

Educational Research for Social Change (ERSC)

Volume 11 No. 1 April 2022

pp. 91-94

ersc.nmmu.ac.za

ISSN: 2221-4070

Conference Report

Vitalizing Partnerships: Moving Forward to a Sustainable Future

SANORD 2021 Digital Conference

**Western Norway University of Applied Sciences (HVL) and the
University of Bergen (UiB)**

7–10 September 2021

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Background

The Southern African-Nordic Centre (SANORD) is committed to advancing strategic, multilateral academic collaboration between institutions in Southern African and Nordic regions to address new local and global challenges of innovation and development. SANORD's activities are based on the values of academic engagement, democracy, social equity, and relationships of trust built between the two regions. SANORD was officially established in January 2007 by seven founding members and is governed by a council consisting of the principals of all member institutions or their nominees (<https://sanord.uwc.ac.za/history/>).

The SANORD 2021 Conference was hosted online by the Western Norway University of Applied Sciences (HVL) and the University of Bergen (UiB) on 7–10 September 2021 to ensure participants' safety against Covid-19. The purpose of hosting the conference was to get participants to focus on how Southern African and Nordic partners could strengthen their partnerships to meet the requirements of the United Nations Agenda 2030 (<https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda>). The conference aimed at becoming a space for the transdisciplinary exchange of research ideas from scholars based in Southern African and Nordic institutions. A total of 130 abstracts were accepted for presentation and more than 400 participants engaged in the conference proceedings.

Conference Theme

The World Economic Forum's (2019) Global Risk Report identified extreme weather and the failure of climate-change mitigation and adaptation as the two risk factors likely to have dire consequences for humanity. Addressing these issues requires concerted efforts and collaboration from stakeholders across countries, disciplines, and institutions. Thus, the UN 2030 Agenda asked for transformation of global economies in line with social and environmental demands expressed in the Agenda's 17 goals and sub-goals (<https://sdgs.un.org/goals>). Agenda 2030 requires a rethinking of global politics and partnerships at all levels (government/civil society, elected government/customary leaders) to ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all, at all ages.

Global education systems must contribute to addressing the global risks and achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) such that we can achieve sustainable development for animals, humans, nature, and plants. This warrants a need to develop a curriculum that includes the SDGs in courses, as well as increase the implementation of relevant research in teaching and learning activities. Education institutions need to challenge long-standing, hegemonic understandings (academic and other) of knowledges and global academic hierarchies so that they can work towards intellectual emancipation and epistemological liberation.

The SANORD 2021 Digital Conference therefore aimed at exploring the ethical, political, and moral dimensions imperative in redefining South–North partnerships as well as the meaning of intellectual labour within such collaborations. To realise the theme of *Vitalizing Partnerships: Moving Forward to a Sustainable Future*, the conference had the following broad categories:

- Climate and climate impacts on humans
- Higher education: Shaping the SDG curriculum
- Health: Addressing complexity in health
- Innovation and entrepreneurship
- Epistemic challenges, intellectual labour, and South–North partnerships
- Moving forward: Music and arts

The conference theme and categories allowed researchers and participants the flexibility to challenge traditional thinking around sustainable development and education's role in this endeavour by exploring new paradigms and approaches necessary for transforming our world into a sustainable space. The uncertainty of the Covid-19 pandemic demands new perspectives, ways of being and doing, and theorisation towards preserving our livelihoods. By focusing on new ways of being and doing, the conference presentations provided insights into how academics, researchers, community members, and policy-makers reimagine sustainable futures for all.

Participants engaged in robust and scholarly discussions and presentations that challenged and disrupted thinking around how the South–North partnerships could be revitalised towards sustainability in all spheres of life. By engaging in the dissemination of ideas and research on trans-geographic and transdisciplinary innovations and responses to global challenges, the SANORD 2021 conference highlighted the critical role of collaboration in creating the world we want.

Overview

The Covid-19 pandemic intensified the myriad challenges facing the world. With increased infection rates, came restricted travel and loss of economic activity in some spheres. Livelihoods were disrupted and many lives lost. Hence, the SANORD 2021 conference endeavoured to engage participants innovatively and positively in rethinking their roles and contributions towards sustainable development. By engaging with the conference theme, keynote speakers, papers, and special interest group (SIG) presentations, the SANORD 2021 delegates were encouraged to rethink and transform their approaches to partnerships towards reimagined teaching and learning landscapes, research agendas, and engagement initiatives for sustainable development.

The conference commenced on 7 September with a SANORD board and contact persons' meeting. The opening event on 8 September was moderated by the Pro-Rector for Research, Gro Anita Fonnes Flaten. Fargespill provided the opening performance to clear the stage for the Minister of Research, Henrik Asheim; the Mayor of Bergen, Ms. Marte Mjøs Persen; the Rector of HVL, Rector Gunnar Yttri; and Rector Margareth Hagen of UiB. The Director General of the Norwegian Agency for Development

Cooperation, Bård Vegard Solhjell, gave the opening speech on “Partnerships for the Goals: North–South Relations.”

Christopher Henshilwood presented the first keynote address of the conference titled, “Studying the Behavioural Origins of Homo Sapiens in Southern Africa Between 120,000–50,000 Years Ago: Norway/South Africa Co-Operative Research.” This keynote focused on exploring when, why, and how humans first became behaviourally modern, based on a holistic approach of networks between South Africa, Norway, and Europe. Another interesting keynote address was delivered by Maria Paula Meneses on “Food as Knowledge: Interconnecting the Global South,” which focused on exploring sustainable ways of dealing with food using epistemologies of the South. Meneses privileged the broad Indian Ocean space of contacts as key to understanding how food enables the emergence of other ontologies beyond the culture/nature divide through invoking others’ knowledges, contacts, and identity processes.

Masego Katsi’s keynote address, “Balancing North–South Partnerships in Health: Reflections on Processes Underlying Synergistic vs. Antagonistic Outcomes” used a systemic theoretical perspective to examine the operationalisation of South–North partnerships, both idealistically and practically. While advocating for authentic partnerships, she shared research-based and practitioner experiences exemplifying processes that promote synergy and antagonism. The final keynote by Sveinung Jørgensen and Lars Jacob Tynes Pedersen explored “The Role of Alliances in Succeeding With Circular Business Models.” They talked about the role of alliances in succeeding with circular business models and responded to how businesses could become ethical, sustainable, and profitable through integrating environmental and sustainability issues into business strategies. Their website (www.jorgensenpedersen.no) provides information on how businesses could use digital technologies to drive business models towards sustainability and rethink a changed and sustainably developed world.

Apart from the many thought-provoking keynote addresses, participants also engaged in SIG presentations in the following categories: industry, innovation and infrastructure; equity, Africa and collaborations for the SDGs; capacitation, empowerment and the next generation scholar; and STEP SANORD teacher education partners. There were many learning moments when participants shared strategies that have worked in their North–South collaborations across the six broad conference themes, which were presented in thematic parallel sessions. Some participants declared that they wished they had been able to attend more than one of the parallel sessions, due to the interesting issues being discussed. Hopefully, all attendees have gained further insights into rethinking and embracing diversity as a tool towards a changed world that espouses sustainable development ideals in all spheres.

Despite these uncertain times of disease, environmental degradation, exclusion and inequality, gender-based violence and poverty, SANORD 2021 conference delegates were reminded that they can make a difference in their spaces by engaging all stakeholders in all their diversity. People of the South need to value their being and becoming while also learning best practices from the North, and vice versa. According to Nietzsche (1966), people always act out of their self-interest in every field; he posited that each individual action is driven by people’s vested interests in the game of life because they have a will to power. All delegates at the conference have a will to change the world into a better place for the entire human race, flora, and fauna. And, the world needs agents of hope and social change now!

References

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