



SOUTH AFRICA AND AGENDA 2030

**CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON DELIVERING
SUSTAINABLE DEMOCRACY AND DEVELOPMENT**

EDITOR: DANIEL SILANDER

South Africa and Agenda 2030

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South Africa and Agenda 2030: Critical Perspectives on Delivering Sustainable Democracy and Development

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Contents

About the Editor	vii
About the Contributors	ix
Chapter 1 Sustainable Democracy and Development in South Africa <i>Daniel Silander</i>	1
Chapter 2 Sustainable Democracy – Challenges to Strong Political Institutions <i>Martin Nilsson</i>	13
Chapter 3 Democracy and Sustainable Development – Justice <i>Pieter Heydenrych</i>	29
Chapter 4 Public Access to Information <i>Emma Ricknell</i>	43
Chapter 5 A Violent and Volatile Democracy <i>Daniel Silander</i>	57
Chapter 6 Reduced Poverty <i>Herman van der Elst</i>	71
Chapter 7 Quality Education <i>Daniel Silander and Charlotte Silander</i>	83
Chapter 8 Decent Work in 21st Century <i>Gideon Van Riet and Seshupo Mosala</i>	99

Chapter 9 Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure Development: Towards Democratic Consolidation <i>Kgame Molope</i>	113
Chapter 10 Inequality <i>Ilse Rieder</i>	129
Chapter 11 Climate Change and Democracy Considered <i>Henry Wambui and Don Wallace</i>	147
Chapter 12 A New Political Landscape and Remaining SDG Challenges <i>Daniel Silander</i>	163
Index	169

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Chapter 1

Sustainable Democracy and Development in South Africa

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The SDGs aren't just a list of goals. They carry the hopes, dreams, rights, and expectations of people everywhere. ([Guterres, 2023](#))

In 2023, the United Nations (UN) Secretary-General, Mr Antonio Guterres, stressed the importance of Agenda 2030 on sustainable development highlighting how only 12% of the sustainable development targets were on track. The statement was made at the high-level forum at the UN headquarters. South Africa has often been portrayed as one of Africa's most advanced democracies, categorized as free by [Freedom House \(2024\)](#) since the transition to a multi-racial democracy in 1994. South Africa has also had a strong civil society, a well-founded democratic constitution and symbolized a high (upper) middle-income country with the second-largest economy on the African continent ([South Africa, 2024](#)). On 29 May 2024, the African National Congress (ANC) lost, however, for its first time its parliamentary majority. ANC had seen its support decline to 40.18%, 17% less than in the 2019 elections and the sharpest decline since 1994. Voter turnout was 58.6% to be compared to 66.1% in 2019 and 86.9% in 1994. Having governed South Africa since the first democratic elections in 1994, the ANC was pushed to form a unity government with the Democratic Alliance (DA) and the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) together with minor parties ([Friedrich Naumann Foundation, 2024](#)).

The election outcome indicates a new political era for South Africa. Declining popular support for ANC over a long period of time has been a warning sign of South African's dissatisfaction over ANC's governance on democracy and development on issues such as corruption, poverty, inequality, poor education, unemployment and basic services, etc. Framed by the UN sustainable development goals (UNSDG) of 2015–2030 and the end of 30 years of ANC hegemonic

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dominance in South African politics, this study is about sustainable democracy and development in contemporary South Africa. Each chapter provides insights on the status of specific SDGs. Altogether, this book presents an analysis of the status of sustainable democracy and development in a context of a changing South African political landscape.

The Path Towards Agenda 2030

In September 2015, a special UN Summit in New York, including 193 member states, adopted *Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (UN, 2015a). Since then, the Agenda has become the blueprint for the global ambition to promote sustainable development. The very first commitment to sustainable development could perhaps be dated all the way back to the ashes of World War II and the birth of the UN in 1945 (UN, 1945). The world war forced the international community into discussions on how to prevent future wars and how to settle political disputes peacefully. The UN received the global responsibility to address challenges to peace and security but also to socioeconomic development and environmental protection. It was not, however, until *the Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment* in 1972 (UN, 1972) that the concept of sustainable development was used to refer to challenges to development and environment. It led to the establishment of the UN Environment Program (UNEP) with an official agenda for future progress. A few years later, in 1977, *the World Commission on Environment and Development* (WCED) was institutionalized providing further discussions, and in 1987, the report *Our Common Future* stressed the concept of sustainable development (Thomsen, 2013). The report highlighted the importance of global sustainable development to address contemporary human and societal needs in balance with the needs of future generations: a nexus that became the focus for upcoming global discussions on worldwide development.

Another major milestone was the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in Brazil, *the UN Conference on Environment and Development* (UN, 1992). The outcome in the Rio Declaration focussed on the importance of environmental, economic and social development. In addition, the Summit also resulted in a platform for upcoming important international environmental agreements such as *the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change* (UNFCCC, 2024) and *the Convention on Biological Diversity* (UN, 2000). In September 2000, after decades of global and UN orchestrated conferences and summits, political leaders from around the world met at the UN headquarters in New York to sign *the UN Millennium Declaration* (UN, 2000). The Declaration established a new global partnership to fight extreme poverty within the timeline of 15 years. The eight millennium development goals (MDGs) were to (i) eradicate extreme poverty and hunger; (ii) achieve universal primary education; (iii) promote gender equality and empower women; (iv) reduce child mortality; (v) improve maternal health; (iv) combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases; (vii) ensure environmental sustainability; and (viii) establish global partnership for development (UN Dag Hammarskjöld Library, 2024).

The Millennium Project was led by the UN Secretary-General to set out actions for global stakeholders to take. In 2005, the UN Secretary-General was assisted by the independent advisory body, led by Professor Jeffrey Sachs, launching the report *Investing in Development: A Practical Plan to Achieve the Millennium Development Goals* (Sachs, 2005). In September 2005, the UN held another World Summit at the headquarters in New York with more than 170 Heads of States and Governments, following up on the 2000 Millennium Summit (UN, 2005). The UN Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, had in March 2005 launched his report *In Larger Freedom* proposals on sustainable development and how to reform the UN organization (UN, 2005). The global ambitions presented in 2005 led to a high-level event of 2008 on MDG where a wide range of important actors agreed on new commitments. The event also resulted in a generated financial allocation of about \$16 billion for sustainable development. In 2010, the Summit on the MDG adopted *Keeping the Promise: United to Achieve the Millennium Development Goals* embedding new actions to be taken as well as promises to raise additional \$40 billion in resources (Janzekovic & Silander, 2013).

In 2012, at the Rio +20 Conference, also named *the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development*, in Rio de Janeiro, a global review of progress made took place (United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, 2012). It was discussed and decided to create a new set of SDGs to substitute existing MDGs. In September 2013, the president of the UN General Assembly held a special event to address actions taken on MDGs, and the UN Secretary-General, Ban Ki-Moon, presented his report *A Life of Dignity for All* (UN, 2015b, 2015c). Before that, the Secretary-General held a high-level forum (UN, 2015b, 2015c) to further push for actions on sustainable development with the allocation of more than \$2.5 billion. This was followed by *the Paris Agreement* in 2015 and the adoption of *the Paris Agreement on climate change at the UN Climate Change Conference (COP21)* focussing on limiting global temperature rise and improving the capacity of climate resilience (UN, 2015d).

The UN Millennium Development Report of 2015 (UN, 2015a, pp. 4–7), assessing 2000–2015, set out numerous success stories, but while considerable progress had been made globally, the development had been uneven across regions and countries. Millions of people were left behind due to gender inequality, poor education, unemployment, scarcity of resources, hunger, sanitation, climate change and violent conflicts. Almost 800 million people continued to live in extreme poverty, over 10 million children under the age of five were malnourished, the maternal mortality ratio was 14 times higher than in developed regions, no access to improved sanitation remained with approximately 2.4 billion people (one in three) still using unimproved sanitation facilities. In addition, it was also estimated how about 16,000 children died per day before reaching the age of five, about 57 million children of primary school age were not enrolled in school and existing vulnerable work conditions left almost half of the global workforce employed in precarious jobs. Due to urbanization, over 880 million people were left living in slum-like conditions in developing world cities (UN, 2015a, pp. 8–9).

The UN Agenda 2030 was a result of a long political process of debates and negotiations. The global process included a wide range of stakeholders in

governments, civil society organizations, business and other actors. In 2015, 193 UN Member States agreed on *the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* at the UN Summit for the Adoption of the Post-2015 Development Agenda (UN, 2015b). Compared to the millennium goals, Agenda 2030 (Table 1.1) was more comprehensive with multiple goals and targets but foremost also including a political dimension in Goal 16 in addition to the more traditional social, economic and environmental dimensions.

With Agenda 2030, the UN declared how billions of citizens around the world continued to face challenges to social, economic and environmental sustainability, but the Agenda also addressed challenges to political sustainability, referring to the promotion and protection of peace, justice and inclusive societies based on strong institutions and the rule of law. The democracy–development nexus had for years been highlighted by UN spokespersons (Annan, 2002; Boutros, 1992, 1995; Guterres, 2023). The political declaration of the Agenda now highlighted the importance of democratic governance to sustainable development (UN General Assembly, 2015). Agenda 2030 was to ‘envisage a world of universal respect for human rights and human dignity, the rule of law, justice, equality’ (UN General Assembly, 2015, p. 3) ... and ‘one in which democracy, good governance and the rule of law, as well as an enabling environment at the national and international levels, are essential for sustainable development’ (UN General Assembly, 2015, p. 4).

Sustainable Democracy and Development

Although democracy was not mentioned in the specific SDGs, the political declaration of Agenda 2030 and the UN Secretary-General spoke out clearly for the importance of democratic governance. The importance and interconnectedness of democracy and development had been debated for decades, both in the academic world as in politics (Costa et al., 2017; Diamond, 2003). First, democracy was often referred to as a type of government based on a minimalist and maximalist conception (Collier & Levitsky, 1997). The minimalist conception focussed on democracy as an electoral system where political elites competed for political power based on popular support. From a development perspective, it was argued that democracy then was a political tool for identifying and representing people’s wants and needs. On the other hand, the maximalist conception focussed on political rights and civil liberties beyond the procedure of free and fair elections (Schmitter & Karl, 1991). From a development perspective, the widened conceptualization of democracy included societal freedoms beyond the political system such as rights and liberties in the social, civil and economic society.

Overall, it has been stated how democracy is an important driver for political stability and efficiency and crucial for development. This is due to the mechanism of elections which provides for regulated political reforms and popular legitimacy. Democratic governance promotes gradual reforms based on people’s consent and with long-term development strategies rather than abrupt and drastic measurements that could jeopardize development. Democracy has also been said to be a driver for accountability and transparency, which is extremely important

Table 1.1. Summary of Agenda 2030.

Goals	Content
1. Ending poverty	Reduction and, in the long term, eradication of poverty
2. Food security	Ending hunger and promoting sustainable agriculture
3. Health and well-being	Health systems, health coverage and countermeasures against diseases
4. Quality education	Inclusive and equitable education as well as life-long learning opportunities
5. Gender equality	Girls' and women's empowerment, plus social and economic participation
6. Clean water and sanitation	Sustainable management of water to provide safe water and sanitation
7. Sustainable energy	Sustainable energy services and sure access to affordable, reliable and modern energy
8. Work and growth	Promoting decent work and full employment through inclusive and sustainable economic growth
9. Industries and innovation	Sustainable industrialization and fostered innovation
10. Reduced inequalities	Structural transformation to address income inequalities
11. Sustainable community	Sustainable urbanization to enhance effective local development
12. Responsible consumption and production	Responsible supply chains and business practices, as well as promotion of green economy
13. Climate action	Combating climate change and its impacts
14. Life below water	Conservation and sustainable use of oceans, seas and marine resources
15. Life on land	Protecting and promoting sustainable terrestrial ecosystems on land and combating unsustainable management of forests, desertification and land degradation
16. Peaceful societies and strong institutions	Promoting inclusive societies based on strong institutions and the rule of law
17. Global partnerships and implementation	Strengthening and monitoring means of implementation of development goals based on global partnerships

Source: UN General Assembly (2015).

to link political power to the people. Accountability, transparency and checks and balances are all essential tools for a viable, legitimate government and lower the risk of corruption and other forms of misuse of power. Democracy is also a driver for people's empowerment in terms of participation in the political-, civil- and economic society. Democracy encourages citizens to engage in politics and society and become drivers for societal reforms and cohesion. Although research shows a complex relationship, democracy tends to develop policies on freedoms of ownership, private investment, entrepreneurship, employability, education and social welfare, and when failing to do so, it is accountable to the people in the next election.

Focussing on development, studies have often highlighted the importance of economic, social and environmental conditions for democracy. Such conditions for overall well-being have been economic growth and employability, health, education, poverty reduction, life quality, sanitation, clean water and air, etc. (Bornemann et al., 2022; Sachs, 2015). Within social sciences, numerous studies have focussed on how limited development provides human insecurity and fragile governments. The idea of human insecurity often refers to weak states (Fukuyama, 2004). Arguments have pointed out how socioeconomic growth and welfare provides democratic stability and pro-democratic orientations. An expanded prosperity for the many, distribution of economic and social rights and opportunities, private ownership and improved education both promote and protect democracy. Strong state institutions and quality institutional performances, on social services and the rule of law, require a solid economic base. Socioeconomic development therefore provides for higher levels of institutional capacity to deliver services to the people. Development is also said to be a driver for democracy by fostering societal unity. Socioeconomic development provides for cohesion and inclusion, access to the welfare services, resources to combat inequalities and injustices, which all favours democratic institutions and political stability.

Therefore, over the last three decades or so, the UN has from time to time argued for the importance of both democracy and development for sustainability. Although the UN consists of numerous authoritarian states, refusing to approve democratic governance in declarations and statements, the political declaration of the Agenda 2030 did mention the importance of democracy. While the concept is not used in Goal 16, the nature of the Goal embeds ideas on democracy. In addition, previous UN Secretary-Generals, in Javier Peres de Cuellar, Boutros Boutros-Ghali, Kofi Annan and Antonio Guterres, have in the global negotiations on MDGs and SDGs firmly argued for the importance of democratic governance to ensure the protection of people's needs and wants. They have explicitly spoken out on a strong democracy–development nexus (Annan, 2002; Boutros, 1992, 1995; Guterres, 2023).

Agenda 2030 and South Africa

In 2015, at the end of the Millennium Project, it was announced that Africa had made great strides towards sustainable democracy and development. In areas such as health and education, progress had been significant compared to other

developing regions. But compared to the northern parts of Africa, less MDGs had been fulfilled, leaving Sub-Saharan Africa behind. In an overall assessment, it was stated that despite progress made, Sub-Saharan Africa had the highest rate of child mortality, 70% continued to suffer from lack of access to improved sanitation facilities and about 41% had less than \$1.25 a day. In addition, it was reported how only 15% of the Sub-Saharan African rural population had access to electricity besides already limited infrastructure investments throughout the continent (UN, 2015a). Also, when already vulnerable African states and regions faced limited gross domestic product (GDP) growth per capita, the level of extreme poverty increased and health progress slowed down. On top of these alarming data, about 120 million people became displaced with a dramatic increasing number of civilian casualties due to conflicts and war (UN, 2015a).

The many challenges to sustainable development in Africa were also a great concern for African state leaders. In 2013, the African Union Summit, declared an Agenda 2063, pointing out 50 years to come of hard work on sustainability. The Agenda 2063 has become Africa's blueprint for developing and transforming Africa into a prosperous future. It consists of a strategic framework to pursue sustainable development, unity, self-determination, freedom and prosperity. The Agenda also includes a strong strive for Pan-Africanism and self-determination to push for economic, social and environmental sustainability, but the Agenda also includes goals such as democratic governance and peace (African Union, 2025).

On 22 October 2024, the UN Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) launched the report on *Towards Africa's Prosperity: Creating Conditions for Socially Inclusive, Environmentally Sustainable and Well-Governed Continent*, as an attempt to support the African continent to continue its path towards sustainable development in accordance with Agenda 2030 and Agenda 2063 (ECA, 2024). The report answered to the call for urgent actions by the UN Secretary-General but also to the negative impacts of Covid-19, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the war in the Middle East and climate crisis had on Africa. Overall, the series of wars and crises had resulted in increased global and African hunger, undeveloped health services, poor educational quality, gender inequality and violent conflicts both within and between states. The report set out Africa as the worst-affected region in the world. The ECA acknowledged, half the way through the Agenda 2030, that Africa faced about 600 million people without access to electricity and how more than 430 million people were living in extreme poverty (see also Pedro, 2023). In addition, the Sustainable Development Report in 2024 also stressed how about 145 million workers (about 50%) were living in extreme poverty in Sub-Saharan Africa; about 26.6% stated experience of bribery over the last year and regarding infrastructure and connectivity, only 37% were online (Kuwonu, 2024a). The report further identified urgent needs of an agricultural revolution, human capital development, improving infrastructure and communication, promoting entrepreneurship and private sector development, improving gender equality, pushing for trade and regional integration and improving environmental sustainability.

The challenges identified were many. It was stated how the wide range of reforms that had to be made required strengthened transparent and inclusive political, judicial and economic institutions; political and judicial institutions

referred to democratic and participatory entities and human rights bodies as well as the rule of law, while economic institutions referred foremost to national planning, resource management and accountability frameworks (ECA, 2024). In September 2024, the Institute for Security Studies (ISS) stated how Africa would not be able to meet the SDGs in 2030. The institute highlighted how, 'Out of the 144 measurable SDG targets, Africa is on track to achieve only 10 by 2030. As many as 106 targets require accelerated action, while 28 are moving in the wrong direction' (ISS, 2024). The institute further argued that Agenda 2063 had a timeline more aligned to the African realities on sustainable development, stating:

The remaining SDG gaps are immense, particularly for low- and middle-income countries, where insufficient financing is exacerbated by debt burdens, reduced fiscal space and limited access to global financial markets. It's also unclear whether the political will exists to push through necessary reforms. (ISS, 2024)

In this alarming African context on SDGs, in the *South African Country Report of 2023*, President Cyril Ramaphosa stated the strong commitment to the SDGs and how such work on *the National Development Plan* (including blueprint for development outcomes and national targets), Agenda 2030 and Agenda 2063 had to be conducted together with partners within the society at large. The president acknowledged a turbulent world with pandemics, wars and conflicts as well as climate change, but identified South African progress on livelihoods of its citizens with increased public spending on basic services and social security, increased access to internet broadband services, a reduction in CO₂ emissions and, in a context of national shortage of electricity supply, firm actions on producing renewable energy. The president also, however, argued that the remaining challenges were many (Ramaphosa, 2024). While there had been progress in the social sector, with an increase in the number of social grant beneficiaries, improved access to basic services, a growing proportion of the total government expenditure on services and a decreased level of maternal, infant and neonatal mortality, social challenges remained regarding poverty, inequalities, an undeveloped quality in early childhood services and the misalignment between higher education and the job market leading to high levels of unemployment. Progress had also been far more limited in the economic sector with declining manufacturing, an unsustainable industrial sector, unequal distribution of financial resources and high youth unemployment. The environmental sector had seen a positive trend of increasing renewable energy, improved accesses to safe drinking water and sanitation facilities in addition to a reduction of CO₂ emissions, but challenges remained here as well with limited access to green spaces, low quality of life for the urban population, climate change consequences in droughts and flooding and an overall lack of integrating infrastructural reforms to the ecosystem and biodiversity values. Finally, the political sector faced polarization and popular dissatisfaction, which was seen in the latest election of 2024, while corruption and state capture continued to be widespread undermining for trust and stability (Silander et al., 2022; South Africa, 2024, p. 3).