
Sustainability: a discourse for local economic growth post-Covid-19 in South Africa

Robert Walter Dumisani Zondo,

Associate Professor, Durban University of Technology (DUT), Faculty of Management Sciences,
Department of Entrepreneurial Studies and Management, Durban,
Email: dumsaniz@dut.ac.za
<http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0214-860X>

Abstract:

South Africa had a number of sustainable policy reforms pre-Covid-19, including the protection of rural producers, consumers and the markets. However, the spread of Covid-19 / novel coronavirus at the beginning of 2020 was fast and dramatic. With an increase in death toll in various countries around the world resulting from different Covid-19 variants, its effect had tremendous impact on the general economy and local communities, most particularly in rural areas. The economic effects were also exacerbated by emergency strategies like lockdowns by various countries around the world.

Strategies to turn the situation around in poverty-stricken local communities, but mostly the rural settings, post-Covid19, must be established. This is due to the fact that the rural institutions in South Africa are viewed as having a potential role to play in rural poverty alleviation and sustainable development. The enforcement of local institutions and capacity building as fundamental elements of strategies for rural poverty alleviation becomes necessary. Local economic growth, as a poverty alleviation strategy, is a people-centred process and circumstance specific. Common parameters for such growth include improved health facilities, infrastructure services, sanitation facilities and educational services. Other than the above parameters for local and sustainable development, local communities have vast indigenous knowledge that can be used to facilitate sustainable development. This knowledge is not fully utilised due to a lack of complementary institutions and facilities that enable people to improve productivity and sustainability. It is essential for development practitioners and policy makers to facilitate the dissemination of this local knowledge to enable sharing amongst community members, rather than spend scarce resources in bringing in more new knowledge and information that will not benefit the local community for sustainable development.

This study assesses the influence of sustainable development on local economic growth in South Africa. It establishes the suitability of sustainable development as a strategy for local economic growth, post- Covid-19, for South Africa.

Keywords: environmental management, local economic development, post- Covid-19, rural development, South Africa, sustainable development

INTRODUCTION

Sustainable development and sustainability have various interpretations that can move towards weak or strong outcomes (Amba, 2010). Generally, sustainable development is a desirable yet debatable concept with attainable objectives (Subban, 2009). On a smaller scale, where it can be seen as synonymous with concepts such as urban autonomy, self-reliance or self-sufficiency, it is, however, less applicable (Brennan & Withgott, 2005). In the 1990s the slogan 'Act Locally, Think Globally' occupied the global agenda regarding the environment, giving impetus to the implementation of sustainable development (Amba, 2010). Choudhury and Harahap (2015) aver that sustainable development is accepted as a policy framework in planning and development, both internationally and locally. The term

is defined as a process whereby environmental opportunities are maximised for current generations without compromising or limiting opportunities for future generations (Mishra, 2014). It must be noted that, historically, the development and the conservation and management of natural resources were considered as mutually exclusive and conflicting needs within a society. The concept of sustainable development has thus reversed that trend by indicating that it is both possible and desirable to attain a balance where development and the management of natural resources coexist. Hence, this paper discusses the environmental management for ecological modernisation on one hand, as well as the governance for sustainable development, post-Covid-19, including local economic development, on the other.

Over the years, the term sustainable development has been used as a catch-all and fix-all concept with little real examination of whether it is a process or a state that is either real or achievable (Manley, 2007). Few people talk about environmental management or conservation without implying that the ultimate goal is sustainable development. Fadara (2010) states that few have demonstrated the examples that real sustainable development exists and those that do are small representative projects within limited geographical areas. Part of the problem is that the term 'sustainable development' implies an end point or something that can be achieved (Subban, 2009). However, this end point as a 'package' does not exist. As a result, sustainable development can be defined as a normative concept that looks at how the world *should be*, not how the world is. Consequently, sustainability is a journey or pathway that needs to be taken so as to meet the goals and principles of sustainable development (Amba, 2010).

In the Brundtland Report, the World Commission on Environment and Development (1987) defined sustainable development as a condition that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Emerging international agendas around sustainability define it as a holistic approach aimed at the economic, social and biophysical environment rather than limited to a green agenda (Amba, 2010). Following on from the 2000 Millennium Summit of the United Nations, the millennium development goals were set up to focus on sustainable development through the eradication of poverty, with emphasis on the importance of halving the number of people who live on US\$1 a day or less (United Nations, 2004). The implementation of sustainable development requires a concerted effort at reducing poverty, as well as the finding of solutions for hunger, malnutrition and disease. The urgency and speed for change will be critical in the post-Covid-19 era. At the start of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, South Africa experienced recession and was downgraded to junk status by the rating agencies (that is, Fitch and Moody) after revising the outlook on the country's investment-grade credit rating to negative due to the slowdown in economic growth and rising debt burden.

On a broader level, a preliminary report from the United Nations' Sustainable Development Agenda for 2030 suggests that COVID-19 pandemic may add between 83 and 132 million to the total number of undernourished people in the world (The Times of India, 2020). There are already 282 million people in Africa facing malnutrition and the trend is growing faster than any other region in the world (Rédaction Africanews & AP, 2020). This is partly caused by the lack of investment in the agricultural sector (World Food Programme, 2018). Hence,

the need to revisit sustainable development goals and strategies, post-Covid-19, for local development in South Africa.

PROBLEM STATEMENT: the lack of integrating sustainability in the Integrated Development Plans (IDPs) for local economic growth in South Africa

South Africa has, over the years, experienced a number of socio-economic problems that have deprived the country of growth and sustainable development (Littlewood & Holt, 2018). However, the government has developed several measures and policies to reduce the level of poverty, unemployment and other socio-economic problems among the people, such as the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP); the Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) programme, and the National Development Plan (NDP) (DTI, 2018; Lewis, 2001). Years after the post-apartheid era, these measures and policies have not achieved their desired goal of enhancing the quality of livelihood of South Africans (Littlewood & Holt, 2018). The socio-economic decline was severe during Covid-19. According to Department of Trade and Industry (DTI, 2018), the poorest 20 per cent of the South African population consumes less than 3 per cent of total expenditure, while the wealthiest 20 per cent consumes 65 percent. It further states that unemployment averaged 25.41 per cent from 2000 to 2017. The national poverty levels remain relatively high, with about 31 per cent of the South African population living below the poverty line (Littlewood & Holt, 2018).

In spite of the above situation, it has been noted that the levels of strategic planning and strategic environmental management in South Africa have been conducted as separate processes (Subban, 2009). This practice is relevant to both the national and provincial levels. This situation influences the level of compliance on sustainability in the country. Hence, the environmental reports assess sustainability at the national and provincial levels only. The main tools for planning at these levels are the National Spatial Development Perspective (NSDP), as well as the Growth and Development Strategy (GDS). These documents show the need for sustainability mainly in terms of pro-socio-economic, infrastructure and governance developmental issues (Blowers, 2012). Within the South African context, the Integrated Development Plans (IDPs) provide an opportunity for the integration of sustainability into this strategic document and is mandatory in many municipalities. Coetzee (2013) states that the IDPs provide an avenue for strong sustainability to emerge. Despite this, Donk, Swilling, Pieterse and Parnell (2008) argue that the integration of sustainability into IDPs is lacking. The problem lies in the focus on the process issues of the IDPs rather than the content. The IDP content is dominated by social and economic concerns (Subban, 2009). It is anticipated that the problem, if not resolved, will exacerbate the post-Covid-19 era.

Hence, this paper assesses the appropriateness of sustainable development as a discourse for local-based economic growth, post-Covid-19, in South Africa. It elaborates on environmental management as a method of achieving sustainable development, the institutional systems, as well as governance for sustainable development. Local economic

development as a determinant for strong sustainability, the discussion, as well as conclusions and recommendations conclude this paper.

ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

This section discusses the importance of maintaining the ecological system in which sustainable development attempts to achieve a balance where development and the management of natural resources coexist (Mishra, 2014). It addresses social justice and the decision-making that involves people. The mechanisms for environmental management to achieve sustainable goals and ecological modernisation conclude the section.

It has been established that in order to implement a sustainability agenda, the importance of maintaining ecological systems (while developing and enhancing social capital, involving people in decision-making and addressing issues of social justice) needs to be recognised, as does ensuring that decisions taken are both economically viable and sustainable (Choudhury & Harahap, 2015). The implementation of the principles of sustainability via a wide range of mechanisms has, however, proved difficult to attain. Although mechanisms for environmental management have been developed to meet the goals of the sustainability agenda, the success of these mechanisms has thus far proved to be limited. Whilst many initiatives, worldwide, have made attempts to reduce environmental degradation, the beginning of this century still reflects serious environmental degradation, increased poverty levels, a widening gap between the rich and the poor, as well as a fight to restore the earth's ecological balance. This shows that the 'war' is being lost (Staley, 2006) and the situation will exacerbate if nothing is done post-Covid-19. Perhaps part of the problem lies in the manner in which environmental problems have been socially constructed. Within the techno-centric approach to environmental management, environmental issues are defined as problems of inefficiency, marginalising the importance of social issues and the broader social, economic and political context of these problems. The use of technical solutions to deal with complex problems that defy rational and objective approaches have thus been implemented. Within the South African context, it is evident that although mainstream environmental management approaches still dominate environmental policy, there is a move towards alternate approaches that challenge the dominant technical and scientific discourse of ecological modernisation (Amba, 2010). Hence, sustainability is a pathway that needs to be embarked upon in order to fulfil the goals, objectives and principles of sustainable development (Choudhury & Harahap, 2015). It is a process of assisting in the integration of the ecological, social and economic realms. Manley (2007) states that it can also be seen as a scientific principle, as well as a political goal, a social practice and a moral guideline. National governments around the world have institutionalised discussion of mainstream environmental management through state policy and legislation that seek to manage the impacts brought about by development. Subban (2009) explains that environmental conditions in South Africa relate to three key dimensions of poverty. These include:

- **Livelihoods:** Poor people tend to be most directly dependent on natural resources, and are therefore the first to suffer when these resources are degraded

- **Health:** Poor people suffer most when water and air are polluted because pollution sources are often placed in or near poor communities
- **Vulnerability:** Poor people are most often exposed to environmental hazards and environment-related conflict, and are least capable of coping when they occur.

Wealthier people are able to afford medical care for pollution-related sicknesses, like asthma, and are able to move out of congested and polluted areas, whereas poorer people cannot do so. Hence, the next section discusses institutional choices for communities to achieve sustainable outcomes. It elaborates on government actions for social welfare, as well as the nature of decision-making in local communities in South Africa.

INSTITUTIONAL SYSTEMS FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Selecting the correct institutional mechanism for making collective choices regarding the relationship between politics, the environment and the economy is still being developed, despite the fact that sustainability has been around since the 1970s (Mishra, 2014). Tietenberg, (2005) confirms that while sustainable development has adopted more specific definitions in recent years, economists have been concerned about sustainable economic growth in an environmental context for decades. The United Nations (2001) advanced an important step in this discussion when it formulated a widely cited definition of sustainable development as that of meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations in meeting their own needs. Many analysts believe that sustainable development emerged as a core organising principle of urban planning on a global scale (Amba, 2010; Fadara, 2010; Katsamunska, 2016). The institutional choice, however, has important implications for understanding the likelihood of communities achieving sustainable outcomes (Staley, 2006). Webster and Lai (2012), for example, have emphasised that collective decision-making through actions of government can enhance social welfare as long as it also reduces the transaction costs associated with investment and urban redevelopment, whereas Choudhury and Harahap (2015) hold that to a large degree it is competitive advantage that determines what products and services are provided by the private or public sectors. Webster and Lai (2012) hypothesise that the mix of private and public decision-making tends to evolve as communities experiment and priorities change. Owing to the evolutionary nature of decision-making, opportunities for public intervention using a variety of institutional mechanisms from top-down, centrally-directed planning to more contractual and market-based transactions are provided (Webster & Lai, 2012; Yu, Shaw, Fu & Lai, 2014). However, these authors emphasise the possible inefficiency of these choices that could result in lower social welfare should transaction costs increase unnecessarily.

Although sustainable development concepts appear to be negative, they do attempt to prevent the use of resources in ways that compromise the ability of future generations to use them (Yu *et al.*, 2014). Their application tends to be prescriptive by mandating the adoption of specific technologies in order to achieve specific environmental goals, although political choices on environmental policy tend to be specific and discreet rather than dynamic and open-ended.

GOVERNANCE FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

This section elaborates on the delegation and devolution of power to local communities for sustainable development. According to Manley (2007), power relations within which governments and institutions operate cause them to undertake courses inconsistent with development (Manley, 2007). A decentralised governance structure tends to reduce the need for co-ordination, while a centralised structure transfers to lower levels of government those functions that it cannot manage effectively. Large, centralised and hierarchical organisations such as governments tend to simplify, centralise and standardise (Fadara, 2010), which are appropriate methods of organising some kinds of activities. According to Henfridsson and Bygstad (2013), decentralisation for sustainable development has three forms:

- **Deconcentration:** transferring resources and decision-making from headquarters to other branches of central government;
- **Devolution:** devolution of resources and power to autonomous units of government such as municipalities and local governments; and
- **Delegation:** delegation of resources and power to organisations outside the regular bureaucratic structures, such as public corporations, development agencies or NGOs.

Devolution and delegation, properly executed, can enhance the effectiveness of development programmes (Yu *et al.*, 2014). In developing countries, decentralisation has mainly taken the form of deconcentration, as in India where one major act of devolution was the transfer of resources and power to village governments. This has not necessarily resulted in an improvement in the efficiency of the administration of rural development (Subban, 2009). In fact, such decentralisation benefits have mainly been enjoyed by the dominant political party's dominant power groups. Local governments also suffer from a shortage of technical and administrative skills, and Subban (2009) states that a genuine decentralisation of resources and power cannot take place in India unless the entire structure of development planning is changed. In a decentralised power structure, plans are formulated by rural people at the grass-root level and not imposed from above.

The empowerment of people can be facilitated by the decentralisation of power. Hence, local communities should be empowered, an action likely to result in more sustainable development in the post-Covid-19 era as local communities are said to be more knowledgeable about the results of local environmental changes (Henfridson & Bygstad, 2013). Features of normal bureaucracy, including centralisation of authority (especially the financial control and standardisation of rules, recommendations and actions), may not facilitate the empowerment of people, resulting in the necessity of the participation of beneficiaries in the formulation, implementation and maintenance of improvement programmes. According to Bond (2012), the justification for the participation of the local community is based on the argument that local people organise optimally around the problems they consider to be most important. This includes assessing needs and finding appropriate solutions, making rational economic decisions in the context of their own environment, ensuring voluntary commitment of resources, as well as exercising local control over the quality and distribution of benefits. It must be noted that the centralisation

of power has, in some cases, resulted in destruction of the environment and the loss of forests, as was reported for Nepal (Mishra, 2014). On the other hand, it is decentralisation that has hastened deforestation and biodiversity loss in Indian states like Mizoram (Amba, 2010). It would seem thus that there are advantages and disadvantages to both the centralised and decentralised governance structures for sustainability. Hence, this paper assesses the influence of sustainable development on local-based economic growth in South Africa.

Mishra (2014) points out that planners and local policymakers have a role to play in achieving sustainable development in cities and regions, although Donk *et al.* (2008) feel that their resources may be more effectively focused on enabling sustainable development practices to emerge spontaneously through market mechanism rather than by prescribing specific outcomes. In general, markets move more swiftly and dynamically in responding to changing consumer needs and preferences than do governments, while legislative processes are particularly unstable when they provide for significant citizen participation. Planning processes run the risk of adopting an incorrect technology and are subject to less economic accountability. Thus, Subban (2009) claims that local community leaders and policymakers who want to encourage sustainable development policies should consider the following strategies and approaches:

- focus on measuring sustainable development outcomes and make these measures transparent;
- hold local government sustainable development programmes to the same standards as those in the private sector;
- avoid mandating specific technologies or approaches in achieving environmental goals;
- benchmark progress based on peer communities and the region;
- incorporate consumer trends and preferences into sustainable development practices and strategies;
- focus on applying sustainable development principles to local government operations rather than imposing new technologies and costs on the private sector; and
- build sustainable development goals and objectives into competitive contracting programmes.

Having discussed governance for sustainable development, the next section elaborates on local economic development for strong sustainability. It reviews the South African national and provincial levels in sustainable development. This includes the tools used in the process and the assessments for sustainable development.

LOCAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AS A DETERMINANT FOR STRONG SUSTAINABILITY

Whatever form of economic change is proposed, the importance of the local context is emphasised as being the key focus of efforts leading to stronger sustainability (Blowers, 2012). It has been noted that local problems are frequently caused by geographically distant consumers and producers (Blowers, 2012). To counteract the effects of globalisation and

the international economy, a strong sustainability discourse argues for decentralisation and the reassertion of localism, to create a 'protective space' for local communities and regions (Choudhury & Harahap, 2015). Linked to this would be a decreasing dependency on external markets, thus increasing self-reliance, autonomy and self-determination. This involves a focus on meeting the basic needs through self-sufficiency (Choudhury & Harahap, 2015). Central to strong sustainability is the need to address issues of social inequality, which are intricately linked to issues of power, through environmental and social justice (Staley, 2006). The poor are the most vulnerable to environmental impacts and change and are exposed to environmental hazards. According to Fadara (2010), the notion of strong sustainability is the need to promote the participation and empowerment of affected individuals in any development context. Strong sustainability argues for the redistribution of power, allowing for local communities to take control of, or at least contribute to, decision-making that affects their livelihoods and living environment. This requires a commitment to "a participatory framework of decision-making which provides people with effective power" (Blowers, 2012: 167). While participatory democracy is not without difficulties, including lengthy and contradictory decision-making and participation fatigue, sustainable change requires that people are given greater freedom and responsibility in decision-making (Amba, 2010). Essential to participatory democracy is ensuring that the concerns of local communities are not excluded, by the expedient of using non-scientific or non-technical language in policymaking processes. Expert discourses have often been deployed by those in positions of political or economic power to attempt to diminish the importance of local viewpoints or concerns (Curtis, 2006). Scientific or other formal institutionalised arguments should be balanced by local discourses, arguments and traditional forms of knowledge. It must be noted that local communities have vast indigenous knowledge that can be used to facilitate sustainable development (Morolo, 2014). Unfortunately, this knowledge is not fully utilised due to lack of complementary institutions and facilities that enable people to utilise them for sustainable development.

DISCUSSION

The Covid-19 pandemic has disrupted the world's social and economic order (Horowitz, 2020). It gravely affected the sustainability and growth of not only the healthcare services supply industry but also other industrial sectors (Ozili, 2020). It inadvertently led to serious economic disruptions, job loss and the smooth functioning of the South African economy (Georgieva, 2020). Covid-19 has spread globally killing hundreds of thousands of people (Ozili, 2020). The emergence of Covid-19 has undoubtedly influenced strategy formulation as businesses had to become adaptive to the new macro-environment ushered in by this disease (Horowitz, 2020). It is against this background that this study assesses the suitability of sustainable development as a discourse for local economic development, post- Covid-19, in South Africa.

It has been determined that a strong sustainability discourse gives voice to a range of concerns or issues most strongly expressed at a local level by (or for) those who have experienced the inequalities of the current development paradigm (Coetzee, 2013). The discourse brings together diverse interest groups from urban communities in dealing with

environmental justice issues seeking alternative sustainable lifestyles, to rural communities who depend on natural resources for their livelihoods (Subban, 2009). How then can the strong sustainability discourse make an impact on the status quo in environmental politics? Will South Africa reverse losses they have experienced pre- and during the Covid-19 period? During the Covid-19 period, the community had to stay at home and this strongly affected the local economy. The Covid-19 pandemic is likely to be a threat stressor, reinforcing existing as well as generating new forms of tension and conflicts in South Africa. The African Centre for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes (ACCORD) (2020) indicates that the Covid-19 pandemic contributes to the additional stress of a pre-existing mix of economic, social and political tensions; which among a variety of other influences, are also aggravated by climate-related security and development risks.

Thus, South Africans require sustainable development in their local communities in order to realise local economic development. Fadara (2010) argues that, for meaningful change to happen, it requires transcending the diverse interests through the establishment of stronger alliances between communities, labour and environmental activists, both at a local and global level. The prominent aspect in driving such a discourse is self-reliance in local communities. It must be noted that self-reliance (or self-sufficiency) are part of sustainable development processes (Brennan & Withgott, 2005). While this study focuses on local economic growth, self-reliance is possible through the participatory approach of local communities. Appropriately facilitated in communities, this will sustain their development in the post-Covid-19 era. Dawkins (2006) indicates that sustainability is represented by reproduction of resources in agricultural lands, given their due linkages with agro-based industries and service outlets.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The inability of government to address the increasing levels of various social and economic problems in South Africa has amplified the need to develop new approaches that could ensure adequate service delivery and create systems that are more sustainable for local communities. The complete dependence on government in providing most of the services to the people has been identified by some researchers as one of the problems hindering growth in local communities (Steinerowski & Steinerowska-Streb, 2012; Olutuyi, 2016; Moses & Olokundun, 2014). Hence, it is suggested that more people should participate in the development and delivery of services to enable the sustainability of their communities (Olutuyi, 2016; Moses & Olokundun 2014; Littlewood & Holt, 2018).

According to Makura (2013), local communities are making efforts to implement sustainable development initiatives. However, there is lack of capacity, specific development strategies, expertise, infrastructure and finance. These deficiencies disadvantage self-reliant initiatives as the development interventions and investments are directed to better-off urban communities. It is pertinent for government and public funding development agencies in South Africa to pay special attention to local communities. For self-reliance to be realised, Fadara (2010) indicates that:

- there should be a continuous interaction with and amongst the local communities in order to develop appropriate responses to their livelihood strategies, needs and development challenges; and
- a Rural Support Fund must be established to support key needs such as the erection of earth dams, structures for community development and capacity building.

In addition, for sustainable development to be a success, the indigenous knowledge system in local communities must be recognised. Such knowledge can be viewed from cultural, social and economic perspectives (Morolo, 2014). This indigenous knowledge must be systematically managed when the achievements of sustainable development goals in local communities are expected.

It has also been realised that the municipal IDPs tend to overlook activities pertinent to accelerating rural development. Thus a special framework and processes are required to accommodate rural economic activities, as well as the rural institutions that support self-reliance. On issues relating to business activities in rural areas for sustainable development, there are impediments that block potential entrepreneurs from starting (Makura, 2013). These include the lack of land, water and mechanisation equipment, while other entrepreneurs cannot be fully operational due to lack of appropriate branding and marketing as well as poor infrastructure. For sustainable development to be realised, the economic empowerment programmes should be tailored for such rural entrepreneurs.

In addition, sustainable development in South Africa can also be improved by a strong relationship between local government and the players in the private sector. It should incorporate revitalisation programmes in local villages. Local community growth in villages cannot be achieved through the efforts of local governments alone. Collaboration and cooperation among the various other players, including local shopping establishments, landowners and various private organisations involved in the village development, must be encouraged.

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