



## Roundtable Discussion Summary: Politics of Sustainability

### Introduction

On 1 October 2024, Future Africa at the University of Pretoria (UP) together with the University of Oslo, held a roundtable on the politics of sustainability. The event was held at Stellenbosch University during the inaugural Africa-Europe Clusters of Research Excellence (CoRE) conference, held from 29 September to 2 October 2024. The roundtable provided a platform for sustainability experts to discuss how power and history shape sustainability narratives and Africa's socio-ecological futures.

Led by Professor Maano Ramutsindela, the Future Africa Research Chair in Sustainability Transformations (a joint chair held by UP and the University of Cape Town), the panel included insights from Dr Heide Hackmann of Stellenbosch University and Associate Professor Aklilu Amsalu from Addis Ababa University. This roundtable is part of Future Africa's ongoing work of exploring the broader concept of sustainability through African and political lenses.

The discussion highlighted the urgency of building sustainability strategies that integrate social justice, economic progress, and environmental resilience. Professor Ramutsindela emphasised, "Our definitions of sustainability should not be imported wholesale; they must reflect our specific challenges and our vision of the future."

This report summarises the essential insights from the discussion, providing a resource for all those interested in the future of sustainable development in Africa.

### Key Themes Discussed

#### Sustainability and Socio-Economic Transformation

The roundtable opened with a discussion on the concept of sustainability itself, probing whether it should primarily focus on addressing historical injustices or the future without addressing those injustices. Professor Ramutsindela highlighted a statement made by the Ugandan President, Yoweri Museveni, who commented that Africa should focus on socio-economic transformation rather than conventional sustainability measures. He posed the question of whether sustainability should be defined in terms of immediate survival needs or broader environmental impacts.



Dr Hackmann added to this debate, noting that sustainability often risks becoming an abstract concept disconnected from urgent social and economic needs. Dr Hackmann observed that developed countries may have the luxury to prioritise environmental sustainability. Still, in Africa, where communities often grapple with poverty and resource scarcity, sustainability must incorporate socio-economic progress.

Associate Professor Amsalu remarked that “Sustainability must be rooted in tangible outcomes. If people lack basic necessities, discussions on environmental preservation become secondary.” This sentiment was echoed by other panelists, who urged a redefinition of sustainability that aligns with African economic and social realities and responds to local communities' specific needs.

#### **Power Dynamics and Policymaking**

Power dynamics were explored through the lens of policymaking and funding influence. Professor Ramutsindela highlighted how power imbalances affect policy outcomes, noting that international funding often dictates priorities that do not always align with local needs. He argued that 'We need to ask ourselves: whose interests are truly being served by these policies? Too often, they reflect external priorities rather than local concerns.'

Prof Ramutsindela also emphasised the importance of transparent policy-making processes, where African communities have greater representation and voice. He remarked, 'Sustainable policy must be built with, not imposed on, our communities.' This perspective resonated with attendees and underscored the need for African autonomy in the sustainability conversation.

Dr Hackmann raised concerns about the influence of foreign funding, noting that donor conditions often dictate the terms of sustainability efforts, sidelining local priorities. She questioned, “How can we ensure that these policies genuinely reflect local needs when they are often crafted to meet international expectations?”

Associate Prof Amsalu echoed this sentiment, pointing out that sustainability policies are rarely neutral, often advancing the interests of powerful states and corporations. He argued, “The politics of sustainability often benefits those who shape it. To create truly inclusive policies, we must examine who has a voice in these discussions.”

The debate expanded to consider the need for African nations to assert greater autonomy in



sustainability decision-making, with attendees calling for a shift toward more localised policies that empower communities and respect their unique socio-economic contexts. The panel stressed the need for transparency in policy formulation, advocating for a system that includes grassroots representation and accountability.

### Global vs Local Sustainability Goals

The alignment—or lack thereof—between global sustainability goals and African priorities was another focal point. Panelists debated the relevance of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) within the African context, noting that while these goals offer a valuable framework, they may not align with Africa’s unique and urgent needs.

Dr Hackmann questioned the dominance of the SDGs in framing scientific research and funding on the continent. “SDGs have become the yardstick for scientific success. But are they tailored to address Africa’s pressing issues, or do they serve external agendas?” she asked.

Associate Prof Amsalu added that the African Union’s Agenda 2063 offers a vision that is potentially more aligned with the continent’s goals but may be sidelined in favor of global standards.

This conversation highlighted the potential of region-specific goals, like Agenda 2063, to address African development in a manner that resonates more closely with local realities. Panelists called for a dual approach, suggesting that while global goals provide structure, regional priorities must guide implementation.

## Attendees Inputs

Attendees provided valuable insights, further enriching the dialogue.

Their perspectives included:

- Questions about the feasibility of implementing global sustainability frameworks in Africa’s diverse socio-economic landscape: 'How can we focus on sustainability when basic needs remain unmet?' This concern underscores the gap between global standards and local realities, especially in rural areas.
- Afrobarometer data was cited to illustrate African citizens' views on climate change, indicating



that while awareness is growing, there is a significant disparity in knowledge levels across rural and urban populations. The data suggested that African governments are perceived as the primary agents responsible for leading climate action, followed closely by citizens themselves.

The role of transdisciplinarity was a recurrent theme with attendees calling for the integration of local knowledge in policymaking. One attendee observed that transdisciplinary approaches have yet to fully mature on the continent, particularly when compared to developed nations. They advocated for a stronger commitment to mutual learning across sectors and disciplines to foster more inclusive and effective policy outcomes.

These contributions emphasised the need for a comprehensive sustainability approach that respects local contexts and includes diverse voices.

## Concluding Remarks

The roundtable concluded with a call for a nuanced approach to sustainability that respects the unique socio-political context of each region. Panelists agreed on the importance of transparency, citizen engagement, and regional autonomy in shaping sustainability policies that truly serve African communities.

The session underscored that while global frameworks like the SDGs offer valuable benchmarks, they must be adaptable to regional needs. Panelists urged African governments to advocate for policies rooted in local realities and resist the pressure to adopt global standards uncritically.

This report summarises the roundtable's insights, inviting stakeholders to further dialogue, research, and action on the politics of sustainability in Africa. It offers a foundation for further dialogue, research, and policymaking, and for stakeholders to envision a future where sustainability is shaped not by external mandates but by the voices of those it aims to serve.

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