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Book Review

'AFRICA AND THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS' BY MAANO RAMUTSINDELA AND DAVID MICKLER (EDS.)

Mukunda Mishra¹✉

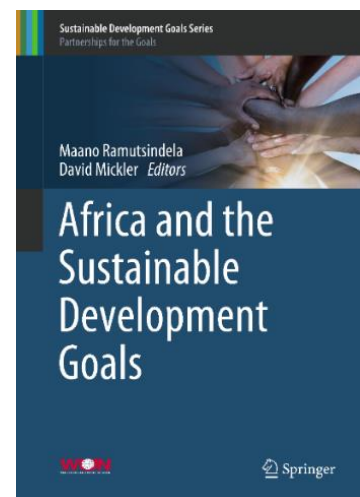
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Sustainable Development or, more specifically, fathoming the progress toward it in terms of some specific sets of goals (which in its standard format is the Sustainable Development Goals, or say SDGs here in forth) forms the research agendas at different corners of the globe. The United Nations verses:

"The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted by all United Nations Member States in 2015, provides a shared blueprint for peace and prosperity for people and the planet, now and into the future. At its heart are the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which are an urgent call for action by all countries - developed and developing - in a global partnership." (see the official website of the SDG under the URL <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>)

So, straightforwardly, 17 SDGs with a range of targets within each are expected to draw a roadmap for action for a better world where the progress toward that



1 [Author] ✉ [Corresponding Author] Assistant Professor (Senior Scale) in Geography and Designated Vice Principal, Dr. Meghnad Saha College, Ranipur, Tilna, Itahar, Uttar Dinajpur, 733128, West Bengal, INDIA. E-mail: mukundamishra01@gmail.com

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'utopian' world will be measured through a set of globally harmonized indicators for monitoring performance at national and sub-national levels. However, neither the 'data revolution,' nor the 'presentation revolution' could alone help achieve the vision of the 2030 Agenda unless a diagnostic approach is followed properly to make proper use of the intuitive and communicable data to strengthen decision-making. This is more important for the areas having the prevalence of under development historically. From this standpoint, books and research volumes have started appearing as the SDGs have run for subsequent years, making them available for diagnosis. The book entitled 'Africa and Sustainable Development Goals', edited by Maano Ramutsindela and David Mickler, is of the same genre which is the outcome of the successful collaboration between African and non-African to make it meaningful with the motto of the SDG 17 that seeks to 'strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development'. Several years of research of the 'Global-Africa' research and education collaborations through the Global Africa Group (GAG) of the Worldwide Universities Network (WUN) with equal partnerships between the 3 African and 20 non-African university members of the Network in the setting of research priorities have set the architecture of this volume. With the motto of dealing with the critical thinking and scholarly queries arising at the intersection of African and global development debates and agendas, this volume looks promising. Its 26 insightful chapters have been contributed by 81 individual contributors across five continents that perfectly reflect the successful collaborative effort approaches.

The arrangement of the chapters in this volume is straightforward - an introductory chapter by the editors that critically clarify the ongoing development agenda in Africa. It is followed by twenty-five chapters clustered into three different sections based on their standpoint of analysis. The first chapter works as the curtain-raiser through which the editors bring the matters of how the African development has been long a subject of policy interventions by state and non-state actors. This chapter discusses the development agenda of the African continent in the context of the SDGs based on some selected themes relevant to the volume. As the opening chapter, this brings a fascinating discussion on the issues of running two parallel development agendas in the continent, i.e., the UN 2030 Agenda and African Union (AU) Agenda 2063, which were, interestingly endorsed in the same year, 2015. This coincidence questions the legitimacy of both because the underdevelopment prevails there historically, with its extreme forms despite several development agendas theoretically in place in Africa and elsewhere in the Global South. Critically viewing SDGs concerning the political economy of Africa's natural resources and linking it with the higher education institutions networks of the continent places the discussion to that position that the readers could comfortably resemble the situation with scenarios prevailing most of the global south nations. This chapters also make careful commentary on the typical constraints that the African development has been facing for many years and highlights the burning debates of climate-human-ecosystem interactions at the backdrop of changing human-environment relations.

Prefixing 'sustainable' with 'development' is undoubtedly a gamechanger. When sustainability is focussed, the development pathways should be routed through the regional opportunities (and challenges also). Methods for measuring performance may be 'global', but the methods (or strategies) for achieving the same goal may differ across the countries based on multiple actors operating the development agendas. The authors have made it clear:

"We do not call for repackaging the SDGs for Africa. Rather, we suggest that the SDGs should be domesticated to African realities without disrupting existing and promising local development initiatives. African scholars and other researchers should not shy away from a critical reflection on the SDGs even as they acknowledge the prospects of these global goals for African development. Assessments of SDGs in Africa need to consider conditions under which these goals

are implemented. We caution that those conditions should not be used to characterise the continent as an exceptional region of the world as there are many similarities between Africa and the broader Global South.” (p.8, Chapter 1)

Chapter 2 to 9 form the Part I of the book, entitled ‘Africa’s Sustainable Development: Approaches, Institutions, Agendas.’ Amidst an array of relevant discussion, most of them critically analyze the African in-situ parameters in the development pathways, the discussion of Tobias Broich, Adam Szirmai, and Ayokunu Adedokun in Chapter 4, entitled ‘Chinese and Western Development Approaches in Africa: Implications for the SDGs’ graces this section for the very relevant issues of African development issues being controlled by the non-African actors, particularly the entry China into the foreign finance in Africa. The true essence of this analysis is how the authors establish their argument, standing against most of the previous literature dealing with China’s economic embrace of Africa to domestic factors, that the sectoral distribution of China’s foreign aid is also affected by changes in the patterns of Western aid flowing to the African continent through examining the quantitative evidence for long-run trends. With a perfect sense of logic, the authors prove how China feels the vacuum of foreign aid in physical infrastructure, agriculture, and manufacturing in Africa due to the shift of Western financial flows to capacity building and reforms in governance. The authors, in their final verdict, treat the role of financial aid sourced by both the traditional Western donors and China as effective for African recipient countries for fulfilling their SDG agendas.

Now, one could recall the observations of Tor Halvorsen and John Higgins in Chapter 2, entitled ‘Growth or Solidarity? The Discourse of the SDGs’ which speculate:

“... SDGs cannot be achieved unless large parts of Africa improve the living conditions of the majority of its citizens. This improvement cannot come about through adopting the western ‘growth model’; this will only contribute to the destruction of our global environment. ... It is a question of how the few within the rich world who are consuming and polluting the most need to act in solidarity with those left behind.” (p. 13, Chapter 2)

“It is a continent most victimised by mainstream economics and global capitalism. At the same time, Africa can justify its demand for social and material development with reference to the SDGs. The demand from us all across the world is that we must not yet again suffer from the destructive consequences of industrialization.” (p. 20, Chapter 2)

This is not self-contradiction. Instead, this reflects the complexity in the development path of the continent - on the one hand, the necessity for foreign aid for achieving SDGs, and on the other hand, the threats from the intrusion of global capitalism form the cloud of confusion.

Chapters 10 to 21 are clustered under the Part II of the volume. Within this part of this volume, the authors carefully examined the role of the health system and the more specific – mental health of the women, youth employment, talent management, decent work environment, agriculture upscaling, food security, quality water, and sanitation, biodiversity and wildlife management and many other in achieving the SDG target of Africa. The chapters are informative; however, a few chapters fail to address the theme of the Part II, which is titled ‘Scientific Evidence and Critical Thinking on the SDGs in Africa.’

Part III of the book, entitled ‘Africa and the SDGs: The Role of Collaborative Research’ accommodates Chapters 22 to 26, amongst which most of the chapters deal with the available collaborative networks of research in Africa, their extent and constraints. When the collaborative research is concerned for SDGs, basic questions that arise in readers’ minds are well pointed out in a recent article entitled ‘Mapping Collaborations and Partnerships in SDG Research’ by Payumo et al¹. as:

“• Is research activity on SDGs increasing? Is collaboration a feature of SDG research, and if so, what can we learn about changes to collaborative research networks over time?

- Do partnerships result in long-term collaborative relationships, at either author or institutional levels?
- What time intervals between publications characterize SDG research partnerships? Are partnerships sustained and do SDG research networks expand over time?
- Are SDG research networks characterized by domestic or international collaboration? Are there other features of research networks we may be able to detect?
- What role do institutions play in SDG collaborations, and can we identify key institutions that may be influential in growing and sustaining SDG research networks?”

There may be many more directions to examine the relationship between collaborative research and the SDGs, and also, some questions, as Payumo et al. mention, may be irrelevant for a specific study. However, if some of them are supposed to be valid, the discussions in the chapters under Part III of the book edited by Maano Ramutsindela and David Mickler are concluded, keep the basic query untouched: how these collaborative agendas could help the continent achieve the SDGs in the African continent within its stipulated time frame.

Although, an inquisitive reader will find all the chapters in the volume as valuable, informative, and built with a robust logical flow inside. The Editors set a real example of collaborative efforts in garlanding the academic writings dealing with the African development issues, which is the need of the time. Each of the chapters is insightful, and they have genuine values to contribute to the policy-making processes for building a better Africa.

¹See: Payumo, J., He, G., Manjunatha, A.C., Higgins, D., Calvert, S. (2021) Mapping Collaborations and Partnerships in SDG Research, Vol. 5, ISSN 2504-0537, DOI 10.3389/frma.2020.612442