University Social Responsibility in The Face Of The Challenges Of Climate Change: Towards A Post Covid-19 Agenda

La responsabilidad social universitaria frente a los desafíos del cambio climático: hacia una agenda post COVID-19

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Abstract

University Social Responsibility (USR) is a comprehensive university management policy that encompasses all its processes and evolves within the new context of globalization, innovation, and the knowledge economy. In the face of the challenges posed by climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic, this article analyzes the USR of universities in response to these twin crises. A qualitative social research methodology and documentary analysis were applied. Beyond their core functions (teaching, research, and outreach), universities also need to strengthen their internal and external linkages in order to implement USR as a policy of ethical quality through responsible educational, labor, and environmental management to promote sustainable development. Two priority areas of USR are explored in more detail: environmental education and communication, and the consolidation of a green campus. We argue that USR must also address inequities related to poverty and gender, as well as give voice to the most vulnerable social groups. Furthermore, we propose refocusing USR efforts in light of the major challenges currently faced by universities and society and incorporating this commitment into university planning through their mission, vision, and economic, social, and environmental strategies.

Resumen

La responsabilidad social universitaria (RSU) es una política de gestión integral de la universidad en todos sus procesos, que evoluciona en el nuevo contexto de globalización, la innovación y la economía de conocimiento. Ante los desafíos que representan el cambio climático y la pandemia COVID-19, este artículo analiza la RSU de las universidades frente a estas crisis gemelas. Se aplicó la metodología cualitativa de la investigación social y análisis documental. Aparte de sus funciones sustantivas (docencia, investigación y extensionismo), las universidades también requieren consolidar su vinculación interna y con su entorno, para realizar la RSU como una política de calidad ética mediante una gestión responsable educativa, laboral y ambiental para promover el desarrollo sustentable. Se exploran con más detalle dos vertientes prioritarias de la RSU: educación ambiental y comunicación, y consolidación de un campus verde. Consideramos que la RSU también tiene que enfocarse a las inequidades asociadas a pobreza o género, así como la voz de los grupos sociales más vulnerables. Además, proponemos reenfocar los

esfuerzos de RSU ante los importantes desafíos que actualmente enfrenta y la sociedad, así como incluir el compromiso en la planificación universitaria en su misión, visión y estrategias económicas, sociales y ambientales.

Palabras clave: Responsabilidad social universitaria, cambio climático, COVID-19, educación ambiental, comunicación, campus verde.

Códigos JEL: I23,I29, I39, Q54.

Introduction

University Social Responsibility (USR) is a comprehensive university management policy that encompasses all its processes. The USR model follows the one adopted worldwide, which understands the university's responsibility for its impacts and is reflected in international standards such as SA8000, AA1000, Global G.A.P. (for agriculture), and SGE 21–Ethical Management System–which require organizations to implement strict controls to ensure good practices (Vallaeys, 2014).

Reiser (2008) defines USR as "a policy of ethical quality in the performance of the university community (students, faculty, and administrative staff) through the responsible management of the educational, cognitive, labor, and environmental impacts generated by the university, in interactive dialogue with society to promote human development."

Many higher education observers have noted changing forces, trends, and challenges in the world. For example, Gibbons (2005) argues that universities today are affected by the new context in which they operate: "globalization, innovation, and the knowledge economy" (p. 124). Currently, climate change is one of the most pressing global environmental problems due to its significant impact on biodiversity and ecosystems, as repeatedly warned (IPCC, 2014). Associated dangers such as the melting of polar ice caps, rising sea levels, increasing temperatures, coastal flooding, wildfires, and droughts underscore the importance of promoting environmental education for climate awareness among current and future generations. The Global Risks Report 2021 ranks the failure of climate action and other environmental risks as the second greatest threat globally, following pandemics (World Economic Forum, 2021).

This calls for increasingly local actions aimed at mitigating and adapting to the impacts of climate change, and contextualizing the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) promoted by the United Nations since 2015 (Velázquez Labrada et al., 2021). Sustainable development means meeting the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own (UN, 1987). An economic and social model in which the well-being of some is guaranteed at the cost of present and future impoverishment of others is therefore "unsustainable." In this sense, among the 17 goals, Goal 4: Quality Education, aims to ensure that all learners acquire the theoretical and practical knowledge needed to promote sustainable development (UN, 2015), including responses to the challenges of climate change through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles. Goal 13: Climate Action seeks to improve education, communication, and human and institutional capacity for mitigation, adaptation, early warning, and reduction of the impacts of climate change.

By mid-century, climate challenges are expected to seriously disrupt daily activities and change the way people live around the world. In fact, many countries are already experiencing the first waves of these challenges, and many organizations are planning for projected risks (e.g., limited access to clean water, expensive and unreliable energy, floods, and natural disasters).

Even before the discovery of infectious agents in the late 19th century, it was known that climate conditions affect epidemic diseases. "The emergence and spread of COVID-19 was not only predictable but predicted [in the sense that] another viral emergence from wildlife would pose a threat to public health," said Professor Andrew Cunningham of the Zoological Society of London. A 2007 study on the 2002-03 SARS outbreak concluded that "the presence of a large reservoir of SARS-CoV-like viruses in bats, combined with the culture of eating exotic mammals in southern China, represented a ticking time bomb." Bill Gates also joined these warnings in a 2015 conference, affirming that "the next big risk of a global catastrophe" would be "a pandemic caused by a highly infectious virus that spreads rapidly worldwide and for which we are not prepared" (Ivanova, 2020).

This is further exacerbated by certain conditions

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and deficiencies, such as insufficient access to clean drinking water; mass food production; livestock and poultry farms where bacterial and viral mutations occur, creating new diseases; the rapid growth of the global population; uncontrolled expansion of urban areas with little or no sanitation services; uncontrolled deforestation that brings humans closer to pest habitats; insufficient state investment in disease surveillance, prevention, and control; and the lack of public health infrastructure and personnel needed to treat infectious diseases not only in poor and developing countries but also in wealthy nations. Furthermore, globalization and the rise of international travel and transport have become ideal vectors for rapid disease transmission.

The post-COVID-19 world must not aim to return to the "normality" that led us into this health crisis and accelerated climate change. It cannot be the same or even more unequal; and if it is, it will be a grim sign that everyone will lose. Addressing global problems at multiple levels also helps reveal disparities in how different population groups experience these effects. The COVID-19 crisis has once again shown how inequities related to poverty or gender among others, in terms of access to resources, options, and voice lead to a disproportionate burden of vulnerabilities and consequences on specific groups in society. In this sense, the role of university social responsibility is crucial.

Given this, the objective of this article is to analyze university social responsibility as a concept, its growing importance in the holistic formation of students, and to emphasize two aspects of USR that are increasingly impactful in the university's efforts to promote sustainable development and climate action in different regions and countries. These efforts aim to contribute to building a post-COVID-19 future that is more inclusive, greener, and fairer. Through a qualitative social research methodology, various methods and techniques were applied, such as analysis-synthesis, inductive-deductive reasoning, and document analysis, during the processing of bibliographic data related to university social responsibility and climate change. To achieve this goal, the first section analyzes the evolution of the concept of university social responsibility, the second presents the challenges of climate change that demand strengthened USR, and the third explores two USR branches considered as its top priorities: environmental education and communication, and the consolidation of a green campus both within and beyond the university. The article concludes with a brief set of final reflections.

Concept of University Social Responsibility (URS)

Universities have undergone a series of reforms aimed at addressing new challenges: globalization, sustainability, the knowledge society, innovation, and technological development, along with a growing emphasis on market forces as influential factors in shaping the university's identity and organization (Vasilescu et al., 2010).

Universities fulfill their responsibility to educate young people and conduct research (Martí Noguera et al., 2017). However, to these two core missions, a third one has been added: universities' commitment to society (Howard & Sharma, 2006). Today, more and more universities aim to promote and practice USR, and it is becoming one of the priority issues on the Latin American university agenda (Vallaeys, 2016).

However, we must reflect carefully on what University Social Responsibility really means and above all, what changes it implies in the traditional way universities have understood "social outreach and engagement."

The two mains purposes of the university are:

i. Human and professional development (academicista purpose) and

ii. The construction of new knowledge (research purpose), knowing that these two goals are closely interrelated, as it is through faculty research that the university builds the academic content it delivers to students for their formation.

In terms of the impacts generated by the university through its daily operations, these can be grouped into four categories:

a. Organizational functioning impacts: Like any labor organization, the university affects the lives of its administrative, academic, and student personnel (which should be managed through social welfare policies), and it also pollutes the environment (waste, deforestation, vehicle emissions, etc.).

b.   Educational impacts: The university has a direct influence on the formation of young people and professionals, on how they understand and interpret the world, behave in it, and what they value. It also influences professional ethics by shaping (consciously or not) the ethical framework of each discipline and its social role (Giuffré & Ratto, 2014).

c.   Cognitive and epistemological impacts: The university influences the production of knowledge and technologies and shapes what society recognizes as "Truth, Science, Rationality, Legitimacy, Usefulness, Teaching," etc. It reinforces fragmentation and specialization in knowledge by defining disciplinary boundaries. It mediates the relationship between technoscience and society, enabling social control of science. It may promote scientific elitism and "expertocracy," or alternatively foster the democratization of science. It also influences which issues are prioritized on the scientific research agenda.

d.   Social impacts: The university influences society and its economic, social, and political development. It shapes the future by training professionals and leaders, and acts as a social reference point and change agent, promoting progress, creating social capital, and linking student education with real-world issues. In doing so, the university's surrounding society forms a perception of its role and capacity to be a valid interlocutor in solving problems (Lo, Pang & Eqri, 2017).

These four impacts define four axes of socially responsible university management (Vallaeys, 2016):

1.   The socially responsible management of the organization itself, particularly its human, material, and environmental resources.

2.   The socially responsible management of academic training and teaching.

3.   The socially responsible management of research and the epistemological models it promotes.

4.   The socially responsible management of participation in sustainable human development of the community.
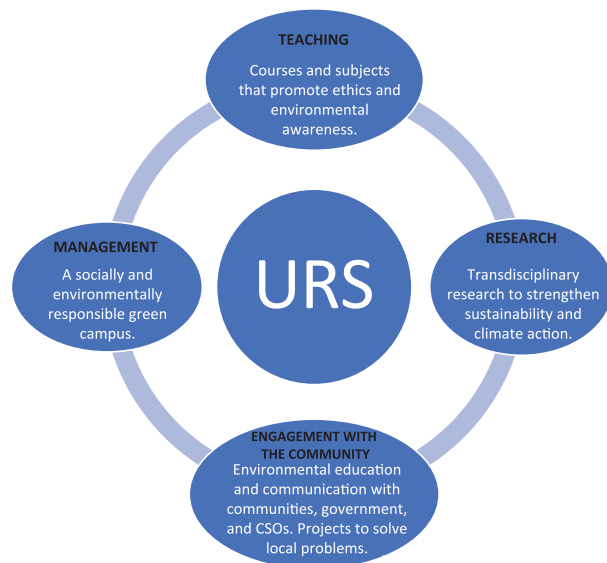
If USR is a university management strategy, it is

Figure 1. Main areas of USR. Prepared by the authors.

necessary to maintain as much as possible a holistic approach to the university organization itself and to conceive initiatives that are both interdisciplinary (in that they create synergy between various degree programs or academic departments) and intra-institutional (in that they associate several functions of the university institutional structure: administration, teaching, research, and social engagement). In this context, the concept of the green campus and its consolidation is included.

We can mention four challenges that all protagonists of University Social Responsibility initiatives will necessarily face.

a.   The challenge of the "return" of the initiative for the benefit of the university: this involves solid work in institutionalization, shared leadership, and internal communication. The question is: To what extent does our social good initiative contribute to the teaching and research work of our university?

b.   The challenge of including central administration in the academic dynamics of the university: this requires convincing administrative staff and authorities of their genuine educational role, and ceasing to separate academia and research on one side from organizational management on the other. It demands understanding that "ethics" means caring for the common space and what people do in it, not just delivering nice speeches from the lectern.

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c. The challenge of creating learning communities: this implies decentralizing and relocating the teaching-learning process by opening education to new spaces and actors outside classrooms and campus. It is not just about opening the university to society but rethinking pedagogical activity and trusting that non-university actors and non-academic situations can genuinely constitute meaningful learning dynamics for all. Social project-based learning shifts the teacher's role: from instructor to facilitator (Vallaeys, 2016).

d. The challenge of socially managing knowledge: this means realizing the university's fundamental role as an actor for social and economic progress in the "knowledge era." The new technoscientific organization of production and the enormous social impact of science require creating links between specialized scientific activity and civil society to achieve proper social control of science through a knowledge society one where citizens know and can learn continuously and are not victims of social uncommunicability of science. Currently, the university is the most appropriate organization to facilitate these articulations.

However, University Social Responsibility (USR) starts at home because the university is not immune to negative social and environmental impacts. USR is a policy of continuous improvement of university routines toward the effective fulfillment of its social mission through four processes:

1. Ethical and environmental management of the institution to avoid negative impacts;

2. Formation of conscious, innnovate, and supportive citizens;

3. Generation and communication of socially relevant knowledge and learning.

4. Social participation in promoting a more equitable and sustainable development with local actors, fostering the exchange of knowledge and learning.

The specific socially responsible strategies to achieve this improvement are: integrated participation of internal and external stakeholders in the university's mission; articulation of curricula, research, outreach, and teaching methods with solving societal problems; regular institutional self-diagnosis using appropriate measurement tools for continuous improvement; and accountability toward stakeholders.

Challenges of Climate Change

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC, 2013) in the report titled Climate Change 2013: The Physical Science Basis describes the very high probability by the end of the 21st century of increased temperatures and more heatwaves over most land areas; increased frequency, intensity, and/or amount of intense precipitation; longer and more intense droughts; increased tropical cyclone activity; and extremely high sea-level rise. Regarding water, the World Resources Institute (2015) provides a global water risk map; with sea level rise, coastal freshwater reserves are expected to become saline, flood risks will increase, and large coastal populations will be displaced. Regarding food production, warmer temperatures threaten crop production as plants need more water while fostering more insect proliferation, increasing rates of vector-borne diseases (IPCC 2014). Food costs and scarcity are expected to rise.

Global climate change presents the most urgent problems for industry, government, and civil society this century (Okereke et al., 2012). Related environmental meta-trends (e.g., reduced access to freshwater and global climate change) threaten to disrupt organizational operations due to reduced resource supply (e.g., inadequate water) and the potential displacement of the workforce and customer base (Shen et al., 2011; Wei & Fang, 2012). Climate change is expected to increase healthcare costs, disrupt access, raise costs for supply chain materials, and alter fiscal structures as the public sector attempts to cope with intensifying weather conditions and its capacity to provide infrastructure and social services support (Allen, 2016). Climate change challenges increase risks for insurers and insurance costs for organizations and individuals (Tucker, 1997; Wei & Fang, 2012). By 2050, economic impacts from extreme events and climate variability are projected to increase financial losses by up to 3.9 times current levels (Preston, 2013).

limate change is linked to carbon emissions, and dependence on fossil fuels is the main driver of rising carbon levels. Between 1854 and 2010, most emissions negatively impacting global temperature

rise are attributable to large energy-producing organizations (Heede, 2014; IPCC, 2014). Climate change is also positively associated with electricity consumption, which is expected to increase along with changing climate variability and extreme weather events (McFarland et al., 2015).

When functioning properly, solar radiation passes through our atmosphere, some is trapped, but most is reflected back into space. Increasingly, the accumulation of carbon trapped in our atmosphere hinders solar radiation from reflecting off the earth's surface and escaping our atmosphere. This change effectively allows heat in but reduces its ability to leave. The system is further complicated by the melting of more reflective ice, which allows additional heat absorption in the world's oceans and less solar radiation to be reflected (United Nations Environment Programme, 2013). Scientists worldwide have warned that the consequences for humanity could be very dangerous if global temperature rise is not kept below 2°C.

Awareness of the imminent challenges of climate change and the need to limit fossil fuel use and other carbon emissions were discussed in 2009 at the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen. These discussions set the stage for a historic meeting in Paris in winter 2015. Before December 12, 2015, 186 countries published their nationally determined commitments on how they intend to reduce their greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. "This agreement marks a change in direction toward a new world. It confirms the goal of keeping temperature rise below 2°C... The agreement even sets, for the first time, that we should aim for 1.5°C to protect island states, which are most threatened by sea-level rise" (Open Letter, 2015).

Two functions of University Social Responsibility: role for climate action

Environmental education and communication

Today, environmental problems are no longer independent but interconnected. Therefore, we must study the different social constructs of each culture regarding the environment and explain the roles acquired by the various agents involved in environmental conception and management.

Thus, environmental education, which integrally includes education for climate change, is a social practice in permanent construction aimed at providing values, strategies, and adequate knowledge to each sector of the population, responding to the needs and contingencies of the complex transitions of our time. Environmental education increases citizens' awareness and knowledge of environmental issues or problems (Parsons, 2014).

In doing so, it provides communities and policymakers with tools to make informed decisions and take responsible actions.

The main objectives of environmental education are:

• Awareness to recognize everyday problems;

• Acquisition of knowledge to develop a critical understanding of reality;

• Attitudes to promote social values and greater active participation in environmental protection and improvement;

• Development of capacities to provide the necessary problem-solving skills;

• Evaluation capacity to provide objective assessment of actions performed regarding social, ecological, political, and educational aspects;

• Participation capacity to adopt measures to solve environmental problems (Zabala & García, 2008).

The international community, governments, and citizens are realizing that the technological development that has made life comfortable can be reversed and made impossible. Pollution and conservation, once considered purely environmental issues, have become social problems linked to forms of organization, culture, and human values (Calvo & Gutiérrez, 2007).

Environmental problems humanity has witnessed in recent decades proclaim the limits of the Western civilization project and its development model based on an economic worldview. This signals the deep crisis of capitalism, which has measured its progress only through "quantitative indicators and economic growth" (Sauvé et al., 2008).

Climate change education for sustainable development began being increasingly implemented internationally during the second half of the United

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Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development, 2005–2014 (Shek et al., 2017). The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted by the global community recognize the importance of education in achieving their 2030 targets. The Global Action Programme (GAP) on Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), developed from 2015 to 2019, aimed to generate and expand ESD and accelerate progress toward sustainable development (UNESCO, 2015). Through its Education for Climate Change for Sustainable Development program, UNESCO aims to make climate change education a more central and visible part of the international response to climate change. The program seeks to help people understand the current impact of global warming and increase "climate literacy" among youth (UNESCO, 2010). To do this, it strengthens the capacity of its member states to provide quality climate change education; fosters innovative teaching approaches to integrate climate change education in schools and raise climate awareness; and improves non-formal education programs through communication, networking, and partnerships.

Researchers and professionals must think more broadly about the role of communication. Given the challenges associated with climate change, effective communication is absolutely essential for mobilization; achieving acceptance and reaching consensus on priorities. Therefore, a measure of "consensus and synergy is required across all domains; from the boardroom to the boiler room; and from federal to municipal governments" (Okereke et al. 2012, p. 26). Communication is always present "when issues related to sustainability are conceived, defined, discussed, planned, initiated within and among organizations, modified and, perhaps, terminated... and when various stakeholders engage and react to the initiatives" (Allen, 2016, p. 25). Communication is pragmatic when it educates, alerts, persuades, and helps people implement sustainability initiatives within and across organizations (Cox, 2013; Allen and Craig, 2016). Theories and research exist to guide communicators at all levels in the creation of University Social Responsibility (USR) and its dissemination throughout an organization and within interorganizational collaborations (Allen, 2016).

Communication and awareness must also be developed within universities for employees and faculty. For example, in a study on universities in Spain, Serrate et al. (2019) argue that students do not perceive that their professors are prepared to understand sustainability, and therefore even less to integrate it into classes in a transversal or specific way. Our approach focuses on how communication can be used to change the behavior of a corporate actor so that its operations better respond to key stakeholders in terms of USR and sustainability.

To promote transparency, it is important to generate reports on the medium- and long-term outcomes and plans of USR. These reports provide a mechanism to present the university's values and management model, and to demonstrate its commitment to climate action and sustainability. Going through the reporting process can help universities set and measure goals, understand the social and environmental impacts of their actions, and communicate on economic, environmental, social performance, and management issues. Senior decision-makers can use the information in the report to shape organizational strategy and policy and improve performance. However, evidence suggests that such reports are rarely read within an organization (Mitchell et al., 2012). Therefore, more studies are needed in the future to investigate how management can use the report content to drive true USR or sustainability-related changes.

One of the most powerful tools we possess is our ability to collaborate as we solve problems, plan, implement, evaluate, and redesign in a continuous process. Communication is key to successful collaboration in the areas of climate action and sustainable development (Allen, 2016). However, further research is needed on how successful cross-sector communication can lead to the creation of more resilient communities and more sustainable supply chains.

Green Campus

The importance of promoting a green campus has considerable influence on University Social Responsibility (USR) for a number of reasons. First, it promotes sustainability and climate action within the university area, while increasing efficiency and reducing management costs (Henderson et al., 2017). Second, new technologies are implemented, such as renewable energies, clean transportation, smart buildings, and waste processing, which prove useful within the campus, leading to energy savings, reduced greenhouse gas emissions, and resilience

to the impacts of extreme events developments that can later be scaled up in the broader university environment. Third, experimental use is made of new research conducted at the university, driving the development of transdisciplinary research projects related to sustainability and climate change. Fourth, students can empirically observe and participate in the implementation of solutions to climate and environmental issues; in other words, they can see the theoretical knowledge acquired in various courses or research projects applied in practice. Fifth, ethical behavior and environmental values are promoted among students, faculty, and university staff. Sixth, the positive outcomes observed in the green campus serve as examples that can be presented to politicians, decision-makers, investors, and community members to encourage the large-scale implementation of environmentally friendly and climate-action-contributing solutions in the university setting. Seventh, positive practices can be shared and implemented in other universities through the exchange of experiences between national and international institutions.

A Green Campus presents and implements measures mainly for:

• Productivity in the agricultural sector, with the environmentally responsible cultivation and growth of plants and trees, as well as sustainable practices in livestock farming, fisheries, and marine studies.

• Environmentally efficient use of potable and non-potable water on campus.

• Management of solid and non-solid waste to prevent negative impacts on the geology and air quality on campus, which could affect the health of academics and nearby communities.

• Sustainable use of alternative and non-alternative energy. This requires not only applying, practicing, researching, and creating alternatives, but also efficiently using public energy sourced from petroleum-based fuels.

• Mobility and transportation management. Universities should promote the use of sustainable transportation within their institutions through electric vehicles or infrastructure that supports walking and cycling; they should also demand quality public transportation from relevant authorities, as such services are heavily used by

large captive audiences for over nine months each year.

• Conferences, concerts, training sessions, and workshops for the community. Most of these measures focus on saving resources, improving health, and addressing the sustainability of planet Earth.

In their study of Canadian universities, Henderson et al. (2017) point out that key institutional policy statements outline several more or less concrete objectives to reduce the total fossil fuel consumption by the institution. Institutions have developed energy plans aimed at reducing total carbon dioxide emissions, including policies that aim to achieve "carbon neutrality" or a "net-zero carbon footprint."

The same study shows that many institutions also included plans related to energy-efficient buildings and changes in transportation systems within their policy statements. In the context of planning, they considered modernization of heating, ventilation, cooling, and lighting systems, as well as energy performance in the construction of new campus buildings and in campus transportation systems (Ibidem).

Conclusions

If there's one thing we must be convinced of, it is that after the pandemic, we cannot continue doing things the same way. It must be an inflection point that does not overlook the social and transformative impact that solidarity and collective cooperation demonstrated by millions of citizens around the world have had and can continue to have. Universities, as well as governments, must have learned enough to give appropriate responses to a population whose desire for change will be strengthened when this nightmare ends.

The economic model must change. The political model must change. The energy model must change. The energy transition must be forcefully pushed toward a global energy transformation. The stimulus packages that governments are announcing around the world should not only benefit large corporations but also the disadvantaged masses who need a different system and way of life.

All of the above will help us address social and environmental issues, because even after COVID-19,

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climate change will remain. In any case, a small light at the end of the tunnel tells us that something good is happening: universities and cities are declaring a climate emergency; citizen organizations, youth, and students around the world are mobilizing against climate change; climate litigation is increasing, and courageous judges are halting misguided policies.

The post-COVID-19 world is not about recovering the "normal" that led us into this health crisis and accelerated climate change. It cannot remain the same, nor unequal; if it does, it will be a bad omen in which we all lose. Addressing global problems at multiple scales also allows us to reveal the disparities in how different population groups experience impacts. The COVID-19 crisis once again reveals how inequities linked to poverty or gender among others, in terms of access to education, opportunities, and voice lead to a disproportionate burden of vulnerabilities and consequences on specific groups in society. In all these tasks, USR has a key role, by communicating knowledge, raising awareness, and collaborating with governments and communities to solve environmental and social problems (often caused by climate change).

Although evidence suggests significant movements toward climate action and sustainable development in universities, they face various obstacles in fulfilling their social role. These include a weak USR culture, lack of internal USR organization within institutions, a weak culture of giving, lack of ethical commitment to development, and the absence of specific USR measures. Today, universities should have assumed their social responsibility, as well as promoted awareness and instilled in individuals the values that make USR a natural behavior and moral obligation for all. This article proposes refocusing USR efforts in light of projected climate challenges, strengthening the role of communication and environmental education in such efforts.

Finally, the university's commitment to its social role requires the incorporation of USR into the institution's mission and vision. The university should ensure internal institutional support for USR by including it in its economic, social, and environmental dimensions within its strategic objectives and plans.

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