

Sustainability and Well-Being in Under-Globalized Countries: Post-Pandemic Perspectives

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Abstract. *This paper explores how globalisation and sustainability influence well-being in the period following the COVID-19 pandemic, paying particular attention to countries with limited integration into global systems. The pandemic brought numerous economic and social weaknesses into sharp focus, prompting a renewed discussion around the importance of sustainable development in supporting recovery efforts. A central aim of the research is to understand the extent to which economic globalisation and sustainability measures have shaped living standards and financial resilience in the aftermath of the crisis.*

In the "Literature Review" section, the study undertakes a thorough bibliometric examination of existing academic sources, identifying both newer lines of inquiry and longstanding theoretical contributions that continue to shape the discourse. Noteworthy among these are the works of Goodland (1995) on environmental sustainability, Scoones (2007) on the conceptual landscape of sustainability, and Tisdell (2001), who links globalisation to environmental and trade-related dynamics through the lens of the Environmental Kuznets Curve.

By adopting this bibliometric perspective, the study maps out how thinking around globalisation and sustainability has evolved, both conceptually and in practice. Particular emphasis is placed on how these themes have been reinterpreted in light of the global health crisis. A comparative approach is also employed to investigate how differing levels of globalisation influence the effectiveness of sustainability policies, using selected case studies drawn from less-globalised national contexts.

The research is further strengthened by an econometric analysis designed to uncover how sustainability initiatives interact with macroeconomic variables in the post-pandemic landscape. Panel data models are applied to capture both temporal trends and country-specific nuances, offering a more grounded understanding of how nations are managing the shift towards more sustainable economic models in the face of recovery-related pressures.

Keywords: Globalisation, Sustainability, Well-being, Post-pandemic, Economic recovery, Macroeconomic stability.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic did more than just cause economic disruption—it exposed vulnerabilities that had long existed beneath the surface of global systems. In this study, I explore how globalisation and sustainability intersect in shaping the well-being of people living in countries that are, for the most part, outside the main channels of global economic integration.

Rather than taking a broad or general approach, my focus stays on countries that, due to limited exposure to international markets, tend to experience recovery in a different rhythm compared to more globally embedded economies. The pandemic brought their unique structural limitations into sharp focus, raising urgent questions about how recovery efforts can be made both more effective and more sustainable.

This research takes a closer look at the ways in which globalisation—economic, mostly—and sustainability policies together influence outcomes like quality of life and macroeconomic stability. To ground the analysis, I drew on a wide range of recent academic literature. Through a

bibliometric lens, I traced key ideas, frequently cited works, and thematic shifts, particularly in post-2020 publications.

Case studies from countries with minimal global entanglement were especially useful in showing just how varied recovery strategies have been. These examples revealed clear contrasts—not just in how nations define sustainability, but also in how they apply it under the strain of economic uncertainty and limited international support.

A core part of the study includes econometric modelling, used here to examine how sustainability policies affect core macroeconomic indicators such as GDP per capita, inflation, and trade balance figures. The panel model I’ve used helps capture country-level differences as well as how these effects play out over time.

What stands out in the literature is how much of the conversation still centres on highly globalised countries. There’s surprisingly little consensus—or even consistent focus—on what recovery and resilience look like in places with fewer international ties. And yet, these are precisely the environments where the impact of external shocks, like COVID-19, is often most severe.

By highlighting how these less-connected nations have approached recovery—what’s worked, what hasn’t—this study contributes to filling that gap. I’ve tried not just to measure outcomes, but to explore the thinking behind different national responses.

In sum, this work offers two things: an in-depth look at the economic responses of countries outside the mainstream of globalisation, and a reflection on how sustainability measures have been adapted (sometimes improvised) in pursuit of long-term economic and social stability.

I combined both qualitative and quantitative methods to gain a more rounded understanding. My goal wasn’t to produce perfect models or generalised theories, but rather to provide grounded insights—ones that reflect the messiness and diversity of post-pandemic recovery as it actually happens.

Literature review

The Evolution of Globalisation and its Impact on the Well-being of Populations

Globalisation has undeniably shaped the lives of people across the world — though not in equal measure. Following World War II, global markets opened up, and corporations began operating across borders with greater ease (Gindin & Panitch, 2012). While this led to rapid economic growth and improved living conditions in many places, the benefits were distributed unevenly. Countries on the periphery of global integration often found themselves falling further behind.

In recent decades, our understanding of well-being has expanded beyond simple economic output. It’s no longer just about GDP — concepts like social fairness, ecological responsibility, and quality of life now play a key role (Lambin, 2014). On one hand, multinational companies have reduced production costs by relocating operations, but on the other, this has sometimes come at the expense of environmental sustainability. Resource depletion and pollution, as Brondoni (2014) notes, have lasting consequences for public well-being.

In more developed states, rising living standards have often gone hand-in-hand with mounting social and environmental pressures. Meanwhile, in less-globalised economies, things look rather different. These nations frequently face a mix of obstacles — lack of infrastructure, weak institutional capacity, and exclusion from global value chains. As a result, they’re more vulnerable to the negative side-effects of global economic fluctuations and tend to struggle to reap the benefits.

What I found particularly striking in the literature is how limited access to capital, technology, and external markets creates a kind of economic isolation. Globalisation opens doors,

but for some countries, those doors remain mostly shut. And without meaningful investment or innovation, sustainable development becomes much harder to achieve.

Far from being lifted by globalisation, many such economies find themselves further marginalised. This, in turn, feeds into a cycle of underdevelopment: essential services like healthcare and education remain underfunded, and quality of life stagnates. The idea of transitioning to a greener, more sustainable model sounds promising, but the reality is that it often remains out of reach.

Methodology

In designing this study, I wanted to approach the topic from more than one angle. To begin with, I carried out a bibliometric analysis using VOSviewer, focusing on research published between 2010 and 2023. This helped establish a strong theoretical foundation, highlighting the major debates and recurring themes in areas such as sustainability, globalisation, and economic recovery.

We extracted keywords from the titles and abstracts of over 5,000 peer-reviewed articles sourced from the Scopus database. Editorials and papers that lacked empirical content were excluded. The analysis helped map not only the evolution of thought across disciplines but also collaboration networks between scholars, which was a helpful layer in understanding how knowledge is shared in this space.

Following that, the research moved into a more quantitative phase. Using RStudio, I applied an econometric panel model based on macroeconomic data collected from ten countries with lower levels of globalisation — as classified by the 2024 KOF Globalisation Index. The countries included Slovakia, Singapore, Estonia, Lithuania, the USA, Croatia, Slovenia, Poland, Malta, and Malaysia.

The goal here was to detect patterns across different economies and to see how sustainability policies have influenced indicators such as GDP per capita, inflation, and trade balance over the past decade. The model enabled me to capture both year-on-year changes and national particularities. What emerged was a more layered picture of how low-globalisation states have adapted — or struggled to adapt — in the post-pandemic environment.

Some of the key questions guiding this research were quite straightforward, though not always easy to answer:

- How do economic globalisation and sustainability initiatives influence the well-being of populations in countries with low levels of globalisation, particularly after a global shock like COVID-19?
- To what extent do globalisation and sustainability affect macroeconomic stability differently across various national contexts?
- And finally, what concrete strategies have these countries adopted to achieve a form of sustainable recovery?

For the timeframe, I looked at 2013 to 2023 — a decade that includes both pre- and post-pandemic economic shifts. This allowed for a clearer understanding of how financial dynamics evolved across three key stages: before COVID, during the pandemic, and in its aftermath.

The variables I worked with were chosen based on their relevance to both sustainability and macroeconomic health. These included GDP, unemployment, investment in green technologies, and emissions reduction. I also paid special attention to trade indicators and resource efficiency metrics, which turned out to be useful in illustrating how globalisation links to long-term financial sustainability.

One of the most useful tools throughout this analysis was the KOF Globalisation Index, which helped pinpoint which countries had relatively low levels of integration. This, in turn, helped narrow down where to look and how to interpret the national strategies. I also added metrics around responsible finance and green investment, given their growing importance in the sustainability debate.

By combining both qualitative mapping and econometric analysis, the methodology adopted here offers a more rounded view. It's not a perfect picture, of course — no single model can capture everything — but the dual approach did help surface insights that might otherwise have been missed.

Results and discussions

Globalisation, with its economic, cultural, and technological dimensions, has reshaped how countries interact — but it hasn't done so evenly. Its impact on people's well-being and national economic stability is far from uniform. When assessing what this process means in practice, it's not enough to look at GDP growth alone. We also have to consider resource distribution, income inequality, and how economies respond to shifts in global markets.

What struck me early in this analysis was how much the conversation around globalisation still centres on a handful of dominant economies. That said, in this chapter, I wanted to take a more grounded approach — beginning with a bibliometric overview of the research landscape using VOSviewer. Over 5,000 articles from the Scopus database were analysed, focusing on terms in abstracts, titles, and keywords.

This subchapter reflects on the methods I used to do that, while also highlighting some of the key academic voices in the field and mapping out how scholarly networks have evolved. What emerged was a picture not just of overlapping disciplines, but also of recurring ideas — sustainability, inequality, and economic resilience among them.

Digging deeper into the data, I noticed recurring clusters of thought around a few core areas: environmental sustainability, income distribution, labour market trends, and cross-border investment flows. These are not new topics, but the way they're being linked to globalisation has changed, especially in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis. One thing I didn't expect was how often climate-related terms appeared alongside trade and growth concepts — that intersection has clearly gained more traction in recent years.

Another thing that stood out was the relatively sparse coverage of smaller economies or countries with low global integration. Much of the literature is still dominated by case studies from the Global North or major emerging markets like China, Brazil, and India. This leaves a knowledge gap, especially when trying to understand how globalisation functions at the margins — in economies that may be politically stable but economically peripheral.

That's part of what motivated my focus in this study: the idea that weakly globalised economies might offer a different lens on resilience, sustainability, and adaptation. These countries often face different pressures — limited access to global capital, fewer research institutions, and smaller domestic markets — and as a result, their strategies for economic stability are shaped by different constraints. The way sustainability is defined and implemented in these contexts may look very different from the frameworks promoted by highly integrated economies.

The bibliometric approach helped me trace these shifts over time. I was able to visualise how certain themes gained prominence — like "green growth" or "inclusive development" — and which ideas remained more peripheral. Collaboration patterns between researchers also revealed a tendency for academic silos: environmental researchers don't always publish with economists, and

vice versa. That lack of interdisciplinary exchange might explain why some sustainability strategies remain fragmented or poorly implemented.

Overall, this phase of the research served as both a map and a mirror: it pointed toward dominant patterns in the literature while also reflecting the unevenness in who gets to frame the globalisation debate. The goal here wasn't to draw final conclusions but to set the stage for more empirical work — the kind that brings those abstract relationships between sustainability, well-being, and globalisation down to a measurable level.

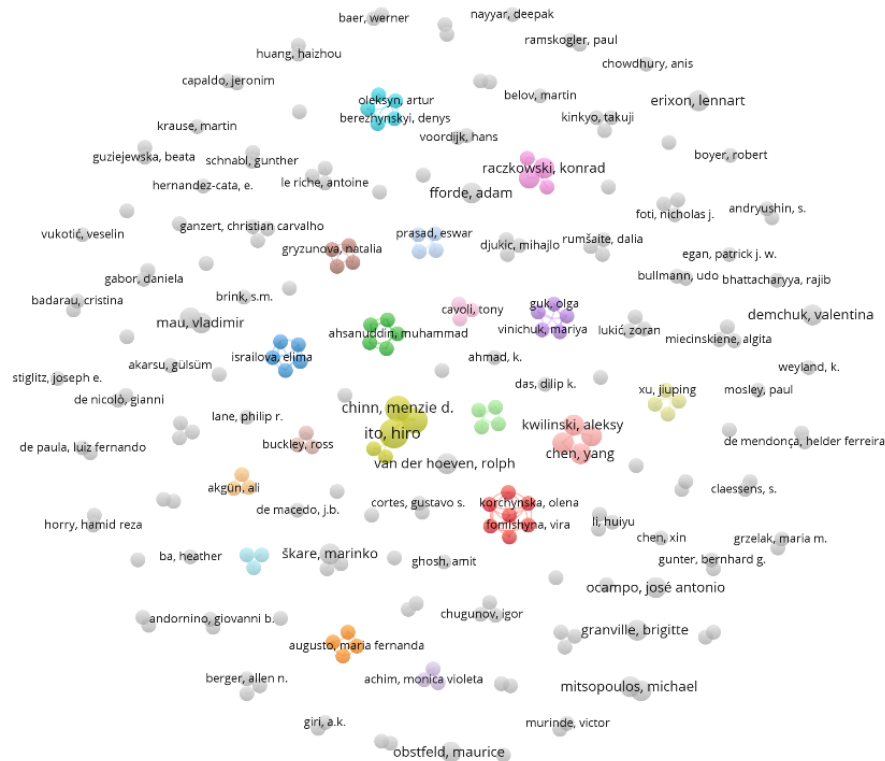


Figure 1. Bibliometric analysis of all authors who have published on the topics of Globalization and Sustainability

Source: Own processing using VOSviewer software.

Figure 1 gives us a look at who's working with whom in the academic space around globalisation and macroeconomic stability. Authors like Chinn Menzie D. and Ito Hiro appeared frequently and were well connected across clusters. That kind of centrality might suggest they've played a key role in shaping discussions.

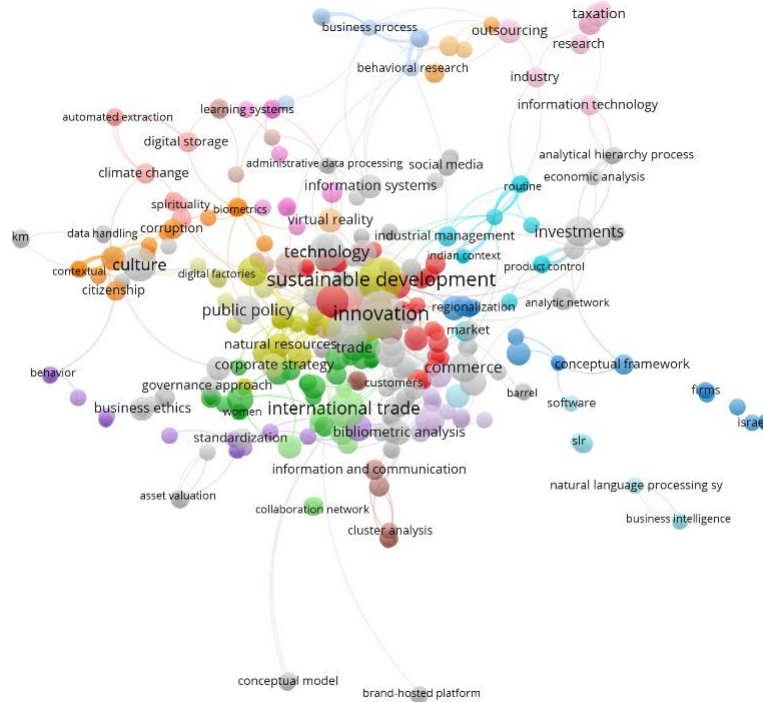


Figure 2. Bibliometric analysis of the most frequently addressed areas in the context of globalisation
Source: Own processing using VOSviewer software.

In the second figure, I mapped out the topics that come up most in globalisation-related studies. Unsurprisingly, terms like sustainable development, international trade, and technological innovation took centre stage. These topics tend to appear together, suggesting an ongoing academic effort to link global market integration with long-term development and innovation.

Figure 3 digs deeper into which indicators researchers use when trying to connect globalisation with sustainability. Things like regional convergence or export performance highlight the importance of infrastructure and trade capacity. At the same time, terms such as patents and innovation point to the growing significance of technology and intellectual property.

What I found especially telling was how frequently environmental terms cropped up: ecological footprint, carbon emissions, sustainability metrics — they show that the debate isn't just economic. It's increasingly tied to the environment, especially when growth comes at a cost to natural systems.

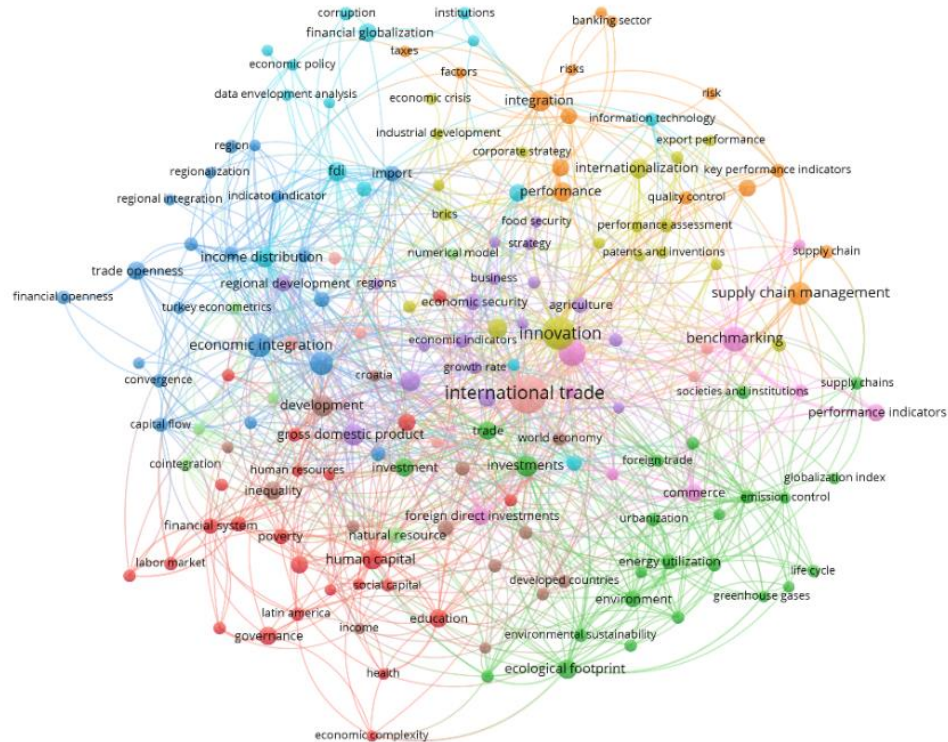


Figure 3. Bibliometric analysis of the most frequently mentioned indicators related to globalisation and sustainability

Source: Own processing using VOSviewer software.

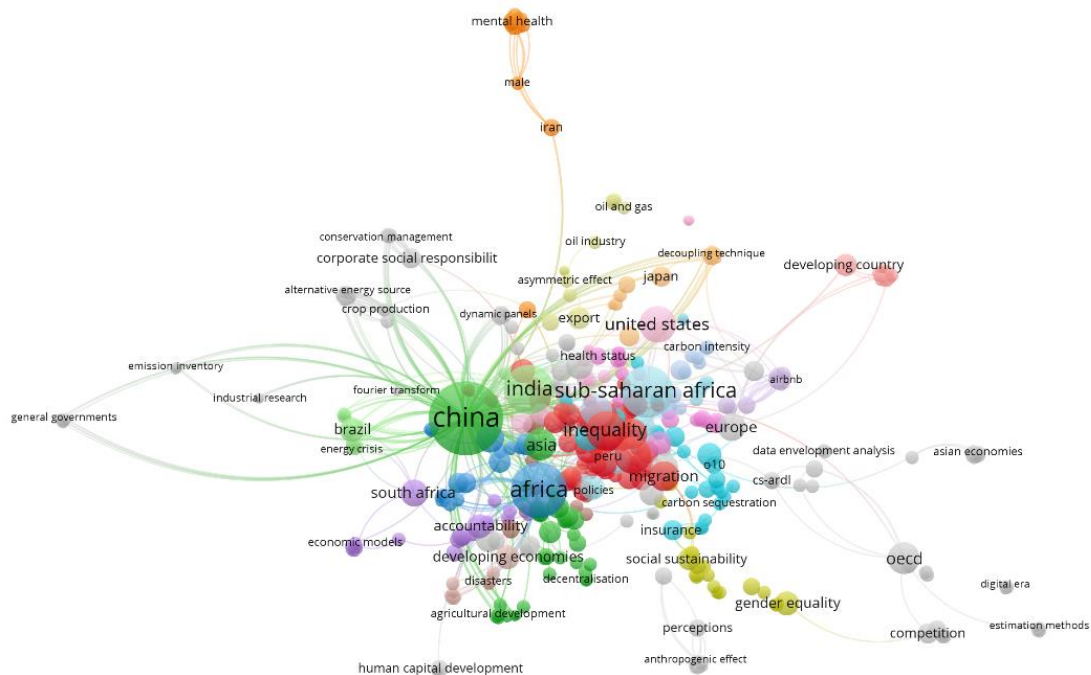


Figure 4. Bibliometric analysis of the keywords: globalisation, country, quality of life, poverty

Source: Own processing using VOSviewer software.

Figure 4 brings the idea of "asymmetric effects" into focus. Simply put, globalisation doesn't impact everyone the same way. Countries in Sub-Saharan Africa or Southeast Asia, for example, don't experience global flows in the same way the US or Japan might. Keywords like poverty, quality of life, and health disparities come up a lot — and they reveal how economic status shapes outcomes.

There's also an interesting thread around CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) and social sustainability, which shows that scholars are thinking about more than just profit. Environmental concerns — from carbon intensity to renewables— surface here too, underlining the tension between economic ambition and ecological limits.

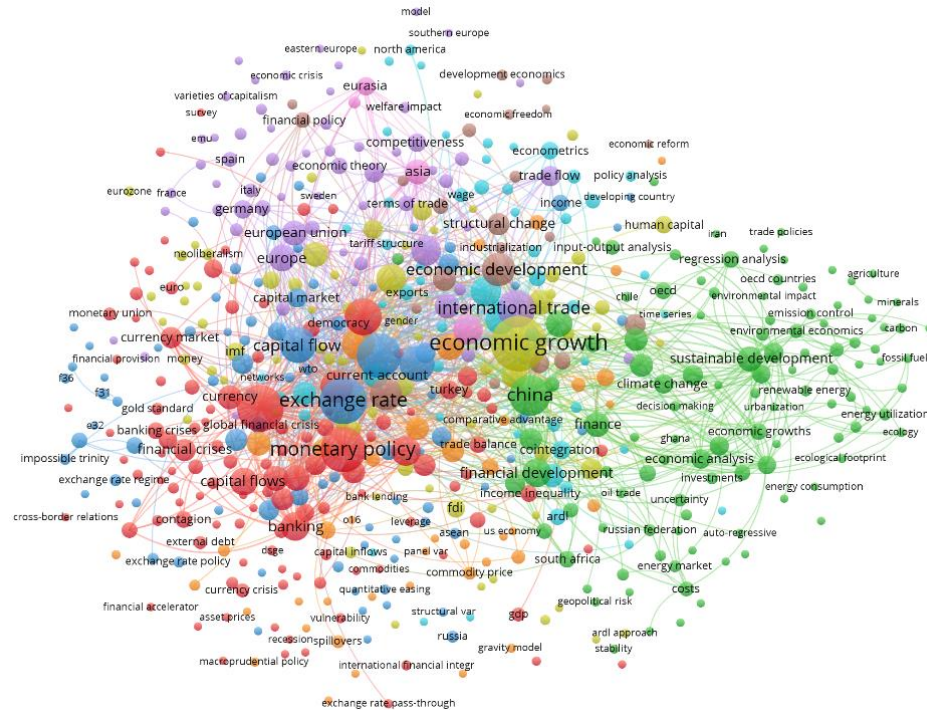


Figure 5. Bibliometric analysis of keywords: globalisation, monetary policies, trade balance

Source: Own processing using VOSviewer software.

Figure 5 shifts the lens to macroeconomic policy. What stood out were clusters linking monetary policy, trade balances, and crises like the one in 2008 or the more recent pandemic. These maps highlight how financial systems are tightly interwoven and how shocks travel.

Keywords like industrialization, tariff structure, and comparative advantage also appear, reinforcing the idea that countries still rely heavily on strategic trade planning. And as always, the environmental layer persists — climate change, footprint analysis, and sustainability metrics continue to surface.

To move from theory to data, I selected 10 countries with relatively low globalisation scores based on the KOF Index. These included Slovakia, Singapore, Estonia, Lithuania, the United States, Croatia, Slovenia, Poland, Malta, and Malaysia. The study focused on the period from 2013 to 2023, aiming to capture trends before, during, and after the pandemic.

I applied three Gaussian Graphical Models (GGMs) using RStudio to examine the interactions among economic and sustainability indicators. The process relied on Bayesian inference (EBIC) and the EBICglasso method to isolate meaningful patterns while minimising noise.

We worked with a wide range of indicators — from GDP growth and employment to urbanisation, imports/exports, and trade balances. Social variables, like youth unemployment and government spending on services, were also included.

One thing that became clear was that countries with lower globalisation levels showed greater sensitivity to shifts in environmental investment and green policy adoption. This aligns with the idea that sustainability isn't just a matter of economic capacity, but also of political will and institutional flexibility.

The final models offered a kind of map — not perfect, of course, but useful — showing how different factors correlate with long-term macroeconomic stability and social well-being. My aim is that this analysis brings us a bit closer to understanding how sustainability can be meaningfully pursued, even outside the traditional centres of global economic power.

Table 1. Interdependence between descriptive statistical indicators and economic and socio-demographic variables

Descriptive Statistics						
	Valid	Median	Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
URB	219	77.260	77.696	43.634	53.330	686.900
GDP	219	417.110	1765.742	4602.399	10.550	27357.830
GDP/CAP	220	44445.265	40164.100	22552.049	43.110	100413.170
GDP GROWTH	106	2.115	1.923	4.191	-10.360	13.790
EMP	191	4.830	890.637	3542.366	0.190	16120.600
UNEMP	220	5.805	6.223	2.457	2.880	17.290
YOUTH UNEMP	220	12.300	14.319	6.986	2.930	50.030
INFL	220	1.500	2.442	3.183	-1.140	19.450
IMP	220	171.525	355.846	570.882	5.720	3371.750
EXP	220	168.725	298.479	379.356	2.610	2065.160
TRADE BAL	220	-0.130	-41.853	228.893	-1306.590	287.020
DEBT	100	285.080	2096.912	6208.242	2.570	30899.570
DEBT/GDP	114	67.925	69.944	31.172	8.490	162.140
MIL/GDP	200	1.350	1.538	0.748	0.440	4.030
GOV/GDP	100	44.990	43.768	10.241	14.010	61.350
BUG/GDP	106	-2.450	-2.593	3.662	-14.900	4.130
KOF	180	84.500	84.856	4.207	77.000	91.000

Source: Own data processing using Rstudio software.

The main indicators used in the descriptive analysis are summarised in the table discussed earlier. Rather than just listing values, I tried to build a broader understanding of how these figures behave across countries and over time. This form of descriptive mapping allowed me to see more than just numbers — it began to show patterns, outliers, and relationships that hint at deeper trends in well-being, sustainability, and economic resilience.

All statistical analysis was carried out using RStudio, focusing on basic descriptive metrics such as the mean, median, standard deviation, and range. These metrics were calculated for each variable to offer a clear overview of distribution and variability. One detail that caught my attention was the "GDP" indicator. With a mean of 1,765.74 and a standard deviation of over 4,600, the disparity between economies becomes immediately visible. That kind of spread tells us that

comparing national economies directly without context can be misleading — there's a significant range in terms of economic output, and that gap has consequences.

This kind of variation also has implications for sustainability. In countries where GDP is low or highly unstable, implementing sustainable practices becomes more difficult. Conversely, higher-income nations may have the resources but not always the political will or urgency. It's this dynamic — between capacity and intent — that deserves closer attention.

Indicators like renewable energy use, CO₂ emissions, and investment in green infrastructure serve as proxies for understanding how economic development intersects with environmental responsibility. What I found revealing here was how uneven that intersection really is. In some countries, economic growth goes hand-in-hand with rising sustainability metrics; in others, the two appear to operate in isolation.

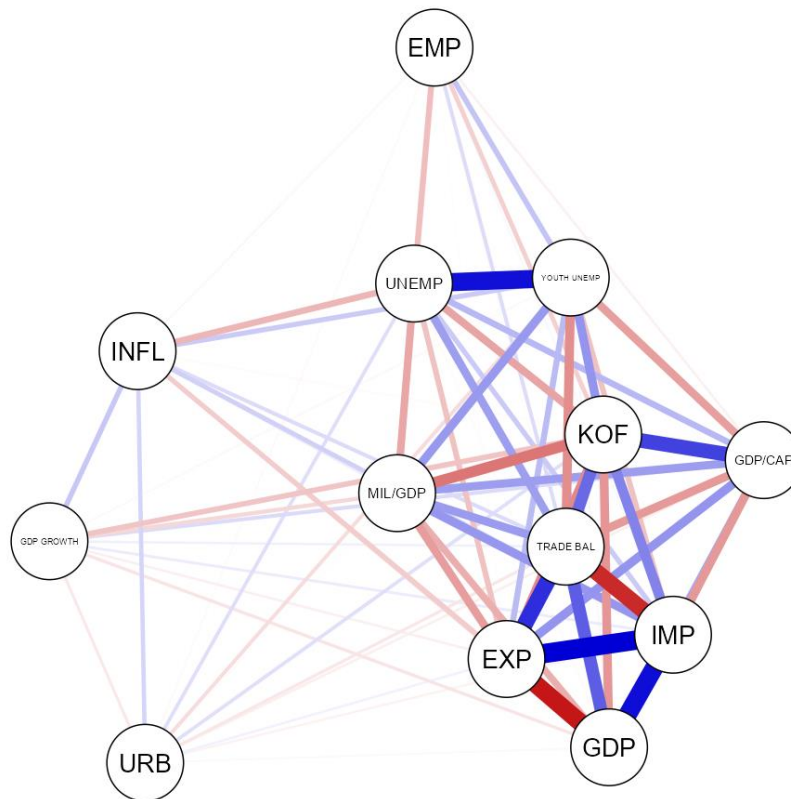


Figure 6. Interrelationship between dominant indicators through the Gaussian model EBICglasso

Source: Own data processing using Rstudio software.

Figure 6 presents a network diagram constructed using the Gaussian Graphical Model (GGM) and the EBICglasso method. Each node represents a macroeconomic or sustainability variable, and the edges illustrate direct relationships between them, filtered for the influence of other variables. This method gave me a cleaner sense of what's truly connected, beyond superficial correlation.

One thing that stood out was the strong link between exports (EXP) and imports (IMP) — no surprise there, but the thickness of the connecting line confirmed their co-dependence. Similarly, connections between GDP and the KOF Globalisation Index reaffirmed the theory that global integration correlates strongly with economic scale.

The model also highlighted interesting links in the labour market space. Variables like unemployment (UNEMP) and youth unemployment (YOUTH UNEMP) clustered closely with employment (EMP), showing how shifts in one part of the labour market ripple through the rest. From a sustainability perspective, these labour trends are crucial, especially in developing countries where employment directly relates to public health and living standards.

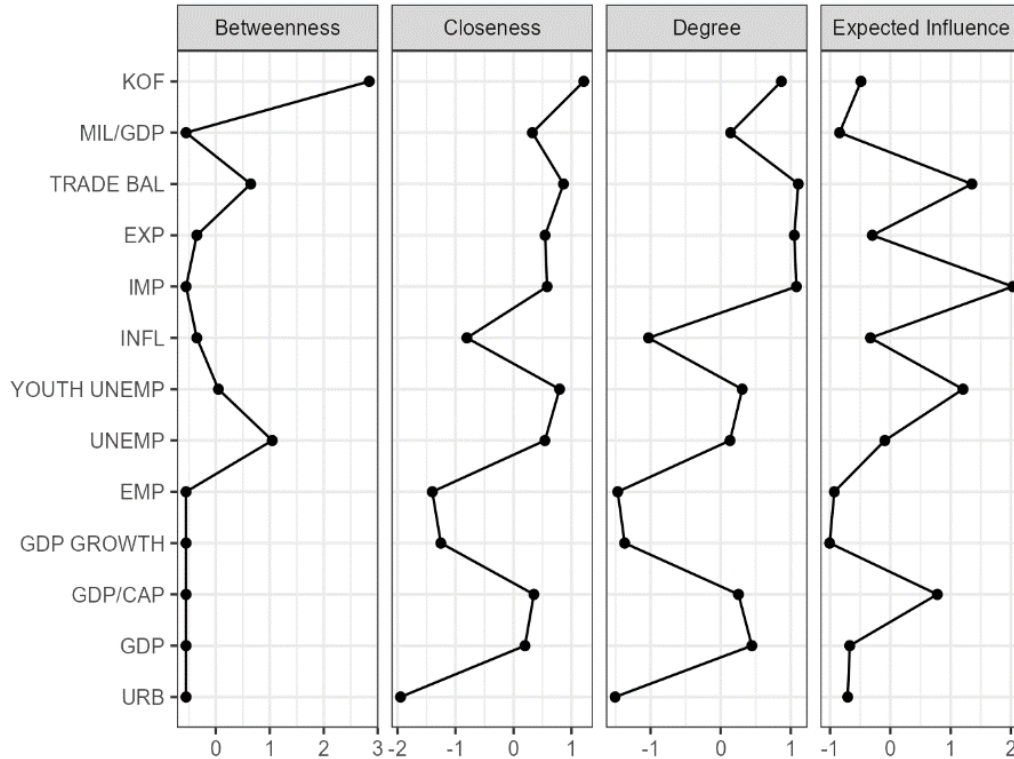


Figure 7. How economic variables play a role in networks: an approach by measuring centrality

Source: Own data processing using Rstudio software.

In Figure 7, the focus shifts to centrality measures — tools that show how influential certain variables are within the economic network. The metrics used here include betweenness, degree, and eigenvector centrality. Betweenness was particularly useful, as it pointed to variables that act like bridges within the system. For example, the KOF Index appears central in connecting unrelated areas like military spending and trade balance.

Degree centrality, on the other hand, showed which variables are most connected. Unsurprisingly, trade balance, KOF, and MIL/GDP were near the top. Others, like GDP per capita or urbanisation, had fewer links, which suggests that while they're important, they may not be as structurally influential in the network as one might assume.

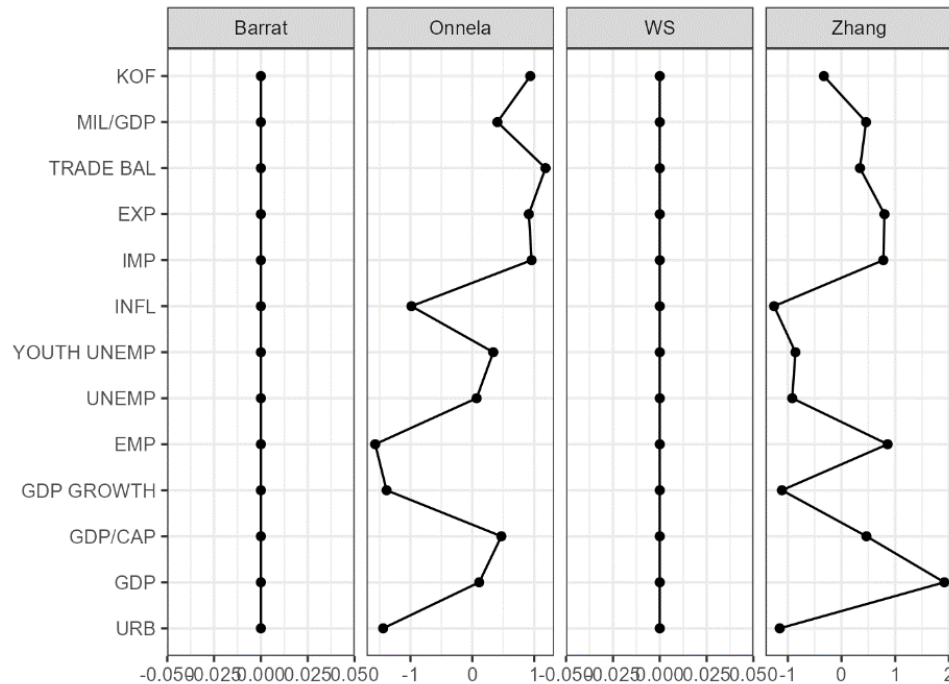


Figure 8. How to differentiate clustering methods in the economic network: Barrat, Onnala, WS and Zhang

Source: Own data processing using Rstudio software.

Figure 8 introduces a new layer to the analysis by comparing different clustering algorithms — Barrat, Onnala, WS, and Zhang. I was initially sceptical about how much these would add, but they turned out to be surprisingly helpful in identifying hidden relationships.

The Barrat method, in particular, revealed that financial variables tend to be spread out, not forming clear centralised clusters. That told me that economic indicators don't necessarily converge around a single node — they operate in more fragmented ways. Yet, other methods, like Zhang, hinted at more cohesive clusters around specific variables like youth unemployment and trade balance.

These insights matter because they help bridge theory and policy. For example, if trade balance and social outcomes like youth employment consistently cluster together, it might suggest that trade policy has a bigger role in social stability than usually acknowledged. The aim here wasn't to prove causation but to generate new hypotheses and ask better questions.

What I take from this is that economic variables don't operate in silos — they weave into a complex web of mutual influence. And if we want to talk seriously about sustainability, especially in economies with limited global integration, we need to understand these interdependencies more fully.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic did more than just disrupt global health systems — it accelerated the urgency with which we need to re-examine our economic models. What I found particularly striking in this context was how globalisation continues to act as both a catalyst and a constraint in shaping that transformation. While it opens up access to global markets and technological flows, it also reinforces existing inequalities.

Recent studies — including my own — suggest a consistent relationship between urbanisation and economic advancement. High-density urban areas tend to generate higher productivity, attract more investment, and offer a broader range of public services. Urbanisation, when guided properly, has the potential to lift quality of life, promote sustainability, and foster inclusive growth. Green technologies and infrastructure investment are increasingly seen not just as aspirational, but as necessary.

Yet, the reality is more complicated. Urban growth has brought improvements, yes — but it has also magnified longstanding challenges: pollution, overcrowded transport systems, unplanned housing developments, and rising emissions. During the pandemic, many cities reached a breaking point. Basic services, particularly health and transport, became the frontlines of resilience — and their weaknesses were exposed.

In this study, I observed that countries investing early in sustainable urban infrastructure — public transit, clean energy, digital access — tended to cope better, socially and economically. But the gap between these and less-prepared nations remains wide. Cities are, by nature, centres of complexity. Solving their sustainability issues won't happen through technology alone. Public policy, political will, and long-term financial planning must work in tandem.

Of course, we must acknowledge the broader structural forces at play. Economies heavily reliant on natural resources often suffer disproportionately during global crises, due to volatile commodity prices and limited fiscal flexibility. The pandemic has only underlined the fragility of these systems. At the same time, financial integration has not benefited all equally. Marginalised groups — both within and across national borders — often remain disconnected from the gains of globalisation.

One limitation of this research is that it focused primarily on weakly globalised economies. While this offers valuable insight into a less-explored segment of the global system, it also means the findings may not translate seamlessly to highly integrated economies. Furthermore, the evolving post-pandemic landscape is shaped by too many external variables — government responses, global financial trends, technological leaps — for any static model to capture everything.

That said, several paths for future research emerged clearly. It would be useful to directly compare the sustainability trajectories of weakly versus highly globalised countries, to understand what structural differences most affect outcomes. Equally, more in-depth analysis of how green technologies are adopted in emerging economies — and under what conditions they succeed — could guide future development strategies.

Another intriguing line of enquiry could examine how international environmental standards are received and implemented locally. There seems to be a gap between global sustainability discourse and local capacity to act — and bridging that gap may be one of the central challenges of this decade.

In closing, the post-pandemic era demands a shift in mindset. Urbanisation, globalisation, and sustainability are no longer distinct policy areas — they are interwoven. The success of national economies will depend on their ability to navigate these intersections thoughtfully. Investment in sustainable infrastructure, inclusive public services, and adaptive governance structures will be key not just to growth, but to resilience in an increasingly uncertain world.

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