

Achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) In Africa



Challenges and Prospects

By Kennedy Mahlatsi | Opinion

Abstract

The implication of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable development is that Africa's structural transformation must be anchored by the principles of sustainable development. It is noted that Agenda 2030 does not provide political economy approach to understanding the genesis and cycles of poverty and inequality. The article further noted that Africa lags most significantly behind in its achievement of the SDGs, with a lower percent of countries achieving target by 2030 than any other region. Only limited progress towards achieving human development related SDGs is likely. However, due to their strong inclusivity focus, the SDGs present a better opportunity to involve more effectively different stakeholders. Achieving 2030 Agenda and Agenda 2063 calls for the African Union to focus more on implementation and follow up mechanisms, using monitoring frameworks that are robust enough to translate strategies into concrete development outcomes. The article argues that neoliberalism

undermines the ability of developing countries in achieving sustainable development because of its emphasis in promoting the interest of the market at the expense of social and environment development. The article proposes the sustainable development model, which integrates economic, environmental and social objectives, to fully replace current growth-led models. To achieve pro-poor growth, countries must develop policies that have the potential of increasing growth and reducing poverty simultaneously. The article concludes that it is impossible to eradicate poverty without radically changing the system of global industrial capitalist production. In addition, Africa must develop holistic and all-encompassing approach with a view to achieving of SDGs while reformulating the short-term and mid-term policies during and the post-COVID period. Achieving the objective of eradicating extreme poverty and leaving no one behind by 2030 will be difficult if corruption and other development challenges are not seriously tackled.

Introduction

In this article, an evaluation is made of the experiences gained from the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) with a view to building upon their successes and learning from their failures. The MDGs were mainly for developing countries and were poverty-centric development goals, while the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) emerged as universally applicable for all countries and accounted for all aspects of development – social, economic, and environmental. A critical review reveals that the prescription of liberal policies by developed nations as the most appropriate path of development for Africa has in most cases clashed with the developmental objectives and vision of the continent. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and Africa's Agenda 2063 include several goals, targets and indicators that capture the three dimensions of sustainable development into national planning frameworks.

This article illustrates that there were instances where African countries reported high levels of growth and GDP per capita, and yet demonstrated an inability to tackle problems such as women empowerment and quality education. Growth in GDP has limited impact on the economic and social development of African countries. Poverty has increased in a number of countries, despite growth in the long run. Neoliberalism undermines the ability of developing countries to achieve sustainable development because of its emphasis on promoting the interest of the market at the expense of social and environmental development. It is impossible to achieve the SDGs without fixing or radically changing the system of global industrial capitalist mode of production.

The African continent is still battling with developmental issues such as poor governance, corruption, unemployment, mismanagement of funds, insurgencies, terrorism, political upheavals, insecurity, population influx, and a depleting economy. These problems faced by African countries are not specifically addressed in the SDGs, and until these issues are dealt with within an African context, achieving these developmental goals in Africa will remain a challenge. Covid-19 will create additional pressure and add to the existing financing gap as countries face a financial crunch in the post-

Covid-19 period. The article supports a developmental model that is aimed at benefiting the poor and the environment.

What Are Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)?

The SDGs were first formally discussed at the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development held in Rio de Janeiro in June 2012 (Rio+20). The Intergovernmental Negotiations on the Post-2015 Development Agenda began in January 2015 and ended in August 2015. Following the negotiations, *Transforming our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* was adopted at the UN Sustainable Development Summit in September 2015 in New York. The 17 SDGs include 169 targets to meet these goals and 304 proposed indicators to show compliance (Sparks, 2016: 49). According to Armah and Baek (2015: 2), the implication of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is that Africa's structural transformation must be anchored by the principles of sustainable development. All 193 countries have unanimously committed to adhere to and implement the SDGs throughout their 15-year lifespan, up to 2030.

To what extent the SDGs will be able to catalyse meaningful change depends on a range of factors at the national and local levels, including leadership, participation, shifts in mindsets, and abilities to create synergies through cross-sectorial planning. It also depends on the abilities of different stakeholders to recognise that achieving their goals will increasingly depend on their willingness to cooperate with each other (Shivakoti et al., 2015: 11). According to Moyer and Hedden (2020: 2), Africa lags most significantly behind in its achievement of the SDGs, with a lower percentage of countries achieving targets by 2030 than any other region. These authors note that only limited progress towards achieving human development-related SDGs is likely.

However, the Agenda's approach has been criticised for a lack of analysis, since it does not look into the underlying causes of the state of the world. There is no political economy approach to understanding the genesis and cycles of poverty and inequities. The Agenda is oblivious to power relations, both in the sense of the monopolistic economic predominance

of large firms and large nations, and in the societal sense of the power hierarchy between the poor and the rich, women and men, children and adults, dominant communities and those who are politically, socially, culturally, and economically excluded. It is not clear from the 2030 Agenda how poverty is to be eradicated, how inequities are to be redressed, or how sustainability is to be achieved. For example, there are recommendations for social protection measures, but there are no policies that would encourage decent work or income redistribution (Koehler, 2016: 152).

THE 17 SDGS SET OUT UNTIL 2030 ARE:

SDG 1	Eradicate poverty in all its forms everywhere.
SDG 2	Eradicate hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture.
SDG 3	Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all.
SDG 4	Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.
SDG 5	Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.
SDG 6	Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all.
SDG 7	Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all.
SDG 8	Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all.
SDG 9	Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialisation and foster innovation.
SDG 10	Reduce inequalities within and among countries.
SDG 11	Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable.
SDG 12	Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns.
SDG 13	Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts.
SDG 14	Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development
SDG 15	Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, manage forests, combat desertification, halt and reverse land degradation, and halt biodiversity loss
SDG 16	Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions
SDG 17	Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalise the global partnership for sustainable development

Lessons Learnt from the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)

There are a number of issues distinguishing SDGs from MDGs. MDGs helped elevate the status of water and sanitation to a basic human right, while the SDGs offer scope for a more practical understanding of its application. SDGs aimed at combating poverty, for the period of 2000–2015. While MDGs were mainly for developing countries and were poverty-centric development goals, the SDGs emerged as universally applicable for all countries and accounted for all aspects or pillars of development – social, economic, and environmental. Although the SDGs are often considered successors of the MDGs, they differ fundamentally in the sense that they are considerably more robust, interlinked, and based on a framework of three pillars of sustainability. This incorporates ending poverty as a core objective, but the 17 goals and 169 targets set out a broader agenda that includes environmental, social, and economic sustainability (Mukarram, 2020: 3; Fukuda-Parr, 2016: 3). The SDGs are meant to achieve some of the objectives that the MDGs failed to address (Chitonge et al., 2020: 216; Munang and Andrews, 2014: 3).

The prescription of liberal policies by developed nations as the right and most appropriate path of development for Africa has in most cases clashed with the developmental objectives and vision of the continent. The design of the targets and indicators of the MDGs can be deemed as being unfair to developing countries, particularly African countries, because the basis of their measurement made it difficult for these countries to progress. Another lesson from the MDGs is that a comparison of countries' performances is made possible by the existence of a harmonised metric. MDGs were denounced on the ground that they were unfair to Sub-Saharan African countries precisely because ranking countries became an immediate by-product of the MDG targets matrix (Chantel et al., 2017: 5; (Durokifa and Ijeoma, 2018: 360). Fukuda-Parr (2016: 2) emphasises that the MDGs were a North–South aid agenda. The goals and targets – such as universal primary education – were mostly relevant for developing countries only.

The simplicity of the targets that set absolute goals served as a strong conduit for state action and guided international funding organisations. The MDGs

created a simple narrative, triggering self-fulfilling prophecies: they imagined a future of 'zero hunger', 'half the number of people in extreme poverty', and in doing so shifted expectations and spread the idea that achieving the goals was not only necessary, but – more importantly – possible (Chantel et al., 2017: 5). Fukuda-Parr (2016: 6) observes that the SDGs also include 'means of implementation' as a goal of its own (Goal 17) and as targets for each goal, recognising the need to change policies and institutions if transformative change is to take place. Inequality has a goal of its own (Goal 10), and emphasis is placed on the inclusion of marginalised social groups through the other goals, which include goals for governance (Goal 16). The SDGs also incorporate economic dimensions, on which the MDGs were silent; they include a goal for growth that is sustainable and inclusive (Goal 8). The adoption of a stand-alone goal on inequality (Goal 10) that addresses disparities within and between countries is a significant departure from the MDGs; they explicitly excluded this politically sensitive issue.

Having the benefit of progress made by the MDGs, albeit unsatisfactorily in Africa, the greater emphasis on economic inclusivity under the SDGs is easier to prioritise in policy formulation and to be put into effective operation in African economies than it was over a decade ago. Due to their strong inclusivity focus, the SDGs present a better opportunity to more effectively involve different stakeholders such as policy-makers, civil society, donors, politicians, etc. They differ from the MDGs in their wider focus on interpreting sustainability – economic and environmental – which can involve a wider variety of contributors. In the African context, this is exceedingly valuable, but it will require visionary leadership which can build cohesion between, and identify clear outcomes for, potential role-players (Van Niekerk, 2018: 9).

African Union's Agenda 2063 and SDGs

Two contemporary macro development frameworks finalised in 2015 – the United Nations (UN) 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, containing the SDGs, and the African Union's (AU) Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want – are important instruments to guide Africa in pursuing its developmental agenda. The two instruments complement each other on socio-economic and environmental issues. While the 2030 Agenda is global in scope and has a 15-year

timeframe, Agenda 2063 is Africa-specific and has a time horizon of 50 years. African influence in the process of negotiating the SDGs was supported by the AU coordinating the development and promotion of the Common African Position (CAP) on the Post-2015 Development Agenda. The CAP, mandated in July 2012, included the creation of a High-Level Committee (HLC) to lead the regional process (Mickler and Wachira, 2020: 52). Agenda 2030, more than Agenda 2063, problematizes how the social, environmental, and economic aspects of development go together, acknowledging usually ignored fissures in the discourse of growth (Halvorsen and Higgins, 2020: 15).

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, as well as Africa's Agenda 2063, include several goals, targets, and indicators that capture the three dimensions of sustainability – economic, social, and environmental – into national planning frameworks. Unlike the MDGs, the SDGs, as well as the AU's Agenda 2063, were drafted in a collaborative manner, from the ground up, not from the top down (Sparks, 2016: 48; Armah and Baek, 2015: 2). However, Durokifa and Ijeoma (2018: 363) disagree and stress that the premise underlying development is unchanged. They argue that it is still a top-down approach, just like the MDGs, although there were participatory platforms like regional consultations and websites through which people/civil societies could send in their opinions. According to DeGhetto et al (2016: 96), the Agenda 2063 vision is comprehensive, covering issues of identity, self-determination, political independence, and socio-economic development in the context of globalization.

Oduola (2017: 5) writes that achieving the 2030 Agenda and Agenda 2063 calls for the African Union to focus more on implementation and follow-up mechanisms, using monitoring frameworks that are robust enough to translate strategies into concrete development outcomes. Based on Africa's efforts in economic integration, Sparks (2016: 54) argues that Africa's regional economic integration efforts, and particularly the Regional Economic Communities and the Continental Free Trade Agreement, generally are in harmony with the SDGs and Agenda 2063. DeGhetto et al (2016: 94) posit that Agenda 2063 aims to position Africa for growth over the next 50 years, incorporating lessons and experiences from the past. The ultimate goal is to secure three ideals –

unity, prosperity, and peace – for all its citizens. They emphasise that critical success factors for Agenda 2063 include the participation of multiple stakeholder groups at all stages, a results-based approach with measurable objectives, and inculcating the right set of African values in line with the African Renaissance, which suggests the transformation of attitudes, values, and mindsets. They opine (ibid., 101) that Africa and the AU member states need to leverage their existing resources and exploit their current cost advantages. The region has valuable resources at its disposal; leaders in the public and private sector need to focus on strengthening how these resources are organized and utilized within and across national borders.

Neoliberal Growth Path Paradigm: A Critical Analysis

The theory of the relationship between sustainable development and transformation can be gleaned from the work of Simon Kuznets who hypothesized that the relationship between inequality and transformation is U-shaped, with inequality increasing in the early stages of development as capital holders become relatively more wealthy due to new opportunities to invest, and subsequently decreasing as the benefits of transformation trickle down to the population, allowing an average level of income to be achieved through notably better wages. The Kuznets theory is in line with the 'grow first and redistribute later' school of thought and is at odds with the current thinking on sustainable development, which requires countries to integrate or decouple greenhouse gas emissions from their growth process even in the initial stages of development. In line with the sustainable development paradigm, there is a growing body of research that suggests that relative to other continents, the potential for economic greening is higher in Africa (Armah and Baek, 2015: 3).

Halvorsen and Higgins (2020: 16) observe that combating climate change and environmental destruction caused by unsustainable patterns of consumption and production will require multiple innovations at the conceptual, policy, institutional, social, and technological levels. The sustainable development model, which integrates economic, environmental, and social objectives, needs to fully replace current growth-led models where the

social and ecological dimensions are mere add-ons. Ogujuiba and Jumare (2012: 54) insist that African countries report high levels of growth and GDP per capita and yet possess the inability to tackle problems such as women empowerment and quality education. Growth in GDP, which is supposed to be the centrepiece of development, has limited impact on the economic and social development of African countries. They conclude (ibid., 59) that sustained poverty reduction cannot be guaranteed by increase in economic growth, thus raising concerns about the possibility of the poor benefiting from long run growth. In order to achieve pro-poor growth, countries must develop policies that have the potential of increasing growth and reducing poverty simultaneously.

Neoliberalism undermines the ability of developing countries to achieve sustainable development, because of its emphasis on promoting the interest of the market, at the expense of social and environmental development. A pro-poor growth approach should be adopted. It will be essential for national governments to divert from the conventional approach of achieving development where the focus is on economic growth indicators such as low inflation, fiscal sustainability, and the balance of payments towards a paradigm where sustainable development does not lead to unemployment, removal, or cuts of social support schemes, deterioration of environment and natural resources – and one that strongly protects the interests of the poor. The specific interventions to achieve these objectives should be designed with adequate consideration to national circumstances. The principal objective of neoliberal policy has been to enhance economic growth and productivity based on the principles of market competition. This belief often

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tends to overemphasise economic values above social justice goals and environmental concerns. Growth in GDP per capita is largely used as the overriding determinant of poverty reduction and general progress of development (Kumi et al., 2013).

Inclusive economics is a way of empowerment for the whole of humanity to participate in a robust and all-inclusive economic process. Pro-poor growth, as part of inclusive growth, focuses on the effect of growth on poor people's incomes in the context of either relative poverty or absolute poverty. Another component of inclusive growth is broad-based growth. It involves more disadvantaged people in the growth process through employment. Shared growth emphasises that the fruits of growth be shared in a way that eliminates poverty and reduces income inequality. Therefore, the growth process must be expressly non-discriminatory and disadvantage-reducing (Van Nierkerk, 2018: 4).

One of the reasons why neoliberal policies have failed in addressing sustainable development ideals relates to the excessive focus on economic growth as the overriding focus for achieving sustainable development and in particular poverty reduction. Many of the approaches and interventions underpinning neoliberalism tend to focus on increasing the rate of growth, with the hope of addressing patterns and the distribution of benefits later. But, the trickle-down logic has failed largely to address the underlying needs of the poor. It only enriches a few and contributes largely to the deterioration of the natural environment. Kopnina (2015: 5) cogently observed that poverty is the symptom of economic growth imperative and high population growth. Having all people lifted out of poverty without fixing or radically changing the system of global industrial capitalist production will mean more consumption and a greater crisis of resources.

Karl Marx's entire intellectual corpus ought to be interpreted as a critique of the political economy of unsustainable development and its human and natural consequences. The Marxist perspective is that the problem threatening the global environment is the accumulation of capital under the present phase of monopoly-finance capital, and not just economic growth in the abstract. That is, issues of the qualitative nature of development as well as

quantitative development are involved. This raises the question of the ecological value form associated with capitalism in its monopoly-finance phase, geared to the promotion of economic and ecological waste as a stimulus to accumulation. In reality, capitalism can be defined as a system of unsustainable development (Foster, 2010; Foster, 2015). The appropriation of surplus value by the owners of capital deliberately leads to the pauperisation of the working class. Capitalism with its requirement to systematically extract natural resources inherently leads to planetary destruction (Koehler, 2016: 152).

Challenges in Implementing the SDGs in Africa

The implementation of both Agenda 2063 and SDG 16 face significant challenges considering the disparity between norm setting and norm implementation by African governments (Mickler and Wachira, 2020: 55). Oduola (2017: 10) maintains that corruption is very high and endemic in Africa and that it has been linked to dramatic economic haemorrhages. He warns that achieving the objective of eradicating extreme poverty and leaving no one behind by 2030 will be difficult if corruption is not seriously tackled. Chitonge et al. (2020: 212) identified disparities between countries—for example, although South Africa and Uganda achieved their MDGs for water in 2010, Zambia failed to achieve this goal by 2015. Other challenges include inadequate infrastructure and funding levels, growing populations (especially in informal settlements where people often live under sub-human conditions), and the effects of climate change which impinge on freshwater availability. They stress that the lack of commitment from politicians and policymakers has contributed to the failure to realise MDGs. Lack of commitment in the context of the SDGs is reflected in the low budgetary allocation given to water services, for instance.

Durolifa and Ijeoma (2018: 363) observe that the African continent is still battling with developmental issues such as poor governance, corruption, unemployment, mismanagement of funds, insurgencies, terrorism, political upheavals, insecurity, population influx, and a depleting economy. These problems faced by African countries are not specifically addressed in the SDGs, and until these issues are dealt with within an African context, achieving these developmental goals in Africa will remain a challenge.

The Impact of Covid-19 on the SDGs

Mukarram (2020: 2) argues that the pandemic is very much poised to impact the SDGs in various degrees in different parts of the world, which in turn will have bigger ramifications on the economy, society, and the environment. He calls for a holistic and all-encompassing approach, with an eye to the overall achievement of SDGs, while reformulating the short-term and mid-term policies during and post-Covid-19. He observes that financing always remains a prime concern for the implementation of any development agenda, and that the SDGs are no exception. An estimate says that even before the current global pandemic started, the financing gap to achieve the SDGs by 2030 was USD 2.5 trillion per year. Undoubtedly, Covid-19 will create additional pressure and add to existing financing gaps as countries face a financial crunch in the post-Covid-19 period. Again, priority sectors like health and agriculture would need increased allocation, which would mean that other sectors which are equally important would lag behind.

Van Zanten and Van Tulder (2020) postulate that Covid-19 increases the complexity of sustainable development governance, as policymakers have to create policies that simultaneously tackle interrelated health, economic, environmental, and social crises. Timely and intelligent policies are needed to steer through these crises and towards long-term sustainability and resilience. Overcoming this hurdle requires governments to integrate long-term policy objectives – like the SDGs – with the short-term interventions required to fight Covid-19 and its socio-economic consequences. Covid-19 led to many governments adopting more active and interventionist roles than they could have ever imagined (on the basis of neoliberal policies, for instance).

Conclusion

This article has contextualised the factors that are impacting on African countries' ability to achieve the SDGs. Africa lags most significantly behind in its achievement of the SDGs, with a lower percentage of countries achieving target by 2030 than any other region. Although Africa may not achieve the SDGs in the next nine years, the Agenda 2030 provides an

impetus and springboard for Africa to be on the right track for the progressive realisation of Agenda 2063. It is clear that political commitment in Africa is a crucial factor to achieve the SDGs.

Neoliberalism has proven that it undermines the ability of developing countries to achieve sustainable development because of its emphasis on promoting the interest of the market at the expense of social and environmental development. A more developmental non-capitalist path is envisaged to address the developmental agenda in Africa. A growth model should be aimed at benefiting the poor and the environment. In order to achieve pro-poor growth, countries must develop policies that have the potential of increasing growth and reducing poverty simultaneously. The failure of neoliberal policies to address sustainable development ideals relates to the prioritisation of economic growth as the overriding focus for achieving sustainable development and in particular poverty reduction. A policy shift from the crisis-ridden capitalist mode of production is required to tackle socio-economic and environmental problems in Africa.

Covid-19 poses challenges for Africa and the world, but it also brings about opportunities as many governments resorted to more active and interventionist roles in tackling the pandemic than they could have ever imagined. Achieving the objective of eradicating extreme poverty and leaving no one behind by 2030 will be difficult if corruption is not seriously tackled. Covid-19 is creating additional pressure and adding to the existing financing gap as countries face a financial crunch in the post-Covid-19 period. Combating climate change and environmental destruction caused by unsustainable patterns of consumption and production will require multiple innovations at the conceptual, policy, institutional, social, and technological levels.

Governments should integrate long-term policy objectives – like the SDGs – with the short-term interventions required to fight Covid-19 and its socio-economic consequences. The continent is facing a number of challenges which need to be addressed if the SDGs are to be achieved. In line with the sustainable development paradigm, there is a growing body of research that suggests that relative to other continents, the potential for economic greening is

higher in Africa. The sustainable development model, which integrates economic, environmental and social objectives, needs to fully replace current growth-led models.

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