

University Autonomy and SDG16 Implementation in De Facto States Evidence from Afghanistan

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Abstract

This study analyzes the relationship between university autonomy and the implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 16 (SDG16) in Afghanistan. SDG16 provides a global framework for strengthening institutions for peace, justice, and inclusion, but its implementation in fragile or unstable countries faces many challenges. Afghanistan faces particular challenges post-2021 due to political instability, limited financial resources, and reduced university autonomy. The study assessed the impact of university activities, political pressures, and financial constraints through focus groups with 35 political science university lecturers. The findings show that universities have a role in promoting peace and justice through educational activities, but are weakened by political interference and limited resources in the areas of leadership, research, and governance. The conclusion is that university autonomy is vital for the implementation of SDG16, and international support and local capacity building are necessary for universities to play an effective role in strengthening institutions for peace, justice, and inclusion.

Keywords: Autonomy, De Facto States, Fragile States, Higher Education, SDGs 16, University

1. Introduction

Sustainable Development Goal 16 (SDG16) provides a global framework for strengthening institutions for peace, justice, and inclusion, which is particularly important in fragile or unstable countries. Afghanistan faced serious challenges after 2021 due to political instability, restrictions on women's education, weak governance, and restrictions on university autonomy. The role of universities is not limited to the production of human resources, but is also an important social resource for the development of social peace, inclusion, and justice. In the past few years, university activities have been affected by security pressures, political interference, and financial constraints, which have created challenges for the implementation of SDG16.

The link between university autonomy and the implementation of SDG16 is important for both academic and political parties. Universities can have a significant impact on peace, justice, and inclusive institutions, but if their autonomy is limited, their activities remain incomplete and inconsistent. This study needs to clearly analyze the capacity of universities, the impact of political pressures, and the impact of implementing SDG16 goals in the specific context of Afghanistan, in order to provide practical recommendations for the role of universities and international support.

The main objective of this study is to assess the autonomy of universities in Afghanistan and the impact of political pressures on the implementation of SDG16. The sub-objectives are: To assess the impact of universities' educational activities on peace, justice, and inclusive institutions. To analyze the limitations of autonomy in the areas of research, leadership, and administration. To discuss the needs and recommendations for international and local support.

How does university autonomy limit or enhance the impact of implementing SDG16? To what extent have political pressures affected the leadership, research, and governance of universities? How can international support and local capacity building empower universities to strengthen institutions for peace, justice, and inclusion? The autonomy of universities is crucial for the implementation of SDG16, as it allows universities to play an effective role in developing institutions for peace, justice, and inclusion through their curricula, research, and social programs. In fragile states, balancing international frameworks with local needs is a key issue, and universities can play a mediating role. This article attempts to clarify this relationship, analyzing the capacities, challenges, and opportunities of universities to implement SDG16 in light of the fragile situation in Afghanistan.

1.1. Literature Review

1.1.1. SDG16 and the SDSN Framework

Sustainable Development Goal 16 (SDG16) is a global framework for strengthening institutions for peace, justice, and inclusion that is an important tool for assessing the role of universities in fragile states [1]. The Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) framework sees universities as champions of social change in four key areas: 1) Curriculum and learning, 2) Research and production, 3) External leadership, and 4) Governance and administration [2,3]. In this framework, universities are not just educational institutions, but also active agents of social change. Analytical findings show that in fragile states such as Afghanistan, universities are largely engaged in the curriculum, but their research, leadership, and administration are affected by financial constraints and political pressures [4]. Thus, the SDSN framework provides a detailed and systematic framework for analyzing university activities and achieving SDG16 goals [2].

1.2. Academic Freedom Theory

Academic freedom of universities is a theory that plays a central role in assessing the autonomy of universities [5]. According to this theory, universities should be able to make independent decisions, free from political, financial, and security pressures, to play an active role in the development of research, curricula, and social projects [6]. In Afghanistan, some private university institutions are influenced by political networks, which have limited the process of achieving SDG16 goals [7]. Academic freedom not only ensures the development of universities' research capacity but also increases opportunities for social reform, civic leadership, and transparent governance [8].

1.3. Peacebuilding Theory and Global-Local Balance

Peacebuilding theory assigns universities a special role in resolving social conflicts and sustaining peace in fragile states [9]. Universities can play a mediating role between local communities, national institutions, and international organizations [10]. The concept of Global-Local balance suggests that global standards such as SDG16 should be implemented in conjunction with local cultural and social needs, as global standards alone are not effective without the support of local communities [11]. Analytical evaluation shows that university mediation enables global goals to be applied in local contexts and has a real impact on strengthening institutions of peace, justice, and inclusion [12]. In the context of these three theories and frameworks, universities are considered a central point for implementing SDG16 [13]. The SDSN framework articulates four areas of activity, academic freedom highlights the importance of university autonomy, and Peacebuilding + Global-Local balance guides the localization of global goals [14]. Analytically, this conceptual framework serves as a fundamental tool in assessing the capacities and limitations of universities and sheds light on the effectiveness of universities in the sensitive political and security context of Afghanistan [4].

1.4. SDG16 and Higher Education

Sustainable Development Goal 16 (SDG16) is a global framework for strengthening institutions for peace, justice, and inclusion, which can be implemented through higher education institutions in fragile states [15]. Universities have three key roles in implementing SDG16: curriculum, research, and social leadership [16]. In many conflict-affected countries, such as Afghanistan, Iraq, and Sudan, universities play a critical role in disseminating social knowledge, educating youth, and developing civic values [7]. However, the persistence of conflict, financial constraints, and restrictions on women's education limit the impact of implementing SDG16, leaving universities as educational institutions with little impact on research and leadership [17].

1.5. University Autonomy Theory

University autonomy has a direct impact on the quality of institutional activities, research, and educational programs [18]. According to this theory, if universities are able to make independent decisions without political pressure or external interference, they can contribute effectively to SDG16 goals [19]. In Afghanistan, some private university administrations are influenced by powerful political networks, which create constraints on curriculum implementation, research, and leadership [20]. Lack of university autonomy not only hinders research freedom but also limits opportunities for social reform, transparent governance, and civic leadership (Akhtar et al., 2025).

1.6. De Facto Recognition and Political Pressures

In fragile states, such as Afghanistan, the recognition or non-recognition of the de facto government directly affects the activities of universities [4]. The lack of formal recognition by international countries and the presence of local political pressures limit universities' ability to meet national goals [7]. In such circumstances, universities often adopt a limited approach due to security and political risks, which reduces the chances of achieving SDG16 targets [13]. Furthermore, research based on international funding, sometimes called donor-driven research, further limits university autonomy and weakens local capacities [21].

1.7. Global-Local Tensions in Fragile States

The conflict between international standards and local needs is a major challenge for the activities of universities in fragile states [22]. If global frameworks such as SDG16 are implemented only based on global standards, local cultural and social needs are not considered, which leads to the failure of projects [4]. Universities can play this mediating role, creating a balance between global frameworks and local needs, and increasing the ability of local communities to support those [18]. For example, some universities in Africa have integrated peace curricula into community repair and local conflict resolution, which is an effective example of localizing global goals [19].

2. Materials and Methods

This study combined a desk-based literature review and

field data to examine the relationship between university autonomy and SDG16 implementation in Afghanistan. This mixed-method design follows standard research standards in analyzing the theoretical background and obtaining primary data. Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews, selected from 35 lecturers, working in the social sciences and law departments at 7 private universities in Nangarhar province. Participants were selected based on purposive sampling and snowball sampling to include lecturers with experience in SDG16, teaching, research, and administration. The data collection tool was a semi-structured interview form, which elicited information on university autonomy, political pressures, financial constraints, and the impact of implementing SDG16. The interviews lasted approximately 30–45 minutes and collected specific examples of university activities.

The analysis of the data obtained was based on Qualitative Thematic Analysis [23]. The analysis process was carried out in the following steps: The interview transcripts were recorded in written form. Initial codes were extracted related to university autonomy, political pressures, leadership, research, and governance. Coherence and synthesis were carried out in the form of thematic sections (Themes), which included the impact and constraints of implementing SDG16. The results of the analysis were compared with existing literature and theoretical frameworks to obtain analytical and research conclusions. The names of the participants were kept confidential, and their personal information was kept confidential. Due to security and political circumstances, some questions were modified to ensure the comfort of the participants, and any sensitive information was analyzed without disclosure. The participants' consent was obtained before the interviews. This adopted methodology strikes

a balance between theoretical and practical background analysis. Studying international and regional experiences through Literature Review and obtaining primary data through Semi-structured Interviews helps in a precise analysis of university autonomy, political pressures, and the impact of implementing SDG16. The use of Qualitative Thematic Analysis provides a standard and appropriate framework for analytical and in-depth evaluations of the results.

3. Result

This study was conducted based on semi-structured interviews and Qualitative Thematic Analysis of faculty members from private universities in Nangarhar, Afghanistan. The findings were organized around four main axes: educational activities, research and leadership, political interventions, and financial constraints.

3.1. The Power of the Teaching Sector

According to the participants, universities are the ones that are most closely aligned with SDG16 goals through their educational activities. One faculty member directly stated: "We are trying to teach students the concepts of peace, justice, and social values, because this determines the future of our society." This finding is consistent with the Anwar (2025) and Arora & Mishra (2019), research, which shows that universities are the main source of social knowledge development in fragile states. In Afghanistan, too, social science and law curricula focus on students' justice, transparency, and civic leadership. The results show that universities with autonomy can make an effective contribution to SDG16 through educational activities, but if autonomy is limited, activities remain incomplete.

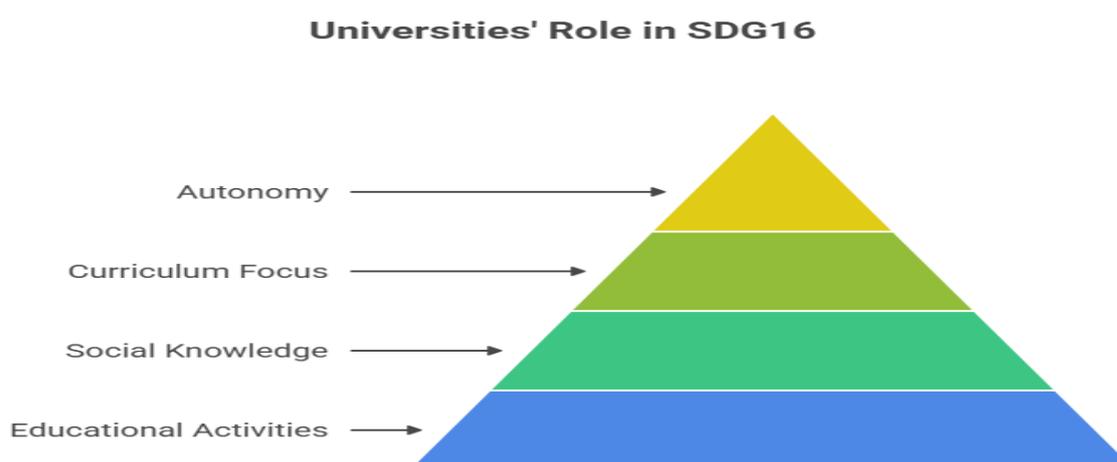


Figure 1: Universities' Role in SDG16

3.2. Research & Leadership Weakness

Many lecturers noted that research and leadership have been limited in implementing SDG16 goals. One lecturer said, "Most of our research is funded by international donors, and we are only involved in implementation. This has weakened our autonomy." This finding is consistent with previous

research, such as Guizzo and Baranyi et al, which shows that universities are limited in research and leadership due to donor-driven projects [8,14]. The results show that political pressure and international funding reduce the independence of research and limit leadership activities.

The Interplay of Funding, Politics, and Autonomy in SDG16 Research



Figure 2: The Interplay of Funding, Politics, and Autonomy in SDG16 Research

3.3. Political Interference

According to the lecturers, some universities are influenced by political networks and are forced to adapt to pressures from the government and local politics. One lecturer explained: “We sometimes have to adapt curricula and projects based on political sensitivities, not just on educational standards.”

This result is in line with Grzybowski and Matthews, that in fragile states, the presence of de facto government or the presence of political pressure limits universality [16,21]. The results show that universities are underperforming in SDG16-related activities due to political constraints, especially in the areas of leadership and governance.

Political Interference Hinders University Development

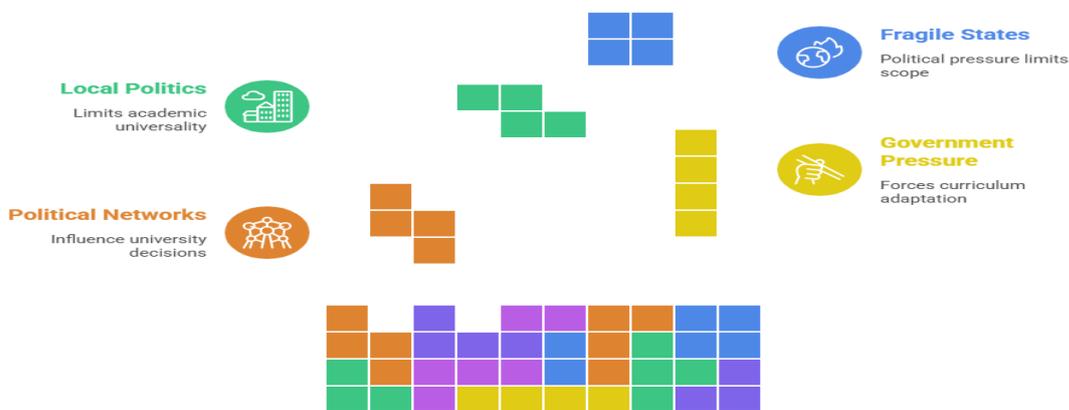


Figure 3: Political Interference Hinders University Development

3.4. Funding Constraints & International Support

Many participants noted that financial resources are limited, and this affects the autonomy of universities and their SDG16 activities. One lecturer said, “If the budget is limited, we cannot innovate for research and social projects.” At the same time, the results show that international support and coordination of local needs can enable universities to

achieve SDG16 goals. This finding is consistent with Moiwo and Akhtar et al, research, which found that local capacity building and international support ensure the sustainability of universities’ activities [4,10]. The results show that support for international projects, especially when aligned with local needs, enables universities to meet SDG16 targets and ensure sustainable social impact.

Challenges in Achieving SDG16 Goals in Universities



Figure 4: Challenges in Achieving SDG16 Goal in University

Former studies, such as Truong & Tran et al and Akhtar et al, have highlighted the limitations of university autonomy and donor-driven research, but this study specifically highlights the importance of aligning international support with local needs, offering a new perspective [3,7]. Direct quotes reveal the empirical perspectives of lecturers, which confirm the analytical claims of previous studies, and particularly reflect the operational realities of universities in fragile states.

4. Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that universities in Afghanistan have the potential to implement SDG16, but this potential is not fully utilized due to limited autonomy, political interference, and financial constraints. This discussion examines four main analytical axes based on these findings.

4.1. Universities as Mediators Between Global Goals and Local Realities

The results showed that the education sector is the most active area for disseminating the values of SDG16, and some universities are trying to connect global concepts with local needs. This finding is consistent with the theories of peacebuilding and global-local balance. However, the critical question is: can universities truly mediate independently, or have they become merely instruments for implementing international funding? Although the results show that some curricula consider local needs, the dominance of donor-driven projects in research raises concerns that universities may be forced to pursue global agendas. Therefore, universities have not yet reached a full intermediary role, but rather have an incomplete transposition role.

4.2. Policy Gaps Due to Limited Autonomy

Results showed that political pressures and institutional interference create obstacles in the areas of leadership and research. This situation creates an important gap at the policy

level: universities teach SDG16-related ideas, but cannot actively participate in policy formulation and practical change. A similar situation has been observed in other fragile states, where universities have only an educational role, but are forced to the margins in public policy formulation. In Afghanistan, this gap is even more serious, because the autonomy of universities is linked to political legitimacy and institutional stability. Therefore, until institutional autonomy is strengthened, SDG16 will remain only at a symbolic level.

4.3. Comparison with Other Fragile States

The findings of this study are similar to the experiences of Iraq, Sudan, and some African countries, where universities teach peace and justice concepts but remain constrained by security and political pressures. However, an important difference is that in Afghanistan, international engagement is limited due to the de facto political situation, which has further limited the scope for funding, research, and academic relations. In some African countries, universities have been able to innovate in curricula on ethnic reconciliation and local conflict resolution, but the findings of this study show that in Afghanistan, these innovations are still in their infancy. This comparison demonstrates that political stability and international engagement are essential conditions for the effectiveness of universities.

4.4. Implications for Academic Freedom, Governance, and SDG16

The analytical assessment shows that academic freedom is not just a theoretical concept, but a practical condition for the implementation of SDG16. If universities lack autonomy in research and curriculum development, they cannot truly promote the values of justice, transparency, and accountability. The results also show that internal university governance (transparency, faculty and student participation) can be a model for social change. However, if universities themselves are influenced by opaque networks, they cannot

be models of strong institutions. This situation creates a paradox for SDG16: institutions that should foster strong institutions are themselves operating under the shadow of weak institutions. Overall, this study shows that universities have a potentially important role to play in implementing SDG16, but this role remains incomplete due to limited autonomy, political interference, and financial constraints. Universities can bridge the gap between global goals and local realities, but only if academic freedom, institutional transparency, and sustainable funding are in place. If these conditions are not met, SDG16 will remain in educational curricula and will have a weak impact on practical change.

5. Conclusion

This study shows that universities in Afghanistan have high potential to achieve SDG16 (peace, justice, and strong governance), but this potential is not fully utilized due to limited academic autonomy, political interference, and financial instability. The findings show that the teaching sector has a relatively strong foundation and the concepts of peace and civic education are embedded in the curriculum, but the research and leadership sectors are weak and operate under political and funding constraints. Also, this study shows that universities can play a mediating role between the global goals (SDG16) and local realities, but this role can only be effective if there is academic freedom, administrative transparency, and sustainable funding. Otherwise, SDG16 will remain only at the conceptual and curricular level and its impact on practical change will be limited.

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are made: At the policy level, the administrative and academic autonomy of universities should be strengthened, so that they remain free from direct political interference in research, curriculum development, and academic activities. Independence is a prerequisite for the practical realization of SDG16. International funding should not be used only for project activities, but also for building local research capacity, leadership skills, and sustainable academic networks. Local needs should take priority over donor-driven agendas. The concepts of peace, justice, accountability, and transparency should be implemented not only in the curriculum, but also in the internal governance, decision-making, and administrative structure of universities. Universities should themselves become models of strong governance. Overall, Afghan universities can be important institutions for strengthening a culture of peace and justice, but this will only be possible if academic freedom is guaranteed, institutional autonomy is strengthened, and international support is aligned with local needs. The practical realization of SDG16 is not possible without the active, independent, and responsible participation of universities.

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