

Editors' Note

Redefining African Futures: The State, Resilience and Pathways to Progress for a Sustainable Future

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Abstract

This editorial essay introduces the special issue, which is a direct outcome of the 2023 Academic Conference on Africa convened by the United Nations Office of the Special Adviser on Africa. Proposed by the SDG Academy at the UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network and the United Nations Office of the Special Adviser on Africa, the issue conveys articles on the future of development in the region, presented as expert commentaries, to add to the discourse informing the UN Summit of the Future and events in its aftermath. With contributions from several top experts, scholars, and policymakers, the special issue conveys a wide array of perspectives on sectors such as health, education, urban development, energy, and more.

Furthermore, it highlights important issues underlying development that inhibit wide-scale and sustainable progress, including post-colonialism, gender inequality, governance, and conflict and crisis. The 19 contributions in this special issue offer rich threads of commentary that weave together a picture of various African futures—futures that are bold, transformational, and sustainable when they leverage the momentum of social policies, economic pivots, and energy transitions. The issue examines the vast potential for improved development outcomes within Africa as well as advancing the region's competitiveness at the global level. This editorial essay

provides a brief summary of the articles and encourages reflection on disrupting long-held narratives on Africa's development, better contextualizing policies and practice, and embracing the rich opportunities for African nations that are associated with current global challenges.

Introduction

In 2021, the United Nations Secretary-General issued *Our Common Agenda* as a call to action for reestablishing trust in multilateralism and creating better, more inclusive, pathways to peace and development. At a moment when regional conflicts were overwhelming global security and recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic was proving highly inequitable, *Our Common Agenda* aimed to reunite nations and communities towards the causes of peace-building, shared prosperity, and better global governance. To follow up the Secretary-General's call, the Summit of the Future (2024) was envisioned to mend eroded trust in the multilateral system and demonstrate that international cooperation can effectively achieve agreed goals and tackle emerging threats and opportunities.

The UN's actions have surfaced important discourse on international development and governance, and moreover, opened an opportunity to remedy the inequities and injustices that have eroded global trust. Specifically, recent actions have brought underrepresented voices to the fore and made central the question of who defines the future, and for whom? Critiques of an inequitable multilateral system have coalesced into a new Pact for the Future, a landmark declaration adopted by Member States, intended to "bring multilateralism back from the brink" (Guterres, 2024). The Summit of the Future and events in its aftermath mark an important moment in global development, one that elevates long held critiques to spur action for a more equitable and prosperous future.

Africa has a powerful opportunity to leverage current momentum to reform perspectives that have historically inhibited the continent from truly transformative progress. The moment is ripe to shift narratives centered on dependency to more equitable views on the contributions of African nations to advance multilateral agendas. As momentum from the Summit of the Future grows and events in its aftermath unfold, it is both essential and valuable to amplify Africa's voice in the next era of international cooperation and governance.

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This special issue extends on these principles and offers 19 commentaries authored by esteemed experts, from both the continent and its diaspora. Its featured authors were curated to touch on a diversity of issues and were selected due to their track record of meaningful knowledge contributions and innovative perspectives. The articles were conceived of as brief commentaries to allow a wider array of discourse from multiple stakeholders. Although the nature of the contributions took a commentary approach, each underwent a thorough peer review process. It is our hope, as editors, to establish a portfolio of insightful, informed, and impactful perspectives on the future of Africa's development, one that can shape and guide practical pathways forward.

The following sections convey a brief overview of development progress in Africa, followed by a summary of the commentaries offered in the special issue. The commentaries touch on major themes that have emerged more heavily in recent discourse on Africa's development; specifically, themes of governance and state capacity, as well as resilience, which were highlighted as leading threads of discussion in the 2023 UN conference, "Redefining African Futures: The State, Resilience, and Pathways to Progress." Furthermore, many of the articles take on sub-themes linked to the six transformations for sustainable development (Sachs et al., 2019). The editorial essay concludes with a reflection on steps forward and encourages a reframing of current development discourse.

African development and the road to 2030

From the MDGs to the SDGs

From the onset of global goal-setting with the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in 2000, Africa has been a central target of international development efforts. Now in the era of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Africa remains an important focus of the global agenda. Over time, the continent has seen much progress but continues to lag behind other regions. Deeper understandings of the levers and inhibitors of progress are ongoing, but there is much to reflect on in the last two decades of goal-based development.

During the MDGs, Africa achieved impressive gains, including increasing net primary school enrollments, bridging the gender gap in education, growing the representation of women in national parliaments,

and reducing child and maternal deaths (UNECA, 2015). Across several indicators, Africa was a global leader in progress, including its efforts to increase GDP per capita (UNECA, 2015) and to raise net primary school enrollment rates. Sub-Saharan Africa was exemplary in this regard, increasing enrolments more than any other region globally (UN, 2015). However, overall assessments of development progress in Africa during the MDGs often evoke rhetoric of failure given that no goals were fully achieved. For example, although the child mortality rate in Sub-Saharan Africa declined five times faster during 2005-2013 than it had from 1990-1995, the region still had the highest rate globally (UN, 2015).

Although African nations did not meet the MDGs, noteworthy progress was made when gains are viewed nationally and regionally rather than comparatively across the world. Takeuchi et al. (2015) note, depending on the indicator, up to 46 per cent of poor countries for which sufficient data were available registered better-than-expected progress on some MDG targets, even though they were not 'on track' to meet them (Kindra and Wasswa-Mugambwa, 2015). By the end of the MDG campaign, whether Africa's success could be recognized, depended on whether linear or non-linear perspectives were used to assess MDG targets and indicators. However, it was evident that considerable progress had been made, despite having far to go.

The establishment of the SDGs renewed momentum for development in Africa with a new set of 17 more complex, inter-related, and ambitious goals. The new development framework, *Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, aimed to leverage the progress of the MDGs to advance development aligned with principles of sustainability. Since 2015, SDG progress in Africa has been punctuated by a series of crises but has continued onwards at varying rates.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, many African nations saw marginal to moderate gains in such areas as renewable energy and water and sanitation. By 2018, one third of all new power grids were drawing on large-scale renewables (hydro and geothermal), and access to electricity had increased by 8 points to 53 per cent in the first three years of the agenda (UN, 2018). Nonetheless, the 2019 UN Sustainable Development Report (UN, 2019) cited that although progress was notable in some areas; the global commitment to the SDGs had not yet been sufficient and the most vulnerable people and countries were still at risk of being left behind. In

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2015, Africa began the SDG campaign largely under-resourced and by 2020 needs were exacerbated by the global pandemic.

The onset of COVID-19 elicited new obstacles to development, compounded existing ones, and highlighted a need for greater resilience in Africa. The pandemic provoked an economic downturn that threatened decades of progress on the continent. Although the number of poor was already projected to increase in 2020, the pandemic was anticipated to double the rate, pushing millions of people back into extreme poverty (Min, 2021). By 2024, the UN Sustainable Development Report (UN, 2024a) highlighted that global progress towards the SDGs had ground to a halt or been reversed across multiple fronts.

The combined effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, escalating conflicts, climate-related disasters, and economic instability have deepened pre-existing inequalities, particularly in Africa. Globally, between 2019 and 2022, an estimated 23 million more people fell into extreme poverty, and over 100 million additional individuals faced hunger. Furthermore, although certain health indicators saw improvement, the overall pace of global health advancements has slowed significantly since 2015 (UN, 2024a). Ultimately, the first half of the SDG timeline saw slow progress in Africa due to insufficient global commitments and has been met with ongoing challenges, amplified by vulnerabilities on the continent.

The Road to 2030

As the world moves into the second half of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, Africa stands at a critical juncture. Having passed the midpoint of the SDGs in 2023 and now in the Second Ten-Year Implementation Plan of the African Union's Agenda 2063, it is clear that development progress must be expedited to meet goals. The alignment of these milestones with the UN Summit of the Future offers African leaders and their development partners a unique opportunity to reassess progress and recalibrate efforts toward achieving the continent's development ambitions.

While Africa has made strides towards the SDGs, the pace remains insufficient to meet the 2030 deadline. Presently, Africa is significantly off track on 15 of the 17 SDGs (UN, 2024b). Persistent challenges, including political instability, violent conflict, and weak governance structures,

continue to threaten the gains made. Additionally, recent global disruptions such as the ongoing conflict in Gaza, ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine, and rising inflation have further exacerbated the region's socio-economic vulnerabilities, intensifying food insecurity, inflationary pressures, and deepening inequalities.

In particular, rising conflict and instability, including the increasing threat of violent extremism and terrorism, pose a grave obstacle to Africa's progress. Last year, global deaths from terrorism surged by 22 per cent, with Africa accounting for the majority of these fatalities (IEP, 2024). Unconstitutional changes of government have also added to Africa's challenges. Between 2020 and 2023, the continent witnessed coups in seven countries, most recently in Niger and Gabon (UN, 2024b). These events, along with the broader decline in security and rule of law, underscore the fragility of governance structures across Africa. According to the latest Ibrahim Index of African Governance, 70 per cent of Africa's population lives in countries where the rule of law and security has worsened in the past decade (Mo Ibrahim Foundation, 2023). This fragility has severely hindered progress toward sustainable development, especially in conflict-affected regions.

Despite these formidable obstacles, Africa has demonstrated resilience in advancing certain SDGs, particularly those related to environmental sustainability. Progress has been noted in goals such as responsible consumption and production (Goal 12) and climate action (Goal 13), where African nations have started implementing innovative solutions to address their environmental challenges. Yet, the broader development landscape remains uneven. Africa still lags in many essential areas, including poverty eradication (Goal 1), hunger (Goal 2), and access to quality education (Goal 4). Over 850 million people on the continent remain food-insecure, and nearly 29 per cent of school-aged children are out of school, while three-quarters of the population lack access to reliable energy (UNICEF, 2024).

The road to 2030 requires concerted efforts to address the broad range of development challenges that persist across the continent. From poverty, food insecurity, and education deficits to governance, health, and infrastructure, Africa's progress hinges on implementing inclusive, people-centered policies that promote peace, strengthen governance, and enhance climate resilience. Policymakers, civil society, and development partners

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must work together to create solutions that address not only immediate crises but also the underlying structural issues that hamper long-term development.

As the world embarks on implementing its ambitious Pact for the Future, it is essential that Africa's voice plays a central role in reshaping global priorities to reflect the continent's unique challenges and opportunities. In this context, African scholars are pivotal. Their research, insights, and innovations will continue to illuminate the complex realities that Africa faces and drive the transformative solutions needed to overcome them. The commentaries in this special issue highlight the diversity and depth of African scholarship on these matters, providing critical perspectives on the continent's development trajectory and offering new pathways toward a more resilient and prosperous future.

Overview of Commentaries

The commentaries in this special issue link to important themes highlighted in recent international conferences and discourse. Specifically, the 2023 Academic Conference on Africa, convened by the UN Office of the Special Adviser on Africa in collaboration with UN Academic Impact, provided a platform for African academics to initiate conversations on the status of development in the region. The title of the conference, “Redefining African Futures: The State, Resilience, and Pathways to Progress,” which also lends its name to this special issue, highlighted the need to amplify African academics in order to enrich development policy. Two themes guided the conference: 1. African Governance: Assessing the State of the State, and 2. Complexities of Resilience in Africa: Expanding the Perspective.

In addition to the overarching themes of governance and resilience, many of the commentaries link to Sachs's six transformations to offer practical perspectives and tangible avenues for progress (Sachs et al., 2019). Such transformations include: 1. Education, Gender, and Inequality; 2. Health, Wellbeing, and Demography; 3. Energy Decarbonization and Sustainable Industry; 4. Sustainable Food, Land, Water, and Oceans; 5. Sustainable Cities and Communities; and 6. The Digital Revolution for Sustainable Development. We have added two further transformations to cover the breadth of perspectives in this issue, which include: 7. Finance and State Capacity, and 8. Policy, Peace, and Partnerships for Development.

The summaries to follow offer a glimpse of how to rethink and reframe development efforts in Africa.

Energy Decarbonization and Sustainable Industry

Global progress on climate change has not proceeded at the rate required to meet the aims of the Paris Agreement. In recognition of this, the 2023 Nairobi Declaration on Climate Change stressed the importance of climate positive growth in Africa and acknowledged the continent's unique circumstances (IRENA, 2024). Africa remains at an important crossroads for the energy transition. The continent simultaneously needs to increase energy access, with some 570 million people without electricity (IRENA, 2024), and ensure energy sources that are sustainable and aligned with global climate objectives. The articles in this section touch on the challenges and opportunities of the energy transition in Africa. Specifically, they highlight Africa's potential to lead the world into a safer climate era, while also enhancing human development outcomes across the continent.

Antonio Pedro and Maryanne Iwara succinctly discuss Africa's comparative advantage to become a major international player in the global energy economy. Pedro and Iwara open their argument with an emphasis on the richness of natural resources abundant in Africa, noting its stock of around 30 per cent of the world's mineral reserves, specifically those critical to the global energy transition. Moreover, the authors highlight that the potential for renewable energy in Africa is vast given high solar irradiance and significant wind speed in many regions. The article positions the richness of Africa's natural resources alongside recent economic and governance frameworks as mutually beneficial. Specifically citing the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), the authors put together the puzzle pieces of resources, governance, and global objectives to solidify Africa's potential future trajectory. They do this alongside a critique of resource extractivism and the dependence and vulnerabilities it creates in resource-rich developing countries in Africa.

Similarly, Abel Kinyondo emphasizes the opportunities associated with addressing global concerns like climate change. Seeking to find the positive in a dire situation, Kinyondo advocates that Africa can make use of current circumstances to enhance economic growth on the continent and expedite important climate action. He presents how severe socio-economic challenges across much of Africa can be remedied through the outcomes of

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climate adaptation. However, Kinyondo highlights that Africa currently lacks the adaptive capacity necessary to navigate out of the current climatic effects due to inadequate technology, institutions, financial and technical resources. Similar to Pedro and Iwara, he offers solutions such as leveraging critical minerals, and furthermore, reforming supply chains to invest in more downstream activities that would prioritize growth within Africa rather than beyond.

Education, Gender, and Inequality

According to Sachs et al. (2019), “Education builds human capital, which in turn promotes economic growth, the elimination of extreme poverty, decent work, and overcoming gender and other inequalities” (p. 806). As such, education is a key driver of development progress and specifically builds stronger social outcomes. Notably, the interconnected topics of education, gender, and inequality are synergistic with no major trade-offs. Consequently, investments in education have a high rate of return not only for the economic pillar of sustainable development but the social pillar as well. In this section, the authors reflect on necessary improvements in education, as well as the current state of gender inequality, reflected overtly in policies and governance, and more subtly in the mindsets of people.

In education, Sub-Saharan Africa has made immense gains since the MDGs campaign. From 2000 to 2015, the region saw a 20 percentage point increase in net enrolment, more than any other region in the world (UN, 2015). However, COVID-19 disrupted education systems globally and exposed inequalities as well as pushed progress backwards in many of the poorest countries. The article by Titus Pacho highlights the challenges of improving education in Sub-Saharan Africa post-pandemic. He conveys important considerations such as the obstacles associated with teachers professional development and infrastructure and resources. Moreover, he addresses challenges uncovered by the pandemic and other crises, such as the digital divide and safe learning environments. According to Pacho, developing better frameworks and more effective mobilization of resources may put Sub-Saharan Africa on a stronger path towards access to quality, equitable, and inclusive education in the post-COVID-19 era.

Turning to a perspective on gender inequality, Awino Okech introduces contemporary debates on gender and development. She highlights “a growing global movement of transnational actors working collectively and separately to undermine women’s rights and gender justice broadly” (see Okech in this issue). For Okech, there are two primary concerns most worthy of discussion: 1. rising anti-gender rhetoric linked to state-informed legislation on gender, and 2. anti-gender actors undermining multilateral spaces and agendas. Okech presents her argument through various manifestations of gender violence, particularly highlighting the rollback of reproductive rights and increasing anti-homosexual legislation in countries such as Uganda. Ultimately, Okech concludes that society requires a strengthened understanding of how anti-gender movements are impacting the global development agenda via the reduction of civil liberties for women and girls. Furthermore, she highlights that multilateral spaces must be liberated from conservative forces and returned to more progressive actors.

Sharing similar perspectives on gender inequality, Keneilwe Sadie Mooketsane explores how women have been systematically omitted from African historical narratives, which has contributed to their marginalization in political leadership and decision-making. In the article "In the Margins of Political Power: Rewriting women into history" she outlines how, despite their significant roles in anti-colonial struggles, liberation movements, and traditional societies, women are often rendered invisible in historical accounts, which remain predominantly androcentric. This exclusion reinforces male dominance and perpetuates myths that undermine women's contributions to nation-building and governance. The article argues for the importance of incorporating women's narratives into mainstream history to acknowledge their vital contributions and to challenge the gender biases that shape our understanding of African history and politics.

Health, Wellbeing, and Demography

Africa’s future development and resilience are deeply tied to the health, wellbeing, and demographic shifts of its populations. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed significant vulnerabilities in Africa’s healthcare systems, revealing the urgent need for investment in health infrastructure, workforce development, and preparedness for future pandemics. In addition, addressing the continent’s social protection systems, both formal

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and informal, is critical for building resilience and advancing sustainable development. As this section explores, insights from across the academic spectrum highlight the complex interdependencies between health, social protection, and demographic trends, offering pathways to address these challenges and foster long-term resilience.

As Tolbert Nyenswah illustrates in his article “Pandemic Risks Threaten Africa's Sustainable Development,” the ongoing threat of infectious diseases, many of which are exacerbated by severe climatic conditions, continues to challenge Africa’s healthcare systems. He argues that adopting the “One Health” approach, a collaborative strategy that integrates human, animal, and environmental health, is essential for combating emerging infectious diseases and zoonoses. Nyenswah’s analysis emphasizes the interconnectedness of these sectors, suggesting that by increasing investment in health infrastructure and workforce capacity, African states can better prepare for future pandemics. This approach dovetails with Haroon Borat’s discussion in “Expanding Social Protection in Africa: A Menu of Early Policy Ideas,” which underscores the need to expand social protection systems in response to persistent poverty despite economic growth. Together, these perspectives reinforce the idea that health and social protection are mutually reinforcing—investments in health must be paired with robust social safety nets to build stronger, more resilient societies.

Building on Nyenswah’s argument about strengthening healthcare systems, Borat’s article focuses on the structural weaknesses in social protection systems across Sub-Saharan Africa. He points out that Sub-Saharan Africa spends significantly less on social protection compared to other regions, even those with similar income levels, which leaves millions vulnerable to shocks such as pandemics. Borat highlights the importance of both traditional and technological infrastructure in building effective social protection systems, citing examples from the Democratic Republic of Congo and Togo, where innovations such as mobile-based social registries and geospatial analysis are helping to extend coverage to the informal sector. This analysis complements Nyenswah’s call for greater investment in health by showing how social protection systems, if properly resourced and expanded, can help mitigate the socioeconomic impacts of health crises and other shocks.

In this context, Zitha Mokomane provides a crucial perspective in “Indigenous Social Protection in Africa: Pathways to Resilience and Sustainable Development.” Mokomane highlights the often-overlooked role of indigenous social protection mechanisms—rooted in African traditions of solidarity, kinship, and reciprocity—in supporting community resilience. These systems, which have long served as informal safety nets, play a key role in mitigating risks in the absence of formal social protection. Bhorat illustrates that formal social protection systems in Africa remain underdeveloped and underfunded; but Mokomane’s analysis offers a complementary solution: by integrating indigenous social protection systems into formal development strategies, African nations can enhance their resilience to both health and economic crises. In essence, while formal social protection systems are being strengthened, indigenous mechanisms can provide an immediate and culturally resonant source of support for vulnerable populations.

Sustainable Food, Land, Water, and Oceans

Despite Africa’s vast land and water resources, the continent is yet to meet the food and nutrition needs of its population. More than any other region of the world, Africa still grapples with hunger and malnutrition. According to the most recent report on the “State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World,” in 2023, between 713 and 757 million people globally faced hunger, with one in five living in Africa. Moreover, Africa had the highest prevalence of hunger at 20.4 per cent compared to single-digit rates on all other continents, affecting nearly 300 million Africans in 2023. By 2030, Africa will account for 53 per cent of the projected 582 million chronically undernourished people globally. The prevalence of moderate or severe food insecurity in Africa is 58 per cent, nearly double the global average (FAO et al., 2024). The same report stresses the urgent need for agrifood system transformations to achieve zero hunger (Goal 2). The quagmire of hunger and malnutrition has reached humanitarian proportions in some countries, exacerbated by violent conflicts, climate change and weak policy environments. The commentary in this section reflects on these critical issues and offers insights for food system transformation in Africa.

John M. Ulimwengu, in his article, “Africa Pathways to Food Systems Transformation: Challenges and Opportunities,” underscores vital issues related to the transformation of food systems in Africa. He opines

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that the challenges of environmental degradation, low agricultural productivity, limited availability and adoption of yield-increasing technologies, high malnutrition rates, violent conflicts and threats to peace and security, and inadequate governance continue as major inhibitors of progress to agricultural transformation in Africa. Fortunately, he claims the opportunities for transforming African food systems are within reach, but require enabling policy environments and commitments to technological and digital innovations, empowering women and youth, supporting community-led initiatives, and leveraging the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) to enhance intra-African trade.

Sustainable Cities and Communities

Africa is home to the fastest growing urban population in the world, with cities there expected to add an extra 950 million people by 2050 (OECD, 2020). The rapid urbanization process in Africa is generating cautious optimism with concerns about cultural assimilation, liveability, resilience, and sustainability (Kasim et al., 2020). In addition, the pattern of development in rural and urban areas has left much to be desired with its increase in slums and shanties (Mfuno et al., 2016). SDG 11 underscores the imperatives of making cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable. Addressing this challenge in Africa, where cities are urbanizing at rapid rates, creates several paradoxes. Africa has the daunting challenge of creating sustainable cities, while simultaneously navigating housing crises, crumbling infrastructure, and inadequate investments to support the rate of change.

Isaac Olawale Albert reflects on this in his commentary to offer unique and relevant solutions. He brings to light the importance of traditional institutions to the sustainability of African cities and communities. He states that the expected growth of urban areas or modern settlements in Africa may be unsustainable if traditional institutions are neglected. According to Albert, “traditional institutions” are those structures and knowledge systems that African peoples depended upon before coming in contact with modernity, but which still find relevance today, having been transmitted across many generations. These institutions are increasingly brought to cities from rural communities by streams of urban migrants, and help people to build resilience against the social, economic, political, and environmental challenges of urban living. The commentary advocates that future development of African cities should

actionably integrate these traditional institutions into urban management regimes. Albert identifies four critical areas of engaging traditional institutions for promoting the sustainability of African cities and communities: 1. giving traditional title holders more official roles in urban governance, 2. deploying the resources of traditional African institutions for dealing with emergent social, economic, political and environmental problems in cities and communities, 3. injecting more African values into urban management protocols, and 4. mainstreaming gender in the application of African traditional institutions in urban governance.

In the article, "Governance and the Resilience of Cities in Africa," Emmanuel Remi Aiyede explores the crucial role of governance in fostering urban resilience amidst rapid urbanization and heightened vulnerabilities due to climate change and other shocks. The article emphasizes that effective governance is key to mitigating these challenges by promoting social equality, enhancing adaptive capacity, and prioritizing community well-being. It advocates for smart, responsive governance structures that integrate digital technologies and citizen engagement to build resilient urban systems. It defines a smart city as one that "leverages governance and technology to enhance the benefits while addressing the drawbacks of urbanization for its inhabitants" (see Aiyede in this issue), highlighting their ability to foster economic growth, social cohesion, and environmental sustainability, as well as to address interconnected challenges, such as housing affordability, transportation access, environmental quality, protection of vulnerable populations, and enhancement of infrastructure and services by promoting long-term sustainability in the face of rapid urbanization and climate change impacts. The article emphasizes the importance of state involvement, cross-sectoral collaboration, and the inclusion of marginalized communities in decision-making processes to strengthen resilience in African cities. It ultimately highlights the challenges of fragmented governance in Africa and the need for reforms to create sustainable, resilient cities capable of withstanding future uncertainties.

Lastly, in the article by Nara Monkam and Charite Leta, the authors further examine the progress and challenges of achieving SDG 11 in Africa. Addressing the issue of urban sustainability, Monkam and Leta offer an overview of factors that challenge efforts to establish sustainable cities. Africa's rapid rate of urbanization, coupled with colonial-era planning systems, high youth unemployment, and a multitude of other factors, create a paradox for sustainable urbanization in Africa. To resolve these issues,

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Monkam and Leta explore several innovative solutions, such as digital twin technologies to advance progress. The article underscores the need for significant policy changes, increased investment in urban infrastructure, and innovative financing mechanisms to bridge the existing gaps.

Digital Revolution for Sustainable Development

The deployment of digital technologies is increasing rapidly and ushering in a new era of global growth and development. These technologies have the potential to address inequalities around the world in the ways that they transform economies and bring resources to the most vulnerable. Services critical to society such as healthcare, education, banking, and more are enhanced by the innovations of the new digital era. However, with its immense potential, comes alarming threats.

The rise of many new technologies poses serious questions to human rights, social protections, and the net good of society. This conundrum is highlighted by the Global Digital Compact (GDC), an agreement of UN Member States accompanying the UN Pact for the Future. Whether or not the GDC can effectively put guardrails on technological advancements and leverage their potential for social good is yet to be determined. The commentary in this section reflects on some of these issues, particularly the call for stronger, more effective data governance.

In the article “Operationalizing Comprehensive Data Governance in Africa,” Chinasa Okolo emphasizes the need for African Union Member States to adopt comprehensive data protection regulations to address challenges posed by the increasing use of artificial intelligence (AI) and data exploitation. Although 36 out of 55 AU countries have data protection laws, disparities exist in their quality and enforcement. In this context, the article analyzes data governance measures in Africa, outlines data privacy violations across the continent, and examines regulatory gaps imposed by a lack of comprehensive data governance to outline the sociopolitical infrastructure required to bolster data governance capacity. The article proposes the Reformation, Integration, Compliance & Enforcement (RICE) Data Governance framework, which outlines measures for policy reform, integration, cooperation, and enforcement to improve data governance across the continent. The framework advocates for regional and sub-regional collaboration, sectoral policy reforms, and the establishment of a

continental supervisory authority to ensure robust data protection and privacy.

Financing and State Capacity

Achieving the SDGs requires a focus on national planning, financing, oversight and assessment. Major investments are needed for the transformational change proposed by the SDGs, as well as further government planning to ensure effective implementation. However, countries in the Global South, particularly Sub-Saharan Africa, are under-resourced to make necessary progress on the current development agenda. Consequently, some scholars are calling for a global reassessment of how to support and strengthen financing and state capacity in developing countries. In this section, the commentary focuses on the issue of public debt, its impact to wellbeing, and effective measures of mitigation.

According to the article by Marcellin Stephane Bella Ngadena, African countries continue to experience a rapid increase in public debt, with the median public debt-to-GDP ratio reaching 61.9 per cent in 2023, while the median public debt nearly doubled, from 25 per cent to 46 per cent between 2013 and 2023. In the article, Bella Ngadena examines the impact of public debt on well-being in 41 African countries from 2012-2021, focusing on how education and health spending mediate this relationship. The study finds a generally negative correlation between public debt and well-being, but highlights that increased spending on education and health can mitigate these adverse effects. Specifically, while higher levels of public debt typically lower well-being, strategic investment in social services can counterbalance these effects, providing valuable insights for policymakers. The findings emphasize the importance of prioritizing education and health expenditures to enhance well-being despite rising debt levels in Africa.

Policy, Peace, and Partnerships for Development

The interplay between policy, peace, and development is particularly significant in Africa, where fragility and conflict remain key drivers of poverty and underdevelopment. The increasing number of conflict-affected countries, coupled with the continent's complex governance challenges, underscores the urgent need for innovative policy solutions that address the root causes of instability and foster long-term resilience. As more than 85 per cent of Africa's population is impacted by

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conflict, whether through direct involvement or proximity, the spillover effects hinder not only national progress but also regional stability (African Development Bank, 2022).

Beyond addressing issues of conflict and security, implementing new approaches to policy planning and intersectoral collaboration have immense potential to provoke change. Specifically, when the global development agenda is viewed holistically rather than as 17 disparate goals, governments can plan more efficiently and maximize investments by leveraging synergies, or in other words, SDG interlinkages. In addition to identifying these important interlinkages, intergenerational collaboration is essential to advancing progress to ensure sustainable outcomes. The role of youth cannot be neglected in this regard, particularly when topics of peace, security, and long term development are discussed. The commentaries in this section explore issues of policy, planning, peace, and partnership. Specifically they cover the critical need for restructuring African states, rethinking approaches to counterinsurgency, transforming policy planning with a deeper perspective on SDG interlinkages, and empowering the next generation of Africans to take up the charge of achieving sustainable development.

As Kelechi A. Kalu illustrates in his article, “Restructuring African States to Achieve Sustainable Development Goals,” the governance frameworks of many African states remain rooted in colonial legacies. These externally imposed structures, designed to serve European interests, leave African states institutionally weak and economically dependent, perpetuating underdevelopment. Kalu argues that, for Africa to escape this historical trap, it must restructure its state systems to support intra-continental trade, mobility, and institutionalized human rights protections. In doing so, African states can enhance their resilience; better address poverty, and secure long-term stability.

Yet, as Anouar Boukhars’s article, “Lessons Learnt from Countering Militant Groups in Africa,” demonstrates, the reality that governance deficiencies, particularly in justice and security, have fueled the rise of militant groups in many fragile African states. Boukhars highlights how militarized responses to insurgencies often undermine state legitimacy, exacerbating instability rather than containing it. His analysis of cases like Côte d'Ivoire and Kenya shows that states that combine security reforms with community engagement and improved service delivery can counter

the rise of militancy more effectively. This complements Kalu's argument, suggesting that while restructured state systems are essential for long-term resilience, immediate governance reforms—particularly in justice and service provision—are critical to restoring public trust and state legitimacy in the short term.

Shifting to a policy-oriented view, Moira Faul and Felix Laumann explore an interesting perspective on the SDGs, one that emphasizes interlinkages across goals at the regional level. Although the literature on SDG interlinkages has grown over time, it has largely overlooked the value of regional and local variations. Faul and Laumann explore this issue across Africa concluding that the continent has nuances unrecognized at the global level, particularly within the frame of often authoritative perspectives of the global north. Their findings support calls for improved knowledge equity between the global north and global south with an emphasis on creating better solutions tailored to regional and local circumstances. The article by Faul and Laumann strikes a similar note to Kalu's point that Africa's colonial legacies continue to influence its development trajectory and there is a need to break away from these one-size-fits-all approaches. Their analysis builds on the need for restructured systems of global governance by calling for more localized approaches to sustainable development.

In the broader framework of aligning Africa's goals with global development objectives, Akinlolu Olalekan Akanmu and Olubukola Oluranti Babalola in "The Future of Development in Africa within the Framework of UN Policy and the 2030 Agenda" emphasize the synergy between Africa's own Agenda 2063 and the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Their analysis underlines that Africa's future development depends on effective governance and institutional strengthening, reinforcing Kalu's earlier call for structural reforms. Furthermore, Akanmu and Babalola argue that strong partnerships and multi-sectoral engagement are crucial to accelerating progress, a point that complements Boukhars's advocacy for holistic, community-centered counterinsurgency approaches. By linking institutional strengthening to broader governance reforms and regional cooperation, their analysis provides a vision for how African countries can work towards long-term development while addressing the immediate challenges of fragility.

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Lastly, this section concludes with a commentary on the value of youth, leaving us with optimism for continued progress across generational divides. Employing the Social Change Theory, Femi Oyeniya, E. Olowoyo, and Labode Popoola champion the role of youth for achieving the SDGs in Africa. They discuss the continent's rapidly growing youth population and highlight several obstacles that prohibit their success, including, unemployment, gender inequality, and limited educational opportunities. The authors offer a very practical perspective by evaluating five youth initiatives in Africa and examining how they improve the situation of young people—and society in general—on the continent. The commentary proposes collaboration between governments, civil society organizations, and the private sector in the bid to foster youth innovation, reduce poverty and improve sectors such as education and healthcare.

Conclusion

The articles in this special issue offer an array of deeply reflective and transformative perspectives on development in Africa. They surface important critiques, share new knowledge, and add to the discourse on how Africa can define sustainable futures. Each article highlights important topics related to the 2030 Agenda, and moreover, discusses many of the complexities that have emerged since the SDGs' adoption in 2015. The contributions in this issue examine how African nations have adapted to meet global goals and shown resilience amid crisis and fragility. Perhaps of greater consequence to long-term development, the contributions emphasize how the landscape of global governance and legacies of colonialism have held back the potential for wide scale progress and transformation.

It is the aim of this special issue to elevate African voices and create greater equity in the vision and implementation of our global development agenda. Through exposing long-held narratives on Africa's development and offering unique solutions and perspectives posed by the region's top experts, we endeavor to enrich and inform the high-level dialogues that have so often been driven by the global north. This issue is a call for greater reflection within policy arenas on how to localize and contextualize development objectives, give weight and power to historically underrepresented voices, and pursue global development in fair and equitable ways.

Aside from reconciling global histories of inequitable development, this issue also endeavors to highlight the vast potential for Africa to contribute to multilateral agendas. Clearly, Africa offers robust potential to lead the world into a safer era and to share critical perspectives on effective development pathways, but space must be made for this potential to flourish. Through the commentaries of this special issue, we advocate for policy makers, practitioners, and experts involved in the establishment and implementation of multilateral agendas to rethink global development and raise the voices of those most at risk of being left behind.

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