Sustainable Development Goals, are we there yet?–challenges and shortcomings

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Abstract

Purpose – Literature reviews were conducted with the aim of analysing and deriving evidence and reference points. A qualitative research approach was also used in order to properly identify situations, problems and solutions related to the particular context of sustainable development with Africa as a focus.

Design/methodology/approach – The Sustainable Development Goals are a commendable metric and framework by which to measure practical improvements in various governments, communities or socio-economic regions. There is also the reality of adapting and implementing this framework to the dynamic nature of myriad environments consisting of many distinct cultures, ideologies and lifestyles. The purpose of this article is to briefly and pointedly assess the African status quo in relation to achieving the United Nations' (UN) prescribed Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The African challenges and shortcomings in this regard are addressed and ideas for solutions are also looked into.

Findings – Economic inadequacies and poor development are not always rooted in a lack of resources or the will to act but usually as a result of bad governance, corruption and poor adoption of suggested strategies for recovery. This brings into focus the facet of the resource curse. It is seen in multiple contexts across continents that having reserves of resources does not translate to economic prosperity if the concerned region is weighed down by poor governance or stagnant policies. The article shows that though the journey to implementing solutions is challenging, consistent commitment to trusted development frameworks and social programs will benefit many communities and spark projects for economic self-sufficiency.

Originality/value – This article is important because it is a quick and concise snapshot about the realities experienced by a contemporary African attempting to evaluate the cumulative value and worth of the UN prescribed SDGs. This work is also valuable to academic institutions and young/aspiring researchers alike, it can serve as a compact reference point that analyses the realities of the concept of the "resource curse" in relation to attainable SDGs.

Keywords SDGs, Africa, Development

Paper type Literature Review

The short answer is no and when considering Africa in that context, the answer is still a hard no. As a matter of fact, a recent article by the Brookings Institute stated that although there is massive adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Africa continues to be on the back foot (Begashaw, 2019). According to the SDG Centre for Africa, in its 'Africa (2030) SDGs 3-Year Reality Check Report', the continent continues to champion highly unsavoury statistics, e.g. one in three Africans is at risk of food insecurity (Twinoburyo *et al.*, 2019). I can attest to this personally, since I am acutely aware that one or more financial/personal emergencies can mean I am squinting into the distance scouring for the next meal, luckily family and friends are available though not to an infinite degree, but how many can say that equally. The report also shows that half of the global population living under poverty ($1.90/day) is in Africa. As if the grim information knows no bounds, the SDG centre also predicts that under the various facets which sufficient data exists, i.e. access to electricity and clean water, poverty and maternal mortality; the major regions of Africa are unlikely to attain the SDGs. The North African region is exempt from this forecast, while Central Africa is where the highest difficulties are being experienced (Begashaw, 2019).

Still focusing on the SDGs, Africa is tentatively on the way to attain 3 goals centred on SDG 5, 13 and 15–gender equality, climate action and life on land, respectively–the operative

word here being "tentatively". This assertion is based on the International Monetary Fund's 2017 Sub-Saharan regional economic outlook report which confirmed that 2016 saw the lowest level of growth (1.6%) in over two decades, owing mostly to difficult conditions in resource-intensive countries and recession for oil exporters (Robinson and Allard, 2017). The same report expected a 2.6% improvement in 2017 which honestly still falls short of any sustainable parameters for the socio-economic landscape of the continent.

One simply cannot ignore the negative impact that poor SDGs standards deal to education. The World Bank's Human Capital Project report posits that on the Human Capital Index (HCI) ranking, Nigeria is ranked 152 out of 157 with an index of 0.34 (World Bank, 2018). What this means is that a child born in Nigeria will only be 40% as productive at age 18 compared to a child that was born elsewhere with a higher HCI (Begashaw, 2019). Furthermore, SDG attainment issues revolve in many cases around governance. The 2019 Africa SDG Index and Dashboard Report clearly showed in one of its surveys that a whopping 61% of African countries did not include SDGs in their latest national budget, while 4% included SDGs and indicated all investment requirements in that regard (SDGCenter for Africa, 2019). Conversely, 89% of said governments issued official statements endorsing implementation of SDGs, and 76% launched formal processes to align existing national strategies with SDGs. No need for a magnifying glass here for anyone to notice that lack of commitment is a massive drawback in this context.

The resource curse, yes, it's a thing
First, Investopedia defines the resource curse as a "paradox of plenty" whereby countries endowed with non-renewable natural resources experience a contraction in economic growth or even stagnation (Chen, 2019). This would usually occur when a country focuses most/all its means of production on a single industry to the detriment of other major sectors. Furthermore, corruption, under-regulation and volatile pricing mechanisms in the concerned industry would also serve to hamper development in other vital sectors of the "cursed" country's economy. This condition is mostly observed in the world's so-called emerging markets, with Africa being the focus of this article.

Despite the fact that many African countries readily display conditions of this resource curse, it is not unique to the continent. Russia with its vast gas reserves, Venezuela and Bolivia with their record-breaking deposits of oil and lithium respectively are examples of countries that focused too much on development of these resource industries to the disadvantage of other aspects of their economies. The point here is that there is a large body of knowledge detailing and verifying the existence of the resource curse on a global and localised scale (Tiba and Frikha, 2019).

It should be noted that an abundance of resources in a country does not have to manifest as a curse. Indeed, it can be a blessing if there are effective mechanisms of accountability and actual dedication to fulfilment of contextual SDGs. Oil-rich countries can be susceptible to the idea of massive profits in the short-term. This is usually with disregard for the environmental repercussions of the activities of extractive industries which may or may not be properly regulated, the Niger–Delta region in Nigeria being a prime example of this. In this particular frame of reference, SDGs 3, 6, 11, 14, 15 and 16 cannot be addressed because of the single action of inadequate/absent industrial regulation, the domino effect is undeniable. Renewed commitment to the SDGs by African institutions through regional agreements, sound economic strategies and harmonised policies aimed at enhancing sustainable practices across the various socio-economic dimensions is the main way the continent reignites its long sought-after progress (Tiba and Frikha, 2019).

Finally, notice must be taken of the role that organised crime and illicit underground economies play in ultimately stifling the ability of African countries to achieve SDGs. The

threat of organised crime threatens SDGs such as the reduction of poverty, reduction of illegal financial/arms flows. Biodiversity is also threatened in the form of illegal wildlife poaching and logging (Reitanoand Hunter, 2018). Ironically, an ENACT/EU report points out a strange correlation between organised crime and development. The report states that organised crime can be a source of livelihood in certain communities and may also provide the best chances of developmental returns in said communities as well as for the life chances of individuals within (Reitanoand Hunter, 2018). Studies referenced within the report (page 2 specifically) also showed development and economic growth in Africa will inflame and expand the drivers of organised criminal activities as opposed to mitigating them. This is puzzling information to which adequate answers will not be arrived at in this article.

Solutions, solutions…where to start and how to do so

Poor governance and lack of commitment to stated goals as described in earlier sections of this article are major points of contention when discussing SDGs in Africa. First, governance as a concept can be understood as the complex process through various socio-political actors with differing interests interact to build, promote and achieve common objectives by exchanging and activating a range of ideas, rules and resources (Torfing *et al.*, 2012). There are important works of research attempting to address governance issues in relation to attaining SDGs such as a 2019 study by Farah and Sabani (2019) where two frameworks for tackling governance issues are presented; an inter-active governance framework and a governance framework for sustainable development outcomes. The inter-active governance framework essentially covers how contemporary issues can be addressed by the public, economic and institutional facets of society taking collective and iterative actions towards mutually agreed outcomes. On the other hand, the governance framework for sustainable development outcomes focuses on highly coordinated decisions as a result of governance steering of political, economic and institutional actors with the collaborative aim of pursuing SDGs (Farah and Sabani, 2019).

The role of entrepreneurship in obtaining Africa's 2030 SDGs is incredibly vital, so much so that the 2015 World Bank enterprise survey showed that there was a 90% increase in Nigeria's micro-, small- and medium-scale enterprises (MSMEs); such potential can be properly harnessed to fast track the attainment of the SDGs centred around hunger and poverty reduction as well as stimulation of work and economic growth (Ugwuebge *et al.*, 2018). Recommendations to providing an enabling environment for the Nigerian entrepreneur *in lieu* with achieving SDG 2030 agenda include;

(1) Increased funding to MSMEs promoting agencies of the government.

(2) Increased SMEs loans and funding programs.

(3) Better training for creativity and self-reliance.

(4) Provision of infrastructure to ease setup and operation of business ventures.

The above suggestions are not exhaustive and are gleaned from the 2018 AfriHeritage Policy Brief no.16

Environmental issues in Africa as a result of deforestation, massive unregulated waste disposal, desertification and pollution are also dire issues to be addressed. The Forum on China–Africa Cooperation has highlighted this with a focus on tackling climate change and bolstering mechanisms for environmental protection (Jonkerand Robinson, 2018). In this circumstance, China posits itself as ready to play a key role through innovative transfer of technology that focuses on renewable energy solutions as well as the reduction of greenhouse

gas emissions while striking an environmentally-safe balance that encourages SDG achievement (Jonkerand Robinson, 2018).

Additionally, SDG 7 which concerns clean and affordable energy must be looked at through lens of the existing socio-economic realities in Sub-Saharan Africa, where there is a stark difference in energy access between urban and rural areas. Decentralised grids of renewable energy in such areas can create chances for more competitive access to electricity thereby having the run-off effect of improved human development and economic productivity (Owusu and Sarkodie, 2016). Alternatively, tourism governance frameworks when effectively inclusive, i.e. incorporating standards of justice, trust, ethical practices and accountability definitely move the needle closer to SDG achievements. Although the challenges around integrating tourism governance and activities of extractive energy industries still persist, collaboration between private corporations (local and international), governments and indigenous communities can only yield positive results (Siakwah *et al.*, 2019).

Conclusion

As an overview, this piece covered aspects of challenges facing Africa when it comes to achieving its SDG agenda. It is obvious that a major stumbling block the continent deals with centres around governance issues. Corruption, organised crime and inadequate industrial regulation are also not helping issues. On the brighter side, there is a growing body of research on how shortcomings can be addressed. With interactive governance frameworks to stimulate collective action and inclusive solutions, there is in fact a persistent window of opportunity to deal with Africa's problems around attaining the SDG agenda.

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