

Access to information: A key driver to achieve Sustainable Development Goals

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ABSTRACT: In 2015, the 193 member states of the United Nations adopted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The adoption was meant to achieve development and create better livelihoods for people all over the world. The objective of SDGs is to eradicate poverty, protect the environment, eliminate diseases and fight corruption. The efforts are supposed to be achieved through collaboration and information flow between governments, the private sector and individuals, among other stakeholders. The study employs a narrative literature review to establish the relationship between access to information and success of SDGs. The results suggest a strong relationship between public access to information and accomplishment of the SDGs. When the public is informed, they can get involved in the developmental course, evaluate the progress and keep their leaders responsible. The study examines the role of information in fostering sustainable development with respect to SDGs.

Keywords - access to information, accomplishing goals, information flow, Sustainable Development Goals.

I. INTRODUCTION

All the 193 member states of the United Nations agreed to the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015. The SDGs represent an ambitious move to enhance the lives of the poorest population in the globe after 15 years. However, the objective does not focus on only poverty, but also on environmental protection, gender equality, corruption and barriers to healthcare. In total, the agenda set out 17 goals to be achieved by 2030 (United Nations, 2015b). All 17 SDGs are linked by the recognition that any success achieved in a single area impacts outcomes in other areas. Moreover, there is the recognition that development ought to create a balance between economic, environmental and social sustainability. The member states also agreed to focus more on those countries that have been left furthest behind. The specific objectives of formulation of the SDGs include eradicating poverty, inequality against women and girls, hunger and HIV/AIDS.

Therefore, although the agenda looks desirable, it requires the incorporation of technology, creativity, knowledge and funding resources from all corners of society to realise. Since SDGs are intended to be implemented at society level, access to information (ATI) is crucial in its implementation. Although ATI in this context is a goal in itself, it is also a necessary input in ensuring the success of SDGs.

Access to information entails equipping people with the right knowledge that would enable them to demand services. When people are empowered through information, their access to services such as water and healthcare will be enhanced. According to Open Development (Article 19, 2017), public ATI is also a crucial tool for compelling public officials and government to observe transparency and accountability. Information gives control to the population to control the state action and to learn more about how decisions are made on their behalf by the state officials. In other words, citizens are engaged in the process of evaluating public officials. As such, it is evident that the establishment of ATI by the public is a prerequisite to the success of the SDGs (World Bank, 2016). The idea is to empower people to play an active role and have a voice in matters that affect society.

Members of society can handle issues that affect them better whenever they are integrated into the implementation processes. For instance, when all concerned citizens at all levels are engaged in tackling environmental issues, such projects are bound to succeed. On the other hand, citizens also ought to be equipped with the environmental information held by national authorities. The relevant information includes hazardous

materials and any other activities conducted around their communities that are likely to affect their livelihood. More importantly, for the SDGs to succeed, the public must be subjected to the decision-making processes at all levels. According to Maeve (2013), it is the role of the state to encourage and facilitate public participation and awareness by making information readily accessible. Noteworthy, the role of the civil society should be recognised and they should be encouraged to participate in sustainable development. International human rights laws spell out clearly the right of citizens to obtain information concerning activities and decisions of the public officers (United Nations, 2015a). The right is spelled out that everyone should be allowed the freedom of expression, including the reception and imparting of information.

The objective of this narrative literature review was to gather necessary information, integrate, analyse, and interrogate to establish whether ATI, especially by the public, has an impact on the accomplishment of the SDGs. Therefore, since the SDGs focus on society, the emphasis will be on ATI by the members of the society as provided by the authorities.

II. METHODOLOGY

The study employs a narrative literature review. In this narrative review, the emphasis is on the set of items that focus on evaluating the intervention. In other words, only those narratives that focus on how access to information affects success in SDGs were emphasised.

All the published studies containing randomised and controlled research on the topic of access to information and the accomplishment of SDGs were included during the search for information. The search engine was set to search information relevant to the topic, but only those published between 2015 and 2021. Universally recognised databases including PubMed, ERIC, Web of Science, Scopus, ScienceDirect, IEEE Xplore, Google Scholar, JSTOR, Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ) and the United Nations website were searched for information. The strategy utilised during the study was to retrieve literature dealing with the impact of access to information on the accomplishment of SDGs. However, general information on the role played by information in the success of any project was also relevant to the study. Nevertheless, the most important keywords for the search included "access to information", "impacts" or "effects", "accomplishment" and "SDGs".

Only those studies that mentioned the impact of ATI on the accomplishment of the SDGs were included in the study. Additionally, those studies that touched on the role played by information on the success of a project were also included in the study to provide general information. Studies based on the access to information by the society, especially about public officers to enhance accountability, were also useful for the study. Finally, the study also considered studies that interrogated the concept of SDGs in general for in-depth understanding.

To establish the eligibility of the articles that were included in the study, the abstracts as well as titles were interrogated. Thereafter, the relevant full-text studies were selected. Only information based on the role of information and the success of SDGs or projects, in general, was included in the final article. Another important criterion used for the selection of relevant studies was that they had to be published between 2015, when SDGs were launched, and 2021. Finally, the UN website materials that were included were also not older than 2015.

III. RESULTS

Sustainable Development Goals are also often referred to as the Global Goals and were adopted in 2015 by the member states of the United Nations to make the world better (United Nations, 2015a, 2015b). The main agenda was to ensure that development is achieved by 2030 globally, especially for the backward countries (World Bank, 2016). According to Poluru (2020), the major objective of the global goals was to protect the planet. To ensure development by 2030, the SDGs must ensure collaboration between the private sector, governments, civil society and educational institutions. Numerous attempts have been made around the world to offer solutions to complex problems affecting the population. Nevertheless, these efforts become futile due to a lack of integration of information, especially access to information communication technology by the public. One of the international organisations championing the inclusion of information into SDGs is the International Federation of Library Association and Institutes (IFLA). The study by Pulu (2020) emphasises the crucial role that libraries in different countries can play in equipping organisations and society with the necessary information to ensure the success of the SDGs.

Information is recognised as an important component in monitoring the progress of the SDGs. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (2019) indicated that information was categorised at Tier I in 2019 to mean that it was recognised as an important means of assessing progress on information access and implementation. Before this, access to information was placed at Tier II. This means that the Inter-Agency and Expert Group on Sustainable Development Goal Indicators (IAEG-SDGs) agrees that information is continuously becoming important to ensure the success of SDGs. Reclassifying information access from Tier II to Tier I is a great move since it enables countries to access information as a priority in

strategies meant to implement SDGs. Countries are continuously encouraged to recognise the importance of access to information in implementing SDGs and incorporate the indicator in the monitoring and reporting of progress at the global and national levels. Access to information is also regarded to be more than just a basic human right (UNESCO, 2019). Information access is believed to encompass tools for the promotion of the rule of law and observing other rights and the objectives of SDGs. In other words, information is an important facilitator of sustainable development in different areas, including health, poverty eradication, environment and eliminating corruption.

The importance of accessing, managing, sharing and using information for sustainable development in different sectors has been reiterated by the United Nations for years. According to Chowdhury and Koya (2017), sustainable information practices have proven effective in helping institutions, individuals, countries and governments to achieve sustainable development. Sustainable development is defined as the type of development which meets the present needs without affecting the ability to meet future needs. The definition may seem to emphasise only environmental sustainability. However, sustainable development requires a convergence of three major elements of economic development, environmental protection and social equity. Therefore, SDGs ought to be integrated and should combine all three elements. For successful integration of these elements and ensuring that the set goals are achieved, the public should be allowed to access relevant information freely. In addition, availing of alternative technology also ensures that the public makes an informed decision concerning NDGs and other issues affecting them. Furthermore, citizens need training on certain processes and products that impact their livelihoods. Such information can then be applied in their local circumstances. The main problem in this quest is that information is dispersed and not pooled (Maevae, 2013).

The Open Access (OA) movement began in 2002 led by a global group of scholars to allow unrestricted access to information for the public. Such access was identified to be important in enabling free knowledge and resources exchange to create an impact in society and enhance creativity (Article 19, 2017). Gaining access to sources of information is the main determinant of whether a particular goal is achieved or not. According to Mamtora and Pandey (2017), increased access to information is the foundation of literacy in the world. Literacy, on the other hand, is a crucial pillar in sustainable development. Enhancing data and information availability and collaborating with the local communities ensures better allocation and utilisation of resources. Therefore, in the quest to improve the livelihoods of people all over the world, the SDGs must incorporate attempts to enhance access to data and information for sustainable development. Public access to information and data is essential in the development of any region or nation as it ensures that citizens make informed decisions and engage in development initiatives. Noteworthy, libraries form an important institution that increases access to information by the public worldwide. The advantage brought by libraries is that they are readily available to the communities and provide skills and information in the digital age.

UNESCO is the custodian for SDG indicator 16.10.2 regarding ATI. UNESCO is charged with the role to monitor and report on the adoption and implementation of policy or statutory and constitutional guarantees for access of the public to information. Legal guarantees providing access to information were adopted by 129 UN Member States in 2021 (UNESCO, 2021; UNESCO, 2019). According to UNESCO (2021), ensuring journalists' safety and safeguarding freedom of expression is a prerequisite to ensuring that verified and reliable information is accessible to the public. Since the SDGs were adopted, it has become central for countries to use in fostering international corporations and advancing their national agendas. However, this cannot become a reality without emphasis on access to information. Access to information has also become an essential tool for the protection of human rights and empowering citizens to make an informed decisions regarding their development. Besides, information available to the public is needed for effective monitoring and holding those in charge accountable for the progress of the SDGs. The indicator of success in ensuring enhanced access to information is the number of countries that successfully adopt and implement policy, and statutory and constitutional guarantees to enable the public to get access to information.

Since the adoption of the Rio Declaration in 1992, public access to information has been identified as one of the key drivers of sustainable development. As stated in a report by UNESCO (2020), ATI is a crucial enabling vehicle for participatory, accountable and transparent governance. In addition, the rule of law and peace within the societies is also an element that is found under "Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions", the SDG number 16 (UNESCO, 2020). More specifically, target 6.10 requires countries to ensure that the public can get ATI and that their freedom is safeguarded in line with both national laws and international agreements. The importance of ATI as a driver for the success of SDGs can be seen in the declaration of 28 September 2015 as the International Day for Universal Access to Information by the 38th General Conference of UNESCO. The attempts have been fruitful in ensuring that the progress of ATI is tracked. Indicator 16.10.2 of the SDG was adopted by the Statistics Commission of the UN in 2016 and subsequently adopted by the General Assembly in 2017 (UNESCO, 2021).

IV. DISCUSSION

The literature gathered from various sources seems to point to the fact that the SDGs, which were adopted in 2015, were meant to enhance people's lives, especially in the poorest nations. The agenda is aimed at achieving development by 2030 by eradicating poverty and diseases and protecting the environment. To achieve this objective, the SDGs must be approached from a multi-agency perspective. Therefore, it involves the input from the government in various countries, the private sector and individuals. Sustainable development is an integral phenomenon that encompasses social and economic development as well as environmental protection (United Nations, 2015a, b). Therefore, the link between the three aspects must be established. Nevertheless, it is not possible without access to data and information (Chowdhury & Koya, 2017). The societal input in the process of realising sustainable development is of utmost importance. However, the public cannot be involved in processes that affect them without gaining ATI. Information and data ensure that the public makes an informed decision and engages fully in realising the SDGs. Moreover, the public also needs information to monitor and evaluate the progress of the processes and hold the leaders accountable. If this is done, the process will be considered to be transparent. Therefore, it is clear that information ought to be availed at local level (Mamtora & Pandey, 2017; Maeve, 2013).

UNESCO is the branch of the United Nations that is charged with ensuring that member countries adhere to the requirement to provide the public with access to free data and information. "Access to information is labelled as indicator 16.10.2 which the agency monitors to ensure that all countries observe progress. The agency maintains that this free access is not only a fundamental human right but also upholds the rule of law" (UNESCO 2021). The freedom of expression is reiterated with regard to accessing and utilising information to assist in decision-making by the public about issues that affect their lives. Additionally, the importance of safeguarding the rights of journalists has also gained momentum as it is crucial in providing the information that the public requires. However, another important source of information includes the library. Libraries are found all over the world and have proven critical in providing the public with the much-needed data and information to engage in decisions that affect their lives (Puluru, 2020; Open Development, 2017). The SDGs look desirable but cannot be achieved without emphasising the need for ATI.

V. CONCLUSION

The objective of the study was to gather, integrate and analyse information to examine whether public ATI has an impact on achieving the SDGs set by the United Nations in 2015. From the available literature, it is evident that information plays an important role in ensuring the success of SDGs in various ways. The success of this initiative is dependent on the collaborative efforts of various agencies and individuals. The public is one of the stakeholders of SDGs and ought to be involved in the decision-making processes at all levels. However, for this to succeed, they should be provided with the relevant information to enable the making of informed decisions. The UN through UNESCO has ensured that efforts to provide the public with ATI are tracked and documented. The agency ensures that countries adhere to the set criteria for providing ATI. Finally, libraries, which are present globally, have also been identified as an important source of information to aid in sustainable development.

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