

# **New wines, old bottles? Cities in the global South and the Sustainable Development Goals**

Oteng-Ababio, Martin

## **Abstract**

*Sustainable development recently topped the global agenda again when, on 25 September 2015, the UN adopted the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), including SDG 11 on cities: ‘Make cities inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable.’ Though heralded with pomp and pageantry, in reality the relevance of cities to global development is hardly new. For example, the first two UN Conferences on Human Settlements (Habitat I and II) saw governments back then making qualified commitments not only to universal water and sanitation but more importantly also to the upgrading of informal settlements. This viewpoint<sup>8</sup> therefore reflects on how cities, especially in the global South, can implement the global agenda with targets in areas of critical importance: people, planet, prosperity, peace, and partnership. In this paper, I argue that the novel approaches and strategies for addressing the global agenda (SDGs) tie in with the hopes and aspirations of the Savannah Accelerated Development Authority (SADA)<sup>9</sup> and offer hope of greater effectiveness, particularly by giving recognition to the fact that how urban growth is managed in developing countries, the type of infrastructure that is put in place, and the jobs and city socio-economies that are developed will be crucial to the SDGs for decades to come. Hinging on the multi-faceted nature of the urbanization debate, I consider that without a well-managed urban transition, it will be difficult to see how the SDGs—and SADA for that matter—can be achieved in Ghana.*

**Keywords:** sustainable development, cities, transformation, Ghana.

Department of Geography and Resource Development, University of Ghana; Legon E-mail: [moababio@yahoo.com](mailto:moababio@yahoo.com) ; or [moteng-ababio@ug.edu.gh](mailto:moteng-ababio@ug.edu.gh)

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<sup>8</sup> I first presented this viewpoint at the maiden edition of the ‘Impact Africa Summit: Ghana’, which went off successfully at the Tang Palace Hotel in Accra on Thursday, 7 July 2016. The summit brought together key government officials, senior diplomats, academia, top local and international business executives, civil society, and the media to share ideas on the implementation of the SDGs in Ghana. Six distinguished personalities (described by the Summit Council as the ‘New African Personality’) from different fields were honoured and awarded for their impact and contributions to the socio-economic development agenda of the country in various fields. The summit presented the much-awaited forum for these prominent groups of leaders in Ghana to display a deep and a broad commitment to the global SDGs.

<sup>9</sup> Savannah Accelerated Development Authority (SADA) is a Government of Ghana agency responsible for coordinating a comprehensive development agenda for the savannah ecological zones comprising the three northern-most regions and stretches of Brong Ahafo and Volta Regions that are contiguous to the northern region of Ghana.

## Introduction

*Overcoming poverty is not a gesture of charity. It is an act of justice.*

Nelson Mandela, 3 February 2005

The 21<sup>st</sup> century is a uniquely urban century, with a multi-faceted urbanization debate.<sup>10</sup> Not only are the least-developed countries, particularly in Asia and Africa, witnessing unprecedented urban population growth (UN, 2014; UNDESA, 2014), but their governments are becoming more and more wary of the associated externalities—since cities, as they grow rapidly across the world, become increasingly vulnerable to urban violence, natural disasters, climate change, and poverty (Oteng-Ababio, 2011, 2013; Lwasa et al., 2014). At the same time, most governments remain eager for the economic benefits, innovation, and opportunities that cities bring (Glaeser, 2011; McGranahan et al., 2016). The resulting conundrum is reflected in the creation of exclusionary cities through strategies that privilege economic growth and result in many people being left behind (UN-Habitat, 2016; Oteng-Ababio & Grant, 2017). Put differently, although cities can be sites of opportunity, they also harbour deep inequalities, particularly for the urban poor, whose access to basic services and livelihoods remains precarious, with the number of people living in slum and informal settlements set to treble between now and 2050 (Turok, 2016; UNDP, 2016). Consequently, contemporary cities in the global South face deeply rooted sustainability challenges: they produce a high level of pollution, consume large amounts of energy, and, given

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<sup>10</sup> Cities have become key nodes in a new age of urbanization of the globe and globalization of the urban. Cities hold tremendous potential as engines of economic and social development, creating jobs and intersection of goods, ideas, and people through economies of scale and of scope. More than 54% of the world's population currently lives in an urban environment, and urban populations are predicted to grow at a rate of 1.5–2% per year. According to the UN, Africa is indeed the most rapidly urbanizing region and a significant percentage (nearly 90%) of the expected additional 2.5 billion people globally who will move to urban areas by 2050 will be located in Africa and Asia (UN, 2014). As a result, the debate on city management has often been about development, generally defined in the narrow sense of economic growth and access to social services, and it was assumed that with development would come prosperity, and with prosperity, greater safety and better security for people and communities.

their high concentration of people, are vulnerable to human, social, and economic loss caused by climate change and natural disasters (Satterthwaite et al., 2010; Africa Economic Outlook, 2016).

In this context (i.e. the situation where cities offer both great opportunities and deep challenges), it stands to reason that how Ghana's urbanization process, especially within the SADA zone, is managed (the type of infrastructure that is put in place and the jobs and city economies that are developed) will be critical and crucial for decades to come, particularly with regards to the implementation of the SDGs, including SDG 11: 'Make cities inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable' (UN, 2015; Paula, 2016). In truth, without a well-managed urban transition, it will be difficult to see how the rural–urban drift will be mitigated and how to guarantee all-inclusive city development. If our governments are serious about implementing the sustainable development commitments agreed in 2015, cities must be perceived as key partners in this endeavour. The reality is that city governments are responsible for implementing these global goals, or, simply put, local governments are often responsible for the delivery of basic services that are clearly linked to many of the SDGs (e.g. water, sanitation, and land-use decisions leading to housing provision, etc.). Thus, the roles played by the local governments are critical and paramount for the success of the SDGs (Lucci & Lynch, 2016). In spite of this recognition, little work has been done to date on the implementation of the SDGs, particularly at city level (Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments et al., 2016; UNDP, 2016). Indeed, the question of how likely it is that Ghana, one of 50 countries in which the post-2015 agenda consultations were held in 2012–2013, will achieve the SDG goals by 2030 based on the current trends is an imperative one to address, but it remains largely unanswered.<sup>11</sup>

This viewpoint examines the city authorities' ability to achieve most of the SDGs and proceeds in four steps. The next section sketches various days of reckoning, in part examining the first global

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<sup>11</sup> Ghana was directly involved in the development of the SDGs and, as such, the goals can be said to reflect the aspirations and needs of its people. According to the tenets of the SDGs, national governments have the primary responsibility for the implementation of the 17 goals and must take the lead by establishing national plans. This effort was already visible in the development of Ghana's Shared Growth and Development Agenda II. The official launch of the SDGs in Ghana in February 2016 by then President John Dramani Mahama demonstrates the government's commitment to enable public understanding of and support for the SDGs in the country.

attempt to respond to the new age of urbanization of the globe and globalization of the urban. Indeed, by 2000, it had become increasingly clear that cities can bring positives but also generate and intensify social exclusion, denying the benefits of urban life to the poor, to women, to youth, and to minorities and marginalized groups. This shows that the assumed relationship between development, prosperity, and safety is neither linear nor causal and that the social exclusion and inequality that can arise from development may be key contributors to insecurity, poverty, and alienation. In spite of this recognition, the Millennium Declaration in 2000 ended without significant improvement in the living conditions of the world's poorest populations. The third section sketches some of the new opportunities presented by the new global agenda, albeit some sectors characteristically need more attention than others. The following section briefly examines some challenges that may frustrate the attainment of the SDGs' agenda by 2030, while the final section calls for a more nuanced appreciation and understanding of the global agenda, and it attempts to identify how the challenges identified may be overcome.

## **From Millennium Development Goals to Sustainable Development**

### **Goals**

We are all aware that in the year 2000, the UN entered into one of its most ambitious anti-poverty drives, which translated into eight inspiring Millennium Development Goals<sup>12</sup> (MDGs) that ended in 2015 (UN, 2014, 2015). The Millennium Declaration in 2000 was a milestone in international cooperation, inspiring development efforts that sought to improve the lives of hundreds of millions of people around the world (Lucci & Lynch, 2016). In the same spirit, during the Rio+20 summit in 2012, the UN member states, mindful that the MDGs were due to 'expire' by 2015 and without significant improvement in the living conditions of the world's poorest populations, committed to developing a new set of goals to build on the successes of the MDGs and extend these to the whole

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<sup>12</sup> The Goals represent human needs and basic rights that every individual around the world should be able to enjoy—freedom from extreme poverty and hunger; quality education; productive and decent employment; good health and shelter; the right of women to give birth without risking their lives; and a world where environmental sustainability is a priority, and where women and men live in equality. Leaders also pledged to forge a wide-ranging global partnership for development to achieve these universal objectives.

world's population (UN, 2015). So September 2015, when 193 UN member states agreed on 17 SDGs in New York, marked another important milestone in the UN's history. Agreed in 2015, this ambitious agenda was accompanied by 169 targets in areas of critical importance: people, planet, prosperity, peace, and partnership (ibid).

In hindsight, it is clear that most countries, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa, missed most of the MDGs; nonetheless, the modest achievements chalked up under the framework have shown that with improved international cooperation, it is possible to defeat the scourge of poverty (Lucci & Lynch, 2016). Progress was not uniform across countries, and there were obvious setbacks and disappointments. But overall, the rate of progress in reducing poverty and in increasing access to basic health, education, water, and other essential services was unparalleled in many countries' histories (Satterthwaite et al., 2010; UNDP, 2016). The MDGs provided an important motivational force and measuring rod for progress. At least, for the first time, they defined an integrated set of deadline-bound quantitative targets that gave operational meanings to some of the basic dimensions of human development, and indeed, in the process strengthened global partnership for development. The small achievements in transforming the quality of life for hundreds of millions of people served as a sign of hope and a spur to action in others. Perhaps the most important lesson from the MDG framework (2000–2015) was that goals are achievable when nationally owned development strategies, policies, and programmes are supported by international development partners. At the same time, it further demonstrated that improvements in the lives of the poor have been unacceptably slow, and some hard-won gains are being eroded by climate, food, and economic crises (Simon, 2015; UNDP, 2016).

Be that as it may, the framework was fraught with a number of weaknesses. Fundamentally, an estimated 15.5% of the world's population still suffers from hunger, and many countries, particularly on the African continent, were unable to meet the targeted two-thirds reduction in child mortality by 2015 (UN, 2015; Lucci & Lynch, 2016). Furthermore, the reduction in maternal mortality (Target 5.A) was equally slow, and such mortality remains alarmingly high (Lucci & Lynch, 2016). In Sub-Saharan regions and Southern Asia, where 80% of people live in extreme poverty, progress in reaching the MDGs was generally very limited (UN, 2015). Perhaps the main weakness was that the MDGs' agenda was developed by a small group of experts, with developing countries largely in mind (Amin, 2006; UNDP, 2016). Consequently, prior studies describe MDGs

as being created by only a few stakeholders without adequate involvement by developing countries and overlooking development objectives previously agreed upon (Fehling et al., 2013).

Others claim the MDGs were unachievable and simplistic, not adapted to national needs, did not specify accountable parties, and reinforced vertical interventions (ibid.). The UN Secretary-General linked the MDGs' lack of progress to 'unmet commitments, inadequate resources, lack of focus and accountability, and insufficient interest in sustainable development' (UN, 2014). It is further considered that the MDGs could not be fully met because of how the goals were designed. In the words of President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf of Liberia:

*At the time of the crafting of the MDG Agenda, peoples' voices were not taken into account, with local realities ignored. In spite of this, Liberia began the implementation of the MDGs six years after its adoption, and has a progress rate of 33 percent. (UNDP, 2016: xx)*

It was against this background that the post-2015 sustainable development agenda, titled *The World We Want*, was crafted and passed. As already indicated, this agenda is a single global development framework with a comprehensive set of 17 goals, 169 targets, and 232 indicators (UN, 2015) and addresses the environmental, economic, and social challenges facing the world (Lucci & Lynch, 2016; McGranahan et al., 2016). With its adoption in September 2015 in New York, UN member states were encouraged to integrate its contents into their respective national development agendas. The main objective of the SDGs is to harmonize three core elements: economic growth, social inclusion, and environmental protection. The framework also has three key characteristics: it is universal, indivisible, and transformative. The SDGs officially came into force on 1 January 2016. As part of the ambitious 2030 agenda, the goals challenge nations around the world to unite in eradicating poverty, achieving equality, and addressing climate change (UN, 2015). In principle, its widespread adoption is progress, but a commitment to the SDGs is not enough. The SDGs are not legally binding on governments, and the reality is that they will be extremely tricky to translate into practice. In order to be successful, the focus of the SDGs must be on implementation. A global vision is nothing without the tools that enable individual nations to translate high-level promises into local strategies. For the success of the SDG framework, there is a need to domesticate these goals, taking into consideration each individual country's opportunities and impediments. This process entails three critical aspects, one of which is to create a national awareness and ownership of the global agenda. And to quote President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf once more: 'This time this [SDGs] agenda included everybody and we must work to have them achieved. We are leaving no

one behind.’ This is the task the world has set for itself from 2015 to 2030; it is a roadmap to the promised land: *The World We Want*.

## **Unravelling some of the new opportunities**

In the last decade or so, the Ghanaian economy has shown signs of significant prosperity. The country’s economic growth, which had slowed from 4.0% in 2014 to 3.7% in 2015, recovered to about 5.8% in 2016 and is expected to reach 8.7% in 2017, following consolidation of macro-economic stability and implementation of measures to resolve the crippling power crisis (Africa Economic Outlook, 2016). At the same time, the country continues to experience rapid urbanization, which has led to a number of sustainable development challenges, particularly regarding sanitation and transportation infrastructure. For instance, by 2010 over half of Ghana’s population lived in urban areas (localities with a population of 5,000 or more), compared with 30% at independence in 1957, and this is projected to increase to 72% by 2035 (Owusu & Oteng-Ababio, 2015). While rural–urban disparities are still significant, there are signs that Ghana’s cities are facing considerable challenges with land use, infrastructure and services provision (particularly with regard to housing, sanitation, and transportation), and the absence of gainful and productive employment opportunities (especially for the youth in northern Ghana; see Oteng-Ababio et al., 2017). The critical policy challenge has been to ensure orderly and sustainable spatial development, co-ordination and planning, and measures to enable metropolitan and municipal authorities to secure adequate financing for infrastructure and services (Africa Economic Outlook, 2016).

In spite of the obvious signs of hope and prosperity, clearly all is not that well yet nationwide. Indeed, there has been no structural transformation economically of northern Ghana. Importantly, the 2015 slowdown resulted from a number of economic challenges, most of which were in play in 2014. These included a 3-year power crisis, rising fiscal deficit and public debt levels, a significant external sector deficit, and unpredictably low world market prices for the country’s oil and gold exports (Owusu & Oteng-Ababio, 2015; Oteng-Ababio et al., 2017). The services sector was the main driver of growth. The industrial sector also posted a positive growth rate of 9.1%. Thus, over the medium term, if the country should see a sustainable recovery with a projected GDP growth of 8.7% in 2017, then there will be the need for fiscal consolidation measures to remain on track, quick resolution of the power crisis, the two new oil wells to come on-stream, and improved

cocoa harvest and gold production (Africa Economic Outlook, 2016). Typically, the projected sustained economic growth also increases the need for several actions that only the state can perform, including showing greater commitment to the ideals of SADA, which without doubt is a prerequisite for the world we want. So far, these actions, which I will divide into two groups, have not been forthcoming or have been very slow in appearing. These two groups are: (a) managing the future, and (b) delivering services.

First, Ghana's greatest economic opportunity to manage its future remains the exploitation of its natural resources to ensure even (or near even) development (Oteng-Ababio, 2016). For example, the depletion of the country's mineral resources between 2006 and 2011 was not met with equivalent investments. With quicker mineral depletion, Ghana's economic growth accelerated (to reach a peak of 14% in 2011, up from 6% in 2006), as did national savings and investments, though not fast enough to replace the depleted mineral capital (Africa Economic Outlook, 2016). While gross national savings, measuring the nation's capacity to invest, increased from 15.6% of Gross National Income (GNI) to 17.9% between 2006 and 2011, adjusted net savings decreased from 7.7 to 2.0% of GNI over the same period of time. Thus, in order to maintain investment at higher levels, Ghana decided to significantly increase its external borrowing during the period 2012–2015. Such a decision brings additional challenges in terms of debt sustainability—that is, sophisticated debt management and the need to ensure high economic rates of returns for investment projects (Africa Economic Outlook, 2016; African Economic Outlook, 2016; Oteng-Ababio, 2016).

Indeed, the new oil discoveries make this a far greater opportunity than it has ever been. Yet resource exploitation for future economic development requires a more active role from the government than other development paradigms such as industrialization or the commercialization of agriculture (Collier, 2014). The reason is simple. Natural resources are special because, as noted by Paul Collier (a professor at Oxford University and the International Growth Centre), they generate economic rents and are also finite. Explaining the issue of rent, Collier (*ibid.*) reveals that it costs around \$10 to cover all the costs of getting a barrel of oil out of the ground, at which point it is currently worth around \$50. The surplus \$40 is the rent, which in principle belongs to the country but is initially under the control of the company that extracts the oil. Usually, the transfer from company to country is achieved through taxation (*ibid.*). However, a few resource-rich OECD countries, such as the USA and Australia, have largely left the rents

with the companies. Unfortunately, such a strategy is inappropriate for Ghana. This is because in the USA and Australia, the rents accruing to the companies are distributed to shareholders who are predominantly citizens or are captured by skilled workers who are also citizens (Collier, 2014; Africa Economic Outlook, 2016). In the case of Ghana, both the shareholders and the skilled workers are overwhelmingly foreign. Consequently, if the whole country is to adequately benefit from our resource extraction, then the rents have to be appropriately taxed. This then will provide us the opportunity to adequately invest in Ghana's future.

In addition, we must appreciate the fact that high investment is also imperative, because extraction obviously depletes natural assets. Thus, responsible economic management must seize this opportunity to convert unproductive natural assets into productive invested assets such as infrastructure (Collier, 2014). This is an opportunity we have so far failed to seize to build the future. It is an open secret that from the onset of the flow of oil revenues in Ghana in 2011, the share of public investment in GDP dropped significantly, while public sector wages rose by around 50%, especially with the introduction of the Single Spine Salary Structure.<sup>13</sup> Within the African continent, evidence abounds indicating that well-managed natural resource exploitation can build the future, as it has done in Botswana, where over the past 60 years the country has defied the odds to create a successful economy that has been touted as one of the most successful in the world (Lewin, 2011).

Botswana's achievement is remarkable, because at independence in 1966 its prospects were not encouraging. The sparsely populated, arid, and landlocked country was also one of the poorest in the world, with a per capita income of just \$70 a year. Just after 1966, about 60% of its expenditure consisted of international development assistance. There were only 12 km of paved roads, and agriculture (mostly cattle farming for beef production) accounted for 40% of its GDP. However,

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<sup>13</sup> The Single Spine Salary Structure (SSSS) is one of the major components of the Single Spine Pay Policy (SSPP) introduced by the Government of Ghana and implemented in 2010 to regulate the payment of public service workers, especially those under Article 190 of the 1992 Constitution of Ghana.

by 2007 the country had 7,000 km of paved roads, and per capita income had risen to approximately \$6,100 (\$12,000 at purchasing power parity), making Botswana an upper-middle-income country comparable to Chile or Argentina (Lewin, 2011). The country's success is also evident in other measures of human development. For example, according to Lewin (ibid.), at independence Botswana life expectancy at birth was 37 years. By 1990 it was 60, 10 years above the African average. Under-five mortality had fallen to about 45 per 1,000 live births in 1990, compared with 180 for Africa as a whole. Development assistance has shrunk to less than 3% of the government budget, and the proportion of poor people fell from about 50% in 1985 to 33% in 1994 (Leith, 2005).

Nonetheless, not all indicators are as positive: income distribution in Botswana remains very unequal (the Gini coefficient was about 0.55 in 1994). Unemployment remains high, reflecting to a large extent rural-to-urban migration, although it too has fallen, dropping from about 21% in the 1990s to about 17% in 2008 (Lewin, 2011; Africa Economic Outlook, 2016). When well-managed, natural resource exploitation can build the future, as it has done in Botswana; however, it also has a dangerous downside. In most cases, contested ownership, as in Sierra Leone and Nigeria, can tear a society apart, including developed nations.

A second major opportunity we have for managing the future is urbanization. As already noted, Africa is the least urbanized but one of the fastest-urbanizing regions worldwide (Satterthwaite et al., 2010). Prior studies have revealed that approximately 40% of Africa's population currently live in cities and towns (Turok, 2015; 2016). The urban population has grown 14-fold from 32 million in 1950 to over 450 million in 2014 and is expected to triple to over 1.3 billion by 2050. Ghana is no exception to this trend, as its urban population more than tripled from 4 million in 1984 to nearly 14 million in 2010 (Owusu & Oteng-Ababio, 2015). This is a huge opportunity for our economic progress and prosperity: no country has ever developed without urbanization (Oteng-Ababio, 2016). In order to reap the benefits of urbanization, we need an active public policy—a policy that plans with the people and not for the people, a policy that ensures that cities are modelled for people and not people for cities. Infrastructure, for example, must be planned and built in advance, and density must be enforced using appropriate regulations. Yet to date, our urbanization has been typified by sprawling slums—or what Pieterse (2014) described as *rogue urbanism*. These slums offer neither decent places to live nor productive places to work (Grant, 2015). Again, we are not seizing the opportunity to build the future.

Regarding the second group of actions I mentioned that only the state can perform—the delivery of services—one important service governments are expected to provide as a direct response to sustained economic growth is security (Collier, 2014; Owusu et al., 2015). Indeed, security is perhaps the easiest public service to provide because the role of defending a country from threats is usually highly motivating for the young men on whom security services depend. However, when poorly recruited and motivated, the results can be disastrous; and this appears to be the bane of most Africa security services—arguably, most of them are still not working effectively and fall short when it come to their combat readiness.<sup>14</sup> This is the most important factor in maintaining both internal and external security; but as basic as it is to the security services, it remains a complicated subject for others to understand. Due to its multi-dimensional and somewhat diffuse nature, it also has few natural supporters. In Sub-Saharan countries where tribal and ethnic considerations predominate in our body politics, it is easy to support a policy that increases the number of security personal from one’s ethnic perspective, but it is difficult to construct a constituency to professionally support the complex issue of security readiness. Therefore, readiness tends to suffer significant harm in the increasingly fierce competition for tribal space and resources (Oteng-Ababio et al., 2016).

To fight effectively, the security services require the right personnel operating the right equipment with the right training to win. It is no secret that when terrorists took over a Kenyan shopping mall, the soldiers who were detailed to fight the terrorists used the opportunity to loot the shops (Collier, 2014). Similarly, when 800 of former Libyan leader Gaddafi’s mercenaries invaded Mali, the national army disintegrated, yet security was rapidly restored once French troops arrived. In northern Nigeria, a large and well-funded national army has proved unable to defeat Boko Haram. In Ghana, members of a vigilante group affiliated to the ruling New Patriotic Party (NPP), Delta Force, stormed a Kumasi Circuit Court on 6 April 2017 and freed members of their group who were facing charges for causing disturbances at the Ashanti Regional Coordinating Council (Citifmonline.com/Ghana, 2016). This comes at a time when many social commentators, especially those from opposing political parties, have expressed disappointment in the

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<sup>14</sup> Combat readiness is interpreted as the ability of military forces or the police service (and the security services in general) to fight for and to meet the demands of the national security strategy.

government's inability to deal with such vigilante groups in the country. Many have also suggested that the uncontrolled activities of vigilante groups are slowly turning Ghana into a lawless land in the name of political expediency. Evidently, our governments have not been able to motivate the men-in-uniform well enough to effectively discharge their constitutional duties.

## **Unpacking the old impediments**

My comments thus far may be upsetting and appear to paint a gloomy picture concerning the journey to the promised land by 2030, but I am convinced that they are not particularly controversial. They are simply matters of fact. Suffice it to highlight two old impediments that can impede our quest for the global agenda, *The World We Want*. The first relates to the need for well-established sources of public and private data, where data collection is transparent, accountable, and consistent enough to enable accurate measurements over time. The UN Secretary-General's Independent Expert Advisory Group (IEAG) has called for a data revolution through which statistical systems are strengthened at local, national, and international levels. Although in some cases countries have portals with data—for example, in Ghana we have the local government data portal—data on many of the SDG indicators are not easily available through user-friendly websites. In some cases, the data often tend to be held by different local government agencies and across many departments within these agencies. In such a situation, accessing city-level data,<sup>15</sup> for example, becomes a challenge, especially for those outside of government.

Regarding this challenge, the Overseas Development Institute (2016: 23) further observes that 'in some cases the data exist, for example on informal settlements, but are not publicly available', adding emphatically:

*There are no practical reasons why tables based on census data, often disaggregated by different geographical categories and included on governments' statistical websites, could not include readily available information on slums and informal settlements.*

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<sup>15</sup> I focus on city-level data to narrow the scope, but of course many targets beyond SDG 11 are relevant at the city level. In fact, a recent study suggests that up to 65% of the SDG targets are at risk should local urban stakeholders not be assigned a clear implementing role (Cities Alliance, 2015).

In most Sub-Saharan countries, including Ghana, there is only one data point, and the data are not disaggregated to the level required for measuring progress on SDGs. In Ghana, there is hardly any data available to facilitate the assessment of the city-level target on access to public transport (SDG 11.2), as the available data are unlikely to be disaggregated by sex, age, and persons with disabilities (Oteng-Ababio, 2016: 23). Essentially, other indicators, such as the number of people living in slums and informal settlements, are not easily accessible either, as there are questions over whether the instruments used to collect the data include these marginal communities.

Several studies have referred to the possibility of census data deliberately undercounting these communities for political or practical reasons (e.g. in unsafe or unhygienic environments, enumerators may collect the data on these neighbourhoods superficially) (Lucci & Lynch, 2016). Also, in the case of household surveys (also used to produce UN-Habitat's data on slums and informal settlements), the sampling frames are often not large enough to be representative of cities and of the settlements (Overseas Development Institute, 2016: 23). This means these estimates can have large margins of error and, for smaller cities, may not be possible to produce. In other words, the data challenge in Ghana is not only about the difficulty in getting the right data at the right time, but more importantly, accessing disaggregated data that can facilitate analysis of intra-community inequalities and track any changes. It must be appreciated that the lack of such nuanced disaggregated data can potentially yield misleading information and, ultimately, inadequately informed or even badly misinformed policy prescriptions. The second impediment relates to the need to build the capacities of our institutions.<sup>16</sup> Essentially, this call resonates with former President Obama's admonition:<sup>17</sup> 'Africa doesn't need strongmen; it needs strong institutions'.

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<sup>16</sup> The dictionary definition of an institution is 'any public or private structure or mechanism of social order and corporation governing the behaviour of a set of individuals within a given human collectivity. Institutions are identified with a social purpose and permanence, transcending individual human lives and intentions, and with the making and enforcing of rules governing cooperative human behaviour.' So, a strong institution is one that ensures that the social purpose for which it is defined is achievable and continues to provide direction for future generations of individuals.

<sup>17</sup> President Obama's remarks, as prepared for delivery, from his speech to Ghana's Parliament on 11 July 2009, during his first visit to Sub-Saharan Africa as the President of the United States.

He added;

*In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, capable, reliable and transparent institutions are the key to success—strong parliaments and honest police forces; independent judges and journalists; a vibrant private sector and civil society. Those are the things that give life to democracy, because that is what matters in people’s lives. (The Huffington Post, 2009)*

This is also in accord with Acemoglu and Robinson’s (2010: 7) assertion:

*Economic institutions matter for economic growth because they shape the incentives of key economic actors in society; in particular, they influence investments in physical and human capital and technology, and the organization of production.*

Acemoglu and Robinson (2010) further alluded to the fact that although cultural and geographical factors may also matter for economic performance, differences in economic institutions are the major source of cross-country differences in economic growth and prosperity. For these authors, economic institutions determine not only the aggregate economic growth potential of the economy, but also an array of economic outcomes, including the distribution of resources in the future (i.e. the distribution of wealth, physical capital, or human capital). In other words, they influence not only the size of the aggregate pie, but how this pie is divided among different groups and individuals in society (ibid. 390).

Arguably, in Ghana strong institutions do not necessarily work, as most institutions tend to rest upon the beliefs that are prevalent in a particular society (Oteng-Ababio & Wrigley-Asante, 2013; Oteng-Ababio, 2016). Although it is easy to point fingers and to pin the blame for the country’s problems on others, a critical examination of people’s beliefs reveals their identities and how these identities interpret how a society works. As noted by former President Obama:

*Yes, a colonial map that made little sense bred conflict, and the West has often approached Africa as a patron, rather than a partner. But the West is not responsible for the destruction of the Zimbabwean economy over the last decade, or wars in which children are enlisted as combatants. (The Huffington Post, 2009)*

Most challenges in Ghana today—ranging from the over-a-decade-long conflict between the Abudus and Andanis in northern Ghana, or the Nkonya and Elavanyo feud in the Volta region—are engineered partly by tribalism and ethnic considerations that for a long period have derailed the regions’ fortunes, and we know that this kind of unrest is a daily fact of life for far too many. Indeed, most Ghanaians today hold both local and national identities, and the relative potency of

these two identities is distinctive: local identities are stronger than the national identity. These tendencies can hold sway over any political commitment to achieve the SDGs or any other local policy intervention such as SADA.

When examined critically, the governance of the country since independence in 1957 can be seen largely as a series of ethnic autocracies, run by and for particular groups. The animosity between the Convention Peoples' Party (CPP) and the United Party (UP) traditions just after independence resonates and (I dare say) pales into insignificance compared with the current so-called multi-party democracies, in which parties are openly organized on tribal lines, disseminating divisive, tension-packed narratives of vilification of opposing parties. This stands in stark contrast to the scenario in Western countries, where by and large there is a virtual absence of inter-state warfare, happily precluding the violent means by which they built their identities in the past (Collier, 2014). These tribal divisions are often connected with the history of the formation of African countries, with borders having been artificially imposed by external colonial powers. Nevertheless, if we are to achieve the global agenda, then we must work with the conditions as they now are and find ways to make the country we live in work as a unified entity, overcoming our individual differences. The future in an increasingly globalized world calls us to greater fellowship, an understanding of our mutual dependence, and possibilities beyond tribal and ethnic divisions (Collier, 2014). Addressing this observation is critical for the success of the SDGs, because the government is better able to be effective when the structure of identities matches the structure of political power. In other words, power is more likely to turn into authority and win the acceptance of the citizenry if these citizens see themselves as sharing a common identity with their leaders (ibid.).

A clearer manifestation of the power of shared identities was with the National Sanitation Day initiative, instituted by the former NDC-led administration, which in spite of all its great intentions and initial enthusiasm failed so spectacularly that memories of the event have since faded into quiet oblivion (see Manteaw, 2017). For the most part, and particularly with local communities of predominantly minority party strongholds, the National Sanitation Day initiative came to represent only what they perceived as a monthly fanfare of travelling high-profile personnel from showbiz and the ruling government, decked out in full Zoomlion cleaning regalia with brooms and shovels, who converged on towns and cities around the country to clean up. All too soon, enthusiasm for the National Sanitation Day dwindled and 'successfully' died a natural death. The monthly travelling party of sanitation crusaders from Accra lost momentum and the showmanship could

not be sustained (ibid.). The programme failed because it was politically top-down and not all-encompassing, conceptually incoherent, inherently paternalistic, and lacked local ownership. Indeed, the lack of local ownership was a sure sign of failure right from the outset, creating apathy and a lack of participation, a situation which prompted quiet intimations about using legislation to make participation a legal requirement. But for most local people, the spectacle of ‘big men’ cleaning gutters in their communities was probably just a sight to behold, and all they could do was to stand and stare.

Similarly, it is highly probable that most public employees are likely to internalize their work as a mission if they see their employer and service users as having a common identity with themselves. Unfortunately, such common identities are not much in evidence in Ghana today, hence occasioning a radical mismatch between power and identity. We have a situation where power is unusually concentrated at the national level, while identity is unusually concentrated at the local levels. And without doubt, local identities are strong (and justifiably so) because tribes are far older than nations. In truth, this state of affairs can neither take us to the promised land by 2030 nor fulfil the locally domesticated SADA agenda—and therefore we must change. To realize our planned agenda, we must first recognize a fundamental and an unequivocal truth: development depends upon good governance. That is the ingredient which has been missing in far too many places, and for far too long. That is the change that can unlock our potential to achieve the SDGs and the SADA initiative. For any effective governance, power must be at a higher level than identity. The question is *how* this can be achieved. Collier (2014) suggests two approaches: either power can be shifted to identity, or identity can be shifted to power. I see the two approaches as complementary. They do not need to be alternatives; they can be pursued together. However, since identities are slow-changing, it may be faster to shift power to identity by means of decentralization. I am referring to effective decentralization and not just cosmetic actions—those actions described in Ghanaian local parlance as ‘*Akwasi ko na ogyina nkwantia*’ (‘a nine-day wonder’).

### **Concluding remarks: The SDGs in context**

I have so far attempted to outline some internal impediments that can thwart our quest for *The World We Want*. I will use my concluding remarks to also highlight one exogenous factor that inadvertently exacerbates these endogenous challenges. As our experience with the MDGs revealed, the tendency of some development partners to promote their own model of political

*New wines, old bottles? Cities in the global South and the Sustainable Development Goals*

design as the template for all to follow does not always work. Typically, the core of their model, which is sometimes used as a condition for development aid, is democratic accountability of government to citizens through periodic multi-party elections (Collier, 2014). Regrettably, recent developments (including what Mommon describes as the ‘our time to chop syndrome’) have interfered with the efficacy of this model, particularly when our identities are ethnic-centred, with parties organized along ethnic lines and thereby impeding inclusive nationalism (Oteng-Ababio & Wrigley-Asante, 2013; Collier, 2014). The result has been high-stakes, winner-take-all, divisive ethnic contests, disastrously exemplified by the Kenyan experience in 2008.

In the particular case of Kenya, from December 2007 to February 2008, the country experienced ethnic violence triggered by a disputed presidential election held on 27 December 2007. A country with over 70 distinct ethnic groups—the five largest being Kikuyu (20%), Luhya (14%), Luo (13%), Kalenjin (11%), and Kamba (11%)—Kenya’s elections since gaining independence in 1963 have been dominated by ethnic affiliation, resulting in exclusion and discrimination of those affiliated with the opposition (International Coalition for the Responsibility to Protect, 2013). In the lead-up to the elections, the two coalitions vying for government—the Orange Democratic Movement (ODM) and Party of National Unity (PNU)—were strongly supported by ethnically rooted political constituencies. The turnout for the election was the highest on record, with approximately 70% voter participation, and on 30 December 2007 the Electoral Commission Chairman declared Mwai Kibaki the winner. Hours later, he was hastily sworn into office. Odinga and the ODM immediately rejected the results, stating the elections had been rigged, a position with which foreign election observer missions, in particular the European Union (EU) election monitors, agreed. This triggered widespread and systematic violence, resulting in more than 1,000 deaths and the displacement of over 500,000 civilians, violence that was seen as pre-meditated and planned by politicians and community leaders at both the local and national levels. Indeed, Kenya’s police forces were also implicated, with reports suggesting they were responsible for almost 40% of civilian deaths (ibid.).

Ghana is not immune to such election-related violence, except perhaps only in the matter of scale of occurrences and fatalities (Owusu et al., 2015). The last three general elections in the country have generally been touted as peaceful, but in reality these have been characterized by extremely intense and tension-packed undertones. How the country managed to pass through unscarred remains unclear, but likely a possible worsening of the situation around elections should be a

matter of concern if we are to achieve the goals we have set for ourselves. Perhaps the mistake of our development partners has been to be too much outcome-focused or over-concentrated on how electoral power is acquired, rather than on how that power is used. Without doubt, the reality of our socio-cultural norms and practices—which can potentially plunge our country into a deadly ethnic conflict—demands that we recognize that in order to achieve the SDGs’ agenda, how power is acquired and used are equally important and must be handled pragmatically. This in fact echoes the words of former President Obama to Ghana’s Parliament regarding the peculiarities of African politics:

*Repression takes many forms, and too many nations are plagued by problems that condemn their people to poverty. No country is going to create wealth if its leaders exploit the economy to enrich themselves, or police can be bought off by drug traffickers. No business wants to invest in a place where the government skims 20% off the top, or the head of the Port Authority is corrupt. No person wants to live in a society where the rule of law gives way to the rule of brutality and bribery. (The Huffington Post, 2009)*

History repeatedly shows that unanticipated socio-cultural-induced violent events often catch us by surprise and that, as a nation, we have paid and continue to pay a high price in blood to compensate for our lack of preparedness (Oteng-Ababio et al., 2016). Admittedly, our approaches may not necessarily be familiar to the West. But they may also probably be more effective than the tick-box institutional isomorphic mimicry that Western pressure creates. I am not in any way suggesting that we abandon the Western agenda. But I think we need to acknowledge the limitations inherent in some of these models as they travel from New York to Accra.

In conclusion, I am absolutely hopeful that with dedication, political will, and good governance, Ghana can substantially achieve most of the targets set by the SDGs—and, by extension, the SADA initiative. Ghana, and indeed Africa as a continent, requires its own solutions, based on local country conditions as well as on local knowledge and traditions. In hindsight, Ghana’s National Sanitation Day, if necessary at all, should never have been about the occasional get-together of a travelling team of high-profile personalities descending on local communities to usurp a problem which is entirely local. It is far better to learn the lessons of history than to repeat them. Often, solutions cooked up in distant, unrelated societies and Western economics departments can, at best, provide guidelines and ideas. But for solutions to actually work, Ghanaians must feel that they *own* these solutions, that they have a major input into crafting them, and that the solutions originate from their own best understanding and wishes for their future. As

*New wines, old bottles? Cities in the global South and the Sustainable Development Goals*

a nation, we need to imbibe an ideology of inclusive nationalism, diffused power, generational sacrifice, and frugal leadership. Most remarkably, these are the very principles that have led President Kagame in post-genocide Rwanda to succeed in reducing poverty more rapidly than ever before achieved on the continent of Africa. We need to avoid unbridled conservatism, but our quest for modernity and technology must necessarily be linked with our tradition. We should recognize that less orthodox political approaches may be viable as routes to create the effective framework we need in order to harness our new opportunities to build *The World We Want* by 2030.

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