

Reducing Inequalities and Empowering Youth through the Multi-Stakeholder SDG Network, RCE Greater Atlanta

Jennifer Hirsch,¹ Na'Taki Osborne Jelks,² and Lolade Owokoniran³

Abstract

Atlanta has one of the largest wealth gaps in the United States, and it is a racialized one: as of 2017, almost 75 percent of residents living below the poverty line were Black. Sustainable development efforts like the Atlanta Belt-Line have been exacerbating inequalities since well before COVID-19. Known as a Black mecca, the region is the birthplace of the Civil Rights movement and also boasts a high concentration of higher education institutions (HEIs) as well as the most Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) in the country. In 2017, HEIs and other stakeholders banded together to launch a regional network—Regional Centres of Expertise (RCE) Greater Atlanta—that builds on the region's strengths to place equity and justice at the center of sustainable development. This RCE is part of a global network of over 170 United Nations-affiliated RCEs on Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) that advance the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) through education and training. The importance of the network's focus on establishing deep collaborations among stakeholders, with an emphasis on youth and marginalized communities, has become especially clear as members grapple with the disproportionate impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. In this article, three members reflect on how the network is helping advance sustainable development and preparing the region's youth to be sustainability change agents who take equity and justice seriously. The article features a case study of a recent network project, the UNITAR Youth and the Sustainable Development Goals e-learning course, developed by students from eight Atlanta HEIs to provide SDG training for youth from around the world.

Keywords: equity; disproportionate impacts; higher education; networks; UN Sustainable Development Goals; youth

Introduction

Regional Centres of Expertise on Education for Sustainable Development (RCEs)

On October 10, 2018, as rain and wind beat at the tall glass windows of the National Center for Civil and Human Rights in Atlanta, Georgia, over 200 people streamed into the museum to celebrate the launch of a new regional sustainability network:

RCE Greater Atlanta, acknowledged by the United Nations University in December 2017 (see Figure 1 and Figure 2). Guests comprised students, faculty, and staff from an array of area universities and colleges, including the three founding higher education institutions—Emory University, Georgia Institute of Technology, and Spelman College—as well as Agnes Scott College, Clark Atlanta University, Georgia State

University, Kennesaw State University, Morehouse College, and collaborators from local government, industry, and nonprofit and community organizations.

Part of the Global RCE Network of Regional Centres of Expertise on Education for Sustainable Development (RCEs), RCE Greater Atlanta is one of nine RCEs in the United States and over 170 worldwide (Global RCE

¹Georgia Institute of Technology, Atlanta, Georgia, USA.

²Spelman College, Atlanta, Georgia, USA.

³Kennesaw State University, Kennesaw, Georgia, USA.



Figure 1. Guests listen to the opening speakers at the public launch of RCE Greater Atlanta at the National Center for Civil and Human Rights in Atlanta, Georgia on October 10, 2018.

Network, n.d.). RCEs support multi-stakeholder implementation of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) at the regional level through education and training.

Specifically, they work on SDG#4: Quality Education, Target 4.7:

By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills

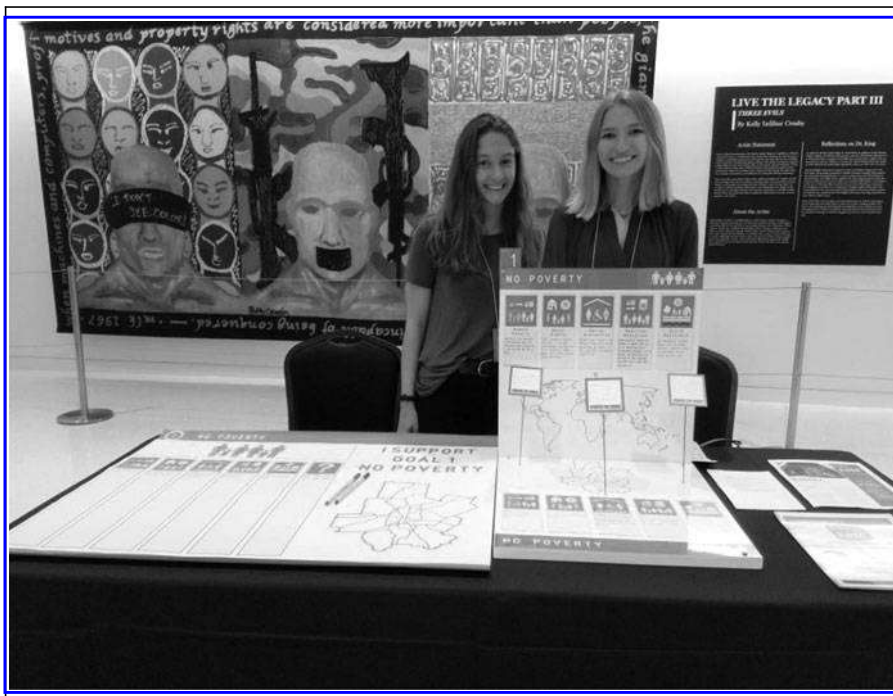


Figure 2. Architecture students from Kennesaw State University show the SDG#1: No Poverty interactive display that they designed and built in one of their classes. Student teams staffed similar displays on other SDGs throughout the National Center for Civil and Human Rights, in front of relevant displays related to civil and human rights history. [Image used with consent.]

needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture’s contribution to sustainable development. (United Nations Statistics Division, n.d.; Vaughtner & Noguchi, 2020).

As multi-stakeholder networks, RCEs are equally focused on SDG#17: Partnerships for the Goals. This focus on process is generally overlooked in sustainability education, which tends to emphasize outcomes. However, RCEs are grounded in the understanding that to achieve sustainable development, they need to transform both the ways members work together and what they consider to be “knowledge” and “expertise.” They spend significant time figuring out how to collaborate across domains, fields, and demographics to unlock knowledge, especially from marginalized communities, and then combine different types of knowledge and expertise to create innovative directions forward.

RCEs emphasize the importance of changing education systems, from K-12 through higher education. They aim to incorporate both scientific and local knowledge and to make collaboration with communities a central part of the educational mission. The long-term goal is to prepare students to better understand and take action on big challenges. RCEs provide one example of what has been termed a “generative social-impact network” aimed at fostering broad change: “‘generative’ because they are designed to be a platform for generating multiple, ongoing kinds of change, not just

accomplishing a single outcome; ‘social-impact’ because they specifically focus on achieving change that results in social good” (Plastrik et al., 2014, p. 5). The broad change that RCEs work on is not only sustainable development, but also, and primarily, change in educational systems themselves.

One main reason for starting RCE Greater Atlanta was to band together, as higher education institutions (HEIs) and with partners, to experiment with a new approach to sustainability education: using the SDGs to highlight and address Atlanta’s crippling inequality as a key component of sustainable development. Known as a Black mecca, Atlanta is the birthplace of the Civil Rights movement and boasts one of the highest concentrations of HEIs in the United States and the most Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) in the country. Yet every year, the city is singled out as having one of the largest wealth gaps, and it is racialized: as of 2017, almost 75 percent of residents living below the poverty line were Black (Deloitte, n.d.). Rather than improving these disparities, sustainable development efforts like the Atlanta BeltLine have exacerbated them (Immergluck, 2009).

RCE Greater Atlanta aims to understand and promote sustainable development without displacement by building and then demonstrating more equitable and just ways of col-

laborating on education for a sustainable region. The network has three goals: 1.) advance SDG knowledge and action, 2.) nurture youth leadership, and 3.) model inclusive and collaborative community. In 2020, it committed to advancing all of the SDGs through an equity and justice lens, as defined in its guiding principles (Table 1). In the spirit of working across SDGs to create systemic change, RCE Greater Atlanta can be seen as using SDG#17: Partnerships for the Goals as a way to address SDG#10: Reducing Inequalities (and other SDGs focused on inequalities) via SDG#4: Quality Education.

The network’s educational and training initiatives bring together members to work within and across their institutions and organizations to develop SDG teaching tools, collaborate with community partners across universities, host SDG symposia, run a sustainability career mentoring program, and support community-based projects. One example of advancing SDG knowledge and action is RCE Greater Atlanta’s engagement with the Drawdown Georgia project. Inspired by Project Drawdown®, Drawdown Georgia aims to identify and implement solutions that will lead to a decline in greenhouse gases and put the state of Georgia on a path to carbon neutrality (Drawdown GA, n.d.). The Drawdown Georgia research team has turned to RCE Greater Atlanta

to develop a plan for maximizing the equity benefits of the proposed solutions—in essence, to address SDG#13: Climate Action, in relation to SDG#10: Reducing Inequalities, through SDG#17: Partnerships for the Goals.

Of equal importance to the new strategic focus on equity will be the RCE’s intentional amplification of community voices in advancing solutions to climate change, as well as its focus on student engagement, as described in the Case Study that follows. If successful, the Drawdown Georgia project can provide one model for an equitable, community-centric approach to carbon reduction for the Atlanta region and beyond.

As with all RCEs, a key focus of the Greater Atlanta network is training and empowering youth as sustainable development change agents, accomplished through deep collaborations with stakeholders and an emphasis on members of marginalized communities. One example of an RCE Greater Atlanta collaborative project focused on youth is the e-learning course, Youth and the Sustainable Development Goals, developed in partnership with the United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR) and described in the following case study. This course was awarded the 2020 Outstanding Flagship Project by the RCE Global Network.

Case Study: Youth and the Sustainable Development Goals—A UNITAR E-Learning Course

In August 2015, then United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon delivered a speech in commemoration of International Youth Day. He stated,

Table 1. RCE Greater Atlanta’s Guiding Principles (2020)
(RCE Greater Atlanta, n.d.)

1. We build long-term, intergenerational relationships.
2. We acknowledge Atlanta’s disparities and discriminatory history, and commit to advancing equity.
3. We recognize each other’s gifts to build on them to advance network goals.
4. Activities will be led by members and will advance their core work by incorporating contributions from other members from different sectors, generations, and backgrounds.
5. We commit to being SDG advocates, investing in our youth, and expanding the network.

“A child who is ten will come of age with the Sustainable Development Goals. I call today’s youth the ‘SDG generation.’ Young people can mobilize the world. They can lead us to a better future” (Ban, 2015). With more than half of the world’s population under the age of 30 (United Nations Department of Economic Affairs, n.d.), it is critical that youth not only be included in conversations around systemic change, but also be empowered to become the future leaders who will achieve sustainable development. Moreover, youth engagement is a required component of every RCE around the world. RCE Greater Atlanta provides young people the opportunity to engage in regional and global activities and fosters youth leadership and action around the SDGs. The network has been strategically designed to mobilize individuals of multiple generations, ethnicities, and backgrounds to tackle the community’s most pressing issues, including racial and educational inequalities.

In an effort to provide an easily accessible educational resource for all youth, RCE Greater Atlanta developed the Youth and Sustainable Development e-learning course with financial support from the Turner Foundation and in partnership with UNITAR (United Nations Institute for Training and Research, 2020). The project was led by Kennesaw State University and supported by the Georgia Institute of Technology, both founding members of the RCE.

To effectively address sustainable development issues and inequalities in the Greater Atlanta region and beyond, it is imperative that youth be given the tools and resources necessary to recognize their own individual strengths, passions, and potential for leadership. To this end, the course

uses a number of modules to empower youth in becoming sustainability change agents: training modules on the history and implementation of the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development; modules on seven SDGs identified as priorities for Greater Atlanta, with local and global case studies; and a local action project.

This course was developed by 12 undergraduate and graduate student fellows who attended eight very different institutions: Agnes Scott College, Atlanta Metropolitan State College, Emory University, Georgia State University, Georgia Institute of Technology, Kennesaw State University, Oglethorpe University, and Spelman College. In addition to compiling content on each of the priority SDGs, fellows researched and developed case studies on more than 15 organizations and nonprofits, which are included in the community portion of each SDG module (Table 2). A number of the case studies showcase work being done in Atlanta and surrounding regions to tackle inequalities (SDG#10) that have led to poverty (SDG#1) and hunger disparities (SDG#2) among marginalized communities in the area.

Two organizations featured in the course are Atlanta’s Community

Urban Food Forest and Comunidad Connect. The food forest is the first and largest of its kind to supply fresh and healthy nuts and produce harvested for public consumption. It is located on 7.1 acres of land centered in a designated food desert in the metropolitan area. As defined by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), a food desert is a “low-income community with a substantial number or share of residents with low levels of access to retail outlets selling healthy and affordable foods” (USDA, Economic Research Service, 2020).

Access to affordable and nutritious food in communities that live within the 35 or more food deserts in Atlanta classified by the USDA (Mapping food deserts in the United States, 2020) has been increasingly limited due to efforts to reduce the spread of the coronavirus. Including the food forest in the e-learning course not only sheds a light on a resource for healthy, accessible food for Atlanta residents but also offers emerging leaders a solution to combat hunger and health disparities in their communities.

Illustrating the network’s global reach, Comunidad Connect, headquartered in Atlanta, is a nonprofit organization that works with local

Table 2. Organizations Providing Case Studies Featured in the Youth and the Sustainable Development Goals Online Course

Anthem	Cox Enterprises
Archi	Delta
Atlanta CareerRise	Feeding America
Atlanta Community Urban Food Forest	School of City and Regional Planning, Georgia Institute of Technology
Canadian Consul General in Atlanta	GLOBE Observer
Chick-fil-A	The Ray
Coca-Cola	Siemens
Comunidad Connect	Southface

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and international partners to create programs that improve community health, alleviate poverty, and support sustainable community development in communities located in Nicaragua and the Dominican Republic, many of which are greatly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic (Comunidad Connect, n.d.). According to a United Nations report, more than 28 million Latin Americans could be classified as extremely impoverished by the end of 2020 due to the economic consequences of the pandemic (United Nations, 2020). Thus, more support is needed to assist and bring awareness to nonprofit organizations like Comunidad Connect, whose mission and efforts highlight the critical nature of global partnership during worldwide crises.

Launched in May 2020 with a virtual showcase, the Youth and the Sustainable Development Goals e-learning course has already reached over 450 youth from over 70 countries. Participants learn about the work of the food forest, Comunidad Connect, and other organizations and businesses that are taking action to address the SDGs and also carry out their own projects, paying special attention to equity and justice with regard to both problems and solutions.

Developed by youth in one region of the world for youth from around the world, as a cross-institutional and intergenerational collaboration, the UNITAR Youth and the Sustainable Development Goals e-learning course provides one example of how a multi-stakeholder network can help weave connections among issues and link the local to the global. Equipping younger generations, especially those of marginalized communities, with the tools necessary to tackle today's most pressing issues, including health disparities and so-

cial inequities, empowers future change agents to create a more sustainable world for all.

Taking a Network Approach to the COVID-19 Pandemic

If the importance of working together with marginalized populations, and centering their experiences, was not clear before COVID-19, it is certainly clear now. COVID-19's impact has been experienced in deep proportions globally with more than two million COVID-19 deaths worldwide and over 24 million cases and 400,000 deaths in the United States a year after the first U.S. case was identified in January 2020 (Baker & Saldanha, 2021; Johns Hopkins University & Medicine Coronavirus Resource Center, n.d.). Just a few months into the pandemic, however, as rates of vulnerable and high-risk groups began to emerge, it became apparent that SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, is not an equal opportunity virus (World Health Organization, 2020).

There is increasing evidence that COVID-19 disparities in the United States, in particular, are experienced along racial lines, with some racial and ethnic groups at an increased risk for contracting COVID-19 and dying from it (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021). Centuries of institutionalized racism and systemic inequities have rendered Black and other communities of color vulnerable to COVID-19 and poor health outcomes in general (Gravlee, 2020). To a large degree, health disparities are attributable to the unjust distribution of health-promoting social, economic, and environmental resources needed to ensure optimal health for all members of a society regardless of race, class, gender, sexual orientation,

geographic location, disability status, or a combination of these factors (United States Department of Health and Human Services, n.d.).

A growing body of evidence points to the zip code as the single best predictor of one's future health and well-being (Graham, 2016). Racism and racialized politics have shaped systems that have birthed widespread inequities experienced from Atlanta's Westside to Flint, Michigan, and beyond, with racial and ethnic disparities in health, education (American Psychological Association, 2012), access to healthcare (Riley, 2012), and economic mobility (Hardy & Logan, 2020) reverberating throughout the country. Communities that are disproportionately impacted by COVID-19 are the same communities that suffer disproportionately from negative environmental factors such as poor air quality; substandard housing; lack of healthy food options; lack of access to clean, affordable drinking water; and inadequate access to clean, safe parks, green space, and open spaces (Wen et al., 2017). Some racial groups are also overrepresented in essential workplaces, which may put them into more contact with the public and other workers, thereby increasing their risk of COVID-19 transmission (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021).

These complexities point to the need for new approaches to elicit the keen understandings required to change current trajectories for health and well-being in vulnerable communities. They demonstrate the imperative of practicing and teaching systems approaches capable of tackling these types of interconnected challenges (Checkland, 1999; Jackson, 2003; Maani & Cavana, 2000) in opposition to reductionist approaches that emphasize

linear, causal relationships devoid of a broader systemic context (Midgley, 2000).

Conclusion

RCE Greater Atlanta was spearheaded in 2017 by a coalition of HEIs and partners to try out a new way of addressing persistent inequities in the region—including some that are being exacerbated by supposedly “sustainable” development—by building on the city’s civil rights history and prominence as a higher education hub. The COVID-19 pandemic has shed new light on the systemic nature of these inequities that affect Black and other communities of color disproportionately with respect to health, environment, climate change, and other sustainability challenges.

With their grounding in multi-stakeholder partnerships, their attention to community and culture, their approach to education combining both local and scientific knowledge, and their local-global connections, RCEs show promise as one systemic approach to tackling the SDGs at the regional level. RCE Greater Atlanta is attempting to tilt this systems approach further in the direction of addressing the social inequalities that have always been at the root of unsustainable development, which are particularly pronounced in the Atlanta region. It does this via its commitment to using equity and justice as an umbrella lens through which to view all of the SDGs, coupled with its dedication to nurturing future change makers empowered to find solutions that lead to transformational change.

Developed by RCE Greater Atlanta students with staff, local and global partners, and UNITAR, the Youth and

Sustainable Development e-learning course exemplifies how strategic collaborative partnerships can effectively foster sustainable development education, leadership, and action. But collaboration does not automatically lead to systems thinking or practice (Jones, 2020), for example, changing one’s own beliefs, projects, goals, or organizational structures based on new perspectives, even when so many systems pieces are inherent in the network structure. Indeed, this shift from individual or ingrained approaches to systems approaches needs to be intentionally nurtured along. All of us—youth and adults alike—need to develop the systems-related competencies identified by UNESCO as key to achieving the SDGs, which include systems thinking, collaboration, self-awareness, integrated problem-solving, and more (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2017).

This is the stage RCE Greater Atlanta finds itself in at this point. Three years in, having built relationships and trust through engaging in shared activities, the network recently overhauled its structure to have a more distributed governance model as well as a more intentional process for proposing projects to ensure that they embody the network’s goals and principles. Through this type of continued attention to process and to the dynamics of how members work together, the network hopes to become a model for other regions committed to centering equity and justice in their efforts to create a sustainable future.

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Address correspondence to:

Dr. Jennifer Hirsch
 Center for Serve-Learn-Sustain
 Georgia Institute of Technology
 266 Fourth Street NW
 Atlanta, GA 30332-0940
 USA

E-mail: jennifer.hirsch@gatech.edu