



7th ASEF Rectors' Conference and Students' Forum (ARC7)
 Students' Forum: 11–14 May 2019 | Rectors' Conference: 12–14 May 2019
 Bucharest, Romania

**Higher Education Taking Action Towards the Sustainable Development Goals:
 Perspectives from Asia and Europe**



Interview | Conducted by Rebekka Opsal

Taking Action at the International Level; SDGs to Reorient Internationalization

Rebekka is a Master's student in the Religion, Society and Global Issues program at MF Norwegian School of Theology, Religion and Society. She has devoted much of her time as a student to student politics, both locally as Vice President and President and nationally as a Central Board Member in the National Union of Students in Norway.

Since I started my studies at *MF Norwegian School of Theology, Religion and Society* in the fall of 2015, I have not only studied here, but also devoted time to the student democracy and worked part time in the administration. After all these years, I have come to consider MF as my second home.

It is important to me how MF conducts its many societal responsibilities as a higher education institution, among them contributing to the world becoming a better place. Especially from acting as a student representative, it is clear to me that sustainable development on a global level is an issue that matters greatly for students, researchers, and staff at MF.

Therefore, I wanted to conduct this interview with Kjetil Fretheim, Pro-Rector and Professor of Ethics and Diaconal Studies, and ask him how MF is working to contribute to reaching the sustainable development goals (SDGs) through internationalization and furthermore to make internationalization at MF more sustainable.

How are the SDGs implemented in MF's vision in terms of internationalization?

The SDGs feature as an important element in the national long-term plan for research and higher education in Norway and at MF, this is equally high on the agenda. We have stated clearly in our current strategy that MF will contribute to reduced inequalities, democratic participation and sustainable development. In terms of internationalization, this means that the SDGs give direction and profile to our international study programs, student and staff exchanges, and research activities.

Which of the SDGs are the most relevant in relation to MF's academic profile?

As a higher education institution, sustainable development goal number 4 Quality Education is especially important to MF. This is what we do: we provide quality education. But as our academic focus is on theology, religion and society, all of the SDGs are highly relevant and important in our study programs and research efforts. SDGs 1 Poverty, 5 Gender equality, 10 Reduced Inequalities, 13 Climate action and 16 Peace, justice and strong institutions could be highlighted, but you will find that students and scholars at MF engage in several, if not all, of the SDGs in different ways.

What is MF's role in reaching the SDGs?

Our main role is to provide and make high quality education accessible and relevant research available for politicians and the wider public.

Providing education and making it accessible for prospective students, is a key part of what we do. At MF we have a BA program in Theology, Religion and Society which is taught in English and thus aimed at international students. At MA level, we have several programs: MA in Religion in Contemporary society, MA in History of Religions and MA in Theology. We believe that these programs not only contribute to SDG 4 Quality Education, but also prepare and qualify our students to engage in a wide range of sustainable development issues.

In addition, our research programmes play an important role in this. Scholars at MF engage in a number of international academic networks where the SDGs are explicitly or implicitly on the agenda. One example is our research group on Migration, Minorities and Marginalization. This group focuses on refugees and minorities in Europe, with special attention to vulnerable groups such as unaccompanied minor asylum seekers, undocumented migrants and Roma. In this field we cooperate with Södertörn University in Stockholm, Sweden, and the Central European University. Other research projects at MF focus on religion and gender, climate change, education and ethics.

How has the SDGs affected MF's views on internationalization in higher education?

The SDGs have affected MF in the way that they have helped us broaden the scope and thematic focus of our international engagement. The 17 development goals concern all aspects of social life, and we see how our focus on theology, religion and society is highly relevant in relation to all of them. In this sense, it has also made us focus more clearly on the relevance of our research to address social challenges and current global issues in both education and research.

How is MF working to increase the number of students who go on exchange abroad during their studies at MF, and what is the importance of MF's students going on exchange?

We are constantly seeking and developing new programs and partnerships in order to increase this number. Recently, we have offered shorter exchange opportunities with partners in Myanmar and Brazil. We find that this has been very beneficial and unique opportunities for our students. It has given them a chance to be exposed to very different economic, social and political conditions, and to discuss the role of religion, ethnicity, democracy and migration in new ways with students and staff from other countries. These programmes have also included opportunities to do follow-up studies for both students and staff members.

From your point of view, what are the main challenges in working with the SDGs at an international level?

There are many challenges. The SDGs are many and address a wide range of complex, global issues. Many stakeholders need to be included and involved as we develop partnerships to achieve these goals. We need to come together and work together.

Research is international, so it is clear to me that MF and other higher education institutions have an important role to play.