



Students from Providence College ran a workshop on effective and fun handwashing techniques. The aim was to decrease the spread of infections resulting in health issues and impacting school attendance.

The global community is currently facing several challenges, including poverty, inequality, and climate change. In response to these challenges, in 2015 the United Nations (UN) created a blueprint for peace and prosperity for people and the planet. This blueprint, known as the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), is composed of 17 interlinked objectives that countries have committed to achieving by 2030 for a better and more sustainable future for all.

The challenges outlined in the SDGs are not uniform across the globe; therefore, finding solutions to these problems requires developing collaborative partnerships that make use of local knowledge and innovation. Higher education institutions provide knowledge and innovation and can help implement the UN SDGs by developing partnerships with local organisations to help drive sustainable developments and create a better world for all.

Providence College, a small liberal arts college in the Northeast region of the USA, has partnered with the Global Sustainable Aid Project (GSAP), now defunct, and local organisations in Ghana to explore and implement solutions relating to the low level of literacy in Africa. In recent works, Dr Comfort Ateh has explored this partnership, including the challenges faced and the lessons learned, and how partnerships like this can help achieve the SDGs.

#### Literacy in Ghana

Literacy is a global problem. According to UNESCO, there are still more than 700 million illiterate adults in the world, and 25% of these people are living in sub-Saharan Africa. Literacy is associated with the UN SDG 4, which targets education, but it is also linked with several other goals. It's regarded as an

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important tool against poverty, as the ability to read, write, and use arithmetic can help people to increase their income above the poverty level.

Literacy in Ghana is low. The main language used in schools is English, but as this is not the primary language spoken at home, it can make learning difficult. To help combat this, policies have been introduced to teach children to read and write in their mother tongue from kindergarten through to grade three, which should help enhance literacy.

# How can collaborative partnerships promote sustainable development goals?

- The United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals aim to help the world overcome several global challenges, including poverty, inequality, and climate change.
- Literacy is a global problem that is linked to poverty and education.
- A collaborative partnership between the Global Sustainable Aid Project, Providence College, and local organisations aimed to find solutions to increase literacy in Ghana.
- These solutions helped increase literacy skills but only work if local stakeholders are engaged.



Providence College students and collaborators in Ghana train a local women's group to create a simple slow sand water filter system that makes water potable.



Providence College students work with students from Ghana University and Ashesi University, learning and reflecting on sustainable solutions for global/local problems.



Female students share their educational experiences.



Students install monitors at local health centres to educate the community on common diseases and their prevention.

However, there are still other issues that hinder learning – such as access to resources including technology.

### Sustainable interventions

The collaborations between GSAP, Providence College, and multiple in-country collaborators have led to several interventions that have aimed to increase the levels of literacy in Ghanaian schools. As part of the undergraduate education at Providence College, students can take part in a course that aims to develop sustainable solutions to global problems. Lab in a Box, an extensive set of digital educational materials and resources that can be accessed without the need for internet access, is the outcome of one of these projects, which includes the RACHEL initiative (Remote Area Community Hotspot for Education and Learning), a portable plug-and-play server that is specifically designed to help increase literacy and can be used on a wide range of devices. These resources are intended to make access to technology more affordable while also complementing the Ghanaian curriculum. The Lab in the Box resources were used on computers that

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were donated to the schools from the US, along with large donations of books to help the Ghanaian students have access to the resources they needed.

Providence College students also travelled to Ghana to help provide training on how to use the portal. In addition, they provided training sessions on effective, fun handwashing techniques that were developed by the students at Providence College. This handwashing workshop aimed to decrease the spread of infections resulting in health issues and impacting school attendance. The multifaceted nature of interventions to enhance literacy revealed the essence of a systems thinking lens in defining sustainable solutions for global issues.

### Successes and challenges

The successes of this partnership were most prominent in areas where they occurred in conjunction with local interventions. For example, the Brim North District was one of the lowest-performing regions before the partnerships interventions but moved from 117th to 17th place in the national performance assessment in 2014, despite only receiving minimal resources from the interventions – a single PC for each school and book donations to five community libraries that were shared between five or six schools.

This substantial increase in performance can be attributed to the development of local initiatives that aimed to increase the use of donated books and digital resources. This

included the introduction of two policies by the Minister for Education that impacted students' engagement in literacy. The first was to extend the school day by one hour, with school starting 30 minutes earlier and ending 30 minutes later. Secondly, the minister mandated that this extra time was to be used for reading and writing to help students to improve their literacy. This is a great example of engaging local stakeholders to create awareness and address local issues.

The interventions also provide students from Providence College with a global education and a chance to see how these collaborations can help us achieve the SDGs and improve peace and prosperity for all.

### Take-home message

Global collaborations are key to developing sustainable solutions and making progress towards achieving the UN's SDGs. These collaborations can help raise awareness of local problems and engage local stakeholders in finding and implementing solutions while also increasing knowledge and skills among all those involved. While the schools in Ghana benefitted from the interventions, local initiatives were also required for the students to receive the maximum benefit. This was reflected by the high performance of students in regional exams from schools that had previously been performing badly. Increasing literacy in Africa has the potential to help eliminate poverty and other related problems by providing students with skills that can help them to attain higher-paid jobs.

## Personal response

### What inspired you to conduct this research?

My inspiration for this research is the slow progress in attaining the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 2030 agenda on the universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet, and improve the lives and prospects of everyone, everywhere. I am especially concerned about a strong commitment to global partnership and collaboration to be inclusive of all countries, developing and developed. Students in my institution in the USA who are participating in a collaborative partnership aimed at enhancing literacy of students in a developing country, Ghana, shared positive perspectives about their experiences that motivated me to explore the experiences of the local collaborators. Although the students did not specifically mention the UN-SDG, their perspectives reflected their contributions in advancing goals like quality education. I was inspired by students' perspectives in the collaborative partnership and in contributing to quality education while learning from other collaborators, as captured in this excerpt:

*My trip to Ghana was truly inspiring and life changing. By going out and meeting the local people, as well as working hands-on in different schools and institutions, I feel this trip has afforded me a newfound appreciation for not only the struggles the Ghanaians face, but also their culture and lifestyle. Consequently, I have grown to love this country. Looking at the course part of the trip, I believe the videos and group lessons were very pertinent and informative. These learning activities helped me to familiarize myself with systems-thinking and social value analysis, two concepts I have never encountered in my studies of biology and psychology. I enjoyed our group discussions of the social and economic issues that not only developing countries face, but also people here in the United States. During this time, I was exposed to the various opinions and information provided by people of all different majors and expertise. In this way, each of us students were able to use the tools we learned from previous classes, as well as our own personal experiences and thoughts, to fully divulge and analyze important health and sustainability issues throughout the world. This allowed me to gain new perspectives on how to solve certain crises, in ways I would have never thought of.*

I thus wanted to explore the extent to which the collaboration benefitted the local population in contributing to the literature on effective collaborative partnership at the core of the UN-SDG 2030 agenda.

### Will these interventions be introduced in other areas experiencing low levels of literacy?

Hopefully, stakeholders of the sustainable development goals will benefit from this research and engage in effective collaborative partnerships that will result in introducing these interventions effectively in other areas experiencing low levels of literacy.

### What other sustainable solutions have been produced by the students at Providence College?

Providence College presents opportunities for students to engage in partnerships that contribute to sustainable solutions either indirectly or directly, mostly through the [Center for Global Education](#). Faculty-led programmes like the one I was involved in engage students in a course with an overseas component, typically ranging from 1–3 weeks. These courses combine classroom study with real-world experiences, allowing students to gain international insight in their field of study.

### Why do you think it's important to engage undergraduate students in initiatives like these?

The UN-SDG concerns everyone on planet Earth. Undergraduate students are well positioned to engage in the goals through coursework like the Maymester course offered at Providence College that presents an opportunity for students to take part in collaborative partnership. They can effectively engage in and reflect on the UN-SDG as they focus on career goals in enhancing the UN-SDG 2030 agenda. Students get a broader perspective of the world as they interact with local and global partners in understanding the complexity of challenges and the essence of effective partnership in solving global problems. Engaging students in initiatives like this will advance the UN-SDG 2030 agenda and specifically target collaborative partnerships to build on existing initiatives to develop measurements of progress on sustainable development that complement capacity-building in developing countries.

## Details



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### Funding

Providence College

### Collaborators

- Late Professor Steve Mecca
- The Global Sustainable Aid Project and board members
- Eric Agyemang, Director of the GSAP Center in Ghana
- Local women groups, schools, and health centers
- Dr Monsignor Alex Bobby Benson, director of the Matthew 25 House Koforodua
- Local Chiefs and council members

### Bio

Comfort Ateh is Associate Professor of Education and Associate Provost for DEI in Providence College, Rhode Island, USA. She is originally from Cameroon and holds two PhDs: agronomy from the University of Wisconsin, Madison and science education from the University of California, Davis. She is passionate about education without borders for all.

### Further reading

Ateh, CM, (2022) [Engaging students in global endeavours through partnerships, promoting sustainable development goals: the case of a small liberal art college](#). In Öztürk, M, (eds) *Engagement with sustainable development in Higher Education: universities as transformative spaces for sustainable futures* (pp 169–181). Cham: Springer International Publishing.