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# The Sustainable Development Goals: Reflections on the work of the Albert Luthuli Leadership Institute

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## Reimagine Leadership

[www.up.ac.za/alli](http://www.up.ac.za/alli)

# What is sustainable development?

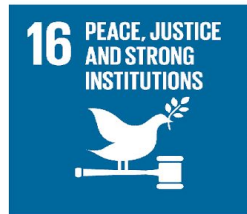
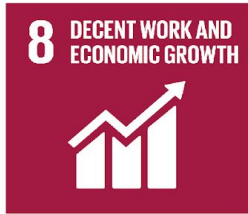


“Sustainable development is the development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” (International Institute of Sustainable Development, 2025, based on ‘Gro Harlem Brundtland Report of 1987’)

# The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)



**SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS**  
17 GOALS TO TRANSFORM OUR WORLD



# Implementation of the SDGs

## THE WHAT



## THE HOW

1. Technical feasibility
2. Trade-offs
3. New technologies
4. Policy coherence
5. Business incentives
6. Civil society engagement

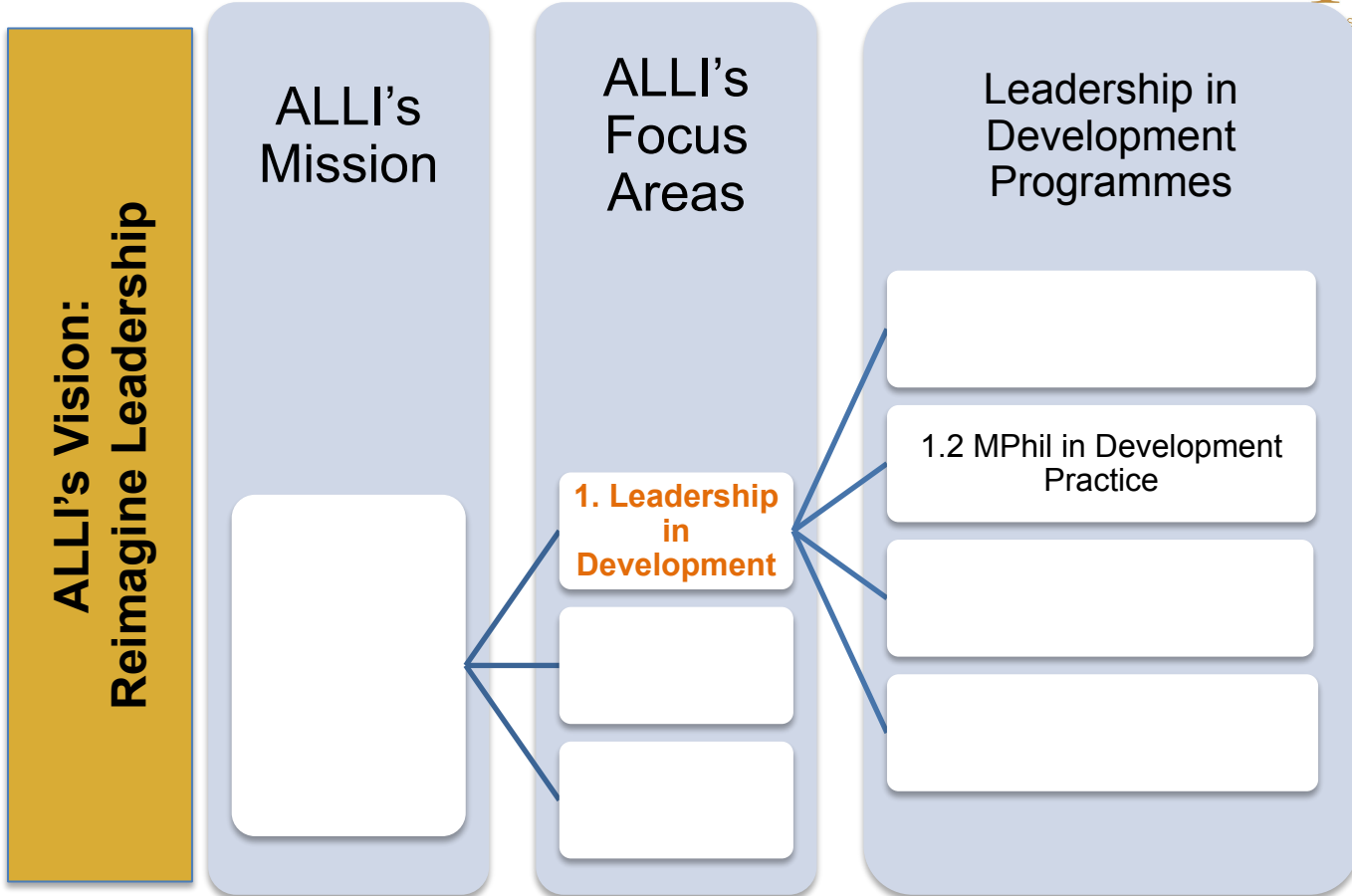
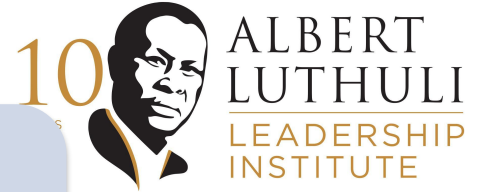
## ACTIONS FOR ACADEMIA

1. Capacity building (e.g. Food & Landuse Coalition)
2. Time-bound benchmarks (e.g. <https://sciencebasedtargets.org/>)
3. Stakeholder engagement
4. Policy tracking and M&E

Source: Jeffery Sachs et al. 2019

Each Transformation describes a major change in the organization of societal, political and economic activities that transforms resource use, institutions, technologies and social relations to achieve key SDG outcomes (represented by the SDG wheel in the centre).  
Figure adapted from ref. 1, TWI2050; SDG colour wheel courtesy of UN/SDG.

# ALLI's contribution to the SDGs



# MPhil in Development Practice (MDP@UP)

## Programme outcome and alignment



After completing the MDP@UP students will be able to understand the complexity of sustainable development challenges, as expressed by the SDGs, and they will be able to design multidisciplinary solutions to such challenges (**from a leadership perspective**).

# MDP@UP Content and Structure



## Sub-outcome 1:

Complex development challenges

- Sustainable development (critical theory and practice)
- Mini-dissertation (case study)

## Sub-outcome 2:

Foundational multi-disciplinary theories from social, health, natural, economic & management sciences

- Foundational theory (engagement with experts from UP Faculties)
- Individual & group assignments to development solutions/responses

## Sub-outcome 3:

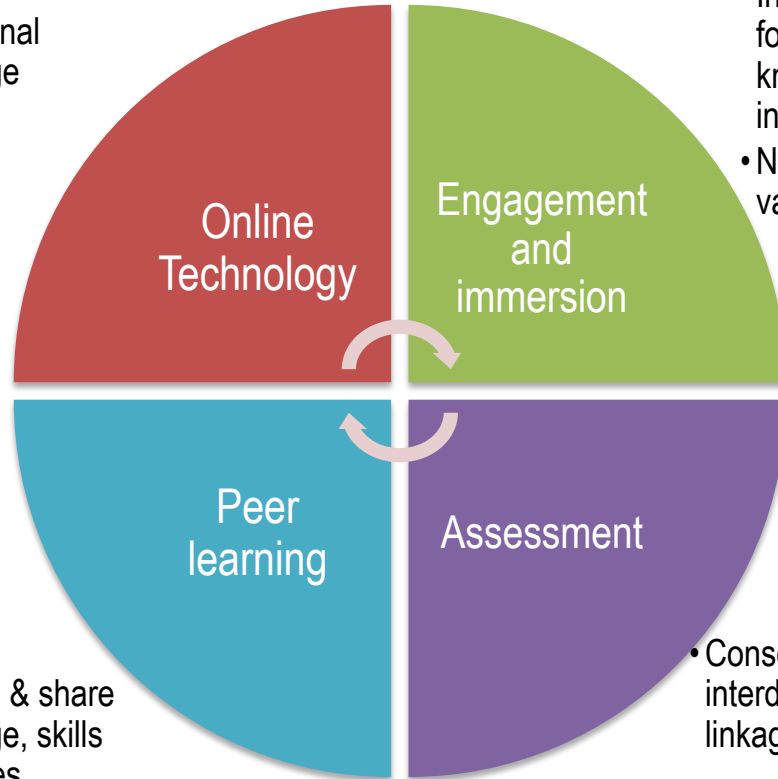
Leadership theory and application in terms of solving sustainability challenges

- Advances in leadership research
- Service-learning course to apply leadership theory in a community development project.

# MDP@UP Learning Approach



- Acquire foundational knowledge



- Integrate foundational knowledge & interdisciplinarity
- News skills and values

- Discover, structure, & share knowledge, skills and values

- Consolidate interdisciplinary linkages

# MDP@UP Modules



**DVP 800:** Health Sciences and Development Practice (15 credits)

**DVP 801:** Natural Sciences and Development Practice (15 credits)

**DVP 802:** The Age of Sustainable Development (15 credits)

**DVP 803:** Social Sciences and Development Practice (15 credits)

**DVP 804:** Leadership theory (15 credits)

**DVP 805:** Leadership Service Learning (15 credits)

**DVP 895:** Case Study/Mini-dissertation (90 credits)

# Exposure of the students to critical thinking, advances and various options for solutions



“The kind of problems human societies faced in the past are today in the context of the Anthropocene... very different from the problems that previous societies had to deal with...” (Delanty, 2024:169).

# Global Networks



- The MDP@UP is affiliated with the **Global Association of Master's in Development Practice**.
- The secretariat of the association is based in the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN), in its headquarters in New York.
- There are certain activities that the association coordinates for both MDP students and faculty e.g. MDP Global Summit (June 2025), MDP Global Challenge (October to December 2025), online meetings, etc.
- In 2025, the association has facilitated bursary funding for MDP students of the University of Pretoria in South Africa and University of Los Andes in Colombia. The donor is Leopold Bachmann Foundation, based in Switzerland.

# CASE STUDY2:

## *The South African SDG Initiative*

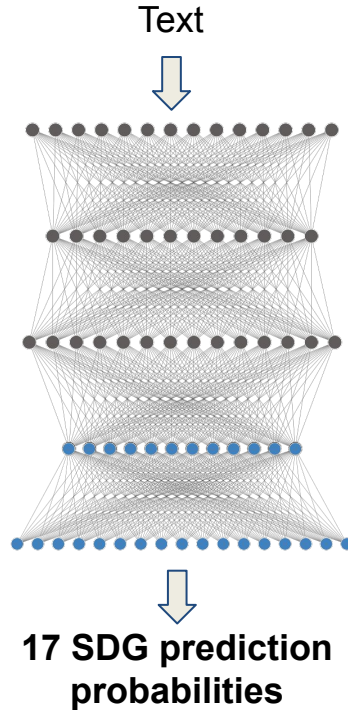


- Partnership between The Presidency, University of Pretoria (ALLI), Stellenbosch University (Policy Innovation Lab), German Development Agency (GIZ), and African Monitor (Civil society).
- The role of the Albert Luthuli Leadership Institute:
  - ✓ Hosting the **Policy Support Initiative**, which serves to provide academic inputs to evidence-based policymaking
  - ✓ Hosting the **South Africa SDG Hub**, which is a machine-learning based meta-platform that aggregates openly available academic papers from South African universities and other institutes from abroad.
- For the demonstration and use of the SDG Hub visit: [sasdgghub.ac.za](https://sasdgghub.ac.za)



# South African SDG Hub

# 3. Key technology



- We use a custom BERT model: sdgBERT
- Have developed and deployed different versions of the model
- Finetuned DistilBERT 66M paramaters
- Pytorch, Huggingface
- 113 314 English training examples
- Trained for 10 epochs on an Nvidia RTX 3080 Ti with 12 GB of VRAM





# The potential role of leadership in the SDGs:

## Five features of systems leadership



A systems leadership mindset	Reject heroic top-down leadership Collaborate to fulfil a vision and moral purpose Focus on the big picture Be flexible, curious, and open to learning
A sophisticated understanding of wicked problems and policymaking complexity	Learn how wicked problems transcend traditional silos, and how to collaborate across boundaries Anticipate the dynamics of complex policymaking systems
Systems leadership capacity	Clarify key principles, roles, and competencies Foster attributes such as humility and compassion Foster skills such as enabling, brokerage, facilitation, evaluation, conflict resolution, and political astuteness
A supportive architecture	Maintain support for systems leadership cultures in politics and performance management Secure the time and space for training and development Protect a common vision or focus, such as Place or Equity.
Innovation and learning	Engage in continuous trial-and-error learning Build and share an evidence base for success

(Source: Cairney & Toomey, 2025)

Questions?



# THANK YOU



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## Rethinking Leadership

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