



Let's talk to each other: What can Africa teach Germany about the Sustainable Development Goals?

Unless countries like Germany rethink their approach, "Sustainability" and the UN Sustainable Development goals" will remain buzzwords gulping billions of Euros without promised impact, African experts say. Yet, Africa has good insights and responses we can learn from. We present—and discuss them with an African-German community.

Text and photos: Ruona Meyer

Aid for "sustainable development" must be rethought, African experts demand. The UN is urging countries to spend more—with no guarantee of the promised impact. Yet, Africa has tech-based solutions ongoing. Over the year, we'll report on these responses, and facilitate a conversation across two continents.

In April 2017 a glossy, online brochure boasted about how Germany's Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) was helping smallholder farmers across a dozen African countries, through its Green Initiative Centres (GICs). [The publication](#) contained pictures of a man milking cows, a smiling woman driving a tractor, another closely examining a potato. Even the then Minister Gerd Müller made a front-page appearance in a suit, holding hands with farmers. At this time, about EUR 266.5million of taxpayers' money had been budgeted since 2014 for the GICs.

But by early 2018 a different story about the GIC emerged, from Zambia.

In Mfuwe, an area whose vibrant chili trade began by accident

when residents started growing the crop to scare away elephants, farmers complained. The GIC profits were far below a living wage: “we are being cheated, we are being disadvantaged...we have no decision at what price to sell at,” they told the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation.

Researchers there did not think Germany's GIC project would meet its target of fighting hunger. Their reasons? It mainly ignores informal market channels, pushes for commercial agricultural development that favours bulk exports and therefore benefits only a few farmers. Currently, it remains unclear exactly how many of the targeted 70,000 Zambian farmers have achieved increased income under the GIC. What is clear is that funding will continue to flow from German pockets and purses, as this programme continues till 2026 in several countries.

Aishatu Ella-John, Head of Environment and Climate Action at Clean Energy Technology Hub in Nigeria thinks this situation where donor intentions are mismatched with beneficiary needs, is a general problem. She experienced this while



In African countries, young people are increasingly developing digital skills; children as young as five years are enrolled in coding courses. Photo-Credit: Ruona Meyer

implementing a programme for free HIV and Tuberculosis medicines.

“The ideology was that poor people who can't afford drugs would rush to access and accept drugs. However, the first problem people had was that it was free. They kept wondering why anyone would just bring free drugs; what was the hidden motive? Others believed Tuberculosis was a spiritual matter, only cured by traditional and religious healers. We spoke with churches, traditional healers and mosques in communities, educating them on the dangers of housing Tuberculosis patients for healing. We got their buy-in. So, instead of taking patients and claiming to heal them, they were sending patients to us. We started treatment from a community approach, with

volunteers and treatment supporters who visit them at home, go with them to support group meetings and hospital visits every two weeks."

What could really help the people?

Ella-John is one of several aid sector workers, beneficiaries and everyday citizens across Germany and Africa currently sharing their views with us – through an online community we set up with a tool called '100eyes.' We will be talking with this community over six months.

Often, news on the development sector (is reported from the



Stanley Achonu is one member of our online community discussing the projects from African countries that are covered in our article series.

perspective of government action, or inaction. We want to broaden the narrative by creating a community where everyday people from Africa and Germany can share their views about what buzzwords like "sustainable development" mean, or what they think would help communities best – not only in Africa, but also in Germany. What can we learn from each other? Already, they have been very honest with us.

SDGs: More than a buzzword?

To achieve a shared understanding of development and how to give development aid, governments often sign agendas or treaties. These commitments may be between countries or

What are the Sustainable Development Goals?

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are a set of commitments made by all countries, after consultations held worldwide. It is also called the UN SDGs, because the United Nations is coordinating countries' response to achieving the Goals. There are 17 goals, which

aim to reduce poverty and inequality, promote peace, manage natural resources and respond to climate change.

The 17 SDG goals are: No Poverty; Zero Hunger; Good Health and Well-being; Quality Education; Gender Equality; Clean Water and Sanitation; Affordable Clean Energy; Decent Work and Economic Growth; Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure; Reduced Inequalities; Sustainable Cities and Communities; Responsible Consumption and Production; Climate Action; Life Below Water; Life on Land; Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions; and Partnerships for the Goals. There are hundreds of targets and indicators which countries are using to measure if they are achieving the SDGs.

continents, and may be coordinated by a regional organization like the EU or by the United Nations. Currently, the most prominent development commitment is the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These are 17 goals which aim to stop hunger and poverty, promote peace, individual and economic well-being, as well as reduce the impact of climate change. In 2015, all countries worldwide committed to work towards the SDGs, and the deadline for achieving the goals is 2030. Since then, several countries use the SDGs as a guide in their international aid programmes. For example, Germany repeatedly cites the Green Innovation Center as part of its international development assistance to Asia and Africa under the SDGs.

But why does this matter?

Because as of 2015, about \$21 trillion is spent every year on SDG-related sectors. Experts at the US-based Brookings Institution also expect that amount to reach \$33 trillion or more annually, by 2030; they are unequivocal that increased spending cannot guarantee increased SDGs achievement. Yet, UN Secretary-General António Guterres [has said](#): "we need more money to implement the SDGs." But most people in the 100eyes forum either did not think the SDGs are suited to all countries, while some felt awareness amongst everyday people is lacking. Like Joy Eke, an educator living in Reutlingen. She only heard of the SDGs recently, during a course on her apprenticeship training program. Eke wrote in our forum that: "there should be more awareness about the SDGs. It would help if more radio, TV, Apps and word of mouth is used to spread the message."

In Germany, comprehensive SDG-funding numbers are hard to come by (yes, we asked) but the government's Sustainable Development Strategy for 2021 says public-sector institutions gave development support totalling EUR 21.6 billion in 2019. This is about 0.61 % of our country's gross national income

(GNI). Also, between 2017 to 2020, Germany provided over 2.8 billion euros in funding to support African countries on SDGs implementation, as part of the BMZ Marshall Plan for Africa. On SDGs, Germany also assists 28 partner countries across Asia, Africa and Latin America.

The problem is that despite these significant resources spent, [the world is likely to achieve almost none of the goals by 2030](#). All nations have challenges with the data requirements for reporting on the impact and progress of the SDGs. Such that the [World Bank argues](#) enough data may not exist: whether to celebrate any achievements, or to analyze non-achievement of the goals.



Foto: OnJosh Ayodele

Aishatu Muhammad Jibril is one member of our online community.

These challenges are greater in low-income countries in the so-called “global south” and were [predicted since 2017](#) by Tom Moultrie, professor of Demography, and Director of the Centre for Actuarial Research at the University of Cape Town, South Africa.

Almost five years later, Professor Moultrie stands by his words that some countries are being left behind. “If anything, the situation has got worse rather than better,” he said in an email interview.

The main factors behind this are: the development of technological solutions without an understanding of the socio-political context, and “a well-established practice of intellectual and data neo-colonialism,” where “(solutions) are designed and dreamt-up in the well-funded think-tanks of the global North, with a general reticence to draw on knowledge or insight from the South.”

100eyes community member Gerhard Karpiniec is also “not very confident” the SDGs will be met. Karpiniec, who has been involved in the development cooperation sector for over

50 years, says: "in the SDGs events I visited, there are only declarations of intent, unfortunately I found neither individuals nor groups who want to implement this sustainably. More is invested in PR than in productive work."

For James Otto, a coordinator at environmental rights nonprofit Sustainable Development Institute in Liberia, the best way for development aid to achieve faster SDGs impact is for donor organisations to familiarize themselves with the lived experiences of Africans. This will localize their work, in ways that reflect the actual reality of individual countries.

"People in Europe need to work with (African) governments to hold them more accountable, in the implementation of the SDGs. Because things are happening in government... from corruption, weak policies, interest-driven approaches, flawed

processes - all can undermine the implementation of the SDGs. Europeans (also) need to work within themselves to ensure organisations from Europe are more accountable, accepting the way of life of ordinary people in our country. In that way they can learn how to support the implementation of the SDGs."

Our Community approach

To share more insights from people during our research, we discuss the projects we cover and how they improve or not improve the work on the SDGs with an online community. In this community are citizens across Africa and Germany, SDG implementers, founders, beneficiaries and others. Together with them we want to find possible learnings for Germany. You can join the conversation through our online community by emailing info@riffreporter.de

The "Lessons from Africa" Project

How Germany funds and implements the SDGs in-country and in other continents is important for every German taxpayer. Therefore, over the next few weeks we will also be reporting on the ground, about the

Africans using tech-based responses to achieve the SDGs. We aim to bring lessons that can create more awareness for citizens, NGO workers and public officials - and show solutions in Germany can also learn from.

But why Africa? It is a continent with the highest rate of entrepreneurship worldwide, where technology is increasingly being adapted for development. Our series over the course of the year will highlight some teachable examples for our esteemed German audience. For example, you'll read about rural cooperatives that provide Internet in a

continent that pays the highest data costs, see how short codes help people invest in farms owned by women, have a front-row seat on the tractor applications boosting food security, and learn about the various internet learning platforms removing gender imbalances and financial hurdles that prevent access to education.



James Otto is one member of our online community.

Throughout our project, we will stay in touch with our online community with the tool 100eyes, ask them about their impressions on the published articles, and what they think works well or could have been done better. In two additional articles, we will focus on community members' views and share an overview for our audience.

"I believe some people still look down on the African continent as an aid receiver, rather than a solution provider. So, one of the impacts I hope this series will have is contributing to changing such perceptions," community member Chibuike Alagboso says.

Alagabso, who's a Programme Manager at NGO Nigeria Health Watch is convinced that for those open to learning, the "Lessons from Africa" series could show possibilities for Germany: "it has the potential to birth collaborations and partnerships between German and African innovators to scale some of the responses that will be reported on."

You can find more articles about Lessons from Africa, every last friday of the month on riffreporter.de.

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