

Research Impact Through the SDGs: The Evolving Role of Social Science Librarians

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Abstract

As members of the academic library community, we constantly explore ways to showcase our impact and unique role in advancing the broader research community. One often overlooked avenue is the connection between the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and social science librarians' growing role in supporting evidence-based research. By emphasizing this connection and leveraging the SDGs' well-established framework and branding, we can enhance the visibility and importance of our work as catalysts for social, economic, and cultural development.

The United Nations established the SDGs to tackle various social, economic, and environmental challenges by the year 2030. While progress has been made, significant gaps and challenges remain in achieving these goals. In 2023, the UN reported that only 15 percent of the goals were on track. In response to this shortfall, the United Nations and its partners increasingly rely on evidence-based research and data-driven approaches to accelerate progress towards the SDGs. One such initiative, the Global SDG Synthesis Coalition, launched by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), utilizes evidence-based research to identify effective interventions and approaches for achieving the SDGs. By leveraging evidence-based research, policymakers can prioritize proven interventions, allocate resources better, design policies, and implement programs that effectively address the complex challenges outlined in the SDGs.

Librarians can play a significant role in supporting evidence-based research by providing expert guidance and support for evidence synthesis methods, such as systematic reviews. While these methodologies have traditionally been prominent in health sciences, social science librarians are increasingly encountering and responding to a growing demand for expertise in this area. Researchers new to evidence synthesis can benefit from librarians, as they are able to educate them on established reporting guidelines to ensure the production of high-quality evidence synthesis. However, one of the librarian's most significant contributions to this methodology lies

in developing and executing a comprehensive search of all the available research essential for identifying patterns, trends, gaps, and diverse perspectives. Failure to ensure comprehensiveness risks excluding specific viewpoints, especially those of our most marginalized communities, disregarding their valuable insights and perspectives derived from their experiences. While librarian inclusion is not a requirement of evidence-based research methods, studies have shown that their involvement enhances the rigor, comprehensiveness, and efficiency of the literature search, improving the quality and reliability of the findings. This approach directly contributes to SDG 17 by providing comprehensive, reliable data and insights that facilitate informed decision-making, collaboration, and stakeholder partnerships.

Studies show that many researchers are eager to become more familiar with and effectively incorporate the SDGs into their work. Librarians have the power to bridge this gap by offering training sessions to align projects with global objectives. By highlighting specific SDG targets and relevant indicators in research projects, we can present case studies and concrete examples demonstrating how our work directly advances critical goals, enhancing awareness of the SDGs and showcasing the research community's work.

The SDGs present a unique opportunity to incorporate their iconic marketing graphics into promotional materials like flyers, posters, and presentations, effectively highlighting librarians' contributions. Integrating SDG branding into library spaces through signage, displays, and exhibits raises patrons' awareness and emphasizes the library's commitment to promoting sustainable development through evidence-based research practices. These design elements can streamline our efforts and strengthen our connection to the university and global communities.

Keywords: Sustainable development goals (SDGs), evidence synthesis, marketing, strategic alignment, research impact, social science librarians

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Academic libraries face significant challenges as we navigate the evolving landscape of higher education. An era of increased marketization has generated local and global competition between institutions and changing user expectations (Cox, 2023), resulting in fundamental shifts in the role of libraries within campus environments. The traditional belief in the library's inherent value to the university's mission and its priority in budget allocations is no longer a certainty. As libraries actively compete for resources and relevance with numerous stakeholders involved in information management, student success, researcher support, and global reputation, the library as the "heart of the campus" is now a subject of debate (Salisbury & Peseta, 2023). In addition, despite our efforts, institutional leadership's perception of academic libraries has largely remained unchanged (Gwyer, 2018). These factors have created the need for adjustments in operational strategies to meet the demands of modern academia.

While the current situation presents challenges, it also offers opportunities to revitalize and reshape the identity of academic libraries, protecting the integrity and resilience of the profession. To help facilitate shifts in long-standing perceptions, academic libraries should continue to build on and adopt approaches that align with the changing needs and expectations of the institution. This effort should be strategic, transparent, and proactive, aligning the library's initiatives with institutional core values and strategies (Cox, 2018) to ensure that all stakeholders understand, appreciate, and value the library's contributions.

Strategies to Revitalize the Institutional Identity of Academic Libraries

A survey conducted by Murray and Ireland (2016, as cited by Cox, 2018) provides valuable insights for academic libraries striving to remain relevant in today's higher education landscape. Their study, which surveyed 209 provosts, revealed a significant shift in the expected role of academic librarians. Rather than concentrating solely on managing collections and physical spaces, provosts now emphasize the need for librarians to engage with broader

university issues. They highlight the critical importance of libraries aligning closely with institutional goals and fostering collaboration across campus.

Lewis (2016, as cited in Cox, 2023) discusses the importance of leveraging our unique strengths and Oakleaf (2010, as cited in Cox, 2023) suggests that we achieve this by supporting faculty research, thereby enhancing institutional reputation. This approach involves capitalizing on what distinguishes libraries from other campus units and seizing emerging opportunities before they are supported elsewhere (Lewis, 2016, as cited by Cox, 2018). Cox (2016, as cited by Cox 2023) urges libraries to assert their identity and contributions within collaborations, suggesting a transition from terms like *service* and *support* to *expertise* and *partnership*.

This chapter discusses the critical importance of libraries leveraging specialized skills, in areas such as evidence synthesis, to establish themselves as indispensable partners in research. With the increasing prevalence of systematic reviews in the social sciences, librarians have unprecedented opportunities to engage directly in research, whether as consultants or co-authors (Chapman, 2021). We have the potential to significantly enhance faculty research and contribute towards advancing the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This alignment also directly supports SDG 17, which focuses on fostering global partnerships for sustainable development.

By strategically redefining and reinforcing our roles, academic libraries can effectively demonstrate our continued evolution within the shifting landscape of higher education. This proactive approach not only aligns with the core values and overarching objectives of the library and the institution but also underscores our commitment to scholarly collaboration and sustainable development on a global scale.

The Sustainable Development Goals

One hundred ninety-three United Nations member states adopted the SDGs in 2015 as a blueprint for addressing our time's most pressing global challenges. The 17 goals include 169 targets, and 231 indicators related to reducing poverty, hunger, improving education quality,

gender equality, health and well-being, clean water and sanitation, affordable and clean energy, decent work, and economic growth (United Nations, n.d.). The goals guide governments, businesses, and civil society on ways to work together towards common objectives to ensure the preservation of our planet for future generations while emphasizing inclusivity and interconnectedness, as encapsulated by their motto "Leave no one behind" (Siegel & Bastos Lima, 2020). Despite the initiatives provided by the SDGs, recent assessments indicate that the global community is falling short of these ambitious targets.

In its July 2023 Sustainable Development Goals Report, the United Nations revealed a sobering assessment that our progress is alarmingly off course halfway through the SDG timeline. The report warns that humanity faces prolonged periods of crisis and uncertainty without both course correction and a significant acceleration in our efforts. Progress has stalled on over 50% of targets, with approximately 30% showing signs of stagnation or regression. If current trends continue, an estimated 575 million individuals will still live in extreme poverty by 2030, with only a third of countries on track to halve their poverty levels. Global hunger has reached levels not seen since 2005, and food prices have risen in more countries compared to the period between 2015 and 2019. At the current pace, it will take 286 years to close gender disparities in legal protections and discriminatory laws. Continued underinvestment and learning losses in education will leave 84 million children out of school and 300 million unable to read or write by 2030. The COVID-19 pandemic, compounded by such ongoing crises as climate change and geopolitical tensions like the Russia-Ukraine and Israel-Hamas conflicts, has significantly worsened global conditions. Consequently, living costs have surged and exacerbated inequalities, disproportionately affecting developing nations burdened by debt and inadequate financial resources (United Nations, 2023a).

These intricately interconnected challenges weave together environmental, economic, and social threads, each amplifying the others' impact. Without immediate action, the 2030 Agenda risks becoming a testament to what the world could have achieved. The United Nations

is sounding the alarm for greater awareness and participation in its goals, and academic libraries have a crucial role to play in this effort by amplifying our proficiency in supporting the production of high-quality evidence syntheses and actively aligning research with and championing global objectives. Through collaborative efforts with researchers, we can support the development of SDG-related projects, showcase our expertise, and demonstrate our value and impact within the institutional community.

Evidence Synthesis Expansion in the Social Sciences

The Global Sustainable Development Report (GSDR), published every four years and compiled by an independent group of scientists appointed by the UN Secretary-General, offers evidence-based insights on global sustainable development. The 2023 edition highlighted the pivotal role of science and evidence-based interventions in helping to navigate uncertainty and address global challenges. It emphasized our ability to leverage this research for transformative change toward a promising future, underscoring the indispensable nature of multidisciplinary, equitably produced, openly shared, widely trusted, socially robust, and relevant scientific insights (United Nations, 2023b). Chapter 4 of the report notes a substantial increase in academic research that aligns with the SDGs. Researchers, funders, and educational institutions are increasingly framing their research, teaching, and societal outreach strategies around the SDGs, and several database platforms, such as Scopus and Web of Science, now include SDG mapping in their content.

Evidence synthesis is one research method designed to identify, select, and combine results from multiple studies. *Systematic reviews* and *meta-analyses* are types of evidence synthesis that have long been a cornerstone of health science research, providing evidence for everyday clinical practices. They rigorously identify, select, evaluate, and synthesize relevant studies addressing specific research questions. Transparency and replicability are ensured through predefined methodologies that minimize bias and facilitate reproducibility. These reviews involve systematic searches across multiple databases, transparent criteria for selecting

studies, and rigorous appraisal of study quality, supported by peer review to uphold methodological rigor. By integrating findings from diverse studies, systematic reviews provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of interventions, guiding evidence-based practices, informing policy decisions, and directing future research efforts. Expanding social science evidence synthesis beyond health science disciplines is particularly relevant to the SDGs, building a solid foundation for informing policy and guiding actions toward achieving these global objectives.

Global Collaborative Evidence Networks

Global Collaborative Evidence Networks (GCENs) are vital in the expansion of evidence synthesis because they facilitate international, multidisciplinary collaborations. These networks share, synthesize, and apply scientific evidence, bringing together researchers, policymakers, practitioners, and stakeholders from various fields and regions (Jordan & Pilla, 2024). By fostering the development of high-quality, evidence-based solutions, the collaborative evidence networks ensure that decision-making is grounded in the best available evidence, adhering to agreed-upon standards and improving responses to global issues.

One notable GCEN network is the Cochrane Collaboration, which has been a pioneering force in the health sciences since its inception in 1993. Cochrane's repository of evidence synthesis ensures that treatment protocols are based on rigorously evaluated and independently verified research. By collaborating only with organizations free from commercial interests, Cochrane provides a counterbalance to industry-driven research. Notably, 76% of the World Health Organization (WHO) guidelines reference Cochrane Reviews for their recommendations, highlighting the significant impact of this evidence network on global health policy (Cochrane Collaboration, 2022).

Recognizing the need for systematic reviews on the effectiveness of social interventions, members of Cochrane established the Campbell Collaboration in 2000. Named in honor of Donald T. Campbell (1916-1996), a member of the National Academy of Sciences who believed

that scientific evidence could be used to evaluate the impact of governmental reforms, Campbell championed the idea that such evidence-based evaluations would lead to better-informed policies and practices, ultimately enhancing people's well-being (Campbell Collaboration, n.d.).

Other evidence networks in the social sciences include the What Works Clearinghouse, established in 2002 by the Institute of Education Sciences in the US Department of Education. Its purpose is to review the quality of education research and compile systematic reviews to guide practice. The organization has created standards and a database of reviewed and rated studies (Seftor, 2017, as cited in Chapman, 2021). Similarly, the Collaboration for Environmental Evidence established the CEEDatabase of Evidence Reviews (CEEDER) in 2018, promoting and delivering evidence syntheses on issues of most significant concern to environmental policy and practice as a public service. The growth of such networks further highlights the expansion and significance of evidence synthesis beyond health sciences (Collaboration for Environmental Evidence, n.d.).

To highlight the importance of this research methodology in achieving the SDGs, the Global SDG Synthesis Coalition was established in January 2023. This collaborative effort involves over 40 UN entities and diverse organizations, including bilateral and multilateral bodies, global evaluation networks, and private sector partners. The coalition's primary goal is to produce actionable insights organized around five SDG pillars: People, Planet, Prosperity, Peace, and Partnership. In support of each pillar, the coalition compiles and synthesizes research findings to provide a comprehensive understanding of what works, what does not, and why in the context of sustainable development. This approach provides policymakers with the latest high-quality evidence to inform decisions directly related to the SDGs. The coalition stresses that the success of this initiative relies on the contributions of researchers and the strength of collaborative efforts, underscoring the importance of a robust evidence ecosystem (The Global SDG Synthesis Coalition, n.d.).

The expansion of GCENs and the formation of the Global SDG Synthesis Coalition are changing the approach to evidence-based research on critical global issues by incorporating diverse interdisciplinary perspectives. Aligned with the 2030 Agenda and its 17 SDGs, these initiatives promote a comprehensive and unified approach to sustainable development. Global challenges, including conflict, security threats, financial instability, and democratic decline, highlight the need for urgent action. In response, there has been a significant increase in collaboration among researchers, funders, and academic institutions to address these complex issues. Stakeholders are now ascribing more importance to the SDGs through interdisciplinary research, collaborative innovation, and purpose-driven scientific efforts. This change is evident in the growing number of publications referencing the SDGs and the proactive initiatives led by various organizations. The global community depends on the contributions of researchers and the strength of collaborative efforts, including partnerships with librarians, to produce high-quality research that informs sustainable solutions.

GCEN Challenges

Despite their vital role, GCENs face significant challenges in providing robust evidence to support the SDGs. A report by the Global Commission on Evidence Synthesis to Address Societal Challenges (2024) highlights disparities in the breadth and quality of evidence synthesis efforts, worsened by the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. This international initiative, involving experts from academia, policy, and industry, aims to bridge the gap between research findings and their practical application in addressing complex societal issues.

To address these challenges, the Commission proposed several recommendations. Researchers are encouraged to prioritize filling evidence gaps, maintain rigorous standards, and focus on areas lacking sufficient evidence while avoiding redundancy in others. Academic institutions are urged to incentivize contributions to national and global evidence systems and to

support institutional assessment exercises, such as the United Kingdom's Research Excellence Framework, to showcase the impact of evidence generation.

The Global Evidence Commission report (Global Commission on Evidence to Address Societal Challenges, 2024) also calls upon journal publishers to enforce strict reporting guidelines, thorough critical appraisal, and proper contextualization of individual studies to enhance the quality of evidence. This includes publishing nonpositive results, combating biases, addressing misconduct, and ensuring timely updates to dynamic evidence repositories. These recommendations highlight the critical role librarians can play in educating researchers on these methodologies and fostering the growth of this research area, further reinforcing the importance of librarians actively engaging as research partners.

Academic Libraries and the SDGs

Librarians, with our unique positions and skill sets, have the potential to make significant impacts in integrating the SDGs into research agendas. A recent Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI) survey revealed that faculty members expressed a desire to “learn more and integrate the goals into their prioritization processes” (Jordan & Pilla, 2024). The survey, which included 77 respondents mainly from the academic sphere, found that 56% desired a deeper understanding of the SDGs, highlighting a significant knowledge gap in evidence synthesis work. It is concerning that less than 30% of participants consider SDGs in their research prioritization, indicating a substantial disconnect.

One of Jordan's survey participants (2024) noted that current research patterns often fail to align directly with SDG objectives due to the misconception that SDGs are primarily the responsibility of the public sector or nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). This misconception perpetuates a gap between development and research priorities at the policy level, given that research predominantly resides within universities. Recent studies stress the necessity for concerted action to acknowledge challenges in SDG implementation across diverse sectors, including academia, civil society, and industry (Jordan & Pilla, 2024).

Librarians can play a unique role in addressing this gap. Drawing on insights from Chapman (2020, as cited in Jordan, 2024), librarians are more than facilitators—we are catalysts for fostering interdisciplinary connections that align with institutional and SDG frameworks. By aligning library and institutional missions with SDG targets, librarians empower researchers to integrate SDGs seamlessly into their teaching and research efforts. Through these initiatives, librarians can advocate for sustainable development, guiding academia toward a future grounded in SDG principles.

Evidence Synthesis

Despite the growing use of evidence synthesis, many researchers remain unfamiliar with the wide variety of available types and the rigorous procedures involved. This lack of familiarity can lead to confusion and misapplication (Grant & Booth, 2009), highlighting another opportunity for librarians to educate and guide researchers. Those trained in evidence synthesis methods can be crucial in clarifying nuances and facilitating the appropriate selection of review types tailored to researchers' specific needs.

Once an evidence synthesis method is identified, librarians can expertly navigate researchers through the vast expanse of literature. Drawing on our profound understanding of various subject-specific and interdisciplinary databases, we can formulate and refine complex search queries tailored to the research question. Utilizing Boolean operators and search filters, librarians can ensure access to the most pertinent studies and actively incorporate fewer mainstream sources, such as pre-prints and grey literature, to enhance the comprehensiveness and scope of the search process. These searches can then be translated across various databases, ensuring replicability, robustness, and comprehensiveness. Evidence shows that librarian involvement significantly enhances the rigor, comprehensiveness, and efficiency of literature searches, ultimately improving the overall quality and reliability of research findings (Ramírez et al., 2022; Pawliuk et al., 2024).

Scientific research is pivotal for achieving both the SDGs and Agenda 2030. Librarians play a crucial role in the academic community due to our impartiality (Cox, 2023), focusing primarily on enhancing and facilitating research rather than engaging in academic competition. This unique position enables them to serve as highly effective facilitators. Librarians excel at bridging gaps between researchers and the SDGs by identifying collaboration opportunities, mapping existing efforts, setting priorities, integrating SDGs into research agendas, and monitoring, evaluating, and communicating these initiatives. Our expertise ensures seamless alignment of research efforts with the SDGs (Thorpe and Gunton, 2022).

The Importance of Credit for Our Work

Unfortunately, given the library's traditional roles, our contributions often go unrecognized. Whether educating others on SDGs and evidence synthesis, engaging in consultation work, or co-authoring research, librarians must assert our identity and ensure that we receive proper credit for our leadership (Cox, 2023). Recognizing our role in evidence synthesis may seem straightforward, but a study by Brunskill and Hanneke (2022) sheds light on this issue. They analyzed 209 protocols registered on PROSPERO from 2017 to 2018 that noted librarian involvement, revealing significant insights into how librarians' contributions are acknowledged and documented.

Their analysis revealed that a substantial portion of the reviews recognized librarian involvement: 28% listed a librarian as a co-author, 41% acknowledged librarians in the acknowledgments section, and 78% mentioned librarians' contributions within the main body of the review. However, the study also highlighted areas for improvement. Specifically, 31% of the reviews did not explicitly identify the librarians involved, and 9% made no mention of librarians at all. Librarians' roles, primarily focused on developing search strategies, were often referred to in a generic manner as simply "a librarian."

Reviews with librarians as co-authors tended to provide more detailed acknowledgments of our contributions than those without librarian co-authors. While many reviews boasted

reproducible search strategies, some lacked essential details or exhibited methodological flaws. Brunskill and Hanneke's (2022) findings underscore a clear need for enhanced documentation and recognition of librarians' integral roles in the systematic review process. This provides an opportunity for improved practices in acknowledging librarian contributions within the academic research community.

Addressing Challenges and Apprehension

In the face of the evolving landscape of higher education, academic librarians are not just passive observers. We are active participants, facing challenges and seizing opportunities to innovate by redefining our roles and contributions. By strategically aligning our services with the evolving needs of our communities, embracing our unique positioning in evidence synthesis, and fostering collaborations that advance global goals like the SDGs, libraries can enhance our relevance while reaffirming our pivotal role as catalysts for positive change.

Individuals trained in evidence synthesis have the potential to produce higher-quality systematic reviews, but despite potential benefits, the substantial time commitment remains a significant barrier. Estimates suggest a wide range of time investment, from 2 to over 200 hours per project, with a median total of 18.5 hours, notably spending about 471 minutes solely on the searching phase (Slebodnik et al., 2022). This capability is underscored by the significant increase in systematic reviews published daily, rising from 11 in 2010 to about 80 in 2019, with over 40,000 citations found in Scopus by 2021 (Slebodnik et al., 2022). This growth extends beyond healthcare to include the social, physical, and life sciences disciplines.

Libraries should document the growing number of systematic review requests, both met and unmet, and use this information to present our need for increased funding and resources. Without demonstrating demand, securing additional support may be challenging. When we are unable to fulfill researchers' needs, we should leverage these discussions to explain the necessity of additional resources and encourage researchers to advocate on behalf of the library. Effectively managing researcher expectations is crucial to address potential challenges,

such as increased workload, and engaging in authorship roles in published reviews. Many libraries have adopted systematic review services structured around tiered collaboration or consultation models to manage demand effectively.

The strategies discussed in this chapter reflect the interconnected values of our libraries, universities, and communities. Actively promoting these values and aligning our actions with institutional strategies is crucial for maintaining our relevance and standing in the academic community (Cox, 2023). Engaging in evidence synthesis research and prioritizing the SDGs effectively translates our principles into tangible actions. Through proactive adaptation and strategic engagement, libraries can continue to develop new ways to highlight our impact, ensuring that we remain integral partners in shaping the future of academia and society.

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