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Implementation progress of the SDGs: Sub-Saharan Africa regional survey

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Abstract

Africa accounts for a huge share of the global population facing mass poverty. As such, progress made on the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in this region may determine the overall pace of implementation worldwide. This study explores the status of implementation in the context of both the global 2030 Agenda and the region's own specific Agenda 2063. It highlights the salient issues affecting implementation and the different country approaches adopted. The focus of the survey is on implementation of three particular SDGs—education (SDG 4), energy (SDG 7), and economic growth and labour (SDG 8). Progress, processes, structures, and status of SDG implementation are examined in consideration of the five challenges: policy alignment, institutional structures, resource mobilisation, partnerships, and participation, as well as data availability and accountability mechanisms. Besides the United Nations 2030 Agenda, Africa signed up to two other major development programmes—the Agenda 2063 and the 2011 Istanbul Programme of Action (IPoA). The study illustrates the challenges of aligning multiple regional agendas—which for the SSA case are, in some instances, competing with the global 2030 Agenda.

Keywords: poverty, multiple development agendas, and financing SDGs

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Introduction

Africa accounts for a huge share of the global population facing mass poverty. As such, progress made on the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in this region may determine the overall pace of implementation worldwide. This regional survey assesses the status of SDG implementation in the context of both the global 2030 Agenda and the region's own specific Agenda 2063. It highlights the salient issues affecting implementation and the different country approaches adopted. The focus of the survey is on implementation of three particular SDGs—education (SDG 4), energy (SDG 7), and economic growth and labour (SDG 8) to ensure alignment with other ongoing surveys for Latin America and Asia for Southern Voice on the State of the SDGs (SVSS) report. The survey focuses on sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) only and is based on a review of literature and secondary analysis of relevant global databases (e.g. the World Bank and UNESCO) to assess progress. In addition, the study utilised regional databases (e.g. United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) and Sustainable Development Goals Center for Africa). Country-based Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) were also an important source of information on the process of integration of the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda with national development plans.

Besides the United Nations 2030 Agenda, Africa signed up to two other major development programmes—the Agenda 2063 and the 2011 Istanbul Programme of Action (IPoA). African countries have been implementing the IPoA, the 2030 Agenda and Agenda 2063 simultaneously. The synergies and complementarities between the three initiatives should yield effective outcomes. But aligning all these plans is a daunting task for many African countries, often resulting in competition with the global agenda. The novelty of the study partly lies in precisely illustrating the challenges of aligning multiple regional agendas—which for the SSA case are, in some instances, competing with the global 2030 Agenda.

With respect to SDG 4 we find that the relatively high rate of net primary school enrolment across Africa has not translated into higher education attainment, especially in West and East Africa. The poor performance in net enrolment rates was partly driven by reversals in enrolment in conflict-affected countries (UNESCO, 2018). With regard to SDG 7, the majority of SSA countries are rated as poor regarding access to electricity. The slow pace of expanding access to electricity may be explained by both the cost of electricity as well as the high initial cost for households to connect to the national grid. For SDG 8, on decent work and economic growth, the five-year average GDP growth per capita is very low, at less than 2% per annum (Sustainable Development Goals Centre for Africa, 2019). Furthermore, major oil producers have recently registered significant declines in living standards.

On the other hand, financial inclusion—critical for accessing working capital and creating jobs—is moderately increasing as more countries embrace mobile financial services.

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Approach

The focus of the survey is on implementation of three particular SDGs—education (SDG 4), energy (SDG 7), and economic growth and labour (SDG 8) to ensure alignment with other ongoing surveys for Latin America and Asia for Southern Voice on the State of the SDGs (SVSS) report. In addition, the progress, processes, structures, and status of SDG implementation are examined in consideration of the five challenges: policy alignment, institutional structures, resource mobilisation, partnerships, and participation, as well as data availability and accountability mechanisms. Specifically, the focus is on: integration of the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda with national development plans; mobilisation of funds and other resources to support implementation of the goals; development of the requisite institutional networks and structures to achieve the goals; collection and generation of representative data to track and monitor progress on the goals; and building multi-stakeholder partnerships and platforms to facilitate the realisation of the interlinked goals (Bhattacharya et al., 2016).

The analysis also explores some of the main means of implementation, which include, but are not limited to, financing, technology, and innovation. Financing, in particular, is key as the SDG agenda has increasingly become the foundation through which donors allocate funding. As such, countries that are highly dependent on aid to finance budgets and government programmes may find that their planning and prioritisation are increasingly informed by the SDG agenda over the next decade.

SSA, as considered in this review, is made up of 48 countries broken down into four geo-political regions, namely East Africa, West Africa, Central Africa and Southern Africa. These regional clusters are mindful of the various Regional Economic Communities on the continent and allow for analysis between countries with similar economies, cultures, and socio-economic structures and challenges. There are several important reasons why the survey is restricted to SSA and excludes five countries from North Africa. The North African economies are not only much more advanced, there are also structurally different with more emphasis on large-scale natural resource extraction, unlike SSA, which is largely dependent on subsistence agriculture. Furthermore, the demographic characteristics of North Africa differ significantly from those of the rest of the continent. Consequently, North Africa has significantly better human development indicators and is not easily comparable to most of SSA.

Implementation Challenges

Expansion of school enrolment affects quality of education

Achieving inclusive and equitable access to education remains a challenge for many SSA countries. For example, in some countries, three times as many rural children are out of school at primary level compared to their urban counterparts. Furthermore, the relatively high enrolment rates (i.e. above 80%) have not translated into actual learning in SSA and this is a cause for concern. The 2018 World Development Report (WDR) offers some explanations for poor learning during the expansion of enrolment in SSA countries. First, school classrooms have not kept pace with enrolments, leading to very crowded classrooms and thus a poor learning environment. Second, due to low pay, teachers are poorly motivated and compensated; this has increased their absences from school. Third, due to missing out on early childhood education, such as nursery schooling, children do not enrol in primary school adequately prepared to start learning (World Bank, 2018).

Taxes affect the pace of expansion of financial inclusion

For SDG 8 on decent work and economic growth, only a few countries, such as Ethiopia, Djibouti, Guinea, and Rwanda, have registered a per capita growth rate of more than 4%. On the other hand, countries affected by conflict, such as the Central African Republic, have reversed—attaining an average deceleration of 5.2 % in the past five years (Sustainable Development Goals Center for Africa 2019). Also, major oil producers, such as Equatorial Guinea, have recently registered significant declines in living standards due to the collapse of oil prices. With respect to financial inclusion, our results show that access to either bank or mobile finance is moderately increasing (Sustainable Development Goals Center for Africa, 2019), even though 56% of the countries with data (42 SSA countries) are rated poorly (i.e. have rates below 40%). Nevertheless, substantial progress has been made by countries embracing mobile finance. Finally, most progress has been registered with respect to starting a business, with more than 55% of the SSA countries on track to achieve the indicator (Sustainable Development Goals Center for Africa, 2019).

On the other hand, significant improvements in financial inclusion through access and use of mobile finance has led to the imposition of taxes on mobile transfers as a means to expand the tax bracket to capture the informal sector. A number of African governments have recently introduced or increased taxation on mobile financial services in order to raise revenue. Research shows that such taxation may reverse the gains made in both financial inclusion and the use of retail electronic payments (Ndung'u, 2019). In some countries part of this new domestic revenue is earmarked for attainment of the SDGs. For example, in Kenya, the funds collected from the excise tax on mobile finance are earmarked to fund universal healthcare, with the aim of covering all households by 2022—as part of the country's commitments to meet SDG 3.

With respect to SDG 7 on affordable and clean energy, the majority of SSA countries are rated as poor regarding access to electricity, i.e. having less than 65% coverage. Only four SSA countries meet the global average of 89% electrification (Sustainable Development Goals Centerfor Africa, 2019). Nonetheless, some countries have registered significant strides—for example, Ghana nearly doubled access rates between 1999 and 2017 (Republic of Ghana, 2019). Based on sub regions, Southern Africa is leading with an average of 49% with access to electricity, while Central and East Africa are lagging with an average of 42% access (Sustainable Development Goals Center for Africa, 2019). As noted earlier, the slow pace of expanding access to electricity may be explained by both the cost of electricity, as well as the high initial cost for households to connect to the national grid.[2] At the same time, SSA's large and growing population constrains the ability to meet this particular target. According to the 2018 Africa Sustainable Development Report, population growth has outstripped the pace of electricity expansion across SSA (African Union et al., 2018).

Divergence between the SDGs and Agenda 2063

In terms of policy alignment, although there is substantial convergence between the SDGs and Agenda 2063, some divergences remain, especially with respect to targets, indicators, and timelines. Our research shows that at least 65% of SDGs are strongly matched to the goals of Agenda 2063. However, the proportion of targets and indicators that are equally strongly matched is only 37% and 40 % respectively. Prior to the adoption of the SDGs and Agenda 2063, African countries were also signed up to the 2011 Istanbul Programme of Action (IPoA). This programme aimed to graduate at least 50% of countries from least developed countries status by 2020. As such, it was expected that at least 17 African countries would graduate. A year away from the end of IPoA, and despite strong efforts, the specific objectives are at a high risk of not being met.

Limited domestication of SDGs

Since the start of the SDGs, 28 SSA countries have participated in Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs), with the number of SSA countries undertaking VNRs increasing from four in 2016 to 12 in 2019. All 28 SSA countries that have participated in VNRs have made significant progress in integrating the 2030 Agenda into their national development plans. Beyond the VNRs, a number of African countries have developed five-year development plans aligned to the SDGs.

2 Due to the high cost of electricity connections, some Africans without electricity have overhead cables running close to households.

Countries that have 'domesticated' the SDGs into their local context stand a better chance of successful implementation because they will better understand the targets and should be better placed to attract financing and avoid duplication of efforts (Republic of Ghana, 2019).

In the region, the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) is the main institution driving the 2030 Agenda, along with the United Nations Country Teams (UNCTs) and national and local governments localising and implementing the SDGs at national and subnational levels. UNCTs contribute through building awareness, applying multi-stakeholder approaches for SDG integration, adapting SDGs to national, subnational and local contexts, creating horizontal and vertical policy coherence, financing and budgeting for SDG-related activities, monitoring reporting and accountability, and, finally, through assessing risk and fostering SDG adaptability. In addition, UNCTs are responsible for building robust, strategic partnerships among all stakeholders to ensure synergies with all other relevant interventions and programmes and to ensure 'buy-in' from government at both national and local levels. Overall, the UNCT has helped countries to identify initial national priorities to be considered in the framework of the 2030 Agenda and contribute to achieving the SDGs. For example, the UNCT in Lesotho has been supporting the Government of Lesotho in localising and mainstreaming the SDGs through planning and capacity building at national and local levels. The 'domestication' process involved advocacy and sensitisation for various stakeholders including the Cabinet, parliamentarians, districts, ministries, youth, and civil society organisations. The UNCT established a UN SDG Task Team to facilitate, coordinate, and provide joint UN support to the Government of Lesotho.

A challenge for the region is how to ensure genuine and active civil society participation.

While the 2030 Agenda is driven by UNCTs at national and subnational levels, the extent of progress at subnational levels appears to vary between countries. For example, Ghana mainstreamed localisation by setting up a three-tier coordination mechanism composed of: (i) a High-Level Ministerial Committee (HLMC), (ii) a technical SDGs Implementation Coordination Committee (ICC), and (iii) a CSOs Platform on SDGs—composed of 300 local and international CSOs clustered into 17 sub-platforms aligned to each of the 17 goals. However, while the national government in Lesotho has reaffirmed its commitment to the localisation and implementation of SDGs, the process appears to be still in the mainstreaming stage.

The role of civil society has been seen as particularly important for the achievement of SDGs in terms of reviewing progress, providing supplementary citizen-oriented data, and demanding accountability. However, a challenge for the region is how to ensure genuine and active civil society participation with a weak civil society and narrowing civic space. For example, some South African civil society organisations had raised concerns that "government no longer trust CSOs in the country as CSOs are accused of pushing for regime change" (African monitor, 2017, p. 6). Private sector involvement is also important to achieving the 2030 Agenda. For example, more than 600 companies and other stakeholders from Africa are participating in the UN Global Compact across 35 countries. The business landscape in SSA is marked by many opportunities but also beset by complex challenges for the private sector.

Inadequate funding for all SDGs

As was the case during implementation of the MDGs, Official Development Assistance (ODA) will continue to play an important part in financing SDGs. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that, as was the case under the MDGs, ODA from Development Assistance Committee countries is earmarked for particular SDGs—notably goals targeting energy, health, and education (OECD, 2018). The ODA focus on energy is partly explained by the substantial cost of energy infrastructure as well as the fact that support to the sector mainly comes from loans and equity investments, and loans have grown faster than grants in the recent past (Development Initiatives, 2015). In order to plug its large infrastructure deficit, SSA has turned to China to help close the gap. As such, China accounts for 20% of total debt held by African countries (Jubilee Debt Campaign, 2018). The funds have been used to establish ports, railways, and initiate mineral extraction.

South-South investment flows are increasingly becoming a key source of development financing for SSA countries. Foreign direct investment outflows from the BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) have increased over the past decade, with China leading the way. In fact, in 2017 foreign direct investment outflows from Africa increased by up to 8% from 2016 (UNCTAD, 2018).

Africa is one of the developing regions severely affected by non-availability of data on some SDG indicators. The 2017 Africa Sustainable Development Report shows that only 38% of the 232 SDGs can be tracked for Africa (African Union et al., 2017). The same report notes that the lack of data on the African continent is linked to a number of issues, including weak statistical capacity and inadequate government funding—only 12 states have autonomous statistical agencies. Furthermore, for indicators with data, there are challenges relating to inadequate disaggregation, e.g. by age, sex, and location, and this can affect any explicit attempts to ensure no one is left behind. Beyond the limited statistical capacity, concerns have been raised as to whether low public investment is an indirect means through which politicians ensure limited accountability (African Union et al., 2017). In some cases, politicians have an inherent interest not to have statistics produced that may show that their programmes are not working. Finally, several SSA countries have national statistical plans (31), however only three are fully funded (African Union et al., 2018).

Conclusions and recommendations

Progress on implementation of SDGs considered for this review is mixed. With respect to SDG 4, whereas enrolments in primary school have substantially increased, this has not been matched with school retention. More children are dropping out before completing school. Furthermore, the expansion of school enrolment has been attained at the cost of declining education quality, as the supply of school inputs has not kept pace with enrolments. For SDG 7, despite substantial investment in infrastructure—including the construction of hydro-power dams—overall access to electricity remains low partly due to connection costs.

Regarding the attainment of decent work and economic growth, SSA countries have not measured up to expectations—especially the targets set by IPoA in 2011. GDP growth rates have remained very low to offer the required boost to employment creation. Nonetheless, with the proliferation of mobile phones, financial inclusion has expanded and it is hoped that access to financial services could in the future be a major source of capital for enterprise start-ups and job creation.

Attainment of the SDGs is only one of a number of cross-national development agendas in Africa. Some of them pre-date the 2030 Agenda. The existence of multiple development agendas across Africa calls for extensive coordination, management, and administration of the implementation processes. It is also worth noting that global targets may not be reached by SSA, as evidenced by the IPoA, due to end in 2020. It is vital to localise global targets. This can be done by establishing realistic goals that are tailored to a country's specific context. Furthermore, the move from alignment in policy documents to actual implementation in actions, regulation, partnerships, and programmes is key. A few countries, e.g. Ghana, have made strides in this respect by linking national and subnational coordination mechanisms. Others, like Kenya, have gone as far as mapping the SDGs to initially existing long-term plans, i.e. Vision 2030. The 'domestication' process in Lesotho, which commenced in 2016, involved advocacy and sensitisation for various stakeholders including the Cabinet, parliamentarians, districts, ministries, youth, and civil society organisations. In addition, in most SSA countries, the localisation of SDGs is housed in the finance ministry or national planning agencies. But comprehensive domestication requires a wide range of stakeholders from multiple sectors. Only then can the diverse, yet interconnected, nature of the SDGs be catered.

Regarding institutional structures, UNECA is the main institution driving the 2030 Agenda at the SSA level, while UNCTs are responsible for localising the SDGs, i.e. adapting them to national and subnational contexts. However, country progress varies, due to differing levels of resources, government ownership, and involvement. Progress is, to some extent, dependent on strong national and local ownership, embedded in a coordinated system of governance.

The participation of civil society and private sector is crucial to achieving the SDGs. A weak civil society and private sector, and limited civic space are salient challenges in the region. Only a few countries, such as Kenya, have managed to significantly involve other partners, e.g. private sector, in implementing SDGs. Furthermore, South-South cooperation is an important form of partnership, acting as a valuable tool for capacity building and promoting development by involving partners who face comparable challenges. The importance of South-South cooperation is reflected in the financing of SDGs. Countries such as China, India, and South Africa have emerged as important players in financing SDGs—especially with respect to infrastructure. In order to finance SDGs themselves, some African countries have introduced specific measures to boost domestic revenue mobilisation. However, some of these measures, such as taxing mobile financial transfers, could end up being counter-productive in as far as they affect the pace of financial inclusion.

> **Progress is dependent on strong national and local ownership, embedded in a coordinated system of governance.**

Finally, with respect to data, SSA needs to be mindful of prioritising funding for data which is important not just for tracking and monitoring, but also for setting the agenda for realistic domestic targets that guide national development plans. Technology, adaptability, and preparedness are key for national statistical agencies because they are tied to institutional capacity and human capital. Many SSA countries need to take advantage of technology and provide incentives to enable rapid adoption to close data gaps.

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