

Higher Education and the SDGs in Africa: More of the Same?

Damtew Teferra

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the predecessor of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), have been widely criticized for overlooking higher education as an important factor in the development process. After decades of neglect by international organizations and domestic governments alike, the higher education sector across Africa has struggled to regain its footing, and the lack of attention to the sector within this international campaign further exacerbated the damage.

Prior to their unveiling in 2015, many commentators anticipated that the SDGs, the internationally agreed-upon framework for tackling poverty, inequality, disease, and

Abstract

There has been much talk about the increased focus on higher education in the Sustainable Development Goals. Yet, when compared with the preceding Millennium Development Goals, the new framework actually includes very few references to higher education. Africa would do better to focus its development efforts around other, more relevant, local and regional policies, which recognize the crucial role of higher education in development.

climate change, would finally acknowledge higher education's rightful role in realizing social, economic, and technological advancement, poverty reduction and wealth creation, and sustainable global development. But it became clear that the SDGs were only a minor rehash of the MDGs.

In contrast, local campaigns and policies, initiated by organizations on the continent, have a better focus on the crucial importance of higher education and, perhaps, should be leveraged as a way to direct necessary funding toward institutions across Africa.

The Assumed Importance of the SDGs

In 2015, shortly before the launch of the SDGs, a comprehensive set of policy actions was proposed by UN Member States under the groundbreaking agreement of the Addis Ababa Action Agenda, with a package of over 100 concrete measures to finance sustainable development, transform the global economy, and achieve the SDGs. This agreement stipulated a strong foundation to support the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. It provided a new global framework to finance sustainable development by aligning all financing flows and policies with economic, social, and environmental priorities. The wording of the agreement, which will affect the funding of nearly all countries in sub-Saharan Africa, underlines the fact that resource flows across the continent will be directly aligned to the priorities of the SDGs—in which, unfortunately, higher education has once again been given a very tenuous place.

Higher Education in the SDGs and the Reality on the Ground

When analysing the 17 goals and 169 targets of the SDGs, it is striking to note that the words “higher” and “tertiary” education, and “university,” appear just once each, and, in the case of “university,” in fact rather tangentially. The only goal in which higher education is explicitly mentioned is Goal 4, which stipulates inclusive and equitable education and lifelong learning opportunities. There are also serious oversights in terms of particular issues related to higher education. For example, the document speaks only of ensuring equal access, not about expanding access or strengthening the sector. Despite higher education's critical role in meeting all of the goals, the lack of active and seasoned lobbyists for higher education during the process leading to the SDGs is starkly evident in the virtual absence of higher education from this grand scheme.

As would be expected, given the impact of the Addis Ababa Action Agenda, there is evidence that this absence is already having an effect on funding decisions on the ground. The minister of science and higher education of Ethiopia, for example, noted recently that, while support to other sectors of the education system is growing, the sector under her portfolio is still considered a luxury by most and garners only marginal support.

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Another Perspective on Higher Education

Meanwhile, what gives some hope is that other organizations are taking up the cause of higher education. In early July 2019, during a global event organized by the Higher Education Sustainability Initiative, three university organizations representing more than 2,000 universities globally (the Association of Commonwealth Universities, the Agence Universitaire de la Francophonie, and the International Association of Universities) used their collective weight to champion the importance of higher education for the SDGs. During that event, they declared that, despite the relatively limited references to higher education within the SDG framework, none of the SDGs can be achieved without the contribution of higher education through research, teaching, and community engagement. Likewise, during their respective conferences in 2019, the Association of African Universities and the International Network for Higher Education in Africa had a special focus on higher education and the SDGs in their deliberations.

These more recent arguments support the stance of a number of local organizations, which in recent years have been calling for support for higher education. In 2016, for example, the chairperson of the African Union announced the establishment of a Committee of Ten Heads of State and Government, or C-10, to champion higher education, science, and technology in Africa. In its first extraordinary meeting in 2018, the committee emphasized that higher education, science, and technology are primary instruments that will enable Africa to effectively implement its long-term vision of the transformative

Agenda 2063 (African Union), in spite of the challenges facing development on the continent. During this high-level meeting, African governments were urged—for the umpteenth time—to raise their research investment to 1 percent.

Other countries are also getting involved. As Africa has moved from “the Hopeless Continent,” as described by *The Economist* in 2000, to “A Hopeful Continent” and “the world’s fastest growing economy,” as described by *The Economist* in 2013, the landscape of development partnerships involved in African higher education has been expanding—with both “historical” and “emerging” players. Probably more driven by a geopolitical interest rather than by any particular regard to the SDGs, a number of countries are slowly entering the African higher education scene through an array of direct and indirect interventions. China is now one of the largest hosts of African students globally and is working hard to expand the number of Confucius Institutes on the continent, while also working (physically) to build institutions—a rare occurrence. India also hosts one of the largest contingents of African students, although it is struggling with keeping some of its pledges to the African Union, to contribute to the development of higher education on the African continent. South Korea is emerging as an active player on the scene, while others, such as Russia, which had been slumbering for over two decades following the demise of the USSR, is also showing growing interest.

Conclusion

While a stronger global effort must be made to secure a more favorable place for higher education within the framework of the SDGs, Africa must concurrently be guided by the African Union’s Agenda 2063, particularly in sectoral, time-bound derivatives such as the Continental Education Strategy for Africa (CESA) and Science, Technology and Innovation Strategy for Africa (STISA 2024).

While the support of development partners—within the framework of the SDGs or as a result of geopolitical imperatives—may remain important, African countries cannot continue to outsource their development aspirations, ambitions, and goals in the sector of higher education or otherwise, to external entities, however benevolent, charitable, or altruistic they may be. ▲

Damtew Teferra is professor of higher education at the University of Kwazulu-Natal and founding director of the International Network for Higher Education in Africa at www.inhea.org. E-mail: teferra@bc.edu or teferra@ukzn.ac.za.