

Article

# Africanizing the SDGs: A key factor for enhancing sustainability consciousness within South African universities

Chinaza Uleanya\*, Kathija Yassim

Education Leadership and Management, University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg 2006, Gauteng, South Africa

\* **Corresponding author:** Chinaza Uleanya, [chinazau@uj.ac.za](mailto:chinazau@uj.ac.za)

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**Abstract:** The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) can be viewed as the aftermath of the Millennial Development Goals (MDGs). This is due to the fact that the seventeen (17) SDGs are designed to continue the work expected to have been done by the MDGs. In other words, the failure of the MDGs to eradicate poverty birthed the SDGs. However, the SDGs seem not to be achieving the desired result. This has led to the projection for the need for a decade of action. In the African context, the questions of why the MDGs failed and the SDGs tend to be failing are yet to be asked. By projection, if the questions are not asked and answers are not provided, the projection of the decade of action may also fail. Hence, the reason for this conceptual paper which was targeted at exploring the possibility of considering the Africanization of the SDGs as remedy to ensuring sustainable development in the African continent. Different relevant sources were identified, reviewed and analysed. The findings from the reviewed and analysed sources showed among others that for Africanization of the SDGs to be a reality and practicable, glocalization must be embraced. Meanwhile, there will be need to question the use of Eurocentric curricula in African institutions of learning.

**Keywords:** Africanization; glocalization; sustainability; sustainable development; Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

## 1. Introduction

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) remain a pivotal concept still seeking expression in different societies. Previously, in an attempt to ensure that SDGs are realised and knowing the importance of education to such, the period 2004–2015 was declared a decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD) by the United Nations. The focus was to ensure the integration of sustainable development principles and practices into education in order to promote changes in different areas (UNESCO, 2014). These areas include attitude, values and knowledge as well as vision capable of enabling and enhancing sustainability and justice in the society (UNESCO, 2014). DESD is considered relevant based on the important role education plays in enhancing changes in the society. Moreover, education played crucial roles in enabling and equipping people during the period of the first, second and third industrial revolutions respectively. However, regardless of the DESD, the SDGs are yet to be realised. Thus, 2020 is envisaged to usher the decade of action in attempt to ensure the realisation of the SDGs by 2030 (United Nations, n.d.). For instance, Worldfavor (2022) reports that, “As the UN explains, the Decade of Action calls for accelerating sustainable solutions to all the world’s biggest challenges—ranging from poverty and gender to climate change, inequality and closing the finance gap”. However, the questions remain, where is Africa in the pursuit of the

realization of the SDGs? How have African nations been pursuing the realization of the SDGs? Which should be sought in Africa: SDGs, Africanization or both?

Africanization on the other hand, dates as far back as the early 1960s when many African countries newly gained independence. According to Yesufu (1973), in the early 1960s when many African countries recently gained independence, Africanization was adopted in the education systems to infuse African beliefs and practices in order to capacitate Africans. This aided the promotion of African cultures and beliefs. The term 'Africanization' was used to call for the pursuit of African values, norms, beliefs, among others. Education was seen as a major instrument used in driving the agenda. However, after over four decades, the subject of Africanization remains a struggle. This led to the struggle for decolonization which remains a major issue in the continent. Hence, with Africanization and decolonization on one side and SDGs on the other, the question is: where or what should be the focus of Africans and African nations?

The call for the need to Africanize the SDGs in order to enhance sustainability is an attempt to explore possible ways of ensuring sustainable developments in the African continent. This implies breaking the SDGs to suit the local demands of African nations such as South Africa and conscientise its citizenry towards its realization. Also, attempting to proffer solutions to challenges or meet the local demands through the use of local resources while bearing in mind global standard should be mostly desired. Thereby, calling for glocalization which is used to mean meeting local demands using global standard. The work of Ochiai (2023) reporting the case of Japan shows that local resources can be used to ensure the desired development. In support, the World Economic Forum (WEF) (2023, p. 1) posits that glocalization helps to create "a better balance between global and local" and "brings opportunities to increase resilience and sustainability and ultimately spread prosperity". This coincides with the submission of Goffman (2020, p. 8) who had earlier stated that, "We need a new kind of glocalization, one predicated not on economic growth but on environmental awareness and economic equity". Goffman (2020, p. 49) further explains that, "A society capable of surviving, and even thriving, in coming decades and into the 22nd century, will need to adapt a version of glocalization in which people live much more locally while encompassing a far broader vision of the planetary common good than we have seen thus far". This suggests that African countries need to explore the possibility of embracing glocalization which appeals to their contexts and is capable of promoting their vision(s) to aid the desired sustainable development and sustainability.

Meanwhile, in the words of Koma (2018, p. 102):

"Education seek to conceptualise a new world order informed by Africa's conception of sustainable development inimical to westernised conception of development which includes market economic development advancement, availability of capital, superiority of infrastructure, automation of resources, and acquisition of techno-logical materials".

The submission of Koma (2018) suggests that attempts are being made to promote sustainability through education in African continent. Moreover, Soda (2023, p. 3) posits that, "Education changes people's minds, local cultures, and socioeconomic systems. This process requires knowledge integration from diverse

sectors, especially for historically accumulated knowledge. It is necessary to develop new theoretical and practical skills for building local context". However, the questions remain: How well has such been achieved? How many African institutions of learning are attempting to refrain from adopting the Eurocentric thoughts, especially in the area of curricula designs? More so, Africanising the SDGs towards the realisation of objectives is bound to remain futile if the relevant stakeholders are unaware or unconscious of the desired and enhancing practices. For instance, Moallemi et al. (2020, p. 300) report that, "Diversity of local conditions across regions has led to numerous challenges and opportunities for the implementation of global sustainability frameworks such as the Sustainable Development Goals". This implies that a contributory factor to the reason for the slow pace or non-attainment of the sustainable development goals in the African society may be attributed to diverse local conditions which are yet to be taken into consideration. Thus, the reason for this concept paper which aims at exploring and possibly creating sustainability consciousness amongst (South) African university stakeholders, considering three echelons—lower cadre (students), mid-level (lecturers) and higher level (the leadership). Hence, the questions: How conscious are these university stakeholders of the SDGs, let alone Africanising them? Moreover, universities have the potential to raise sustainability consciousness and influence social, cultural and economic sustainable development (Djordjevic and Cotton, 2011). This further helps in creating suitable environment for people from various backgrounds to get a better level of knowledge and awareness (Wals and Benavot, 2017), while aiding an understanding of complex environmental and social issues in different countries (Wright, 2007). Moreover, institutions of higher learning are considered to have pivotal roles to play in ensuring sustainability. Prabhu (2021) reporting for Observer Research Foundation (ORF) adds that glocalization is capable of aiding economic growth, economic equity as well as environmental awareness. This accounts for the more reason why glocalization should be preferred, embraced and implemented in African countries. Hence, this conceptual paper is guided by the following research questions: Can/should the SDGs be Africanized? How can the SDGs be Africanized as a key factor for enhancing sustainability consciousness within South African universities? This conceptual paper is further structured as social background which is as a result of the importance of such to the study, the identified research questions are then used as a guide for the discussion.

### **Social background of SDGs**

The notion of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) was birthed in the year 2012 by the United Nations (UN) at a conference on Sustainable Development in Rio de Janeiro (United Nations Development Programme, 2024). This was in an attempt to replace the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) (2024, p. 1), "The objective was to produce a set of universal goals that meet the urgent environmental, political and economic challenges facing our world". This suggests that the non-achievement of the MDGs led to the birth of the SDGs. However, the submission of McCloskey (2015) becomes crucial and presents the need for African nations and by extension

countries in the Global South to consider their specific contexts while attempting to embrace and work towards the attainment of the SDGs. For instance, McCloskey (2015, p. 186) posits that:

“One of the reasons that new goals are necessary and the MDGs failed to meet all of their targets was the absence of a critical consciousness that considered the structural causes of poverty. The development sector’s preoccupation with overseas development assistance (ODA) has diverted our efforts away from larger, arguably more significant issues for the global South such as illicit financial flows, debt and unfair trade rules. Above all, we have failed to relate the dominant neoliberal economic model to persistent levels of poverty and climate change. Unless the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) come to terms with these larger obstacles to development they will fail to meet their targets.”

This indicates that the issue of contexts is critical. Hence, the reason for this study which explores the possibility of Africanizing the SDGs as a major factor for ensuring sustainability consciousness within the African continent with specific focus on South African universities. Suffice to state that the SDGs may be unachievable in African nations if their contexts are not taken into account. Moreover, nations in the Global North (western/developed nations) and those in the Global South (underdeveloped/developing nations) have different contexts. Thus, their starting point in the pursuit of sustainable development are definitely different.

In proffering answers to the identified research questions guiding the study, different headings have been identified. In other words, the research questions are answered using identified relevant headings.

## **2. Research question 1: Can/should the SDGs be Africanized?**

### **2.1. Africanization versus decolonization**

The terms ‘Africanization’ and ‘decolonization’ though similar and tend to be targeted towards the attainment of common goal(s), are sometimes mistaking as the same. However, the two terms differ. For instance, while Africanization can be described as “...a process of inclusion that stresses the importance of affirming African cultures and identities in a world community” (Letsekha, 2013, p. 6), decolonization is ‘the process by which subordinated territories become sovereign and independent states (Shin, 2022, p. 214). Nonetheless, the two terms are focused towards achieving a similar goal which is aiding African nations to be self-reliant, ensuring sustainable development and sustainability in their domains. This corroborates the work of Porter and Cook (2023) who submit that decolonisation can be a driver for the attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Similarly, Frandy (2018) had earlier stated that:

“...sustainability discourses have historically evolved within the context of colonial and capitalist states, and they are often complicit—if not overly weaponized—in the advancement of colonial agendas (p. 2) ... Sustainability cannot exist outside cultural frameworks, and outside the disparities of power endemic to our world. Sustaining a resource requires making value-laden choices that are rooted in our own cultural experiences (p. 3).”

Frandy (2018, p. 4) goes further to state that “Ingenious systems of environmental and economic protections exist in indigenous cultures around the world, representing perhaps the most sophisticated and effective systems of sustainability on the planet”. This shows the importance of infusing indigenous practices and processes into ensuring sustainability, which is the drive for decolonization and Africanization. In other words, sustainability can be enjoyed following the decolonization process. Similarly, it is in alignment with the findings of the work of Hudson and Vodden (2020) which show the need to decolonise the pathways to sustainability.

Meanwhile, the quest for the desired development in the Africa continent has led to struggles and demand for decolonization. For instance, several issues related to practices in African institutions of learning being Eurocentric have called for the need for decolonization (Du Plessis, 2021; Govender and Naidoo, 2023; Hlatshwayo and Alexander, 2021). However, the question remains whether institutions of learning in the African continent need to be decolonised or Africanised or both? In other words, which should be considered in the African continent: decolonisation or Africanization or both or none? Hence, the next section which considers whether the SDGs should be Africanised.

#### **Should the SDGs be africanised?**

This is a subtle way of asking whether there is need for the SDGs to be localised. Meanwhile, the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs Social Inclusion (2021) reports that, “While indigenous peoples have accumulated valuable traditional knowledge about nature and sustainable practices, this knowledge often is not recognized as an important tool to protect the environment and to enhance resilience”. In support, Lazaro (2020) had earlier stated that “sustainability cannot be achieved without indigenous leadership”. This indicates that there is tendency for traditional knowledge to be downplayed by people, and eventually hinder sustainability. Also, considering the submission of Aarnseth (2013, p. 14), “Traditional African lifestyle holds many sustainability-bearing values”. In furtherance, Aarnseth (2013, p. 14) citing Wangari Maathai the Nobel Prize winner while describing the African lifestyle posits that:

“Much of the African Culture before colonialism was, to a big extent, a sustainable type of culture. Human beings lived in harmony with other species and the natural environment, and they protected that world. People took what they needed for their life, not more, not less. They did this so that future generations would be able to survive and thrive. Their ways of measuring happiness, material and spiritual well-being is completely different ways than we do today. Domestic animals were kept and used carefully for survival and treated humanely. A variety of crops were cultivated. Because most of their basic needs were met, they didn’t consider themselves poor. At the same time, their community was full of rituals, ceremonies and expressions of their connection to the land and to their culture. As a result, they didn’t feel alienated or adrift in meaninglessness.”

The foregoing shows that the African society has always embraced and catered for sustainability prior to colonisation. Thus, decolonization would be a good process

to ensure that features and possibilities of the pre-colonial African society are recalled, adapted and imbibed in the current postcolonial era to aid sustainability.

Conversely, Mahlatsi (2021) clamouring for transformation in Africa, submits that there is need for such transformation to be anchored on the principles of sustainable development goals. In other words, sustainability is desired in the African continent, hence, the quest for transformation. Nonetheless, such transformation should be guided by the principles of sustainable development. However, the question remains: Can the SDGs be Africanised?

### **3. Research question 2: How can the SDGs be Africanized?**

Considering the possibility of the SDGs being Africanised, the question is: How can such be done? Hence, the need for the next heading which presents and explains scholarly thoughts on how the SDGs can be Africanised for relevance in the continent. This is done using the submissions of scholars and relevant report documents, especially those of supranational organisations like the United Nations. According to Prabhu (2021, p. 9), a “medium of employing glocalisation is through utilising the resourceful intelligence of the local people when it comes to resource efficiency or the on-ground realities of the population living in remote areas of developing countries”. This implies that the knowledge of indigenous people within local communities in African countries are to be desired to promote glocalization, in order to ensure sustainability. In support, Matsuoka (2023, p. 17) calls for collaboration between the global and local by stating that “the collaboration between various forms of specialized knowledge alone is insufficient to overcome the limitations of unknown unknowns: The formation of socially robust knowledge through collaboration between specialized knowledge and local knowledge is required”. This indicates that synergy between global and local knowledge is one way by why the SDGs can be Africanised rather than continuous and absolute dependence of Eurocentric knowledge for driving sustainability in African countries.

On the other hand, Pedro (2024), the acting executive secretary of the Economic Commission of Africa (ECA), reporting on how the African continent can salvage the SDGs posits that:

“For a long time, the extractive and commodity sectors in many African countries have been enclaves without meaningful linkages to local economies. The continent has been locked in perennial booms and busts that have amplified Africa’s vulnerability to global shocks. To rescue the SDGs, this must change. Countries need to pursue sustainable industrialisation and economic diversification to transform Africa’s resources into inclusive growth and thereby tangible benefits for the continent’s people.”

This indicates that the African continent is capable of experiencing sustainability. However, different factors tend to hinder and hamper such. In support on how sustainability can be ensured in and by countries in the continent, The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) (2023) reporting the words of the Acting Executive Secretary of ECA (Economic Commission of Africa)—António Pedro, states that, “Africa must create green growth by adding value to its green minerals. This green growth through green minerals must be central to Africa’s SDG rescue

strategy. Africa also needs scaled-up concessional financing to regain momentum on the SDGs and the Agenda 2063”. Meanwhile, according to The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (2018), green growth means “fostering economic growth and development while ensuring that natural assets continue to provide the resources and environmental services on which our well-being relies”. The OECD (2018) further explains that for green growth to be enjoyed, “It must catalyse investment and innovation which will underpin sustained growth and give rise to new economic opportunities”. This implies that for African nations to experience and enjoy sustainability as desired, they are to support investments and innovations. However, the works of Ahmed and Anifowose (2024), Bazie et al. (2023), as well as Murphy and Albu (2018) show that corruption is a hindering factor affecting the governments of African countries from supporting the expected investments in their nations.

The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) (n.d.) 2023 report on ‘Economic Development in Africa’ shows that, “Investments in the continent’s infrastructure, including ports, roads and rail, have lagged, contributing to delays that discourage businesses from sourcing products from African countries”. This suggests that there is need for the governments of African nations to first invest in improving the state of infrastructures, among which are ports, energy, roads, hospitals, and rail to serve as a form of attraction to potential investors. By so doing, the desired growth is envisaged to be enjoyed. Conversely, Diop et al. (2015) who reporting for the World Bank had earlier reported that, “By adopting sound macroeconomic policies over the past two decades and sector reforms, many African economies have already shown that they can sustain a trajectory of economic growth” (par. 1). This suggests that there is tendency that countries in the African continent got it right at some points through their adopted and implemented policies. However, following the current trend, a decline has been experienced, thereby leading to a lack of sustainability. Thus, policies are considered to play pivotal part in ensuring sustainability in and among African nations as well as the continent at large. This coincides with the works of scholars such as Atalla et al. (2022), Fabrizio et al. (2015) as well as Glass and Newig (2019) which show that policies play crucial roles in ensuring sustainability. In congruence, The OECD (2018) calls for “green growth policies” which are described as being essential to “structural reforms needed to foster strong, more sustainable and inclusive growth”. Green growth policies are crucial as they are considered to have the potency of unlocking “new growth engines by”:

- Enhancing productivity by creating incentives for greater efficiency in the use of natural resources, reducing waste and energy consumption, unlocking opportunities for innovation and value creation, and allocating resources to the highest value use.
- Boosting investor confidence through greater predictability in how governments deal with major environmental issues.
- Opening up new markets by stimulating demand for green goods, services and technologies.
- Contributing to fiscal consolidation by mobilising revenues through green taxes and through the elimination of environmentally harmful subsidies. These

measures can also help to generate or free up resources for anti-poverty programmes in such areas as water supply and sanitation, or other pro-poor investments.

- Reducing risks of negative shocks to growth due to resource bottlenecks, as well as damaging and potentially irreversible environmental impacts.

Considering the importance of the green growth policies as presented by the OECD (2018), it is pertinent for the government of African countries to embrace such to suit their various contexts. This is envisaged to promote sustainability as desired in the countries as well as the continent. The question therefore remains: What is the process of Africanising and decolonising the SDGs? The next section attempts to proffer answer to this question following the submissions of different scholars.

### **Process in Africanising and decolonising the SDGs**

Institutions of learning are considered as having critical roles to play in aiding the Africanization and decolonization of the SDGs. Waghid and Hibbert (2018) alluding to the work of Pillay (2015) state that: “The need to Africanise and decolonise higher education is certainly warranted in addressing epistemic violence of colonial thought and colonial knowledge, meaning that African texts and perspectives are conspicuously absent in higher education curricula. Similarly, Porter (2023, pp. 8–9) advocating for decolonisation and sustainability to be connected and used for addressing challenges, states that:

“By decolonising sustainable development, we start by introducing the perspective of indigenous bodies of knowledge. The focus would be on looking at indigenous theories that explore the interconnected and interdependent nature of people and planet. This way of thinking about sustainability subverts more western notions of “development”, which assumes a natural division between human and planetary life, and the idea that the environment is a space outside of us; an area to be controlled, manipulated, and governed externally”.

Meanwhile, one major way of introducing the perspectives of indigenous bodies of knowledge would be through the curricula. This suggests the need for the revision of the curricula of institutions of learning to accommodate and cater for issues of sustainability, especially in the context of specific countries, as no “one size fits all” (OECD, 2018). This coincides with the submissions of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (2023) and Louw (2013) who advocate for green curriculum to aid sustainability. Meanwhile, green curriculum is used to mean “curriculum integrates climate mitigation and adaptation in teaching and learning from pre-primary, primary, secondary and tertiary school levels as well as in teacher training. It emphasizes the interconnections between the environment, economy, and society, engaging students across cognitive, socio-emotional, and behavioral domains to inspire action for sustainability” (UNESCO, 2023, p. 1).

In support, review of the work of Hungwe and Mkhize (2022, p. 148) shows that in upholding the process of Africanisation and decolonisation to aid sustainability, there is need for every institution of learning in Africa “to re-align



itself with the goals, worldviews, epistemologies, values, and norms of African people”. This suggests the need for African institutions of learning to begin to align themselves with the practices and demand for sustainable development as well as sustainability.

#### **4. Methodological implication**

Sequel to the argument of this study, there is need for African institutions of learning to begin to explore and embrace the concept of glocalization. Hence, exploring various ways of Africanizing the SDGs is pivotal as this would enable countries in the continent to align themselves with global standard where possible, taking cognizance of the sustainable development Goals for sustainable development and sustainability. However, this is to be done having the context of each country and the continent at the fore. Similarly, identifying challenges in the context of the continent and exploring ways by which global standard can be used to resolve such while taking into cognizance sustainability and sustainability is paramount.

#### **5. Conclusion and recommendations**

Africanizing the SDGs is one crucial way of making it relevant and achievable in African countries and the continent at large. In this regard, glocalization is to be preferred and required. This is envisaged to help Africans relate with the demands as well as what is obtainable in the era of sustainability. It is also envisaged to enable them play their own part rather than possess theoretical knowledge which may fail to translate to practice. However, the process of Africanising the SDGs places several demands from the leaders and citizens of Africa nations. Thus, micro-theory becomes relevant as this would enable institutions of learning to focus on specific issues in their different African nations in relation to the African continent and the interactions amongst them instead of having focus on the global world. It is against this backdrop that this conceptual paper submits the following as recommendations:

- Africanization of the SDGs is possible. However, for such to be a reality and practicable, there is need to embrace glocalization. In this regard, there would be need to promote the use of global standard in proffering solution to local needs and demands, rather than focusing more on globalization by seeking global relevance regardless of the local challenges. In this manner, institutions of learning would be channeled and adopted as tools for meeting local demands and possibly proffering solutions to challenges faced by their communities.
- The curricular of institutions of learning must be designed to aid meeting the demands of local communities. Thus, Eurocentric curricula would need to be put away or redesigned.
- There is need to sensitize education stakeholders—students, educators, government parastatals, parents, community leaders and members, among others on the need to promote the Africanization of the SDGs. This can be done through seminars, orientation programmes, workshops, seminars, symposia, Parents Teachers Association meetings, among others. In this regard, collaborative efforts would be enjoyed.

## 6. Limitation and suggestion for further study

This conceptual note was limited to literature sources. Hence, it is suggested that study on Africanising the SDGs while taking into account specific country contexts should be considered. This can be done through the use of any of the identified approaches: quantitative, qualitative and quantitative or mixed methods. This is envisaged to ensure the collection of data from large sample, thereby aiding generalization of results.

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