European Journal of Sustainable Development Research
2024, 8(3), em0263
e-ISSN: 2542-4742
https://www.ejosdr.com/

MODESTUM

Research Article

OPEN ACCESS

Prioritizing sustainable development goals in Africa: Perspectives from academia in Ghana and Uganda

Paddy Mugambe [1]*, Florence Abugtane Avogo [2]

[1] Uganda Management Institute, Kampala, UGANDA
[2] Technische Universitat, Berlin, GERMANY
***Corresponding Author:** paddymugambe@yahoo.com

Citation: Mugambe, P., & Avogo, F. A. (2024). Prioritizing sustainable development goals in Africa: Perspectives from academia in Ghana and Uganda. *European Journal of Sustainable Development Research, 8*(3), em0263. https://doi.org/10.29333/ejosdr/14783

ARTICLE INFO

Received: 28 Mar. 2024

Accepted: 15 Jun. 2024

ABSTRACT

United Nations (UN) sustainable development goals (SDGs) are interlinked targets for global development adopted in 2015 to be achieved by 2030. While UN prioritizes progress for those countries further behind, individual countries set their own priorities within SDGs based on their circumstances. The prioritization is a recognition that certain goals may hold greater significance than others. The paper examines how academic staff in selected African higher education institutions prioritize these goals using Q-sort technique in Ghana and Uganda, supplemented by a survey for the logical reasoning behind the ranking. The paper highlights that each country has distinct preferences for SDG actions influenced by their unique circumstances. Additionally, it suggests that countries' periodic SDG performance may not solely result from national efforts but also from factors like natural events and luck.

Keywords: SDGs, country SDG ranking, perception, Africa, Ghana, Uganda

INTRODUCTION

In the preamble to United Nations (UN, 2015), the 2030 agenda for sustainable development presents the sustainable development goals (SDGs) as a plan of action for the people, the planet, and prosperity. The agenda itself calls upon all countries and stakeholders to work in a collaborative partnership to implement action. SDGs were adopted by UN sustainable summit in September 2015 (Andreoni & Miola, 2016), as a replacement for the millennium development goals (MDGs) that were at the center of the global campaign to end poverty in its various manifestations. Unlike MDGs whose focus was on developing countries, SDGs are universal and apply to all UN member states. The widening of the Global development agenda is incorporated in the aspect of sustainability so that concerted effort is recognized towards the consideration of future generations in the pursuit of current development aspirations. SDGs, therefore, take into consideration the dimensions of sustainable development (Purvis et al., 2018) including; economic development, social inclusion, and environmental management (Fukuda-Parr, 2019). The global agenda generally originated from the trend of development among the different countries that constitute UN member states. It is a general concern that the economic decisions of different actors inadvertently create uncertainty about the future well-being of people and nature. These uncertainties are in the form of the planet as well as governance of the world population reflected in the behaviors and actions of the different actors/institutions. These concerns are popular among both the developed and developing countries with each having a considerable level of interest based on the peculiar attributes or problems affecting the individual countries. This divide in terms of concern may be a precursor to customization of interests even within the pillars of sustainable development with different levels of interest among different countries. It is generally plausible that well-developed countries may have less interest in economic development as a pillar of sustainable development but possibly pick interest in social inclusion and environmental management while the least developed countries may find themselves paying more attention to economic development and social inclusion with lesser concerns on the environmental management (Fukuda-Parr & Muchhala, 2020; Running, 2012).

In this paper, SDGs are considered as a global agenda agreed upon by UN member states from the global consideration of the aspirations of all member states in a collaborative manner. The collaborative efforts in the generation and adoption of SDGs would therefore be expected to lead to similar or closely related efforts in achieving these SDGs. However, progress reports indicate different levels of success in meeting these SDGs by different countries (Sachs et al., 2022). This brings up the question of whether there is

Copyright © 2024 by Author/s and Licensed by Modestum DOO, Serbia. This is an open access article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution License which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

preference given to SDGs across different countries. In line with the preference theory of Betsch (2005), which states that the center of our decisions is on our prior knowledge and our routines, it is tempting to believe that at the implementation level in pursuit of SDGs, different countries look at the targets differently. This would most likely imply that countries that are of comparable economic, social, and environmental concerns would also have comparable focus and attention to SDGs. It is for this reason that this study uses the perception of relatively informed academicians from Ghana and Uganda to analyze their ranking of SDGs within their individual country perspectives. The paper seeks to answer the question of whether the reported progress on the achievement of SDGs in the two countries reflects the perceived level of importance by academia for the individual SDGs. The paper also assesses the level of similarity in the progress and ranking of SDGs among the two countries. This paper reveals the previously underappreciated insight that different countries have unique interests and priorities in pursuing common global goals. It underscores the importance of recognizing and accommodating these national differences when setting international agenda targets. By doing so, policymakers can create more effective and inclusive global strategies that respect and address the specific needs and objectives of individual countries, rather than imposing uniform targets on all nations. The paper was based on two objectives; to analyze the academia's prioritization of SDGs in Ghana and Uganda; and to compare country specific SDG performance rankings with the academia's prioritization of SDGs in Ghana and Uganda. It is hoped that the results of the study will help shape policy decisions regarding the action required to enhance the realization of SDGs for the two countries involved and also replicate the same to other countries globally.

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

Available literature on SDGs is predominantly driven by reports from global bodies responsible for overseeing the implementation of these goals. However, there is a growing interest from the academic community, leading to an increase in scholarly articles on the subject. This trend is expected to continue as we approach the end of the agenda period, reflecting heightened scrutiny and analysis of SDGs. Consequently, there are relatively few specific references focusing on the African context, as much of the existing literature has a broader, global scope. This underscores the need for more localized studies to address the unique challenges and opportunities within Africa. Indeed, it is important to note that given that Africa faces significant development obstacles (Danlardi et al., 2023), this attention to its progress on SDGs is of particular importance.

According to UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2021), the global population is projected to rise to 8.5 billion in 2030, the target date for achievement of SDGs. The rapid population growth presents a challenge to the entire global population due to the expected consumption of the resources that are meant to cater for both the interests of the current population and the future population. It is from this angle that aspect of SDGs emanates.

It may be difficult to lay claim to the actual origin of the concept of sustainable development, but available literature indicates that simulation results in the book *the limits of growth* by Meadows et al. (1972) brought about focused attention on the idea of depletion of non-renewable resources whose intention not to reach is the basis of sustainable development. The simulation results from the authors may however be directly linked to an earlier scholar, Malthus (1798) who in predicted that the population at one moment would get constrained by the availability of food as a resource leading to starvation unless the growth in population was matched to keep pace with the food production level. Later, in the available literature (Dernbach, 2003; Guillen-Royo, 2019; Stoddart, 2011), the most famous reference to the use of the concept of sustainable development is traced to Brundtland 1987 commission (UN General Assembly, 1987), which brought it into the sphere of economic development. Brundtland 1987 commission through the report *our common future* came up with the most famous definition of sustainable development as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs" (UN General Assembly, 1987, p. 43). Even though this definition may have its weaknesses in terms of clarity, it clearly brings out the need for economic advancement and governance to consider the need for the protection of resources in the environment for the long-term good of the planet and its actors. It is on this basis that the framework for appropriate governance towards the protection of natural resources while in pursuit of economic development was hinged, giving rise to SDGs.

Generally, the main goal in the sphere of sustainable development is the long-term stability of economic, social and environmental concerns. This requires the overall governance to put into consideration economic, environmental and social concerns in planning and decision-making (Emas, 2015; Vivien, 2023). The foregoing formed the backbone of the ideation of SDGs especially as far as the generation of consensus and standardization of action is concerned. SDGs can be looked at as the set of goals or objectives meant to set a global agenda toward planned economic development that takes into consideration peace and prosperity for all people now and in the future within a habitable planet. Promoted as a replacement for MDGs that were the basis of global action aimed at the developing countries for the period 2000-2015 (Eppinga et al., 2022; Morton at al., 2017). SDGs, 17 in number were adopted by UN member states in 2015 to cover a fifteen year period running from 2016 to 2030 through a UN resolution at the time of adoption. The entire process leading to the adoption of these goals comprehensively took into consideration the primary influences of a global agenda including inclusiveness and political acceptance in line with the definition of sustainable development coined by the Brundtland commission report of 1987. In line with this, SDGs set the framework for a commitment toward a fair and sustainable world for us all including future generations (Acharya, 2021). The goals are pegged on the three dimensions of sustainable development; economic growth, social inclusion, and the environment. They do this by rallying around what UN resolution refers to as the five 'Ps', also referred to as the five areas of critical importance also called

Figure 1. Five areas of critical importance in sustainable development or sustainability domains (Source: Developed by the authors, from literature review)

sustainability domains. These five Ps are people, planet, prosperity, peace, and partnerships. It is on these five Ps that all 17 SDGs center around (**Figure 1**).

17 SDGs are accompanied by 169 targets that help in determining whether the goals have been met or not. Additionally, there is a set of indicators that can be used to assess the progress towards the realization of these goals. Both the targets and indicators vary in number from one goal to another with some goals having more targets and indicators than others. 17 SDGs are summarized in **Figure 2** based on UN graphical illustration.

Despite the above elaborate process towards the adoption of SDGs, it is important to note that action towards their realization is based on the voluntary commitments of UN member states. This may largely explain the variances between member states when it comes to how they progress on the individual SDGs. It is important to note that the integrated nature of SDGs makes it difficult to divide the goals distinctively, yet the structuring of the goals seems to imply that they are distinct objectives towards which countries can allocate resources at the implementation level. It is for the foregoing reason that there are clear interdependencies among the different SDGs (De La Poza et al., 2021; Eppinga et al., 2022; Reyers & Selig, 2020).

According to several scholars such as Moila et al. (2019), Nilsson et al. (2016), and Reyers and Selig (2020), the interdependency between SDGs does not come out clearly in the implementation framework based on the targets and indicators. This could further be observed from the silos nature in which each SDG is presented. It is this very attribute that possibly contributes to the different attention that different UN member states pay to each SDG at the country policy level. Indeed, it is the general belief that the least developed countries would prioritize SDGs associated with people, prosperity, and partnerships over peace and planet (Forestier & Kim, 2020). It has however been argued that the

Figure 2. SDGs (https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/about-us/sustainable-development-goals-sdgs-and-disability.html)

prioritization may be explained by factors outside the country's economic status, these may include ease of implementation and existing governance policies prior to the adoption of SDGs (Allen et al., 2018; Costanza et al., 2016; Forestier & Kim, 2020). All the above factors may contribute to the prioritization of SDGs by individual countries.

Walesiak and Dehnel (2024) assessed the progress of individual EU countries towards achieving SDG 7, which focuses on ensuring access to affordable, reliable, sustainable, and modern energy for all. The results indicate significant disparities in progress among the countries and identify key policy measures that have been effective. UN (2023) global sustainable development report reviews the progress of 193 UN member states towards 17 SDGs. It provides detailed country profiles and identifies trends, challenges, and successful strategies in different regions. The report also offers policy recommendations for accelerating progress. When looked at critically, countries have differing performance scores across the different targets within the individual goals. Fang et al. (2023) offer another context of the progress of different countries within the belt and road initiative. The authors, examine the achievements and challenges of the belt and road initiative countries in meeting SDGs. Their major focus is on goals such as SDG 13 (climate action) and SDG 16 (peace, justice, and strong institutions), providing insights into the strategies that have worked and those that need improvement but also indicating the disparities among countries with a shared motive. Generally, the disparity in progress towards meeting targets on SDGs is widespread among countries. In Africa, UNDP (2023) Africa SDGs report highlights uneven progress among countries towards SDGs. While there has been commendable advancement in areas such as 4G mobile network coverage, access to safe drinking water, and electrification rates, significant challenges remain. It is indicated that only Egypt and Tunisia seem to be on track to achieve universal basic sanitation by 2030. The report emphasizes the need for increased investment in water, sanitation, and hygiene infrastructure, as well as enhanced integrated water resource management. Without differing greatly from UNDP report, an earlier report by UN Economic Commission for Africa (2022), had indicated that countries were struggling to meet most SDG targets due to the impacts of COVID-19, climate change, and geopolitical conflicts. The report emphasized the need for strategic acceleration in areas like quality education, gender equality, and partnerships for

Table 1. SDG performance & ranking of Ghana 2016 to 2022

Year	Rank	Score	SDG achieved	Challenges remain	Significant challenges	Major challenges	Data unavailable
2016	104/149	51.4%	-	-	-	-	-
2017	109/158	59.9%	-	-	-	-	-
2018	101/156	62.8%	-	13	1, 4, 6, 8, 12, 15, & 17	2-5, 7, 9-11, 14, & 16	
2019	140/162	63.8%	-	12	1, 4, 8, 13-15, & 17	2, 3, 5-7, 9, 10, 11, & 16	-
2020	100/166	65.4%	12 & 13	17	1, 4, 8, 14, & 15	2, 3, 5-7, 9-11, & 16	-
2021	114/165	62.5%	12 & 13	-	1, 4, 7, 8, 15, & 17	2, 3, 5, 6, 9, 10, 11, 14, & 16	-
2022	110/163	63.4%	12	13	1, 4, 7-9, 15, & 17	2, 3, 5, 6, 10, 11, 14, & 16	-
2023	122/166	61.8%	12	4 & 13	2, 7-9, 15, & 17	1, 3, 5, 6, 10, 11, 14, & 16	

Table 2. SDG performance & ranking of Uganda 2016 to 2022

Year	Rank	Score	SDG achieved	Challenges remain	Significant challenges	Major challenges	Data unavailable
2016	123/149	43.6%	-	-	-	-	-
2017	129/158	52.9%	-	-	-	-	-
2018	125/156	54.9%	13	-	1, 6, 8, 12, & 17	2-5, 7, 9-11, 15, & 16	14
2019	140/162	52.6%	13	12	8 & 15	1-7, 9-11, 16, & 17	14
2020	142/166	53.5%	13	12	4 & 8	1-3, 5-7, 9-11, & 15-17	14
2021	140/165	53.5%	13	12	4	1-3, 5-11, & 15-17	14
2022	136/163	54.9%	12 & 13	-	-	1-11 & 15-17	14
2023	141/166	55.0%	12 & 13	5	-	1-4, 6-11, & 15-17	14

development by addressing hinderances such as, progress in education being hindered by a lack of funding and infrastructure some areas especially in conflict-affected regions. In an Earlier sustainable development report of 2020, UN Economic Commission for Africa (2020) had indicated the disparity in the progress towards SDG targets among the African countries with key areas of progress being reported on reductions in maternal and child deaths and improvements in primary school enrollment and significant gaps being identified in poverty reduction, economic growth, and governance.

Country Progress on Sustainable Development Goals for Ghana & Uganda

Ghana as a UN member state was among the 193 countries that adopted SDGs in 2015. With its decentralized governance system, the country has moved to localize SDGs into its lower-level governance structures in the form of metropolitan, municipal, and district assemblies. The decentralized SDG implementation is complimented by the central government structure through the ministries, departments, and agencies. At the oversight level of the setup for implementation is SDG advisory unit, where the presidency plays a critical role. The supervisory role regarding the implementation is coordinated by a high-level ministerial committee. This committee supervises the implementation coordination committee that works with a technical committee. The performance of the country on SDGs is tracked annually using the sustainable development report. This report ranks all participating countries based on an assigned overall score as well as provides details on the performance per individual SDGs based on the indicators. The performance of the individual SDGs is along four different categories, which are in increasing order. These categories are; SDG achieved, challenges remain, significant challenges remain, and major challenges remain.

Using the sustainable development reports for 2020, 2021, 2022, and 2023 Ghana was ranked in positions 100 out of 166, 114 out of 165, 110 out of 163, and 122 out of 166, respectively with marginal changes in the score from 65.4% to 63.5% to 63.4% to 61.8% over the years, respectively. We show the highlights of the country's performance over the years of the 2030 global agenda.

From **Table 1**, Ghana has consistently achieved the target for SDG12 since 2020 with a number of other SDGs such as goals 3, 5, 10, 11, and 16 consistently experiencing major challenges towards their realization.

Uganda on the other hand is one of those countries that have set up the required infrastructure to support the implementation and realization of SDGs. A multi-stakeholder national SDG coordination framework under the office of the Prime Minster (head of government business in the country) was established way back in 2016 to coordinate efforts associated with progress towards SDG targets. This arrangement gives political support to the implementation of initiatives towards the realization of SDGs. For technical support, SDG secretariat provides the necessary link to the implementation of SDGs including but not limited to the day-to-day operations, monitoring, evaluation, and learning from the results. Just like Ghana, the performance of the country on SDGs is tracked annually using the Sustainable development report.

Using the sustainable development reports for 2020, 2021, 2022, and 2023 Uganda was ranked in positions 142 out of 166, 140 out of 165, 136 out of 163, and 141 out of 166, respectively with marginal changes in the score from 53.5% to 53.5% to 54.9% to 55.0% over the years, respectively. We show the highlights of the country's performance over the years of the 2030 Global agenda.

From **Table 2**, the country has only consistently achieved the target for SDG 13 with the majority of SDGs such as goals 3, 7, 9, 11, 15, and 16 consistently facing major challenges towards the realization of the set targets. Additionally, SDG14 has consistently remained without information for possible verification along the entire period of evaluation.

Table 3. Re-arranged SDGs in order of prioritization for Ghana & Uganda

Rank	Ghana			Uganda		
	Goal	Weighted mean	Deviation	Goal	Weighted mean	Deviation
1	SDG4	4.73	0.44	SDG17	4.60	0.71
2	SDG6	4.53	0.88	SDG16	4.20	0.83
3	SDG8	4.53	0.72	SDG3	4.13	0.81
4	SDG9	4.37	0.48	SDG6	4.07	0.77
5	SDG3	4.33	0.79	SDG1	4.00	1.21
6	SDG2	4.10	1.04	SDG4	3.93	1.18
7	SDG11	4.03	0.80	SDG9	3.67	1.53
8	SDG1	3.97	1.40	SDG10	3.67	0.87
9	SDG16	3.90	1.14	SDG2	3.60	1.08
10	SDG7	3.67	0.47	SDG13	3.60	1.08
11	SDG13	3.40	1.05	SDG11	3.53	1.20
12	SDG10	3.07	0.73	SDG15	3.20	1.17
13	SDG5	3.03	0.91	SDG8	3.13	0.96
14	SDG12	2.83	0.93	SDG14	3.00	0.97
15	SDG17	2.67	1.07	SDG12	2.93	1.06
16	SDG15	2.27	0.81	SDG7	2.73	1.39
17	SDG14	2.00	0.68	SDG5	2.20	1.47

METHODOLOGY

The study employed a Q-sort technique within Q methodology in order to rank SDGs based on the perception of 60 academic staff (Kar & Ramalingam, 2013) from two countries (Ghana and Uganda). This was used for the empirical part of the study, where the respondents were requested specifically to sort SDGs in order of their personal prioritization. Q sort technique is defined by Brown (1980, p. 17) as the rank ordering of a set of statements by a subject under a specified condition of performance. This was used as an alternative to the survey method. The justification for the use of the Q methodology is on the freedom and latitude that the respondents enjoy in a perception-based study. In the study, the participants ranked SDGs in order of priority based on their perception and knowledge. The categories used in the Q tool are, as follows: highest priority, high priority, moderate priority, low priority, and least priority. Respondents, where requested to move each SDG to the category, where they would place it in the context of the country. This placing became the ranking for each individual within the study.

It is the rankings of the participants that are analyzed, and the results are compared with the individual country's progress on SDGs as per the sustainable development reports to determine the extent to which they comply with the preference theory. The analysis was based on the weighted average ranking to determine those SDGs that have a higher priority in the perception of the respondents from each of the two countries. In terms of weighting, the highest score of five was assigned to highest priority, a score of four to high priority, a score of three to moderate priority, a score of two to low priority and a score of one to least priority. The results from the above weighting process, gave rise to the responses to the first research objective.

The other part of the study focused on documentary review using the global sustainable development reports that reflect the country rankings for all the 193 UN member states to generate the country specific ranking. The results from the weighted average ranking by the academia and the assessment of the specific country rankings are compared and hidden meanings derived to order to respond to the second research objective.

The analysis undertaken for all respondents and a weighted average and standard deviation were determined to establish each country's ranking of SDGs as indicated in the following.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

The results from the study are presented in this section, as follows: First, the prioritization of SDGs at the country level is examined, including justifications provided by respondents. This is followed by a comparison of the respondents' prioritization with the respective country's performance since 2018. Finally, the results are discussed within the broader context of the African continent, aligning with the overall theme of the study. This empirical section synthesizes data obtained from respondents with global rankings, providing a comprehensive analysis.

Country-Level Prioritization of Sustainable Development Goals on Perception of Academia

The prioritization of SDGs varied substantially between the two countries under consideration as presented below. In order to understand the prioritization of SDGs by each country, the rankings from the respondents were weighted based on the prioritization to establish the weighted average scores. Based on the weighted average scores, SDGs are then re-arranged in order of magnitude from the highest weighted average to the lowest weighted average. In order to provide a full picture, the standard deviation of the individual SDG scores was also calculated to provide a picture of the level of dispersion within the perceptions of the respondents. **Table 3** is a summary of the output tables for the scores.

From the rankings in **Table 3**, there is a noticeable concentration of higher scores from Ghana compared to those from Uganda for SDGs ranked from one to 10. However, SDGs ranked from 11 to 17, Ghana presents lower scores than those from Uganda.

Table 4. Ranking of sustainable domains for Ghana & Uganda

Rank	Ghana			Uganda		
	Domain	Mean	Deviation	Domain	Mean	Deviation
1	People	4.12	0.550	Partnership	4.60	0.710
2	Peace	3.90	1.140	Peace	4.20	0.830
3	Prosperity	3.75	0.631	Prosperity	3.66	0.670
4	Partnership	2.67	1.070	People	3.28	0.366
5	Planet	2.56	0.610	Planet	3.27	0.250

This may be by coincidence because there was no statistical test carried out to explain this occurrence, but it could also be due to the fact that the Ghanaians have a positive outlook on the ranking reflected in the country's higher scores in terms of performance as per the sustainable performance reports.

Beyond the scores, **Table 3** also indicates a higher level of agreement across most of SDGs prioritized by Ghana, as indicated by the low deviation of these cores when compared to the same deviations from Uganda. The outliers, in this case, are SDGs ranked 2, 8, 9, and 15, where the deviation was greater than that of Uganda. The implication of this low deviation is that the respondents from Ghana seemed to have a common or nearer understanding of the priorities of the country vis-à-vis SDGs (Hassan et al., 2010).

Generally, there are major differences in perception regarding the prioritization of the individual SDGs across the two countries in this study with Ghana preferring SDG4 (quality education), SDG6 (clean water and sanitation), SDG8 (decent work and economic growth), SDG9 (industry innovation and infrastructure, and SDG3 (good health and wellbeing) rounding up the top-five. On the other hand, Uganda's top-five preferences are made up of the following: SDG17 (partnerships for goals), SDG16 (peace, justice, and strong institutions), SDG3 (good health and well-being), SDG6 (clean water and sanitation), and SDG1 (no poverty). The only areas of convergence within the prioritization of the top-five SDGs in each of these two countries were on two SDGs (three and six).

Following the individual SDG prioritization at the country level, further analysis was undertaken based on the five areas of critical importance also called sustainability domains (**Figure 1**). The analysis was intended to gain a deeper understanding of SDG prioritization according to the Sustainability domains. The output for this analysis is presented in **Table 4**.

Unlike the individual rankings for SDGs at the country level, where the prioritization was distinct for each country, the prioritization based on domain or areas of critical importance produced relatively similar results for the two countries. A review of the ranking shows that there were agreements on three of the five areas of critical importance. Both countries ranked Peace, prosperity, and Planet based SDGs at rank 2, 3, and 5, respectively. It is only people and partnership clustered SDGs that produced different rankings in the two countries.

Empirical Results vs. Country's Performance as per Sustainable Development Reports

A comparison of the prioritization from the empirical results with the reported performance for Ghana from the sustainable development reports indicates that all SDGs for which the country has achieved the set targets or nearly achieved the set targets in the recent five years (SDG12, SDG13, and SDG17) do not feature among the top five ranked SDGs by prioritization. In support of the prioritization provided, it was observed that a number of reasons were provided for this mismatch, and these include:

- Consideration of what enhances the capacity of humans such as education, health, and infrastructure should be a priority compared to aspects of nature.
- The performance in those SDGs may have been driven by global or external influences rather than country interests.
- The country's focus should be on food, water, and well-being at its stage of development rather than responsible consumption and production.
- SDGs whose targets were consistently achieved may be those, which are easy to achieve given the natural environment of the country. This may not be a result of effort or action purposely planned to achieve those results.
- There seems to be considerable interest globally in SDGs, where Ghana is performing well. This may signal resource allocation to particular SDGs at the global level. With the availability of resources, it becomes easier to achieve results.

Uganda's performance in terms of realizing SDG targets is not that different from that of Ghana. The country has consistently realized or nearly realized the targets for SDGs12 and 13 over the recent five years. However, the empirical results of the prioritization did not feature any of these SDGs among the top-five spots. In support of the prioritization from the empirical results, a number of reasons were provided that may explain this mismatch and these include:

- The key consideration should be support for human well-being at the basic level including Food, water, health, and education.
- Peace, justice, and other related systems are the backbone of any human development especially in reducing vulnerability and human rights abuse.
- The achievement of targets for the two SDGs must be a result of rudimentary tools of production that can only keep the country undeveloped due to low productivity that is being reported as a success.
- There is a need to focus on SDGs that are enablers of development (such as education) rather than those focusing on sentiments.
- It is possible that targets are being realized due to the abundance of nature including rain-supported agricultural production. However, there are indications

of reducing wetlands, increasing incidents of flooding, and landslides among others, which may lead one to doubt the results.

CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

From the results presented, there is clear evidence that SDGs form a clear and systematic global agenda that influences action and resource allocation both at the global and country levels. It is also important to note that the approach to the realization of SDGs targets in countries such as Ghana, Uganda, and probably several other countries are largely driven by global forces and nature rather than concerted effort and action planned to move these countries towards the set target. The foregoing may be contrary to the expectation of UN that each country shall prioritize (Allen et al., 2018; Forestier & Kim, 2020) the implementation based on their interests and circumstances. What is noticeably evident is that countries with comparable economic, social, and environmental concerns have similarities in the prioritization of any given action in line with the preference theory (Betsch, 2005). This was prominently displayed by the perception ranking of the sustainability domains.

On the other hand, it is also surprising that documented performance of the countries along SDGs is fundamentally different from the way the same SDGs are ranked by the individuals involved in the study. The justification of the individual country's performance is not only questioned by the respondents in the study but some attribute the performance to chance or luck rather than action taken towards the realization of the referred to performance.

As part of the above conclusion, we recommend that countries have to go back to basics to allow for a bottom-up approach to the action and effort toward the realization of SDG targets. This would call for a national-level dialogue, where the prioritization of action is driven by the desires of the majority of the nationals of that country. This will help to harmonize the interests of the country with the performance of the different SDGs.

Author contributions: Both authors have been involved in all stages of this study in varying propotions. **PM:** conceptualization, review and editing of final manuscript (lead); **FAA:** writting the original draft (lead). All other stages of the study had equal involvement of the authors. Both authors agree with the results and conclusions.

Funding: No funding source is reported for this study.

Ethical statement: The authors stated that the study was conducted with strict adherence to ethical guidelines. Ethical clearance was deemed unnecessary due to the minimal risk exposure to the human subjects involved. The research did not involve any interventions or invasive procedures with living subjects. The authors further stated that data collection was limited to the use of Q-sort method where selected respondents ranked the SDGs in their own individual prioritization as well as publicly available information using secondary sources. This ensured that no personal or sensitive data was accessed or utilized in any manner that could compromise privacy or confidentiality. The entire study was conducted in accordance with the principles of respect for persons, beneficence and justice while ensuring that the rights and well being of all parties potentially impacted by the study are fully respected.

Declaration of interest: No conflict of interest is declared by the authors.

Data sharing statement: Data supporting the findings and conclusions are available upon request from corresponding author.

REFERENCES

Acharya, U. (2021). Sustainable development practices in developing countries: Major drivers and future discourse. *Nepalese Journal of development and Rural studies, 18*(01), 61-66. https://doi.org/10.3126/njdrs.v18i01.41951

Allen, C., Metternicht, G., & Wiedmann, T. (2018). Initial progress in implementing the sustainable development goals (SDGs): A review of evidence from countries. *Sustainability Science, 13*, 1453-1467. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11625-018-0572-3

Andreoni, V., & Miola, A. (2016). *Competitiveness and sustainable development*. Publications Office of the European Union. https://doi.org/10.2788/64453

Betsch, T. (2005). Preference theory: An affect-based approach to recurrent decision making. In T. Betsch, & S. Haberstroh (Eds.), *The routines of decision making* (pp. 39-65). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers.

Brown, S. R. (1980). *Political subjectivity: Applications of Q methodology in political science*. Yale University Press.

Brundtland, G. H. (1987). *Our common future: Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development. Geneva, UN-Dokument A/42/427*. http://www.un-documents.net/ocf-ov.htm

Costanza, R., Fioramonti, L., & Kubiszewski, I. (2016). The UN sustainable development goals and the dynamics of human well-being. *Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment, 14*, Article 59. https://doi.org/10.1002/fee.1231

Danlardi, S., Prasad, M. S. V., Modibbo,U. M., Ahmadi, S. A., & Ghasimi, P. (2023). Attaining sustainable development goals through financial inclusion: Exploring collaborative approaches to Fintech adoption in developing economies. *Sustainability, 15*, Article 13039. https://doi.org/10.3390/su151713039

De La Poza, E., Merello, P., Barberá, A., & Celani, A. (2021). Universities' reporting on SDGs: Using the impact rankings to model and measure their contribution to sustainability, *Sustainability, 13*(4), 2038. https://doi.org/10.3390/su13042038

Dernbach, J. C. (2003). Achieving sustainable development: The centrality and multiple facets of integrated decisionmaking. *Indiana Journal of Global Legal Studies, 10*, 247-285. https://doi.org/10.1353/gls.2003.0006

Emas, R. (2015). *The concept of sustainable development: Definition and defining principles*. https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/5839GSDR%202015_SD_concept_definiton_rev.pdf

Eppinga, M. B., Mijts, E. N., & Santos, M. J. (2022). Ranking the sustainable development goals: Perceived sustainability priorities in small island states. *Sustainability Science, 17,* 1537-1556. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11625-022-01100-7

Fang, K., Xu, A., Wang, S., Jia, X., Liao, Z., Tan, R. R., Sun, H., & Su, F. (2023). Progress towards sustainable development goals in the belt and road Initiative countries. *Journal of Cleaner Production, 424*, Article 138808. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2023.138808

Forestier, O., & Kim, R. E. (2020). Cherry-picking the sustainable development goals: Goal prioritization by national governments and implications for global governance. *Sustainable Development, 28*(5), 1269-1278. https://doi.org/10.1002/sd.2082

Fukuda-Parr, S. (2019). Keeping out extreme inequality from the SDG agenda–The politics of indicators. *Global Policy, 10*, 61-69. https://doi.org/10.1111/1758-5899.12602

Fukuda-Parr, S., & Muchhala, B. (2020). The Southern origins of sustainable development goals: Ideas, actors, aspirations. *World Development, 126*, Article 104706. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2019.104706

Guillen-Royo, M. (2019). Sustainable consumption and wellbeing: Does online shopping matter? *Journal of Cleaner Production, 229*, 1112-1124. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2019.05.061

Hassan, H., Ghodsi, M., & Howel, G. (2010). A note on standard deviation and standard error. *Teaching Mathematics and Its Applications. 29*, 108-112. https://doi.org/10.1093/teamat/hrq003

Kar, S. S., & Ramalingam, A. (2013). Is 30 the magic number? Issues in sample size estimation. *National Journal of Community Medicine, 4*, 175-179.

Malthus, T. (1798). *An essay on the principle of population*. St. Paul's Church-Yard.

Meadows, D. H., Meadows, D. L., Randers, J., & Behrens, W. W. (1972). *The limits to growth*. Universe Books.

Miola, A., Borchhardt, S., Neher, F., & Buscaglia, D. (2019). *Interlinkages and policy coherence for the sustainable development goals implementation: An operational method to identify trade-offs and co-benefits in a systemic way*. Publications Office of the European Union.

Nilsson, M., Griggs, D., & Visbeck, M., (2016). Policy: Map the interactions between sustainable development goals. *Nature, 534*, 320-322. https://doi.org/10.1038/534320a

Purvis, B., Mao, Y., & Robinson, D. (2018). Three pillars of sustainability: In search of conceptual origins. *Sustainability Science, 14*(3), 681-695. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11625-018-0627-5

Reyers, B., & Selig, E. R. (2020). Global targets that reveal the social-ecological interdependencies of sustainable development. *Nature Ecology & Evolution, 4*(8), 1011-1019. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41559-020-1230-6

Running, K. (2012). Examining environmental concerns in developed, transitioning, and developing countries-A cross-country test of the objective problems and subjective value explanations. *World Value Research, 5*(1), 1-25.

Sachs, J., Lafortune, G., Kroll, C., Fuller, G., & Woelm, F. (2022). *From crisis to sustainable development: The SDGs as roadmap to 2030 and beyond*. Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009210058

Stoddart, H. (2011). *A pocket guide to sustainable development governance*. https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/index.php?menu=35&nr=147&page=view&type=400

UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division. (2021). Global population growth and sustainable development. *United Nations*. https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/sites/www.un.org.development.desa.pd/files/undesa_pd_2022_global_population_growth.pdf

UN Economic Commission for Africa. (2020). *Accelerating equitable and sustainable development in Africa: 2020 Africa sustainable development report*. https://www.uneca.org

UN Economic Commission for Africa. (2022). *Building back better from the coronavirus disease while advancing the full implementation of the 2030 agenda for sustainable development*. https://www.uneca.org

UN General Assembly. (1987). Report of the world commission on environment and development: Our common future. *United Nations*. https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/5987our-common-future.pdf

UN. (2015). Transforming our world: The 2030 agenda for sustainable development. *United Nations*. https://wedocs.unep.org/20.500.11822/9814

UN. (2023). Global sustainable development report 2023. *United Nations*. https://sdgs.un.org/publications/global-sustainable-development-report-2023

UNDP (2023), Africa Sustainable Development Report. *Accelerating the recovery from the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) and the full implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and African Union Agenda 2063 at all levels*. https://www.undp.org/africa/publications/2023-africa-sustainable-development-report

Vivien, S. (2023). Sustainable development: Balancing economic prosperity and environmental concerns. *Journal of Economics and Economic Education Research, 24*(4), 1-3.

Walesiak, M., & Dehnel, G. (2024). Progress on SDG 7 achieved by EU countries in relation to the target year 2030: A multidimensional indicator analysis using dynamic relative taxonomy. *PLoS ONE, 19*(2), Article e0297856. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0297856