

Viewpoint

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Reforming academic publishing to support the sustainable development goals: a call for leadership

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Abstract

Paywalls and high article processing charges in academic publishing restrict access to scientific knowledge, limiting who can produce, use, and benefit from research. These barriers disproportionately affect researchers and institutions in low- and middle-income countries, reinforcing global inequalities in research capacity and evidence-informed policymaking. Addressing these challenges requires determined system leadership to reform funding models, expand equitable open access pathways, and ensure publicly funded research is freely available. Without coordinated action, the promise of inclusive, globally shared scientific progress central to the Sustainable Development Goals will remain unrealised.

Keywords:

Academic publishing, leadership, open access, sustainable development goals

Introduction

Access to scientific knowledge is a fundamental driver of research, innovation, equity, and progress. Yet, the dominant model of academic publishing, anchored in article processing charges (APCs) and subscription-based paywalls, creates financial barriers that exclude vast numbers of researchers, institutions, and citizens from both producing and accessing scientific information.¹ This exclusion undermines the global commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)², particularly SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequality), and SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals).

The current publishing model, by privileging those who can afford to pay to publish or read, directly contradicts the SDG ethos of inclusivity and shared progress. The SDGs call for global collaboration and equitable access to knowledge, yet the pay-to-publish and pay-to-read systems reinforce inequality between and within countries. If the international research community is serious about the SDG agenda,³ the inequities embedded in the academic publishing system must be addressed as a matter of priority, requiring coordinated system leadership that aligns policy, funding, and institutional practice across governments, funders, research performing organisations (RPOs), and international organisations.

In this paper, leadership is understood not as a single locus of authority, but as a system-level function exercised across multiple actors whose decisions jointly shape the conditions under which knowledge is produced and shared. Effective reform of academic publishing to support the SDGs therefore depends on complementary forms of leadership,

including regulatory, financial, institutional, and normative, that act on different parts of the publishing system while collectively advancing equitable access to knowledge.

The Current Landscape of Academic Publishing

Based on an open dataset of annual APC list prices from Elsevier, Frontiers, MDPI, PLOS, Springer Nature, and Wiley,³ researchers worldwide spent an estimated €7.7 billion on APCs between 2019 and 2023, with expenditures rising sharply to approximately €2.18 billion in 2023 alone.⁴ From the same dataset, it⁵ shows that the median APC for a gold open access (OA) journal providing immediate free access, but funded by APCs, in 2023 stood at approximately €1718, while hybrid journals (subscription journals offering optional OA for a fee) were closer to €2774. These figures demonstrate how the cost of participation in global science has escalated to levels unaffordable for most researchers outside well-resourced institutions, to the point that some researchers may not even be able to publish their findings.¹

It is important to acknowledge that proponents of APC-based and subscription publishing models frequently emphasise their role in supporting financial sustainability, editorial services, and quality assurance, including the coordination of peer review. Also, in some contexts, APC-funded OA can increase readership compared with purely subscription-based models, particularly where institutional agreements or national consortia absorb costs.⁶ However, these arguments do not negate concerns about systemic inequity. High APCs, fragmented waiver systems, and uneven institutional oversight can exacerbate the proliferation of predatory journals, which undermine both research quality and

equitable participation.⁷ These risks underscore the need for system leadership to steer publishing systems towards models that preserve quality while avoiding the exclusionary effects associated with high fees, fragmented waiver systems, and uneven institutional capacity. Without such leadership, the risk remains that cost-based access mechanisms will continue to shape whose knowledge contributes to global SDG agendas.

While the share of gold OA articles increased from 14% in 2014 to 40% in 2024,⁸ most scientific knowledge remains accessible only to those with institutional subscriptions or personal means.⁹ Notwithstanding this growth in OA publishing, approximately 75% of scholarly documents across all disciplines remain locked behind paywalls.¹⁰ These realities contradict the vision of universal access to knowledge and technology transfer embedded within the SDG agenda.

The financial structure of the publishing ecosystem has effectively commercialised the dissemination of knowledge. Wealthier institutions and nations can afford both to publish and to read, while poorer ones face dual exclusion. The result is an uneven global knowledge economy that favours those already in positions of power and resources, thereby reinforcing systemic inequalities in research and innovation.

Implications for Sustainable Development

This viewpoint does not seek to attribute specific SDG outcomes directly to publishing models but rather to articulate the system-level mechanisms through which access to knowledge shapes participation, visibility, and evidence availability for policymaking.

At a system level, inequities in publishing can have profound effects on the SDGs. Article

processing charges and paywalls limit who can contribute to, and benefit from, global knowledge production. Researchers from low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) frequently lack access to institutional funds to cover APCs, resulting in their underrepresentation in international journals.¹¹ This exclusion weakens the diversity of scientific discourse and contradicts the principle of ‘no one will be left behind’ that underpins the SDGs.²

While APCs do not function uniformly as direct barriers at the individual researcher level, given variations in institutional support, funder coverage, and waiver schemes, they operate as system-level constraints that shape participation and visibility across the research ecosystem. These dynamics affect whose evidence informs policy debates, whose research is discoverable, and whose perspectives are represented in global knowledge flows. In this way, publishing barriers influence SDG outcomes indirectly but materially, by restricting access to the knowledge base required for evidence-informed policymaking in areas such as health, education, and environmental governance.¹²

While the current publishing system imposes barriers, it is important to recognise that LMICs are not homogeneous. Research systems across these contexts are highly heterogeneous, and significant leadership in OA publishing has emerged from regions such as Latin America, parts of Africa, and Asia, including non-APC, publicly funded infrastructures such as SciELO and Redalyc.¹³ These examples illustrate that even within resource-constrained settings, alternative models and leadership can expand access and participation, offering practical lessons for broader reform.

Nonetheless, the current model also stifles innovation. When access to research is

restricted, scientists and policymakers in resource-limited settings are unable to build upon existing knowledge. This not only slows progress in addressing global challenges such as health, economics, and climate adaptation, but also impedes the collaborative exchange of solutions across borders.

By commodifying access to knowledge, the academic publishing model undermines SDG 4's objective of inclusive education, SDG 9's emphasis on innovation, SDG 10's aim to reduce inequality, and SDG 17's vision of global partnership. In this sense, the economics of academic publishing is fundamentally misaligned with the SDG agenda.

The Role of Leadership in Enabling Change

Leadership in reforming academic publishing should be understood as system leadership, exercised across interconnected actors rather than as the responsibility of any single institution. In this context, leadership operates through distinct but complementary forms: regulatory leadership by governments and public authorities through legislation, mandates, and procurement rules; financial leadership by research funders through funding conditions, eligibility criteria, and sustained investment in non-commercial publishing infrastructure; institutional leadership by RPOs through promotion, evaluation, and researcher support structures that reward equitable publishing practices; and normative leadership by international organisations and scholarly communities through standard-setting, coordination, and the legitimisation of alternative models. These forms of leadership translate into systemic change not through isolated actions but through aligned mechanisms that reshape incentives,

redistribute costs, and establish shared expectations around access to knowledge. Framed in this way, leadership functions as an operational function for addressing publishing barriers that undermine progress towards the SDGs, rather than as a purely aspirational appeal.

From a system leadership perspective, the central challenge is not the absence of initiatives, but the lack of alignment across them. Governments, funders, RPOs, and international organisations each exert influence over different components of the publishing ecosystem, yet reforms often proceed in parallel rather than in coordination. Where leadership is fragmented, measures intended to improve access may produce uneven outcomes or simply shift costs without reducing inequity. Effective leadership therefore requires deliberate coordination across policy, funding, and institutional practice, ensuring that commitments to equitable access are mutually reinforcing rather than symbolic.

While several initiatives have begun to promote OA, significant gaps remain. Programmes such as Plan S in Europe require publicly funded research to be made freely accessible, and many RPOs maintain institutional repositories to facilitate open dissemination.¹⁴ These efforts demonstrate that governments, RPOs, and international organisations can function as catalysts for reform. However, variations in scope, enforcement, and institutional capacity illustrate how leadership that is not consistently applied across actors and jurisdictions can dilute impact, underscoring the need for sustained implementation and oversight.

Leadership within academia and publishing itself is essential. Institutional leaders and research funders can establish new models for financing OA that do not rely on high

APCs. Such models could involve collaborative publishing platforms, cross-subsidisation, or collective agreements that distribute costs equitably across institutions and countries. In addition, encouraging the routine use of preprints can provide a baseline level of access even where final publications remain paywalled, while recognising that disciplinary norms and evaluation practices shape how effective this route can be. Taken together, these approaches illustrate how system leadership can translate into practical, context-sensitive reforms that expand access to knowledge while maintaining quality and integrity, in support of SDG-aligned research systems.

Policy Pathways and Recommendations

Aligning academic publishing with the SDGs will require coordinated system-level policy action. Governments should introduce mandates requiring that research funded by public money be made available OA without prohibitive costs to researchers. While such requirements exist in some high-income countries, many LMICs lack equivalent policies, leaving researchers in these regions at a disadvantage. International funding agencies could create pooled funds to support equitable OA, particularly targeting under-resourced researchers and institutions in LMICs. Currently, such pooled funding is rare and concentrated in wealthier nations.

These policy pathways are not cost-neutral and will encounter political, fiscal, and institutional constraints. Reallocating funds towards pooled or non-commercial OA models implies trade-offs within national research budgets and is likely to face resistance from commercial publishers and stakeholders

invested in existing revenue structures. However, emerging initiatives such as the Action Plan for Diamond OA demonstrate that coordinated, funder-led approaches can incrementally shift financing models without relying on researcher-facing fees, providing a pragmatic reference point for implementation.¹⁵

Equally important is investment in non-commercial OA infrastructure. Although platforms like *arXiv*, *bioRxiv*, and *Zenodo* provide valuable free access, coverage remains uneven across disciplines and regions. Many researchers in LMICs face barriers to participation, limiting equitable global knowledge dissemination.

Collaborative agreements between RPOs, governments, and publishers could reduce the financial barriers to publication. However, these agreements are often limited to wealthy institutions, leaving many researchers excluded from the benefits. System leadership is required to ensure that such agreements are designed and implemented to maximise equity, transparency, and sustainability.

These efforts must be anchored in international cooperation. Global frameworks that establish minimum standards for openness, transparency, and affordability would ensure that knowledge circulates freely and that all countries can contribute to, and benefit from, global scientific progress. At present, international frameworks such as UNESCO's recommendation on open science provide guidance, but compliance is voluntary, and enforcement is uneven, with many countries and institutions excluded from the full benefits.¹⁶ Embedding SDG-aligned principles into these frameworks can strengthen their impact, ensuring that access, equity, and participation are not merely aspirational but

operationalised across the global research ecosystem.

Conclusion

The world cannot achieve the SDGs while much of its collective knowledge remains restricted behind paywalls and high publication charges. The structural inequities run counter to the SDG agenda for inclusion, innovation, equality, and partnership. Addressing these inequities is not merely a technical adjustment to publishing practices, but it is an ethical imperative that lies at the heart of sustainable development.

Effective reform depends on system leadership across governments, funders, RPOs, and international organisations. Coordinated action, clear incentives, and aligned policies are required to reshape incentives, redistribute costs, and establish shared expectations around equitable access to knowledge. Only by dismantling the financial barriers to scientific communication can we ensure that the pursuit of knowledge truly serves humanity's collective progress and contributes meaningfully to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

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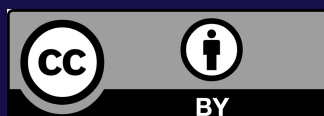
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