

Exploring the intersections and interaction of formal institutions and ‘informal’ structures in the sustainability discourse

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Introduction

The discourse on sustainable development and the necessary road maps to achieving realistic sustainable development goals (SDGs) has been a long-standing policy and research issue for decades. The strive towards an understanding of the challenges faced by developing regions while leveraging on the opportunities for growth and stability in an effort to balance economic growth, environmental protection, and social inclusion has been at the forefront of the conversation among various developmental stakeholders (Juju et al., 2020; Halkos and Gkampoura, 2021; Okyere et al., 2021; Lino et al., 2023). For developing countries, the need to shift from over reliance on natural resources, promote long term economic growth, improve the environment, and reduce vulnerabilities while empowering local communities to achieving effective and locally adapted solutions calls for adoption sustainable development approach and practices (Sajjad and Chan, 2019; Halkos and Gkampoura, 2021; Shakoor and Ahmed, 2023). For context, sustainable development is an approach at advancements that strive to meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (Tomislav, 2018; Ruggerio, 2021). It intersects the need to ensure equitable

and inclusive economic growth which caters for social inclusivity while preserving the natural resources and ecosystem in their capacity to support life and development overtime (Gupta and Vegelin, 2016). In this sense, the pursuit of sustainable development ensures proffering solutions to immediate challenges while laying foundations for long-term prosperity and stability. In essence, this implies the provision of a framework that addresses immediate societal needs while ensuring that resources and opportunities are equitably distributed and preserved for future generations.

For communities in the Global South, sustainable development implies addressing interwoven issues such as poverty, housing, inequality, environmental degradation, and economic instability among other human security challenges (Knutsson, 2020; van Niekerk, 2020). As Patrick et al. (2021) and Sheidu and Patrick (2023) argued for instance, over 70% of the African livelihood is dependent on climate sensitive endeavours such as agriculture. By implication, the swings in agricultural productivity (due to climate change or the high reliance on natural resources for economic activities) has direct and indirect impact on the human security (economic, social, health, and community) and vulnerability index of Africans in general.

Outside agriculture and the environment issues, Africa is also bedeviled with the issue of migration, especially intra migration emanating from urban-rural/rural-urban flow and the eminent challenges these poses in terms of individual and household economy as well as infrastructural constraints among others (Potts, 2013; Tacoli, McGranahan and Satterthwaite, 2015; Østby, 2016; Mlambo, 2018; Mubangizi, 2021). These vulnerabilities is also worsen by weak governmental coping strategies (Patrick 2021; 2022) hereby begging the question as to how individuals, households, and communities can reduce their collective vulnerabilities.

Consequently, the need to pursue and embrace sustainable development solutions in order to ensure social equity, resilient economies and a sustainable future for present and future generation becomes an important policy goal. This paper seeks to assess the operations of formal and informal systems in SDGs actualization as well as the viability of integrating both systems in realising SDG goals in the Global South. It also explore the viability of integrating formal and informal systems in realising sustainable development goals from the grassroots level.

Conceptualization of formal and informal systems in SDGs implementation

While there are high level conversations on the practicalities of SDGs (see Hettiarachchi, 2022; Moreno Pires et al., 2022, Berrone et al., 2023), an exploration of the interactions between formal institutions (government bodies, NGOs) and the informal structures and practices (local communities, informal economies)

especially in the Global South in the strive towards sustainability and sustainable community is imperative. For context, the formal systems are structured systems which operate through established institutional frameworks which are often characterized by documented procedures, with regulations and authority (Grzymala-Busse, 2010; McEvily, Soda, and Tortoriello, 2014; Smith-Crowe, 2015). The informal systems on the other hand, are spontaneous practices that are established through informal community culture and practices informed by indigenous knowledge and customs which are influenced by social relationships and networks in resource mobilization and activities coordination (Lauth, 2015; Postuła and Wąsowska, 2020). The informal systems also mobilise community participation by leveraging on exiting social networks and provide innovative solutions tailored to local contexts and needs (Fox-Rogers, 2014; McEvily, Soda, and Tortoriello, 2014; Schorch et al., 2016). It also provides social support and foster community cohesion through mutual aid, shared values, and cultural practices

The harmonizing of formal and informal systems in the Global South could enhance sustainable development initiatives in multiple ways as leveraging on their respective strengths would promote more sustainable outcomes (Helmke, G., & Levitsky, 2012; Caldeira, 2017). In this sense, this will mean leveraging on the flexibility, grassroots mobilization, and local customs prevalent in informal system while taking advantage of the regulatory support, resources and structure available in the formal systems. While this merger in practice would spur development, the regulatory and bureaucratic tendencies of the formal

system such as hierarchy of command and reporting systems, specialization and division of labour, standardized procedure for engagement, etc., may serve as a fundamental barrier to integration as it would not align with the spontaneous and adaptable nature of informal practices (Lauth, 2015). The tendencies of resource posing as a constraint to integration is also highly likely as the resource limitation of the informal systems may be difficult for the formal system to accommodate due to its own budget limitations. This is also factoring the gap in information and data between formal and informal systems due to the limitation (or the lack of) data within the informal sector which may impair on planning and coordination.

Despite the many woes of integrating the formal and informal systems, the overall gains of such integration are enormous. The merger of the formal and informal systems could enhance service delivery as well as accessibility especially in underserved areas. This boost efficiency, equity, and resilience while fostering economic growth and social cohesion. Leveraging on the strengths of both systems (in terms of flexibility and innovation) would lead to creative solutions, cost effective services, improved community engagements, resiliency, and build capacity for sustainable practices among stakeholders (Šūmane, et al., 20108; Youssef, Boubaker, and Omri, 2018; da Silva, Weins, and Potinkara, 2019). In this regard, a balance of both systems for

effective and sustainable outcomes is crucial in the Global South. Therefore, fostering collaboration and flexibility of both systems is critical in promoting sustainable development. However, what remains a challenge is the extent or the degree at which such integration would happen. This is also coupled with the behavioural and institutional bottle necks that may arise in course of such integration.

Selected Examples in Context

In June of 2024, I was with a group of students from McMaster University, Canada on an exchange program sponsored by the McMaster African and Caribbean Leadership Exchange (MACLeads)³ project, to the University of Development Studies, Ghana in an effort to learn about the shea butter value chain. In the course of the visit, we had interactions with the women from Northern Ghana (Tamale, Bolgatanga to Bawku) and I fell in love with a particular liberation song sung by the women in the shea factories we visited. The song spoke of the pride and dignity that the women found in their labour over what they referred to in colloquia term as “kaayaaye.” In context, the “kaayaaye” was the kind of informal job available to a significant number of young ladies from the rural communities in the Northern Ghana when they migrate to the urban areas (Azungah, 2016; Lattof, 2017; Opuni, 2023). Due to the lack of formal training or education, most young girls end up as indenture labourers, domestic helps

³ The MACLeads projects provide diverse undergraduate students with experiential learning opportunities through work/study placements in the Global South. The goal is to provide high impact leadership training that opens minds, doors and opportunities for young, emerging and under-represented Canadian leaders to tackle global

challenges, especially in the Global South (Africa and the Caribbean). The project is coordinated by Alexandria Montague and co-led by Drs Mudavanhu, Selina, Abebe, Alpha, Ibhawoh, Bonny, and Daniel, Juliet, Kapiriri, Lydia, Deen, Jamal, Ogunkoya, Iyobosa (see [MACLeads Team](#)).

or carriers of goods for cash (porters or bearers) in urban centers as the chance of gaining economic independent or any form of labour dignity is significantly limited or non-extant (Otieku, Ackah, and Forkuor, 2017; Yeboah, 2021). While the conditions of the women in the shea value change is not significantly better in the rural communities, they pride themselves in the dignity of their current labour drawing from the fact that the conditions of those who migrate to urban centers for the 'kaayaaye' trade are way worse (Awo and Agyie-Sasu, 2016; Opoku-Mensah, 2023; Okyere et al., 2023). Drawing from this deposition and position by these women, it begs the question as to how to improve the general welfare and wellbeing of the women in the informal systems while drawing on the gains in the formal systems.

While the above scenario is a common reality in the Global South, the situation of informal housing in urban areas is another common reality that poses a challenge for sustainable development. In South Africa, for instance, the challenges of informal settlements commonly referred to as 'shacks' is a human security, research and policy concern (See Turok and Borel-Saladin, 2016; Khan, 2019; and Storey, 2021). Issues around how to ensure equity and social inclusion in service delivery vis a vis the presence and increase in shack settlements in urban areas has been discussed extensively in the literature (Patel, 2016; Turok and Borel-Saladin, 2016; Masiya, Davids, and Mangai, 2019; Khan, 2019; Storey, 2021; Ellison et al., 2022). These issues include,

- a. infrastructural constraints emanating from the struggle to provide basic services (water, electricity, sanitation, roads, etc.) to informal settlement;

- b. the slow and cumbersome processes experienced in upgrading essential services within the informal settlements due to the bureaucratic tendencies of the formal systems;
- c. resource allocation issues due to limited budget and competing priorities; and
- d. lack (or inadequate) data from the informal systems for formal urban planning and development process among others.

From the above two cases described in context, a lingering characteristic is the interplay between the formal and informal systems in the actualization of development trajectory for individuals, households, and communities. In this sense, the degree of presence of either system and the impact it has on sustainable development are important indicators for growth in terms of planning and implementations. An understanding of the peculiarities of both formal and informal systems is therefore pivotal for sustainable development. This understanding is very critical for development in Africa as the interplay of both systems is a common occurring in African settings.

Concluding Remarks

This paper is an attempt at espousing the operationalization of formal and informal systems within sustainable development discourse. It also explores the viability of integrating formal and informal systems in realising sustainable development goals from the grassroots. The paper concludes that it is pertinent to note that the integration of the formal with the informal in systems and practices requires an acknowledgement of the strengths and limitations of both systems. This also

requires negotiating and collaborating on all fronts to ensure that all parties benefit, and that service quality is maintained. It further requires an openness to change by both systems in response to the evolving needs and circumstances prevalent in the society. This is also factoring the continuous culture of monitoring and evaluation to assess the impact of such integration, and the necessary adjustments required per time. Therefore, to facilitate this gap bridging, a conscious attempt must be made at ensuring participatory planning where decisions are made with the community members to ensure solutions are tailored to community peculiarities and needs. This would spur effective partnerships and ensure pro-people policy reforms.

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