

Localising the Sustainable Development Goals in Africa: implementation challenges and opportunities

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Abstract

At the point of adopting the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Africa's starting point on almost all dimensions of development was much lower than that of other regions of the world. Thus, SDG progress on the continent determines to a large extent whether the global SDG commitment to 'leave no one behind' remains rhetoric or becomes reality. Local government action is critical to the achievement of the SDGs, as most services provided at the local level have a direct impact on SDG indicators. This paper reflects on the first quadrennial review cycle of the SDGs, and highlights challenges encountered in localising the SDGs in sub-Saharan Africa. Furthermore, the paper contributes to the ongoing strategising for the remaining timeline of the SDGs and analyses the opportunities for local governments to contribute to SDG implementation. The paper also seeks to inform policy action to strengthen local capacity to drive the SDGs agenda in the 'Decade of Action' (2020–2030).

Keywords: Local government, localisation, SDGs, Africa

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Introduction

In the year 2000, world leaders at the United Nations Millennium summit adopted a goal-based strategy for development. The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) set out eight goals with the primary objective of significantly reducing the world's poor populations (United Nations 2015a). The MDG framework guided global development efforts, particularly in the developing world, over a 15-year timespan (2000–2015) and stimulated efforts to meet the needs of the poorest populations (United Nations 2015b). The MDGs have been touted as the most successful anti-poverty movement in history, contributing to halving the number of people living in extreme poverty (UNDESA 2015). Other key indicators including food security, primary school enrolment, under-five mortality, maternal mortality and access to water also recorded significant improvements over the MDG period. Nonetheless, significant gaps persist, with uneven achievements and poor populations concentrated in certain regions, particularly in Africa (United Nations 2015b). The unfinished business of the MDGs has therefore been reflected in the successor plan, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which was adopted in 2015 with a 15-year outlook to 2030. The SDG strategy builds on the successes of the MDGs and broadens the vision to end poverty everywhere, permanently (United Nations 2015c).

The SDGs comprise 17 interconnected goals that provide a comprehensive approach to securing the well-being of present and future generations while safeguarding the planet (United Nations 2020). Also described as the '2030 Agenda', the SDGs call for collective action at all levels to address the challenges of inequality, with the overarching imperative to 'leave no one behind'. The SDGs' ambition to reach 'the last mile' is particularly relevant to the African context given the multi-dimensional nature of poverty experienced by a large proportion of the continent's population. The transformative potential of the SDGs will therefore be enhanced if coherence and alignment are maintained with the direction outlined in Agenda 2063, the African Union's 50-year vision and action plan (Nicolai et al. 2016).

It was alongside the adoption of the SDGs, in 2015, that African countries reached a consensus on Agenda 2063: a roadmap to facilitate radical transformation of the continent. Agenda 2063 recognises the positive strides in Africa's development, particularly since the beginning of the millennium. However, it notes that "*sustaining this path and pace, though positive, is not sufficient for Africa to catch up*" (African Union Commission 2015, p. 11). Hence, the framework seeks to consolidate gains at all levels and propel progress within the continental and global context, including via the SDGs. There is a significant connection between the global 2030 Agenda and Africa's Agenda 2063, which facilitates the integration of both programmes into the development frameworks of African countries, albeit with slight differences in the details of implementation (United Nations Economic Commission for Africa 2017).

After five years of SDG implementation, in 2020 many countries took stock of progress through the voluntary reporting mechanism of the United Nation's high-level political forum on sustainable

development (UN Foundation 2019). The reports produced in the first round of evaluations (the first quadrennial cycle) indicate progress in some important areas, including reducing extreme poverty and child mortality. It is however evident that progress is not occurring at a pace that guarantees achievement of the goals by 2030 (UN Foundation 2019; United Nations 2020). As the UN Secretary-General observed, *“It is abundantly clear that a much deeper, faster and more ambitious response is needed to unleash the social and economic transformation needed to achieve our 2030 goals”* (United Nations 2020). Consequently, the remaining timeline of the SDGs has been declared a ‘Decade of Action’ by the United Nations, with a call on all nations to renew efforts towards achieving the goals.

The SDGs represent the responsibilities of governments towards their citizens, particularly at the local level: *“As part of their day-to-day responsibilities, local governments are implementing policies and carrying out actions which although not always officially ‘SDGs-labelled’, have a direct impact on populations’ access to infrastructure, services and life opportunities”* (United Cities and Local Governments 2019a, p. 13). Accordingly, the term ‘localising’ was adopted by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in 2005 in the context of the MDGs, and continues to be relevant to the SDG mandate (Reddy 2016). Localising the SDGs is understood as the role that regional and local governments play in the implementation of the 17 global goals (Lucci 2015). More specifically, it recognises sub-national contexts for the achievement of the 2030 Agenda, from the setting of goals and targets to determining the means of implementation and using indicators to measure and monitor progress (Tan et al. 2019). Localisation helps reflect much more accurately the state of local communities and provides a more detailed overall picture of the progress being made in localities (Reddy 2016).

A core commitment of the SDGs is to eliminate all forms of poverty and ensure that no one is left behind (United Nations 2015c). Given the concentration of the world’s poor in Africa, we argue that the success of the 2030 Agenda depends to a large extent on the progress recorded in sub-Saharan Africa. Furthermore, local governments play an essential role in delivering basic services relevant to the SDGs. This paper therefore outlines some challenges to SDG implementation in Africa and examines how local government engagement can be used to address these issues. It is not designed to be an exhaustive review of the current state of localisation in Africa; however, it considers some of the key issues which must be addressed to enable local governments to effectively implement the SDGs. We also highlight some unique opportunities local institutions present and suggest strategies to accelerate progress on the SDGs in Africa.

Methods: data sources and analysis

This paper’s review is based on a comprehensive analysis of reports produced by key international development organisations working in Africa. A total of ten reports were analysed through detailed qualitative content analysis (see Table 1). The publications were purposively selected based on the

scope of the publishing organisation and its relevance to the Africa region. The 2019 report of the Sustainable Development Goals Center for Africa (hereafter ‘SDGCA’) provided a comprehensive overview of SDG implementation on the continent. The United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) reports provided assessments specific to local government contexts in Africa and globally. The analyses in these reports were based on updated information from the 2019 country evaluation reports. Two reputable think-tanks, the Overseas Development Institute and Brookings Africa Growth, provided perspectives that facilitated our analysis: a 2016 prediction of progress, and a 2019 review that looked back on progress over the first three years of implementation. The report commissioned by the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) reviewed the integration of the regional Agenda 2063 and global 2030 Agenda into national development plans; we reflect later in this paper on challenges to integration at the local level. The deliberations by the Commonwealth Local Government Forum (CLGF) and United Nations Development Group (UNDG) stakeholders provided useful thoughts from local government practitioners. Given the relevance of the World Bank Group to development efforts in the Africa region as a major development partner, we reviewed the Bank’s Africa Poverty Report, which provided insights relevant to SDG implementation in the region. We complemented this analysis with the 2018 global update report on implementing the 2030 Agenda, also by the World Bank.

Table 1: Summary of reports analysed

Organisation	Report title	Publication year
United Nations Economic Commission for Africa	Integrating Agenda 2063 and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development into national development plans	2017
United Nations Development Group (UN Habitat, Global Taskforce, UNDP)	Localising the Post-2015 Development Agenda – Dialogues in implementation	2015
Overseas Development Institute	Projecting Progress – The SDGs in sub-Saharan Africa (Regional Scorecard)	2016
Sustainable Development Goals Center for Africa	Africa 2030: Sustainable Development Goals three-year reality check	2019
United Cities and Local Governments Global Observatory on Local Democracy and Decentralization (‘GOLD V’ 2019)	The Localisation of the Global Agenda: How local action is transforming territories and communities (Africa Regional Chapter Report)	2019
United Cities and Local Governments Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments	Towards the localisation of the SDGs – Local and Regional Governments’ report to the 2019 High-Level Political Forum	2019
World Bank Group	Poverty in a rising Africa – Africa Poverty Report	2016
World Bank Group	Implementing the 2030 Agenda: 2018 update	2018
Commonwealth Local Government Forum	Local Government 2030: achieving the vision (Commonwealth Local Government Conference)	2015
Brookings Africa Growth	Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals: The state of play and policy options	2019

We used the methodology outlined by Hsieh and Shannon (2005, p. 1,279) for an initial review of the documents, namely to “*achieve immersion and obtain a sense of the whole*”. The reports were then re-examined with careful attention to the qualitative assessment of key challenges highlighted as well as opportunities available for implementing the SDGs. We grouped issues under common themes and selected the most frequently recurring issues that were pertinent to the local governance level (see Table 2). This gave us a list of four key challenges, which we discuss further below.

In our review, we also looked out for pointers to opportunities at the local level to advance the SDGs. We highlighted a number of issues which we discuss here under the broad theme of ‘multi-stakeholder engagement’. These issues include increasing awareness of citizens, taking advantage of the ‘youth bulge’ in Africa and developing peer support mechanisms. We note that the list is not exhaustive; however, we aim to highlight salient issues to aid policy-makers in identifying priorities to address in the short to medium term that will yield the most impact on the SDGs’ performance.

Table 2: Frequency of appearance of issues in reports

Organisation	Challenges				Opportunities
	Data	Finance	Institutional context	Social inclusion/human capital	Multi-stakeholder
United Nations Development Group (UN Habitat, Global Taskforce, UNDP)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Overseas Development Institute	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Sustainable Development Goals Center for Africa	✓	✓	✓	✓	
United Cities and Local Governments Global Observatory on Local Democracy and Decentralization (‘GOLD V’ 2019)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
United Cities and Local Governments Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
World Bank Group (Africa Poverty Report)	✓	✓		✓	
World Bank Group	✓	✓		✓	✓
Commonwealth Local Government Forum	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Brookings Africa Growth	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
United Nations Economic Commission for Africa	✓			✓	✓

Results and discussion

Localising the SDGs in Africa – the journey so far

The sub-Saharan Africa region faces the most challenging task of achieving the absolute targets of the SDGs by 2030, given its lower starting position and the trend of relatively poor performance on the MDGs (Nicolai et al. 2016). This being the case, the SDGCA (2019) observes that attainment of the SDGs by African countries will require more than business as usual. At the start of the SDG era, Africa was characterised by 52% low-income countries. Furthermore, high population growth continues to outstrip progress on the people-centred goals, thus constraining the achievement of the SDGs. The effects of conflict and natural disasters compound the situation. Consequently, available data on Africa's progress for the first three years of SDG implementation points to 14 goals being off track, with notable progress towards only three: SDG 5 on gender equality, SDG 13 on climate action, and SDG 15 on life on land (SDGCA 2019). The 2019 Africa SDG Index and Dashboards Report showed that 18 countries (46%) in sub-Saharan Africa have made less than 50% progress towards the best possible outcome on all the SDGs (SDGCA and Sustainable Development Solutions Network 2019). Even the top-ranked country, Mauritius, only showed 66% progress towards the best possible outcome (Brookings 2019). The frequently observed pattern across the region reflects stagnation or moderate improvement on most of the goals. Table 3 presents a summary of SDG progress in Africa using the latest available data in 2020.

The following year, the 2020 Index and Dashboards Report on Africa's development highlighted the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on progress towards the SDGs in Africa. The socio-economic crisis precipitated by the pandemic threatens to derail the limited progress recorded and heightens the urgency of the 'Decade of Action' (SDGCA and Sustainable Development Solutions Network 2020). Research indicates that the impact of the pandemic is unequally experienced by different segments of the population. This is because the most vulnerable people, including those with limited access to basic services such as water and health delivery, are likely to be more adversely impacted (SDGCA and Sustainable Development Solutions Network 2020). Given the high numbers of people living in under-served conditions in Africa, the short- to medium-term outlook for achieving the SDGs is not positive (see Table 3). Additionally, in order to contain the spread of COVID-19, most African countries have imposed lockdowns which have had an impact on economic activities (SDGCA and Sustainable Development Solutions Network 2020). The resulting decline in revenues is spurring an economic crisis that is exacerbating the resource scarcity in poor countries in sub-Saharan Africa (United Nations 2020). This situation therefore calls for innovative and expedited action to achieve meaningful progress on the SDGs.

Table 3: Status of SDG indicators in Africa, 2020

SDG Goal	Description	Status
<p>Goal 1</p> 	End poverty in all its forms everywhere	Nine out of ten extremely poor people in the world are found in Africa. 2020 estimates suggest that another 59 million people are likely to be pushed into extreme poverty due to the COVID-19 pandemic, reaching a total of 514 million Africans. Countries most impacted, including Nigeria and the Democratic Republic of Congo, expect 5 million and 2 million more poor people respectively.
<p>Goal 2</p> 	End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture	Evidence available in 2020 indicates that 135 million people globally are food-insecure. A majority of food-insecure people, 73 million, live in Africa. Additionally, one in five people in Africa are under-nourished, and approximately 59 million children (30%) have stunted growth. Furthermore, disruptions in the food supply system due to the global pandemic impacted household consumption and food availability, and this is expected to double the food-insecure population.
<p>Goal 3</p> 	Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all age	Globally, the number of maternal deaths decreased by 4% between 2015 and 2017, resulting in an overall maternal mortality rate of 211 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births. Sub-Saharan Africa accounts for about 66% of global maternal deaths. The weak healthcare systems in the region, coupled with healthcare personnel shortages, are worsening with the ongoing pandemic, further reducing the likelihood of realising Goal 3 by 2030.
<p>Goal 4</p> 	Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all	Available data from 129 countries indicates that globally, the percentage of primary school teachers receiving the minimum pedagogical training according to national standards has stagnated at 85% since 2015. The percentage is lowest in sub-Saharan Africa (64%). Closure of learning institutions in many African countries due to the pandemic is expected to delay progression and the development of critical social and emotional skills, further widening inequality gaps.
<p>Goal 5</p> 	Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls	Evidence shows that in 2019, one in five young women 20 to 24 years of age throughout the world married in childhood. The incidence is highest in sub-Saharan Africa, with more than one in three young women experiencing child marriage. Available data from 57 countries for the period 2007–2018 indicates that only 55% of married or in-union women, of 15 to 49 years of age, make their own decisions on sexual and reproductive health and rights. Central and Western Africa account for the lowest range, less than 40%.
<p>Goal 6</p> 	Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all	2.2 billion people globally do not have safely managed drinking water, and 785 million of that number do not even have basic drinking water. In sub-Saharan Africa, about 63% of people have difficulties in accessing basic water services.
<p>Goal 7</p> 	Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all	Globally, the electrification rate increased from 83% in 2010 to 90% in 2018. However, the world's deficit is increasingly concentrated in sub-Saharan Africa, with about 548 million people (53%) without access to electricity.

SDG Goal	Description	Status
<p>Goal 8</p> 	Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all	2016 data shows 61% of global workers engage in informal employment. The dependence on informal employment is highest in sub-Saharan Africa, with 89% of workers (250 million persons) engaged in informal employment. Furthermore, small and medium-sized enterprises account for 80% of employment.
<p>Goal 9</p> 	Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialisation and foster innovation	Available data in 2019 shows that 14% of the world's workers are employed in manufacturing activities, with the smallest share (6%) recorded in sub-Saharan Africa. Moreover, only 22% of small-scale industries in sub-Saharan Africa have access to loans or lines of credit that facilitate their integration into global value chains. This average is much lower than the 34% recorded for developing countries in general, including the Latin America and Caribbean regions which have an average of 48% access to loans.
<p>Goal 10</p> 	Reduce inequality within and among countries	While no SDG data exists to assess this indicator, growing evidence suggests that Africa is one of the most unequal regions in the world. Based on a measure of total resource flows for development, inequality worsened in 25 African countries between 2000 and 2015.
<p>Goal 11</p> 	Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable	Globally, the number of slum dwellers in 2018 was more than 1 billion. Sub-Saharan Africa has 238 million people living in slums, making it one of the regions with the highest occurrence of slum dwellers, alongside East and South-East Asia with 370 million.
<p>Goal 12</p> 	Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns	Global domestic material consumption per capita increased from 10.8 metric tonnes per capita in 2010 to 11.7 metric tonnes in 2017, with increases in all regions except Africa and North America.
<p>Goal 13</p> 	Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts	Sub-Saharan Africa is the best-performing region in the world when it comes to CO ₂ emissions. Only one country in the region, South Africa, is among the top 20 emitters of CO ₂ , with 467.7 MT emissions per annum.
<p>Goal 14</p> 	Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development	The sustainability of global fishery resources continues to decline marginally, with the proportion of fish stocks recorded as within biologically sustainable levels standing at 65.8% in 2017, 0.8% lower than 2015 levels.

SDG Goal	Description	Status
<p>Goal 15</p> 	Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss	The world's forest area declined by about 100 million ha between the year 2000 and 2020. Regions contributing to this decline include sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America and South-East Asia, largely due to land conversion to agriculture.
<p>Goal 16</p> 	Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels	The global rate of homicide per 100,000 persons declined from 6.8% in the year 2000 to 5.8% in 2018. Of the global homicide victims, 36% were reported in sub-Saharan Africa. 2019 data indicates that 127 countries have binding laws and policies that facilitate an individual's right to information. Out of the 43 countries that have adopted such regulations in the past ten years, 40% are in Africa.
<p>Goal 17</p> 	Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalise the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development	Net overseas development aid flows stagnated between 2018 and 2019; however, the poorest countries recorded an increased share. Overall, aid to Africa increased by 1%, but humanitarian aid fell by 3%. The number of countries with national statistical plans increased from 129 in 2018 to 141 in 2019. Sub-Saharan Africa has the second highest number of countries (36) implementing national statistical plans. The region however had the lowest percentage of fully funded plans (25% of plans fully funded), compared with 95% in North America and Europe.

Sources: Africa SDG Index and Dashboards Report 2020 (SDGCA and Sustainable Development Solutions Network 2020); Progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals Report of the Secretary-General (United Nations Economic and Social Council 2020)

The need is to reach first those people and social groups who are furthest behind, in line with the SDGs' pledge to leave no one behind (World Bank Group 2018). An effective way to identify the most vulnerable is at the local level, and hence the implementation of the SDGs requires strong sub-national action to engage cities and territories (UCLG 2019b). Lessons learned from the implementation of the MDGs highlight the essential role local governments play in defining and communicating the global agenda to citizens. Given their proximity to citizens, local governments can promote the local planning and participation that is necessary to deliver long-term solutions to development challenges (UNDG 2015). Many African countries which presented their voluntary national reviews (VNRs) in the first quadrennial cycle (2015–2019) reported significant progress in incorporating the SDGs into their national plans. The reports however showed limited participation of local governments in national processes for coordinating and reporting on SDG implementation. For instance, only 15 out of the 35 countries that presented VNRs between 2016 and 2019 included local governments in the consultation process (UCLG 2019b). This demonstrates that there remains considerable scope to harness the strengths of local governments to accelerate progress towards the SDGs. Therefore, in the following sections we discuss four key challenges to localising the SDGs in Africa and offer suggestions to enhance the role of local governments in SDG implementation.

Challenges to localising the SDGs in Africa

Inadequate data

An assessment of Africa's progress on the 2030 Agenda shows that approximately six out of every ten SDG indicators cannot be tracked in Africa due to severe data limitations (UNECA 2017). The SDGCA (2019) also laments data scarcity, noting that most countries have not updated their national data, including crucial indicators such as poverty, health and education, since the SDGs started. Although the availability of data has improved over the last two decades, there is a general paucity of regular and good-quality data to measure poverty in Africa. The data challenge can be traced to a lack of funding and low capacity, as well as weak political commitment. Beegle et al. (2016) emphasise the relationship between high-quality data and good governance, and argue that the availability of funds to statistical institutions reflects what governments choose to invest in. The data gap undermines capacity to establish baselines, track performance and make evidence-based decisions at national and sub-national levels. Poor-quality data also reduces accountability as it masks inequalities within countries. Furthermore, non-adherence to methodological and operational standards affects comparability and inhibits the usefulness of some data sets (Beegle et al. 2016).

In order to reach 'the last mile' and bring the benefits of the SDGs to the poorest and most marginalised populations, it is essential that the ability of local governments to develop contextualised SDG monitoring systems is strengthened (UNDG 2015). Political support backed by financial resources is required to develop strong national statistical systems (Beegle et al. 2016). Timely and reliable national data provides a basis for local governments to establish their own tracking mechanisms. Additionally, inclusive data ecosystems involving the private sector, academia, civil society and local communities are critical to ensuring that information required for development decision-making is made available in a coordinated way (UNECA 2017).

Evidence from MDG implementation in Kenya highlights, as an example, the contribution of local-level tracking to advancing development. In this case, sub-national monitoring of net enrolment ratios in primary and secondary education revealed large disparities between the arid and semi-arid areas of northern Kenya and other parts of the country. This stimulated a response from the central government targeting these deprived areas with a specific intervention, including school meals programmes and low-cost boarding schools (United Nations 2015b, p. 10). This example indicates that achieving the transformative goals of the SDGs requires reliable local data to monitor progress.

Several African countries are already taking steps towards aligning the SDGs with their national development plans and establishing baselines using secondary data from their national statistical offices (SDGCA 2019). UCLG's analysis of recent VNRs, however, shows that the collection of data and use of disaggregated indicators at the local level are still lagging in almost all regions of the world (UCLG 2019b). Therefore, initiatives by local governments to develop their own bottom-up monitoring systems

should be encouraged. This is important because disaggregated local data presents the opportunity to uncover inequalities at lower scales and helps ensure that no one and no place is left behind in the SDG era (UCLG 2019a). For example Uganda, one of the first four countries to implement the voluntary local (as opposed to national) review process, a mechanism that encourages local-level reporting on SDG progress, has recorded successes in promoting awareness and commitment to the SDG agenda (Republic of Uganda 2020) (see Box 1). This initiative supported by UNECA is in line with a globally conceptualised review approach that promotes meaningful multi-stakeholder engagement to advance the 2030 Agenda. Replication of similar local-level monitoring mechanisms will strengthen local-level capacity to identify implementation gaps and take pragmatic steps to address them. Furthermore, initiatives such as Ghana's strategy to create statistics offices in all local government units should be encouraged, to enhance local capacity for monitoring and reporting on the SDGs (Republic of Ghana 2019). The initiative to recruit more statisticians at the local government level is in response to the realisation that although the SDGs have been mainstreamed into medium-term development plans at the local government level, the associated capacity to monitor and evaluate progress remains weak. The Government of Ghana, therefore, seeks to enhance monitoring and implementation capacity through this initiative.

Box 1: Voluntary local review process in Ngora District, Uganda

In addition to enhancing statistical capacity to monitor and report progress at the national level, the Government of Uganda is also building strong institutions at the sub-national level to accelerate the implementation of the SDGs through localisation and voluntary local reviews (VLRs). For example, the Ngora District VLR process integrated the SDGs' 2030 Agenda into the objectives and performance monitoring indicators of the district development plan (2015/2016–2019/2020). As a consequence, the SDGs were fully reflected in the five objectives of the district development plan and accompanying budget. The VLR process also enabled the district to identify areas where SDG progress was lacking, in order to allocate more resources to address these issues.

Source: Republic of Uganda (2020, p. 4)

Funding gaps

In the first three years of implementation, the inadequacy of financial resources, from both domestic and international sources, posed a critical challenge to SDG implementation in Africa and globally (World Bank Group 2018). The SDGCA (2019) highlights significant public revenue shortfalls in Africa – one in five African countries does not raise enough in revenues to meet its basic state functions. Furthermore, declining overseas development assistance, one of the major supplements for African economies in the last three decades, has reduced options for many countries (Brookings 2019). With dwindling foreign direct investments and the significant financing gap, an average of 14% of GDP,

especially for low-income economies in Africa, more innovative and pragmatic funding mechanisms are required (SDGCA 2019).

Brookings (2019) highly recommends boosting efforts to mobilise domestic resources. This can be done through strengthening tax capacity, broadening the tax base and improving governance in revenue collection. Analysis by Coulibaly (2019) cited in Brookings (2019) shows that additional efforts to boost tax revenue collection and stem illicit capital flows could significantly narrow the region's financing gap for SDG implementation from the current US\$256 billion to about US\$10 billion per year. Given the necessary training and capacity-building, along with administrative reforms, local governments can strengthen their revenue mobilisation efforts to contribute to this objective. Efficient public spending in support of the SDGs will also encourage citizens to comply with tax collection once they trust that tax revenues are being managed well.

Additionally, lessons from, for example, Rwanda's progress on the SDGs highlight the importance of creating an enabling environment to attract private sector investment to assist in delivering the goals. In line with Rwanda's improved ranking on the World Bank's 'Doing Business' index, from 150th position in 2008 to 29th in 2018, total private investment in the country increased threefold between 2009 and 2018, and foreign direct investment increased nearly fourfold (Brookings 2019). This favourable environment means Rwandan local governments can explore non-traditional financing mechanisms, including public-private partnerships, to finance development projects. Such new funding arrangements will, however, be more beneficial to local governments if they have their own revenue base to enable them to be effective partners.

Fiscal capacity is generally low at the sub-national level in Africa. In 2016, the local level represented less than 20% of total public investment on the continent (UCLG 2019a). The CLGF (2015) has therefore suggested that localisation of the SDGs will require greater political will to facilitate access to the necessary resources while local revenue mobilisation is improved. For many countries in Africa, unfortunately, administrative decentralisation does not necessarily include a fiscal dimension or the political commitment necessary for SDG implementation (Fessha and Kirkby 2007; McLennan and Ngoma 2004). Fiscal autonomy, including the extent to which local governments can generate revenues, control expenditure, and borrow resources, is also limited in most countries. While countries like Kenya, Burundi, Ghana and Rwanda have made significant progress with fiscal decentralisation reforms, there is the need for further reforms to facilitate conducive environments for local governments (UCLG 2019a). Furthermore, the inability of most local governments to generate enough revenue to meet their budgeted expenditure results in 'fiscal squeeze' across the continent: the impact of rising local expectations without the matching fiscal resources to satisfy those expectations (UCLG 2019a, p. 53).

To address this issue, several initiatives to strengthen the financial capacity of local governments and their ability to implement the SDGs in Africa are emerging. For instance, the United Nations Capital

Development Fund (UNCDF) is working in collaboration with the Global Fund for Cities Development to diversify the financial resources of local government institutions (see Box 2). This initiative is being implemented in Cameroon, Madagascar, Mali and Niger in partnership with the Network of African Finance Institutions for Local Authorities (UCLG 2019a). Citizen-led initiatives to finance development initiatives are also evolving. For example, in the Zimbabwean city of Bulawayo residents of the municipality contributed US\$1 dollar each towards a water piping project; and in Rwanda, citizens contribute their labour towards building infrastructure, especially roads (CLGF 2015). In the ‘Decade of Action’, such innovative partnerships should be replicated in local governments elsewhere to expedite progress towards the SDGs.

Box 2: Financial capacity-building of African local government institutions

Between 2016 and 2018, a consortium led by UNCDF worked with four countries (Cameroon, Madagascar, Mali and Niger) to support local governments to boost their own financial resources. The project addressed the mismatch between the role of local governments in SDG implementation and the low potential for tax revenue at the local level, particularly in Africa. The enabling partners (UNCDF, the Global Fund for Cities Development and the World Bank’s Public–Private Infrastructure Advisory Facility) provided support to local government financing institutions through the Network of African Finance Institutions for Local Authorities (RIAFCO). The project enabled the local government financing institutions to gain a better understanding of municipal finance and enhanced their ability to access finance. Specifically, the programmes improved the awareness of local government finance institutions of innovative sources of finance, including climate finance and domestic and private sources of finance. Additionally, the ten member institutions of RIAFCO are now able to access alternative municipal funding sources. The knowledge and capacity-building tools developed through the project also strengthened participants’ understanding of municipal finance instruments.

Source: UNCDF (2021)

Institutional context

Localisation requires that local governments be provided with resources and capacities commensurate with the responsibilities they are given in the implementation process. In order for local governments to effectively function as strategic implementers of the SDGs they need the requisite human capital and financial resources as well as autonomy to take decisions based on the needs of their citizens. UCLG (2019a) further observes that empowered local governments, accountable to their citizens, are necessary for effective SDG implementation. Yet in many contexts in sub-Saharan Africa, incomplete decentralisation impedes the functioning of local governments as strategic SDG implementers (Awortwi 2016). When central government institutions do not grant sufficient autonomy to local government institutions, it makes it difficult for local governments to take independent decisions that respond to the needs of citizens, as they are controlled by central agencies (McLennan and Ngoma

2004). For instance, in Lusophone Angola, provincial governors are appointed by national government, and municipal administrators are appointed by provincial governors, subject to confirmation by the national government (UCLG 2019a). This situation creates local government institutions closely aligned and reporting to central governments. Hence conflicts arise when central government demands are not aligned with the requests of local citizens. Structures like this typically lead to a situation where SDG implementation may be localised, but implementation efforts may not respond appropriately to the needs of citizens in their locality, particularly vulnerable groups. Nearly 25 years ago Ayee (1997) described a similar situation – of regional and district administrations taking policy directives from the central government – as a case of “*decentralised centralization*” (p. 51). Hence, analysis of the institutional context of local governments in sub-Saharan Africa is necessary in order to identify reforms to enhance the effectiveness of local governments as SDG implementers. Contextual analysis is highly recommended because, as UCLG (2019a) suggests, in some cases even when impressive progress on decentralisation is reported, serious concerns about the actual context in which local governments are expected to operate and implement the SDGs could exist. On a positive note, however, evidence from Liberia demonstrates that recent local governance reforms there have contributed to advancing SDG implementation (see Box 3).

Box 3: Local governance reforms in Liberia

The 2020 Voluntary National Review for Liberia highlights that the passing into law of the Local Government Act in 2018 enhanced the legal regulatory framework for decentralisation and local government reform in Liberia. Additionally, to promote efficient service delivery at the 15 county service centres across the country, a handbook of operations was developed by the Governance Commission in collaboration with the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the UNDP Office in Liberia. Further, a revenue-sharing formula for central and local government institutions has been developed. Overall, the local government reforms have enhanced citizens’ access to information and basic social services. The fiscal and administrative reforms have also provided an opportunity for vulnerable groups, including women and youth, to participate in local governance administration.

Source: Republic of Liberia (2020)

Social exclusion

Localisation dialogues – for example in Malawi, Ghana and Burundi – have often cited social exclusion as a major challenge to local SDG implementation (UNDG 2015). Despite recent reductions in the proportion of people living in poverty, absolute numbers of poor citizens are increasing owing to a combination of high population growth rates and relatively weak economic growth (SDGCA 2019). Brookings (2019) observes that there is a lack of clear reporting and accountability mechanisms to address inequality. Yet local governments can play a unique role in promoting inclusive ownership of the development agenda and embracing diversity, which will be key steps in fulfilling the SDG pledge

to ‘leave no one behind’. Given their functions in supporting economic development, including the provision of essential services such as water, local governments can facilitate the inclusion of vulnerable groups, including persons with disabilities and women, in development policies.

In order to advance social inclusion, responsive budgeting with ring-fenced funding for addressing poverty and inequality should be promoted, along with opportunities for job creation and poverty reduction (SDGCA 2019). Prioritising the needs of the poorest and most vulnerable members of the community requires concerted inter-governmental effort (CLGF 2015). These efforts should be guided by strategic policies; a good start would be the African Charter on the Values and Principles of Decentralisation, Local Governance and Local Development, which provides for the inclusion of marginalised groups and gives them priority in service delivery (UCLG 2019a). In support of this approach, evidence from Malawi demonstrates that sub-national inclusion efforts, particularly in rural areas, can contribute to enhanced participation of marginalised populations in SDG implementation efforts (see Box 4).

Box 4: Fostering inclusion through sub-national decentralised structures in Malawi

To enhance inclusion at the decentralised sub-national level, the Government of Malawi established area and village development committees to highlight the needs of local communities and feed them into district development plans. The SDGs have also been integrated into district development plans and socio-economic profiles. Additionally, the committees also occasionally participate in the monitoring of projects being undertaken in their areas of jurisdiction. Malawi’s 2020 National VNR indicates that both types of committee have been instrumental in SDG implementation and progress reporting at the local level. Additionally, the Government of Malawi’s recently adopted Integrated Rural Development Strategy creates a platform to empower citizens living in rural areas to access socio-economic opportunities and enhance their livelihoods.

Source: Government of Malawi (2020, p. 39)

Opportunity: multi-stakeholder engagement

Local governments occupy unique positions as community leaders with the ability to draw on a network of partners from across the community to deliver development (CLGF 2015). Effective localisation involves all local actors, including civil society, traditional leaders, religious organisations, academia and the private sector. Local stakeholders possess varying sets of knowledge and present different opportunities for development collaboration (UNDG 2015). For instance, partnerships with academics can increase access to technical advice as well as skills development programmes; civil society organisations can support local governments to understand the needs of different marginalised groups; and effective collaboration with private sector organisations at the local level can enhance opportunities for public–private partnerships to support development interventions (CLGF 2015). Local governments

therefore need to provide strong and capable leadership to bring key local stakeholders together (UNDG 2015).

A necessary pre-condition for persuading development actors at the local level, including citizens and non-governmental organisations, to buy into achieving the SDGs is raising awareness of the relevance of the global agenda to their own interests. For instance, translation of the key initiatives into local languages will facilitate citizen ownership and commitment, which are essential for effective SDG implementation (UNDG 2015; UNECA 2017). In Malawi, translation of the SDGs into three local languages (Chichewa, Yao and Tumbuka) has engaged local community members who do not understand English and has empowered them to meaningfully contribute to the implementation of the SDGs (Government of Malawi 2019, p. 30).

To mitigate the risk of the global SDG targets not being responsive to the needs of local people, multi-stakeholder platforms and local dialogue platforms can be used to strengthen the capacity of citizens and community representatives to articulate their needs and monitor local service delivery (CLGF 2015). Advocacy and awareness among all stakeholders also helps to promote the cross-fertilisation of ideas; and enhances accountability and community confidence (UCLG 2019b). For example, a multi-stakeholder platform led by the Rwanda Association of Local Government Authorities in collaboration with key development actors enhanced the understanding of the SDG localisation process by districts in Rwanda. The platform also facilitated ownership of the SDGs and a commitment by stakeholders to share information (see Box 5).

Box 5: Multi-stakeholder engagement to localise the SDGs in Rwanda

In 2016 the Rwanda Association of Local Government Authorities (RALGA), in partnership with the Commonwealth Local Government Forum (CLGF) and with funding from the European Union, initiated a project to facilitate the localisation of the SDGs in Rwanda. The project brought together a wide range of stakeholders, and aimed to develop a roadmap for localisation of the SDGs which was specific to Rwanda and flexible to its local contexts. Activities included raising awareness of the importance of a localised response to the SDGs, rather than dictating policies centrally, and a training workshop on how to ensure local development strategies effectively incorporate SDG goals.

Source: UCLG (2018)

Local governments also benefit from engagement with peer associations which support lobbying efforts with national and international stakeholders (UCLG 2019). Peer-to-peer review among local governments has proven to be an effective way of strengthening capacity, including through training and technical assistance services (Global Taskforce 2015). For instance, UCLG Africa's Network of Locally Elected Women of Africa has helped build the capacity of women mayors in leadership, and

has successfully lobbied national parliaments on SDG 5: Gender Equality. Similarly, country-level associations like the National Association of Local Authorities of Ghana, in collaboration with other partners, have been able to build the capacity of local government officers to localise the SDGs and adopt strategic planning at the local level (UCLG 2019). Such partnerships and learning platforms are essential for accelerated SDG implementation in the ‘Decade of Action’.

Conclusion

This paper has discussed four main challenges to localising the SDGs in Africa: inadequate data, funding gaps, institutional context and social exclusion. We acknowledge that the current position of many countries in Africa in relation to the targets/expectations set by the SDGs is not encouraging. We therefore advocate for pragmatic measures to address these challenges that will harness the potential of local governments to effectively contribute to the realisation of the 2030 Agenda.

Local governments are in a strong position to ensure that the needs of local people are understood and that the SDGs are locally owned, inclusive and ‘leave no one behind’. Although many of the key services essential to meeting the SDGs are delivered at the local level (CLGF 2015), capacity to deliver services in a manner that best meets the needs of local people is presently inadequate in several respects. Brookings (2019) observes that the world agreed on the goals and targets for the 2030 Agenda and left the solutions to be developed locally; this implies that local governments have an indispensable role in the successful implementation of the SDGs. Certainly, the empowerment of local governments (through adequate resources, relevant skills and good governance mechanisms) can effectively enhance their ability to engage with communities as drivers of change. Empowered local governments can contribute simultaneously as policy-makers, implementers and investors to facilitate sustainable development in territories (UCLG 2019b, p. 18).

In line with our call for innovative and expedited action towards SDG implementation, we provide a roadmap of strategies that can enhance local-level implementation, drawing on best practices and successes recorded in several locations in Africa. We recognise that localisation of the SDGs in Africa is not amenable to a ‘one size fits all’ approach. This is because African countries have different institutional architecture and varied local government structures, and are characterised by unique capacity challenges – so initiatives for localising the SDGs will have to be tailored. Therefore, although there may be ‘best practices’ that can be replicated across countries, contextual factors will define which strategies work best for the institutions and citizens in specific localities. Table 4 presents a roadmap of recommendations to address the challenges discussed in this paper.

Table 4: Roadmap to address challenges of localising the SDGs in Africa

Priority area	Challenge	Recommendations
Data	Inadequate tracking of progress towards achieving the SDGs	Support local governments to identify priority SDG indicators and establish baselines to track progress on the selected indicators. This will provide an indication of the distance left to achieve the targets most relevant to the local area.
		Train and deploy statistical officers to the local government level. Personnel can be assigned to zones/clusters of local governments where resources are limited.
Funding gaps	Inadequate financial resources to facilitate the implementation of the SDGs at the local level	Local governments can explore non-traditional financing mechanisms, including public–private partnerships, to finance development projects. Required due diligence should however be undertaken to ensure that local governments have a sustainable revenue base to enable them to be effective partners.
		Build capacity of local government finance staff to better understand municipal finance instruments; as also, enhance awareness of innovative sources of finance, including climate finance and domestic and private sources of finance.
Institutional context	Limited institutional capacity to localise the SDGs	Advocate for reforms, where necessary, to enhance the legal regulatory framework for decentralisation and local governance.
		Implement training initiatives to enhance the technical expertise of local governments to monitor and evaluate SDG implementation at the local level.
Social inclusion	Lack of inclusive local development structures	Create and strengthen structures below the local government level, such as village committees, to facilitate the inclusion of the views and opinions of more citizens – particularly typically marginalised groups such as women, youth and ethnic minorities.
		Enhance ownership of SDG implementation by strengthening mechanisms for citizens to participate in development agenda-setting, devising local development plans and monitoring SDG implementation projects.

While some challenges to SDG implementation are beyond the control of local governments, the strategies suggested in this paper could accelerate SDG implementation in Africa. Against the backdrop of the ongoing global pandemic threatening the ambition of the United Nations’ ‘Decade of Action’, the time to act is now; the place for the action is the local level; and the strategic agents are local governments.

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