

## “Bridging Perspectives: A Comparative Study of Sustainable Development Goals Awareness Among Secondary School Students in the UAE and Lebanon”

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### ملخص البحث:

تتناول هذه المقالة كيفية فهم طلاب المرحلة الثانوية، الذين تتراوح أعمارهم بين 14 و18 عامًا، لأهداف التنمية المستدامة التابعة للأمم المتحدة (SDGs) وكيفية تفاعلهم معها. ومن خلال إجراء تحليل مقارنة بين لبنان ودبي، تسلط الدراسة الضوء على تأثير اختلاف السياقات الاجتماعية-الاقتصادية والتعليمية في تشكيل تصورات الشباب واتجاهاتهم. واعتمد البحث منهجية مختلطة جمعت بين نتائج الاستبيانات الكمية وبيانات نوعية مستمدة من مناقشات مجموعات التركيز، بهدف تقييم مستوى انخراط الشباب في قضايا الاستدامة.

تكشف النتائج عن فجوة سياقية واضحة في ترتيب الأولويات. ففي لبنان، وفي ظل عدم الاستقرار الاقتصادي والسياسي، يميل الطلاب إلى إعطاء الأولوية لما يمكن تسميته بـ«أهداف البقاء»، مثل القضاء على الفقر والجوع. في المقابل، يُظهر الطلاب في دبي، في بيئة مستقرة ومدعومة بمبادرات حكومية فاعلة، اهتمامًا أكبر بما يُعرف بـ«الأهداف العالمية»، مثل العمل المناخي والمساواة بين الجنسين. وتخلص الدراسة إلى أنه رغم اتساع الوعي العالمي بأهداف التنمية المستدامة، فإن مستوى الانخراط الفعلي يتحدد بدرجة كبيرة بالظروف المحلية المباشرة. كما تؤكد أن اعتماد مقارنة تعليمية موحدة في مجال الاستدامة لا يحقق النتائج المرجوة، وأنه ينبغي على صانعي السياسات والتربويين تصميم استراتيجيات تعليمية تراعي الخصوصيات الإقليمية والاجتماعية، بما يضمن تحويل الوعي إلى ممارسات مؤثرة وملموسة.

**مصطلحات البحث:** أهداف التنمية المستدامة (SDGs) . وعي الشباب . لبنان . الإمارات العربية المتحدة . التعليم المقارن . أجندة 2030.

### Abstract:

This article explores how secondary school students aged between 14 and 18 understand and relate to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). By conducting a comparative analysis of Lebanon and Dubai, the research highlights how differing socio-economic and educational contexts shape youth perspectives. Using a mixed-methods approach, the study integrates quantitative survey findings with qualitative data from focus group discussions to assess youth engagement. The results reveal a significant contextual divide in priorities. In Lebanon, amid economic and political instability, students prioritize "survival SDGs" such as ending poverty and hunger. In contrast, students in Dubai, supported by a stable environment and active government initiatives, focus on "global SDGs" like climate action and gender equality. The research concludes that while global consciousness is extensive, the level of engagement is determined by immediate local conditions. It concludes that a "one-size-fits-all" approach to sustainability education is insufficient. Instead, policymakers and educators need to tailor teaching strategies to specific regional and social contexts to effectively translate awareness into impactful actions.

**Keywords:** Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Youth Awareness, Lebanon, UAE, Comparative Education, 2030 Agenda.

### How to Cite This Article

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## Introduction

The year 2015 was a defining one for global governance, as all 193 Member States of the United Nations adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (Saner Yiu & Saner, 2014). The foundation of this initiative is the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which serve as a global, urgent call to action to address pressing challenges. These goals are not a set of environmental targets; they are a holistic blueprint designed to tackle the world's most crucial socio-economic and ecological challenges, ranging from ending hunger and poverty to protecting life below water and ensuring quality education (The United Nations Development Programme, n.d.). The 2030 Agenda is built on the core idea that development must be sustainable, allowing us to meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet theirs.

The success of this global vision depends largely on the role of the youth. Today, approximately 1.8 billion individuals aged between 15 and 24 live in the world, the largest youth generation in history (United Nations Population Fund UNFPA, 2014). The significance of these individuals extends beyond sheer numbers. They are not just passive beneficiaries of the SDGs; young people are essential “agents of change” (Bank Ki-Moon Center for Global Citizens, 2018). They are intellectually curious, adaptable, and digitally literate, which equip them to drive the social and technological innovations that the 2030 agenda demand. For the SDGs to transition from high-level policy to grassroots reality, young people must be meaningfully empowered with the needed awareness and tools to lead.

Despite considerable attention to youth participation on a global stage, a significant gap remains in the academic literature, particularly in the Middle East and North Africa region. While the foundation of sustainability education research was historically centered on Western academic settings, recent scholarship has begun to pivot toward the Middle East (Peter Blaze Corcoran, 2002). However, even with emerging studies on digital sustainability in the region, a comparative understanding of how secondary school students in vastly different socio-economic Arab contexts—such as Lebanon and the UAE—relate to the SDGs remains underdeveloped (MDPI, 2024). The available regional data focuses on university-level students or on general public sentiment, often overlooking adolescents aged 14 to 18, a critical stage when values, civic identities, and long-term behavioural dispositions begin to form.

Adding to this gap, little attention has been paid to how divergent national contexts within the region influence these young people's awareness about sustainability. Lebanon and the UAE are two countries that, despite their geographic proximity, represent markedly different realities. By comparing Lebanon, a nation navigating a profound socio-economic crisis, with the UAE, which has emerged as a global leader in rapid development and sustainability initiatives, this study addresses a vital missing link and seeks to understand how local environments shape the global perspectives of Arab youth, and aims to bridge the distance between universal goals and regional realities.

### A. Statement of the Problem

The main challenge in this research is the gap between awareness and action, the persistent disconnect between students' knowledge of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and their meaningful engagement and active participation in advancing them. While the 2030 Agenda offers a universal roadmap for sustainable development, the actual level of youth engagement varies considerably. It is shaped in large part by the specific educational systems, socio-economic conditions, and cultural contexts in which a young person lives. This study highlights that a universal approach to sustainability education does not adequately consider the diverse realities across the Arab World.

The research identifies a profound contextual divide between young students in Lebanon and those in the UAE. In Lebanon, the study problem is rooted in a state of prolonged crisis. Since 2019, the country has been facing a severe financial collapse and political instability, and the aftermath of the Beirut Port blast (World Bank, 2023); (Reuters, 2020). In such an environment, students' engagement with the SDGs is naturally filtered through the immediate pressures of daily survival. Other abstract goals, such as "Life Below Water" or "Climate Action," can feel secondary when the immediate microsystem is struggling with basic needs, including food insecurity, unreliable electricity, and limited access to affordable healthcare.

On the other hand, the UAE presents a “prosperity context” defined by sustained economic growth, institutional stability, and significant government investment in a national green agenda (International Monetary Fund, 2023); (United Arab Emirates Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023); (United Arab Emirates Ministry of Climate Change & Environment, 2021). Students in the UAE have access to world-class educational facilities and demonstrate a high level of theoretical awareness towards sustainability, reinforced by a wide range of national initiatives. However, the problem here is cultural and lifestyle-based. Despite a high level of knowledge, deep-rooted habits, such as reliance on private transportation and high consumption, pose major obstacles to behavioural change.

By exploring these two contrasting contexts, the study problem seeks to identify why awareness translates into action in some regions while remaining largely dormant in others. Recognizing these regional differences is critical. Without directly addressing the survival pressures in Lebanon or the cultural consumption habits in the UAE, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) risk remains an abstract concept rather than a lived reality for the next generation.

## B. Research Hypotheses

Based on the theoretical frameworks of Ecological Systems Theory and Socio-Economic Theory, this study tests the following hypotheses to understand the divergence in sustainability perspectives:

- Hypothesis 1: There are statistically significant differences in the levels of awareness and engagement with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) between secondary school students in Lebanon and the UAE. These differences are primarily due to variance in institutional support and the depth of curricular integration offered by their respective educational systems.
- Hypothesis 2: Socio-economic instability and environmental stressors directly influence students' priorities. In crisis-affected contexts like Lebanon, students prioritize survival SDGs (SDG 1 – No Poverty, SDG 2 – Zero Hunger, and SDG 3 – Good Health and Well-Being) over environmental SDGs (SDG 13 – Climate Action, SDG 14 – Life Below Water, and SDG 15 – Life on Land). Whereas students in stable, prosperous contexts like the UAE demonstrate a more balanced or environmentally focused prioritization.

## C. Research Objectives

The aim of this study is to conduct a comprehensive investigation into how secondary school students in Lebanon and the UAE perceive and prioritize the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). To achieve this, the following specific objectives have been established:

- **Assess the Variability in SDG Awareness:**  
To identify and analyse the differences in awareness levels among students aged 14 to 18 by examining how cultural, socio-economic, and educational backgrounds shape their understanding of sustainable development.
- **Compare Prioritization Patterns:**  
To explore which specific SDGs students in each country prioritize and to uncover the motivations—whether social, environmental, or economic—that influence these preferences.
- **Investigate Contextual Influences:**  
To investigate how regional factors, such as the economic crisis in Lebanon and the strategic national initiatives in the UAE, influence student engagement with sustainability.
- **Propose Actionable Educational Strategies:**  
To provide evidence-based recommendations for curricula, teacher training, and community outreach that can successfully bridge the awareness-action gap in various geopolitical settings.

## D. Significance of the Study

This research is of considerable importance to policymakers, educators, and the broader community. By analysing how secondary school students in Lebanon and the UAE perceive and prioritize the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), this study addresses a crucial gap in the existing literature by providing a comparative analysis of youth aged 14 to 18 in two diverse contexts, addressing the current lack of comparative research focused specifically on the Middle East.

The significance of this study lies in its ability to shed light on the unique regional challenges and opportunities that Arab youth face in engaging with sustainability. For educational policymakers and practitioners, the findings provide a concrete foundation for developing and building more targeted programs and policy interventions. For example, the results can be used to improve existing curricula by integrating SDG-related content responsive to the specific regional priorities and interests of students across different regional settings.

Also, this study contributes to broader global discussions on sustainable development education by highlighting socio-cultural, environmental, and economic factors that shape how young people understand and engage with sustainable development. By identifying these regional nuances, the research motivates collective action and helps advance the sustainable development agenda across the region and the wider international community.

## E. Limitations of the Study

To maintain the accuracy and practicality of the study, the following boundaries were set:

- **Human Scope:**  
The research focuses on secondary school students aged 14 to 18. This age group represents a critical developmental stage for the formation of civic values and sustainability mindsets.
- **Spatial Scope:**  
Data collection was conducted within specific educational institutions located in Beirut, Lebanon, and Dubai, UAE. These locations provide a robust basis for comparing youth engagement in crisis and prosperity contexts.
- **Temporal Scope:**  
The study spans a period from February 2020 through the post-pandemic adjustment era. This timeframe accounts for the significant educational shifts necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the evolving socio-economic conditions in the region.

## F. Study Terminology and Definitions

To ensure clarity and consistency in this study, the following key terms are defined concerning the research context:

- **Sustainability:**

This concept is defined as the practice of meeting the demands of the present day without compromising future generations' ability to meet their own needs. It involves a balance among environmental protection, economic stability, and social inclusion.

- **Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs):**

These refer to the 17 global blueprints adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 2015. Each goal includes specific targets to end poverty, protect the planet, and ensure prosperity for all by 2030.

- **Youth:**

While the United Nations defines "youth" for statistical purposes as individuals aged 15 to 24, this study specifically focuses on the secondary school bracket. In this research, the term refers to students aged 14 to 18 years.

- **Secondary School Students:**

Refers to students currently enrolled between grades 9 and 12 (or their regional equivalents such as Brevet and Terminale) within the Lebanese and UAE educational systems.

## G. Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

A comprehensive theoretical approach is necessary to understand the factors that affect students' awareness and engagement with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Lebanon and the UAE. This study integrates various theories to develop a comprehensive framework that examines how behavioural, social, cultural, and systemic factors shape students' attitudes and behaviours toward sustainability.

### 1. Core Theoretical Framework

The research integrates eight core theories to analyse the variables from multiple perspectives:

- **Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB):**

Ajzen's framework indicates that students' engagement with the SDGs is predicted by their intentions, which are shaped by their attitudes toward sustainability, perceived social pressures, and perceived control over participating in sustainable behaviours (Ajzen, 1991).

- **Social Cognitive Theory (SCT):**

Bandura's theory highlights the importance of observational learning and self-efficacy. It suggests that students learn about Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by observing role models, such as teachers and peers, and that their belief in their ability to contribute (self-efficacy) is vital for their engagement (Bandura A. , Social Learning Theory, 1977); (Bandura A. , Social Foundations of Thought and Action: A Social Cognitive Theory, 1986); (Bandura A. , 2001).

- **Ecological Systems Theory:**

Bronfenbrenner provides a layered understanding of environmental influences, ranging from the microsystem, such as family and school, to the macrosystem, which includes cultural values and national laws. This framework helps explain how Lebanon's crisis context and the UAE's stable environment impact students in different ways (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

- **Cultural Theory:**

Building on Hofstede's work, the theory explores how cultural dimensions such as power distance, collectivism vs. individualism, and uncertainty avoidance shape perceptions of sustainability (Hofstede, Dimensionalizing Cultures: The Hofstede Model in Context, 2011); (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind, 2010); (Taras, Kirkman, & Steel, 2010).

- **Socio-Economic Theory:**

This theory, drawing on Bourdieu, explores how income levels, social capital, and access to educational resources influence awareness (Bourdieu, 1986).

- **Social Learning Theory (SLT):**

Building on Social Cognitive Theory (SCT), this theory emphasizes the importance of imitation and reinforcement. Students are more likely to adopt sustainable behaviours when they observe them being modelled and rewarded in their social environments (Bandura A. , Social Learning Theory, 1977).

- **Transformational Leadership Theory:**

This theory explores how educators and school administrators can inspire and motivate students by communicating a compelling vision of sustainability and creating a supportive institutional environment (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000).

- **Systems Theory:**

Senge's theory offers a comprehensive perspective on the interconnectedness among curriculum, pedagogy, and policy. It identifies leverage points within the educational ecosystem to promote the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) effectively (Senge, 2000).

## 2. Literature Review: Regional Perspectives

Existing research has established a foundational understanding of sustainability awareness in the Arab world, but it reveals a significant gap regarding secondary school students.

- **The UAE Context: High Awareness and Cultural Barriers**

Research conducted at the UAE University and the University of Sharjah indicates a consistent pattern among university students in the UAE, with a relatively high level of knowledge and generally positive attitudes toward sustainability. The University of Sharjah study found that while students generally recognize the importance of sustainability, there is notable resistance to behaviour changes that conflict with entrenched cultural values, such as car dependency or constant car usage. This highlights the "Awareness-Action Gap" where knowledge does not always translate into practice due to lifestyle preferences (Radwan & Abou Sreea Khalil, 2021); (Ben Romdhane, Lee, & Al-Shaebi, 2023).

- **The Lebanon Context: Resilience Amidst Crisis**

In Lebanon, the landscape is shaped by a different set of forces and socio-economic disruptions. A 2022 UN Global Compact report investigated youth behaviour toward SDG 2 (Zero Hunger), SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-Being), SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 5 (Gender Equality), and SDG 7 (Affordable and Clean Energy), amidst the country's compounded crises. The findings revealed a dualistic impact: while crises led to deterioration in mental health and educational outcomes, they also sparked sensitive awareness and adaptive behaviours regarding gender equality and sustainable energy. Lebanese youth demonstrate significant resilience and agency, yet their engagement is often restricted by a lack of resources and political instability (Anlian, Barbarjli, Fakher Eddine, & Zahran, 2022); (UN Global Compact, 2022).

## 3. Synthesis: The Contextual Divide

The literature confirms that while global awareness of the SDGs is prominent, the depth of engagement is dictated by the student's immediate world (Hofstede, Dimensionalizing Cultures: The Hofstede Model in Context, 2011); (Minkov, 2007); (Chen, Chen, & Meindl, 1998).

In Lebanon, high power distance and collectivist traits lead students to prioritize community-based survival goals like Zero Hunger (SDG 2) and No Poverty (SDG 1) (Hofstede, Dimensionalizing Cultures: The Hofstede Model in Context, 2011); (Minkov, 2007).

In Dubai, a multicultural environment and stable economy allow for a focus on "global aspirational goals" such as Gender Equality (SDG 5) and Climate Action (SDG 13) (Chen, Chen, & Meindl, 1998).

By integrating all these theories, this study develops a comprehensive framework to identify why awareness translates into action in some areas but remains stagnant in others. Understanding these regional nuances is critical for moving beyond a "one-size-fits-all" educational approach.

## H. Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design, integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches to ensure a comprehensive assessment of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) awareness among secondary school students. The main strength of this design is in its ability to triangulate data, whereby numerical trends can be cross-verified and enriched by the depth and texture of individual accounts. The combination of these methodologies enables the research to construct a more robust picture of how different socio-economic environments shape young people's engagement with sustainability.

### 1. Quantitative Phase

The quantitative component measured baseline awareness levels and prioritization patterns through structured surveys.

- **Participants:**

Data were collected from 267 secondary school students in Lebanon. These participants were aged between 14 and 18, representing diverse educational backgrounds.

- **Instrument:**

A 25-question closed-ended survey was developed to cover demographics, familiarity with the term "sustainability," and the 17 Sustainable Development Goals SDGs.

- **Analysis:**

Numerical data were analysed using descriptive statistics and chi-square tests in SPSS to identify significant patterns and associations between awareness levels and demographic variables like gender and age.

**Table 1 Demographic Profile of In-person Survey Participants (Lebanon)**

Characteristic	Frequency	Percentage
<b>Gender</b>		
Girls	121	60.5%
Boys	79	39.5%
<b>Age</b>		
14	40	20%
15	50	25%
16	50	25%
17	30	15%
18	30	15%
<b>Education Level</b>		
Secondary School	200	100%

**Table 2 Demographic Profile of Online Survey Participants (Lebanon)**

Characteristic	Frequency	Percentage
<b>Gender</b>		
Girls	42	62.7%
Boys	25	37.3%
<b>Age</b>		
14	10	14.9%
15	15	22.4%
16	20	29.9%
17	12	17.9%
18	10	14.9%
<b>Education Level</b>		
Secondary School	67	100%

## 2. Qualitative Phase

To gain deeper insights into the data's reasoning, the study included a qualitative phase in Dubai.

- **Focus Groups:**

After securing informed consent from all participants, three focus groups were conducted in Dubai, each involving 10 students (30 students total) from various international schools. These sessions utilized a semi-structured interview guide to explore students' perceptions and perceived barriers to SDG implementation.

- **Interviews:**

In-depth interviews were also conducted with 5 educational professionals to understand the institutional challenges of integrating SDGs into the curriculum.

- **Thematic Analysis:**

Qualitative data were transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis to identify recurring themes, such as the high interest in climate action and gender equality.

**Table 3: Demographic Profile of Focus Group Participants Dubai, UAE**

Characteristic	Frequency	Percentage
<b>Gender</b>		
Girls	18	60%
Boys	12	40%
<b>Age</b>		
14	8	26.7%
15	10	33.3%
16	7	23.3%
17	3	10%
18	2	6.7%
<b>Education Level</b>		
Secondary School	30	100%

### 3. Adaptability and Resilience: The COVID-19 Transition

The research process was significantly affected by the global COVID-19 pandemic, which necessitated a rapid shift in methodology and an adjustment midway through data collection. The initial phase involved on-ground, in-person surveys with 133 students in Lebanon during February 2020. However, the onset of the global health emergency of COVID-19 and nationwide lockdowns led to school closures. To maintain research continuity, the process transitioned to online data collection, resulting in an additional 67 surveys. This shift highlighted the dynamic and adaptive nature of the research process, requiring both methodological flexibility and the protection of participants' safety in unforeseen circumstances.

#### I. Research Instrument

The main instrument for data collection was a survey of 25 closed-ended questions designed to assess various dimensions of sustainability engagement among young people. The survey was developed following an extensive literature review and an analysis of theoretical frameworks. To ensure academic accuracy, the survey was reviewed by human sciences specialists prior to deployment. Also, the survey received formal ethical approval from the Saint Joseph University of Beirut Ethics Committee on December 5, 2019 (Ref: USJ-2019-262). Following this approval, informed consent was obtained from all students in Lebanon and Dubai before they proceeded with the survey or focus group sessions.

The survey was divided into five strategic sections:

##### 1. Demographics:

Capturing gender, age 14 to 18, and educational level (Grades 9–12) to facilitate comparative analysis.

##### 2. Baseline Awareness:

Measuring familiarity with the term "sustainability" and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

##### 3. Prioritization of Concerns:

Identifying immediate regional concerns, including the economy, environment, health, and peace.

##### 4. Practical Application:

Evaluating where young students consider sustainability, such as in school, at home, or during vacation, and the specific activities they practice, like recycling or waste sorting.

##### 5. Institutional Responsibility:

Measuring the expectations of students regarding which sectors lead the implementation of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

In the qualitative phase in Dubai, a semi-structured interview guide was used during focus group discussions to explore participants' perceptions, motivations, and obstacles related to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

#### J. Results, Recommendations, and Conclusion / النتائج والتوصيات والخاتمة

##### 1. Results and Comparative Analysis

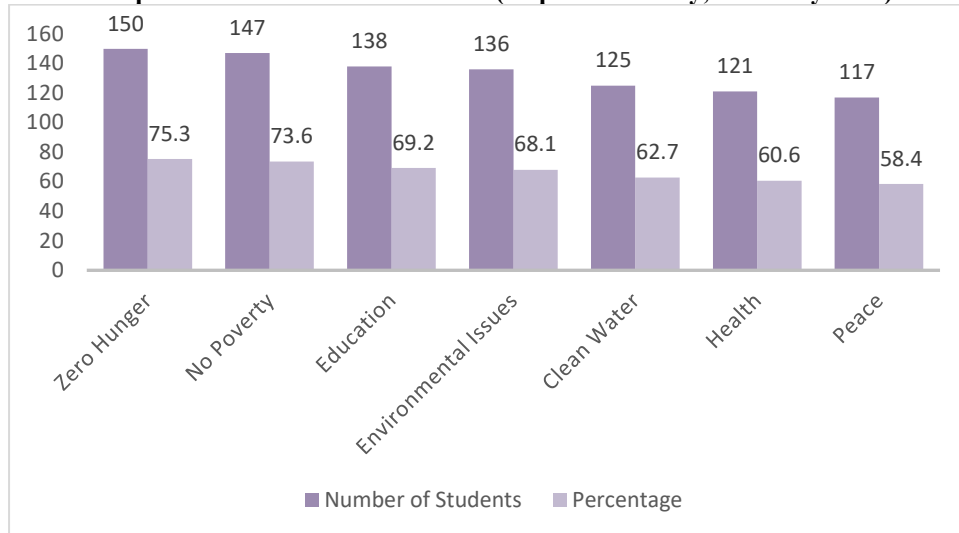
The key findings of this research highlight a profound contextual divide in the ways secondary school students in Lebanon and Dubai perceive and prioritize the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Although general awareness of the concept of "sustainability" was notably high in both groups, with levels at 82.5% in Lebanon and 86.6% in Dubai, the intensity of engagement and the specific goals students identified as most urgent were shaped by their respective socio-economic and political environments.

##### • Lebanon: The Primacy of Survival SDGs

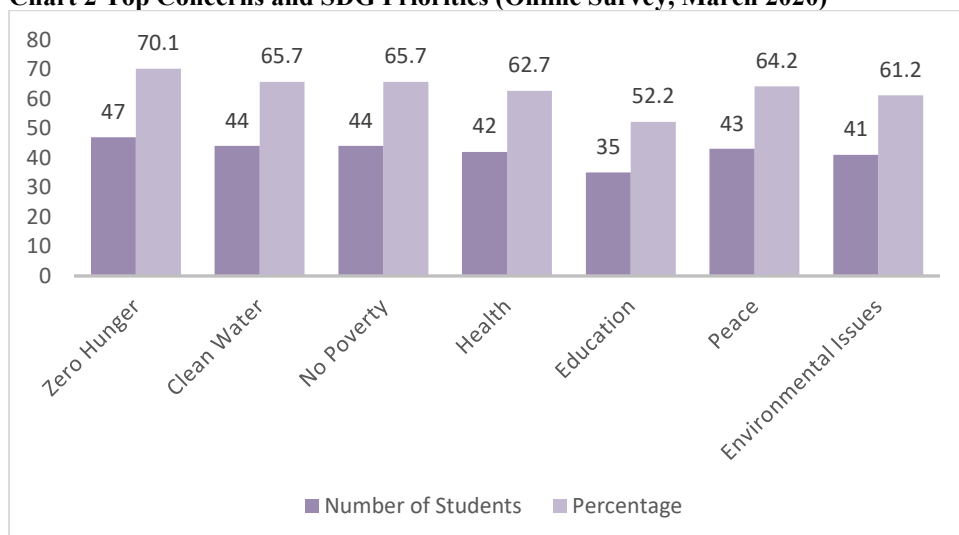
In Lebanon, the ongoing financial collapse and political turmoil have created a "crisis context" that directly shaped how students understand and engage with sustainability (World Bank, 2023); (UNICEF, 2022); (UNDP Lebanon, 2013). Data collected from 267 students reveal a clear emphasis and prioritization of what could be called "Survival SDGs". A significant 75.3% of respondents identified Zero Hunger (SDG 2) as their top priority, followed closely by No Poverty (SDG 1) at 73.6%, highlighting the pressing issues of food insecurity and hyperinflation faced in their everyday lives. Additionally, Quality Education (SDG 4) remained a significant concern for 69.2% of Lebanese students, reflecting a widespread worry that the ongoing national crisis could jeopardize their future opportunities.

**Table 4 Summary of In-person Survey Results (February 2020)**

SDG Priority	Number of Students	Percentage
Zero Hunger	150	75.3%
No Poverty	147	73.6%
Education	138	69.2%
Environmental Issues	136	68.1%
Clean Water	125	62.7%
Health	121	60.6%
Peace	117	58.4%

**Chart 1 Top Concerns and SDG Priorities (In-person Survey, February 2020)**

**Table 5 Summary of Online Survey Results (March 2020)**

SDG Priority	Number of Students	Percentage
Zero Hunger	47	70.1%
Clean Water	44	65.7%
No Poverty	44	65.7%
Health	42	62.7%
Education	35	52.2%
Peace	43	64.2%
Environmental Issues	41	61.2%

**Chart 2 Top Concerns and SDG Priorities (Online Survey, March 2020)**


• **Dubai: A Focus on Global Aspirational SDGs**

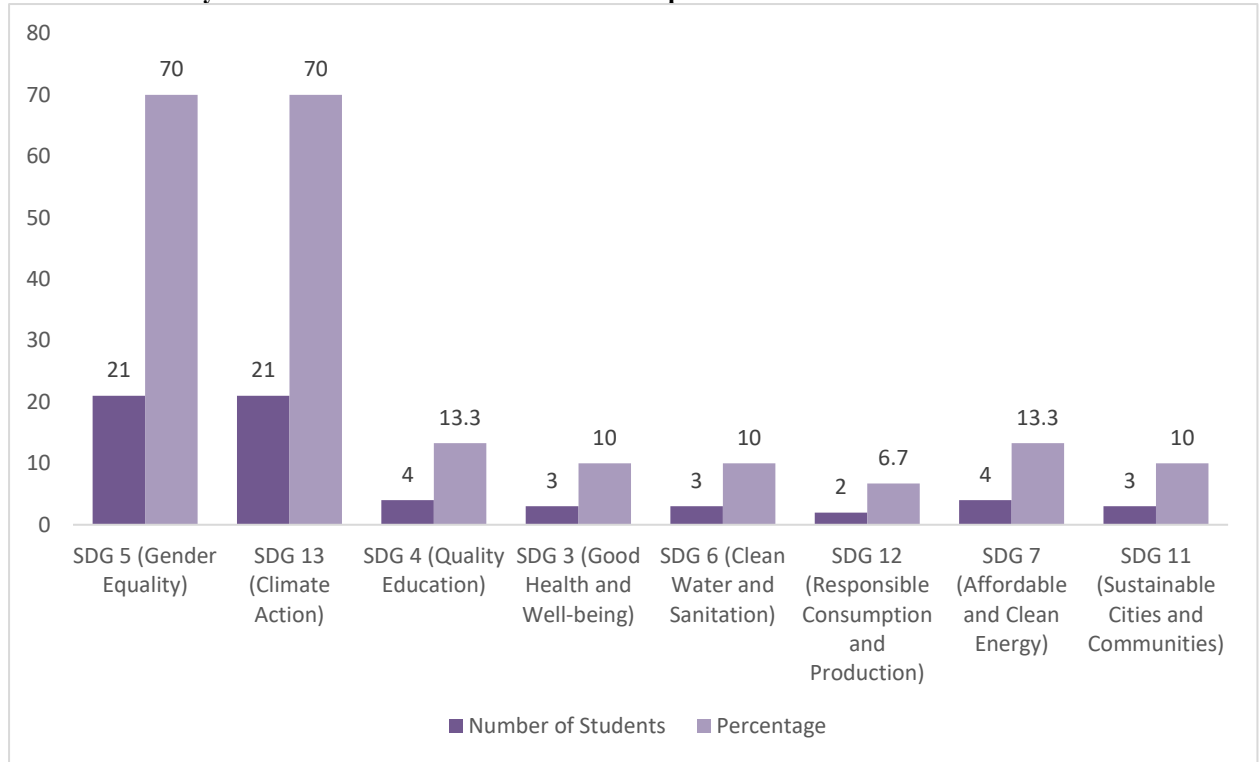
On the other hand, students in Dubai live in a stable and well-resourced environment (International Monetary Fund, 2023). Qualitative insights from focus group discussions indicate that these students are more likely to engage with broader global issues than with immediate personal needs. Gender Equality (SDG 5) and Climate Action (SDG 13) emerged as the primary priorities, each receiving 70% positive response rate. This prioritization is reinforced by high-profile national campaigns and initiatives such as the Year of Sustainability and Expo 2020 Dubai, as well as by an educational environment that actively promotes global citizenship and encourages students

to see themselves as participants in addressing challenges and contributors to their solution (United Arab Emirates Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023).

**Table 6 Summary of Interests in SDGs in all Focus Groups**

SDG Priority	Number of Students	Percentage
SDG 5 (Gender Equality)	21	70%
SDG 13 (Climate Action)	21	70%
SDG 4 (Quality Education)	4	13.3%
SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being)	3	10%
SDG 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation)	3	10%
SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production)	2	6.7%
SDG 7 (Affordable and Clean Energy)	4	13.3%
SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities)	3	10%

**Chart 3 Summary for Interests in SDGs in all Focus Groups**

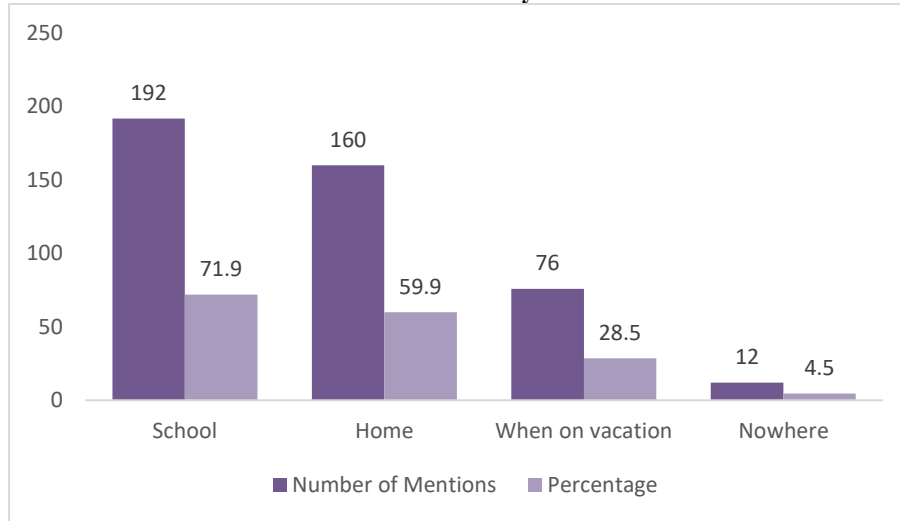


## 2. The Awareness-Action Gap

The data also reveal a significant "Awareness-Action Gap," particularly in the Lebanese context. Despite high levels of reported awareness, only a small proportion of students felt that their schools effectively implemented sustainability practices. In Lebanon, 71.9% of students reported engaging in sustainability behaviours at school; however, this percentage dropped sharply to 28.5% during holidays, suggesting that sustainability is mainly viewed as an institutional obligation rather than a genuinely internalized value. In Dubai, students felt more empowered and expressed a greater sense of personal agency and initiative, yet cultural lifestyle preferences, particularly a heavy reliance on private car usage, remained a barrier to consistent sustainable behaviour.

**Table 7 Summary of Where Students Practice Sustainability**

Where Sustainability is Practiced	Number of Mentions	Percentage (of 267 students)
School	192	71.9%
Home	160	59.9%
When on vacation	76	28.5%
Nowhere	12	4.5%

**Chart 4 Were Students Practice Sustainability**


### 3. Recommendations

To move beyond passive awareness, the research proposes a multifaceted approach tailored to regional realities:

- **Cross-Curricular Integration**

Educational institutions should go beyond treating the SDGs as topics in science or geography courses. A truly multidisciplinary approach is needed, one that integrates sustainability concepts throughout economics, social sciences, and the arts. In the UAE, this integration can be enhanced through the use of cutting-edge digital simulations and virtual reality technologies. In Lebanon, the curriculum should be adapted to reflect the immediate socio-economic challenges students face and to employ community-based initiatives to make the SDGs more accessible and personally significant to young people's realities.

- **Teacher Professional Development and Transformational Leadership**

In the frameworks of Social Cognitive and Social Learning, teachers play a critical role as exemplars of the behaviours and values they wish to cultivate. There is an urgent need for training programs that provide educators with the pedagogical tools and methods needed to facilitate interactive and project-based learning. At the institutional level, school administrators should adopt transformational leadership styles that integrate sustainability within the school's overall ethos and culture.

gain from embracing transformational leadership styles that integrate sustainability not just as an additional curricular component, but as an essential aspect of the school's overall ethos and culture.

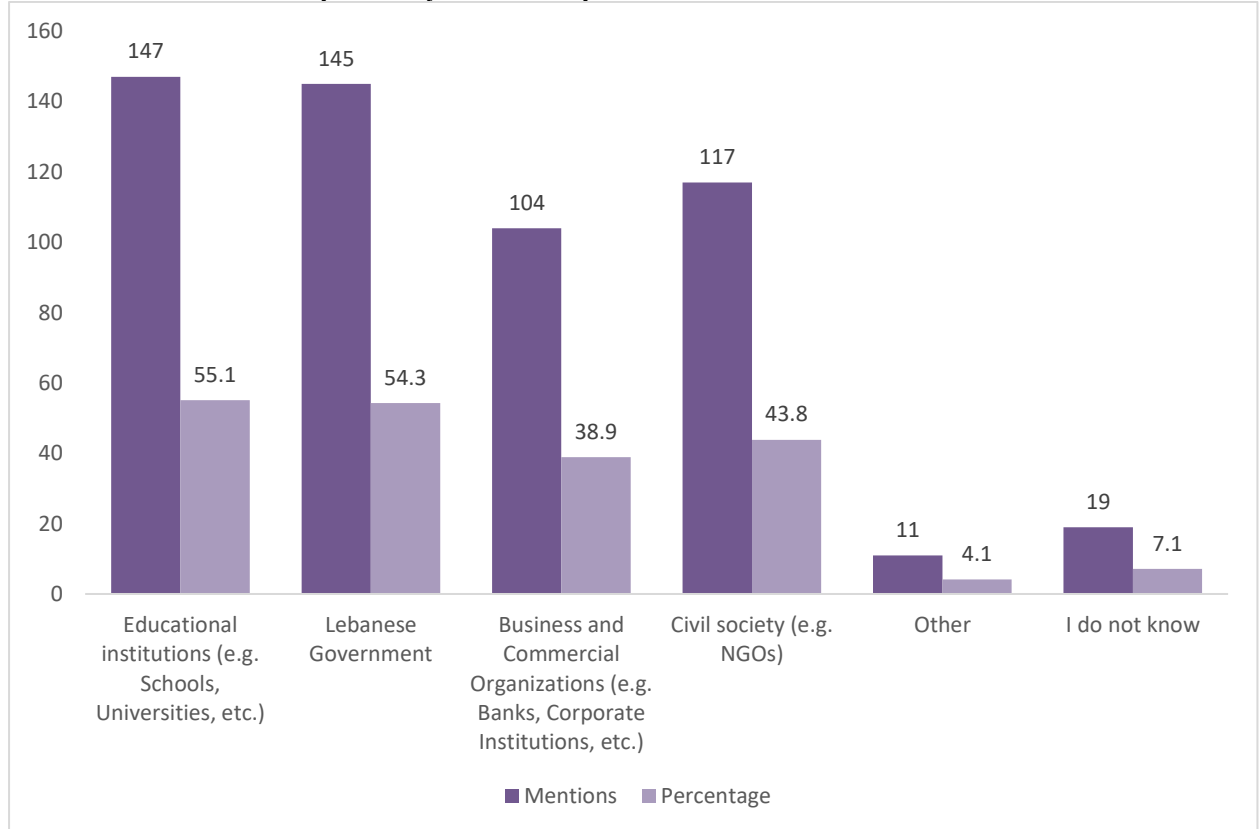
- **Strengthening Public-Private and NGO Partnerships**

The data reveals a significant expectation placed on educational institutions (55.1%) and the government (54.3%) to lead SDG implementation. This indicates recognition of the foundational role of education in shaping sustainable mindsets and the necessity of government policies and actions to advance sustainable development. The considerable mention of civil society and business sectors highlights the multi-stakeholder approach required to achieve the SDGs.

The research also revealed that 43.8% of Lebanese students viewed NGOs as the most appropriate actors to lead SDG implementation. Establishing partnerships between schools, local businesses, and civil society organizations can provide the funding and experiential learning opportunities (such as the Zayed Sustainability Prize) necessary to sustain student interest.

**Table 8 Summary of Distribution of Responsibility for SDG Implementation**

Responsible Party	Mentions	Percentage (of 267 students)
Educational institutions (e.g. Schools, Universities, etc.)	147	55.1%
Lebanese Government	145	54.3%
Business and Commercial Organizations (e.g. Banks, Corporate Institutions, etc.)	104	38.9%
Civil society (e.g. NGOs)	117	43.8%
Other	11	4.1%
I do not know	19	7.1%

**Chart 5 Distribution of Responsibility for SDG Implementation**


#### 4. Conclusion

This study provides an in-depth evaluation of secondary students' awareness of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in the Middle East, illustrating that engagement is not uniform but rather a dynamic response to environmental factors. The execution of the 2030 Agenda cannot follow a "one-size-fits-all" model, as students' comprehension of sustainability is deeply rooted in their immediate socio-economic and political contexts.

In Lebanon, "Survival SDGs" dominate the student perspective. For these young people, sustainability is not an abstract environmental concept but a framework for resilience in the face of economic collapse, food insecurity, and political instability. The significant emphasis on Zero Hunger (75.3%) and No Poverty (73.6%) reflects a reality in which the pressing need to meet immediate demands shapes everyday life. Educational initiatives in such environments must prioritize local relevance, address basic needs, and cultivate the sense of agency necessary for long-term recovery and involvement.

The prosperity found in Dubai enables students to direct their focus towards what could be referred to as "Global Aspirational SDGs," actively participating as engaged global citizens on issues such as climate action and gender equality. This engagement is reinforced by robust government initiatives, such as the Year of Sustainability, and by a diverse educational setting that fosters a comprehensive understanding of worldwide issues. However, the ongoing presence of cultural obstacles, even in affluent environments, particularly the deep-rooted dependence on private vehicle use, serves as a reminder that high levels of theoretical awareness do not necessarily lead to significant lifestyle changes.

The research confirms that schools are pivotal microsystems for influencing behaviour; however, a notable "Awareness-Action Gap" still impedes progress. This issue is particularly pronounced in crisis-affected areas, where resource constraints and political instability constrain the practical application of sustainability principles. To move beyond passive knowledge acquisition, educational policies must become context-sensitive, aligning curricula with the lived realities of the students they serve. By leveraging the proactive nature of youth and supporting committed educators through transformational leadership and sustained professional development, the Middle East has the potential to develop a generation equipped to navigate both the region's urgent crises and the larger challenges shaping our shared future.

Reaching the 2030 objectives will ultimately require a collaborative and multidisciplinary approach that respects regional specificities while driving towards universal sustainability. Formalizing partnerships among educational institutions, NGOs, and the private sector is essential to bridge funding gaps and provide the experiential learning opportunities needed to translate theoretical awareness into meaningful action. Through these initiatives, educators and policymakers can

significantly empower Arab youth to become proactive agents of change, thereby contributing to a more resilient and sustainable future for the region and the world.

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