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MAPPING THE ACADEMIC LANDSCAPE: A STATE-OF-THE-ART PERSPECTIVE ON SUSTAINABILITY, INNER DEVELOPMENT GOALS AND HIGHER EDUCATION

Yuliya Shtaltovna

Abstract

The increasing prominence of sustainability in global discourse has led to a rising interest in the integration of Inner Development Goals (IDGs) as a complementary framework to the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This study explores the intersection of sustainability, transformational leadership, and inner development, emphasizing how personal traits and skills are essential for addressing complex global challenges. Using *Google Books Ngram Viewer*, this research tracks the historical evolution of key sustainability-related terms, revealing a shift from broad discussions to structured, policy-driven discourse following the introduction of the SDGs in 2015. Additionally, this study examines the IDG framework's development and application, highlighting its emergence as a participatory initiative that draws on interdisciplinary perspectives from education, leadership, and sustainability sciences. The research also presents findings from a dynamically updated *Google Scholar* profile, which systematically indexes IDG-related academic publications, providing a valuable resource for scholars, educators, and policymakers. The results indicate an increasing integration of IDGs into higher education, leadership development, and sustainability policymaking, underscoring the importance of inner transformation for sustainable global change.

Keywords: sustainability, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Inner Development Goals (IDGs), transformational leadership, higher education, youth and adult pedagogy, research on IDGs

Introduction: Sustainability and Sustainable Development Goals

The increasing emphasis on sustainability in global discourse has led to a significant rise in the usage of related terminology in academic and general literature. This analysis uses Google Books Ngram Viewer to examine the frequency trends of key terms associated with sustainability: "sustainability," "sustainable business," and "sustainable development goals (SDGs, SDG)" from 1980 to 2022. Google Books Ngram Viewer provides a quantitative measure of word and phrase occurrences in a large corpus of digitized books. The selected search terms were analyzed in the English language corpus from 1980 to 2022 with a smoothing factor of 1 to identify trends and fluctuations in their usage over time. This graph illustrates how the popularity of these terms has evolved and what this suggests about shifting priorities in sustainability research, policy, and business practices.
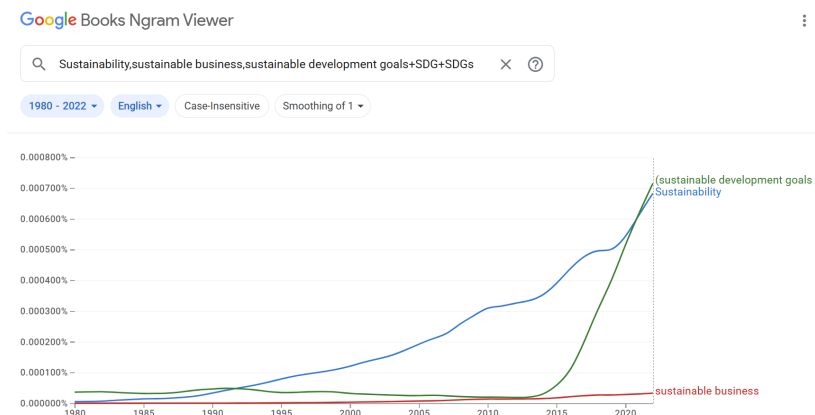
Figure 1. Ngram Analysis on Sustainability, Sustainability Business and SDG+SDGs, as per 01.03.2025, Author's own compilation via Google Books Ngram Viewer, 2025.

As a tool, *Google Books Ngram Viewer* provides access to a vast corpus of digitized books, allowing for the quantitative analysis of word and phrase occurrences over time. The database consists of

millions of books in various disciplines, making it a robust tool for identifying linguistic and conceptual trends in academic and general literature.

Search Parameters:

- **Keywords:** "Sustainability," "Sustainable business," and "Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs, SDG)"
- **Timeframe:** 1980–2022
- **Language:** English corpus gathered by Google Books and Google Scholar
- **Case Sensitivity:** Case-insensitive search to account for variations in capitalization
- **Smoothing Factor:** 1, which applies minimal smoothing to the data to preserve year-over-year variations

The term "sustainability" first appeared with a very low frequency in the early 1960s and maintained a marginal presence until the late 1980s. During this period, environmental concerns were present but had not yet gained widespread recognition in mainstream literature. Similarly, "sustainable business" remained nearly absent from the literature until the 1990s.

From the 1990s onwards, "sustainability" experienced a steady increase, reflecting its growing importance in policy discussions, corporate governance, and academia. The Kyoto Protocol (1997) and the rise of environmental movements in the late 1990s and early 2000s likely reinforced this trend. In 2015, the United Nations officially introduced the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015, replacing the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). After 2015, where the term "sustainable development goals (SDGs, SDG)" exhibits an exponential rise. This reflects the global adoption of the UN 2030 Agenda, which placed SDGs at the centre of international policy and academic research. The results indicate a shift from general discussions on sustainability to more structured policy-driven discourse following the introduction of the SDGs in 2015. The exponential rise in SDG-related terminology suggests that sustainability discussions are increasingly being framed within the context of these global goals.

The Inner Development Goals (IDG) Framework and Its Relevance to Sustainable Development

The Inner Development Goals (IDG) framework was developed to address the cognitive, emotional, and social skills required to tackle complex societal challenges, particularly those outlined in the United Nations' Agenda 2030 and the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). While various frameworks emphasize general well-being and individual empowerment, the IDG framework focuses specifically on skills and qualities that enhance problem-solving and decision-making in sustainability efforts. It highlights the need for personal transformation as a fundamental component of addressing global sustainability challenges (Wamsler et al., 2021; Jordan et al., 2021).

The IDG initiative emerged as a low-budget project, initially lacking the resources for an in-depth literature review or empirical research. Instead, it relied on two large-scale surveys and extensive community input to identify key competencies needed for sustainability leadership. More than a thousand individuals – including researchers, practitioners, and stakeholders in sustainability and leadership development – actively contributed to reviewing and refining the framework. Given its broad and participatory foundation, the IDG framework is not directly tied to any specific theoretical model but instead draws from interdisciplinary perspectives in adult learning, strategic leadership, and sustainability science (Jordan et al., 2021; Woiwode et al., 2021).

A significant discussion within the IDG framework concerns the interplay between individual and collective capacities for sustainability. It acknowledges that many competencies emerge not just at the individual level but as systemic properties of organizations, cultures, and institutions. The current version of the framework serves as a starting point for further exploration of how different societal structures can facilitate personal and collective development to advance sustainability efforts. Future research is needed to refine institutional strategies that support the cultivation of transformative leadership and sustainability skills (Wamsler et al., 2021; Wamsler et al., 2020; Woiwode et al., 2021).

Despite its broad engagement, the IDG framework currently exhibits a Western-centric bias, as most contributors were from Western

societies and were already engaged in leadership development and global sustainability discussions. The creators of the framework acknowledge this limitation and aim to expand its reach to diverse cultural and geographical contexts. Future iterations of the framework should incorporate insights from non-Western perspectives and marginalized communities to enhance its applicability and inclusivity (Jordan et al., 2021). This need for diversification is also reflected in related sustainability education and leadership development frameworks, which emphasize the necessity of contextualizing transformative skills for different global settings (Wamsler & Restoy, 2020).

Inner Development Goals
- Transformational Leadership for Sustainable Future

Since its introduction in 2021 (Stålne & Greca, 2022), the Inner Development Goals (IDG) framework has been applied across various domains. Educational institutions, including schools and universities, are incorporating IDGs into their curricula to cultivate future leaders who possess both cognitive abilities (Shtaltovna & al., 2024) and inner capacities. In the corporate sector, businesses and organizations utilize the framework to develop leadership programs and enhance team cohesion, and innovation. Policy and advocacy groups, including NGOs and governmental institutions, employ IDGs to shape policies that support holistic development. Community initiatives leverage the framework to empower individuals and local communities, enabling them to engage with and address broader societal and global challenges.

A Thematic Analysis of Top Fields of Study

The Inner Development Goals (IDGs) framework was designed to emphasize the inner capacities required to navigate the complex challenges posed by the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Recognizing the intrinsic connection between external transformation and internal growth, the IDGs advocate for both personal and collective development as essential components of sustainability and equity.

Figure 2. Interdisciplinary Research Landscape of Inner Development Goals (IDGs) and Sustainability as of December 01. 2024. Author's own compilation via Google Books Ngram Viewer, 2025, via Lens.com.

A growing body of research from 2021 to 2024 highlights an increasing trend in integrating Inner Development Goals (IDGs) within Education and Pedagogy. This literature underscores a shift towards embedding IDGs in educational structures to facilitate both individual and collective transformation. The research stresses the importance of equipping students and educators with the necessary skills for sustainable leadership, resilience, and global citizenship, emphasizing diverse pedagogical approaches. A comprehensive search conducted through Dimensions and Google Scholar identified 220 papers published between June and December 2024, with this body of literature continuing to expand through the automatic scraping of the GScholar indexation base and manual addition of the relevant papers in various languages.

This visual was generated using Lens, a comprehensive academic and patent database that enables the analysis of research trends across various disciplines. The dataset was built by extracting publications related to Inner Development Goals (IDGs) and Sustainability from

the Lens database, filtering for works that mention IDGs in their title, abstract, or keywords. The fields of study were identified using a semantic analysis of indexed publications, categorizing them based on their relevance to disciplines such as psychology, sociology, sustainability, epistemology, engineering ethics, and political science. The size of each term in the visualization reflects the frequency of its occurrence in the dataset, indicating the prominence of these research domains within the IDG literature. The dataset was last updated on December 1, 2024, ensuring that the visualization represents the most recent academic contributions in the field.

IDG & Sustainability Research:
A Dynamically Updated Google Scholar Profile

To support researchers and practitioners working with Inner Development Goals (IDGs) and Sustainability, IDG Higher Education Circle has established a dynamically updated profile on Google Scholar. This profile systematically indexes Google Scholar-listed papers, including articles and book chapters in multiple languages, that focus explicitly on IDGs – specifically, those that mention Inner Development Goals in their Title, Abstract, and/or Keywords.

Starting from April 2024, this collection has been regularly updated with newly published academic works, as well as contributions from the Higher Education Circle at IDG Global. The collected studies were classified into four principal categories: Sustainability and Climate Change, Well-Being and Social Frameworks, Education and Pedagogy, and Leadership and Transformation. Research within the Education and Pedagogy category explores how IDGs are reshaping educational methodologies, transformative learning experiences, and enhancing understanding of sustainability and ethical leadership. These studies contribute to a broader discourse on redefining education to support both personal growth and global problem-solving.

The initiative originally began as a shared document, where participants could manually submit their research, but it has since been automated into the IDG Research Google Scholar Profile. Each week, a set of automatically proposed articles is reviewed against the predefined inclusion criteria before being added to the list.

Tracking Academic Contributions and Citation Impact

The IDG Research collection is accessible via https://bit.ly/GScholar_IDG. As of March 1, 2025, this compendium includes 220 indexed publications, providing a comprehensive resource for scholars, educators, and policymakers interested in the intersection of inner transformation and sustainable development. This initiative ensures that IDG-related academic discourse remains visible, searchable, and continuously expanding, supporting the growing body of research in leadership, sustainability, and personal development.
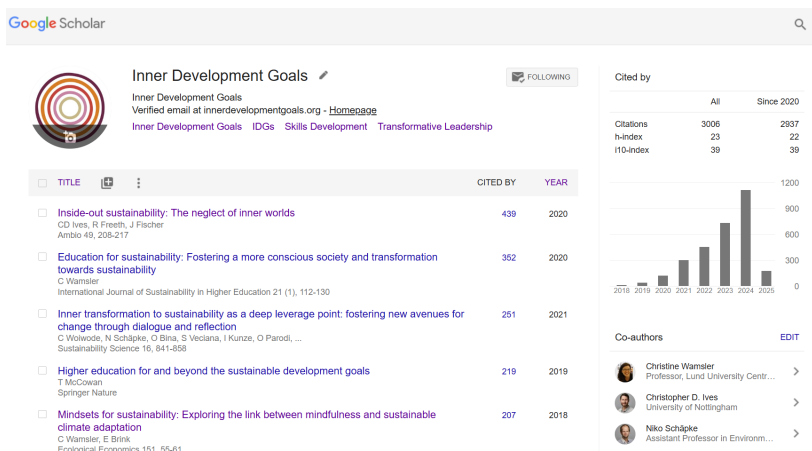
Figure 3. Google Scholar Profile for Inner Development Goals (IDGs) Research, Author's own compilation as per March 1, 2025.

As per March 01, 2025, this collection represents a significant global engagement with IDGs, with 169 contributors from 52 institutions across 28 countries, demonstrating the interdisciplinary and international nature of research on Inner Development Goals (IDG). The United States (22 contributors), Germany (20 contributors), the United Kingdom (18 contributors), Sweden (15 contributors), and Australia (14 contributors) are the leading contributors, reflecting the strong involvement of well-established research institutions in sustainability and leadership education.

In addition to contributions from countries with traditionally strong research infrastructures, there is notable participation from regions such as Brazil, Mexico, Colombia, India, and South Africa, which together account for 15 contributors. This diversity indicates a broadening interest in sustainability-focused education beyond historically dominant academic institutions. The inclusion of 52 institutions across these regions emphasizes the collaborative nature of IDG research and its applicability across different educational, cultural, and policy contexts. The widespread institutional and geographical representation suggests that IDG implementation is part of a larger global effort to integrate transformative, skills-based leadership approaches for sustainability into higher education.

The citation analysis of Inner Development Goals (IDGs) and Sustainability Research reveals a significant growth trajectory in scholarly engagement, as demonstrated by a total of 3,006 citations, with 2,937 citations since 2020. The h-index of 23 (22 since 2020) indicates that at least 23 publications have been cited 23 times or more, reflecting a moderate to strong research impact. Meanwhile, the i10-index of 39 confirms that 39 publications have received at least 10 citations each, signalling a broad academic reach. The year-over-year citation trend highlights an exponential rise, starting with minimal activity before 2020, followed by a gradual increase in 2020-2022 as IDGs gained traction in sustainability, leadership, and higher education research.

A notable surge occurred in 2023, surpassing 600 citations, reflecting a wider adoption of IDGs across interdisciplinary studies. The peak citation count in 2024 exceeded 1,000, marking a breakthrough year for IDG-related publications, positioning them as a key topic in contemporary sustainability discourse. While 2025 is still ongoing, the early citation count remains relatively high, suggesting sustained academic interest in the field. These metrics confirm that IDGs are evolving from an emerging research area to a well-established framework for personal and collective transformation in sustainability and leadership studies. If this growth trajectory continues, IDGs will likely become an integral component of research on sustainable development, systemic change, and higher education methodologies in the coming years.

Overview of Research on IDGs in Education and Pedagogy (2021–2025)

The adoption of IDGs aligns with the broader effort to reconsider education's role in democratization. By prioritizing inner development, educational institutions can nurture the ethical and political sensibilities necessary for democratic engagement and leadership (Straume, 2014; Strand & Papastephanou, 2023). The IDGs also help address inequalities by bridging skill gaps, such as enhancing emotional intelligence and resilience, which are essential for leadership yet often overlooked in traditional curricula (World Economic Forum, 2020). Encouraging inclusive mindsets promotes empathy and compassion, enabling leaders to engage with diverse communities and promote accessibility and equality (Laloux, 2014). Furthermore, supporting lifelong learning for a culture of continuous personal and professional growth, ensures that future leaders remain adaptable and receptive to change (Scharmer, 2007).

Figure 4.
Research overview on Implementing IDGs in Higher Education.
Author's own compilation, 2025

Sustainability in Education	Pöllänenv et al. (2023) – Investigate the integration of sustainability principles into educational curricula. Garcia-Alvarez et al. (2023) – Examine the role of education in sustainable development. Nordén (2024b) – Provides methodological insights for assessing sustainability in teacher education.
Transformative Learning and Resilience	Brooks & Brooks (2024) – Explore transformative frameworks that support education in times of crisis. Wamsler et al. (2024), Rodriguez Carreon (2023) – Focus on resilience and trauma-informed higher education.

IDGs Framework and Higher Education	Shtaltovna et al. (2024) – Discuss the integration of IDGs in higher education, emphasizing skill development and cognitive growth. Merlin et al. (2023), Blankenship-Lai (2024) – Analyze leadership education's role in promoting sustainable practices and resilience. Shtaltovna (2024) – Examines metamodern education's potential for leadership transformation and its alignment with societal change and IDGs-based educational frameworks.
Inclusive Education and Learning Design	Rossi (2023), Randhawa & Kumar (2017), Engel & Janssen (2024) – Investigate strategies for equitable and inclusive learning environments, inclusive pedagogies, and transformative educational experiences.
Psychological and Organizational Dimensions	Cheng (2021), Leigh & Rivers (2023), Benayoune (2024) – Examine the psychological aspects of learning and leadership in education, including behaviour, privilege, and competency development in higher education.
Future-Oriented Methodologies and Assessment	Nordén (2024), Disterheft (2024), Wood (2024), Shtaltovna (2024) – Focus on future-ready education approaches, sustainability assessments, and IDGs' integration into higher education.
Skills Development in the Context of Sustainability & Higher Education	Shtaltovna (2021), Bremner et al. (2024), Cripps & Smith (2024), Jakubik et al. (2023), Libertson (2023), Shtaltovna & Muzzu (2021), Makhachashvili et al. (2021) – Examine soft skills development in sustainability education, focusing on competency assessment, mindset shifts, and leadership preparation

However, effectively integrating inner development and leadership skills into curricula requires institutional flexibility and support, which may not always be readily available (Barnett, 2014; Jakubik et al., 2023). Additionally, critical scrutiny of the underlying assumptions in educational practices is necessary to prevent perpetuating existing inequalities or undermining democratic values (Biesta, 2022; Strand & Papastephanou, 2023). Addressing these challenges will enable higher education institutions to harness the IDGs effectively, preparing a new generation of leaders capable of navigating and resolving complex global challenges.

Further Research: Need for Case Studies on IDG Implementation in Higher Education

Further research is essential to enhance sustainability awareness, encourage action, and transformative leadership aimed at building more sustainable businesses. The IDG Scholar can focus on exploring real-world applications and provide valuable guidance for institutions seeking to integrate IDGs effectively, ultimately strengthening the connection between education, leadership, and sustainability.

The primary aim of the upcoming studies is to document, analyze, and share global cases of implementing the Inner Development Goals (IDG) framework within higher education institutions. Using a qualitative case study approach, this research could examine various cases to capture diverse methods, impacts, and integration strategies across different educational settings. Through a global call for cases, educators and administrators worldwide are to be invited to submit narratives of their IDG implementation practices, thereby enabling a comprehensive analysis of IDG's influence in higher education. The collected cases can be mapped to identify patterns and offer insights that inform best practices and further adoption.

The outcomes of this study will establish a comprehensive framework for democratizing business education, offering practical recommendations for curriculum design, interdisciplinary collaboration, experiential learning, and faculty development (Jakubik et al., 2023). Emphasizing cognitive and intercultural skills, the research will enhance the current understanding of how higher education can equip students for global leadership and citizenship. Additionally, it will bridge a gap in the existing literature by delivering empirical insights into the effects of democratization efforts on leadership education and student outcomes (Shtaltovna et al., 2024).

Additionally, such research would address specific leadership challenges and vocations such as complexity, human resource exhaustion and depletion, leading teams during crises such as wars and outages, diplomacy and leadership brand management, crisis management, and resilience capacity building, as well as leadership skills and ethics.

Conclusions

The findings of this study highlight the growing significance of Inner Development Goals (IDGs) in sustainability, leadership, and higher education research. The increasing citations and academic engagement reflect a rising acknowledgement of inner transformation as a key enabler of systemic change in achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The IDG framework, with its focus on self-awareness, cognitive flexibility, collaboration, and resilience, has gained traction as an essential complement to traditional sustainability efforts. The data indicate that IDGs are becoming an integral part of academic discourse, influencing leadership development, policymaking, and educational strategies. However, despite this progress, challenges remain, including Western-centric biases, the need for empirical validation, and further exploration of the link between IDGs and measurable sustainability outcomes.

Future research should focus on broadening the cultural and disciplinary scope of IDG studies, integrating perspectives from non-Western societies, indigenous knowledge systems, and diverse professional domains. Additionally, empirical studies assessing the direct impact of IDG-based leadership training on sustainability performance in organizations and institutions are needed. Further investigation into how IDGs can be systematically embedded into higher education curricula and corporate sustainability strategies would strengthen their practical application. Advancing longitudinal studies to measure the effectiveness of inner development practices on systemic transformation would provide valuable insights into the long-term benefits of IDG integration in global sustainability efforts. As we address these gaps, future research can enhance the applicability, inclusivity, and scientific foundation of IDGs, ensuring their role as a transformative force in achieving sustainable and equitable societal change.

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