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A Transformation in Education?

A comparative analysis of SDG4 implementation in domestic contexts.

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Abstract

Progress on Sustainable Development Goal 4: Quality Education (SDG4) has been insufficient and knowledge of how it is implemented into domestic contexts remains limited. Using norm diffusion theory as a framework, this thesis is a comparative study of SDG4 implementation in five countries around the world. By analysing both the discursive and practical impact of SDG4, this thesis has studied if and how implementation has occurred in the domestic contexts of these five countries. The findings suggest that the discursive impact of SDG4 has been uniform across countries, but divergence has occurred in how the countries have sought to practically incorporate SDG4 into their agenda. There were notable variations in the extent of initiatives, type of initiatives introduced and the focus of these initiatives, offering support for the norm diffusion scholars who understand international norms to be flexible. If their global vision of the SDGs is to be realised, the United Nations must ensure that this flexibility is coupled with refined implementation advice.

Key words: International norms, SDG4, domestic implementation, discourse, initiatives

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1 Introduction

A United Nations Report published in May 2023 stated that 84 million children will still be out of school by 2030 (United Nations General Assembly Economic and Social Council, 2023: 10). These findings illustrate the extent of the uphill battle that the world is facing in the quest to achieve the fourth Sustainable Development Goal: Quality Education (SDG4). Evidently, current implementation strategies are either insufficient or ineffective and must be reassessed and advanced. Before this can happen, we need to understand more about the story so far when it comes to SDG4 implementation, and this explains the purpose of my thesis. Below, I investigate the extent that SDG4 has genuinely been implemented in domestic contexts and how this has occurred. I focus on five countries from around the world and study their implementation approach by analysing their discursive and practical response to SDG4.

1.1 Research Problem

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is positioned as the route to ‘Transforming our world’ (United Nations, 2015: 1). The United Nation’s Sustainable Development Goals (UN)(SDGs) are a central feature of this Agenda. The Goals are universal and have been adopted by every UN member state. The UN believes that the SDGs will serve as a roadmap to ‘stimulate action over the next fifteen years in areas of critical importance for humanity and the planet’ (ibid: 5).

Despite the importance attached to the SDGs and their perceived impact, there has been limited research studying how the Goals have been implemented into the domestic context. Indeed, Ordóñez Llanos and Raven suggest that ‘we know little about the actual impact of the Sustainable Development Goals in national and sub-national sociopolitical systems.’ (Ordóñez Llanos and Raven, 2022: 59). This is a concern considering states are the actor with primary responsibility for SDG implementation (The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2023). Gurowitz argues that ‘International norms can matter only when they are used domestically, and they work their way into the

political process' (Gurowitz, 1999: 416). Research is needed to ensure we understand how the SDGs are applied in practice so that progress can be ensured. Recognising these implications, this thesis is an explorative analysis of SDG implementation across five countries around the world.

There are 17 SDGs and it would be impossible to conduct a substantial analysis of every Goal, so this thesis focuses specifically on SDG 4: 'Quality Education'. The UN has described education as 'the key that will allow many other Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to be achieved' (United Nations, n.d.), highlighting how studying SDG4 implementation can offer useful insights into the Goals more broadly.

This study can prove to be useful from a theoretical perspective too. The main theoretical framework of this thesis is norm diffusion theory. The theory has experienced points of contention regarding norm behaviour in recent years. Shawki notes how early international norm research assumed norms to be predominantly static (Shawki, 2016). However, contemporary findings have disputed this, and the increasingly dominant school of thought is that norms should be seen as dynamic (ibid). By framing my thesis around norm diffusion theory, I can contribute further findings to this debate.

Moreover, the mode of analysis in this research can offer relevance and originality. Current education operationalisations threaten to simplify a complex political topic and only understand education in 'functional terms' (Huelss, 2017: 393). Consequently, many education findings in the field of education are formulated without acknowledging context or case variation (ibid). The operationalisations utilised in this thesis avoided such an issue. I pursued a different approach by analysing education based on action rather than outcome. I studied how implementation has occurred and the extent rather than focus on the results that implementation has brought. I then follow this up with a discussion about why these findings may have occurred by engaging with context and case variations.

1.2 Research Question and Aims

This research aims to investigate SDG4 implementation in domestic contexts. Attention will first be directed towards the degree that implementation has occurred. If and when implementation has occurred, this study also aims to explore the approach each country has taken to implementation. This includes how the country has pursued implementation, the areas they have focused on and the style of the approach.

Consequently, the research question is: *How and to what extent do different countries implement SDG4 into their domestic agenda?*

1.3 Thesis Outline

This thesis consists of seven sections. The first section is the introduction. The second section offers some background and context to the SDGs and SDG4 and how the Goals operate in a domestic environment. The third section discusses the theoretical framework of this study which will be norm diffusion theory supplemented by sociological institutionalism. The fourth section of this thesis describes the methodological approach; offering justifications for case and document selection and then discussing the process of data collection and analysis. The fifth section is the empirical analysis. I analyse how and to what extent each country has implemented SDG4 by first focusing on each country individually and then conducting a comparison of the cases. The sixth section discusses major findings of this study and seeks to offer explanations for these findings. The seventh and final section presents concluding remarks before discussing the implications of this study and recommendations for further research.

2 Background and Context: Global Goals and National Implementation

This section offers some background and context. I first discuss the 2030 Agenda and the creation of the Sustainable Development Goals. I then narrow my focus to specifically discuss SDG4. I finish this section by discussing how SDG4 is applied and implemented in domestic contexts.

2.1 The 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is ‘a plan of action for people, planet and prosperity’ (United Nations, 2015: 5). It was founded by the United Nations (UN) and entails 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These SDGs seek to address the pressing political, economic, and environmental challenges we are facing globally. Each Goal has its own set of targets and indicators. Across all 17 SDGs, there are a total of 169 targets which are based on 231 unique indicators (Biermann, Hickmann and Sénit, 2022: 175). The deadline for most of these targets is 2030 (although some targets have no end date), but global progress towards the SDGs has not been on track since 2015 and has decelerated since the pandemic (United Nations General Assembly Economic and Social Council, 2023).

The establishment of the Goals began when the 2012 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development approved an Open Working Group to come up with a draft agenda to succeed the Millennium Development Goals (UNDP, n.d.). The Open Working Group included representatives from 70 countries and submitted their final draft in 2014 (ibid). After this, member states engaged in negotiations concerning the draft and decided upon final wording of targets and goals which were ultimately agreed upon in 2015 (ibid). The process included 88 national consultations and the UN claim that it was informed by an unprecedented degree of public consultation (ibid). Every UN member state (193 in total) adopted the 2030 Agenda, but the Goals are not legally binding. Compared to the preceding MDGs, the SDGs are much more wide-ranging and adopt a more holistic understanding and approach to development (Biermann, Hickmann and

Sémit, 2022). There has also been an effort to ensure that the Goals are cross-cutting.

The SDGs are based on a global vision that understands international collaboration to be the solution for the contemporary challenges we are facing but the UN has been conscious to integrate the local sphere into this vision too. They have indicated that localisation needs to be at the core of the approach (UNESCO, 2015). Corbett and Guilherme have highlighted how the term ‘appropriate’ is used by UN agencies to recognise cultural diversity and shows how the institution understands that a one size fits all approach should not be pursued by international organisations (Corbett and Guilherme, 2021: 451).

2.2 Quality Education: Sustainable Development

Goal 4

Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4) is named ‘Quality Education’ and aims to ‘Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all’ (United Nations, n.d.). It includes a total of 10 targets. Seven of these targets are ‘Outcome Targets’ and three are ‘Means of Implementation Targets’. Progress is measured using 11 indicators. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) is the UN agency that has been tasked with leading the efforts to achieve SDG4. It is the only agency that has a mandate in all areas of education and acts as a coordinator ‘through partnerships, policy guidance, capacity development, monitoring and advocacy’ (UNESCO, n.d.).

While it has built on aspects of *Millennium Development Goal 2: Achieve Universal Primary Education*, SDG4 has sought to make education more relevant and responsive by incorporating a ‘holistic and humanistic vision’ (UNESCO, 2015: 26). Concepts such as Education for Sustainable Development and Global Citizenship are key features of Goal 4. SDG4 calls for a transformation in education stressing the need to be more future-oriented and outward-looking. This is rooted in a belief that education can transform the lives of its beneficiaries and facilitate

growth for all (ibid: 7). Education is understood to be a powerful vehicle to facilitate sustainable development and advancing SDG4 is seen as an opportunity to facilitate progress in the other 16 SDGs too. Indeed, SDG4 is a ‘critical imperative to their achievement’ (Ferguson and Roofe, 2020: 960).

2.3 Sustainable Development Goal 4 in the Domestic Context

While SDG4 was founded and formulated via the UN at the international level, the implementation phase moves beyond their remit. Instead, it is national governments that are the primary actor in SDG4 implementation. UNESCO notes that ‘governments shoulder the main responsibility for ensuring quality education’ (UNESCO, 2023). While not to the same degree, civil society and non-governmental organisations also have a role to play in SDG4 implementation in domestic contexts.

Evidently, SDG4 places significant responsibility and expectation on national governments. The drive to have countries mainstream SDG4 into their domestic agenda is a significant step and transition for many countries (Okitasari and Katramiz, 2022: 2). Perhaps recognising this, the UN has published guidelines for SDG4 implementation for member states to use as a reference point. The Global Education Monitoring Report on ‘How Countries Implement SDG4’ lists six areas that SDG4 implementation should be rooted in. These are *Beyond Averages: equity and inclusion*, *Beyond Access: quality and learning*, *Beyond Basics: content fit for sustainable development*, *Beyond Schooling: lifelong learning*, *Beyond Education: cross sector cooperation* and *Beyond Countries: regional and global cooperation* (Global Education Monitoring Report Team, 2019). The report suggests that focusing on each of these aspects can facilitate progress towards the Goal.

While there are numerous UN resources dedicated to explaining how SDG4 should be implemented, there is also a recognition that states can and will adapt the Goal appropriately to their context. The Incheon Declaration suggests that governments should ‘guide the process of contextualizing and implementing the SDG4-Education 2030 goal and targets, based on national experiences and

priorities' (UNESCO, 2015: 57). The UN wants to support countries to steer action and hopes SDG4 can build on existing structures and mechanisms where possible (ibid: 56).

Despite detailed guidelines, SDG4 implementation into domestic contexts has proven to be difficult. Like many of the Goals, there has been limited progress towards SDG4. Reviews since 2015 have indicated that the world has not been making sufficient progress to achieve SDG4 and this has only been exacerbated by the impact of the pandemic on education. We are now halfway through the SDG cycle and 2023 reports offer grim viewing. A report published in May 2023 indicated that 84 million children will be out of school by the 2030 deadline and 300 million children or young people will leave school without being able to read or write (United Nations General Assembly Economic and Social Council, 2023).

3 Theoretical Framework

This section discusses the theories that will frame this thesis. The main theory of this thesis is norm diffusion theory, but I will also be engaging with sociological institutionalism. While primarily addressed in this section, these two theories will also be integrated into my analysis and discussion sections.

3.1 Norm Diffusion Theory

Finnemore and Sikkink define a norm as a ‘standard of appropriate behaviour for actors with a given identity’ (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998: 891). An actor that seeks to introduce and promote certain norms can be categorized as a ‘norm entrepreneur’ (Sunstein, 1996: 7). Finnemore and Sikkink theorise a three-stage norm ‘life cycle’ which explains the process of norm diffusion (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998: 895). The first stage is the norm emerging, the second stage involves the norm being accepted on a broad scale and is referred to as ‘norm cascade’ and the third stage involves the internalisation of the norm to the point that a norm has become standard and ‘taken-for-granted’ (ibid). The ‘tipping point’ in the visualisation below refers to the point in which an acceptable number of states have embraced the norm (ibid).

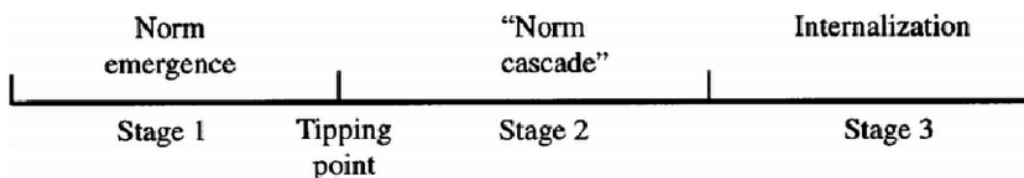


Figure 1: Finnemore and Sikkink's Norm Life Cycle

I argue that the Sustainable Development Goals can essentially be understood as being based on a set of norms or even as norms themselves. SDG4 Quality Education is inspired by a belief that education is a ‘fundamental human right’ (UNESCO, 2020). Such a belief has become an international norm, affirmed by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (ibid). Concepts incorporated into SDG4

such as ‘lifelong learning’ have also been described as norms (Kleibrink, 2011: 72). This highlights how Goal 4 at the very least represents a norm or set of norms. Considering all actors adopting the SDG4 share a given identity (United Nations membership and adoption of SDG4), as is required in Finnemore and Sikkink’s definition, one can make the claim that SDG4 is a norm in itself. Consequently, as the main actor tasked with supporting the implementation of SDG4, UNESCO is a norm entrepreneur, and the countries are norm adopters.

Finnemore and Sikkink’s model and other early research had assumed that once the norm has been established and integrated into frameworks, it will then be accepted and embraced exactly as was envisioned (Shawki, 2016). In this sense, they failed to consider agency around norms. Contemporary norm research has sought to do this and has found that norms do change over time (ibid). In fact, Shawki argues that norm change is ‘almost inevitable’ (ibid: 251). Norm change may be expected in the context of the SDGs. This is because norms that are formulated in the international system are particularly likely to experience adaptation and change (Krook and True, 2010: 104).

There is a ‘dual quality’ to norms (Wiener, 2007: 47) and ‘states will interact with norms as they are or change them, either purposefully or accidentally’ (Winston, 2018: 642). Numerous logics, such as the logics of consequences, appropriateness, and argumentation, primarily understand norms to be stable but the logic that this study aligns with most, especially in the context of this study, is the logic of contestedness. The logic of contestedness understands norms to be both stable and flexible (ibid: 643). Proponents of this logic argue that while the norm itself is the underlying determinant that influences behaviour, norms are often challenged and altered at different points in time.

Such a perspective seems most adept at appreciating the international organisation-state dynamic that is central to this study. In particular, as the logic understands norms to be both stable and flexible, it also assumes that states will understand and react in different ways when encountering a norm (ibid). This study shares this assumption which is why it will be investigating SDG4 implementation in numerous countries with varying backgrounds. The process of norm diffusion

(i.e., SDG4 being formulated and accepted at the international level to being implemented and standardised at the state level) should sometimes result in stability but at other times cause change. If there are no differences, this may indicate that the global vision is dominant and that norms are more stable than flexible.

According to Winston, contemporary international norms involve ‘a problem, a value and a behavior’ (ibid: 638). The problem can be understood as the issue that needs to be addressed. The value gives ‘moral weight’ to the problem (ibid: 640). The behaviour is an action that confronts the problem and embodies the value. The value is understood to be the key element of the norm cycle (ibid). It is of importance in both directions. Actors will only recognise a problem if they understand it to be contradicting or threatening the value. Similarly, the value will determine the solution and adopted behaviour.

If Winston’s formulation is applied to SDG 4, the problem is the current shortcomings and inequalities in education that SDG4 seeks to address. The value is SDG4’s vision that everyone should have the right to a Quality Education. The behaviour is the implementation of actions that can address each element of SDG4 and meet the targets that are associated with the Goal. One would imagine that each actor associated with the SDGs would generally agree with the defined problem and share the same value. After all, states themselves are members of the institution and participated in the formulation of the Goal. Simply by joining the institution, they have shown that they align with the values and principles of the institution. Admittedly, states join international organisations for a variety of reasons, and it could be to enhance their international position or avoid sanction rather than aligning with said values. Nevertheless, one must also remember that the SDGs were formulated after a lengthy and democratic process involving all member states. If there were any qualms or disagreements, these should have emerged and been addressed in the consultation process. Therefore, in theory, SDG4 should have encountered few issues in terms of problem and value. The final part of the cycle, the behaviour, may be the area that divergence occurs. This is because the problem and value are deliberated upon at the global level, but the behaviour occurs at the domestic level.

While all actors may acknowledge the importance of Quality Education and see it as pivotal to confronting many of the contemporary challenges and inequalities that exist, it seems likely that they may have different approaches or understandings regarding how this should be addressed. This is especially pertinent considering that UNESCO and states operate in different contexts and face different conditions. UNESCO is an international organisation, but the member states work in a domestic context. There is often a disconnect here due to differences in institutions and capacities. This means that implementing a norm exactly as it was constructed is often not feasible (Winston, 2018: 645). The transferring of arenas for norms can also contribute to a disconnect with the original intention of a norm being misinterpreted. This is especially common because norms tend to be purposely vague in order to build a consensus around them (Shawki, 2016: 251). Internal institutions can interpret a norm differently and if domestic policies are at odds with SDG4, then implementation could be limited.

This overall dynamic between the global and the domestic level is a central theme of this paper. Acharya highlights how the shift from one setting to the next can affect the process of norm diffusion as localisation occurs and the value at the local level may not align with the broader value (Acharya, 2004). Moreover, it is necessary to highlight that behaviour could also be constrained by capacity as well as willingness. States may agree with the behaviours outlined in the SDGs but may lack the capacity to act on such behaviours or it may not be a priority due to other pressing domestic issues. Conscious of these barriers, this study has sought to analyse the extent that norm diffusion has taken place and determine the stage that SDG4 has reached in Finnemore and Sikkink's life cycle by spotlighting 5 different countries from around the world.

3.2 Sociological institutionalism

Institutions and norms are often used interchangeably in norm literature (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998: 891). March and Olsen define institutions as 'a relatively stable collection of practices and rules defining appropriate behavior for

specific groups of actors in specific situations' (March and Olsen, 1998: 948). This definition overlaps significantly with Finnemore and Sikkink's definition of norms, so it is worth briefly engaging with the theory of sociological institutionalism too.

Sociological institutionalism is one of the contemporary approaches that have emerged from the institutionalist field. Drawing from both political science and sociology perspectives, the theory studies how institutional forms 'are diffused through organizational fields or across nations' (Hall and Taylor, 1996: 947), which is precisely the focus of this study. Hall and Taylor go on to discuss how sociological institutionalists have sought to explain the significant similarities that are noticeable in national education ministries despite such differences in the context and background of the cases (*ibid*). This research is strikingly similar to this study and can serve as a basis to test whether that finding is applicable in the context of this paper too.

Porumbescu argues that sociological institutionalism can either focus on the 'effects' caused by institutions or look at how institutions are created and altered (Porumbescu, 2018: 21). If we understand SDG4 to be representing the institution in this scenario, this project is interested in both of these elements of sociological institutionalism. The study intends to focus on the effects that SDG4 has had on the domestic agenda of the countries but at the same time it will also be important to consider how SDG4 has been adapted by national governments in the process.

An analysis of the international organisation- state dynamic can benefit from the sociological institutionalist approach. Jupille notes how all institutions are driven by certain values (Jupille, 2022: 6). Institutions also influence behaviour by offering a vision of what something can become (Hall and Taylor, 1996: 948). Indeed, this is evident in the overall mission and work of the UN and UNESCO with the SDGs. They contribute to a form of norm and value setting by encouraging nations to participate in the creation and implementation of goals and objectives to ensure a better future. At the same time, sociological institutionalism also acknowledges how international agents can adapt which aligns with Winston's suggestion that norms can be flexible (Winston, 2018). Sociological

institutionalism argues that this adaptation occurs through applying a logic of appropriateness (Schmidt, 2014) and acknowledging context.

A final contribution of sociological institutionalism to this study is that it can offer insights into the process of norm diffusion and the external factors that can affect this process. Sociological institutionalists argue that greater social legitimacy is the main reason for the adoption of new institutional practices (Hall and Taylor, 1996: 949). They suggest that something being ‘widely valued within a broader cultural environment’ will motivate one to pursue it (ibid: 948).

Judging from this quote, the UN and UNESCO would be expected to have cultural authority in the international arena, but whether this authority carries over to the domestic stage remains to be seen. Considering the global influence and reach that the UN has, this sociological institutionalist position should indicate that states would be willing to engage with SDG4. Therefore, this study identifying if this is the case can give insight into the significance of something being valued in a broader environment as sociological institutionalists assume or whether other factors are more important in determining the implementation of norms and values domestically. This and other findings can help to offer clarity into whether sociological institutionalism theory plays out in practice.

4 Methodological Approach

This section will describe my methodological approach. To gain a greater understanding of SDG4 implementation and answer the research question, I selected five countries from around the world to analyse how and to what extent they have implemented SDG4. To determine this, I investigated their discourse surrounding SDG4 and observed the initiatives that they have introduced or altered as a consequence of Goal 4. This section will explain how and why I decided to go down this methodological route.

4.1 Document selection

The unit of analysis in this study was Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs). VNRs are reports submitted by UNESCO member states detailing how they have fared in regard to the SDGs, making VNRs an appropriate document to analyse SDG4 implementation. The desired aim of these documents is to ‘facilitate the sharing of experiences, including successes, challenges and lessons learned, with a view to accelerating the implementation of the 2030 Agenda’ (United Nations, n.d.).

The VNRs are written and compiled by the states themselves meaning reports often take a different style, format, and length dependent on country. This is useful as it can already indicate in itself how states are approaching the SDGs. As it is states themselves that are ultimately responsible for implementing and achieving SDG4, it is essential for any analysis of implementation to revolve around national documents such as the VNRs. While these VNRs cover all of the SDGs, they dedicate a chapter or at least a section exclusively to education and SDG4. These sections were the focus of my coding and data analysis.

I have also read through earlier chapters in the VNRs and paid particular attention to chapters focused on ‘Policy and Enabling Environment’. This offered valuable background and context and enabled me to ground my analysis. However, I did not include these sections in my coding and data analysis. This is because not every country in this study had included these chapters and I wanted to make sure

my analysis was based on a common source. Nevertheless, they served as a complementary source and were used to supplement my findings in the sections on education. Two VNR documents were analysed for each of the five countries that had been chosen for this study. This meant 10 documents in total were analysed. This was deemed to be a sufficient number to ensure that the study could go beyond a surface level but was also a manageable commitment considering many of the documents varied in length and detail.

This study recognised the potential shortcomings of focusing exclusively on documents originating from one actor so academic sources and other relevant documents such as Global Education Monitoring Reports were also studied and are referenced in the paper where appropriate. These documents were not included in my coding and data analysis. Nevertheless, by complementing the VNRs with documents from numerous spheres, this study could ensure a more well-rounded analysis. As VNRs are compiled and sent in by states themselves, they may have felt inclined to paint a positive picture of the situation in their country and perhaps downplay any areas they have made limited progress in. Referencing other sources can mitigate this and offer insight into whether these actors were on the same page and shared the same conclusions regarding progress towards the Goal.

4.2 Case selection

UNESCO categorises member states into five regions (UNESCO, 2023). These regions are Africa, Arab States, Asia and the Pacific, Europe and North America and Latin America and the Caribbean. In this study, one country from each of these regions was analysed. The countries chosen for this study were **Jamaica, Sri Lanka, Switzerland, Sudan,** and the **United Arab Emirates (UAE)**.

There are several factors that determined this choice. Most countries have submitted two Voluntary National Reviews, but a small number have submitted three. To ensure that a sufficient number of sources were analysed and thus enhance the validity of the study, it was initially intended for countries that had published three reports to be selected. However, in the Latin America and the Caribbean region, the only countries that had published three reports had published their first

report in Spanish and I did not have a proficient level in the language to effectively analyse this source. This meant that one of the regions would be under analysed in the study, so it was decided to instead include countries that published two reports. To maintain consistency, countries that published documents in the same calendar years were chosen so that progress towards SDG4 across regions could be analysed using the same timeline. The years chosen were 2018 and 2022. This was to ensure that analysis was based on recent findings (with 2022 being the latest year that reports were fully completed). Choosing reports from different years also offered the opportunity to observe whether much has changed regarding progress towards SDG4 in the countries. It was determined that a five-year period of reports was a sufficient length of time to be able to observe whether each country had experienced change. Moreover, the years 2018 and 2022 were chosen because this was one of the few yearly combinations that at least one country from each region had submitted reports in English in this timeframe.

There were 12 countries which submitted reports in both 2018 and 2022. Jamaica was the only possible country from the Latin America and Caribbean region (Uruguay had reported in Spanish), the UAE was the only country from the Arab States and Sri Lanka was the only country from Asia and the Pacific meaning these three countries ultimately chose themselves. Mali, Senegal, and Togo all published reports in both 2018 and 2022 but these reports were in French meaning Sudan was the remaining option for the Africa region. Andorra, Greece, Latvia, and Switzerland were all potential options for the Europe and North America region, but Switzerland was ultimately chosen as research had indicated that there was a greater availability of other types of documents that will be of use in this study in relation to this country e.g., more academic papers on the SDGs in Switzerland were readily available.

4.3 Operationalisation

There are two operationalisations in this study: discourse and initiatives. While I formulated these operationalisations myself, I have based my operationalisations on what similar studies have done in the past and on what literature has suggested

is important to consider when measuring implementation of a norm in domestic contexts.

4.3.1 Operationalisation 1: Discourse

An area that can demonstrate the domestic impact of an international norm is 'its appearance in the domestic political discourse' (Cortell and Davis, 2000: 70). In fact, they deem this factor to be the 'most important' evidence of norm adoption (ibid). Discourse fits appropriately into norm diffusion theory considering a key tenet of the theory is the formulation of a value and values are often best observed in discourse. Thus, I decided to analyse the discursive response of each country to SDG4.

In order to do this, I needed to gain a greater understanding of the UN's own discourse concerning education and SDG4. Therefore, I got accustomed with several documents on the Goal. These documents were the 'Education 2030: Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action for the implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 4', the UN's detailed descriptions of Targets and indicators related to the Goal and the 2019 book 'SDG4 – Quality Education: Inclusivity, Equity and Lifelong Learning For All' (Ferguson et al., 2019). These documents provided valuable insight into the various aspects of Goal 4. Each of these sources offered several approaches to determine how discourse could be analysed and inspired an area that my discourse operationalisation was built around. Using these documents, I decided on three areas that my study would focus on to determine the discursive response of each country.

The first area was based on the SDG4 vision and purpose. The Incheon Declaration goes into detail about the vision and purpose of SDG4 (UNESCO, 2015). I wanted to see whether each country shared this vision and purpose. Therefore, in each VNR, I monitored occasions that the respective country could be judged as aligning with the vision and purpose of SDG4. If they had done so, this would demonstrate that SDG4 had been implemented into their discourse.

The second area was based on SDG4 themes, phrases, and terminology. Ferguson's book had described many of the SDG4 concepts and offered me valuable insight into the type of ideas that are central to SDG4 (Ferguson et al., 2019). Indeed, many themes and phrases regularly appeared in the SDG4 literature that I had looked at. For example, 'lifelong learning', 'leaving no one behind' and 'inclusion' appear regularly. I wanted to see whether each country also incorporated these themes and phrases into their VNRs. I monitored occasions that the respective country had used terminology related to SDG4. If they had done so, this would demonstrate that SDG4 had been implemented into their discourse.

The third area was based on the SDG4 targets and indicators. I had read through the detailed description of each target and indicator of SDG4 (United Nations, n.d.). I wanted to see whether each country recognised and embraced these targets and indicators. I monitored occasions that the respective country had interacted with the SDG4 targets and indicators. Each of the three areas mentioned above were combined to make up the overall discourse operationalisation of this research.

4.3.2 Operationalisation 2: Initiatives

While a useful starting point to measure SDG4 implementation, it was necessary to move beyond discourse and try to measure tangible actions demonstrated by countries in their process of SDG4 implementation.

This led me to formulating a second operationalisation: *initiatives*. This choice was motivated by numerous factors. Firstly, literature indicates that initiatives are important when studying how international norms progress into the domestic context. O'Faircheallaigh states that application of norms is dependent on legislation, policies and decisions introduced by domestic governments (O'Faircheallaigh, 2013: 155). Meanwhile, Betts and Orchard argue that implementation is a process that incorporates an international norm into the legal and policy framework of a state (Betts and Orchard, 2014: 2). Cortell and Davis also note that legislative changes and policy changes can demonstrate that an international norm has had an impact on the domestic agenda (Cortell and Davis, 2000: 70-71).

Evidently, literature indicates that initiatives are a significant measure of implementation. Therefore, initiatives served as the second operationalisation of this study. I decided to focus on four different types of initiatives. The literature above indicates that laws and policies are central to implementation, so they were the first two initiatives chosen. I also wanted to make room for other types of initiatives that would not explicitly fall into the categories of laws or policies, so I also included programmes and funding. Alongside policies and laws, programmes and funding are common types of initiatives suggested in the Incheon Declaration as a way to ensure SDG4 implementation (UNESCO, 2015).

Ultimately my analysis will be based on discourse and initiatives. While I have formulated these operationalisations myself, other studies have also focused on discursive and institutional changes when analysing implementation at the domestic level (Ordóñez Llanos and Raven, 2022 and Biermann et al, 2022), so my operationalisation choices have some validity.

4.4 Coding Framework

Indicator	How	Why
SDG4 vision and purpose	Counting and contextualising references supporting SDG4's vision and purpose.	Inspired by 'Education 2030: Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action for the Implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 4' (UNESCO, 2015).
SDG4 concepts, themes, and terminology	Counting and contextualising references that reflect SDG4 concepts, themes, and terminology.	Inspired by Ferguson et al's 'SDG4 – Quality Education: Inclusivity, Equity and Lifelong Learning For All' (Ferguson et al, 2019).
SDG4 targets and indicators	Counting and contextualising references engaging with SDG4 targets and indicators.	Inspired by the detailed descriptions of SDG4 targets and indicators.

Table 1: Discourse Coding Framework

Indicator	How	Why
Funding	Counting and contextualising references to funding allocations for education that have been introduced or adapted since 2015.	Regularly referred to in the Incheon Declaration as a way to implement SDG4 (UNESCO, 2015).
Laws	Counting and contextualising references to education laws that have been introduced or adapted since 2015.	Regularly referred to in academic literature as a type of initiative that demonstrates domestic implementation.
Policies	Counting and contextualising references to education policies that have been introduced or adapted since 2015.	Regularly referred to in literature as a type of initiative that demonstrates domestic implementation.
Programmes	Counting and contextualising references to education programmes that have been introduced or adapted since 2015.	Regularly referred to in the Incheon Declaration as a way to implement SDG4 (UNESCO, 2015).

Table 2: Initiatives Coding Framework

4.5 Process of Coding and Data Collection

Once I had decided on my operationalisations, I set about the process of coding and collecting data. I used the qualitative software tool NVivo to code the VNRs. This offered a visualisation of coding frequency and reduced human error. While benefitting from this online tool, I was still the primary researcher and was better equipped to detect nuance.

Firstly, I coded for discourse. I created a code in NVivo to represent relevant discourse. I then read through and analysed all of the VNRs and coded any occasion

that the VNR had represented SDG4 vision and purpose, included SDG4 phrases and concepts or engaged with the targets and indicators. I then combined the overall number of occasions and tallied this up. After having a visualisation and tally of relevant discourse, I began to analyse these references, exploring the tone, wording and context given. Evidently, this entails qualitative analysis and is also interpretative which will be addressed in the limitations section below.

I then coded for initiatives. I created a code in NVivo to represent relevant initiatives. I created subcodes within this code to represent each of the four initiatives: funding, laws, policies, and programmes. I also separated the initiatives into whether they focused on SDG4 Outcome Targets (SDG4.1-7) or SDG4 Means of Implementation Targets (SDG4a, b, c). This was done to secure a more in-depth breakdown of the initiatives and allow my findings to be as specific and tailored as possible. I then read through and analysed the VNRs and coded initiatives appropriately into the relevant category. It was important to ensure that I was not coding initiatives that had been developed prior to the introduction of the SDGs in 2015 therefore I verified the year that each initiative was established. Any initiatives before 2015 were disregarded.

While it would be naïve to suggest that all of the post-2015 initiatives have only come about as a result of the SDGs, they were at least developed and introduced in the context of the SDGs and hopefully with SDG4 in mind. Therefore, they still serve as useful insight into SDG4 implementation. After visualising and tallying relevant initiatives, I began my analysis by looking at the context, justifications, and wordings used in the VNRs to explain each of the initiatives.

After I had completed the coding for each category of the two operationalisations, I reread the VNRs and conducted a second round of coding to check for any mistakes I may have made in my first session. I had practise applying the operationalisations and could verify that I had used the same logic in each case during the second round of coding and analysis.

Evidently, this study is primarily based on qualitative findings as I was identifying relevant passages and interpreting what the text meant. This implies a

social constructivist approach which fits well with the rest of the study. I have incorporated a quantitative element by tallying the number of laws, policies, programmes and fundings that the VNRs mentioned as having been introduced as a result of SDG4. Tallies will also be made to record the number of times that the VNRs have demonstrated discourse in line with the UN's education approach. Simple bar charts will be included in the analysis section to offer a visualisation of these findings.

4.6 Limitations of this study

Perhaps the biggest limitation of this methodological approach is that it is rooted in subjectivity and is only one person's interpretation. While I have engaged in a considerable amount of research in order to better understand SDG4, I am still using my own judgement to formulate the codes so this does have to be acknowledged. I have tried to mitigate any potential shortcomings associated with this in numerous ways. Firstly, I have rooted my operationalisations in what other studies have done. For example, Ordóñez Llanos and Raven's 2022 paper has been a significant contributor to research on SDG implementation and they used a similar approach to the one I have applied in this thesis. Secondly, I surveyed and read through a lot of relevant literature from various different sources to ensure that I took a holistic approach to measuring implementation. I also made sure to align my approach with what theorists deem to be important measures of implementation. Thirdly, the fact that I was the only researcher in this thesis and have conducted the analysis throughout the paper can at least ensure consistency across all cases and that the same logic has been applied to the coding and analysis of each VNR. Indeed, there are also some benefits to creating my own operationalisations. It meant that I could make the empirical analysis effectively tailored to the study rather than trying to adapt an existing framework that may not be as suitable.

Another limitation is that this thesis is only analysing one country from each of UNESCO's five regions. This is necessary due to time and word constraints, but it has meant that the findings of this study cannot be deemed generalisable. This paper merely sought to use a global sample to gain insight into how and to what

extent some countries have implemented SDG4. A much larger study needs to be conducted before any conclusions can start to be drawn. Another potential shortcoming of this methodological approach is that I am only focusing on one type of document and this document may not give a description of the whole situation. As states are the authors of these documents, they may also offer an overly positive picture of the situation and minimise any aspects that could portray them negatively. However, states are encouraged to follow the UN's published guidelines about how the VNRs should be written (SDG Accountability Handbook, n.d.: 1). These guidelines offer common elements that each state should include. Indeed, reading through the VNRs, the states were mainly transparent and open about the challenges they have been facing. This assuaged any concerns about the document type. The method used in this thesis is a document analysis that uses readily available documents from a public database so there are no significant ethical considerations to consider either.

Ultimately, what is most important to note here is that this paper is rooted in an exploratory approach and is a big-picture analysis. The aim of this thesis has been to produce knowledge, offer initial insight and generate debate rather than to make sweeping conclusions.

5 Empirical Analysis: Exploring the Implementation of SDG4

This section presents an analysis of the VNR documents of each of the five countries in this study. I will begin my analysis by studying each country individually. For each country I will look at the discourse they have demonstrated in their VNRs and the initiatives that they have referred to. I will summarise how this implementation has affected the outlook for SDG4 in the country. Following the five individual analyses, I will conduct a comparison of all cases. I will compare similarities and differences between countries in terms of the discourse they have used in their VNR texts, initiatives they have pursued and the ways in which these initiatives have been implemented.

5.1 Jamaica's implementation of SDG4

5.1.1 How and to what extent has Jamaica implemented SDG4.

Jamaica's VNRs write favourably about the SDGs and how they can offer 'benefits to national development' (Planning Institute of Jamaica, 2018: 40). This is generally reflected in a discourse throughout both documents that aligns with the UN's overall education message. In their respective chapters on SDG4, I identified 15 occasions in which discourse reflected the UN's perspective and approach concerning education (Planning Institute of Jamaica, 2018 and Planning Institute of Jamaica, 2022). Many of these references pointed towards education being a source of empowerment and serving as a solution to other national challenges. This sort of dialogue and argument is central to the drive for Quality Education. There was also regular use of key words and phrases which are found throughout UNESCO and UN education documents such as 'inclusion', 'access', 'lifelong learning' and 'to leave no one behind' (ibid). This suggests that the Goals have had a significant impact on building a domestic discourse in Jamaica that reflects SDG4 priorities and beliefs. This is a positive sign regarding norm diffusion from the international arena. Another positive sign is that references were consistent across both of Jamaica's VNRs. There were seven references in the 2018 report and eight references in the 2022 report (ibid). This indicates that a positive discourse

concerning the SDGs has been maintained and suggests that enthusiasm in the SDG mission has not wavered as time has gone on.

At the same time, the report does also note how there have been challenges in building awareness about the SDGs amongst the public (Planning Institute of Jamaica, 2022: 21). This highlights the potential barrier for norm diffusion in that norm entrepreneurs do not have much direct contact with domestic populations and are reliant on states to act as their mouthpiece which can be challenging even when states align with the SDG mission as is the case with Jamaica. This demonstrates some of the concerns outlined by scholars about norm diffusion in the domestic context (Acharya, 2004 and Winston, 2018). Despite this, considering states are the main factor in determining domestic norm adoption, the alignment in discourse at the governmental level is a good sign for the implementation of SDG4 into the domestic agenda of Jamaica.

In terms of initiatives, the study identified 21 initiatives in the 2018 report that were either created or explicitly revised since the SDGs were introduced in 2015 (Planning Institute of Jamaica, 2018). I coded a further 12 initiatives in the 2022 report (Planning Institute of Jamaica, 2022), meaning there was a total of 33 initiatives that lend support to SDG4 being implemented in Jamaica. These initiatives were extensive and wide-ranging as they included policies and programmes that have been matched with all of the Outcome Targets (SDG4.1-7) and Means of Implementation Targets (SDG4 a, b, c) except for 4b and funding has also been allocated for some targets too.

Most explicitly, there is a visualisation in which SDG4 targets are matched to national development policies and programmes which have now supposedly been aligned, adapted, or introduced to address the SDGs more appropriately (Planning Institute of Jamaica, 2018). While the VNRs would seem an obvious platform to connect their approach to SDGs and the links may not be as strong in practice as they are assumed to be in the text, the altered policies do suggest that a conscious effort has been made. Indeed, Jamaica was the most expansive country in this report in terms of initiatives by some distance.

Ultimately, the high degree of new or revised initiatives and relevant discourse suggests that SDG4 has been implemented in Jamaica to a very significant extent. Jamaica ranks first out of the five countries in this paper for references aligning with the UN's education approach and first in terms of total initiatives too.

5.1.2 Outlook for SDG4 progress in Jamaica

Despite the findings bearing overall positive news for the extent of SDG4 norm diffusion in the country, it still remains to be seen whether this diffusion has proved beneficial and effective at achieving the targets detailed in the Goal. The Sustainable Development Report actually suggests that trends are decreasing in terms of progress towards SDG4 in Jamaica (Sachs et al, 2022). Jamaica's VNRs are very transparent about the challenges the country is facing in making progress on SDG4 and areas that they are still lagging behind in. They specifically mention challenges and barriers to targets 4.3 (further education), 4.5 (disparities in education based on background) and 4.6 (literacy and numeracy) (Planning Institute of Jamaica, 2018). Another challenge mentioned by Jamaica is the noted disconnect between policy and practice (ibid). This is concerning as despite there being such an appropriate climate for progress towards the SDGs to be made, this has not necessarily occurred. This raises questions about the applicability of SDG4 in domestic settings.

5.2 Sri Lanka's implementation of SDG4

5.2.1 How and to what extent has Sri Lanka adopted and implemented SDG4.

While the discourse in Sri Lanka's VNRs demonstrated some alignment with the SDGs, this was observed to a lower degree than most of the other country VNRs in this study. I identified six references which indicated alignment with the UN's overall education message (Ministry of Sustainable Development, Wildlife and Regional Development, 2018 and The Sustainable Development Council Sri Lanka, 2022). Once again, these references tend to be rooted in discourse about how Sri Lanka also sees education as a driver for human development. Core UN principles of 'Education for All' and 'leaving no child behind' appeared in the

reports (ibid). Nevertheless, these principles and beliefs featured with less regularity.

Despite this, it appears that Sri Lanka has become increasingly receptive of the SDGs over time. The tone of the 2022 report is warmer regarding SDG4 than the 2018 report was. In the 2018 report, a lot of Sri Lanka's text on SDG4 is focused on their traditional education approach and it comes across as business-as-usual rather than the country responding to SDG4. This was highlighted by the report dedicating its entire first page in the education section to initiatives that were introduced in the 20th century, suggesting that such measures remained consistent and central in 2018 (Ministry of Sustainable Development, Wildlife and Regional Development, 2018). While this may offer useful context, it does not bode well for SDG4 implementation considering the emphasis that Goal 4 puts on modernity and transformation.

Meanwhile, in the 2022 report, there is a greater indication that the country is embracing SDG4 and trying to adapt accordingly. There is significant mention of the pandemic in the report, and one gets the feeling that it served as a turning point with Sri Lanka now recognising that there needed to be a shift in the direction that education was going in the country. Indeed, the report discusses the need to transform from an 'existing exam-centric education model' to a more 'student-centric education system' (The Sustainable Development Council Sri Lanka, 2022: 105). Hettige has been calling for Sri Lanka to update their education model to make it more relevant (Hettige, 2017: 17), so this appears to be a welcome change. The shift also aligns more with SDG4 which seeks a holistic approach to education, as evidenced by targets relating to Global Citizenship and more. This observation also gives weight to the discussion in the theoretical framework about the relationship between problem, value and behaviour and my suggestion that behaviour would be the point of contention in the norm diffusion process of SDG4. While Sri Lanka have consistently aligned with SDG4 in terms of the problem and value, they have only recently adjusted their behaviour and approach to more explicitly match SDG4.

Sri Lanka's increased engagement with SDG4 extends beyond discourse and is also evident in terms of initiatives too. I identified six initiatives in the 2018 report that have been implemented or adapted since SDG4 was introduced in 2015 (Ministry of Sustainable Development, Wildlife and Regional Development, 2018) but this number almost doubled in 2022 with a further 11 initiatives mentioned (Sustainable Development Council Sri Lanka, 2022). This meant that a total of 17 relevant initiatives were identified in Sri Lanka's VNRs. Initiatives were focused evenly on both the SDG4 Outcome Targets (4.1-7) and the Means of Implementation Targets (4a, b, c) with three for each in 2018 and five for the former and six for the latter in 2022. This is a positive sign as it indicates attention is being paid to all areas of SDG4.

Looking more closely at the initiatives, 12 of the 17 were programmes and 5 of the 17 were policies. I did not identify any explicit allocations of funding. All five policy changes were focused on the Means of Implementation Targets (4a, b, c). I identified no policies that addressed the SDG Targets (4.1-7). As policies tend to indicate more long-term and entrenched changes and programmes are more often 'short-term interventions' (Wilson, 2015), this is a positive sign for the Means of Implementation Targets going forward but suggests that the Outcome Targets will be addressed by stop-gap measures.

Ultimately, judging by the operationalisations in this study, Sri Lanka has implemented SDG4 to a mixed extent. The country ranks fourth out of the five countries in terms of references aligning with the UN's education message but ranks second in terms of total initiatives. Significantly, Sri Lanka's engagement with SDG4 has noticeably increased in the second report which leaves one inclined to assume that the country is moving in an upward direction.

5.2.2 Outlook for SDG4 progress in Sri Lanka

The outlook for SDG4 progress in Sri Lanka is mixed. While the shift experienced in Sri Lanka should have a positive effect on SDG4 implementation, it remains evident that the country has a long way to go before all of the targets of SDG4 are realised. Analysing the VNRs, one gets the impression that Sri Lanka

are still only discussing or exploring potential actions in some areas rather than actually committing to them. Considering that we are now nearly halfway into the SDG cycle, this is not a promising sign for achievements by 2030 even if uptake has gained momentum in recent years. According to the Sustainable Development Report, progress is trending in the right direction for SDG4 in Sri Lanka (Sachs et al., 2022), but the indicators used for their analysis only cover areas that the country has been successful in e.g., literacy rate and lower secondary completion, offering an overly positive and distorted picture. Indeed, Sri Lanka makes clear in the VNRs that it has faced difficulties in other areas, highlighting the need to potentially expand the current indicators. Moreover, UNESCO's SDG4 Scorecard shows no or slow progress in Sri Lanka for many of the SDG4 indicators (UNESCO, 2023).

Challenges mentioned by Sri Lanka relate to upper secondary and tertiary education (SDG4.3), education for those with disabilities (SDG4.5) and low-quality education facilities (SDG4.a). Many of these challenges were also mentioned in Jamaica's VNRs and as with Jamaica, 'limited fiscal space in the national budget' is one of several 'key constraints' to achieving SDG4 targets (Sustainable Development Council Sri Lanka, 2022: 106), so this may explain why there has only been limited commitment in certain areas so far.

5.3 Sudan's implementation of SDG4

5.3.1 How and to what extent has Sudan adopted and implemented SDG4.

Sudan's VNRs include the fewest references aligning with SDG4 discourse across the cases in this report. I identified three references in 2018 (National Population Council, 2018) and one reference in 2022 (Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning, 2022). The total of four references is lower than the other countries studied in this paper. Having the fewest references may be in part due to the fact that Sudan's VNRs are far less detailed than some of the other reports. The 2018 report in particular is brief and only dedicates one page to education. I would argue that this lack of information is meaningful in itself. Contributing minimal content to a document with a sole purpose of monitoring SDG progress does not

elicit confidence in the degree that the SDGs are taken seriously and implemented in the country. The 2022 report is considerably more detailed and structured in a similar manner to the other countries observed. The content of the references once again related to how education can foster development and be a force for change (National Population Council, 2018 and Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning, 2022). This observation continues the pattern found in other countries and suggests that SDG4 has been integrated into domestic discourse in the same way in each of the cases.

In terms of initiatives, I identified one initiative in the 2018 VNR and six initiatives in the 2022 VNR, continuing another common trend in this report of countries engaging more with SDG4 as time has gone on. This meant a total of seven initiatives were included across the two reports. Of these seven initiatives, five were policies related to the SDG4 Outcome Targets (4.1-7) and two were programmes for SDG4 Outcome Targets (4.1-7). I did not identify any initiatives that were introduced to meet the SDG4 Means of Implementation Targets.

Despite limited discourse and initiatives, there are some positive signs regarding SDG4 implementation in Sudan that warrant mentioning. It is interesting that the majority of the new or altered initiatives in Sudan involve policy changes. Moreover, the 2018 VNR alludes to a Five-Year Plan from 2017-2021 (National Population Council, 2018: 48) and the 2022 VNR discusses a 2018-2023 Strategic Plan which is related to SDG4 (Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning, 2022: 30), highlighting that frameworks have been developed since the emergence of Goal 4 and operate with SDG4 in mind. On top of this, significant policy changes such as updating the curriculum in 2021 gives support to a change in approach and perhaps indicates that the SDGs are driving a rethink in Sudan just like in Sri Lanka.

Moreover, while it is likely that the VNRs will paint a positive picture of the situation and emphasise achievements, the noticeable statistical increases in attendance and completion do demonstrate progress. Another positive sign regarding how Sudan has implemented SDG4 is the expressed openness to international organisations. The 2022 VNR mentions that the Ministry of

Education is ‘working with many development partners’ including UNESCO and UNICEF (ibid), showing a willingness to engage with international organisations and interact with their norms. Such partnerships may explain why changes have occurred at the policy level.

Nevertheless, considering the low engagement with SDG4 discourse and the limited number of new education initiatives introduced since 2015, it appears that Sudan has implemented SDG4 to a low extent in relation to the operationalisations in this paper. Sudan ranks last out of the five countries in terms of references relating to the UN’s education message and fourth in terms of total initiatives.

5.3.2 Outlook for SDG4 progress in Sudan

This study understands Sudan to have implemented SDG4 to a low extent both in terms of their discourse and also initiatives and this may contribute to the outlook for SDG4 progress in Sudan not being particularly good. The SDG4 Scorecard lists slow progress in many indicators for Sudan (UNESCO, 2023). In other indicators, Sudan’s SDG4 score is decreasing and ‘major challenges remain’ (Sachs et al., 2022).

The main problem I observed in my analysis of the VNRs is that the challenges that Sudan are facing are very broad and wide-ranging. Whereas some of the other countries in this study detail challenges relating to specific demographics or individual targets, Sudan’s VNRs have noted difficulties with access and retention which cover numerous targets in SDG4. Most concerning is that Sudan has stated that a ‘low quality in education’ exists in Sudan (Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning, 2022: 28). Such a problem encompasses all elements of SDG4, and the absence of education quality likely hinders every aspect of SDG4. Moreover, the country has so many additional challenges to consider and barriers to overcome that one doubts that Sudan has the dedication and resources required to fully advance to where SDG4 anticipates countries being by 2030.

5.4 Switzerland's implementation of SDG4

5.4.1 How and to what extent has Switzerland adopted and implemented SDG4.

I identified seven references aligning with the UN's education message across Switzerland's two VNRs. Three references were made in the 2018 report and four references were made in the 2022 report (Swiss Federation, 2018 and Swiss Federation, 2022). The total of seven references identified in Switzerland's discourse is third of the cases analysed in this study. As with Sudan, a reason for this relatively low number may be that Switzerland's VNRs are rather brief. The section on education in the 2018 VNR is less than a page. Once again, this limited content on education does not suggest enthusiasm towards SDG4. In terms of the content of the references, Switzerland aligned with SDG4 themes of inclusion and lifelong learning and recognised how education can enhance 'sustainable thinking and action' (Swiss Federation, 2018: 10). Both of their VNR reports claim that Switzerland's education system has a high level of 'permeability' (ibid and Swiss Federation, 2022: 8). This resonates with SDG4's emphasis on transitioning between levels of education and becoming lifelong learners.

The most significant observation in terms of how Switzerland has implemented SDG4 can be seen in their discussion of their engagement with SDG4 in an international context. Indeed, both the 2018 and 2022 VNRs devote a considerable proportion of the section on SDG4 to describing how Switzerland is making an impact on education for other countries. It is claimed that the country 'tirelessly advocates' for the right to education abroad and has taken an active role in international cooperation projects (Swiss Federation, 2018: 11). The reason for this could be because they understand the SDGs to be rooted in cosmopolitan values or it may be motivated by Switzerland seeing SDG4 as an opportunity to advance themselves internationally. Indeed, making claims about their tireless work does seem to be a way for Switzerland to platform themselves.

In terms of initiatives, no initiatives were identified in the 2018 report. This is perhaps not overly surprising considering the short length of the VNR. In the 2022

report, three initiatives were identified. The total of three initiatives across the two reports is the lowest of the cases in this study. Indeed, it did not appear that the emergence of SDG4 prompted any surge in modifications to education in Switzerland. Whilst introducing just three initiatives does not suggest major changes, it must also be said that the changes that Switzerland have made have all been policy related. This is the highest proportion of all countries in the report and suggests that the initiatives can be significant and have an impact on a broad scale going forward.

Judging from these findings, I would argue that Switzerland has explicitly implemented SDG4 to a relatively low extent. Compared with the other five cases in this study, it ranks last in terms of initiatives and third out of five in terms of occasions in which VNR discourse aligned with SDG4 messaging.

5.4.2 Outlook for SDG4 progress in Switzerland

The outlook for SDG4 progress in Switzerland is an interesting one in that it is perhaps not as advanced as one might assume. The challenges that are mentioned by Switzerland in the VNRs seem to be a lot more manageable than some of the other cases, especially considering Switzerland's wealth and development. For example, these include establishing a monitoring and reporting system at the national level and reducing barriers to training courses (Swiss Federation, 2018: 10 and Swiss Federation, 2022: 23). This suggests that they are already well-placed concerning the foundations of education, they just need to introduce feasible changes in order to continue to enhance the situation. Such an assumption is reflected in Switzerland's 2018 VNR and their claim that they are at an 'advanced stage in achieving various SDGs' including SDG4 (Swiss Federation, 2018: 5). Despite all this, external monitoring mechanisms are less optimistic about progress in education in the country. The Sustainable Development Report scores Switzerland as only 'Moderately Improving' (Sachs et al., 2022). While they acknowledge that Switzerland is on track or maintaining SDG4 achievement in the majority of indicators, trends seem to be decreasing in Switzerland's performance in science which has dragged their overall ranking down. The SDG4 Scorecard also only recognises Switzerland as having made 'Average progress' (UNESCO, 2023).

5.5 United Arab Emirates' implementation of SDG4

5.5.1 How and to what extent has the UAE adopted and implemented SDG4.

There are many references in UAE's VNRs that align with the UN's education message. I recorded 14 occasions in which the UAE reflected the UN's approach and perspective on education (National Committee on Sustainable Development Goals, 2018 and National Committee on Sustainable Development Goals, 2022). There were nine references in 2018 and five references in 2022. Similar to the other cases, many of these references revolved around how education should be a fundamental right and can serve as a 'bridge' to sustainable development in other areas (National Committee on Sustainable Development Goals, 2018: 62).

Evidently, there were notable similarities in discourse when studied alongside the other cases but at the same time, there was a different tone to UAE's VNRs, especially in the 2018 report. It appeared more competitive and the domestic approach in relation to the SDGs was often positioned in comparison to other states. This was evident through the priorities and objectives that the UAE outlined in their 2018 VNR. One target was to be among the top 20 countries in average PISA score and another was to be among the top 15 countries in average TIMSS score (ibid: 65). These targets are part of the UAE's 2021 National Agenda but including them in the VNRs suggests that they see the SDGs as a vehicle to achieve these national goals. Elsewhere, SDG4 is aligned with the national priority to have a 'first-rate education system' and several of the other Goals are to support the national priority to have 'World-class healthcare' (ibid: 21). Such observations and this overall emphasis on the UAE judging progress in relation to other countries aligns with the realist claim that international organisations such as the UN are used as 'instruments of statecraft' (Park, 2018: 21).

The UAE referenced a total of 11 initiatives across the two reports. This included six policies or programmes in 2018 and five in 2022. All of these initiatives were to address SDG4 Outcome Targets with no initiatives addressing SDG4 Means of Implementation Targets. On occasions when policies are

mentioned in the 2018 report, description is very vague, and policies are not named. For example, the report simply mentions a ‘new policy framework’ (National Committee on Sustainable Development Goals, 2018: 65). The 2022 report is somewhat more detailed and names the programmes. In general, the UAE gives off a business-as-usual approach regarding education and there is little indication that the arrival of the SDGs has triggered a significant shift in their strategy. The SDGs have been incorporated into the UAE’s ongoing plans rather than triggering an overhaul and the connections between domestic policy and the SDG targets seem less convincing than Jamaica.

UAE’s VNRs presented a balance between policies and programmes with six policies and five programmes. A higher proportion of UAE’s initiatives were policies compared to most other countries in this report. This may be because the UAE has greater financial capacity to implement long-term changes via policies whereas countries with limited financial freedom may have to resort to short-term measures via programmes. Indeed, when analysing the VNRs, I got the impression that changes to education since 2015 were primarily state-driven and that action was more top-down in the UAE. Ultimately, while there were fewer changes overall, the changes that were observed tended to be focused on more formal centres of governance which may perhaps lead to more significant impact in the long-term.

Ultimately, my findings indicate that the UAE has adopted and implemented SDG4 to a relatively significant extent. They rank second of the five countries in terms of discourse associated with SDG4 and third in terms of total initiatives.

5.5.2 Outlook for SDG4 Progress in the UAE

The Sustainable Development Report recognises the UAE as ‘On track or maintaining SDG achievement’ in Goal 4 (Sachs et al., 2022). They are scoring highly in multiple indicators and my findings show that they are engaging in relevant discourse and introducing new initiatives bodes well for SDG4 progress in the country. At the same time, the SDG4 Scorecard suggests that the UAE has made ‘No Progress’ in public education expenditure (UNESCO, 2023) and this is

reflected in my findings that the UAE mentioned zero funding initiatives in their VNRs. Therefore, while it is evident that the UAE is on track overall, it is important that they do not take their position for granted and become complacent. One could argue that this has been the case in Switzerland who are now going in the wrong direction in some facets of SDG4. The UAE need to make sure that they do not follow suit.

5.6 Comparison of Cases

5.6.1 Comparison of Discourse

Discourse was an area that I observed significant convergence across all cases. Every country seemed to share the same understanding regarding the purpose of SDG4. All of the countries wrote positively about the opportunities that education can bring and how it can serve as a platform for development, reflecting the UN's own stance. This is probably aided by the fact the countries participated in the formulation process but messaging and discourse having remained consistent across all countries is a positive sign. Every VNR also demonstrated a degree of interaction with key SDG4 phrases that are central to the UN's approach to education. Terms such as 'inclusion', 'leaving no child behind' and 'lifelong learning' appeared with regularity in the documents. The consistency of the discourse as it has progressed from the global arena to domestic context suggests that this aspect of SDG4 has been rather stable, offering support for the traditional norm diffusion scholars who align with logics of consequences, argumentation, and appropriateness, and believe that norms do not experience notable alterations as diffusion occurs.

As will be discussed later, countries varied in how much they showed such a discourse, but I think the fact that they all shared the same vision and principles surrounding education and SDG4 is the more significant finding here. Ultimately, every country having engaged with the UN's education message in a similar way offers strong support to the argument that international norms can effectively translate to the domestic context. This becomes particular pertinent when you consider Cortell and Davis' argument that discourse is the 'most important'

determinant in this process (Cortell and Davis, 2000: 70). Indeed, the embrace of SDG4 from a discursive perspective bodes well for implementation towards the Goal. Moreover, each country sharing similar discourse on SDG4 indicates that each country recognises the same problem and value associated with norm diffusion theory.

5.6.2 Comparison of Initiatives

While there were clear similarities between the countries in terms of their discursive reaction to the SDGs, there was a divergence when it came to the initiatives that were used to succeed this discourse. I identified numerous types of initiatives such as policies, programmes, and funding that have been utilised to implement SDG4, but each country clearly had their own preferences and approach to these initiatives. This highlights that there was no consensus in terms of how SDG4 should be implemented, supporting the school of norm diffusion theory that claim norms are flexible and that countries engage with norms in different ways.

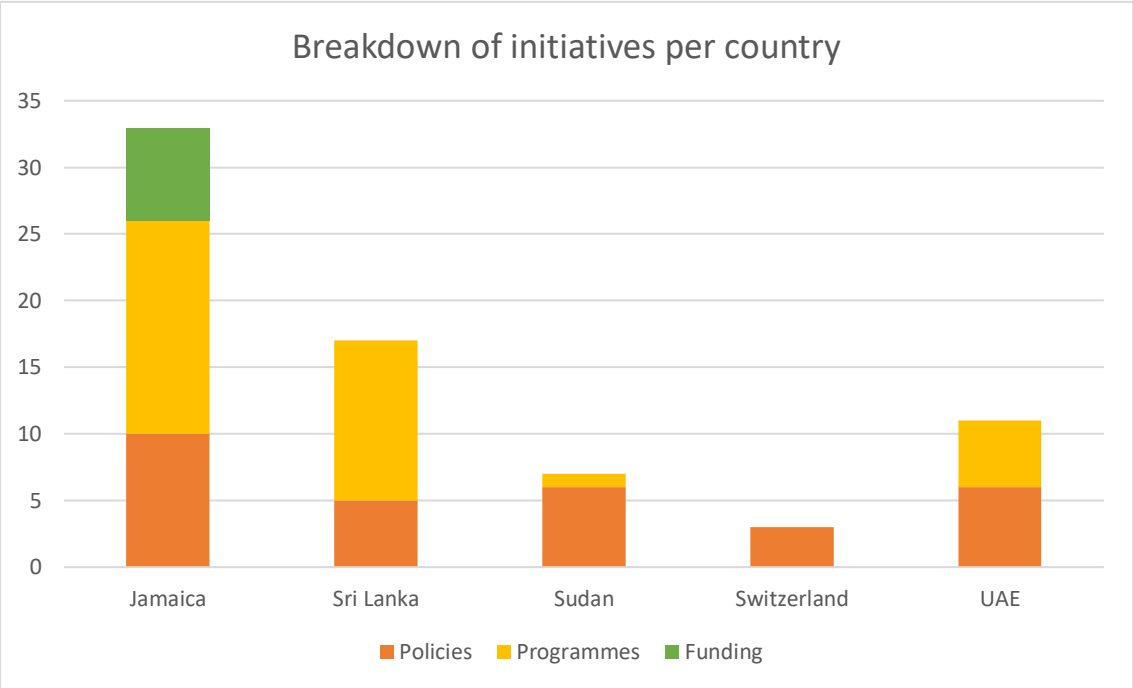


Figure 2: Graph Of Breakdown Of Initiatives Per Country

The first type of initiative observed in the VNRs were funding initiatives. This was the least common initiative observed with most countries not discussing funding changes at all. In my observations, only Jamaica was found to have

developed any type of funding initiatives with eight referenced across their two reports. This finding is backed up by the SDG4 Scorecard which indicates that Jamaica is making 'Fast progress' regarding public education expenditure (UNESCO, 2023).

For the other four countries, I identified zero occasions in which funding initiatives were mentioned. Of course, it is likely that the other types of initiatives will require funding, but this suggests specific allocations of funding has not been a common approach to addressing SDG4. Broader research on the SDGs has gathered similar findings. A large-scale review of SDG literature found 'scant evidence that governments have substantially reallocated funding to implement the SDGs' (Biermann et al. 2022: 796).

The second type of initiatives that I observed in the VNRs were programmes. Programmes were a much more common initiative referenced in the VNRs with four of the five countries engaging with this form of implementation. Programmes were especially prioritised in Sri Lanka, consisting of 70% of their total initiatives. Almost half of Jamaica's (48%) and UAE's (45%) total initiatives were also programmes. Sudan (one programme) and Switzerland (zero programmes) put much less emphasis on this type of implementation.

Overall, programmes were the most common type of initiative used. Out of the 71 initiatives I identified across all of the reports, 34 of these were programmes which is nearly half of the total share. This underlines that programmes are a major way in which countries seek to implement SDG4 into their domestic agenda. This is perhaps not surprising as the relatively informal and practical nature of programmes may make them comparably easier and more convenient to introduce. Nevertheless, programmes are often targeted and can be much more streamlined so the high number of programmes being created is a good sign.

The final type of initiatives that I observed in the VNRs were policies. This was another common type of initiative. Indeed, while I identified fewer policies than programmes overall, policies were the only type of initiative that every country engaged with at least to some extent. Most countries avoided funding initiatives

and Switzerland introduced zero programmes, but all five countries created or adjusted at least one policy initiative focused on education. Switzerland had a particular preference in this arena as all of their initiatives were policy related. Six of Sudan's seven total initiatives were policies. UAE (55% of total), Jamaica (30% of total), and Sri Lanka (29% of total) also introduced policies as part of their SDG4 implementation strategy. Evidently, all countries analysed in this paper showed considerable intent at making changes at the policy level to accommodate SDG4.

I had also prepared codes in NVivo in order to record any changes in laws as an outcome of SDG4. This type of initiative was expected for and included in the coding framework based on Cortell and Davis' suggestion that 'an international norm may be embedded in domestic laws and procedures' (Cortell and Davis, 2000: 70). However, I did not identify any instances in which country VNRs noted a change in laws to accommodate SDG4. This suggests that legislative frameworks have not been significantly adjusted as a result of SDG4 and that concrete changes have been based more on policy. Perhaps this is not surprising considering some features of education do not explicitly apply to a legal framework coupled with the fact that when they do, most countries in this study were already well-positioned legislatively.

Overall, Jamaica demonstrated the most comprehensive approach to SDG4 implementation. They have implemented the largest variety of initiatives in the report by introducing funding, programmes, and policies. Sri Lanka, Sudan, and the UAE implemented both policies and programmes. Switzerland was the least expansive country in the study as they only implemented policies.

Ultimately, the finding that there is no consensus when it comes to initiatives and that each country in this study has taken a different approach offers a mixed outlook for SDG4 implementation and progress domestically. One positive finding is that each country has dedicated a considerable amount of their implementation strategy to address policies. This is perhaps the most significant type of initiative in the long-term. It also shows genuine intent to address some elements of SDG4. On the other hand, some of the countries have only introduced one or two different types of initiative. It is reasonable to assume that having a balance of initiatives can

be complementary and best ensure a coherent and holistic implementation strategy going forward.

The significant variation in initiatives from one country to another does not indicate that implementation has been widespread. What this level of fluctuation does suggest is that the logic of contestedness holds weight in this instance. There being no consensus in the types of initiatives to be used to implement SDG4 suggests that norms are flexible. It may also reflect what the UN were aspiring for when it comes to SDG4. In their policy advice, they are quick to stress that each country should adapt the Goal appropriately based on their own context, arguing that localization must be ‘at the heart of the 2030 agenda’ (SDG Help Desk, n.d.).

5.6.3 Comparison of Implementation Focus

As well as studying the types of initiatives, it is also worth analysing where these initiatives were directed towards. SDG4 included both Outcome Targets (4.1-7) and Means of Implementation Targets (4a, b, c). As was mentioned in the last section, Jamaica had the biggest variety of initiatives but more importantly these initiatives were also directed to all areas. Each type of initiative focused on both the Outcome Targets and Means of Implementation Targets. This is by far the most widespread of the countries in this report and reiterates the earlier claim that Jamaica had the most comprehensive approach.

Sri Lanka was the only country in this study that prioritised Means of Implementation Targets, but they also had programmes focused on the Outcome Targets too. The initiatives of Sudan, Switzerland and Sri Lanka focused exclusively on Outcome Targets. Of course, countries have their own priorities to address but these findings suggest that Jamaica and Sri Lanka were the most flexible in terms of how they approached SDG4 implementation.

It is also worth noting that no specific target of SDG4 served as the main focus of implementation. Indeed, there were no targets or objectives that received similar levels of attention from all countries. This again is likely due to each case having

different areas of need and stresses the necessity of norms being flexible in order for countries to adapt accordingly.

5.6.4 Comparison of extent

As well as investigating how SDG4 has been implemented in domestic contexts, this study sought to determine the extent of this implementation too. While there was significant overlap in terms of how countries in this study interacted with the UN’s education message, there was considerable variation in the extent that each country applied such discourse. Jamaica and the UAE especially embraced the UN’s discourse surrounding education. Across their VNRs, I identified 15 occasions for Jamaica and 14 occasions for the UAE in which they aligned with SDG4 messaging. There was a fairly significant drop after these two countries. I recorded seven references in Switzerland’s reports, six references for Sri Lanka and four references for Sudan. A reason for this may be that the Jamaica and UAE VNRs were considerably more comprehensive but putting more detail into these reports is another indication that these countries embraced SDG4 to the highest extent in terms of discourse and reception.

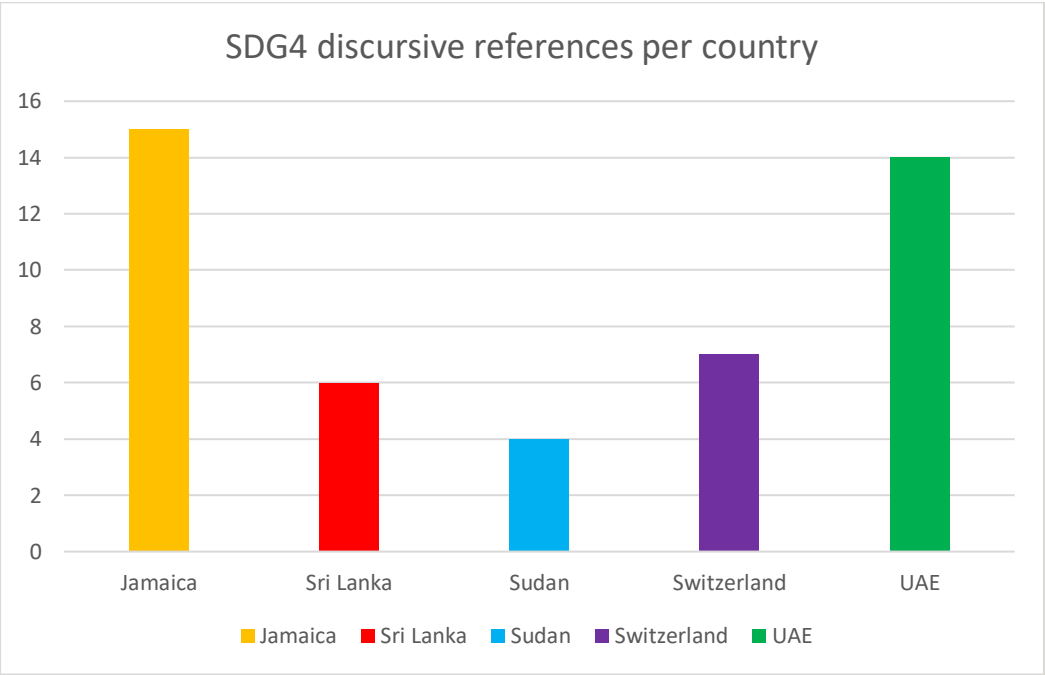


Figure 3: Graph Of SDG4 Discursive References Per Country

Moreover, not only was there significant variation in the initiatives used to ensure implementation, but there was also significant variation in the extent of initiatives. Jamaica ranked first in this operationalisation too. I identified a total of 33 initiatives across their VNRs which was almost twice as many as Sri Lanka who had the second highest number of total initiatives with 17. After this, the UAE had 11 initiatives, Sudan had seven initiatives and Switzerland had just three.

Combining both discourse and initiatives, Jamaica can be judged as the country with the highest degree of SDG4 implementation. They ranked first in both categories and demonstrated a very significant reaction to SDG4. Next is the UAE who also had a significant level of implementation by ranking second in discourse and third in initiatives. Sri Lanka had a moderate level of implementation scoring second highest in total initiatives but fourth highest in terms of discourse. Switzerland showed a relatively insignificant level of implementation by coming middle of the group in discourse and introducing the fewest initiatives. Sudan was the country that I judged to have demonstrated the lowest extent of SDG4 implementation. They ranked last in discourse and second to last in initiatives.

Research on SDG implementation into domestic contexts has so far found that the SDGs have had a discursive impact but a rather insignificant normative and institutional impact in domestic settings (Biermann et al. 2022). After conducting my own research, I agree that the discursive impact of SDG4 is bigger than the practical impact at this stage. At the same time, my findings offer more support for the practical and institutional impact of the SDGs (or at least SDG4) than previous reviews have. Indeed, the wide range of initiatives that I have identified in this study suggests that the practical and institutional changes are not as rare or 'isolated' as such literature has found (ibid: 795).

5.6.5 Country Parallels

Outside of common trends in discourse, there was no area of analysis that every country converged on, but I did identify some comparisons that could be drawn between some of the countries. Firstly, I identified notable similarities between Switzerland and the UAE. These two countries seemed to possess a similar

understanding of the VNRs and SDG4 more broadly. As noted in their individual analyses, both countries positioned their approach to SDG4 in the international context. The Swiss and UAE VNRs included sections about how they interact with other countries when it comes to SDG4. In this sense, their VNRs were much more outward-looking in nature. This may be because both countries are in similarly advanced positions in terms of SDG4 and may have felt that the domestic application of SDG4 had already occurred and that the next stage in the process was to move into the international realm.

They are also the richest countries in this study and have greater capacity to address Goal 4 which offers them the freedom to move beyond their own internal priorities and discuss how they perform and interact with SDG4 in a larger setting. The other three countries do not have this level of freedom and flexibility which may explain why they engaged with SDG4 in domestic terms only. Another similarity between Switzerland and the UAE was that both countries primarily focused on policies. The comparatively high wealth and development of the two countries may have enabled this prioritisation as they are likely better positioned to implement long-term changes at the policy level compared to other countries in this study which may have other priorities or less capacity to do so.

I also observed parallels between Sri Lanka and Jamaica. These two countries were the only countries which pursued programmes as their main form of initiative. The noted economic constraints that both countries experienced may have motivated the preference for programmes as they may have had to rely on strategies that are often more temporary in nature as programmes tend to be (Wilson, 2015). Sri Lanka and Jamaica were also the only two countries that sought to address SDG4's Means of Implementation Targets. A reason for this may be that as with Switzerland and the UAE, these two countries had similar capacities and starting positions which may have meant their areas for attention overlapped.

Incidentally, Switzerland and the UAE are both categorised as high-income countries by UNESCO and Jamaica and Sri Lanka are both categorised as middle-income countries by UNESCO (UNESCO, n.d.). It would be interesting to see if other countries in the same income groups would also be similar in terms of SDG4

implementation. This leads one to question whether economic status affects how and the extent that a country implements the SDGs and is an area that a hypothesis could be generated. Sudan was somewhat of an outlier in this study as it was considerably poorer than all the other cases. This may explain why few overlaps were identified between Sudan and other countries. Conclusions can't be drawn in this instance, but it is an area for further research.

6 Discussion

My empirical analysis has focused on how and the extent that SDG4 implementation has occurred, but it will also be useful to briefly explore why SDG4 implementation may have occurred in different ways and in varying degrees as my findings have deemed to be the case. This will ground my empirical analysis by offering useful context and insight. Moreover, as this paper is an explorative, big-picture analysis, the study will benefit from refined and in-depth analysis going forward. The potential explanations below will offer an opportunity for the formulation of certain hypotheses which can create avenues for further research.

The beginning of this discussion section will explore some potential determinants of SDG4 implementation. These factors are drawn from different areas: (1) explanations given directly by the countries themselves in their VNRs (2) explanations drawn from academic papers (3) my own inferences drawn from my analyses. The second section of my discussion will revert back to a discussion of how implementation has occurred and engage with three major findings from my empirical analysis.

6.1 Potential determinants of SDG4 implementation

6.1.1 The domestic political context

The domestic political context is a key determinant of SDG4 implementation. A political context that is open to global visions and the values of the SDGs can aid SDG4 implementation. Reading through the ‘Policy and Enabling Environment’ chapters of Jamaica’s VNRs, it seems that the domestic political context offers an ideal platform for SDG4 implementation in Jamaica. In the 2022 VNR, it is mentioned that ‘commitment for the SDGs spans both political parties and transcends beyond electoral cycles’ (Planning Institute of Jamaica, 2022: 12), highlighting how the domestic political context is conducive to SDG norm diffusion. It is likely that the implementation of SDG4 would have been a lot smoother and unchallenged in these circumstances.

Attitudes towards education within a country is another important factor to consider. Education is understood to be the ‘main means of economic empowerment and liberation for the poor and marginalised’ in Jamaica (Ferguson, 2019: 84) so discourse probably already centred around the UN’s education message about how Quality Education can lead to the sustainable development of other SDGs too. This may explain why Jamaica scored so highly in the discourse operationalisation.

Domestic education policies already being aligned with SDG4 can also facilitate implementation. This seemed to be the case with a lot of countries in this study. Jamaica’s domestic education policy had largely been based on The National Education Strategic Plan 2011-2020 (NESP) which had a lot of similarities to the priorities and objectives of SDG4 (Planning Institute of Jamaica, 2018: 34). For example, NESP priority 2 was to focus on the early childhood level which bears significant similarity with SDG4.2 and the NESP already recognised key SDG4 concepts such as a ‘learning environment’ and ‘lifelong learning’ (ibid). Indeed, another potential explanation for why Jamaica implemented so many initiatives concerning SDG4 is that this already fit their own agenda. Sri Lanka was another country that I considered to have a supportive environment for SDG4 to prosper. All of the SDG targets were already aligned to their current education approach (Ministry of Sustainable Development, Wildlife and Regional Development, 2018). This indicates the importance of considering the status quo in a country when determining the process of domestic implementation of international norms. This could help to explain the high degree of initiatives identified in the VNRs of Jamaica and Sri Lanka, as they may have been planning to adopt a similar approach anyway.

At the same time, domestic political context can also serve as a hindrance to SDG4 implementation. As the norm diffuses from the global arena to the domestic arena, the actor responsible for implementing the norm changes from international organisations such as the UN to national governments. The international organisation can only play a guiding role from then onwards, so it is important that the state can reliably continue the process. Yet, academic sources have argued that domestic political shortcomings have also created challenges for SDG4

implementation. Herath notes that education has been ‘mismanaged’ and politicised in Sri Lanka (Herath, 2018: 740). This is an important factor to consider when studying state behaviour and why policies and progress may come into fruition.

6.1.2 The state of education in a country prior to SDG4

The state of education in a country prior to SDG4 is also a determinant of SDG4 implementation and progress. By state of education, I mean how the education system had been performing prior to the emergence of the SDGs. If a country has been progressing poorly in the field of education, they may welcome implementation. On the other hand, if a country is already performing highly in education and was already on track for the SDG4 targets, they may feel making significant implementations was not necessary.

This may be an explanation for why Switzerland was ranked the lowest in this paper in the category of new or altered initiatives. Switzerland felt they were well-positioned for SDG4 as they were already advancing towards the targets anyway (Swiss Federation, 2018: 5). A similar story can be seen with the UAE. While they introduced numerous initiatives, they did not direct any of them towards the Means of Implementation Targets. This may initially have appeared as if they had not embraced SDG4 entirely, but the UAE was already at or close to 100% for the Means of Implementation indicators (National Committee on Sustainable Development Goals, 2022: 137) so they may argue that there was simply no need to develop initiatives for this area.

Another consideration for SDG4 implementation could be the capacity and adaptability of the current education system to adjust to SDG4. The UAE is a country that already has insight into how to globalise their education. The country is almost 90% international and Pring notes how the UAE has had to develop an educational system that acknowledges expatriates whilst also maintaining their own values (Pring, 2019: 299). This may have facilitated a smoother diffusion of the SDGs as the UAE may already be well equipped and prepared to absorb the changes that SDG4 may require.

6.1.3 Other domestic challenges

A significant factor that could hinder SDG4 implementation is the existence and degree of other challenges that a country is facing. Sudan is starting from the furthest position back of the cases in this paper when it comes to SDG4. 3.1 million children between the ages of 5 and 13 still being out of school in the 2018 report underlines the distances that Sudan needs to go in order to achieve the targets associated with SDG4 (National Population Council, 2018: 48). This is made especially difficult considering the fact that the country is experiencing multiple domestic challenges that can stall progress on SDG4. Their VNRs highlight several barriers to education such as conflict, food scarcity and socio-cultural beliefs about child marriage and girls education (Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning, 2022: 28-29).

The above barriers likely impact the extent of SDG4 implementation in the country as Sudan could be motivated by other factors or have other priorities. While education is seen as a foundation to development, immediate issues with food scarcity or obstacles to access such as conflict may mean that advancing education takes a backseat on the agenda or is simply not possible. This may also explain why Sudan's 2018 VNR was so short, and discourse associated with the SDGs was so limited, as other pressing issues may have been prioritised.

Sudan also faces unique challenges that were not explicitly recognised in SDG4 that likely affected SDG4 implementation. For example, Sudan's VNRs talk about how disparities in education have been most significantly felt by nomadic people (who make up 2.7m or 8.7% of the population) (ibid: 19). Nomadic people are not specifically covered in SDG4 Targets. This example highlights how certain factors are not accounted for in global visions such as the SDGs and this shows support for the 'logic of contestedness' claim that norms exist to be flexible and adapted appropriately within different contexts.

6.1.4 The pandemic

The pandemic is another factor that may affect SDG4 implementation. The case of Sri Lanka reflects this and is a notable example of how external factors can determine norm diffusion from the international to domestic arena. Indeed, Sri Lankan policy going forward seems to be much more driven by the SDGs than it was previously (Sustainable Development Council Sri Lanka, 2022) and the VNRs indicate that this rethink can be attributed to how the pandemic exposed frailties in education systems and demonstrated the need for change to reflect contemporary challenges. While much of the UN's dialogue concerning the pandemic is oriented around how progress towards SDG4 has stalled or regressed, the case of Sri Lanka has indicated how such a significant event can challenge the status quo and cause states to rethink their approach. This is something that SDG4 undoubtedly needs considering the transformative effects that the UN is calling out for and highlights how the pandemic has created opportunities as well as new challenges.

6.1.5 Economic capacity

One of the most significant determinants of SDG4 implementation in this study seems to have been economic capacity. Several countries have noted how economic constraints have limited ability to implement changes to progress towards SDG4. The biggest barrier for Jamaica has been the 'challenging economic backdrop' (Planning Institute of Jamaica, 2018: 40) and Sri Lanka described 'limited fiscal space in the national budget' as a major constraint (Sustainable Development Council Sri Lanka, 2022: 106). Sudan is the poorest country analysed in this report and has stated that 'low public investment' has contributed to the challenges it is facing in education (Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning, 2022: 28). This restrained financial situation may also explain why Sudan has not developed any initiatives for the three Means of Implementation Targets (building or upgrading facilities, expanding scholarship opportunities, and increasing teacher supply) as they tend to require significant funding. Their 2022 VNR mentions that SDG4 has been particularly affected by education development projects being discontinued due to lack of funding amongst other factors (ibid: 11).

6.1.6 National goals

The SDGs are international goals but how they interact with the national goals of a country may also be a determinant of SDG4 implementation. Indeed, in the case of the UAE, it seems that embracing SDG4 aligned with the national goals of the country. Pring describes a UAE ‘education initiative designed to contribute to a national strategic ambition—that of developing the UAE as a progressive, enlightened country’ (Pring, 2019: 297). Demonstrating a discourse that aligns with the SDGs could offer an opportunity to achieve this. Indeed, showing enthusiasm for SDG4 could dismiss any preconceptions associated with education in the UAE that may appear at odds with the UN’s education approach. Norm diffusion scholars have claimed that countries can adopt norms to gain greater legitimacy in the international stage (Hall and Taylor, 1996) and the UAE may have seen embracing SDG4 as a way to facilitate this.

SDG4 and platforms such as the VNRs can enhance international standing by enabling a country to showcase their achievements. Judging by the UAE’s regular mention of becoming a global player and comparing itself with other high performing countries in these documents, the UAE seemingly saw SDG4 as an opportunity establish itself on the world stage as a serious contributor in the world of education. This particularly rings true when one sees the accomplishments that the UAE has chosen to include in their VNRs. There is a graphic showing ‘UAE Ranked #1’ in ‘Tertiary Inbound Mobility’ (National Committee on Sustainable Development Goals, 2018: 69). They are emphasising their success in the international arena and using their achievements in education to attract the international market. The widespread success that they have experienced enables the UAE to demonstrate how they are contributing positively to a global institution such as the UN. The UAE has utilised education to respond to and benefit from the significant changes the country has experienced in recent decades (Pring, 2019: 299). Ultimately, there were indications that this came across in the VNRs and that SDG4 served as a vehicle for this too.

The potential determinants discussed above are not conclusive or generalisable, but they have been relevant to the countries in this paper. They are based on my own analytical findings combined with the explanations given by the countries themselves in their VNRs and other scholarly articles that investigated SDG reaction in the five countries. They offer several avenues for further research. For example, it would be useful to observe whether certain determinants are more significant factors in the process of implementation. Judging by the prevalence of factors such as economic capacity, it seems that some determinants may be especially significant, but an in-depth analysis is required to see if this is the case.

6.2 Major findings from the empirical analysis

This section will discuss some of the major findings of this study and what this might mean going forward. This is a small-scale study so these findings should only be understood in the context of this study rather than made to be generalisable.

Finding 1: There was no consensus on approach to SDG4 implementation.

The first major finding of this study was that there was no consensus on approach to SDG4 implementation amongst the countries that I focused on. There was considerable variation in terms of types of initiative favoured, extent of initiatives introduced and the focus of these initiatives. This is perhaps not surprising considering the different backgrounds, contexts, and positions of the countries in this study. It makes sense for each country to pursue initiatives that they believe work best for the context they are operating in. In this sense, the findings aligned with what the UN envisioned and desired. They have long been stressing the importance of applying SDG4 appropriately ‘based on national experiences and priorities’ (UNESCO, 2015: 57).

What will be interesting going forward is whether a certain approach to SDG4 implementation is found to be more effective at achieving SDG4. This will not be answered in this study and perhaps cannot be answered until the completion of the SDG cycle in 2030 but it may be a useful avenue for further research. Based on my own inferences, I would hypothesise that policies are a more effective form of SDG4 implementation than programmes. This is because the countries that are

more advanced in this study prioritised this type of initiative. Moreover, I would infer that policies have a greater long-term impact whereas programmes tend to offer short-term fixes.

There was a general consensus in terms of discourse. The five countries generally shared the same attitude towards education and aligned with the values of SDG4. Indeed, while to varying degrees, each country wrote about education in the same sort of style in their respective VNRs. Considering the importance of discourse in norm diffusion (Cortell and Davis, 2000: 70), this suggests that SDG4 has been mainstreamed into domestic contexts from a discursive point of view. Nevertheless, the variations in tangible actions from this point onwards reinforces the claim that norms are flexible.

Finding 2: Implementation does not necessarily translate to progress.

A significant finding of this study is that by and large, SDG4 does not seem to be suffering from a lack of commitment. While to varying degrees, every country showed that they have engaged with the Goal both in discourse and initiatives. Yet, while there has been commitment, there has not been widespread progress. Indeed, in the context of this study, going to extensive lengths to acknowledge and implement SDG4 into the domestic context has not ensured that progress towards the Goal will come as a result. The case of Jamaica particularly reflects this. Jamaica have shown a real commitment to align with the UN's messaging on SDG4 and implement initiatives that can contribute to achieving SDG4, but they have only made limited progress towards the targets (Sachs et al., 2022). Jamaica seems to be following the UN's SDG4 implementation guidelines and what scholars suggest is necessary for norm diffusion to occur, but the country is still facing notable difficulties. Sri Lanka have also directed many initiatives to the Means of Implementation Targets but the SDG4 Scorecard judges them to have made 'No Progress' in most of these areas (UNESCO, 2023).

The countries that have fared better in terms of SDG4 progress in this paper (the UAE and Switzerland) have introduced comparably fewer initiatives since 2015 but have tended to be the countries that had a strong foundation in education and were already making significant advancement towards the targets. This

indicates that commitment may not be as important as the standards of education in the country prior to SDG4 when it comes to progress.

It seems that capacity may also be a more significant determinant of progress than commitment. Jamaica and Sri Lanka have introduced the most initiatives but have expressed in their VNRs that they have been restricted by their economic situation. Sudan has experienced even greater financial constraints and their capacity has also been limited by other domestic challenges so perhaps it is no surprise that they have only made limited progress towards SDG4 too. Meanwhile, the richer countries of Switzerland and the UAE have not had these issues and are generally in a better position for the 2030 deadline. They have also been more inclined to introduce policies (perhaps because they have greater ability to do so) which may have made progress more sustainable.

Ultimately, the findings of this study indicate that willingness or engagement are not the most significant illustration of how an international norm translates to the domestic level. Regardless of commitment, a country also needs to have the means and capacity to enforce meaningful change. This leads one to assume that commitment is not the primary factor in terms of achieving SDG4. One should not draw conclusions just yet considering there are 7 years remaining in the SDG timeline and the pandemic would likely have stalled any other progress, but it is worth observing this argument going forward.

The fact that commitment does not necessarily equate to progress could be due to countries taking an ineffective or inefficient approach. However, considering states such as Jamaica seem to have followed good practice in regard to UN guidelines, it could suggest that SDG4 does not translate effectively to domestic contexts in some circumstances. It seems that in such instances, the challenge is not SDG4 being accepted at the domestic level but rather the limited effectiveness the Goal has in this arena. Nevertheless, this is a small-scale study so this should not be deemed generalisable. Further research is required to determine whether this is the case on a broader scale.

Finding 3 – Norm diffusion theory is significant, but other theories are too.

Norm diffusion theory has served as the main theoretical framework for this study and many of the central claims are supported by the findings of this paper. Firstly, I noted earlier that contemporary literature has found norms to be dynamic which contradicts traditional assumptions that norms are static (Shawki, 2016). The findings of this study align with the contemporary literature. While one can argue that SDG4 is static and stable from a discursive perspective, it is clear that norms are very flexible in their practical application. This is evidenced by the variations in initiatives from one country to the next.

The countries in this study sharing the same discourse on SDG4 indicates that they have aligned in terms of the problem and value of norm diffusion theory, but they have shown variation in the final behaviour as evidenced by the divergence in initiatives implemented. Norms are ‘subject to (re)interpretation when they are invoked’ (Shawki, 2016: 6). The way that Switzerland and the UAE understand SDG4 to be outward looking compared to the other three countries suggests that this sense of interpretation can be applied to SDG4.

Norm diffusion theory also incorporates many logics but the logic which has the strongest case based on the findings of this paper is the logic of contestedness. This logic claims that ‘different states should react differently to the norms presented to them’ (Winston, 2018: 643) and this has proven to be the case in my findings. The countries in this study have reacted differently to SDG4 both in the extent of reaction and type of reaction.

Other logics have assumed that norms are primarily stable as they progress from the international to domestic arena but the significant variation in approach across countries does not offer support to this claim. This emphasises the importance of the process of norm diffusion theory being understood with external factors in mind. The findings of this study not only support the logic of contestedness in theory but also suggest that it is more effective in practical terms too. Jamaica’s high level of implementation not being matched by progress perhaps

indicates that embracing the norms simply as they are does not necessarily drive change and they need to be flexible in order for an impact to be had.

Sociological institutionalist arguments are also supported in this paper. Some of the claims of this theory align with the given explanations for my findings. Hall and Taylor's claim that the prospect of enhanced legitimacy can lead to the implementation of new institutional practices (Hall and Taylor, 1996) was found to be one of the potential determinants for the UAE's embrace of SDG4. Sociological institutionalism also acknowledges a logic of appropriateness which emphasises how international features can be adapted based on what is necessary for the actor (Schmidt, 2014). This was evidenced in my findings with countries pursuing initiatives that were most relevant to their own context and directing such initiatives to areas of priority.

Lastly, some of my other findings lend support to other theories about international organisations. Realists argue that international organisations do not have an independent role in the global system but rather are used by states as 'instruments of statecraft' (Park 2018: 21). My observations about how Switzerland and the UAE have perceived their VNRs and SDG4 as an opportunity to maximise their international role does give some weight to this claim.

This study has shown that the process of SDG4 diffusing to domestic contexts is so variable and case-dependent that certain theories can be applied on some occasions, but no theory can effectively describe the process in every circumstance. This finding most significantly supports the modern branches of norm diffusion theory. This is because this branch recognises that norms are processes and ongoing rather than 'finished products' (Krook and True, 2012: 105). The theory also includes numerous logics with contrasting positions so is perhaps best equipped to appreciate the complexity of norms being implemented into domestic contexts.

7 Conclusion

This final section will offer some conclusions of this thesis. I will begin this section by providing a summary of my empirical analysis and the outlook of my findings on SDG4 implementation. After this, I will discuss several policy implications of my findings. I round out this thesis by discussing some recommendations for further research.

7.1 Summary

This thesis has provided a comparative analysis of SDG4 implementation across domestic contexts. The purpose of this research was to identify both the extent of implementation and how this implementation has occurred by focusing on one country from each of UNESCO's five regions. These countries were **Jamaica, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Switzerland**, and the **UAE**. Using the Voluntary National Reviews submitted by these five countries, I studied the discourse and initiatives that they have engaged in since the emergence of SDG4 in 2015.

My findings indicate that countries tend to engage in similar discourse when discussing education and SDG4. All five countries recognise that education can serve as a platform for sustainable development elsewhere and understand education to be a right that everyone should enjoy. Each country aligned significantly with SDG4 messaging and used phrases synonymous with Goal 4 throughout the reports. There were differences in the extent that this discourse was expressed (with Jamaica and the UAE using this discourse more regularly than Sri Lanka, Sudan, and Switzerland) but there was consistency in the content.

My findings indicate that the second stage of the norm diffusion process – SDG4 being implemented in the domestic context via initiatives – has not experienced the same collective approach that discourse showed. Each of the five countries prioritised different types of initiatives and directed such initiatives to different areas. Moreover, there was a big range in the number of initiatives per country. Jamaica referenced 33 initiatives in their reports whereas Switzerland

referred to just three. Lastly, while countries shared similar discourse and understanding about the purpose of SDG4, it seemed that the countries understood their roles to realise the Goals differently. Switzerland and the UAE positioned their implementation in relation to the international context whereas the other three countries were much more inward-looking. Parallels between countries could be drawn in some areas but overall, it was evident that each country took their own unique approach to SDG4.

These findings offer a mixed outlook for SDG4 going forward. Perhaps of most concern is that while my findings have indicated high implementation in some cases, this has not been reflected in progress towards SDG4 targets in the respective country. However, there is also reason for optimism. The shared discourse across countries offers potential progress going forward. According to scholarly belief, discourse is the first stage in the process and building momentum around initiatives can be a realistic next step (Cortell and Davis, 2000).

I also observed an increased engagement and noticeably more positive reaction to SDG4 in the 2022 reports compared to 2018. The tone of these reports was warmer and more receptive of the prospect of incorporating SDG4 into domestic contexts. This was particularly the case in Sri Lanka, but I also observed a shift in the VNRs of the UAE, Switzerland, and Sudan too. The reports were more detailed and increasingly transparent. This is a good sign for the future of SDG4. That enthusiasm for SDG4 has continued and even increased 7 years removed from the formulation of the SDGs is a reason to be positive.

7.2 Policy Implications

There are several policy implications that can be drawn from this study. My empirical analysis found that many of the countries in this study were already well-positioned on Goal 4, indicating that SDG4 is not as modern and forward-thinking as one might think. The fact that numerous countries in this study were already so aligned with the SDGs poses questions about whether SDG4 truly orchestrated the transformative changes in education approach that were desired. Reading the enabling environment sections of the VNRs, some of the countries in the report

were disconnected from some of the other SDGs but when it came to education, many of the SDG targets did not really disrupt the status quo.

This is perhaps a negative consequence of having states at the forefront of the decision-making process in SDG formulation. While it may be more democratic and inclusive, it might not lead to the transformative impact desired. Instead, states can promote and lobby for a certain approach which fits with their current methods in order to avoid having to introduce an array of new laws, policies, and funding. The Goal has built on previous initiatives, so countries have had somewhat of a head start but SDG4 was characterised as a radical change in global education approach. The UN may need to rethink whether the SDGs have truly driven a rethink at the domestic level. Indeed, my findings align with Brissett's own research that SDG4 has maintained the traditional 'utilitarian' approach to education rather than taking a 'transformational' approach (Brissett and Mitter, 2017). In the future, there may need to be a different approach to the formulation and drafting of Global Goals. Critics have already directed criticisms towards the SDG formulation process, and this may be another area that demonstrates a shortcoming.

Secondly, the finding that there is no consensus in terms of implementation approach may have potentially negative implications. While the flexibility afforded to countries in SDG4 implementation enables context to be considered, it also creates a disconnect in terms of solutions. The lack of specific policy advice and expectations from the UN has meant that states don't have a common practice to follow, nor do they face genuine accountability mechanisms. SDG4 prides itself on being holistic but national governments having such freedom to decide where to direct their attention can mean that some areas fall by the wayside. I found that many countries in this study have been experiencing the same challenges in terms of SDG4. For example, four of the five countries described difficulty in ensuring people with a disability are afforded the same Quality Education (SDG4.5). This goes against the SDG4 mantra of leaving no one behind and is clearly a common problem amongst countries, highlighting the need for concerted effort and attention to be directed to specific areas for the remaining seven years of the SDG4 cycle. Going forward, SDG4 needs to find a balance between enabling contextual

priorities while also building a stronger understanding of how implementation can be collectively applied. The SDGs are rooted in a belief that international collaboration and consensus is the solution to contemporary challenges but too much vagueness in implementation advice can cause the SDGs to depart from this belief in practice.

A final implication of this study is based on the finding that implementation has not equated to progress on SDG4. One may have assumed that the lack of global progress towards SDG4 was primarily due to lack of buy-in from states and limited implementation at the domestic level, but my findings do not identify any problems with commitment. Jamaica has demonstrated significant implementation in this study but is still only making limited progress. Sri Lanka is not experiencing progress in areas they have prioritised either.

I have only looked at a handful of countries so assumptions should not be made just yet, but if it is found that other countries have pursued implementation but not noticed results then it calls into question whether SDG4 can be effective in domestic contexts. The UN may need to rethink SDG4 implementation strategies going forward. This could entail making realistic changes such as reassessing their existing guidelines or enhancing data collection and monitoring mechanisms. Yet, it is more important to address the root causes that states are describing as barriers to progress. This seems unlikely and external factors will continue to play a more significant role in SDG implementation if the current state- international organisation dynamic continues and as long as the UN and SDG 4 ‘largely functions within a neoliberal capitalist model of development’ (ibid: 201).

On the topic, it was evident in this study that monitoring mechanisms need to be improved if SDG4 is going to be advanced. When I referred to the UN’s monitoring mechanisms to complement my own analyses, it was clear that these mechanisms were inconsistent. Different resources painted different pictures. For example, Sri Lanka were improving on SDG4 according to the Sustainable Development Goals Report, but they were making little progress in the SDG4 Scorecard whereas Sudan was the opposite. There is a real need for these

discrepancies to be addressed and a more holistic approach to monitoring is required.

7.3 Recommendations for Further Research

The findings of this study are not generalisable and would benefit from further research. There are numerous potential avenues for this. Firstly, this study has focused on one country from each of UNESCO's regions. It would be interesting to conduct a larger scale analysis of many more countries. This would enhance the validity of my study and determine whether my findings can be extended to other cases. It also offers the opportunity to test an assumption from norm diffusion theory that there is 'one consistent finding that states with similar identities... generally adopt similar policies' (Winston, 2018: 643). A regional analysis of SDG4 implementation can determine whether this claim holds up in practice.

My finding that countries approach SDG4 implementation using various strategies and favouring different types of initiatives also warrants further exploration. It would be useful to analyse if there is a specific approach or type of initiative that is conducive to progress. This will require a much larger and detailed analysis than the one offered in this report.

This study has primarily explored how SDG4 implementation has occurred and the extent of this implementation. While I briefly discussed potential explanations for my findings, further research on why countries implement SDG4 in different ways and to different extents is necessary. As well as it being interesting to see if an approach or initiative is most significant to SDG4 progress, it would be useful to identify whether some external factors affect implementation more significantly than others. In the discussion section, I noted numerous factors such as the economic capacity and the state of education prior to 2015 that seemingly affected SDG4 implementation in the five countries in this study, but it would be beneficial to see if any factors are particularly pertinent.

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