

COMMENTARY

## Strengthening the link between I-O psychology and the SDGs: Providing support for the next generation

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In Mullins and Olson-Buchanan (2023), the authors brought attention to humanitarian work psychology (HWP) and proposed the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as a promising framework for industrial-organizational (I-O) psychologists to improve society. Using a top-down perspective, we further explore how the field's professional organization, academic programs, and graduate students can better incorporate the SDGs into their science and practice. More specifically, we extend the authors' original contribution by detailing current initiatives and potential opportunities that the field can use to strive toward the SDGs. By using some or all of these options, the next generation of I-O psychologists can gain enhanced awareness, more formal support, and a greater appreciation for HWP and the SDGs.

### SIOP

As the leading professional organization in our field, the Society of Industrial-Organizational Psychology (SIOP) is uniquely positioned to utilize the SDGs as an organizing framework. When it comes to preparing and supporting the next generation of I-O psychologists, SIOP can use the SDGs to communicate the societal value of I-O psychology and reimagine our educational processes and competencies. In this section of our paper, we aim to expand upon Mullins and Olson-Buchanan's suggestions by highlighting SIOP's existing efforts and proposing areas for further development.

### ***Communicating the value of I-O psychology***

SIOP currently offers grants and awards to graduate students and early career professionals that indirectly contribute to the advancement of the SDGs. One notable award is The Joel Lefkowitz Early Career Award for Humanistic Industrial-Organizational Psychology, which recognizes outstanding professionals who make significant contributions to humanitarian work. This award inspires young researchers and showcases SIOP's commitment to addressing global well-being and societal challenges. Previous recipients have demonstrated the impact of I-O psychology on humanitarian efforts and the SDGs. For example, Ishbel McWha-Hermann's award-winning project in 2021, "Project FAIR: Exploring Practical Pathways for Reward Fairness in International NGOs," aligns with SDG 8 and addresses equal pay for work of equal value by proposing alternatives to dual salary systems. Dual salary systems are a common practice among international organizations, where they pay their national and international employees on different scales, resulting in unequal compensation for similar work (McWha-Hermann et al., 2017).

Additional noteworthy awards include SIOP's International Research and Collaboration (IRC) Small Grant program and the Hebl Grant for Reducing Gender Inequities in the Workplace. The IRC program provides financial support for collaborative research projects between international partners. By facilitating international cooperation, this program potentially contributes to the SDGs too. Previous award recipients have conducted research on diverse topics related to the SDGs including job insecurity across cultures and the international study of work–family conflict. The Hebl Grant for Reducing Gender Inequities in the Workplace also indirectly supports research related to SDGs 5 (gender equality) and 10 (reduced inequalities). This grant is awarded to graduate students conducting gender-related research for their master's thesis or doctoral dissertation, promoting a more equitable and inclusive work environment. For example, the most recent recipient of this award was Kaitlyn Rose Gallagher for work on “Balanced Negotiations: An Online Negotiation Training for Women,” which examines the important issue of the gender pay gap (2023).

Although SIOP's existing grants and awards indirectly contribute to the SDGs, there is potential for more direct support of research aligned with the goals. Creating a specific grant for early career scholars focused on the SDGs would provide young researchers with an opportunity to intentionally articulate how their research contributes to this global agenda. By incorporating the SDG framework into the evaluation criteria, SIOP could encourage and nurture research that affects positive societal change by directly addressing the pressing challenges outlined by the goals.

The SDG framework could also be utilized by SIOP to further demonstrate and communicate prosocial work already being done by I-O psychologists. In 2017, SIOP introduced a prosocial content area in the annual conference program to highlight sessions contributing to prosocial work. Twenty-four sessions were classified as prosocial last year. However, Moran et al. (2022) emphasize that many SIOP sessions indirectly relate to SDGs, often without researchers' awareness or proper recognition. For example, research on gender discrimination and women in leadership contributes to SDGs 5 and 10 but is often categorized under other content areas, like leadership and inclusion/diversity. Although this situation underscores the interdisciplinary nature of the SDG framework, it also raises a concern that certain work may not be recognized or classified as prosocial despite its significant impact on society and global goals.

One way SIOP could foster a more intentional connection between the work of I-O psychologists and the SDGs is by implementing a checklist for conference submissions. For example, conference submitters could be required to explicitly state the alignment of their submissions with the SDGs. They could be asked to indicate if their work generally aligns with the SDGs and specify the relevant SDGs and targets. If implemented, the checklist could further showcase the societal value of existing work and educate submitters about the SDGs.

### **Expanding I-O competencies**

SIOP is also well positioned to incorporate the SDG framework into I-O education and foster the development of new skills to address the broader problems associated with macro psychology. As Mullins and Olson-Buchanan point out, “it is impossible for us to change the field . . . if we do not shift our educational processes” (p. 25), and SIOP holds considerable influence over the way I-O education is implemented and reimagined.

One avenue to expand the scope of I-O psychology is by integrating the SDG framework into SIOP's official guidelines for graduate training programs. SIOP's Education and Training Committee created the “Guidelines for Education and Training in I-O Psychology,” which define the essential components and competencies for master's and doctoral programs (SIOP, 2016). Although adherence to the guidelines is not formally evaluated, these publicly available guidelines aim to ensure a comprehensive education in I-O psychology for students. Deviating from them can indicate a lack of alignment with best practices and impact education quality. The current guidelines cover many competencies that can be used to address broader societal issues, but there

is room to add more (e.g., corporate social responsibility, intersectional analysis, macro-psychology, and nonprofit governance). Additionally, more can be done to emphasize prosocial training methods, such as applied service-learning opportunities (see Oliveira, 2017).

SIOP's efforts to support the next generation of I-O psychologists interested in prosocial work and the SDGs are commendable. Through grants, awards, and research support, SIOP indirectly contributes to addressing global challenges. However, more direct and explicit support of research aligned with the SDGs can be provided. By expanding existing initiatives and incorporating the SDG framework into educational programs, SIOP can also better equip I-O psychologists to make significant contributions to this global agenda.

### **I-O programs**

Mullins and Olson-Buchanan also highlight the UN Global Compact (UNGC) as a valuable tool for I-O programs to assess their progress toward SDGs without significant curriculum changes. We build upon their discussion by emphasizing not only the societal impact but also the program-level benefits. More specifically, we detail the advantages of existing endeavors and new opportunities in research, education, and practice that align with the UNGC. By reframing its value, we clarify how I-O programs can use it as a tool to directly improve their quality while supporting the next generation's commitment to the SDGs.

### **Research**

In research, the UNGC principles and SDGs can serve as unifying threads, connecting seemingly distinct research streams within and between I-O programs. Although researchers and labs may initially find it difficult to connect their topics of interest (e.g., compensation) to those of their colleagues (e.g., training), both topics can be explored in the context of a specific SDG or UNGC principle. For example, both compensation and training can be linked to SDG 8: decent work & economic growth (see Owens & Stewart, 2016).

Utilizing the SDG framework in research opens opportunities for more, high-quality intraprogram collaborative projects. At the program level, this can further reflect a positive and productive program culture appealing to current or prospective graduate students who desire frequent collaboration with their peers. One example of incorporating the SDGs in I-O research is the 4D Lab at North Carolina State University (<https://www.4dlab.org>). This lab serves as a unifying platform, bringing graduate students with diverse research interests together under the umbrella of the SDGs. I-O programs could also incorporate the SDGs into program-level funding to encourage collaboration across labs and programs. For example, program-provided small grants for multilab UNGC/SDG-related projects could further support that cooperative environment.

Commitment to research grounded in the UNGC objectives and SDGs also promotes interprogram collaboration and innovation. By stimulating the development of cross-cultural research partnerships, faculty and students in programs may report higher satisfaction with team performance and generate more creative ideas on those projects (Stahl *et al.*, 2010). Additionally, these partnerships create research networks (Berry *et al.*, 2017) that can be used to spread resources (i.e., funding, supplies, etc.) and findings among programs that have or lack access to them at any given time. In sum, potential intraprogram or interprogram research opportunities facilitated by a commitment to the UNGC are likely to improve the quality of a program's research agenda. Moreover, program-level acknowledgment and support for SDG-related research puts less burden on students to identify HWP research opportunities on their own.

### **Education**

Signing the UNGC also involves the inclusion of its principles and the SDGs in formal coursework. This is a particularly important method to increase students' awareness of HWP and frameworks that tackle pressing societal issues. One option is to develop dedicated graduate and/or undergraduate-level courses on these topics, but a more efficient option is to modify existing courses to include some HWP and SDG content (Oliveira, 2017). The change(s) could be as simple as adding extra readings from HWP textbooks, presenting recent research related to the SDGs at the end of a preexisting lecture, or creating an assignment where students discuss the effectiveness of I-O practices in achieving UNGC principles or SDGs.

The next generation of interested I-O graduate students and undergraduates directly benefit from these minor tweaks in coursework; it encourages them to evaluate the contexts in which I-O theory holds and how it improves society. Undergraduates who go on to work in other fields can also approach their unique problems with HWP frameworks in mind. As a result, graduates and external parties may view the program's educational curriculum as more comprehensive and beneficial to students' development.

### **Practice**

Dedication to the UNGC also promotes a variety of practical I-O experiences for interested faculty and students. As Mullins and Olson-Buchanan pointed out, some programs already conduct project work with nonprofits. Others even provide pro-bono consulting services (e.g., The Volunteer Program Assessment; Olien et al., 2014). It is pleasing to hear that a portion of I-O programs are already involved in these activities, but there is certainly room for improvement by others.

Through the UNGC, the expected increase in program-level engagement with nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and nonprofits is likely to make timely (albeit, potentially indirect) impacts on organizations and populations covered by SDGs (Mullins, 2017). For I-O programs housed in institutions and departments that value these efforts, it provides concrete support that the program is working toward its host's larger mission. With regard to student training, it creates chances for hands-on application of I-O psychology in the real world; Students can see firsthand if the field's "best practices" work in different contexts.

### **I-O students**

Even when situated in a university, department, or research lab where the SDGs are relatively unknown, there are a myriad of ways that graduate and undergraduate students can engage with the SDG framework. This section will focus on how students can proactively seek out opportunities related to the SDGs in addition to the training they currently receive. We hope this serves as a toolkit for students who are interested in this work but do not feel they have a starting place for getting involved.

When starting in this area, it is first helpful to remember that many I-O psychologists are already doing work related to the SDGs (see "I-O Programs") and that the SDGs are highly interdisciplinary. We recommend students begin by examining their current research interests, projects, and coursework through the lens of the SDGs. Chances are, some of these already relate to one or more of the goals. It is also beneficial to look beyond one's lab or department to consider how other fields are working toward the SDGs, either intentionally or unintentionally. After becoming familiar with the content of the SDGs, students can keep their eyes open for seminars, colloquiums, and discussions related to these topic areas in university discussion lists, department websites, and more. It is very possible that the SDGs *are* being discussed at one's university, but

these conversations are happening in fields such as economics, international relations, and political science.

Beyond the university, we recommend getting involved with the HWP community at large. A good starting place is GOHWP, the Global Organization for Humanitarian Work Psychology. Membership is free, and the organization's website offers a range of resources for those wishing to get involved. In particular, they offer a student resource guide that can be found at <http://gohwp.org/student-guide/>. Another avenue to explore is the SIOP United Nations Committee. This committee provides an excellent opportunity to connect with researchers and practitioners with a wealth of experience in this area. By engaging with this committee, you can deepen your understanding of the UN and contribute to the integration of the SDGs into I-O psychology (see [www.siop.org/About-SIOP/Advocacy/SIOP-and-the-United-Nations](http://www.siop.org/About-SIOP/Advocacy/SIOP-and-the-United-Nations)). The committee regularly seeks student affiliates as interns and provides ad hoc opportunities for SIOP members to advise UN agencies on their areas of expertise (e.g., SIOP UN Committee, 2023). At the SIOP Annual Conference, the SIOP UN committee typically organizes SDG-related conference sessions, and the Prosocial Committee hosts a reception for attendees interested in prosocial work. These events often have overlapping attendees, so it's worth considering them for next year's conference.

In addition to engaging with others who are working toward the SDGs, many resources exist to learn about the goals and their intersection with the field of I-O psychology. For self-guided learning, we recommend Olson-Buchanan and colleagues' book, *Using Industrial-Organizational Psychology for the Greater Good* (2013), and Carr et al.'s book, *Humanitarian Work Psychology* (2012). Beyond I-O, the UN's website (<https://sdgs.un.org/goals>) offers comprehensive information, webinars, events, and recent publications related to the SDGs. Joining relevant discussion lists, such as the UN Global Compact Bulletin, is another way to stay informed about the SDGs and the ongoing UN initiatives.

## Conclusion

Even if formal support is lacking, students can use the resources described in the piece to join the HWP community and advance the SDGs. Through their involvement and success, we hope they will receive greater support from the I-O community in the future. As discussed, various options are currently available for SIOP and I-O programs to advance the SDGs and share HWP with the next generation of I-O psychologists. We encourage them to take advantage of these initiatives, consider the other opportunities we proposed, and generate new avenues for positive change. The field of I-O psychology can be more impactful on society through the advancement of the SDGs, and a generation of well-supported and informed I-O psychologists can help to lead the charge.

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