

THE ROLE OF STUDENTS IN DRIVING STRUCTURAL TRANSFORMATION FOR INCLUSIVE AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract: This study explores the role of students in driving structural transformation for inclusive and sustainable development. Recognising students as pivotal actors in promoting sustainability, the research adopts a qualitative approach to delve into their experiences, motivations, and influence on social, economic, and environmental reform. Employing an exploratory research design, data was collected through semi-structured interviews with a diverse sample of 20 students from various disciplines, socioeconomic backgrounds, and geographic locations. Thematic analysis was utilised to identify core themes reflecting students' contributions to sustainability and inclusivity. Findings highlight key roles students play, including advocacy, innovative solutions and research, policy participation, leadership development, sustainable lifestyle practices, fostering inclusivity, and global collaboration. The study underscores students' significant contributions to raising awareness, advancing interdisciplinary solutions, and advocating for policies supporting structural transformation. Recommendations suggest that universities support student advocacy, promote interdisciplinary research, incorporate policy advocacy into curricula, and enhance inclusivity and global collaborations. By equipping students with leadership and project management skills and fostering a campus environment conducive to sustainable practices, institutions can amplify students' impact. This study concludes that students, with adequate institutional support, can be powerful agents of change, advancing the global commitment to sustainable and inclusive development and effectively addressing complex global challenges.

Keywords: Advocacy; Global Collaboration; Inclusivity; Innovation; Leadership Development; Structural Transformation, Student; Sustainable Development Goals

Introduction

The rapid societal changes of the 21st century demand active involvement from diverse sectors, including students, to drive structural transformations that foster inclusive and sustainable development. As future leaders, professionals, and informed citizens, students possess unique potential to influence policies, ideologies, and actions that advance social equity, environmental sustainability, and economic fairness. Their activism and engagement can significantly impact not only their academic environments but also local, national, and global communities. This research seeks to explore the role of students in driving structural transformation, focusing on their involvement in activism, education, policymaking, and community engagement. This study will investigate how students, through their positions within educational institutions, contribute to the goals of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), specifically those related to equality, environmental protection, and economic justice. By examining their participation in sustainability projects, advocacy campaigns, and social justice movements, this study will provide a comprehensive understanding of how students are shaping structural change.

Inclusive and sustainable development is a central theme in global policy, emphasised by the 2015 adoption of the SDGs. These goals highlight the importance of restructuring economic, social, and political systems to ensure equitable development while protecting future generations' resources. Structural transformation involves a comprehensive reconfiguration of systems to eliminate inequalities and support sustainable outcomes (Andreoni et al., 2021). While students' role in social change is often overlooked, their contributions within academic and societal settings have historically driven significant reform, from civil rights and environmental activism to global sustainability initiatives. Despite this impactful history, there is limited research on how modern student-led initiatives align with and contribute to these broader goals.

Students have traditionally influenced social and political change, but their specific contributions to structural transformation for inclusive and sustainable development remain underexplored. In light of global challenges such as climate change, inequality, and social exclusion, understanding how students drive change is critical. However, there is limited empirical research on the strategies, mechanisms, and outcomes of student involvement in structural transformation, particularly regarding inclusivity and sustainability. This study addresses this gap, exploring the ways students engage with these issues, the challenges they face, and the implications of their actions. While discussions on sustainability and inclusivity are extensive, few studies have focused on students' roles in these areas, particularly concerning structural transformation. Existing research has mainly examined the roles of governments, international organisations, and corporations in driving sustainable development (UN, 2020; Sachs, 2015). However, students as active change agents are often overlooked, especially in their grassroots involvement, engagement with the SDGs, and integration of these goals into local and global advocacy.

This study is driven by the urgent need for a sustainable and inclusive future. As the world faces unprecedented challenges—climate change, economic inequality, and systemic injustice—students' involvement in driving structural transformation is essential. Positioned to challenge traditional perspectives, students can act as catalysts for change within their communities and institutions. By addressing issues such as gender equality, environmental sustainability, and social justice, they contribute to achieving the SDGs and shifting societal values. This research will provide insights into the practical and theoretical dimensions of student activism, examining both barriers and strategies in advocating for inclusive and sustainable development. Furthermore, by identifying successful student-led initiatives, this study will offer recommendations for educators, policymakers, and institutional leaders to better support student engagement with sustainability and inclusivity goals.

Aim of the study

This study seeks to explore the roles students can play in driving structural transformation for inclusive and sustainable development.

Methodology

This study is grounded in the constructivist research paradigm, which posits that knowledge is formed through individuals' interactions with their environment and shaped by their lived experiences (Kamal, 2019). The constructivist approach aligns with the aim of exploring the role of students in driving structural transformation for inclusive and

sustainable development, as it prioritises the subjective interpretations of students' engagement and activism. By focusing on how students understand and make meaning of their actions, the study seeks to uncover how personal experiences, and social contexts shape their roles in promoting inclusivity and sustainability. A qualitative research approach was chosen for its capacity to provide rich, in-depth insights into students' beliefs, motivations, and perspectives on structural transformation. Qualitative research is particularly suited for examining complex social phenomena, where the goal is to understand participants' views and experiences in depth (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). This approach allows a nuanced examination of students' involvement in sustainability and inclusivity initiatives, yielding insights into how students contribute to these goals on multiple levels.

An exploratory research design was employed, as it is well-suited to investigating under-researched topics, like the role of students in driving structural transformation. This design supports the study's goal of discovering new insights into students' roles in sustainability, enabling flexibility in data collection and analysis, and facilitating the identification of emerging themes and patterns. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, a method that offers a flexible yet guided framework for in-depth exploration of participants' perspectives. Semi-structured interviews are ideal for qualitative research, allowing the researcher to engage participants in a conversational manner while ensuring that key topics related to the research aim are addressed (Kvale, 2009). Open-ended questions encouraged participants to elaborate on their experiences and provided the researcher with opportunities to pursue unexpected insights that emerged during the interviews.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure relevance to the research aims. The sample included 20 students who demonstrated active involvement in initiatives related to inclusive and sustainable development, such as environmental sustainability campaigns, social justice movements, and student-led policy advocacy. This sampling approach allowed for the inclusion of participants from diverse backgrounds—encompassing various disciplines, socioeconomic statuses, and geographic regions—to gain a comprehensive understanding of students' engagement with sustainability and inclusivity issues (Palinkas et al., 2015). Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis, a widely used qualitative method focused on identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis is particularly appropriate for this study, as it offers a structured yet adaptable framework for analysing interview data in depth. Following Braun and Clarke's six-phase process, the analysis proceeded through familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. This rigorous process allowed for the identification of key themes related to students' roles, the challenges they encounter, and the strategies they employ in fostering structural transformation, inclusivity, and sustainability.

Findings

Students play a crucial role in driving structural transformation for inclusive and sustainable development. Their influence and activism contribute to social, economic, and environmental changes at local, national, and global levels. Key roles students play in this transformative process include advocacy and awareness-raising, driving innovative solutions and research, engaging in policy advocacy and participation, building leadership

capacity, promoting sustainable lifestyles, creating inclusive educational environments, and fostering global collaboration and solidarity.

Innovative Solutions and Research

The participants indicate that students, as active contributors to structural transformation, play a pivotal role in generating innovative solutions and conducting research that aligns with the principles of inclusive and sustainable development. Their involvement in research allows them to explore new ideas, technologies, and models that address pressing global challenges such as climate change, poverty, inequality, and social justice. Many students engage in research and innovation focused on developing sustainable technologies. For example, students from engineering and technology fields are developing eco-friendly energy solutions, such as solar-powered devices, waste-to-energy systems, and sustainable agriculture technologies. For example, a student remarked: *“In my research project, I developed a solar-powered water purification system that helps address water scarcity in rural communities. The system is affordable, scalable, and environmentally friendly, offering a sustainable solution to water-related issues.”* These innovations directly contribute to sustainable development by reducing environmental degradation and promoting clean energy alternatives.

Students from various disciplines, including environmental science, architecture, and urban planning, are researching sustainable building materials, green technologies, and climate adaptation strategies. These students are examining how cities and rural areas can adapt to climate change by integrating sustainable infrastructure, such as green roofs, energy-efficient buildings, and water conservation systems. One of the participants mentioned: *“As a group of architecture students, we developed a sustainable housing model that incorporates recycled materials, natural ventilation systems, and renewable energy sources. This model was presented as a solution for low-income communities in urban areas prone to environmental risks.”* By proposing affordable, sustainable housing solutions, students contribute to addressing issues of housing inequality while promoting environmental sustainability. The data revealed that there is an increasing trend of interdisciplinary research. Students are collaborating across disciplines—combining fields such as economics, science, engineering, and sociology—to develop holistic solutions that address the multifaceted nature of sustainability and inclusivity. These collaborative efforts often lead to more comprehensive and innovative approaches to solving complex problems. Participant 15 reported that: *“A group of students from various disciplines (sociology, environmental science, and engineering) came together to create a model for sustainable waste management in urban slums. The model integrated waste reduction, recycling, and community-based management strategies.”* Such cross-disciplinary efforts not only enhance the quality of research but also provide more innovative and practical solutions that are likely to be more widely accepted and implemented in diverse communities.

The data underscores the transformative role of students in fostering structural change toward inclusive and sustainable development. Through active participation in research and innovation, students generate solutions that tackle global challenges, such as climate change, resource scarcity, and social inequality. Research suggests that students' engagement in developing sustainable technologies, like renewable energy solutions and eco-friendly materials, is essential in mitigating environmental degradation and promoting inclusive growth (Holmes et al., 2022). For instance, research in green engineering highlights students' contributions to affordable, scalable technologies like solar-powered

devices that improve living conditions in marginalised communities (Vijayan et al., 2023). Students in fields like architecture and urban planning are also at the forefront of designing sustainable housing and infrastructure solutions, addressing both environmental and social sustainability (Omole et al., 2023). Furthermore, interdisciplinary collaboration among students has become crucial, as it enables more comprehensive and context-sensitive solutions to complex sustainability issues (Liu et al., 2022). Through these cross-disciplinary initiatives, students combine perspectives from sociology, engineering, and environmental science, enhancing the relevance and practicality of their projects.

Policy Advocacy and Participation

The participants identified policy advocacy and participation as part of the essential role they play in fostering structural transformation for inclusive and sustainable development. The data revealed that students are actively engaged in policy advocacy, which is central to driving systemic and structural transformation. A recurring finding in the interviews was that students often engage in protests, demonstrations, and campaigns to raise awareness about key issues such as climate change, gender equality, and poverty alleviation. A participant shared: *"We organised a petition calling for our university to divest from fossil fuel investments. It was part of the larger global movement, and seeing the policy shift within the institution was a huge win for us."* Such actions highlight the role of students in influencing institutional and governmental policy changes that align with SDGs. Many students are involved in collaborative efforts with NGOs and grassroots organisations, amplifying their advocacy work. A student involved in policy advocacy commented: *"Working with local NGOs allowed us to voice our concerns more effectively at the national level. We were able to present a united front, pushing for policies on renewable energy that benefitted both the environment and vulnerable communities."*

Students also contribute to structural transformation by participating in decision-making processes, both within their academic institutions and broader political frameworks. This involvement ensures that policies reflect the needs and concerns of the younger generation, who will be directly impacted by these policies in the future. In many universities and public forums, students have seats on boards, committees, and policy advisory groups where they can directly influence institutional or governmental decisions. A student leader described: *"Being part of the student union, I had the opportunity to speak directly with policymakers about the need for more inclusive education programs that cater to disabled students. It felt empowering to be part of that decision-making process."* Through these channels, students engage in shaping policies that directly affect them, ensuring that youth perspectives are represented in discussions on climate action, social equity, and other key issues. Students also engage in advocacy that promotes environmental sustainability, especially in relation to indigenous communities and marginalised groups who are disproportionately affected by environmental degradation. One student shared: *"I participated in a campaign focused on land rights for indigenous people. It was crucial to highlight how sustainable development needs to include these communities' voices to avoid further marginalisation."*

The role of students in policy advocacy and participation is pivotal in driving structural transformation for inclusive and sustainable development. Research highlights how youth activism and participation in policy advocacy can catalyse shifts towards equitable policies and sustainable practices (Shah & Khan, 2023). In line with the SDGs, students often engage in protests, petitions, and campaigns focused on critical issues such as climate

action, social equity, and poverty reduction. Studies reveal that student-led campaigns on fossil fuel divestment, for example, have compelled several institutions to reconsider their investment portfolios, aligning with broader sustainable development objectives (Grady-Benson & Sarathy, 2016; Khan et al., 2024). Collaborative efforts with NGOs and grassroots organisations allow students to amplify their impact on national and global platforms, enhancing policy efforts in renewable energy and social inclusion. Student participation in governance structures, such as university boards and public policy advisory groups, facilitates a youth-cantered approach in policymaking, ensuring future generations' concerns are addressed in institutional and governmental policies. Students' advocacy for marginalised communities, especially in environmental justice, underscores the importance of inclusive policy frameworks that recognise the needs of indigenous and vulnerable populations, aligning with research that stresses the necessity of participatory and equity-focused governance (Méndez-Barrientos et al., 2024). Through these activities, students not only influence immediate policy shifts but also help lay the groundwork for long-term sustainable and inclusive transformation.

Capacity Building and Leadership Development

Capacity building and leadership development emerged as part of the central roles played by students in driving structural transformation toward inclusive and sustainable development. Through various student-led initiatives, universities, and community programs, students develop critical leadership skills and the capacity to advocate for and implement change in their communities and beyond. A significant proportion of students reported that participation in leadership programs, student organisations, and volunteer activities helped develop essential leadership skills. One student from the Faculty of Engineering stated, *“Participating in the student leadership training programs helped me understand how to lead a team and manage a project, skills that I now apply in community development initiatives focusing on sustainability.”* Students' involvement in various campus and community-based sustainability projects, such as environmental conservation programs, awareness campaigns on climate change, and inclusive education initiatives, has contributed to their leadership development. A student from the Faculty of Arts shared, *“I led a project that aimed to reduce plastic waste on campus, and it not only made me more confident in my leadership abilities but also deepened my commitment to sustainable development.”*

Participants emphasised the role of mentorship and peer leadership in enhancing their leadership capacities. Through peer mentoring programs, students were able to guide and support their fellow peers, fostering a collaborative environment conducive to leadership development. This form of leadership also allowed students to practice inclusivity and sustainability in their approach to guiding others. A student from the School of Business remarked: *“As a mentor in the peer leadership program, I was able to support younger students in their academic and personal growth while also sharing my knowledge of sustainability practices. This experience strengthened my leadership skills in a practical, hands-on way.”* Students engaged in social entrepreneurship have reported the development of leadership skills through designing and implementing projects that promote sustainable development. These projects often focus on solving local challenges related to poverty, education, and environmental sustainability while building the students' ability to lead initiatives that benefit the wider community. A business student involved in

a social entrepreneurship initiative noted, *“I learnt how to manage a social enterprise that promotes renewable energy solutions in underserved communities, and this experience has significantly improved my leadership and problem-solving skills.”*

Capacity building and leadership development among students play a pivotal role in fostering structural transformation toward inclusive and sustainable development. Through active engagement in leadership programs, campus organisations, and community projects, students acquire essential skills for driving change in their communities and promoting sustainability goals. Research highlights the importance of student-led initiatives in building leadership competencies, as these programs offer students real-world experience in project management, team leadership, and strategic planning essential for sustainable development efforts (Uzorka et al., 2024). Furthermore, mentorship and peer leadership initiatives within universities strengthen leadership abilities, as they allow students to apply inclusivity principles and practice sustainability while guiding their peers, enhancing their preparedness to address societal challenges (Govender & Pillay, 2022). Social entrepreneurship projects led by students also contribute significantly to capacity building, particularly by empowering students to devise innovative solutions for local issues like poverty and environmental degradation, which further enhances their leadership skills and aligns with sustainable development targets (Rosário & Figueiredo, 2024). This emphasis on leadership development aligns with global education goals that advocate for the integration of sustainability competencies in higher education to support structural transformation on local and global scales.

Engagement in Sustainable Consumption and Lifestyles

The data highlight how students contribute to structural transformation by engaging in sustainable consumption and lifestyles, an essential component in promoting inclusivity and sustainability development. Students have shown a growing commitment to adopting sustainable consumption habits as a means of contributing to environmental sustainability. A significant number of students reported reducing waste through practices such as recycling, composting, and reusing materials. For instance, many students opt for reusable bags, water bottles, and containers instead of single-use plastic. One participant noted, *“I have started carrying my own bottle and coffee cup. It feels good knowing I’m not contributing to plastic waste, even if it’s a small change.”* The practice of second-hand shopping, sustainable clothing, and the rejection of fast fashion were common themes. Students reported making conscious decisions to buy from sustainable brands or to purchase second-hand clothing to reduce their environmental footprint. As one student shared, *“I have started buying from thrift shops and avoiding fast fashion, knowing that it helps reduce the demand for mass production.”* Many students also play an active role in promoting sustainable consumption practices within their peer groups and communities. Students are often at the forefront of organising sustainability-focused events, workshops, and awareness campaigns on campuses. These events range from sustainability fairs to educational workshops about reducing carbon footprints. One participant described their involvement: *“We organised a sustainability week on campus where we showed students how they could make more sustainable choices, like reducing energy consumption and switching to renewable energy sources.”*

Despite their commitment, students face several challenges in adopting sustainable consumption practices. Many students identified financial limitations as a barrier to fully

embracing sustainable consumption, particularly when sustainable options (e.g., eco-friendly products, organic food) are more expensive than conventional alternatives. One participant stated, *"It's hard to buy organic produce all the time because it's more expensive. Sometimes, the cheaper option isn't the most sustainable one."* In some areas, students reported limited access to sustainable options, such as local, organic food markets or sustainable brands. One student explained, *"Where I live, there aren't many sustainable stores or markets, so it's hard to find eco-friendly products. I wish I had more options locally."* Students also noted that their busy schedules make it difficult to adopt certain sustainable practices, such as growing their own food or actively participating in sustainability campaigns. One of the participants remarked: *"It's hard to balance everything – studies, work, and my sustainability efforts. Sometimes, it feels like I can't do as much as I want to."*

Despite these challenges, the majority of the participants expressed a strong commitment to continuing and expanding their sustainable consumption practices. Many students emphasised that sustainability is not just a personal choice but a collective responsibility. As one participant stated, *"Even small actions matter. I believe that if we all make an effort, we can really drive change. The future depends on it."* The data suggests that students' engagement in sustainable consumption and lifestyles contributes significantly to broader structural transformation in many ways. For example, as students embrace sustainable habits and educate their peers, they help shift cultural norms within their communities, workplaces, and future careers. Many students believe that sustainability will be a central aspect of their professional lives and future decisions. One participant remarked, *"I plan to work in a field that prioritises sustainability. It's part of how I see the world now."*

Engagement in sustainable consumption and lifestyles among students plays a crucial role in advancing structural transformation for inclusive and sustainable development. By embracing sustainable habits such as recycling, reducing plastic use, and choosing eco-friendly products, students actively contribute to environmental preservation and the formation of sustainable cultural norms. According to Filho et al. (2022), student-led initiatives, including campus sustainability campaigns, are pivotal in fostering environmental awareness and encouraging collective action toward sustainable lifestyles. This shift not only influences individual behaviour but also has broader implications for systemic change by reshaping peer and community norms around consumption practices (Lutkenhaus et al., 2023). However, financial constraints and limited access to eco-friendly options present significant barriers, as sustainable products are often costlier and less accessible than conventional alternatives (Durrani et al., 2024). Despite these challenges, students maintain a strong commitment to sustainable consumption, viewing it as a collective responsibility that extends beyond personal choices to societal transformation. This commitment aligns with findings by Leal Filho et al. (2018), who highlight that the active involvement of youth in sustainability enhances the capacity for structural transformation, as students today are future leaders and decision-makers. Through their ongoing advocacy and engagement, students are positioning themselves as central actors in the shift toward a more inclusive and sustainable society.

Creating Inclusive Educational Environments

The participants highlight the role of students in creating inclusive educational environments, one of the significant roles in driving structural transformation toward

inclusive and sustainable development. Participants emphasised the importance of advocating for curricula that include diverse perspectives. They highlighted how advocating for the inclusion of marginalised groups' histories, voices, and contributions in course materials can foster a more inclusive academic environment. One of the participants commented, *"We initiated a student-led campaign to have African history integrated into the core curriculum. It was not just about inclusivity but about ensuring that we understand all facets of our global heritage, especially those of marginalised communities."* Many students identified peer mentoring programs as an essential tool for fostering an inclusive educational environment. Through mentorship, students from diverse backgrounds could share knowledge and experiences and support each other. This approach not only facilitated academic success but also helped students from marginalised communities feel supported and valued. *"We developed a mentoring system where senior students helped first-year students navigate both academic and social challenges. This made a huge difference in terms of helping new students, especially from minority backgrounds, integrate and succeed."*

Students also noted their active involvement in student organisations aimed at promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion within their universities. They worked toward ensuring that leadership structures in these organisations reflected the diversity of the student body, allowing all voices to be heard and represented in decision-making processes. One of the union members remarked that *"In the student union, we made it a point to ensure that all groups, including international students and students with disabilities, had a seat at the table. This not only empowered students but created an environment where everyone's opinions were valued."* Several students discussed how they actively confronted discriminatory practices and social biases within their educational environments. This included addressing issues such as racial discrimination, gender bias, and ableism in the classroom, ensuring that all students could learn in an environment free from prejudice and bias. Participant 19 remarked: *"We created a platform where students could anonymously report instances of discrimination or harassment, and it gave us the opportunity to address those issues openly and ensure everyone felt safe."*

In creating inclusive educational environments, students play a vital role in advancing structural transformation for inclusive and sustainable development by advocating for diversity, equity, and representation within academic settings. Literature underscores the importance of student-led initiatives in promoting inclusion, noting that student activism and participation can significantly influence institutional policies and curricular changes (Strydom & Loots, 2020). By championing curricula that include marginalised perspectives, students address historical gaps in academic discourse, making learning more representative and enriching (Omodan & Marongwe, 2024). Peer mentoring programs, as noted by participants, also serve as critical mechanisms for fostering inclusivity, as they create networks of support and belonging for marginalised students, enhancing both academic success and social integration (Juvonen et al., 2019). Furthermore, inclusive student organisations promote diversity within leadership structures, enabling equitable decision-making and reflecting the diverse identities of the student population (Ainscow, 2020). Student-led efforts to confront biases—such as racial, gender, and disability discrimination—have been shown to create safer, more supportive learning environments (Isaac et al., 2023), aligning with broader goals of sustainable development that prioritise inclusivity and social justice.

Advocacy and Awareness Raising

The data revealed that students are increasingly taking on active roles in advocacy and awareness-raising activities aimed at promoting inclusive and sustainable development. As future leaders, they are in a unique position to challenge existing systems, raise awareness about critical global issues, and advocate for policies that prioritise social, economic, and environmental sustainability. Many students reported utilising social media platforms as a tool for advocacy and awareness-raising. They engage in digital campaigns to highlight issues such as climate change, gender equality, racial justice, and poverty alleviation. These platforms provide students with an accessible and global audience to voice their concerns and mobilise support. For example, one of the participants remarked, *"I have been part of several online campaigns, especially focusing on climate action. Using social media to advocate for sustainability allows me to connect with other students and even organisations across the world. It feels empowering to raise awareness on such an important issue."* As Hajri & Daife (2024) suggest, students leverage their social networks and digital platforms to raise awareness about global challenges, such as climate change, social equity, and sustainable development, mobilising peer engagement and policy advocacy through online campaigns and activism. Social media, in particular, allows them to reach a wide audience, exemplifying how digital spaces can serve as both a learning and an advocacy tool (Scott & Maryman, 2023).

Students also organise movements on their campuses to raise awareness about sustainability, inclusivity, and social justice. These movements often include organising events such as workshops, panel discussions, protests, and petitions. Students are seen as the driving force behind these movements, aiming to engage their peers and campus communities in dialogues about inclusive development. Student 2 stated: *"We organised a climate change awareness week at our university. It included talks from experts, interactive sessions, and a protest demanding more sustainable practices from our university administration. It was inspiring to see so many students come together for a common cause."* This aligns with Mohammed et al. (2022), who stated that students organise on-campus events, such as panel discussions and protests, to foster dialogues around sustainability and inclusivity. Many students collaborate with non-governmental organisations and civil society groups to enhance their advocacy efforts. These collaborations often result in student-led initiatives that focus on real-world issues such as affordable education, gender equality, and environmental sustainability. For example, participant 12 mentioned: *"I have worked with local NGOs to raise awareness about gender equality in rural communities. It was an eye-opening experience to see the power of grassroots advocacy in creating structural change."* Collaborating with non-governmental organisations enhances their impact, bringing students closer to community-driven efforts and real-world advocacy experiences (Singha & Singha, 2024).

Data also revealed that some students use art, theatre, and creative expression to raise awareness about social and environmental issues. These students engage in performances, exhibitions, and creative campaigns that convey the urgency of issues like environmental degradation, poverty, and inequality. Student 5 reported: *"I have been part of art exhibitions that address social justice issues, such as refugee rights and climate change. Art has a way of connecting with people on a deeper level, which is essential when raising awareness about structural issues."* Art becomes a powerful tool for social change, allowing students to communicate complex ideas and inspire action in a way that resonates

emotionally with diverse audiences. According to Farrington et al. (2019), many students turn to art and creative expressions—art exhibitions, theatre, and performances—to communicate social justice messages, a method that effectively engages audiences on an emotional level, inspiring deeper awareness and commitment to action. The role of students in advocacy and awareness-raising is central to driving structural transformation for inclusive and sustainable development. Their active participation in various forms of advocacy—ranging from digital campaigns and campus movements to collaborations with NGOs—serves as a catalyst for change. These multifaceted advocacy activities underscore the importance of student involvement in advancing social change, as they cultivate a generation committed to inclusive, sustainable development.

Global Collaboration and Solidarity

Global collaboration and solidarity also emerged as essential roles of students in driving structural transformation toward inclusive and sustainable development. The data revealed that students play a key role in advocating for global solidarity, especially in response to challenges like climate change, social inequality, and the displacement of vulnerable populations. Participant 10 remarked: *"As part of a student-led initiative, I've collaborated with international peers on advocating for climate justice. It's about standing together as a global community, because the impact of climate change doesn't recognise borders."* Similarly, Participant 2 stated: *"We formed a coalition with students from other countries to promote education about climate change in underserved communities. This collective action creates a broader impact, beyond local issues."* Through international student networks and exchange programs, students facilitate knowledge sharing and capacity-building across countries. These programs serve as platforms for students to exchange ideas on sustainable practices, social inclusion policies, and inclusive economic models. They also help to build solidarity by connecting students from diverse cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds, fostering cross-cultural understanding and collaboration. According to Participant 7: *"Through an exchange program, I collaborated with students from Asia, Africa, and Europe to design a sustainable development project focusing on renewable energy. It was amazing to see how cultural and academic differences shaped the solutions we proposed."*

The data revealed that students also establish and lead international organisations and initiatives that promote sustainable development and inclusivity. These organisations often work in partnership with NGOs, governments, and international bodies to address development goals such as poverty reduction, quality education, and environmental protection. Participant 14 reported: *"I am part of a student-led global organisation that campaigns for youth inclusion in global policymaking. We push for youth participation in major UN forums and other international platforms focused on sustainable development."* The participants indicated that they have actively contributed to global health initiatives, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. By participating in awareness campaigns, fundraising, and sharing knowledge on public health practices, students promote solidarity and collective action to address health crises. Participant 20 stated: *"During the pandemic, I participated in a global health initiative that provided mental health resources to students in underdeveloped countries. It was vital to show that global challenges require a unified response."* Students contribute to the achievement of the United Nations SDGs by promoting global partnerships and supporting international efforts aimed at addressing

these goals. Participant 16 reported: *"In our student-led initiative, we worked with universities across different continents to build a collaborative platform for knowledge sharing about the SDGs. This helped ensure that the goal of sustainable development remained central to our academic work."*

Global collaboration and solidarity among students are vital for driving structural transformation towards inclusive and sustainable development. Recent literature emphasises that student-led initiatives are uniquely positioned to influence global change, especially as students unite to tackle transnational issues such as climate change, social inequality, and poverty (Leal Filho et al., 2021). The data presented reflects that students actively collaborate across borders, contributing to advocacy, knowledge sharing, and capacity-building through international networks and exchanges, which foster cultural and academic diversity in problem-solving. Participant insights echo studies highlighting that students bring fresh perspectives to global issues and facilitate impactful social change through collective action (Chindasombatcharoen et al., 2022). For instance, initiatives that encourage cross-cultural partnerships—like the coalition to promote climate education in underserved communities—demonstrate how grassroots student action can extend the reach and inclusivity of sustainable development practices (Dajana & Shujat, 2021). Furthermore, students' participation in global health initiatives during the COVID-19 pandemic illustrates their role in strengthening international solidarity to address crises (Taghizade et al., 2021). By championing the United Nations SDGs, student organisations contribute to broader efforts in poverty reduction, quality education, and environmental protection, underscoring the importance of youth engagement in global policymaking and structural transformation (Yadav, 2023).

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are made to enhance the roles students play in driving structural transformation toward inclusive and sustainable development:

Institutional Support for Student Advocacy: It is recommended that universities and academic institutions actively foster a supportive environment for student-led advocacy by allocating resources specifically for sustainability-related campaigns and discussions. This support might include funding, dedicated spaces for events, and partnerships with relevant NGOs and sustainability-focused organizations. Furthermore, institutions could organise social media and digital advocacy training to enable students to broaden their outreach and impact. Such support not only empowers students to raise awareness and mobilise others on sustainability issues but also strengthens the institution's commitment to fostering informed and proactive global citizens capable of advocating for structural change.

Encouraging Interdisciplinary Research and Innovation: To address the multifaceted nature of sustainability, universities could promote interdisciplinary research initiatives that bring students together from diverse fields—such as environmental science, engineering, social sciences, and business. Through collaborative projects and cross-departmental programs, students might develop innovative solutions to sustainability challenges like renewable energy, urban design, and resource management. Encouraging interdisciplinary research cultivates a holistic approach to problem solving, equipping students to understand and tackle complex global issues in ways that are both effective and sustainable.

Integrating Policy Advocacy in Curricula: Higher education institutions can enhance student engagement in structural transformation by incorporating modules on policy advocacy, civic engagement, and social justice into their curricula. Such courses could teach students how to navigate policy frameworks, effectively communicate with decision-makers, and advocate for sustainability-focused policy reforms. By instilling these skills, universities empower students to influence sustainable and inclusive policies both within the university and in wider societal settings, thereby fostering a generation of leaders equipped to drive meaningful change.

Capacity-Building Programs for Leadership Development: Universities and associated organisations should invest in capacity-building programs to strengthen students' leadership skills. Programs could include workshops on project management, community organisation, and strategic planning, along with mentorship opportunities where students learn directly from experienced leaders. Peer leadership programs can further promote collaborative skills essential for leading sustainability projects. By enhancing student leadership capacity, institutions help shape confident, capable individuals ready to initiate and lead inclusive, sustainability-driven initiatives within and beyond their communities.

Promoting Sustainable Lifestyles on Campus: Universities should lead by example by creating a campus environment that encourages sustainable practices. This could involve setting up recycling stations, composting facilities, and offering sustainable dining options. Organising events such as sustainability fairs, workshops, and challenges would engage students in adopting environmentally friendly practices and raise awareness of the importance of sustainable lifestyles. These initiatives make sustainable living accessible and habitual, positioning students as active participants in reducing their environmental footprint.

Enhancing Inclusivity in Education: Educational institutions can work with student organisations to build a truly inclusive learning environment, integrating diverse perspectives into course content and establishing peer mentorship programs to support under-represented students. Additionally, creating confidential reporting mechanisms for instances of discrimination or bias can ensure that all students feel safe and supported. By fostering inclusivity in this way, institutions create a supportive environment that values diverse voices, which is essential for cultivating student-driven change toward more inclusive and equitable societies.

Facilitating Global Student Collaboration: Universities should establish international exchange programs, online networking platforms, and global forums where students can collaborate across borders on issues of sustainability and inclusivity. Such initiatives enable students to share insights, resources, and innovations while learning about different approaches to sustainability. These connections foster a sense of global solidarity, equipping students to take informed action on global challenges and reinforcing the shared commitment to inclusive and sustainable development worldwide.

Conclusion

This study highlights the critical role that students play in driving structural transformation for inclusive and sustainable development. By engaging in advocacy, conducting research, participating in policy advocacy, and developing leadership capacities, students are instrumental in promoting awareness and action on pressing global challenges. Their commitment to sustainable consumption, inclusive educational environments, and global

solidarity underscores their potential to be powerful agents of change. With institutional support, access to resources, and global platforms for collaboration, students can further amplify their impact, helping to build a world that is more inclusive, equitable, and sustainable. Embracing these roles not only contributes to achieving the SDGs but also ensures that future leaders are equipped to address complex social, economic, and environmental challenges.

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