The SoJo Journal: Educational Foundations and Social Justice Education

Whose questions and whose answers? Rebooting the SDGs and resetting higher education transformations for sustainable futures

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Received 25 September 2025
Revised 1 December 2025
Accepted 3 December 2025

Abstract

Purpose – While there is a call for transformation of higher education in the "majority world," especially in Africa, the agenda is set from the Western perspective. As a result, this perpetuates African scholarship as merely an appendage of Eurocentric methodologies, a situation exacerbated by imbibing Westernised curriculum. This paper probes the question, "Whose questions and whose answers?", with a view to propagate for rebooting the sustainable development goals (SDGs) and resetting the higher education transformation agenda that is relevant to the African context.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper forms an opinion based on the authors' scholarly personal narratives, that is, a constructivist research methodology that recognises the researcher's personal experience as a valid object of study. Personal experience forms a central focus of, and resource for, this paper, as the authors have close to or over 30 years in the higher education space, and some of these years were at a higher echelon position.

Findings – The paper established that African universities are encumbered by the hegemony and imposition of Western/and or foreign influences, which limit the solution to Africa's grand societal challenges. Hence, to deepen the liberation of knowledge from its elitist and colonial captivity, knowledge creation and mobilisation can no longer be the sole preserve of scholars who have been largely influenced by dominant forms of knowledge. African universities are urged to break free from the knowledge orthodoxy of the North.

Research limitations/implications – This paper has the obvious limitation of relying mostly on our opinions and experiences within South Africa, which has the potential for subjectivity and interpretation bias. A further empirical study is recommended to cover many universities in the African continent.

Originality/value – While the discourse in the higher education landscape is on institutionalising SDGs, this paper provides a different perspective of rebooting the SDGs to be relevant to the African setting. This may allow for the resetting of higher education transformations for sustainable futures in Africa.

Keywords Sustainable development goals, Universities, Higher education institutions, SDGs, Africa, Majority world

Paper type Conceptual paper

1. Setting the agenda

Many scholars across disciplines and universities have been calling for transformation of higher education in the "majority world," especially in Africa. The majority world is a deliberate move away from the usual description of our collective self as the so-called developing world or the global south. It is unfortunate that there are still few African intellectuals who substantively theorise the African Indigenous Knowledge System (IKS) in diverse disciplines including the social sciences. Instead of theorising the African education system prior to colonisation, in taking note of African epistemologies, particularly how they valued IKS, the current crop of African scholars has done otherwise, becoming merely an appendage of Eurocentric methodologies, a situation exacerbated by imbibing Westernised curriculum. However, with Fallist movements such as Fees Must Fall and Rhodes Must Fall, which led to the manifestation of the decolonisation of the African university's curriculum, especially in South Africa, there was hope. These movements used decolonial theories centred on Black consciousness and Pan-Africanism to contend that the epistemic architecture of universities is firmly anchored in colonialism and that, as a result, the white-liberal institution as we know it must collapse (Mpofu, 2017). It should be noted that the Fallist movement is not

The SoJo Journal: Educational Foundations and Social Justice Education

e-ISSN: 2381-5213
p-ISSN: 2381-5183
DOI 10.1108/SOJO-09-2025-0029

the first wave of decolonisation, as it follows other decolonisation movements from the University of Makerere group of the likes of Wole Soyinka and Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o in the 1950s and 1960s (Nkopo, 2022). The second wave may be the 1962 African Writers Conference in Kampala, which created a platform to reimagine African literature, art and politics outside of colonial rule.

As Nkopo (2022) would argue, the Fallist movements have produced better results than any political party towards the decoloniality project. For a long time, the issue of decolonialisation has been addressed without a solution. The movement continues to play a significant role in advancing the project of decolonisation in higher education across Africa and beyond. It has transformed the discourse of the debate from educational reform to decolonisation (Le Grange, 2018). With the noise caused by the movement, fields of study could have ridden on that movement and decolonise their curriculum so that they address the neglect of African ontologies and epistemologies. As Ngoepe and Bhebhe (2024) would attest, the decolonisation in Africa should begin at the university level, with a radical review of the curriculum that takes into account African epistemologies and ontologies.

As early as 2003, deliberations on the transformation of higher education, focusing on African culture, between the then South African President Thabo Mbeki and vice chancellors of institutions of higher education took place (Horsthemke, 2009). This was followed by a number of initiatives, including a study commissioned by the Development Bank of Southern Africa, which focused on "a diagnosis and analysis of the key issues and challenges of transformation in higher education and training institutions in South Africa, including achievements to date" (Badat, 2010). A number of institutions equally initiated transformation agendas on the organisational level. The transformation agenda in many universities in South Africa focuses on (re)Africanisation and decoloniality of the curriculum and language. Initiatives on language transformation included the translation of teaching materials and the generation of glossaries in various fields of study. While these are laudable, there is a realisation that institutions of higher learning need to move beyond these nascent ideas and implement ways of realising the plans to achieve the introduction of programmes that advance African languages as languages of research, teaching and science, beyond being mere conversational translations. To this day, the higher education landscape in Africa is still struggling to fully implement African languages as languages of science, research, teaching and learning. After the adoption of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development by world leaders in September 2015 at an historic United Nations (UN) Summit, the SDGs officially came into force on 1 January 2016. As a result, institutions of higher learning abandoned transformation agendas and chased the optimisation of SDGs in their curricula and research. While some may argue that the SDGs embrace inequality, they are in a way not directly addressing issues relating to languages and decolonisation, especially in the African context. However, it should be noted that the UN has declared 2022–2032 a decade of indigenous languages. Despite the declaration, implementation of the declaration at the institution of higher learning in South Africa is executed in fragmented silos with no agency responsible for consolidation and reporting (Letsoalo & Ngoepe, 2025).

The title of this paper is inspired by the African paremiology that he who asks questions cannot avoid answers. Indeed, questions are as important as answers in life. If there were no questions, there would be no answers. If there were no problems, there would be no solutions. As in line with the title of this paper, it is therefore appropriate to further bolster the argument in equal measure and probe the question: *"Whose questions and whose answers?"* Both the questions and answers are determined by a set agenda. Therefore, it is necessary to also ask a further basic question: *Whose agenda*? Furthermore, as this invokes a more descriptive identity – the majority of the world – it is therefore necessary to jointly grapple with questions such as: *Why is it that the minority dominates the majority standpoint to the extent of subjecting them (majority) to their (minority) whims?* For example, in the case of Africa, the African Union (AU) Agenda 2063 clearly spells out a programmatic schedule of taking the continent

out of the debilitating legacy of colonialism and apartheid through, among others, creating an enabling atmosphere for the people, particularly the youth, to flourish in areas such as education, diplomacy, information technology, agriculture and many more. In education, the agenda in the African context includes transformation from elementary school to universities. However, this can no longer be realised, as the focus has shifted with the SDGs taking priority and funding at all levels channelled towards that. This is compounded by the current context of increasing economic and environmental fragility, dread over scarcity of resources, the deepening of global tensions and the reshaping of the global order. While these times are characterised by crisis, these are the most exhilarating times when universities must examine afresh their social purpose, practice and presence. Any educational institution remaining far removed from the central transformation challenges of development does so at the risk of being irrelevant.

It is the thesis of this paper that in contributing to global and societal transformation, universities join the international development community and government, industry and civil society networks to act as the *conscience* and *consciousness* of their societies. The university is a cultural manifestation of its time and context and must, therefore, resist the urge for power games and empire building and seek ways to overcome banal careerism and crass competition to become truly connected for the restoration of our world. It is against the given background that this paper interrogates the question raised earlier regarding the owners of the agenda at hand, that is, whose agenda forms the basis of the question, "Whose questions and whose answers?" The question is asked in line with the SDGs for the purpose of resetting higher education transformation for a sustainable future.

This paper forms an opinion based on the authors' scholarly personal narratives, that is, a constructivist research methodology that recognises the researcher's personal experience as a valid object of study. Personal experience forms a central focus of, and resource for, this paper, as the authors spent close to and over 30 years in higher education space, and some of these years were in a higher echelon position. This allowed the authors to use personal experiences as data sources, narrating evocative stories and interpreting their significance.

2. The problem: Whose agenda?

First, a fair assessment of the SDGs must acknowledge that they do seek to find solutions for problems that are serious in Africa and much of the majority world. Countries in the latter context know the harsh realities expressed by the 17 SGDs experientially and are not comparatively as advanced as most countries in the Global North. For example, poverty, hunger, the lack of access to medical care and good-quality education, unemployment and violence are real issues in most of Africa. South Africa's government-owned statistical agency, for example, admits that the "SDGs provide the country with an *ambitious vision* to address and ultimately solve its most pressing societal challenges" (Italics: Authors). Additionally, this agency contends, "Few would disagree that high levels of inequality and persisting poverty are among the most urgent of these challenges" (Stats SA, 2019, p. 21).

A significant challenge of the SGDs is the continuation of the modernist framework that underpinned the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), where the development of the majority world entails "catching up" with Western societies in the North (Biehl, 2013, p. 103). Death and Gabay (2015, p. 598) thus rightly point out that the MDGs were "an ambitious and broadly hegemonic attempt to rearticulate the development project and produce entrepreneurial neoliberal subjects." Though the SDGs were arrived at through a broad international consultative bottom-up consensus, unlike the top-down MGDs, they are fundamentally modernist in nature. Ijeoma and Durokifa (2018, p. 363) are thus on target that, "[. . .] the SDGs, like their predecessor MDGs, are not constituted based on the African context, but on a globalised platform." The globalisation agenda does not deal with important African questions and elements critical to the attainment of development. Bowers-Du Toit (2020, p. 314) points out that, like the MDGs, SDGs are:

> . . .promoted as issue-based development that is based on indicators of the development of respective nations, with the notion that should these be addressed, poverty, marginalisation and environmental degradation will be eliminated forever.

Such a modernist approach means that the SGDs, just like the MDGs, essentially ask questions and provide answers based on the agenda of the Western capitalist nations. They can thus be viewed as colonial in their nature, serving to perpetuate a Western colonial and capitalist agenda. Indeed, despite their negotiated nature, the philosophy of development that underpins the SDGs remains a Western European view of development. More importantly, the coloniality of the SDGs is evident in their erasure of the history of economic dispossession and exploitation in contexts such as Africa, where much of the poverty and inequality they purport to address is historically rooted in the brutal conquest and disposition of Africans of their land and their subjugation into the colonial economies as cheap labour. The SDGs can thus be viewed as attempts by colonial capitalist powers to contain and suppress African questions such as land redistribution and economic reparations by offering elusive development goals. It is therefore difficult to see the SDGs as asking and answering African questions because the problems faced by African countries are not specifically addressed in the SDGs. This means "until these issues are dealt with within an African context, achieving these developmental goals in Africa will remain a challenge as it is currently" (Ijeoma & Durokifa, 2018, p. 363).

In this regard, a developmental agenda that does not address the historical and/or herstorical violence of the Western nations in Africa perpetuates the recolonisation of the continent. Through the SDGs, former colonial powers evade being held accountable for their colonial atrocities and exploitation of Africans by giving the formerly oppressed people a poisoned chalice. Some African countries such as South Africa attest to making some meaningful strides towards the achievement of the SDGs but also admit that there still exist some challenges (Stats SA, 2019). It is interesting that South Africa's evaluation of its inability to meet the SDGs does not view that inability as a result of coloniality and/or apartheid but as a lack of the nation's capacity. Furthermore, the SGDs do not directly address critical African questions within an African context. For instance, the SGDs are framed in a secular humanistic perspective that does not recognise the role of religion and cultural traditions in development. Chilongozi (2020, p. 164) notes with concern that the religious dimension is missing from the SDGs. The neglect of the latter element is linked to a secularist view that views religion as detrimental to development. This exclusion of religion from the SDGs not only hinders religious communities from discerning their mission and/or role towards development but also covertly suggests development as a secular reality in which religion has no place in the quests for the SDGs. Chilongozi's concern about the neglect of the religious dimension in the SDGs is important because in contexts such as Africa, religion plays an important role in people's approach to life, and therefore, an approach to sustainable development that takes religion seriously is important in galvanising people towards the SDGs. A brief note about the context of the majority world can benefit this discussion.

3. The context of the majority world

As the subtitle of this paper is *Rebooting the SDGs and resetting higher education transformation*, it will be pertinent to address why the call for transformation is pertinent to the SDGs discourses. The pertinent question then is which areas of contestation around the SDGs require a reboot, especially from the perspectives of the majority world? Development praxis does not take place in a vacuum but happens within specific national, continental and international contexts. Noteworthy is the fact that within the majority world, almost 90% of the world's youth population [1] *live and move and have their being*. It is, therefore, critical for young people in the majority world to develop leadership agency and actively participate in the formation of a relevant development agenda that is not set by the senior persons and/or citizens of the world. It needs to be set and owned by the youth who will have to contend with the

consequences of the development decisions that are made today. It is critical, therefore, that universities support the youth in moving from victims of society to dynamic *agents* of change.

3.1 The African context as a case in point

Ngoepe (2017) contends that for a continent like Africa, there are complexities upon complexities including the fact that the continent consists of between 47 and 55 countries (although the AU and the UN recognise 54), each with its unique set of socio-cultural and political histories and development. The variation is a result of disputed territories and inconsistencies around the inclusion of island nations off the coast of Africa. Each country in Africa is facing unique problems, but mainly relating to politics. Some countries could be considered fragile states either currently undergoing or just emerging from a period of political and social upheaval, for example, Libya, South Sudan and Somalia. A few territories in or near the African continent have complicated sovereignty, for example, Saint Helena, a dependent territory considered British overseas territory; the Sahrawai Arab Democratic Republic, a state recognised by the AU and 47 UN members that claims territory currently occupied by Morocco; and Somaliland, a state that has not yet been recognised by any UN member that claims territory in Somalia and was formerly known as the British Somaliland Protectorate from the 1920s until 1960. Each of these countries including stable states are characterised by "wicked problems" such as corruption, poor governance, services, healthcare and others.

The situation is compounded by decaying inner cities, a youthful population, deepening inequalities, global monopolies of power, exploitation of natural resources, economic gains valued higher than environmental sustainability and unequal opportunities and access to resources, often leading to social division [2]. In Africa, there has been complete failure in terms of sharing the dividends of mineral wealth, and in this regard, the *Africa Progress Report* of 2013 had already exposed a serious disjuncture between wealth and well-being in the Southern countries. The report noted that resource-rich African countries account for 9 of the 12 countries at the bottom of the UN *Human Development Index* [3]. As an example of this strange disconnect, H.E. T Mbeki, the former President of the Republic of South Africa, notes that the relationship between China and South Africa "consists of South Africa as a raw materials supplier to China and China as a manufactured products supplier to South Africa" [4]. Thus, even in contexts of vast mineral resources, we can still contend with inequality and poverty, which are precipitated by resource depletion and a lack of local beneficiation. Institutions of higher learning are central to mitigating most of these societal challenges. However, higher education is facing rapid change and unprecedented challenges. Now more than ever, resilient and adaptable leaders who foster community and lead with clarity are essential.

In Africa, empires and colonisers have utilised knowledge as an instrument of power to oppress, subjugate, disjoint and disrupt African epistemologies. The obstinate connection between knowledge and power relations warrants scholarship that serves as an emancipatory instrument that challenges the epistemic violence and injustice that has beleaguered the African academy. For this reason, it is a daily task of the African university to break free from the knowledge orthodoxy of the north. Hence, the legacy of the Fallist movement is not just about the initial, high-profile protests but also an ongoing push for a fundamental reshaping of the university. It continues to focus on curriculum transformation through inclusion of indigenous knowledge and languages to enhance access, erosion of symbols of colonisation and funding of higher education. This has resulted in some universities in South Africa fast-tracking implementation of curriculum transformation to address grand societal problems (Letsoalo & Ngoepe, 2025). For example, the University of Pretoria digitised rock art paintings, which Ngoepe and Bhebhe (2024) consider a form of decolonising archives. Rock art paintings have been used by African ancestors to preserve information and communicate messages to the next generations. As Setumu (2015, p. 35) would attest, African ancestors also left messages and stories in the form of symbols etched on the rocks. Such information on the

rocks does not appear to be considered archives by Western standards. The goal of the digitisation project by the University of Pretoria is to digitise rock art collections on the African continent, make them available in an easily searchable database and, in so doing, convey the importance of protecting and preserving the continent's rich archaeological heritage and facilitating ongoing research and interest in its fascinating past (Ngoepe & Bhebhe, 2024).

Other examples of decoloniality projects include the infusion of African content in the curriculum. Mojapelo, Ngoepe, and Jacobs (2023) share how this was implemented in an archival programme at the University of South Africa through the development of five interrelated archival online modules for a postgraduate programme that is responsive to global, national, continental and local issues (glonacol). In this regard, the authors indicate that they ensured that oral history was integrated into all modules of the programme they developed to emphasise the need in Africa to retain oral history. For example, it is stated that

> . . ...in the information and knowledge governance module, we included the governance of oral history as records; in the digital records forensics and archival diplomatics module, we included the authentication of oral history as evidence; and in data curatorship and management, we added content related to the collection and curatorship of oral history. In research methodology modules, we teach students how to use oral history as a research method to collect data. All these are in line with UNISA's curriculum transformation agenda, which seeks to reform and decolonise teaching and learning within the university (Mojapelo *et al*., 2023, p. 88).

The authors acknowledge that many scholars have questioned the reliability of oral sources, and it is for this reason that students on this programme are taught how to use archival principles to authenticate oral history records.

Important to the development of any curriculum at the institution of higher learning is the question of the incorporation of multilingualism, especially with an acknowledgement that language can be a barrier to education and teaching. The revised language policy for higher education, which seeks to promote multilingualism in institutional policies and practices at South Africa's higher education institutions, provides a clear framework under which multilingualism can be promoted in order to transform higher education (Mojapelo *et al*., 2023). The aim is to ensure that everyone, including marginalised communities, has access to higher education and is in a position to enjoy the same benefits of teaching and learning as the rest of the students. As required by the university language policy, students must be supported in their own languages. This support entails compulsory multilingual glossaries in all eleven official languages, translation support for learning materials and tutorial support. Letsoalo and Ngoepe (2025) report that the University of South Africa implemented multilingualism through use of indigenous languages as the language of research, teaching and learning. Challenges identified in implementing multilingualism include a lack of publishing platforms for scholarly works in indigenous languages, as well as the inability of some academics and students to read and write in these languages. Nonetheless, there have been attempts at implementing, hence the publication of the book *Soshanguve paremiology* + with chapters written in five languages (English, isiXhosa, Northern Sotho, Tshivenda and Xitsonga). The choice of languages for implementation of multilingualism is informed by capacity in the chosen languages, as well as the number of enrolled students who are competent in a particular subject (Mojapelo *et al*., 2023). This is a demonstration that it is possible to make indigenous languages the languages of research, teaching and learning. What is required is the costing of the national language policy and investment in indigenous languages.

As reflected in Figure 1, on 16 April 2024, the University of South Africa, through its Principal and Vice Chancellor, Puleng LenkaBula (2021–2030), conferred the Doctor of Philosophy (honouris causa) on Esther Mahlangu, a self-taught Ndebele artist with no academic qualifications, for her mathematical prowess. Despite her "illiteracy" in the Western standards, she was awarded the PhD in Mathematics, as her work of art is geometric. It is generally accepted that, although seemingly simple, the geometric abstractions in her art are underscored by the constant repetition and symmetry of such simple shapes that make the

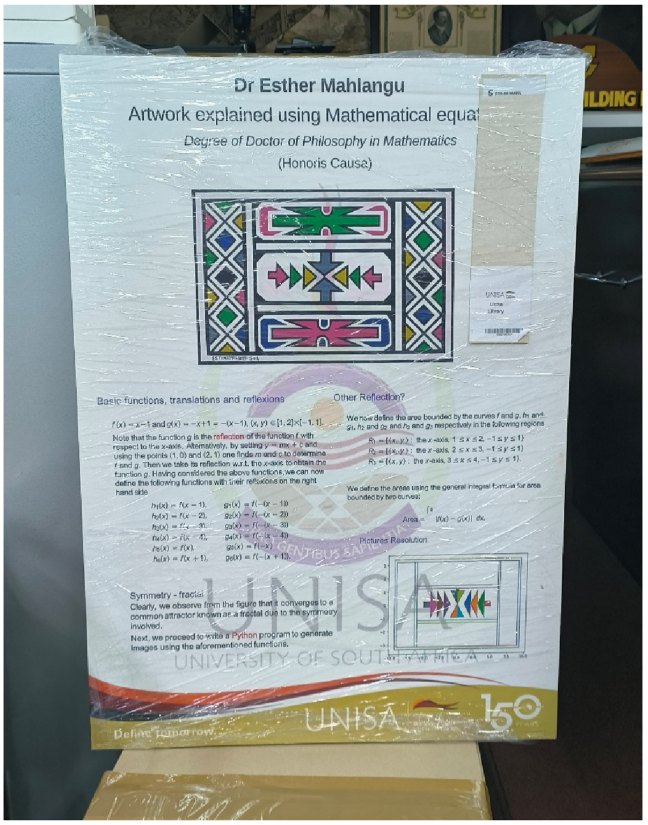

Figure 1. A picture of artwork of Dr Esther Mahlangu explained using mathematical equations (copy at Unisa Archives)

whole work quite complex. The work of Esther Mahlangu is described in a Master of Art dissertation by Boyd (2017) that "the composition of Mahlangu is more compact, more engaging and complex than that of her contemporaries, the borders more complicated. She has a tendency to frame her pattern motifs." As a result, in awarding her an honorary doctorate in mathematics, the University of South Africa affirmed the notion that her work truly transcends art and is a form of mathematics and should thus be recognised as such. In this way, the University of South Africa showed a responsibility to recognise and affirm Indigenous knowledge systems and to ensure that they do not play second fiddle to other knowledge systems in the world.

In the preceding section on whose agenda is being served, it has become clear that the agenda is foreign to Africa. Hence, to deepen the liberation of knowledge from its elitist and colonial captivity, knowledge creation and knowledge mobilisation can no longer be the sole preserve of scholars who have been largely influenced by dominant forms of knowledge. Those who create, own and disseminate development knowledge have supreme power. Knowledge is power, and those who own and produce knowledge have long exerted their power over Africa. Regrettably, the northern knowledge hegemonies that flood the African market with development knowledge, which is owned and produced in the north, continue to persist. The "geography of [development] knowledge" is indeed still uneven. In Africa, it has been said that "for no other continent is so much written about by outsiders" [5]. If Africans are

to be authentic development partners, then surely, Africans should support the increase of local development knowledge.

The development lags on the continent persist despite all the "international support" and capacity-building efforts. Africa is still relegated as the world's development plaything to be toyed with, thrown scraps at, pitied and scrutinised. A World Bank study pertinently titled, *Can Africa Claim the 21st Century*; while offering a qualified yes to the question, describes the development situation in Africa as follows:

> Despite gains in the second half of the 1990s, Sub-Saharan Africa enters the 21st century with many of the world's poorest countries... Incomes, assets, and access to essential services are unequally distributed and the region contains a growing share of the world's absolute poor, who have little power to influence the allocation of resources. Moreover, many development problems have become largely confined to Africa [6].

4. Why we must reboot, reset, reconsider the SDGs

Against the preceding backdrop, it is appropriate to determine why it is necessary to reboot the SDGs. In this context, to reboot means to restart or reset, to start something again or do something again in a way that is new. Succeeding the MDGs, the SDGs have become a critical framework for addressing global sustainability and development challenges. While the current SDGs provide a valuable framework for development, there are key reasons why a reboot is necessary to ensure the effectiveness of the SDGs in addressing the ever-deepening challenges of the 21st century. Education theorist Paulo Freire alerted us that critical consciousness "is a distinctive achievement of human life." Indeed, a critically conscious approach to the SDGs will avert mindless adoption and drive us towards the quality reasoning required for the monumental global task of sustainable development.

Rebooting the SDGs is imperative for fostering equality, upholding human dignity and achieving shared growth and progress that benefits all nations. The reset is necessary to create a more responsive, equitable and effective framework for global progress. By prioritising inclusivity, strengthening international collaboration, learning from past experiences and embracing technological advancements, a recalibrated SDG agenda can pave the way for a future where equality, human dignity and shared prosperity become tangible realities for all global citizens.

4.1 Critical evaluation of the SDGs

The first point to start at is that the very context of the SDGs needs to be problematised.

4.1.1 Problematising the context of the SDGs. Unlike the MGDs were a top-down agenda by the leading Western capitalist nations, the SDGs were implemented after several consultative meetings among the UN member states. This can be lauded as the coming together of the world's nations for the common goal of addressing the burgeoning threat to the world's social, economic and environmental well-being (UN-Economic & Social Affairs, 2024). The 17 SDGs were developed from *the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, adopted by all member states of the UN in 2015. Essentially, the SDGs are rallying points for all the nations of the world to rise and take urgent actions to save the world from imminent disaster. However, it is important to note that this imminent disaster did not come from a vacuum, as already hinted. Rather, the SDGs seek to address a disaster caused by human beings through selfish actions. Furthermore, it should also be noted that many of the SDGs address problems that were caused by colonialism. For example, no poverty (SDG 1), zero hunger (SDG 2), quality education (SDG 4), gender equality (SDG 5), clean water and sanitation (SDG 6), decent work and economic growth (SDG 8), sustainable cities and communities (SDG 11) and responsible consumption and production (SDG 12) cannot be addressed without attending to the problem of Western colonialism in Africa. In southern African countries such as Namibia, South Africa and Zimbabwe, poverty (SDG 1), hunger (SDG 2) and poor sanitation (SDG 6) cannot be fully resolved without addressing the historical

unequal access to land. Furthermore, as Ngoepe (2023) laments in the book review, Mozambique's records detailing how the sewage system of that country was laid out were taken by Portugal when the country gained independence. Mozambique is prone to flooding, and the country now has no records to use in detecting where flooding could impact the sewage system. Likewise, because Belgium took the colonial-era records of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC, formerly Zaire) when the DRC gained independence, the country could not even establish a national archive until 1989 (Ngoepe, 2023).

Furthermore, it is important to note that both the MDGs and SDGs were implemented after the gross destruction of African economies by the Economic Structural Adjustment programs (ESAPs) of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. African governments adopted ESAPs with the belief that they "would promote macro-economic stabilisation, privatisation and free market development, thereby fostering economic growth and extricating people from poverty" (Ijeoma & Durokifa, 2018, p. 357). However, the programmes failed dismally.

4.1.2 A critical evaluation of the SDGs. The critical evaluation of the SDGs reveals multifaceted challenges that necessitate careful consideration for future success as follows:

(1) One of the primary criticisms revolves around the ambitious, oversealous nature of the goals with slow and limited achievement.

(2) The SDGs contain too many priorities. Kasirim Nwuke, former chief for the green economy, technologies and innovation at the UN Economic Commission for Africa, suggested that

> a smaller set of achievable goals will enable policymakers in Africa and elsewhere to protect, to the greatest extent possible, the successes of the recent past in health, education, food security and poverty [6].

(3) The goals lack clear mechanisms for implementation. A significant drawback of the SDGs lies in the absence of concrete, measurable targets.

(4) There is also concern over the reliability of funding instruments.

> The global economic crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has turned an already yawning funding gap into a chasm. Flattening public financing and shrinking external private finance has left a $4.2trn-a-year funding hole, equivalent to about 4% of the world economy and almost twice as much as global defence spending [6].

(5) The timelines for the goals have been heavily affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and recent wars. There are logical concerns about the practicality of achieving the goals within the set timeframe.

(6) The complexity in the relationship between the 17 SDGs presents great challenges, as pursuing one goal may inadvertently hinder progress in another [7]. For example, the focus on economic growth and industrialisation has come with dire consequences for the earth. We must remember that *economy* is inextricably linked to *ecology.*

(7) The perceived "one-size-fits-all approach" of the SDGs lacks a robust focus on addressing systemic inequalities, hindering the effectiveness of interventions and potentially exacerbating existing disparities. In a lecture given to students and UN staff in Addis Ababa in Ethiopia under the title, "*Can the SDGs be made easier for governments to adopt in practice and implement",* David Malone states that despite the principle of universality, the reality was that countries will not adopt and implement the SDGs uniformly [8].

(8) A recalibration should prioritise a more inclusive approach that considers the diverse socio-economic, cultural and historical contexts of the different regions of the world. This tailoring of interventions is crucial for fostering an equitable distribution of benefits and addressing unique systemic challenges faced by individual countries.

(9) Global disparities, particularly on the African continent, may be unintentionally prolonged by the SDGs' universality, due to the overlooking of diverse socio-economic contexts and challenges.

(10) The insufficient emphasis on addressing systemic issues such as corruption, political instability and conflict can impede progress towards the SDGs, necessitating the resolution of structural impediments for impactful sustainable development. Corrupt governments are known to delay the progress of nations at the expense of personal aggrandisement.

(11) Rebooting the SDGs should involve a stronger emphasis on collaboration and global governance to address complex challenges like climate change, pandemics and economic disparities. Strengthening mechanisms for cooperation, resource-sharing and knowledge exchange can enhance the collective impact of global initiatives, fostering a sense of shared responsibility among nations.

(12) Furthermore, addressing the digital divide and harnessing technology for sustainable development should be central to a rebooted SDG framework. Leveraging innovations can amplify the impact of interventions, enhance education and facilitate inclusive economic growth, reducing disparities among nations and communities.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, while the SDGs represent an admirable global effort, their complexity, lack of clear mechanisms and seemingly one-size-fits-all approach raise valid concerns. A recalibrated, more nuanced and context-specific strategy is crucial to ensure the equitable achievement of sustainable development globally. We must ensure that the majority world participates as equals in development thinking. We must continually ask of the SDGs: Who determines the priorities? Who sets the agenda? Who crafts policy? Who implements policy? Where are the gaps? Who stands to gain the most, and who stands to lose? We need to work in collaboration to identify and mitigate risks, increase preparedness, build agency and strengthen innovative thinking for global development and resilience strategies.

We must learn from the past lessons of development. While *development leads to transformation*, it is still a critical site *requiring transformation.* We must remember that *transformation* means a change in shape and form. We can have *transmogrification*, which is a change into something grotesque, detestable and horrid, or we can strive for *transfiguration*, which means a change into something radiant, beautiful and just. Let's hope and work together so that those who come after us do not accuse us of being *high* on the transformation rhetoric while *low* on the real change that will lead to a beautiful, more radiant, just and sustainable world. Let us commit to working together so that we may break the chains of development dysfunction and distress and begin to realise the true sustainable development of our people, the earth and the cosmos. The overview given in this paper has the obvious limitation of relying mostly on our opinions and experiences within South Africa, which has the potential for subjectivity and interpretation bias. A further empirical study is recommended to cover many universities in the African continent.

Notes

1. See Youth social policy and development division http://undesadspd.org/Youth/FAQs.aspx
2. See: Diagnosing Unequal Development: Why Is It Happening? Jason Am (2021)
3. The Africa Progress Report http://www.africaprogresspanel.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/2013_APR_Equity_in_Extractives_25062013_ENG_HR.pdf
4. M Mbeki *Architects of Poverty* 2009): 167.

5. See Poverty matters blog of *The Guardian* (UK) see a feature titled – In a networked world, why is the geography of knowledge still uneven? User-generated internet content is weighted towards the global north; the division of digital labour urgently needs rebalancing. http://www.theguardian.com/global-development/poverty-matters/2012/jan/09/networked-world-geography-of-information-uneven See: Redrawing the map from access to participation: how to improve global knowledge production, creation & dissemination http://openuct.uct.ac.za/blog/redrawing-map-access-participation-how-improve-global-knowledge-production-creation
6. *Can Africa Claim the 21st Century*? World Bank (2000).
7. See Unravelling the complexity in achieving the 17 sustainable development goals https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8291389/
8. There's no "one-size-fits-all" approach to adopting and implementing SDGs. https://archive.uneca.org/stories/there%E2%80%99s-no-%E2%80%9Cone-size-fits-all%E2%80%9D-approach-adopting-and-implementing-sdgs

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