

# Adoption of Analogous Key Roles for Stakeholders to Improve South Africa's Progress Towards the Implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to analyse South Africa's progress on the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) since the adoption of the goals in 2015 and to propose a way forward. The article is based on a desktop study of authoritative sources to conceptualise and contextualise the progress towards the implementation of the SDGs. Unobtrusive research techniques are applied in terms of a documentary and conceptual analysis. The findings suggest that concerning progress of SDGs, South Africa is largely off track on almost all of the 17 SDGs. Out of the 17 SDGs, based on the goal trends, only two SDGs are on track or maintaining SDG achievement, six are stagnating, seven are moderately improving and two have trend information missing. Moreover, of the 17 goals, six are still experiencing major challenges, eight have encountered significant challenges and there are two where challenges remain. The country has made progress through its commitment to realising the goals by implementing various policies, financing the goals, aligning the National Development Plan (NDP) to the SDGs and involving multiple stakeholders.

## INTRODUCTION

While acknowledging the progress made in ensuring successful implementation of the post-2015 SDGs in South Africa, such as the alignment of the SDGs with

the NDP, as well as the fact that South Africa is named as one of the nine country movers in the way SDGs should be implemented, since the adoption of SDGs in 2015, progress on all of the SDGs remains worrisome with an increasing distance from the SDG achievement. For instance, according to the 2020 SDG Index and Dashboard Report, South Africa's overall score against the 17 SDGs is 63.4 with only two SDGs on track, six stagnating, seven moderately improving and two with trend information missing (Sachs, Schmidt-Traub, Kroll, Lafortune, Fuller and Woelm 2020). To put this in context, poverty rates still vary widely by group and geographic location, hunger remains an issue, the prevalence of underweight and stunting among children under five is still a concern, teenage maternal mortality is on the rise and the country struggles with communicable diseases such as Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV). In 2018 alone 19% of adults aged 15 to 49 were HIV positive. Schools' infrastructure provision remains a challenge, the output of the basic education system needs to be improved to enable South Africa to strengthen and expand its pipeline of Science and more Engineering and Technology (SET) qualifications, which are responsible for high-quality skills needed to respond to the SDGs (Fourie 2018:24). Moreover "equitable access to the knowledge infrastructure is a challenge that South Africa also continues to face" (Fourie 2018:24).

Since the implementation of the SDGs, with the accompanying demands for the attainment of the goals becoming more of a reality, the accelerated action to unpack and address the aforementioned progress is imperative. This not only helps in the prioritisation of the challenges in the implementation of SDGs in the South African context, but also helps to propose a way forward to improve the progress of the SDGs.

Despite South Africa's commitment to SDGs, the country is largely off track on almost all of the 17 SDGs. According to the 2020 SDG Index and Dashboard Report, South Africa's overall score against the 17 SDGs is 63.4 with only two SDGs on track, six stagnating, seven moderately improving and two with trend information missing (Sachs, Schmidt-Traub, Kroll, Lafortune, Fuller and Woelm 2020). Divided into three sections, this article first contextualises SDGs from a South African perspective, second it analyses the progress of SDGs in South Africa, and third a recommendation is proposed on how to fast-track progress in the implementation of SDGs in a South African context.

## **METHODOLOGY**

As noted above a qualitative desktop approach grounded in an interpretivist perspective was used by way of unobtrusive research techniques, including document analysis and conceptual analysis. Data from secondary sources was

drawn from published official documents (such as NDPs, the national budget, country baseline reports, vision documents and policy statements). Grey literature was obtained from key statistical databases of United Nations (UN) agencies, the World Bank data, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the Sustainable Development Goals Index, Statistics South Africa (StatsSA) and the World Poverty Clock. All sources were selected based on the general principles of handling sources, namely, authenticity, credibility, representativeness and meaning (Mogalakwe 2006:224).

## **CONTEXTUALISING THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE SDGS IN SOUTH AFRICA**

The concept of the SDGs was raised for the first time at the UN Conference on Sustainable Development in 2012. One of the objectives was to produce a set of universally applicable goals that would balance the three dimensions of sustainable development, that is, environmental, social and economic dimensions (Stats SA 2019:3). The SDGs are a set of 17 global goals with 169 targets and 2030 indicators between them. Built on the lessons learned from the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in particular, they are designed to be a blueprint to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all (South African Institute for International Affairs (SAIIA) 2015). Goals 1–6 were built on the core agenda of the MDGs, while Goals 7–17 break new ground. The goals are made up of 169 tangible targets (including 62 targets on the means of implementation) ranging from five to 12 targets per goal. Across the 16 substantive goals, 42 targets concentrate on “means of implementation” and the final goal (17) is entirely devoted to spreading implementation targets throughout the goals (Stafford-Smith, Griggs, Gaffney, Ullah, Reyers, Kanie, Stigson, Shrivastava, Leach and O’Connell 2017:912; Hák, Janoušková and Moldan 2016:566).

Similar to other UN member states, the SDGs were adopted by South Africa in 2015. South Africa is committed to realising the goals through three principles. These principles include collaboration with all stakeholders ranging from civil society, trade unions, private sector, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and experts in academic institutions and both regional and global institutions; vertical and horizontal coherence between policies, and finally, the short-, medium- and long-term impact, particularly on the lives of those who are currently left out from the benefits of economic growth (Voluntary National Review [VNR] Report 2019:15).

Managed in a decentralised system, various stakeholders play a part in the implementation of SDGs in South Africa. At the national level is the government with the executive as the highest structure, cabinet and government departments with

cross-cutting programmes. These stakeholders are particularly responsible for co-ordinating government-wide priorities, facilitating and monitoring the implementation of priority programmes and providing a consultation platform on transversal priorities pertaining to matters submitted to the cabinet (VNR Report 2019:21). The Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation (DPME) is responsible for monitoring and the implementation of SDGs and leads the quarterly reporting process to the cabinet on the implementation of the Medium-Term Strategic Framework (MTSF) (Stats SA 2019:37). It also coordinates and integrates the follow-up and review process as well as an extensive stakeholder participation exercise which includes civil society, business, academia and a range of non-state actors (Haywood, Funke, Audouin, Masvoto and Nahman 2019:10; VNR Report 2019:21). Congruently, at the local sphere, municipalities are responsible for making the aspirations of the SDGs real to communities, households and individuals, particularly to those who are at risk of falling behind. These aspirations are performed by providing democratic and accountable government for local communities, ensuring the provision of services to communities sustainably, promoting social and economic development, promoting a harmless and vigorous environment and encouraging the participation of communities and community organisations in the matters of local government as mandated by the *Constitution of the Republic of South Africa* (1996).

At the Southern African Development Community (SADC) level, the Regional Indicative Strategic Development Programme (RISDP) is responsible for the effective implementation of the SDGs by way of an integrated follow-up and review of the goals. At the international level are the various institutions such as the UN through its various international agencies, associated local branches, funds and programmes and pioneering partnerships since inception (Witte and Reinicke 2005). The UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) is the main organ of the UN responsible for coordinating efforts towards achieving the SDGs and the unifying platform for integration, implementation, follow-up and review (Haywood, Funke, Audouin, Masvoto and Nahman 2021:12).

Other stakeholders include the private sector or business, civil society, NGOs, indigenous people, science and technology community and academia. Where academia contributes through training, skills development, research, development and innovation, civil society creates advocacy and awareness and the private sector does much of the implementation towards achieving the SDG targets (Haywood *et al.* 2021:12; VNR Report 2019:21).

To ensure success across all of the 17 SDGs, various initiatives have been implemented over the years. For example, based on the notion that SDGs are interlinked and that realisation requires an integrated approach, South Africa aligned the SDGs with its NDP and the African Union (AU) Agenda 2063, and integrated

this into government planning systems and processes at national, provincial and local levels through the MTSF (Haywood *et al.* 2021; Stats SA 2019:35).

SDG 2 is closely aligned with Chapter 6 of the NDP that prioritises the formation of an all-encompassing rural economy, the review of land tenure and the creation of an environment that supports micro and small farmers. All priorities translate to Outcome 7 of the MTSF (2014–2019) which focuses on creating vibrant, equitable and sustainable rural communities that contribute to improved food security (Stats SA 2019:35). SDG 3 aligns with Chapter 10 of the NDP and the medium-term priorities found in Outcome 2 of the MSTF. SDGs 4 and 9 align with Chapter 9 of the NDP and the medium-term priorities found in Outcome 1, SDG 5 aligns with Chapter 6 of the NDP, SDGs 7, 8, 12, 14 and 15 align with Chapter 5 of the NDP on environmental sustainability and resilience and translate into Outcome 10 of the MTSF, while SDGs 10 and 16 align with Chapters 12, 13 and 14 of the NDP and the MTSF (2014–2019) and 15 of the NDP (Stats SA 2019:36; VNR 2019). The outcomes of “mapping” the NDP to SDGs undertaken by the DPME in partnership with the UN Development Programme (UNDP) indicates that approximately 74% of the SDGs applicable to South Africa are integrated into the NDP (Stats SA 2019:26; VNR Report 2019:15).

In an attempt to alleviate poverty and address SDG 2, social wages for those with low or no wage income have been made available. Founded on Sections 24 through 29 of the Bill of Rights, which recognises the socio-economic rights of South African people, old-age pensions are available to the elderly, disability grants have been made available to children and adults with a disability and child support grants for poor children and foster care grants are received by those fostering children of other parents (Stats SA 2019:26; South Africa Social Assistance Act, 2004, s35). To substantiate this, according to findings from Stats SA, there has been a tremendous increase in the total number of grants between 2013 and 2016, from 16 million in 2013 to almost 17 million in March 2016. Moreover, three-quarters of the social grants are children’s grants inclusive of the foster care, care dependency and child support grants (Stats SA 2019:26). Similarly, the Indigent Policy which was introduced continues to help improve the lives of indigents and access to free basic services by ensuring that the poor are guaranteed access to affordable basic services. The services, as per the Indigent Policy, consist of sufficient water, basic sanitation, refuse removal in denser settlements, environmental health, basic energy, health care, housing, food and clothing (Department of Provincial and Local Government (DPLG) 2012:13; Stats SA 2019:235).

South Africa also continues to harness innovative technology solutions to improve access to basic services such as safe drinking water, sanitation and electricity. Thus, in the quest to localise the SDGs as a mechanism to improve services at the local level, South Africa adopted the District-based Service Delivery Model, currently focusing on 44 districts and eight metros, to guarantee consistency and

incorporation in planning, budgeting and implementation of service delivery projects in all districts by all three spheres of government (Stats SA 2019:29).

Similarly, the government has committed to address gender inequalities through legislation such as the Constitution, the Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act 4 of 2000, the Employment Equity Act 47 of 2013, the Labour Relations Act 8 of 2018 and the Basic Conditions of Employment Act 7 of 2018.

While in pursuit of SDGs 13 and 16, various strategies have also been introduced to reduce the rise of greenhouse gas emissions such as the Energy Efficiency Strategy, the Industrial Policy Action Plan, the Green Transport Strategy, the Climate Change Adaptation and the Mitigation Plan for the South African Agriculture and Forestry Sector (VNR Report 2019:15).

Concerning expenditure, in line with pro-poor government policies, R987.1 billion or 56.8% of the allocations in 2021/22 go to social services in learning and culture, health and social development. Learning and culture were allocated the largest amount of R402.9 billion, with expenditure on health taking up R248.8 billion and social development R335.3 billion (Republic of South Africa 2021:6).

## **PROGRESS AND CHALLENGES TO IMPLEMENT THE SDGS IN SOUTH AFRICA**

While acknowledging the progress made in ensuring SDG success in South Africa, recent data shows that the war on poverty is far from over and efforts to combat it must be expanded. According to the SDG Centre for Africa and Sustainable Solutions Network (2020), South Africa's scores are stagnating or increasing at less than 50% of the required rate to end poverty. The projected percentage of the population living under the poverty threshold of US\$1.90 a day is 24.45, while the estimated percentage of the population living under the poverty threshold of US\$3.20 a day is 34.14 despite the long-term objective of both the indicators being 0 (Sachs *et al.* 2020).

Concerning SDG 2, despite the progress on three of the seven indicators, more challenges remain and the attainment of this SDG as a whole is slanting. For example, the percentage of children up to the age of five years old that are stunted, measured as the percentage that falls below minus two standard deviations from the median height for their age is 27.40% with the available data of 2016. The percentage of the adult population that has a body mass index (BMI) of 30kg/m<sup>2</sup> or higher is currently 28.30%, yet the required long-term objective for this indicator is 2.8 (Stats SA 2019; Sachs *et al.* 2020).

Despite being on track with the neonatal mortality rate as one of the 14 indicators on SDG 3, South Africa is falling short in all of the other indicators. For

example, based on the 2019 SDG Progress Report, the infant mortality rate shows an increase from 22.3 per 1 000 live births in 2015 to 35 per 1 000 live births in 2016, while HIV prevalence increased from 15.6% between 2002 and 2005 to 20.6% between 2012 and 2017. Despite alcohol being one of the leading risk factors to population health and a direct hindrance to SDG 3, alcohol consumption in South Africa has remained high at seven litres per capita per annum from 2011 through to 2017 (Stats SA 2019:94). The projected rate of new and relapse cases of tuberculosis in a given year, expressed per 100 000 people is 520, owing to cardiovascular disease, cancer, diabetes or chronic respiratory disease in adults aged between 30 and 70 years of age. This makes attainment of the goal impossible. With the subjective self-evaluation of life indicator, based upon respondents' perceptions on where they feel they stand on a ladder where 0 represents the worst possible life and 10 the best possible life in South Africa, South Africa is at a value of 4.88 below the long-term objective of the indicator. The adolescent fertility rate indicators are currently 67.91, showing a decrease from 2013 but still below the long-term objective of this indicator (Sachs *et al.* 2020).

Concerning SDG 4 – ensuring inclusive and equitable education and promotion of learning opportunities for all – South Africa has made tremendous progress, especially in the literacy rates, scoring a value of 95.32. Just like all the other goals though, significant challenges remain. Where quality remains a challenge in many schools, this is attributed to poor early grade numeracy. “The percentage of children of the official school-age population who are enrolled in primary education is 87.01 below the long-term objective for this indicator” (Sachs *et al.* 2020). Information and Communication Technology (ICT) facilities and connectivity are still evidently lower compared to other countries. The outputs of the basic education system require improvement to enable South Africa to strengthen and expand its pipeline for SET qualifications which account for high-end skills needed to respond to the SDGs (Fourie 2018:24). In addition, although notable improvements have been made in SET, the National Science and Innovation (NSI) is still not fully inclusive, and since 1996 South Africa's innovation performance (measured in patents and products) has been relatively flat (Republic of South Africa 2018).

Furthermore, despite the various measures that have been implemented to address the gender equality goal (5), women continue to have unequal access to income and empowerment. For example, while women make up 51% of the population, they only occupy 44% of the skilled posts and earn 27% less than men in South Africa. Gender-based violence remains unruly, where in 2018 alone 138 per 100 000 women were raped. Equitable access to the knowledge infrastructure is a challenge that South Africa continues to face, while employment of women in construction, mining and transport is 20% and below (Stats SA 2019; Fourie 2018:24; South Africa Voluntary National Review 2019:57; Sachs *et al.* 2020).

Goal 6 relates to clean water and sanitation. Though on track in relation to the percentage of the population using at least a basic drinking water service, such as drinking water from an improved source, significant challenges remain with the percentage of collected, generated or produced wastewater that is treated, with South Africa scoring a value of 21.66 – way below the long-term objective of this indicator at 100. Information is not available on the level of water stress indicator (total fresh water withdrawn by all major sectors and total renewable freshwater resources, after considering environmental water requirements) (Sachs *et al.* 2020). Poor operation and maintenance of both water and sanitation infrastructure, shared with the use of infrastructure beyond the design capacity, is eroding reliability and sustainability of supply (South Africa Voluntary National Review 2019:57).

Goals 7 and 13 – which call for affordable and clean energy and climate action respectively – remain far from reality, as the carbon emissions from fuel combustion for electricity and heating indicator is at 1.78, improving but not enough to meet the long-term objective of 0 (Sachs *et al.* 2020). Affordability remains a concern, especially considering that not every poor household can access energy subsidies such as Free Basic Electricity (FBE) and Free Basic Alternative Energy (FBAE) (South Africa Voluntary National Review 2019:13). Emissions of carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) that arise from the consumption of energy indicator for Goal 13 are at 9.14, far from the long-term objective for this indicator of 0. South Africa's energy system is heavily reliant on coal, and as of July 2018, South Africa had 42 Gigawatts (GW) of operating coal plants, the seventh-largest fleet in the world, 6GW of new coal-fired plants under construction and a further 3GW in the planning stage, namely Medupi and Kusile (McSweeney and Timperley 2018). Moreover, electricity connection of underserved areas and affordability to poor communities still prevails.

The dream to promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full of productive employment and decent work for all is required in Goal 8, but seems out of reach in South Africa. Unemployment is a challenge and, worse still, racially skewed. Youth unemployment increased from 35.7% in 2010 to 38.7% in 2017 (Stats SA 2019). The unemployment rate of South Africa's youth aged 15 to 24 years is particularly high, sitting at 53.4% as recorded in 2017, with many of them representing the black community or those on the margins of society. As an economy, South Africa is underperforming compared to other emerging markets and commodity exporters (Stats SA 2019). According to the available data, the growth rate of the gross domestic product (GDP) adjusted to income levels (where rich countries are expected to grow less) and expressed relative to the United States (US) growth performance is -4.34 (Sachs *et al.* 2020).

Regarding Goal 9 – which calls for a resilient infrastructure, aims to promote sustainable industrialisation and foster innovation – though steadily progressing, the progress remains uneven across the various indicators. Data shows a decline in the quality of trade and transport-related infrastructure, for example, ports,



roads, railroads and information technology, from 3.78 in 2016 to 3.14 in 2018. Gross domestic expenditures on research and development (R&D), expressed as a percentage of the GDP, though moderately improving from 0.73 in 2014 to 0.83 currently, is still insufficient to attain the goal. Scientific and technical journal articles per 1 000 population remain stagnant at 0.23, far from the long-term objective of 1.2 (Sachs *et al.* 2020; The World Bank 2021).

Despite all the interventions, notably the introduction of the National Minimum Wage Act 9 of 2018, the NDP Chapter 5 and the Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment Act 53 of 2003 as amended by Act 46 of 2013, major challenges still hinder South Africa's progress on Goal 10. According to the Sustainable Development Report, economic inequality remains a large issue in South Africa and contributes to extreme poverty with the country scoring 0.63 Gini coefficient adjusted for top revenues unaccounted for in household surveys. Income inequality in South Africa has remained high and decoupled from the average emerging markets, the top 20% of the population holds over 68% of income (compared to a median of 47% for similar emerging markets). Moreover, the significant disparities remain across provinces, whereby income per capita in Gauteng – the main economic province – is almost twice the levels found in the mostly rural provinces like Limpopo and the Eastern Cape (IMF 2020).

Goal 11 – which seeks to make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe and resilient – remains with significant challenges and a stagnating score. As an example, the country scored a value of 25.3 annual mean concentration of particulate matter (PM), less than the 2.5 microns in diameter (PM<sub>2.5</sub>) indicator under this goal. A decreasing score of 57.11 on the satisfaction with public transport indicator was also scored below the required long-term objective of 82.6 for this indicator (Sachs *et al.* 2020).

Goal 12 – which seeks to ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns – is the most complicated concerning the progress. For example, although challenges remain, information is unavailable on this goal to measure progress (Sachs *et al.* 2020).

Concerning Goal 14 – which seeks to conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources – major challenges remain. For example, on the Ocean Health Index that measures the degree to which marine waters under national jurisdictions have been contaminated by chemicals, excessive nutrients (eutrophication), human pathogens and trash, South Africa's index score is stagnating at 55.58 below the required long-term objective of 100. The number of fish caught from overexploited or collapsed stocks remains a challenge, and the country scored 33.60m, far from the expected long-term objective score of zero (Sachs *et al.* 2020).

Relating to SDG 15 – which relates to life on land – based on the available data, South Africa is making progress on five of the indicators minus the Red List Index of

Species Survival. The Red List Index of Species Survival, which is based on multiple assessments of mammals, reptiles, amphibians, birds, freshwater fish, butterflies, dragonflies and a sample of 900 randomly sampled plants, shows a decline in the index from 0.902 to 0.77 over 17 years (2002–2019) (Sachs *et al.* 2020).

Although resonating with several outcomes of the NDP, Goal 16 – which calls for peace, justice and strong institutions – is a major setback in South Africa’s attainment of the SDGs. South Africa continues to experience high levels of violence. The murder rate has increased since the time that the SDGs were adopted with a 1.4% increase in 2019/20, to 21 325 reported cases. This works out to 58 people murdered in the country every day, at a rate of 35.8 people per 100 000 population (BUSINESS TECH 2020). This is confirmed by the Homicide Indicator, with South Africa’s index at 35.90, far from the long-term index value of 0.3 (Sachs *et al.* 2020).

Emanating from the above, South Africa is largely off track on almost all of the 17 SDGs. Out of the 17 SDGs only two are on track, six are stagnating, seven are moderately improving and two have trend information missing. Of the 17 goals, six are experiencing major challenges, eight with significant challenges and two where challenges remain.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS TO FAST-TRACK THE PROGRESS OF SDGS IN SOUTH AFRICA**

Drawing from the existing literature, conclusions are reached that despite the existence of initiatives on which the successful progress of SDGs can be secured in South Africa, the true nature of the status of the progress of the SDGs amid the presence of the afore mentioned initiatives is to a certain degree oblique in 16 out of the 17 SDGs. Therefore, undesirable effects upon SDG progress are still in existence, based on the argument that alliances and innovative partnerships between governments, businesses, civil society and UN agencies are central to meeting the SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals Fund (SDGF) 2016:5; United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development; Addis Ababa Action Agenda 2015). This was reaffirmed since the first UN Conference on Environment and Development in 1992 – known as the Earth Summit, that stipulated that achieving sustainable development would require the active participation of all sectors of society and all types of people (UN 1992). Some 20 years after the Earth Summit, the same importance was reaffirmed by the Rio+20 Conference as seen in the conference outcome document “the future we want” highlighting the roles major stakeholders could play in pursuing sustainable societies for future generations (United Nations General Assembly 2012). The same stakeholder importance was repeated in the Agenda 2030, clearly outlining Goal 17.16 whose focus is to “Enhance the global partnership for sustainable development, complemented

by multi-stakeholder partnerships that mobilize and share knowledge, expertise, technology and financial resources, to support the achievement of the sustainable development goals in all countries, in particular developing countries” (United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development). This is confirmed by Macdonald, Clarke, Huand and Seitanidi (2019:2), who assert that stakeholder partnerships are catalysts towards producing positive societal reforms.

It may be argued that what the country needs to improve SDG progress is to strengthen its stakeholder engagements by adopting analogous key roles for all stakeholders playing a part in the implementation of SDGs. This will not only complement the NDP, but also help to strengthen stakeholder engagement which has been highlighted as a challenge in the country’s progress reports. Adopted from Ulrich’s (1997) model (Ulrich and Brockbank 2005a; 2005b; Ulrich and Brockbank 2010:2; Abbott, Goosen and Coetzee 2013:3; Ogbechie, Amaeshi, Ikiebey, Fawehinmi and Adeleye 2016:7–8), although designed for HR (human resources) experts, stakeholders involved in the implementation of SDGs in their day-to-day operations can adopt the four roles model to deliver excellence. The four roles are notably: strategic partner, change agent, people champion and administrative expert. See discussion below.

As strategic partners, all stakeholders need to become partners or strive to form a partnership. As partners, they come up with joint specific sustainable development commitments and contributions, intended to support the transformation towards SDGs. They should not only act as partners due to the prescribed roles, in this capacity, stakeholders must be capable of identifying and implementing those practices that facilitate strategic success (Long and Ismail 2008:116). According to literature, it is not enough for stakeholders to partake in implementation without being vigorously involved in the planning of the strategies for the successful implementation of SDGs (Ogbechie *et al.* 2016:7–8). Thus, as strategic partners, stakeholders will need to help create country-specific sustainable development strategies to realise sustainable development and integrate development approaches needed to be mainstreamed into each stage of the planning cycle.

The role of employee advocate (also known as the “employee champion”) is the role in charge of gauging people’s morale and satisfaction and using that information to create a positive environment (Ulrich 1997). Though designed with the HR professional in mind, this role can be adopted by stakeholders with the focus on people as “people champions”. This is where all stakeholders act as people champions/advocates in all their activities, by considering the peoples’ satisfaction feedback, and using this information to inform project design. As people champions stakeholders can strive to understand the needs of the people and attempt to meet those needs and also involve the people to increase and ensure their ability to contribute their competence (Long and Ismail 2008:117). Far more often the end-user (people) is not factored into all phases of the planning, creating

a disconnect from what is provided to what people want; leading to many initiatives failing. So, to improve the implementation of SDGs, all stakeholders need to be people champions by involving those that would benefit from their initiatives, at each step of the design and implementation processes to ensure, if not validate, that what they are seeking to do does resonate with the people. Developing programmes and initiatives with beneficiaries and not just for them, ensures that stakeholders have a better shot at achieving the SDGs (Shane 2015).

As change agents, also defined as the change expert role; requires HR professionals to contribute to the process of change and help improve the capacity to do so (Ulrich 1997). But just like the previous roles, this role can be adopted by stakeholders under the umbrella of change agent or champions for change. In particular, requiring all stakeholders, that is, business, academia, NGOs, civil society and the like to co-implement SDG change initiatives and deal with resistance, support in terms of providing time and financial resources, help communicate the need for SDGs, and aligning the SDG indicators with their key strategic priorities. As alluded to by Haywood *et al.* (2021) structural transformation such as change in the different sectors of an economy is key to SDG implementation and stakeholders have a critical contribution to make. It is through partnerships among stakeholders that awareness about SDGs, and financial investments into SDGs can be facilitated.

Finally, as an administrative expert, all stakeholders would need to use their expertise to promote sustainability practices in the performance of various administrative functions related to recruitment and selection, training and development, remuneration and compensation and performance assessment (Ogbechie *et al.* 2016:8). This is not only to strengthen their capacity, but also to help accelerate progress. The following roles in particular are imperative (Ogbechie *et al.* 2016:8):

- **Training and development:** All stakeholders should design training programmes that create awareness of SDGs and highlight the country's progress. This is to mainly afford all citizens a better understanding of the overall importance of the attainment of the SDGs.
- **Recruitment, selection and talent management:** All stakeholders through their various sectors should reinvent the employment process. Sustainability requires employees who are concerned not only about organisational profits and personal financial benefits but also about society and the environment. Therefore, in implementing strategies for recruiting employees, retaining top talent and increasing employees' productivity, stakeholders should ensure that policies that strengthen the social, economic and environmental benefits of employees and the society are developed and implemented. Stakeholders should also understand the benefits of creating equal opportunity to ensure non-discrimination concerning gender, race or tribe, thus policies that encourage diversity and multiculturalism should be put in place for selection and recruitment.

- **Rewards and compensation:** Stakeholders, especially the business, academia, government, and NGOs, through their HR departments should implement guidelines that ensure employee compensation for adhering to sustainable and socially responsible practices.
- **Performance appraisal:** In this aspect all stakeholders should develop and include measurable sustainability metrics in the performance appraisal of their employees. Community service and participation in Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and sustainability projects should also form part of the performance appraisal of employees.
- **Employee engagement:** This is the quest to promote an environment that encourages innovation, creation and expression of ideas and which leads to customer satisfaction that drives business growth. All stakeholders should develop and implement strategies that encourage employees to see themselves as partners in the pursuit of sustainability. This could specifically be done by listening to employees' sustainability ideas and initiatives and encouraging them to participate in the implementation of such ideas and initiatives.
- **Leadership development:** All stakeholders should create a culture of sustainable development by investing in the development of the leadership qualities of employees, especially those with high likelihoods of becoming imminent leaders in their communities and workplace.
- **Values creation and inculcation:** Stakeholders should ensure that sustainability values resonate in all aspects of the organisation. This can be done by rewarding or even promoting employees based solely on the devotion to and inclusion of sustainability values.
- **Collaboration and teamwork:** All stakeholders need to ensure a deeper level of engagement by establishing a good collaborative environment. This is not only to improve problem solving, but to take the lead in coordinating sustainability initiatives where there are no teams to help employees to see the bigger picture.

## CONCLUSION

The attainment of the SDGs is imperative for all UN member states, South Africa included; acknowledging the commitments made by the country, such as the alignment of the SDGs with the NDP, as well as the fact that South Africa is named as one of the nine country movers in the way SDGs should be implemented. Based on the findings of this study, since the adoption of SDGs in 2015, progress on all of the SDGs remains worrisome with an increasing distance from their attainment. Out of the 17 SDGs, based on the goal trends, only two SDGs are on track or maintaining SDG achievement, six are stagnating, seven are moderately

improving and two have trend information missing. Moreover, of the 17 goals, six are still experiencing major challenges, eight have encountered significant challenges and there are two where challenges remain. So, as we pass the five-year mark since the implementation of the SDGs, with the accompanying demands for the attainment of the goals becoming more of a reality, the authors are of the view that what the country needs to improve SDG progress, is to strengthen its stakeholder engagement by adopting analogous key roles for all stakeholders playing a part in the implementation of SDGs.

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