Redefining Sustainability in the SDGs towards Africa's Advantage and Advancement

Under the UN's Sustainable Development Goals, what does the term 'sustainable' really imply for sub-Saharan Africa and how can that term be practically applied in not only the crafting of national policies, but more importantly in the mobilization of citizens around the SDGs. For the SDGs to be successfully achieved within the region, there is need to seriously consider two very important factors, being (a) what does sustainability mean to and for Africans, and second, in its implementation, in what language can the SDGs be crafted that will speak intuitively, implicitly and explicitly to majority Africans. Indeed, once exploration of these core questions commences, the reality will gravitate towards one and the same answer; the need for the SDGs to aim at the lifting of the lid on the authenticity of Africa's own knowledge systems, on the one hand, and for the goals to be communicated with authentic African voices, which concretely address existing worldviews of Africans across communities.

A draft of the SDGs final document released in June 2015, identifies five very important dimensions as fundamentally underpinning the SDGs; these Five P's as the pillars are called, are people, planet, prosperity, peace and partnership. The Five Ps became necessary as a result of the realization gathered from deliberations, that there is need to balance social, environmental, economic and cultural concerns in determining what makes up the SDGs. Of the Five Ps, People come first. The placing of people at the forefront of the Five although not directly clarified in the document, bears on the fact that people determine the pace and success of the rest of the dimensions.

By referring to People as against Person, the Five Ps advances the African Ubuntu philosophy that places community over and above individualism. With that, it could be inferred that the world is finally about to embrace the African Ubuntu philosophy, which emphasizes collective responsibility for personal and community development. The African Ubuntu philosophy simply put says that 'I am a person through other persons.' As an individual, one can achieve so little but as a people, there is no barrier to advancement that cannot be dismantled. For so long, the concept of sustainability has been a mere illusion for the inhabitants of the planet owing sadly to the predominance of western culture, which promotes individualism over and above community right; the enthronement of individual human rights over and above community people's rights. There is need therefore, for Africa's enduring Ubuntu philosophy to be more studied by the rest of the globe, perhaps much more than any other philosophy of social relations in order for sustainability to be achieved.

Further, in emphasizing people as priority in the preamble of the latest SDGs document, it bears that conversations surrounding the goals must come from within communities and not superimposed upon them as was previously the case with not only the MDGs, but also many other externally crafted development strategies emanating from global financial institutions, aid agencies, individual consultants, uninformed governments and other concerned stakeholders. In sub-Saharan Africa, therefore, the SDGs ought to emphasize local knowledge and participatory democracy in crafting national policies and in implementing the SDGs at the grassroots. The knowledge and voice of Africans, long subdued within the global power structure must again be courted and promoted.

In the final analysis, sustainability is about the ability of human beings to collectively explore their own environment in order to generate innovative and progressive responses to challenges. Sustainability entails the need to understand and

to address community aspirations for better life in ways that betters future generation of community members.

African communities have long been labeled as innately unable to carry out this basic task for which all human beings have been fashioned to carry out for themselves. A balanced study of history, however, will reveal that this has been as a result of the prevention of Africans from promoting their own knowledge system and the continued prodding of them by external factors to rely on the wholesale importation of foreign knowledge systems. The UN SDGs document offers a chance to Africans and the rest of the globe to promote sustainable indigenous African knowledge systems across sectors, in order to achieve unparalleled and uncommon advancement for the region, generated mostly from within.