

By
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YEARS

CHASING THE WORLD THAT MIGHT HAVE BEEN,
AFRICA'S PROGRESS AND RACE TO THE 2030 GOALS.

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TO THE SDGs



PHOTOS SUPPLIED; PHOTO BY RON WILLIAMS FREEPIK

In 1980, 35 years after the formation of the United Nations (UN), the Ghanaian philosopher Kwasi Wiredu warned that “unrestricted industrial urbanization is contrary to any humane culture; it is certainly contrary to our own”. Personhood, he believed, could only be attained if an individual married economic success with a responsibility to community: humanity could only flourish through the enrichment gained from shared social capital.

The UN was established for the purpose of constructive cooperation in the aftermath of the trauma of World War II; an invitation to the people of every nation to heal and rebuild this personhood, in themselves and in others, after years of brutal, dehumanizing conflict. “You, members of this Conference, are to be the architects of a better world,” counselled President Harry Truman to the General Assembly, weeks before witnessing the signing of the UN Charter in June 1945. “In your hands, rests our future.”

Eight decades later, ‘development’, defined by the UN as “a multidimensional undertaking to achieve a higher quality of life for all people”, has become synonymous with this vision of a more equitable planet. In 2015, the 193 UN member states adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable



WHY DO WE NEED TWO PHONES? THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA, THE NORMALIZATION OF CERTAIN STANDARDS, PUTS PEER PRESSURE ON PEOPLE TO ACT IN AN IRRESPONSIBLE WAY. SO, AT THE BUSINESS LEVEL, WE SHOULD REALLY FOCUS ON SDG 12 (ENSURE SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION AND PRODUCTION PATTERNS)...”

— Professor Karim Sorour

Development: 17 goals, or ‘SDGs’, extolled as “an urgent call for action by all countries – developed and developing – in a global partnership”. Six years out from the agenda’s scheduled completion, the journey towards the fulfilment of these goals in Africa has been turbulent, buffeted by the vagaries of conflict, climate change and economic turmoil.

In 2023, the UN released its latest *Africa Sustainable Development Report*: a candid evaluation of the progress achieved so far in the context of its overlap with the African Union’s Agenda 2063, a “development blueprint to achieve inclusive and sustainable socio-economic development over a 50-year period”. The Covid-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, and extreme weather events have all savagely undermined this headway; the report laments that “these interconnecting crises slowed global growth, increased debt vulnerabilities, and fuelled inflationary pressures, with negative long-term consequences for the achievement of both agendas”.

The economic implications of these upheavals for the SDGs are so alarming that the UN Secretary-General, António Guterres, has cautioned that “unless we act now, the 2030 Agenda will become an epitaph for a world that might have been”. In April of this year, the African Development Bank President, Dr Akinwumi A Adesina, revealed that the annual financing gap towards realizing these goals has now risen to \$4 trillion, and called on developed countries to “devote at least 0.70% of their gross national income to official development assistance”.

Many African nations find themselves trapped in a vice of tightening economic pressures: insufficient capital squeezing resources from one direction, debt burden suffocating prosperity from the other. At this year’s 10th Africa Regional Forum on Sustainable Development, UN Deputy Secretary-General Amina J Mohammed reiterated the Secretary-General’s entreaty for an SDG stimulus of \$500 billion per year to make debt-servicing less perniciously crippling for African countries desperate for the liquidity they need to fulfil their SDG aspirations.

“For Africa as a whole, public debt now amounts to 66 percent of GDP,” announced Claver Gatete, Executive Secretary of the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, in the same month. “High repayment costs are crowding out essential expenditures on health, education, and climate action... Naturally, all this takes its toll on the most vulnerable. Based on the latest data, 476 million people in Africa are projected to live in poverty in 2024, about 50 million more than before Covid.”

Notwithstanding the grim economics casting an ominous shadow over its findings, the 2023 *Africa Sustainable Development*

Report cites “steady progress” on key SDG targets such as 4G mobile network coverage, access to safe drinking water, and electrification rates, and is cautiously optimistic about the continent’s capacity for the kind of economic reform that might invigorate domestic markets. Professor Karim Sorour, co-editor of *Corporate Governance in Africa: Assessing Implementation and Ethical Perspectives*, and a specialist on Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) in the region, argues that ‘off-the-shelf’ Western solutions run the risk of ignoring the complexity of local realities; instead, healthy financial governance must, and can, begin at home.

“When we talk about corporate governance in Africa, we have to make sure there is transparency at the micro level,” he says. “We’re talking about SMEs (small and medium-sized enterprises), as they have the lion’s share of the economy. There is a huge tax deficit in many African countries; these SMEs are below the radar, they are cash economies. So it’s very difficult to get resources from the tax system. What’s needed is accountability by way of legislation; building normative frameworks by engaging with society at the grassroots level to come up with policy formulations on a country-by-country basis.”

While the impending 2030 SDG targets loom large on the horizon for African nations, Sorour feels that incremental gains in CSR awareness can still make significant aggregate contributions to developmental attainment in the region, particularly in the context of responsible consumption.

“In Egypt, it’s very common to find people who are really struggling who have at least two mobile phones,” he says. “Why do we need two phones? The impact of social media, the normalization of certain standards, puts peer pressure on people to act in an irresponsible way. So, at the business level, we should really focus on SDG 12 (ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns), because the goals create a domino effect through three concepts: economic cost, social development, and environmental sustainability. Linking this level of engagement to the daily lives of people and their businesses is where a little more work is needed.”

The SDGs’ central pledge to understand and empathize with the realities of these daily lives, and “leave no one behind”, is at the heart of the UN’s #WeBelongAfrica program, a project “designed to support state entities in sub-Saharan Africa to become increasingly accountable and responsive to, and inclusive of, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI+) people and young key populations”. Monica Tabengwa, a UNDP programme Specialist in LGBTI+ inclusion, believes sexual and gender minorities in Africa are at most risk of being forgotten in the sustainable development conversation. “Africa has a rich tapestry of cultures and traditions,” she says. “Many traditional African cultures recognized or even celebrated sexual and gender diversity, but colonialism and conservative religious forces from the West often undermined that acceptance of diversity. The biggest challenge is to build on African traditions that celebrate diversity.”

Encouraging but inconsistent advancement has been made towards SDG 10 (reduce inequality within and among

countries), alongside growing public awareness of the correlation between the respective statuses of girls and women and those of the LGBTI+ population.

“There has been tremendous progress in access to essential health services, driven by the response to HIV, although there is still a dramatic lack of gender-affirming medical care,” says Tabengwa. “Access to services in other sectors is more uneven, including economic opportunities, housing, and justice systems. To sustain progress beyond 2030, we need a broad movement that reinforces democracy, inclusion and human rights for all. It is important to emphasize that inequalities are widening more generally – not just for LGBTI+ people.”

The changemakers of 2030 and beyond are the teenagers of 2024; aware, proactive personhood is now being forged in leadership programs nurturing the aspirant decision-makers who will inherit the SDGs successes and failures. Mark Mike Mutumba is Founder and Executive Director of the Omuto Foundation, a “youth-led grassroots movement dedicated to empowering young individuals in underserved communities across Uganda”.

The foundation’s Youth Ambassadors Programme fosters enduring leadership skills by enabling



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participants to design projects which make measurable SDG impressions on their local communities.

“Our approach demonstrates that young people, when given the right tools, are the key to achieving the 2030 goals,” says Mutumba. “With modest support, youth-led initiatives can achieve immense impact. Our model has seen a 25% increase in youth participation, and a ripple effect of positive change.”

Mutumba’s buoyant perspective is predicated upon the evolution of personhood via its roots in a community; on the growth of social capital through innovation and cooperation at its most fundamental local level. “We bridge the gap by translating SDGs into action: our Youth Action 2030 project, for instance, empowers young people to tackle local issues like food insecurity or lack of clean water through social entrepreneurship,” he says. “This shift in mindset is vital. With Africa’s booming youth population, empowering them isn’t just about the future – it’s about unlocking the continent’s potential today.”