented in this chapter was developed considering universities as citizen actors³² which can contribute to progress by developing and disseminating scientific and technological knowledge, and by being committed proponents of civic engagement. Education is important to economic and social development and is essential for disseminating knowledge of sustainable practices to equip new generations to incorporate sustainability as a value and lifestyle.³³ There is a direct relationship between expanding access to basic education, promoting higher education, and increasing investments in science and technology and the improvement of national economic and social indicators. It increases productivity and wages, improves access to health services, increases life expectancy, and contributes to reducing poverty and violence rates, among other indicators.³⁴

Traditionally, education and, more specifically, universities can contribute to sustainable development through the production and dissemination of (1) scientific and technological knowledge applicable to technical transformations with social impacts; (2) knowledge that scientifically supports and promotes public policies and development strategies; (3) social technologies to contribute more actively to shaping initiatives that intervene in society; (4) and in the training of human resources. There are, however, limits to these potentials, which are influenced by global and local inequalities. On the international level, there is grave inequality in the distribution of research activities between developed and developing countries, with only 0.5% of researchers being positioned in the developing world, while more than 40% are found in Europe and North America.³⁵

The research outputs generated within universities also can be disseminated among social

actors through community outreach. Teaching and research facilitates the development of scientific and technological knowledge, while community engagement and service-learning underscore ethical, political, and social dimensions of knowledge and their connections to society. According to article 205 of the 1988 Brazilian Federal Constitution, universities must promote and encourage education as a right of all in collaboration with society. This policy, emanating from the highest norm in Brazilian hierarchy, is complemented by other federal directives, such as the National Plan of University Service-Learning (*Plano Nacional de Extensão Universitária*), which recognizes community engagement as an academic process and ensures that higher education institutions are attuned to social issues.³⁶ Aligned with top-down federal norms, UFPB fulfills its social role of training professionals with social responsibility and contributing to the scientific, technological, artistic, and cultural development of the country while providing public, free, and high-quality education.³⁷ According to the University's statute, outreach is an educational, cultural, scientific, and technological process, inseparable from research and teaching. The University explores problems and issues relevant to national, regional and local constituencies and disseminates that knowledge and its benefits to the community. In this way, institutions of higher learning provide a specialized service by establishing an interactive relationship between the university and the community.³⁸

Outreach achieved through service-learning and community engagement helps ensure that university research is attuned to society's needs. Developed in parallel to teaching and research, service-learning can be a way to disseminate the technical knowledge generated by scientific research to society. Within the University, service-learning enriches research and teaching by connecting theory and practice, which helps to make academic activities socially relevant. Community outreach activities are developed as a two-way street. On one side, they present opportunities to apply scientific knowledge beyond the ivory tower. On the other, the needs of the community where the university is located can inform socially relevant research and education which is better able to promote sustainable development in a democratic society.³⁹ This dialogical relationship between the University and society benefits the community in which the University is located and the HEI itself. HEI's engaged with their local communities are renewed by the process, teachers' pedagogies are updated, and research topics are reinvigorated according to their relevance to society, opening the doors to socially committed critical thinking.⁴⁰

The context in which the initiative considered in this chapter was developed was impacted by changes in federal governance, which made the activities of teaching, research, and community outreach more challenging. These changes commenced during Dilma Rousseff's second term in the Presidency, when her government was disrupted in August 2016 by a spurious impeachment process. After her departure, Michel Temer, became President. During his administration, from mid-2016 to the end of 2018, the government restricted social expenditures and dismantled the National Councils and Conferences.⁴¹ Under Jair Bolsonaro's government since 2019, Brazil has become increasingly like an authoritarian regime with a massive military presence.⁴²

In this context, universities, social organizations, and other political and scientific entities have experienced a financial retraction⁴³ and faced political and ideological attacks from the federal government.⁴⁴ Abrupt curtailment of federal support for the university's community outreach (ProExt) project, has resulted in the conclusion of the service-learning project presented herein, with no prospect of reactivation. The conflict between bottom-up and top-down policies is also present in the area of development. While the federal government adopts an agenda contrary to the SDGs, some states and municipalities in the northeast resist, trying to align public policy planning and implementation with the 2030 development agenda. The result of these disputes is visible in social and economic indicators, which show an increase in inequality in the Brazilian northeast, the resumption of poverty and hunger, rising unemployment, and the risks of a more generalized economic crisis nationally.⁴⁵ The negligent federal policies towards the COVID-19 pandemic also highlighted the tensions between the federal government and the federated entities, as the states sought to follow national and international agencies' guidelines to fight the pandemic.⁴⁶

The project reached its limit at the end of 2016, when the Ministry of Education's program, which financed it, was suddenly concluded. This interruption highlights the frailty of small, bot-

tom-up approaches, such as those espoused here, when confronted by opposing, top-down policies. Its impacts, however, continue to be felt through activities developed by the trained civil society actors and local public administrators. The project has also left its mark on UFPB, which institutionalized its role as a civic agent by helping to localize SDGs through research, teaching, and outreach projects now centered at the institution's [Public Policies and Sustainable Development Centre](#).

Conclusions

This chapter emphasized the importance of recognizing and encouraging the capacity which universities have to act as civic agents by developing community outreach coupled with its more traditional academic activities. Universities are privileged and important spaces for producing the answers needed to advance towards democracy and development. Through community engagement, the communication between HEIs and public and civil society organizations can be improved, making the outputs of academic endeavors more attuned to society's needs and more visible to other social actors who can benefit from them.

Grounding its traditional academic mission in its social context, through service-learning and community engagement, the Federal University of Paraíba was able to promote civic engagement and contribute to localizing the SDGs in northeastern Brazil. It did so by bridging specific life experiences and needs from the local level with the international sustainable development agenda, which required effective participation of civil society to succeed. Through the three basic activities of Brazilian higher education institutions—namely teaching, developing research, and community engagement—intertwined in a service-learning initiative—this experience demonstrates how universities can act as civic agents and contribute to local development, while increasing student's knowledge and encouraging their civic engagement.

Actively disseminating knowledge about the SDGs and appropriating this global agenda by local actors in Northeastern Brazil, was an effective way for faculty from the Department of International Relations at UFPB to connect the global SDGs framework and the subject matter of International Relations to specific demands of northeastern Brazil. This project contributed to the practices of research and learning within the Department and to the engagement of the University and the participating students with civil society organizations, public managers, and the private sector.

For the students themselves, their contributions included: (1) developing research, (2) preparing material to supplement trainings, (3) delivering trainings involving lectures, (4) promotion of debates, and (5) supporting the development of projects. Contributing to the training of civil society and public sector agents, they promoted local ownership of the global agenda. Acting toward a meaningful goal, such as the promotion of sustainable development, the students reflected on the meaning of democracy and development and kindled their civic commitment by seeing how their agency can promote positive change.

The challenges generated by the shift in Brazilian federal administration and national-level policies which took place in mid-2016 and became more acute since 2019, are immense and point to a direction opposed to that promoted herein. They also highlight, however, the importance of strengthening the commitment of educational institutions, social organizations, and citizens to democracy and the value of bottom-up approaches to civic engagement which connect universities and civil society in positively transforming a society like Brazil.

This project also demonstrates, for other universities invested in developing a similar approach, how local bottom-up initiatives can generate impacts and achieve change even in a shifting context where there are tensions between federated entities. Although parts of the project ended, it managed to institutionalize at UFPB the civic mission of localizing the SDGs, something possible for the Federal University of Paraíba given the didactic and scientific autonomy it enjoys despite its dependence on federal funds, a characteristic of the Brazilian public higher education system.

It is through community outreach that higher education institutions act democratically and in dialogue with the population, qualifying and preparing people for the job market and also for

the exercise of citizenship. Through service-learning and community engagement, not only can scientific knowledge be shared with the community beyond the university walls, but higher education institutions can also be updated and have an opportunity to adapt the knowledge which they produce to their social realities. We can only develop solutions to our local problems if we really know them, and socially integrated service-learning has the potential to align the research carried out in Universities to their socio-economic context.

Endnotes

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 25. The faculty from UFPB's International Relations Department is responsible for the undergraduate course on International Relations, which in 2020 serviced around 300 active students, and also contributes to two postgraduate programs on Politics and International Relations (41 students in 2020) and Public Management and International Cooperation (50).
 26. In 2019, the University had a budget of R\$2,069,059,484.00; an infrastructure of 1,196 classrooms, 572 laboratories and 22 libraries; and employed 5,870 regular staff and 1,104 outsourced staff.
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 29. The project's participants included the three students who previously were involved in the Political Economy of the United Nations Millennium Development Goals research project in 2014, as well as other undergraduate students from UFPB who responded to calls publicized by the Department of International Relations to participate in the community outreach project. The applicants were interviewed to identify their interest in the project's goals and if they were able to dedicate 20 hours per week to it. Although this selection did not require prior knowledge about civic engagement or the SDGs, it favored students who were at least on their second year, relatively more mature, and had some knowledge about how the university works. The lack of specific knowledge requirements was handled by immersing every new member of the project in reading and discussing texts on the SDGs and the role of civic engagement in the promotion of development. They were also involved in the project's activities initially as observers, writing reports on the activities developed, and supporting the more senior members in the project's various actions, such as engaging with partners, preparing materials, and carrying out presentations, until they were able to develop these independently.
 30. *Engajamundo* roughly translates to English as 'engages the world,' while *Minha Jampa* means 'my João Pessoa', the city where the project was based and capital of the northeastern state of Paraíba. *Nós Podemos* translates to 'we can' in English.
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42. Among the 23 ministries, 10 of the ministers in Bolsonaro’s the cabinet are members of the armed forces.
43. Law nº 9.711, established in February 2019 reduced the resources destined to education to the constitutional minimum. The following month, the federal government froze 42% of the budget for the country’s science, technology and communications ministry. These measures affected research programs and governmental scholarships, reducing the opportunities for lower-class students to attend universities.
44. In the beginning of 2019, a 30% cut in the budget of Federal Universities was announced, justified by President Bolsonaro’s false claim that public universities do not produce research, affirming that most of the research produced in Brazil originated from private and military institutions. In effect, 99% of research produced in Brazil comes from state universities, and according to the Scientific Production Ranking in Brazil 2014–2018, among the 50 institutions that most publish scientific works in the last 5 years, 44 are universities and 43 of those are state funded.
45. When considering inequality, Brazil’s position in the UNDP’s 2020 HDI ranking fell 20 places, mostly due to lack of advances in the area of education. In 2019 alone, more than 170,000 Brazilians returned to poverty. Currently, the poorest 40% have not yet recovered the income they had in 2014.
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